

## **Streakers, Stalkers, and Squatters: Dealing with Problem Patrons**

by

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**Conference Abstract:** Do “strange” people come into your library? Did library school teach you the best way to deal with a streaker? Discuss and review this and other specific problems and solutions.

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This workshop was designed to empower library workers with the information and resources to meet the challenges of some of these perplexing library users. Librarians may not like the term “problem patrons” but they need to accept the reality of problem behavior. Problem patrons are a small group, but a group that generates quite a bit of discussion. Attendees discussed techniques for front line employees to use in handling various user behaviors. Many librarians had considerable experience in dealing with certain incidents and the participants shared success stories. The groups were not surprised by how many types of problem patrons were common to all of them. To begin the interactive program, the facilitators randomly divided participants into seven groups. Each group was given a different scenario relating a real library occurrence dealing with problem patrons.

Discussed in this workshop were particular types of problem behavior, including 1) Streakers and Flashers; 2) Thieves, Mutilators, and Hoarders; 3) Verbally Abusive Patrons; 4) Consensual Sex Partners; 5) Lonely/Possessive/Helpless Behavior; 6) Stalkers and Lurkers; and, 7) Squatters and Trespassers. The participants examined each category which included real life examples to illustrate each concern. Possible remedies were discussed for each difficult incident.

## Scenario 1

If you work with the public you know that at some point you might encounter a scenario like this:

*It's Sunday and you are working the circulation desk. Three people in various stages of excitement are rushing towards you. They are all very agitated and everyone is talking at the same time. The circulation and the reference desk phones are both ringing. People are calling from different floors of the library and they are panicked. What is going on? It seems that a stalker has run through the library. What should you do?*

You know that you have got to do something fast. This is not something that you have ever imagined happening at your workplace. Here are some things to consider:

- **One time vs. habitual:** Is this a one time occurrence? If a stalker has never run through your library before and this is the week of fraternity pledging, the best thing to do might be to reassure the excited library users and accept the prank with as much good humor as you are able to manage. The situation should be treated differently if this happens every week. At least a more thorough investigation should be initiated.
- **Notify security:** Someone should call security, whether the streaking is deemed a prank or not. There is always the possibility that sexual abuse may have taken place and the stalker is either the victim or the perpetrator.
- **Gather full description/direction of flight:** Ask the witnesses for a description. It might be helpful to security if you ascertain the stalker's direction of flight from the library.
- **File an incident report:** Have incident report forms available at the circulation desk (see [Appendix A](#)).

Bad things sometimes do happen at libraries, and library staff need help dealing with these situations. Policies should be in written form to help library staff deal with problem incidences. The written policies then need to be supported by ongoing training.

Optional scripts with appropriate responses and phrases may be helpful for dealing with these situations. Some staff members may be most comfortable knowing exactly what words to use. Others may want to develop their own scripts. Library staff need to practice and be knowledgeable of the skills necessary to diffuse volatile situations.

## Scenario 2

Here is another of the scenarios:

*A patron has come to the circulation desk to check out another ten books. The library staff person cannot check out the books to the patron because of an outstanding fine. The library user is irate! The staff person has called you over to help. The library patron has now started yelling about the type of help she receives every time she comes into the library. She shouts that the library should be open more hours on the weekends. How do you handle the situation?*

- **Stay calm:** Try to answer in as calm a manner as possible. Other patrons may feel uncomfortable or threatened by the angry patron, so try to diffuse the situation quickly. Try to address the main problem with courtesy and professionalism.
- **Actively listen:** Have the patron stay on track and address the main issue. Don't be sidetracked by additional problems the patron may bring up. Stay respectful. Paraphrase the patron's problem back to him/her.
- **Explain policies:** Showing written policies and procedures may help. Ask the patron if he/she understands.
- **Determine your immediate plan of action:** May the patron pay part of the fine and check out some of the books? Try to find an alternative or solution.
- **Get help if needed:** Backup may help diffuse the situation.

There will always be problem patrons as long as libraries continue to have an open environment and librarians go on welcoming patrons. The proactive strategies in this presentation tried to prepare library staff and trustees for several types of problem patrons that they may encounter. Participants should have come away with more confidence in their abilities to handle difficult situations. Maybe there has not been a stalker in the local library, but that does not mean that one will not show up tomorrow afternoon. People end up being better library employees if they are informed and have listened to other's thoughts and remedies for problem situations.

## Responses to “Problem Patrons”

- Listen carefully to the user’s question, request, or complaint.
- Approach patrons who are engaged in questionable behavior with as nonjudgmental an attitude as possible.
- Repeat your request if necessary.
- Be calm and receptive to the library user.
- Avoid humor or personal remarks.
- Alert other staff members as soon as strange behavior has been reported.
- If the user seems emotional, don’t respond immediately. Pause, breathe deeply, and think before speaking to the patron.
- Do not argue with outrageous statements.
- Speak in a relaxed, low tone. Paraphrasing may be helpful.
- Stay pleasantly calm and firm. Do not argue. Stick to the issue and do not get sidetracked by new complaints and arguments.
- Never try to touch the person.
- Resolve the problem, if you have the authority to do so.
- If you don’t think an exception should be made, explain the policy and give an explanation of its rationale.
- Try to offer a choice of actions or alternatives that do not violate policy.
- Stay in control of the situation. Do not allow the patron to manipulate you.
- Encourage the user to make a complaint in writing if you can’t satisfactorily resolve the user’s issue.
- You may need to refer the user to your supervisor or ask another staff member to corroborate your explanation.
- If the user’s behavior becomes excessively disruptive, call security. Never try to restrain or detain a patron forcefully.

**Appendix A.** Sample Incident Report Form

TO: Library Director

FROM: \_\_\_\_\_

SUBJECT: Incident Report

1. Incident, Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Time: \_\_\_\_\_ Location: \_\_\_\_\_

2. Name(s) of person(s) involved in occurrence:

\_\_\_\_\_

3. Description of incident:

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

4. Patron(s) explanation(s), if any:

\_\_\_\_\_

5. Persons that witnessed occurrence or that may provide pertinent information:

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

6. Action taken:

\_\_\_\_\_

7. If an officer was contacted, print his/her name:

\_\_\_\_\_

8. Library staff member patrons, police, or witnesses should contact:

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Job title: \_\_\_\_\_

*If the incident involved taking/damaging Library materials, include an itemized list along with this report.*

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## **Additional Resources**

Blessinger, Kelly D. 2002. "Problem patrons: All Shapes and Sizes." *Reference Librarian* 75/76: 3-10.

Bullard, Sharon W. 2002. "Gypsies, Tramps and Rage: Coping with Difficult Patrons." *Reference Librarian* 75/76: 245-282.

Easton, Carol. 1977. "Sex and Violence in the Library: Scream a Little Louder, Please." *American Libraries* 8(9): 484-8.

Isaacson, Jason. 2006. "No Problem with Problem Patrons." *Library Journal* 131(1):68.

Osa, J.O. 2002. "The Difficult Patron Situation: Competency-Based Training to Empower Frontline Staff." *Reference Librarian* 75/76: 33-43.

Redfern, B. 2002. "The Difficult Librarian Patron: A Selective Survey of the Current Literature." *Reference Librarian* 75/76: 105-113.

Riley, Naomi, and Christine Whelan. 2005. "Life at the New York Public Zoo... er, Library." *The American Enterprise* 16(6):47.

Yucht, Alice H. 2001. "Strategy: Problem Patrons?" *Teacher Librarian* 29(2):26-7.