Safety in a public library: the perspective of visitors and staff

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Abstract

Purpose – In this study, the authors report visitors' and personnel's safety experiences and concerns in order to understand the safety conditions of a library.

Design/methodology/approach – The analysis is based on answers from a small sample survey of library visitors, interviews with the personnel and incidents recorded in a library in Stockholm the capital of Sweden.

Findings – Dealing with visitors under influence of drugs/alcohol or feeling intimidated by groups of young individuals are examples of situations in which the staff feel most unsafe. Visitors declare witnessing problems of public disturbance and disorderly conduct, fights and other types of aggression. Although the vast majority of visitors declare feeling safe in the library, their perceptions vary according to the library's environment and their individual characteristics, including their previous victimization.

Practical implications – The study is novel because it indicates the importance of the environment to ensure the safety conditions of the library for both visitors and staff. Finally, research on safety in libraries is often from North America and Western European contexts, while this study contributes to the international literature by illustrating libraries in a Nordic European context.

Social implications – The study indicates that more social control, both formal and informal, is at the top of the list of recommendations for visitors. Among personnel, recommendations include the need for cooperation with other local actors to solve problems in surrounding areas as well as better education for librarians in dealing with the current safety challenges of libraries as multifunctional public facilities.

Originality/value – Combine visitors' and personnel's safety experiences to better understand the safety conditions of a public library.

Keywords Fear of crime, Public libraries, Risky facilities, CAD, Surveys, Sweden

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Most public libraries are now multi-functional spaces. They have become a place where visitors come to borrow books, read, study and use computers but also to socialize—a true integration of different functions in time and space (Brandt and Vejre, 2004). However, this "new" role of the libraries imposes a number of safety-related challenges. Although libraries may work in the same way as before and follow similar standards, some libraries can be hit harder by crime and problems of public disturbance than others. These incidents can make visitors feel unsafe and have negative consequences for the staff's working environment. On one hand, librarians may currently have to deal with and make attempts to neutralize patrons' and visitors' antisocial behavior (Cromwell *et al.*, 2008; Pease, 1995), tasks that most staff feel unprepared for. On the other hand, if visitors perceive staff as unprepared or the library as a hostile environment, they may start taking precautionary measures or may not even return to the library.

In order to better understand the safety conditions in libraries, we report visitors' and personnel's safety experiences and concerns about crime and incidents of public disturbance in a public library in Stockholm, Sweden. This exploratory study is based on answers from a survey of library visitors, interviews with the personnel and records of safety incidents from 2017 to 2020. The use of mapping tools was used to help assess the potential relationship between safety and physical and social characteristics of the library's environment.

This public library constitutes an interesting case study for several reasons. According to the national assessment that has been recently carried out by the Swedish Crime Prevention Council (BRÅ, 2020), Högdalen has all characteristics of a risky facility (Eck *et al.*, 2007). In 2017, the library faced a number of challenges. On one hand, the internal environment was perceived by visitors as "old and crowded", some areas were perceived as "messy" by visitors, while corners were said to be used as "hiding places for drug addicts and unruly youth gangs" Ceccato *et al.* (2022). On the other hand, the staff felt unprepared to deal with various incidents of crime and public disturbance. In 2018, the leadership of the library made radical changes, and new routines were put in place and a year later, Högdalen underwent a complete renovation both in terms of the design and furniture and changing the staff working routines aiming at improving the library safety conditions. In 2020, researchers were invited by librarians and safety experts to execute an assessment of the safety conditions of the library. This article reports the answers from a survey with visitors, interviews with staff and analysis of incidents that happen in the library. The intention has not been to assess whether or not the changes have had an effect on the safety conditions but rather to illustrate the perspective from users and personnel on safety of the library.

This article is composed of six sections. First, we discuss the literature on library safety in section two. We start by discussing the uniqueness of libraries as risky facilities than reviewing individual and environmental factors that affect individual's safety perceptions and finally, we summarize the body of research related to safety in libraries. Then in sections three, we frame the current study presenting the research questions, data and methods, followed by the results in section four and a discussion of the results in sections five. The article ends with conclusions and recommendations for research and practice in section six.

2. Theoretical background

Libraries attract demographically-diverse patrons and visitors. Shuman (2002) explains why libraries in particular are more vulnerable to safety problems in comparison with other public facilities, such as museums: "whereas museums, archives and other cultural buildings usually have guards on site, alert to various dangers, libraries all too often do not, which invites trouble" (Shuman, 2002, p. 70). Libraries have no access fee and are normally undefended buildings, allowing a wide range of visitors, with different motivations for

spending time in the building. Moreover, especially pre-pandemic, there were no barriers to protect staff from personal interaction with the public, in case of violence against personnel. Hartley (2015) give examples of the types of library visitors, from technophiles, stubborn violators, to harassers and the mentally impaired. Visitors use libraries for different reasons; from reading, searching for information, to social interaction in cafes, each of which connotates particular safety concerns.

Libraries are composed of a variety of environments, like reception areas, reading areas or cafes, where visitors undertake different activities that may have, by their nature, a predisposition to creating the conditions necessary for crime but the quality of the environment may prevent it from happening (Clarke, 1983; Jacobs, 1961; Newman, 1972). The architectural design influences what occurs in a building's environments; it defines the types of social interactions that promote (or prevent) crime.

The link between environment and crime underlies the theoretical principles of what is often called Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) (Crowe, 2000; Jeffery, 1971). Situational crime prevention, a more recent term that originated in the UK, includes CPTED and is much broader in scope, as it refers to any opportunity-reducing measure, whether of design, the management or policing, intended to increase the difficulties or risks of offending (Clarke, 1995). This body of research has shown that a safe design can take shape in different ways, but often it is associated with places that (1) allow good visibility and promote natural surveillance, (2) empower users to establish the territoriality of the place, (3) make it more difficult to offenders to commit crime, (4) define clear access control routines and (5) have established practices of maintenance (Jacobs, 1961; Newman, 1972; Reynald and Elffers, 2009).

Research in safety in libraries has shown examples of the presence of library anxiety among users (Jiao and Onwuegbuzie, 1999) as well as their safety perceptions in relation to thefts and vandalism (Ajegbomogun, 2004). How individuals perceive a library is affected by the environment as discussed above but is also a function of the individual characteristics of users (such as age, gender, education level, see Box *et al*. (1988), Graham *et al*. (2014) and Hale (1996)). Individuals who have previously been a victim of crime tend to express more fear than those who have never being victimized (Hale, 1996) women are more fearful than men (Pain, 1997); older adults express more fear than younger individuals (Lagrange and Ferraro, 1989); and how familiar they are with a place also matters for their declared safety perceptions (Garofalo and Laub, 1979; Jackson and Gouseti, 2012).

2.1 Previous research on safety in libraries
The international literature is highly dominated by English literature, in particular from North American and Western European contexts (see Nnam *et al*. (2018). The body of the literature that started documenting safety conditions in libraries is steadily increasing. The seminal work of Morris (1986) who indicated the role of natural surveillance in improving library safety has been of immense use, followed by an international comparative analysis from the late 1980s (the UK, Canada and the US) by Lincoln and Lincoln (1984). Shuman (1999) illustrated examples of the systematic work on this area followed by Chaney and MacDougall (2019), whose book was partially devoted to the importance of design for safety conditions in libraries (see also Bean, 2019; Houlgate and Chaney, 2019; Ratcliffe, 2019). More recent studies call for increased knowledge in challenging situations, including acts of terrorism (Cromwell *et al*., 2008; Henrich and Stoddart, 2016; Kahn, 2008; Shuman, 1999; Simmons, 2018). However, only a handful of these studies empirically examine safety perceptions of staff and/or visitors (but see, e.g. Shuman, 2002) and very few relate these perceptions to the library's environment.

Previous studies using CPTED and situational crime prevention principles have shown that criminal events occur often in hidden places in libraries, this includes elevator access points, stairwells, hallways (Henrich and Stoddart, 2016), exits from fire escapes, or entrapped

and enclosed rooms (Carey, 2008; Henrich and Stoddart, 2016). Areas with poor natural surveillance such as behind and between bookshelves have great potential for crime (Cromwell *et al.*, 2008). Dark areas and corners that lack proper illumination are also safety-related areas of concern (Carey, 2008; Cromwell *et al.*, 2008; Henrich and Stoddart, 2016). Some areas are criminogenic because of the activities they attract. Poor management affects crime (Eck, 2019), but also visitors' perceptions of safety. Few rules, lax rule enforcement, poorly-trained personnel allow misbehavior to occur and let individuals get away without being noticed (Clarke and Eck, 2007; Linning and Eck, 2021).

In Sweden, a national assessment commissioned by the government was carried out in 2019 by the National Crime Prevention Council (BRA, 2020). Interviewees indicated that library's size, number of visitors, opening hours and location largely determine how vulnerable a library is, with a large variation in the type of incidents, from violence to minor problems involving public disturbance and theft. Their results also showed that, unsurprisingly, the most vulnerable public libraries are in larger urban areas and the least vulnerable are in more rural areas. For most libraries, however, there are relatively few serious incidents per year and most of them are of a milder nature. In summary, there is a small percentage of libraries that are highly and repeatedly targeted by incidents, which affects both the staff's working environment and the well-being of visitors.

3. Research design
The empirical study examines the following research questions.

RQ1. Which are the most common safety incidents in the library?

RQ2. Which are the experiences and perceptions of safety problems declared by the libraries' visitors and personnel? Do they feel safe in the library?

RQ3. Do safety perceptions of visitors vary by individual characteristics or levels of previous victimization?

RQ4. How do visitors and library staff perceive the environments of the library? How do they feel after changes in the library?

RQ5. Which are the most frequent recommendations suggested by visitors and personnel to improve safety in the library?

3.1 The case study
Högdalen is one of 40 libraries in Stockholm, with around 140,000 visitors yearly, open around 340 days a year. Högdalen subway station is directly adjacent to the library, which means that the premises are easily reached via an escalator from the ticket hall or alternatively via the square outside the library, where a busy bus stop is found but also bars, café, and other public and private establishments. During the renovation of the library, bookshelves were created at different heights and placed in the library in such a way that sight lines were not obstructed for the staff working in the fixed information points—for example, higher bookshelves were placed along the walls and lower bookshelves were placed in the central parts of the library. Staff training involved new routines dealing with service, hospitality, communication skills and conflict management.

3.2 Data and methods
The library was inspected on several occasions by the researchers from July 2021 to September 2022. Researchers used a tested fieldwork protocol to check the design of the

library in relation to the locations of incidents. Incidents of crime and public disturbances were recoded and aggregated by type, time and location and then mapped using a CAD software (CAD – computer-aided design). There was a significant drop of the total number of incidents recorded by library personnel from 2017 to 2020, from 296 to 19 ($N = 315$). The dataset used in this research was collected by the employees of the library between 2017 and 2020 and contain the date, time, occurrence of the event and a free text description of what happens in the library in terms of crime and events of public disturbance.

Half of the staff were interviewed. Six interviews with library personnel were carried out between May and July and September and October 2021, with four women and two men, all of whom had been working in the library for more than 3 years. The semi-structured interviews included open-ended questions so as to give respondents a chance to formulate their own answers and perceptions on the following subjects: (a) library personnel's experiences regarding the library's working environment; (b) library personnel's personal experiences of safety problems they had encountered at the library, with a focus on the library environment and whether and how they perceived any changes; (c) library personnel's suggestions for improvements to the library. Quotes from the interviews with the staff are anonymized in this article and indicated by the number of the interviewee, for example: interviewee person number one was indicated as (H1).

A safety survey with visitors was carried out in Högdalen using a convenience sample, 68% answered the survey via social media because the survey was conducted via the Internet in May and June 2020 (under early COVID-19 restrictions) and the rest of the survey was carried out face-to-face in October and November 2020, for a total of 112 interviews. Visitors' perceived safety at Högdalen's library was measured by asking a series of questions about: (a) visitors' experiences of the library's environment; (b) visitors' perception of the most common problems in the library; (c) visitors' personal experiences of problems in the library; and finally (d) visitors' opinions about the safety experience today in comparison with the safety experience three years prior.

Keeping our research questions in mind, in particular research question 2, we analyzed the 112 responses using spreadsheets, crosstables and Chi-square statistics in a statistical software. Of 112 people, 68% answered the survey via social media and 32% answered via a paper survey; 64% identify as women, 33% as men, 2% did not want to state a gender, 1% identified as non-binary and 3% did not answer the question; 50% of the sample was in the age group 31–50, 17% in the age group 51–64 and 18% in the age group 65 and older; 65% answered that they have a university education or equivalent; 73% live in Högdalen district. In order to identify potential different safety needs of library's visitors, cross-tables and Chi-square analysis were executed to assess significant differences in the answers by age, gender, victimization and selected results are presented in the next section. Finally, drawing from the empirical findings as well as the international literature on safety in libraries, in the last part of the article the authors propose a set of recommendations to improve library safety for visitors and personnel, with a particular focus on the environment of these public facilities.

3.2.1 Challenges. We faced a number of challenges in this study. A challenge had to do with the survey sample size and composition. The intention was to have a stratified sample with answers covering different hours of the day but with COVID-19 restrictions, the number of visitors was reduced because of the risk of contamination, therefore we decided to conduct part of the survey over the Internet. Out of 112 visitors, 68% answered the survey via Internet/social media and 32% answered via a paper survey. Those who answered the survey on paper at the library were more positive and thought the library has become safer in the last few years than those who answered the survey via social media. When visitor's using the library's website got the opportunity to take part in a survey, probably those who had been affected themselves were more interested than others in answering the survey, and took the

opportunity to report the event and express their safety perceptions. While, when a person coming to the library was asked to fill out the paper survey, he or she could be anyone, whether or not the visitor was victimized, which could be one explanation to the differences in the results, between the two groups. Another challenge was related to the interviews because with the pandemic restrictions, we had limited access to the staff, so interviews had to be carried out via zoom (not face-to-face), which may have impacted the way visitors answer the questions.

4. Results

4.1 Typical safety incidents in the library

Most safety incidents recorded in Högdalen ($N = 315$) contain a variety of problems, from public disturbance (49%), such as inappropriate use of entrances (e.g. using drugs, disrupting the stairwell) or smoking in toilets; followed by cases of aggression, fights and harassment (25%); then there are crimes against private property (14%) such as thefts of computers and mobile phones, and robbery; followed by cases of people being under influence of drugs or alcohol (5%); and other minor safety incidents (7%) (Figure 1a). They occur during the

(a)

(b)

Source(s): Incidents reports, Högdalen library and authors' survey
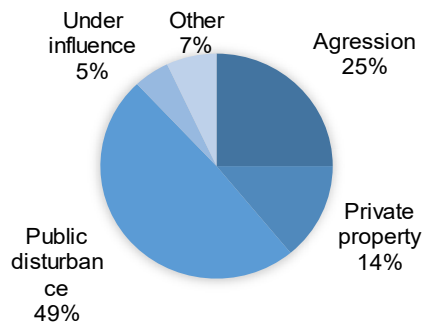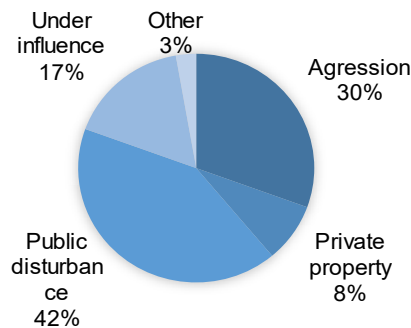
Figure 1.
(a) Safety incidents registered in the library, 2017–2020 ($N = 315$) and (b) safety problems as perceived by visitors

afternoon, especially in the middle of the week, and more commonly during the winter. These temporal patterns are similar after normalizing by the number of visitors.

Many of these safety incidents are actually composed of a chain of events caused by the same (group of) person(s) (e.g. such as being under influence and disrupting the entrance or damaging property, assaulting the librarian or resisting following the security guard's instructions). Within each category, there are variations to the seriousness of events. Violence and aggression involve a range of offences from verbal to physical attacks, threats against personnel, to sexual harassment. Table 1 illustrates examples of the types of incidents that happen in the library while in the next section, we show how these events affect visitors and staff.

4.2 Experiences and perceptions of safety problems of the library: visitors and staff
The vast majority of visitors who answered the survey declared that they felt safe in Högdalen's library (90%), only 6% felt unsafe a few times and 4% have felt unsafe at least once. Regardless as to whether or not they feel unsafe, visitors declare witnessing problems of public disturbance and disorderly conduct, fights and other types of aggression, drugs/alcohol (individual under influence), and crime against private property, such as theft or robbery.

Visitors' safety perceptions of incidents in the library fairly match the distribution of incidents recorded in the library (Figures 1a, b). The experience of witnessing interpersonal aggression as well as incidents of people being under the influence of alcohol or drugs is slightly greater among visitors who answered the survey than on those records registered by library personnel from 2017 to 2020. Similarly, most of the interviewed staff declared having

Type of incidents	Personnel description—incident records (translated from Swedish, and paraphrased when necessary)
Public disturbance	"We had a group of 15–20 young people sitting on children in the children's ward who were loud and blocked the way. They were told off a few times that they should calm down, it did not work, finally I had to call the center guard." "Visitors to the kid's area call the staff's attention and say that three young men were inside the children's toilet and smoked. The visitor says that they shouted and screamed. The staff opens windows for ventilation."
Aggression	"There is sudden big noise in kid's area. Shortly afterwards, two boys start fight, one fell over the table and then against the window. No one was hurt, but the situation was very messy." "Quarrel about computers between two regulars, one pushes the other. Staff arrives and tells that time booking applies. Librarian takes out both from the library to sort out the situation. After being told off, both apologize to each other."
Crime against private property	"A man is very upset as his headphones were stolen from the desk. He believes that the library should be safe. His frustration is first directed at the staff, but he eventually calms down and apologizes."
Under influence/alcohol or drug use	"A suspected drug addict is sitting in the stairwell. Security guards are called, and they ask him to leave the place because he is sitting in the spiral staircase, so other visitors have a hard time getting past him." "A suspected drug addict occupies toilet for over 30 min. Knocks several times but does not come out. A last chance is given before the police are called, the man comes out and walks away."
Other	"A person came past the info desk with a sloshing coffee cup. Coffee spills on the floor. He splashed over the table too. I told him to go down to the cafe and that he was welcome back in the hall. He said something rude back."

Source(s): Created by the authors

never felt unsafe in the library but mentioned situations that may have been uncomfortable, difficult to deal with or unpleasant. The frequency with which they need to deal with safety incidents in the library has been mentioned to be "once a week or every two weeks". They mentioned, for example, that conflicts can occur between visitors and staff but more often occur between visitors, most often in people under the influence of alcohol or/and drugs, as illustrated below:

> People with alcohol and drug problems create a feeling that anything can happen because that person can act unpredictably (H2)

> We have a lot of trouble with messy young people and also alcoholics. (H5)

Two interviewees declare having a sense of powerlessness, mainly due to being female and feeling intimidated by groups of young men. In addition, it was mentioned that prejudice against young male immigrants was increasing. The most extreme case was one of the staff who felt a higher level of stress related to conflicts in the library. However, several interviewees also mentioned that these situations were more common in the past than they are now.

> Never felt unsafe, I just have to ask people to not eat or speak loudly (in the library) but it is usually manageable. It can mostly be uncomfortable to other visitors, not necessarily unsafe (H3)

The staff feel prepared to act if anything happens, which may involve taking precautionary measures, such as closing the library at particular times or always working in groups.

> We never work alone out in the library. And when we close, there are always three of us, precisely because things can happen at the end and then you should not stand there alone but you must have some colleagues that you can lean on, who can be of help (H5)

The goal is to approach a situation in a polite and friendly way. However, if the situation gets out of control, then personnel can contact the guards.

4.3 Safety perceptions of visitors by individual characteristics

The survey shows that users of the library differ in their safety needs. Age influences how one experienced the library, for instance, older visitors (older than 50 years) (25%) have more often witnessed crime or incidents of public disturbance than younger visitors in the last three years (7%) (X2 (1, $N = 112$) = 3.75, $p > 0.05$), but no differences in age were noted regarding exposure to these incidents (X2 (1, $N = 112$) = 2.16, $p > 0.14$). With regard to gender, despite the fact that 66% of visitors who answered the survey were women, gender did not influence how visitors perceived the safety of library (X2 (1, N = 112) = 0.06, $p > 0.78$). In contrast, men (32%) had witnessed crimes or disorderly conduct more often than women (15%) in the last three years (X2 (1, $N = 112$) = 4.30, $p > 0.04$). Men are exposed to these crimes or disruptions more often (21%) than women (7%) during the same time period (15%) (X2 (1, $N = 112$) = 5.00, $p > 0.02$). Visitors with lower education levels (32%) have more often witnessed crime or incidents of public disturbance than those with higher education levels in the last three years at the library (14%) (X2 (1, $N = 112$) = 5.00, $p > 0.03$), but no differences in educational level were noted for exposure to these incidents (X2 (1, N = 112) = 0.58, $p > 0.44$) or safety perceptions in the library (X2 (1, $N = 112$) = 1.88, $p > 0.17$).

Witnessing (and being exposed as a victim) a crime or incident of public disturbance affects a visitor's safety perceptions at the library. Only 20% of those who answered the survey have witnessed crimes or experienced incidents of public disturbances at Högdalen's library. Those who have witnessed these incidents feel unsafe more often (39%) than those who have not (4%) (X2 (1, $N = 112$) = 21.37, $p > 0.00$). Those who have noticed that there have been fewer problems at Högdalen's library do not differ between those who have witnessed crimes in libraries (X2 (1, $N = 112$) = 2.00, $p > 0.16$). Moreover, only 10% of respondents had

been victimized by crime in the library. In terms of victimization, we noticed that 6% of visitors were exposed to crime and/or experienced incidents of public disturbance a few times, while 4% have been exposed as victims of crime in the library at least once. Of these 10% who were victims, most noticed that there have been fewer problems more recently in comparison to those who had not been victims of crime and/or experienced incidents of public disturbance (28%) (X2 (1, $N = 112$) = 3.95, $p > 0.06$).

4.4 Visitors' and staff's perceptions of the environments of the library
Both visitors and personnel indicated the importance of the physical and social environment for safety conditions in the libraries by creating nodes of activity and stimulating appropriate behavior by visitors. Moreover, they also highlighted that having library attendants in the right place to meet, help and quickly direct visitors to the right place during the library's opening hours also affected the safety and well-being of visitors.

The perception of changes to the library environment by both visitors and personnel is highlighted below. Figure 2 illustrates the changes made to the environment according to:

(a)

(b)
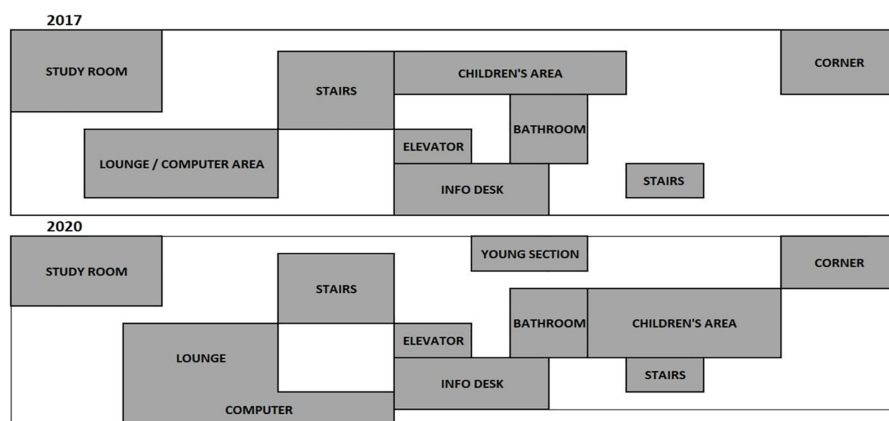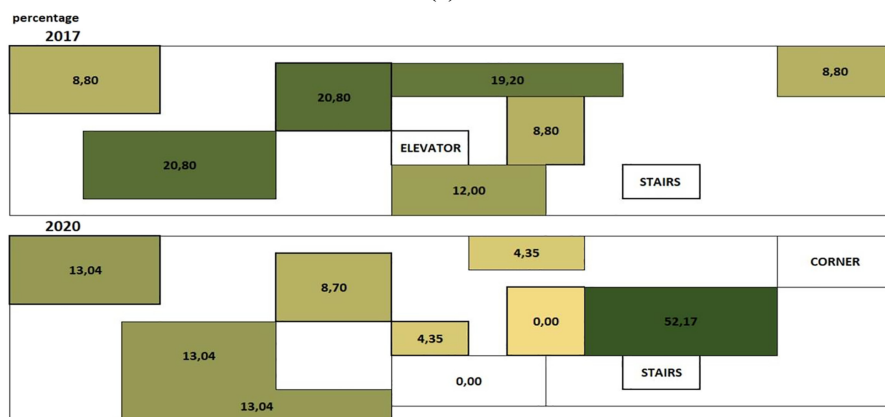
Figure 2.
Changes in the physical environment of the library and percentage of incidents of crime and public disturbance, 2017 and 2020

Source(s): Created by the authors

(a) the function of the rooms and (b) the percentage of crimes and incidents of public disturbance before and after the changes.

> We work with slightly lower bookshelves (now) in the room so that we have a good insight. ". . . and we have also done some work to produce clear rules and make sure we have them in a clear place in the library so that people can see them" (H1)

> Some corridors are too narrow and there are still two corners where people could hide—and cannot be seen from the counter/desk (H4)

The interviews with personnel indicate that improvements in natural surveillance (through lowering bookshelves, better placement of the information desk, etc.) and increased territoriality through zoning (creating a clearly designated children's area) were mentioned by staff. However, note that some of these areas may still concentrate incidents, but do so less frequently than before the changes:

> We have worked a lot with zoning, where we then, for example, moved all the computers to the library entrance in an area far from the area designated to adult literature where people want to sit and read . . . but the zones are not fully adapted for adults . . . there is no good place where you can gather for a book circle. (H3)

> The zoning was intended to create micro-places where particular activities/behaviors are encouraged. (H2)

The staff mentioned that the safety conditions of the library have improved with these changes but identified spots that might feel unsafe.

Of the 112 people who answered the survey, 38% answered that they see a minor difference after the renovation that took place at Högdalen's library; 37% answered that they see a major difference; 24% answered that they did not know; and 1% did not answer the question. Those who suggested that the library is better now mentioned, for example, that it is because the library has become "open and bright", "with pleasant staff present", "entrance has become nicer", "presence of security guards", "less 'mess' than before, even if it occurs", "the noise level has become better", "visitors have a better overview of the premises", "the groups of rowdy young people are no longer there" and "it feels safer when it is well-kept, clean and quiet".

Among visitors who answered the survey, a third felt less safe on the stairs than anywhere else in the library (Figure 3). In the immediate surroundings of the library only 38% declared feeling "very safe". Of the 82 people who answered the question, 65% felt very safe at the toilets, 20% felt safe, 9% felt fairly safe, 4% felt unsafe and 4% felt very unsafe, but note a quarter of those surveyed did not answer the question. As much as 63% of those who answered the survey felt very safe at the computer station, 16% felt safe, 14% felt somewhat safe, 4% felt unsafe and 2% felt very unsafe. 17% did not answer the question.

4.5 Suggestions for improvements of safety conditions
Figure 4 shows the most important suggestions for improving safety conditions in Högdalen. Among those visitors who answered the question "what needs to be done to improve the safety conditions of the library?", they suggest a need for staff to show stronger control over public areas, better overview/lines of sight, including surveillance cameras. Others recommend more helpful/professional staff, better overview of what is happening outside the library, security guards, better orientation, better lighting and better maintenance practices.

Most of the staff interviewed suggest measures to improve the entrance as well as strengthen cooperation with the local community to solve the problems that involve the immediate surroundings of the library.
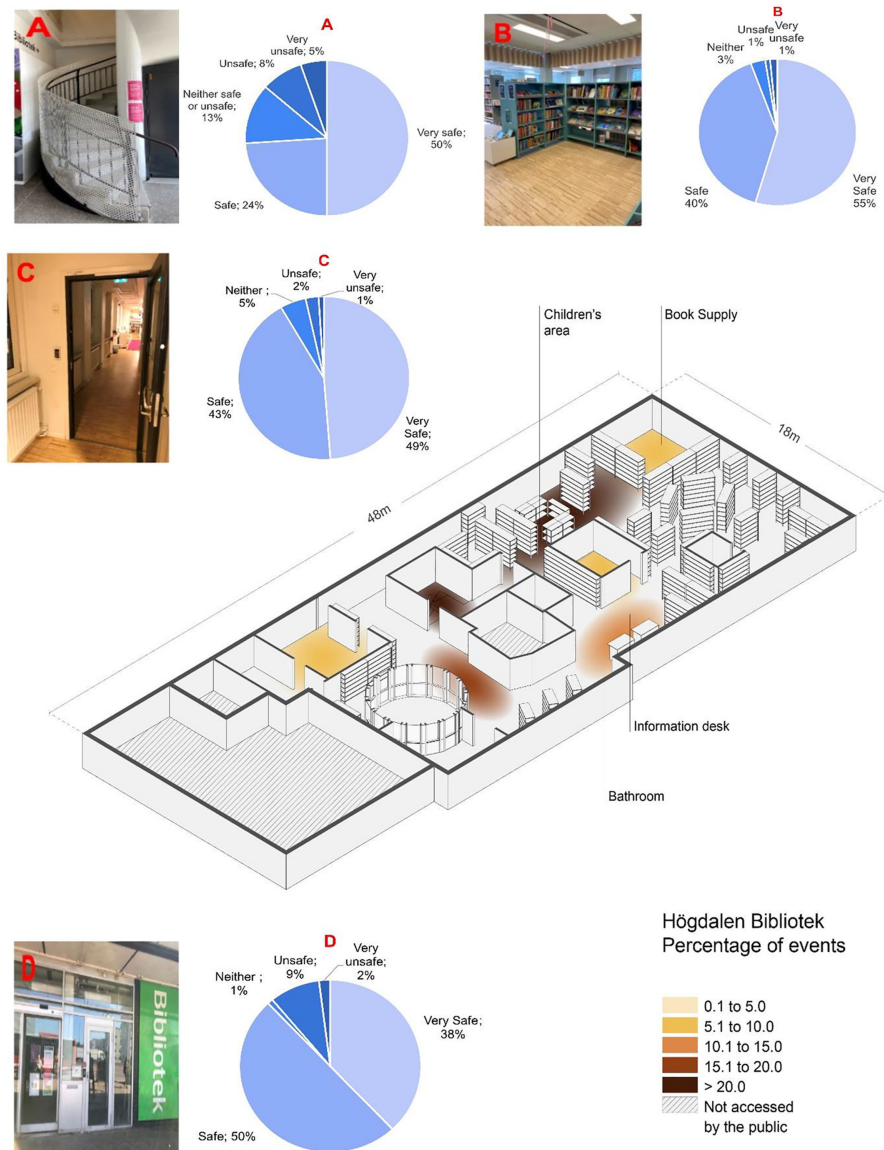
Figure 3.
Location of crime and
incidents of public
disturbance recorded
by library's personnel
(map) and visitors'
safety perceptions in
different parts of the
library (pie
charts). $N = 112$

Source(s): Created by the authors

Improve the entrance—the building was not built to be a library and the space was adapted.

Education related to basic hospitality and special treatment of specific groups—e.g. school groups, groups with mental health problems, etc.

Further develop the collaboration with other actors in the area and in the city
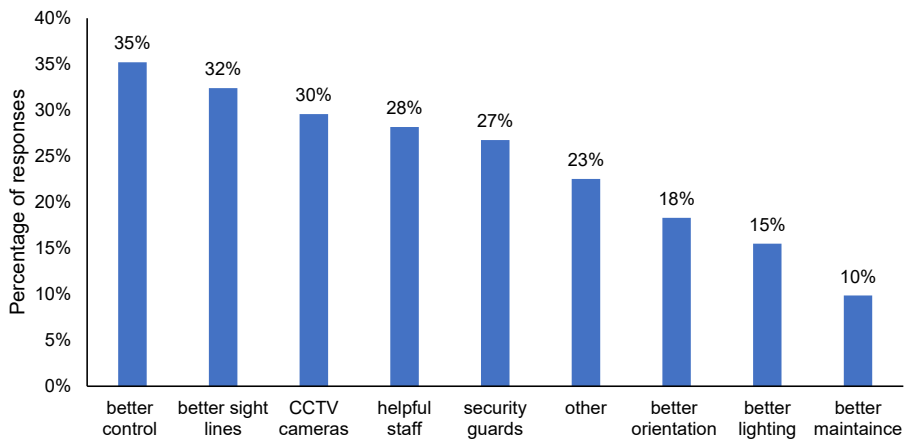
Figure 4.
According to visitors,
what is needed to
improve safety in the
library? *N* = 71

Source(s): Created by the authors

Although not articulated among the top three concerns (namely the wish for better control by personnel over what happens in the library, better sight lines and installation of CCTV), a significant number of visitors flagged for the need for more helpful staff, followed by the need for security guards. Among staff, challenges regarding the need to constantly train staff to deal with safety issues at the library were also mentioned, in particular the fact that personnel changes frequently and that current librarian education in Sweden does not completely satisfy the demands of library as a multifunctional public place from a safety perspective. Almost everyone who was interviewed saw difficulties in organizing their activities around the various functions that libraries are currently expected to have. Visitors have different expectations of how different places in the library should be used or look. These expectations should be incorporated in the process of creating an empirically based framework based on CPTED and situational crime prevention principles that offers librarians a structured approach to the analysis and management of safety incidents involving both staff and personnel.

5. Discussion of results

Our study revealed several important findings about the safety conditions of the library. Half of the records in Högdalen library are minor incidents of public disturbance and not crime. This pattern is also found in other risky facilities, see for instance, in parks (Groff and Mccord, 2011; Iqbal and Ceccato, 2016), in subway stations and bus stops (Newton, 2004, 2014), bars and alcohol selling outlets (Graham *et al.*, 2012) and to some extent, shopping malls (Ceccato *et al.*, 2018) and public baths (BRÅ, 2020) in Stockholm and elsewhere. Therefore, safety interventions that tackle the situational conditions of these minor incidents could more extensively be used in libraries, a few examples in the literature are Shuman (1996), Simmons (2018) and Henrich and Stoddart (2016).

Our results also indicate that visitors' perception of the safety problems in the library reflects well the picture provided by the staff about the safety problems. These safety perceptions also reflect the records of incidents, but not necessarily the geography of these incidents as we found mismatches between perceptions and where most events actually were recorded. On one hand, this means that in cases where libraries do not systematically keep a record of the incidents of crime and public disturbance, our study show that conducting

surveys with a convenience sample of visitors might provide a quick overview of the most pressing safety problems. On the other hand, it is crucial to systematically register these incidents but equally important is to keep records on where and when they happen to better tailor safety interventions given possible mismatches between safety perceptions and the geography of these incidents.

The design of the library's environment has a clear effect on both visitors' and staff's safety perceptions. Research has long suggested that certain environmental characteristics have a positive effect on reducing crime incidents and enhancing feelings of safety, while others have adverse impacts, and seem to relate to higher incidents and/or low safety perceptions (Carey, 2008; Cromwell *et al.*, 2008; Henrich and Stoddart, 2016). Our findings show exactly that, namely that the right height for bookshelves and better lighting can improve safety in the library but also ensure that staff are more visible in the library. Practices should also involve removing hidden surfaces and creating an interior that makes unwanted activities more difficult to be executed, as occurred in Högdalen with the library's refurbishment. This is because dark areas and corners that lack proper illumination were areas of concern in Högdalen before the changes (Carey, 2008; Cromwell *et al.*, 2008; Henrich and Stoddart, 2016).

This study has two important theoretical contributions related to situational crime prevention and CPTED frameworks. First, our results call for a new look at the concepts of natural surveillance and their meaning in indoor environments, such as in public libraries. Despite improvements of the library's environment according to CPTED principles, a third of visitors recommend more "control" by personnel over the library's environment, including use of CCTV cameras. One reason for this can be, on one hand, that although visible, the staff may not feel "present" to visitors. On the other hand, feeling under the constant gaze of personnel ("surveillance" as under the Bentham's panopticon described by Fyfe and Bannister (1996)), or of other visitors ("sousveillance" as suggested by Mann (2004)), may not automatically translate into perceptions that the environment is under control and is therefore is a safe environment.

Poor management of these facilities (Eck, 2019) can make certain areas problematic from a safety perspective because of the activities they attract. The kid's area in Högdalen can be an example of this problem despite good intentions of the personnel and changes in the environment. The fact that this area has a central place in the library, always attracting incidents, may also explain why a quarter of its recurrent users (since 2017) answered that they did not notice much of a difference in the safety conditions in the library. Findings also indicate that despite most incidents are concentrated in a few indoor spots, visitors declare feeling safer inside the library than in the entrance and the immediate surroundings. Solutions may include better cooperation between managers of the library and other local stakeholders, taking into account the complexity of neighborhood and city contexts.

Second, if current evidence from libraries are to be applied to other risky facilities then more attention should be given to the specific safety needs of different users of these facilities. This study indicates that although the vast majority of visitors declare feeling safe in the library, their perceptions vary according their individual characteristics, including previous victimization, as it was initially shown in studies on fear of crime in public environments (Abenoza *et al.*, 2018; Ceccato and Masci, 2017; Garofalo, 1981). Of those who were victims, most noticed that there have been fewer problems more recently in comparison to those who had not been victims of crime and/or experienced incidents of public disturbance. Older visitors have more often witnessed crime or incidents of public disturbance than younger visitors in the last three years but no differences in age were noticed regarding exposure to these incidents. Gender did not influence how visitors perceive the safety of library, but men both witnessed more incidents and were more exposed to these events than women. Visitors with lower education levels have more often witnessed crime or incidents of public

disturbance than those with higher education levels in the last three years, but no differences in answers by educational level were noted for exposure to these incidents or for safety perceptions in the library. These results impacts both research and practice: despite a few contradictory trends on visitors' safety perceptions, overall findings of this study indicate that future safety interventions must be tuned to the needs of users of the library, at particular times and specific locations.

6. Conclusions and recommendations

This exploratory study provides us some good indications and a better understanding about the safety conditions of a public library in a Swedish context that can be relevant for environmental criminology and other public facilities elsewhere. Visitors' safety perceptions accurately reflect the levels of safety incidents recorded in the library but are less accurate regarding their spatial distribution. Although most of the visitors declared feeling safe in the library, perceptions vary as to their individual characteristics. Dealing with visitors under the influence of drugs/alcohol or feeling intimidated by groups of young people were examples of situations in which library staff felt unsafe. Findings also indicate the importance of the environment to ensure safety conditions of the library for both visitors and staff. More social control, both formal and informal, are at the top of the list of recommendations for visitors. Among personnel, recommendations include the need for cooperation with other local actors to solve problems in surrounding areas as well as better education for librarians in dealing with current safety challenges of libraries as multifunctional public facilities.

This study was not intended to assess the impact of changes in the environment of the libraries on safety perceptions, instead the focus was to report visitors' and personnel's safety concerns about crime and incidents of public disturbance in a public library. It is expected that future studies will be able to assess the impact of changes in the environment on safety perceptions, comparing levels of offenses before and after changes were made, with control libraries. In particular, we need to better understand how particular environmental characteristics of a library affect particular types of criminal or other inappropriate behavior. We know that individual respondent characteristics affect safety perceptions in libraries, but the current environmental criminology literature is still lacking studies that show how characteristics such as age and gender interact with characteristics of the physical environmental to increase or decrease levels of perceived safety for both visitors and staff. Equally important is to better understand how unsafe libraries may lead visitors to take precautionary measures, such as avoiding certain times or even staying away from them.

In terms of limitations, the study is based on a single library; thus, future studies may replicate this methodology in other libraries to determine the generalizability of the observed patterns both in terms of the number of incidents and their distribution, as well as safety perceptions of staff and visitors. Another limitation refers to the disruptions caused by the pandemic. Through the employment of group stratified samples and the utilization of advanced statistics, the relative importance of different conditions on safety perceptions of both visitors and staff could be further analyzed in future studies. Because of the nature of this study, we consciously decided to be careful or even abstain from stating straight causal links between results and current environmental criminology theory. Although in this study temporal trends of crime and safety perceptions were not the focus of the analysis, current evidence from other libraries in Stockholm shows an increase in records of incidents during the pandemic while the study area showed a decrease (Ceccato *et al.*, 2022). Future studies should assess the impact of the pandemic on safety concerns in libraries, see for instance some evidence been recently published elsewhere by Chisita and Chizoma (2021) and Harris (2021).

Our recommendations for practitioners are that it is of great importance first to take into account (and deeply map out) the type of problem a public library has before adopting safety intervention measures. Public libraries need to establish good managing practices to ensure

the use of systematic records (to enter into the incident reporting system/database) of what happens (disorders and crimes) in order to be able to monitor the situation over time. In Stockholm, not all libraries register incidents systematically, in some, the records of incidents are completely missing. Luckily, surveys could potentially be an alternative data source, because visitors' safety perceptions seem to reflect levels of safety incidents recorded by the personnel in the library—as illustrated in this study. Finally, special training for personnel in dealing with conflicting situations, especially for those who have direct contact with visitors would be desirable. The multifunctional role that public libraries have at present requires that staff be better prepared to handle situations other than just the lending of books and access to information; it is important to strengthen the role of site managers in promoting safety. It seems like is that rapid development will occur in this field. In this context, it is important to be able to report on experiences of safety in libraries from personnel and visitors, as has been done in this article from a Nordic context, which is missing in the international literature.

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