This study investigated problematic adult behavior in the teen spaces of public libraries in North Carolina. Data was gathered through surveys and interviews, recruiting participants through the state listserv for children and youth services library staff. The results of this study found that problematic behavior commonly included adult use of space, invasion of teen privacy, predatory behavior, disregard of library policies or signage, and acting as authority figures towards teens within the space. This study concludes libraries should consider the role the physical library layout plays in problematic incidents, as well as foster cooperation among staff outside of youth or teen services in addressing problematic behavior in addition to current strategies for handling problematic adult behavior.
LIBRARIAN PERCEPTIONS OF PROBLEMATIC ADULT BEHAVIOR IN THE TEEN SPACE

by
Neda E. Defibaugh

A Master’s paper submitted to the faculty of the School of Information and Library Science of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Library Science.

Chapel Hill, North Carolina
April 2015

Approved by

_______________________________________
Advisor’s Sandra Hughes-Hassell
# Table of Contents

Table of Contents .................................................................................................................................... 1  
Introduction .............................................................................................................................................. 2  
Literature Review ................................................................................................................................... 3  
  Teen Services in Libraries .......................................................................................................................... 3  
  Teen Space ............................................................................................................................................. 6  
  Adults/Issues in Teen Space ....................................................................................................................... 8  
Research Methods ....................................................................................................................................... 10  
  Data Collection .................................................................................................................................. 11  
  Data Analysis ..................................................................................................................................... 12  
Results ...................................................................................................................................................... 13  
  Survey .................................................................................................................................................. 13  
  Adult Use of Teen Space and Problematic Adult Behaviors ...................................................................... 13  
  Librarian/Staff Perspectives on Behavior ................................................................................................. 17  
  Interviews ............................................................................................................................................ 19  
  Problematic Behaviors ............................................................................................................................ 19  
  Incidents .............................................................................................................................................. 22  
  Issue Importance ................................................................................................................................... 24  
Discussion ............................................................................................................................................... 25  
  Problematic Behaviors ............................................................................................................................ 25  
  Perspectives on Behaviors ....................................................................................................................... 26  
  Addressing Behavior ............................................................................................................................... 26  
Conclusion .............................................................................................................................................. 33  
  Limitations of Study ............................................................................................................................... 33  
  Implications for Practice .......................................................................................................................... 34  
Appendix ................................................................................................................................................. 36  
  A. Survey Questions ............................................................................................................................... 36  
  B. Interview: Guiding Questions ............................................................................................................... 38  
Bibliography .......................................................................................................................................... 39
Introduction

The seed for teen services can be seen back in the late 1800s, when library figures like Anne Carroll Moore, director of the New York Public Library’s (NYPL) Work with Children division, recognized the library was losing its younger patrons as they aged out of the children’s room. Moore sought to rectify this through appointing Mabel Williams, now considered a pioneer of young adult services, to act as a liaison between NYPL and the local schools (Campbell, 1998).

However, as can be seen in Voice of Youth Advocate’s (VOYA) timeline of youth services, teens historically have been considered part of either children or adult services, with little call for a department or librarian specifically catering to the needs of teens (VOYA, 2010). Thus, it is only relatively recently that libraries have begun focusing on teens as a population of patrons distinct from children and adults. Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA), for example, was not founded until 1957 when the Association for Young People’s Librarians was split into a children and a teen division. The movement to better serve teens has spawned the creation of a separate department within many libraries, consisting of a physical space, distinct collection, and professional staff. Teen services has also begun focusing on a younger age group than the early libraries, shifting from a focus on high school age to middle and even late elementary aged youths (Campbell, 1998).

One way libraries seek to simultaneously meet teen needs and attract teen patrons to libraries is through creating a separate physical space in the building, which often
houses the young adult literature collection as well as teen programming. This space is intended to be a safe, “private” space for teens to hang out. Combined with a supportive librarian, teen spaces can provide teens with an emotionally and developmentally supportive area (Walter, 2003).

Unfortunately, in existing libraries the teen space is often carved out from the children and adult departments, making it difficult to create a physical area readily identifiable as “the teen space”. Even in new libraries that are designed with a teen space in mind, librarians in charge of the teen space often find themselves struggling to maintain the “teen identity” of the space against adult encroachment. Anecdotal evidence encountered by the principle investigator suggests a tendency of adults to sit wherever there is a quiet space in the library, regardless of “whose space” that is. This habit is problematic, as an adult presence tends to make teens uncomfortable. As part of developing identity and autonomy, teens need privacy and opportunities to “independently exercise judgment” (McNeely, p. 46-7). This paper is concerned with the question: “What are the problematic adult behaviors that occur in the teen library space, and how do teen services librarians and staff handle these problematic adult behaviors?”

As it is difficult to directly observe the behavior in question without becoming part of it, the investigator will rely on teen services librarian and staff reports on the behavior.

**Literature Review**

**Teen Services in Libraries**

Libraries have not traditionally been responsive to the needs of teenagers. Whalen & Costello (2002) identify several trends in public libraries that impede their ability to adequately serve teens. Teen services staff are often more vulnerable to budget cuts, and
many Teen service librarians have a lower status in public libraries compared to other positions. Consequently some libraries treat their Teens service’s position as an entry-level position, which means the library staff are often inexperienced in long-range planning. Additionally, most libraries have a culture of order and quietness protected by policies, which fits ill with the natural tendency of teenagers to be sociable and noisy. As readers, teenagers vary greatly in ability and tastes making them difficult to collect for, while popular teen literature often offends educational sensibilities and is neglected. Further, population patterns cause library planners to believe that they can afford to neglect teens, believing they will return later when they have small children.

Despite these obstacles, however, there is a growing awareness in libraries of the need for teen services and of how to meet teen needs. Pulling from a variety of studies, Whalen & Costello (2002) provide five basic principles for serving teens: “

- ‘Problem-free is not fully prepared’
- Youth need a wide range of experiences in diverse settings to develop adaptive skills and the confidence to use them
- Youth thrive in communities that link families, government services, and private and community organizations into a web of supports for family, youth, and children
- Youth thrive in communities that think round-the-clock and beyond the school day to create opportunities for youth development
- Youth thrive in organizations that see them as valuable contributors to their own development and assets to community development” (p. 32-33).

These are principles libraries are well positioned to meet, especially in libraries that follow Houston’s (2011) suggestions and include full staff involvement, a space set aside and designed for teenagers, a teen volunteering program, regular programing for teenagers, and a teen advisory board.

Providing teen services in libraries offers several benefits. YALSA’s National Forum on Libraries & Teens found that “libraries help to mitigate the social and
economic factors that teens face by bridging the growing knowledge divide, building on
teens’ motivation to learn, providing workforce development training, and serving as the
“connector” between teens and other community agencies” (Braun, Hartman, Hughes-
Hassell, & Kumasi, 2013, p. 11). Additionally, libraries often are the only source of free
Internet and provide access to technology for low-income teens, as well as serving as safe
space for teens who are homeless or social outcasts (Braun et al, 2013, p. 11-12).

Trapskin (2008) suggests providing teen services offers the additional benefit of
improved library security. Providing programming designed for teens can reduce tensions
between teens and adult patrons by reducing competition for computers and allowing
teens an opportunity to release pent-up energy from school without disturbing other
patrons. Additionally, Trapskin asserts that book clubs, especially Guys Read book clubs,
provide teens with both role models and a personal connection to the library, ideally
leading to greater respect towards library property and policies. Trapskin’s assumption is
that teenagers are the primary security concern in the library; however, Bernier (2011)
demonstrates that youth are represented in the media in an unfairly negative manner,
shaping public perception of teens as troublemakers. This brings into question the
validity of Trapskin’s assertion that library security is dependent on occupying teens
attention.

relationship with the librarians can have an impact on teen behavior within the library.
McNeil asserts that, “[In refusing to treat teens respectfully as patrons], librarians may
actually be the disruptive element, not the young adults”(p48). McNeil suggests staff
trained in working with teens is a necessity in any public library, not only for the benefit
of the teens but also to help keep peace within the library by insuring teens feel respected and welcomed.

Yoholen & Pittman (2003, p. 3) identify from the Public Libraries as Partners in Youth Development (PLPYD) initiative several challenges successful teen services face. These include balancing innovation and tradition; balancing breadth and depth of services; engaging youth as partners; rethinking staff recruitment, roles, and development; and building community partnerships. Through overcoming these challenges, the libraries involved in the PLPYD were better able to realize their potential to serve teen developmental needs.

**Teen Space**

Merely creating a teen services department is not enough. The literature supports the belief that the presence of a physical space in libraries devoted to and designed for teen usage is important for both teens and the library. If well designed, this space meets teen developmental needs, increases teen comfort in libraries (which have a negative stereotype for some as being overly restrictive), and increases teen investment in the library. It can also create a space for teens to be themselves, which is potentially noisy and sociable, away from patrons whom it would bother.

Bernier (1998) challenges the allocation of library space in the 1990s for teenagers, criticizing libraries for providing more space for restrooms than teenagers. Instead, Bernier proposes a series of design characteristics for libraries to take into consideration for their teen spaces based on his observation of teen behavior, such as spaces for noisy group studying and a variety of seating options. He also observes that
libraries offer teens “an unparalleled spatial opportunity” as a free, safe, public space which libraries should exploit (p. 52).

YALSA (2012) provides guidelines for what a library teen space needs in order to best meet the developmental, educational, and social needs of teen patrons. YALSA (2012)’s first guideline emphasizes the importance of having teens involved in the planning of the space, which provides teens a sense of ownership while ensuring the library will successfully create a space teens will feel comfortable using. Additionally, YALSA suggests the space should allow teens to be louder, be creative and display their creations, and contain materials in a variety of different formats. Unlike Bernier, YALSA also discusses the library’s virtual space for teens within the guidelines. However, there is a greater focus on the physical space in YALSA’s guidelines, suggesting that a tangible location is still important to today’s teens.

The space for teens also should speak to their interests, while preparing teens for the transition to adulthood. Farrelly (2011) warns against focusing too much on keeping the teen room decorations current with the latest fads or engaging in “cool-hunting,” akin to the YALSA (2012) guideline to “provide furniture and technology that is practical yet adaptive” (p. 7). While Farrelly agrees decorations should be, as YALSA suggests, appropriate to current teen interests, he points out how quickly interests change and describes fads as “hazardous to the library as a whole,” as fads can lend themselves to unforeseen physical danger, create a sense of impermanence in what is meant as a stable space, and be expensive (p. 6-8). Instead, Farrelly advocates that libraries focus on simplicity when designing and furnishing the physical teen space, as this avoids both the danger of investing in a quickly outdated look as well as the equal danger of creating a
“little kids room,” which runs counter to the goal of the space serving as a transition to adulthood.

One way Farrelly (2011) suggests the space can aid the transition to adulthood is by laying the space out in a manner similar to the adult section, while having a “drop zone” based on the latest teen interest or a popular YA title. Unlike some, Farrelly believes the teen space should not be entirely separate from the rest of the library: “Young adults are not being taught to be better young adults; they are being raised to eventually join the adult world…So then, why should the young adult spaces be sectioned off entirely, a wholly separate world from both the children’s section and the adult’s? (p. 9).” Allowing interaction between teens and adults, Farrelly argues, will aid the teen transition to adulthood.

**Adults/Issues in Teen Space**

Teen services literature includes discussions on security and conflict in the library. These address potential conflicts between teenagers and other patrons, vandalism and misbehavior, and safety concerns like cyber-bullying, as well as ways to design or make use of the physical teen space in the library to defuse these issues.

One security issue is protecting the teens using library computers from online threats. To this end, many libraries have installed filters on their Internet access, thus limiting web browsing to “safe” sites. Harris (2010) argues that teens behave online in a much safer fashion than they are generally given credit. She suggests that teens feel more threatened by adults and authority figures who will constrain them or judge them (p. 75).

Another possible issue of security for teens in the library is the presence of unfamiliar adults within the teen space. Attitudes about the issue of adults in the teen
space have changed over recent years. Bolan (2003) says this is not an issue of adults using the teen space, but teens under-using it, and it should be resolved simply by making it a space teens want to use. However, in subsequent years Bolan acknowledges:

“…General [adults usage of the teen area] was due to lack of attention and lack of use of libraries by teen customers. Now, it is more common… because it is the area with comfortable seating and new technology” (2009, p. 134). Bolan (2009) points out that neglecting adult areas can lead to problematic behaviors by adults, who will prefer the nicer furnishings of a well-furnished teen space, and prescribes measures that would help limit adult intrusion, such as signage, design, and polices.

There is another way in which adult presence in a teen space can be problematic. YALSA (2012) guidelines not only address teen discomfort with adults, but also suggest a need to protect teens from predatory adults. Section 5.6.b. justifies a teen-only space because it serves to “Enable teens to feel safe from risky, adult-initiated interactions” (p. 6). Additionally, Males (2013) suggests the clash between teens and adults is not merely a generational one. The current shift in demographics means that while older patrons tend to be white, teens and children are becoming more racially and ethnically diverse, to the degree that by 2030 there will no longer be a “majority” race. Additionally, Males argues that increasing technology changes mean there is little adults and youth can teach or learn from one another. Males (2013) states, “adults, bound to tradition, cannot handle the jolting pace of modern racial and technological change and become irrationally alienated from younger generations they see as embodying an unwanted present and future (p. 153).” However, similar to Farrelly (2011) Males does not believe that
completely separating the generations from one another is the best solution to preventing conflicts in the teen space.

With few exceptions, the literature is largely silent on the issue of adults disrupting the teen space, either through unconscious reclamation of it as a space for adults to sit and work, or through the significantly more disquieting acts of predation or stigmatization of teens in the area. The majority of articles addressing teen safety concerns within libraries is limited largely to online predation and cyber-bullying. However, acts that discourage teen use of their section of the library by making the space seem to no longer be for them or even feel unsafe for them to be in are equally problematic. Protecting the emotional security of teens is just as important as their physical security. This study hopes to expand the literature on the issue of adults in the teen library space.

**Research Methods**

This study was conducted using both online surveys created in Qualtrics and interviews conducted either over the phone or in person. Surveys and interviews are common methods used to research qualitative data. As Babbie (2010) observes, interviews have several advantages over traditional surveys: interviews have higher response rates, reduce the number of unanswered questions, and can insure responses are relevant to the question asked by clarifying misunderstandings. However, interviews carry the risk of the interviewer creating bias in respondents. Semi-structured interview questions allow interviewers greater flexibility to explore certain issues and responses, while still having a framework of themes/questions to explore during the course of the interview.
Surveys, as Babbie (2010) explains, can be used for a variety of studies, but are particularly appropriate for studying large populations that would be difficult to study otherwise. Surveys are also particularly appropriate for assessing the attitudes or opinions of a particular group. Surveys, however, are susceptible to low response rates and completion rates. Further, it can be difficult to determine how representative respondents are of the general population being studied.

Online surveys can allow researchers to reach a greater number of respondents than other types of surveys, like mail or telephone surveys. However, online surveys underrepresent certain segments of the population who do not have access to the Internet or do not feel comfortable using it. For the purposes of this study, this is not a major concern, as most librarians (teen services or otherwise) are required by their jobs to regularly interact with the Internet and to communicate via email. Another issue with online surveys is the greater difficulty in ensuring respondents are representative of the general population.

**Data Collection**

For survey purposes, the population is the members of the North Carolina State Library youth services listserv, NCkids. This listserv has approximately 180 members, out of whom 38 members responded to the survey. The listserv is for both children and teen services librarians and staff in North Carolina, but only employees that regularly work with teenagers or the teen space were able to respond to the survey, as the survey had a filter question that took ineligible respondents to the end of the survey. An invitation to take the survey, which contained a mix of open and closed questions [see Appendix A],
was sent to members of the listserv. The email explained the purpose of the study and also contained a link to the online survey. A reminder email was sent out two weeks later.

For interviewing purposes, I interviewed teen services librarians and staff. I define “teen services librarians and staff” as library employees whose target group for programming, collecting materials, and other job functions are teens. There is no firm consensus in libraries on what ages count as teens, but for the purposes of this study “teen” refers to anyone between the ages of 11-18 years old. Criteria for selection was working as a teen services librarian or staff member within the state of North Carolina and being a full-time employee. Five teen services staff members were interviewed in person using the semi-structured interview method. The interviews were conducted either over the phone or in-person. Interviews that were recorded were transcribed as soon after completion as possible and the participants given pseudonyms, at which point the original recordings and notes on of the interview were destroyed. Each interview lasted between 10-20 minutes, and eight questions were asked [see Appendix B]. Participants were recruited from librarians who indicated on the survey that they were interested in participating in an interview.

**Data Analysis**

According to Wildemuth (2009), qualitative content analysis differs from quantitative analysis in three ways: qualitative analysis seeks to describe the messages within the text, is inductive, and uses purposefully selected texts. This study is concerned with the perspectives of teen service librarians, intends to look more at what the data says about the issue though the research has some basis in previous research, and makes little attempt to randomly sample the population, and, in the case of the surveys, the population
surveys is intentionally selected by the researcher. The researcher believes this study meets the qualifications of qualitative content analysis, though there are some quantitative elements to be addressed in the analysis.

The surveys were hand-coded by the researcher for latent content. According to Wildemuth (2009), manifest content “is easily observable and countable”, whereas latent content “is conceptual and cannot be directly observed in the messages under analysis” (p. 298-299). The interview transcriptions and notes were hand-coded by the researcher, coding for latent content like the surveys.

**Results**

**Survey**

**Adult Use of Teen Space and Problematic Adult Behaviors**

Survey participants were asked in an open-ended question, “Do you experience problematic adult behavior in the teen space at your library?” (question 4, Appendix A). Twenty-four respondents answered this question. The categories were not mutually exclusive, so responses mentioning more than one problematic behavior were assigned to multiple categories. Six staff members indicated that they have “rarely” or “not often” experienced problematic adult behavior, though two qualified this with examples of behavior they occasionally experience. Two staff responded with an unqualified “yes.”

Three distinct examples of problematic behavior were identified in the responses: adult use of the space, adults policing teens, and adults disobeying signage/policies. Adult use of space (see Table 1) was the most commonly cited problematic behavior, being noted by seventeen of the respondents; this behavior was described by respondents as being problematic either because adults competed with teens for resources, or because
teens were uncomfortable with the presence of adults within a space designated for teen use. Adults policing teens and adults disobeying signage and polices were each mentioned three times; policing behavior included noise complaints, as well as parents with children noticing a teen looking at “inappropriate” pictures.

Table 1: Frequency with Which Adults Use Teen Space

As shown in Table 2, the frequency of problematic adult behavior varied among the respondents, with most respondents seeing incidents occur either less than once a month (nine respondents) or seeing incidents daily (eight respondents). The remaining respondents were equally divided among incidents occurring never, once a month, once a week, and 2-3 times a week. Thus, of 38 respondents, 72% reported observing problematic behavior in their library teen space.
Participants were asked to identify how often they observed specific problematic behaviors of adult use of the teen space, including invasion/threatening teen privacy, stalking or predatory behavior towards teens, and other (see questions 6-10, Appendix A). As Table 3 shows, the most commonly experienced behavior was adult usage of the teen space, observed by 31 of the 38 respondents. Invasion or threatening of teen privacy and stalking/predatory behavior were the next most-observed behaviors, being observed by nine and eight respondents respectively. However, invasion of teen privacy was observed more frequently than predatory behaviors, with four of nine respondents seeing invasion of privacy daily, while four of the eight respondents who observed predatory behavior in the teen space described it as occurring less than once a month (See Tables 4 and 5). Only two respondents described “other” problematic behaviors; these included “none” and “conducting tutoring and meetings”.

Table 2: Reported Frequency of Problematic Adult Behavior

![Graph showing frequency of reported behaviors]

Participants were asked to identify how often they observed specific problematic behaviors of adult use of the teen space, including invasion/threatening teen privacy, stalking or predatory behavior towards teens, and other (see questions 6-10, Appendix A). As Table 3 shows, the most commonly experienced behavior was adult usage of the teen space, observed by 31 of the 38 respondents. Invasion or threatening of teen privacy and stalking/predatory behavior were the next most-observed behaviors, being observed by nine and eight respondents respectively. However, invasion of teen privacy was observed more frequently than predatory behaviors, with four of nine respondents seeing invasion of privacy daily, while four of the eight respondents who observed predatory behavior in the teen space described it as occurring less than once a month (See Tables 4 and 5). Only two respondents described “other” problematic behaviors; these included “none” and “conducting tutoring and meetings”.

Table 2: Reported Frequency of Problematic Adult Behavior

![Graph showing frequency of reported behaviors]
Table 3: Types of Adult Problematic Behaviors

Table 4: Frequency of Adults Invading/Threatening Teen Privacy
Table 5: Frequency of Adult Predatory or Stalking Behavior

Librarian/Staff Perspectives on Behavior

Thirty-seven of the respondents shared their perspective of whether adults should use the teen space and in what ways (question 12, Appendix A); responses were counted multiple times if they addressed multiple issues. Twelve of the respondents did not feel adults should use the teen space, as some noted that adults could present a “safety issue” in the space, while others believe that teens need a space of their own. Eight respondents felt that adults should not use the space for “hanging out,” but indicated using the space for other purposes may be acceptable. Several respondents identified specific adult uses of the teen space that they felt to be acceptable: browsing YA literature (10 respondents); use of space for an activity related to helping teens, such as accompanying a teen, tutoring, or by teachers for classroom use (nine respondents); and use of space during times teens were not present (eight respondents).

Four respondents felt that adult usage of the space for adult purposes, such as reading or use of study space or tables, was acceptable at any time. Three respondents
noted that the issue of whether and how adults should use the teen space was complicated by the physical layout of their library, either because of a lack of seating or because the teen space was not physically distinct. Two staff stated that they felt a lack of support from other library employees or administration for their perspective on the issue, though this observation was not directly related to problematic adult behaviors.

**Addressing Problematic Behavior**

Only eight of the 38 total respondents indicated their library had a written policy about adult usage of the teen space (question 2, Appendix A). Seven respondents provided a summary of their library’s policy. Three of these policies reserved the space for teen-only use during specific times (presumably expected periods of highest use) or outright banned non-teenaged patrons from the space. The remaining three policies indicate that adults who enter the space without accompanying a teen or on business related to the space will be encouraged to visit a more age- or purpose-appropriate area of the library.

Thirty-six of the respondents responded to the open-ended question: “Do you currently have a way for teens to report adult behaviors that make them uncomfortable? (question 11, Appendix A)” Eleven respondents indicated there is no mechanism for reporting uncomfortable behavior. Thirteen respondents wrote that teens could inform a staff member or library security, though it was unclear how teens were made aware of this reporting mechanism. Five respondents reported that library/teen staff told teens to inform the staff of any issues in the teen space. Two respondents reported that they maintained friendly relationships with teens, and two listed unique reporting mechanisms, such as a teen suggestion box and a disruptive behavior policy, though the nature of this
policy was not described in detail. One person indicated they had a reporting mechanism in place, but did not describe it.

Survey respondents were given an opportunity to share their suggestions for handling problematic adult behavior, to which 27 responded (question 13, Appendix A); responses were counted multiple times if they addressed multiple issues. Six respondents indicated that they either had no problems or had no suggestions, with one respondent indicating they have not had success in solving adult behavior related issues. The most common suggestion was to maintain staff presence in the teen space (six respondents), followed by defining the teen space either in a physical manner, or by creating a “teen” feeling of ownership of the space (five respondents). Signage and policies were also proposed solutions (four respondents each). Some respondents suggested designating computers for teen-only use (three respondents), while two respondents proposed making the entire teen space a teen-only zone. Two respondents indicated that having other staff involved was important to efforts to prevent problematic adult behavior. Three responses did not fit into any of these categories (“teen department be separate,” “Our problems all arise from aged out teens showing up everyday to hang out with high school kids,” and “If teens feel comfortable in the space they will definitely help regulate it”).

Interviews

Problematic Behaviors

Interview participants defined “problematic adult behavior” in a variety of ways. Danielle defined it simply as “anything that makes teens uncomfortable.” Travis defined problematic behavior in a similar manner, stating that “problematic adult behaviors would mostly be things that either deter teens from using the space or take resources
away from the teens, strictly for adult use.” The remaining participants mentioned more specific behaviors in defining problematic behavior. Kelly and Stacy defined it as adults interacting with teens inappropriately, described by Kelly as “trying to engage teens too much. …[a]dults who are strangers who are trying to get close to teens, but don’t have any reason to do so”; Kelly added this was not necessarily in a predatory manner, while Stacy described this behavior as “definitely problematic, and somewhat predatory”. Stacy added that adult use of the space is also problematic if it runs counter to library polices on use. Kelsey defined problematic adult behavior as adults using the space for “non-library” purpose, such as hanging out in the space.

Interviewees’ also expressed a range of opinions on whether adult presence in the teen space was problematic. Kelsey felt that an adult presence was definitely problematic. Stacy believed adults should not be in spaces designated for teen use, especially if there are policies in place limiting use to teens only. Kelly and Travis took a more nuanced view. Kelly stated that adults in the teen space was not as much of an issue at her library, but felt “it is an issue overall in teen services,” since in other libraries adults take over the teen space and effectively dislocate teens within the library. Travis felt “context is …definitely the important thing,” as there are certain situations in which preferable to have an adult present (such as a disabled teen’s caregiver), though he did feel adults could be problematic in the space. Danielle felt that, while she would prefer there not to be adults within the teen space, an adult presence was not innately problematic: “Just being there is less of a problem than other …concrete activity.”

Most of the interview participants reported that they had experienced issues with adults using the teen space at their library. Kelsey’s teen space had difficulty with adults
who disregarded the library policies and took over the space, through eating and drinking, talking loudly, and using inappropriate language within the teen space. These adults made the space so unwelcoming that even other adults would go to the children’s section to avoid them, forcing the director to ban unaccompanied adults from the children’s space, though no similar action was taken to protect the teen space. Similarly, Stacy had problems with adults being in the teen space against library policy, and becoming confrontational when asked to leave. Travis had adults regularly use the teen space as a quiet room, though this behavior only becomes problematic during certain times of day, and adults rarely become belligerent when asked to move from the teen space. While Danielle has had some issues with adults using the space, aside from an adult who use the teen space for napping, most problematic behaviors were isolated incidents of behaviors that would be problematic regardless of what library space they took place in, such as indecent exposure.

In addition to adults using the space in a problematic manner, Kelly and Stacy both reported issues with adults interacting with the teens in ways that either violated their privacy or were potentially predatory. Kelly had problems especially with “new adults,” 20 to 23 year-olds (particularly male) who do not appear to realize that they have out-grown the teen space, and tend to interact with young teen/pre-teen girls, who they treat “as if they could be potential girlfriend-boyfriend situations.” However, Kelly also had a parent who tried to “educate” teens, which is problematic more in the sense of violating teen’s privacy and space. Stacy reported working at a library in the past where adults spoke or even preached to teens who were strangers to them, or adults would enter the teen space and speak to teens they were familiar with for long periods of time, despite
the teens clearly being uncomfortable with this. Travis reported having difficulties with adults taking away resources from teens, particularly computers, as well as trouble with adults asking teens to be quiet or turning off or requesting that librarians turn off the music the librarians play in the teen space.

**Incidents**

The frequency with which participants observed problematic adult behavior in their teen space ranged from daily to almost once a year. Representing opposite ends of the spectrum, Kelsey experienced daily trouble with adults, while Danielle observed only 4-5 incidents in as many years. Travis’ teen space is a relatively new space, but the frequency of incidents had decreased over time from initially weekly incidents to currently once or twice a month. Stacy observed that the frequency of incidents varied at each library she worked in, though she observed more frequent incidents in spaces that are designated teen-only all the time, as opposed to spaces that are limited to teen-only use at specific times of the day. Kelly described incidents in her teen space as happening intermittently, as “[the teen space will] go long periods of time when nothing …is going on, and then someone—again, its usually a new adult—just for some reason decides to just hang out with us for several weeks. Then they’re gone.”

One cause for problematic behaviors mentioned by participants was the teen space itself. In Travis’ and Kelly’s libraries the teen space is seen by adults as a convenient, quiet space to work in, while Danielle mentioned that her teen space has a very comfortable piece of furniture that is attractive to adults. Kelsey's teen space is located out of the sight of library staff, enabling problematic behaviors. Stacy felt the physical space appeals to adults as a quiet, comfortable area, but also felt problematic
behavior in her teen space is more a result of adults belittling teens’ right to a library space, as “they don’t think the teens deserve those spaces.” Travis and Kelly also reported that, in addition to an appealing space, problematic adult behavior is also caused by misperceptions. For Kelly, problems result predominately from a misperception by new adults both of what the space is intended for (they perceive as a hangout), and even more a misperception of themselves; in other words, these new adults fail to recognize they are no longer teenagers, and thus no longer belong in that space. Travis felt in his library’s teen space there is a misperception by adults of what teens want from a library, which involves noise and multi-tasking.

The interviewees had different strategies for resolving issues in the teen space. Kelly and Travis both have a group of teens that visit the space after school, and found the group’s presence in the library often was enough to dislodge adults from the teen space; Kelly’s teens caused enough disruption in the library that “there are some adults that don’t even come here in the afternoon.” Similarly, Stacy reminded adults reluctant to move from the teen space that it will become noisy and can get “rowdy” when teens are present. This can be something of a double-edged sword, however, as both Kelly and Travis mentioned that sometimes the teens will be unruly elsewhere in the library as well.

Outside of the teens regulating the space themselves, Travis reported adults are generally allowed in the space when it is empty, but if adults become belligerent when asked to leave police will be called. Stacy and Danielle both tried explaining to adults using the space that it is meant for teen use, though Danielle stated that this only works about half the time in her space, while Stacy tried also to discern what the adult is using the space for and redirect them to another library space that will meet that purpose.
Similarly, Kelsey reminded adults who are behaving problematically of the library’s policies; however, she found it difficult to enforce these policies as the adults do not listen, and she and the other library employees are reluctant to ban repeat offenders, since they know that the problematic adults “don’t have anywhere else to go, and have a need for the library.” Kelly’s response was, “[t]o be honest, we don’t [resolve issues]”.

However, when she did observe new adults interacting with underage girls, she told them, “you know she’s eleven” to try and dissuade them; however, due to a lack of policy she felt unable to tell them to leave the area for just talking to these girls, or to ask any other adults engaging teens in a problematic but not obviously criminal ways to leave.

**Issue Importance**

All interviewees felt the issue of problematic adult behavior in the teen space was important. Given the unresolved issues in her space, Kelsey believed it was a serious issue. Travis felt it depended on context, but in spaces with problematic behavior it was a serious concern, “its important to protect that space for teens, because a lot of times they’re not going to protect it for themselves.” Danielle, Kelly, and Stacy agreed that it was critical to provide teens a space in the library, which the presence of adults can undermine. Kelly mentioned that it “is an issue overall in teen services” (question 2, Appendix B), and that “it can really hurt teen services in general”; Stacy felt that there is a movement in the profession to bring in more teens in the library and make them feel welcomed, which is undermined by letting adults occupy spaces ostensibly set up for teens.
Discussion

Problematic Behaviors

By far the most common and frequent problematic adult behavior identified in this study was adult use of the teen space. However, there were a variety of reasons that respondents found this behavior problematic, including that it took resources away from teens, it made teens uncomfortable in their designated space, and it created a possibility for other problematic adult behaviors to occur. One respondent observed “Teens will not use the space if there are adults there. They have plenty of stranger danger training and they listened,” pointing out that for teens any unknown adult represents a potential threat. Unlike invasion of privacy or predatory behavior, adult use of space was often qualified, with many respondents describing when they felt adults could be in and use the teen space without being problematic. However, there were still a number of respondents who felt adults should not use the teen space at all, making this a surprisingly divisive issue.

Regarding the other behaviors asked about in the survey, it was encouraging to see that invasion of privacy and predatory behaviors were not a frequently experienced issue among respondents. However, it is still disheartening to see that some teen spaces have suffered breaches of physical and emotional safety.

While only one additional behavior was listed in the “other” category, other parts of the survey indicated there were problematic adult behaviors beyond the anticipated categories of use of space, invasion of privacy, and predation. These included adults disobeying or disregarding library signage and policies regarding the teen space. One respondent shared a particularly illustrative example: “The adults move the signs [stating tables are for teen use after 3 pm] and get angry when the teens are wanting to use the
space that clearly states it belongs to them at a certain time of the day”. Another troubling adult behavior noted by some respondents was adults attempting to be authority figures towards teens within the teens’ space, such as “adults that try to tell the teens how to act in their own space”. While these two behaviors could be considered part of “invasion of privacy,” they are both very intentional acts that not only disturb teen privacy, but show a lack of respect towards teens and their rights as fellow library patrons, as well as a lack of understanding of their needs.

**Perspectives on Behaviors**

There was a general lack of consensus in the surveys of which adult behaviors were acceptable in the teen space. Some of the respondents felt adults should never be allowed in the teen space; others were divided about the ways adults can use the space that would be non-problematic, though many agreed that adults could be present when most teens were not, and adults could use the space for activities meant to benefit teens, such as tutoring, or selecting materials. Additionally, many felt that adults should be allowed to browse YA literature, without necessarily having to be looking on behalf of a teen. One participant explained that “[a]nyone who's interested in reading YA books should be able to comfortably browse the shelves, and YA titles have gotten much more popular with adults over the last few years,” though it is not clear if all the respondents who felt adults should be allowed to browse in the YA space hoped to encourage adult respect and interest in YA literature.

**Addressing Behavior**

Interestingly, few of the libraries represented in the survey had a policy in place regarding the teen space. Policies and signage were less recommended ways to
circumvent problematic adult behavior. It is not entirely clear in the survey results if policy is a less frequently used method because staff have had success with other methods, or if policies have been tried in the past and failed to curb problematic adult behaviors. There is some evidence in the survey results that the latter may be the case; as mentioned earlier, several respondents had issues in their library’s teen space with adults disregarding policies and signage, and one respondent explicitly stated that both had failed to impact adult behavior: “Signage doesn't work, nor does directly addressing it with adult patrons.” However, this evidence is inconclusive, and policies should remain a potential solution to problematic adult behavior as it gives staff authority to address problematic behaviors as they arise, provided that they are regularly enforced.

The interviews suggested that in some libraries, the lack of policies was not due to a lack of interest on the part of the teen services staff. During the interviews, it became clear that the participants without policies at their library felt hampered by their absence, but were unable to convince library policy-setters that there was a need for policies specific to the teen library space. For Kelly, this meant that she was unable to take action against the new adults behaving in a problematic manner towards preteen girls or adults that invade teen privacy by sitting down to talk with them, because as she states, “they’re not doing anything particularly wrong, and they’re not going against any of our policies, so I can’t necessarily say ‘you need to leave this space.’ Because we don’t have a policy in that says adults cannot be in teen spaces.” Danielle’s library had a board in charge of setting policy, meaning that policy changes occur infrequently. Thus, outside of criminal situations in the teen space, Danielle explains, “I can’t make anyone move, I can just request that they move,” which has proven to be an ineffective method of handling adults
in the space. She adds that because there have not been serious incidents in the teen space, her coworkers and director do not feel there needs to be a policy in place. The fault of such thinking is that it assumes that a library and its user population never change. Additionally, if a serious incident does occur, there will be no way for the teen services staff to protect the teens involved, meaning the library administration has essentially chosen to risk the physical or emotional security of their teens against there never being a problem in the space.

It became clear in speaking with Stacy and Kelsey, however, that having policies or signage in place does not ensure that issues in the space will be easily resolved. Stacy had adults become “confrontational” and “aggressive” when asked to leave the space, despite policies limiting the use to teens-only at certain times of the day or all-day. She has even had difficulty with adults “sitting at table with a sign directly in front of them that says ‘This space is reserved for teens.’” She noted that policies regarding use of space are harder to enforce in libraries that reserve the space for teens at all times, rather than ones that make the space teens-only at specific times. Kelsey’s library had policies regarding acceptable behavior in the library that are actively disregarded by adults using the teen space. However, the measures library staff feel they would have to resort to in order to enforce policy, namely banning or removing patrons from the library, seem to them too harsh, since the problematic adults tend to be individuals perceived as not having “anywhere else to go.”

In contrast, Travis felt his teen space has had success with signage and policies: “we’ve recently changed our signage and made it a little bit more obvious what the room is and I think that’s helped a lot.” He had also recently added a sign near the entrance
informing patrons to ask the librarian on duty if they are looking for a quiet space, since some of the problematic usage o was due to its visibility as a quiet space. His library limited usage of the teen space at specific times of day, when teens tend to present, which has also limited issues as he/staff do not have to “justify an empty room” during times of low teen-usage, and the teens seem to “self-regulate” the space when they are present after school.

Teens appear to have few options for reporting problematic adult behavior in teen spaces. In some libraries, teens could tell staff or security, but there was no indication how, or even if, teens are made aware that they may do so, nor how the library ensured that teens would feel comfortable in approaching these authority figures. Some of the librarians used direct interaction with teens or the teen space as part of their reporting mechanism: “teens informed by staff to tell staff of problems, “staff watches area for issues, and “maintains friendly relationship with teens.”

There were two unique systems for reporting problematic behaviors: a disruptive behavior policy and a teen suggestion box. While it is unclear how a disruptive behavior policy facilitates teen reporting, or how teens are made aware of the policy, it potentially provides a formal mechanism for dealing with problematic behavior. The respondent with the teen suggestion box mentioned that it was not expressly intended for teens to report problematic behavior, but that teens had occasionally used it for such. Though this was only one example, it may prove effective in some libraries to provide a similarly anonymous, low-stakes mechanism for teens to report behavior through, as teens may feel intimidated or fear reprisal if they report in-person to a library authority figure, such as staff or security.
An important issue brought up by several survey respondents was the need for the involvement of other staff and administration in handling issues within the teen space. Some respondents mentioned a need to involve other library staff in creating and implementing policy, while other respondents mentioned maintaining a staff presence around the teen space as a strategy for warding off problematic behaviors—presumably this would include non-youth services or teen services staff, as many libraries would not have enough staff in those divisions to maintain a vigil in the teen space. Additionally, one respondent noted that occasionally problematic behavior was exhibited by library staff: “Some staff members who do not work with teens will often complain of the noise teens make in the teen area. They do sometimes come in and admonish the teens to be quieter in a way that might discourage teens from using the library.” Staff outside of youth or teen services may need training in how to interact with teens.

This issue was also present in the interviews, particularly in relation to policy setting. Danielle would like to have a policy in place for her teen space, but was unable to convince her coworkers and director of the need for one, and without their support it is unlikely that her governing board would consider creating one: “I feel pretty strongly [the issue of problematic adult behaviors in the teen space], and I think I’m in the minority at my library.” Stacy mentioned that in systems with little teen services staff, other library staff tend not to be aware of or address issues with adults in the teen space. She also spoke of the need for the whole library to be involved with service to teens in order to reverse the negative perception of teens in the library and provide better service to teens, through understanding the nature of the teen space (such as the fact it’s going to be a louder space) and being more cognizant of how they arrange the space. She summed her
feelings: “I feel pretty strongly [the issue of problematic adult behaviors in the teen space], and I think I’m in the minority at my library.”

The survey results also highlighted a tension many staff felt in addressing the issue of adults in the teen space: a behavior can be both problematic and legitimate at the same time. As one survey participant observed, “That space needs to be used,” highlighting the difficulty of justifying kicking adult patrons out of an obviously empty space. This may explain the relative popularity of allowing adults in the teen space during specific times of the day. However, doing so may confuse adults who do not understand why they are being asked to leave a space that they have previously allowed in, or have a negative impact on home-schooled teens who visit the library while public schools are in session (though the libraries surveyed may have few or no homeschooled teen users). Another respondent observed that, “Sometimes adults sit with their children and notice that a teen maybe looking at inappropriate pictures or singing too loud using inappropriate words”—in such a case, one may understand that while the space “belongs” to teens, a parent also has a right to expect a “safe” space for their child.

This tension is echoed to a lesser degree in the interviews. Kelly’s space was occasionally visited by a parent who feels he should “educate” the teens to “be the best they can be.” Kelly’s observation on this behavior is apt: “this is not a bad thing, but does that make a teen feel comfortable in what is suppose to be their space? Is that why they’re there? No.” Travis mentioned that his library lets adults in during low periods of use because, “we want people to feel welcomed here, we don’t want to kick people out of an empty room,” pointing to the difficulty in explaining to adults why its unacceptable for them to use a room that is clearly unoccupied.
Another theme in the data was the role that the library’s physical design and layout plays in facilitating or mediating problematic adult behaviors. Several respondents mentioned the physical layout of their teen space when describing problematic adult behaviors in the space. These respondents mention the space affected adult behavior because it was not distinct from other library spaces or because its position relative to a service desk made the space easier or more difficult for staff to monitor. One respondent advised, “It would be a good idea in future librarians to think about space plans and collection layout.” While it would be impractical for many libraries currently to undergo a renovation of the teen space, keeping in mind the way the physical design can impact the effectiveness of the teen space is important to keep in mind when designing new libraries or in future renovations of current library spaces. Current libraries should consider ways to arrange the space that would make it make it distinct from the rest of the library, such as using existing furniture and shelving to demarcate the space or furnishing the teen space with furniture visually distinctive from the rest of the library’s furnishing.

The physical space was also a recurrent theme in the interviews, and all interview participants mentioned the physical teen space as a factor in encouraging or discouraging problematic adult behavior. For Travis and Kelsey, the position of the space in the library encouraged negative adult behaviors; Kelsey’s teen space is located in the back of the library, out of sight of library staff, while Travis’ teen room is at the entrance, making both visible from the library’s exterior and the first quiet spot adults encounter when they enter the library. Furnishings in the space can also attract trouble in the teen space; Danielle and Stacy have had issues with adults using the space because it has the most appealing furniture of all the library spaces.
On the other hand, Kelly and Stacy noted that the design of the space can reduce problematic behaviors when it is more physically defined. Specifically, Kelly and Stacy observed that an enclosed teen space helped reduce instances of problematic adult behavior, since it was clearly a separate space from the rest of the library. In Stacy’s case, the space did not have doors, but she found simply being “walled-off” was sufficient. Stacy added that, “if it's a more open area its really hard to kind of designate it, and its really hard to enforce [usage policies].” However, both also noted that their enclosed spaces still suffered adult intrusion, ranging from being treated as a meeting space in the evenings to adults directly interacting with teens. However, Travis felt that “you really have to fight to sort of define the space as what it is,” even though his teen space also a separate room within the library. In Travis’ case, however, he also noted that some problematic behaviors were due to the newness of the teen space in a population that had never had one before.

Interestingly, some participants also noted how the rest of the library’s design can affect the teen space. Kelly’s library only had two study rooms, so adults will use the teen space as a meeting place because it is one of the few remaining quiet spaces in the library where talking quietly is permitted. Stacy suggested libraries interested in creating a functional teen space need to, among other suggestions, “not put study rooms or public computers inside the teen area unless they are for teens.”

Conclusion

Limitations of Study

This study was limited to the geographic area of North Carolina and findings may not fully reflect the reality of libraries in more urban or rural states. Additionally, staff
selected for interview were those who volunteered, which may skew the findings of the interviews, as they likely would not have volunteered if they did not feel problematic adult behaviors were an issue. Another possible limitation is that library staff were used to indirectly observe the phenomenon under study instead of the researcher, though this is balanced by the difficulty in observing problematic behavior in the teen space without becoming a part of it.

Implications for Practice

This paper has identified several possible tactics for alleviating problematic behaviors in the teen space. However, while problematic adult behavior tends to take similar forms throughout libraries, each library’s situation is unique. The problems and solutions vary from library to library, and what works for one teen space may not be appropriate in another. Regardless, it is the author’s hope that this study’s findings will still be useful to any teen services staff or librarians concerned with problematic adult behaviors in their library’s teen space.

In particular, the role the physical space of the library played in encouraging or reducing problematic adult behaviors proved to be a major theme of the study. Interestingly, not only was the location of the teen space, as well as to whether it was enclosed or open, a factor in problematic behavior, but also the way the rest of the library was laid out and furnished could impact the teen area. For example, a lack of quiet study or meeting areas outside the teen space could lead to adults appropriating the space to work, as well as the presence of furniture nicer than that found in adult spaces. The ability of staff to monitor the teen space from a main desk also impacted the presence of problematic behavior.
Another study finding important for libraries to be aware of is the need for library-wide collaboration and cooperation in fostering the teen space. Staff not trained to work with teens may not recognize some adult behaviors as being problematic within a teen library space, while other may unintentional act towards teens in a problematic fashion, making teens feel unwelcomed in the library. Further, more powerful solutions such as signage and creation of policies will prove unsuccessful if teen services staff are not supported by fellow staff and administration in petitioning for and enforcing these regulations.

The most important finding of this study is, however, that the issue of problematic adult behavior within teen library spaces is a very real and serious concern. Though the staff surveyed had rarely witnessed a severe incident or one that ended with a teen’s safety jeopardized, many witnessed adult disregard and disrespect towards the needs and rights of teens, which is also damaging to both teens and library service.

It is recommendation by the researcher that a future, nation-wide study be conducted. This study should collect both demographic information and information about the physical teen space for the libraries represented by survey participants, in order to determine possible patterns and predictors of problematic behaviors. Future studies should also be expanded to include adults disregarding signage and/or polices and adults interacting with teens unknown to them as distinct categories of problematic behavior.
Appendix

A. Survey Questions

Librarian Responses to Adult Use of Teen Library Space

Thank you for agreeing to participate in our survey. Please answer each of the following questions as completely as possible. Remember participation is voluntary. You are free to answer or not answer any particular question and have no obligation to complete answering the questions once you begin. Completion should take approximately 15-20 minutes.

Q1. "I work primarily with teenagers"
   ☑ Yes (1)
   ☑ No (2)

Q2. Does your library have a written policy regarding adult use of teen space?
   ☑ Yes (1)
   ☑ No (2)

Q3. Please summarize the policy here.

Q4. Do you experience problematic adult behavior in the teen space at your library? "Problematic adult behavior" for the purpose of this survey refers to actions that discourage teen use or makes teens uncomfortable in the teen library space.

Q5. How often does problematic behavior occur?
   ☑ Never (1)
   ☑ Less than Once a Month (2)
   ☑ Once a Month (3)
   ☑ 2-3 Times a Month (4)
   ☑ Once a Week (5)
   ☑ 2-3 Times a Week (6)
   ☑ Daily (7)

Q6. What kinds of problematic adult behavior have you experienced in the teen space? Select all that apply.
   ☑ Using space (thus discouraging teen use) (1)
   ☑ Invading/threatening teen privacy (2)
   ☑ Stalking or other predatory towards teens (3)
   ☑ Other (4) ____________________
Q7. How often do adults use the teen space?
- Never (1)
- Less than Once a Month (2)
- Once a Month (3)
- 2-3 Times a Month (4)
- Once a Week (5)
- 2-3 Times a Week (6)
- Daily (7)

Q8. How often do adults invade/threaten teen privacy?
- Never (1)
- Less than Once a Month (2)
- Once a Month (3)
- 2-3 Times a Month (4)
- Once a Week (5)
- 2-3 Times a Week (6)
- Daily (7)

Q9. How often does stalking or predatory behavior towards teens occur?
- Never (1)
- Less than Once a Month (2)
- Once a Month (3)
- 2-3 Times a Month (4)
- Once a Week (5)
- 2-3 Times a Week (6)
- Daily (7)

Q10. If you selected "other", how often does this other behavior occur in the teen space?
- Never (1)
- Less than Once a Month (2)
- Once a Month (3)
- 2-3 Times a Month (4)
- Once a Week (5)
- 2-3 Times a Week (6)
- Daily (7)

Q11. Do you currently have a way for teens to report adult behaviors that make them uncomfortable?

Q12. Do you feel that it is okay for adults to use the teen space? If so, in what ways?
Q13. Do you have suggestions for preventing or altering problematic behaviors?

Q14. If you are willing to participate in an interview in which you'll be asked to discuss the issue of problematic adult behavior in the teen library space, please include your name and email address. Your survey answers will not be identified with your email address.

B. Interview: Guiding Questions
1. How would you define “problematic” adult behaviors in the teen room?
2. Do you feel the presence of adults in the teen space is problematic?
3. What issues have you had relating to “problematic adult behavior in the teen space”? What are the problematic behaviors?
4. How often do you have these incidents?
5. Why do you think these incidents occur?
   a. Does it stem from adult perceptions or attitudes of the teen space? Is it purely accidental?
   b. Is there a lack of quiet areas or comfortable seating in the library? Is the teen area more desirable than the adult or general spaces?
6. How do you resolve issues involving adults in the teen space?
7. How large or important of an issue do you personally feel this is? Do you feel adults in the teen space tend to be benign and only a minor issue?
8. Do you have any other comments on the issue of problematic adult behavior in the teen space?
Bibliography


Bibliography Continued


Bibliography Continued

