Manitoba

How libraries in some other Canadian cities deal with security risks

Libraries CBC News contacted in other parts of Canada have security guards, but not metal detectors

Josh Crabb, Nathan Liewicki · CBC News · Posted: Jan 24, 2023 6:00 AM EST | Last Updated: January 24

Winnipeg's downtown Millennium Library is open with enhanced security measures on Monday, the first day the public's been allowed in since the stabbing death of Tyree Cayer on Dec. 11. (Cameron MacLean/CBC)

Millennium Library isn't alone in Canada when it comes to dealing with safety-related incidents, but some other libraries have stopped short of resorting to the enhanced security measures introduced at Winnipeg's largest branch.

The downtown library reopened Monday, with a walk-through metal detector, security screeners and uniformed police officers added, following a fatal stabbing six weeks earlier.

Tyree Cayer, 28, was fatally stabbed in the library on Dec.11. Four teenage boys — two 14-year-olds, a 15-year-old and a 16-year-old — have been charged in his death.

Paul Takala, chief librarian and chief executive officer of the Hamilton Public Library, says he has not responded to a homicide inside any of the Ontario city's 23 branches since he took the job in 2012, but there have been other safety-related issues over the years.

Downtown Hamilton's Central Library, as well as a couple of other branches in the city, have seen more security incidents than at most other branches because of the neighbourhoods they're located in, Takala said Monday.

"When libraries exist in neighbourhoods, when we're doing our job, we're welcoming people in those neighbourhoods in our spaces," he said.

Hamilton Public Library branches have seen few incidents in which there's been a physical altercation, says chief librarian and chief executive officer Paul Takala. (Jonathan Silver)

He said welcoming people is usually a positive experience, but Takala added that "when people are facing challenges, we start to feel it inside."

"It's by and large, basically verbal abuse," he said. "We have very few incidents where there's been a physical altercation."

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, Hamilton's Central Library welcomed approximately 25,000 visitors per week. Last week, 17,000 people visited the library — a decline Takala attributes to the pandemic. The space is 160,000 square feet in size, has five floors and is typically staffed with five or six security guards, Takala said.

"Part of the role of security guards would be to have a presence at the security desk so people can go to them and ask for help and then we'd also have security guards doing regular rounds," he explained, adding that security personnel have training in non-violent de-escalation of crisis situations.

Security personnel are commonplace at libraries in major Canadian cities. (Lyzaville Sale/CBC)

He said off-duty police officers have previously been hired by the Hamilton Public Library temporarily, in response to security concerns, but that hasn't happened in quite a few years.

Security at 5 Calgary library locations

Off-duty police officers aren't used at Calgary Public Library branches either, according to director of service design and innovation Heather Robertson.

Like Hamilton, Calgary libraries have security guards, but only at five of the 21 locations.

No Calgary Public Library branches have off-duty police presence, according to director of service design and innovation Heather Robertson. (Dan McGarvey/CBC)

"There are a variety of different tools we have in our toolkit when we look at our security and safety measures and the ones that we have in place right now. Having the security teams on

site ... has been successful for us in helping to meet and address some of the needs we're seeing in our community," Robertson said Monday.

Libraries in Toronto, Edmonton, Vancouver also have security personnel staffing some of their branches, according to statements emailed to CBC News from public library spokespersons in each of those cities.

But unlike Winnipeg's flagship branch, no library in Calgary, Toronto, Edmonton, or Vancouver has introduced metal detectors as a security measure, those spokespersons wrote.

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The same goes for Hamilton libraries.

"It's never needed to come up," Takala said. "We haven't gone down that road."

"I don't see us planning to do that anytime soon, unless something changes."

'Complex situation'

Takala said he hopes for a future in which there are fewer people in the community struggling, a future in which the library sees fewer security incidents.

"I think the thing we say to our council is look, we're trying to keep everyone coming into the library connected to the community, support them in their access and learning, but at the end of the day these are broader problems that you can't expect a public library to solve."

- **Edmonton Public Library sees significant increase in security incidents**
- **Assault on guard highlights security challenges at London's central library**

Robertson also understands there are more challenges when it comes to ensuring library patrons feel safe, while also keeping branches open to more vulnerable sections of the population.

She called it a "complex situation" that requires conversation, partnerships and continuous monitoring and assessment.

"Part of our role is to work together in partnership and adapt and mitigate the challenges we're seeing in community and find the best strategies, and also to make sure that the library is playing the right role in that we are a support and a resource for our communities for information and needs and activations," she said.

The Canadian Urban Libraries Council recently started a new safety and security working group, of which the Winnipeg Public Library is a member. (Jaison Empson/CBC)

Libraries are facing challenges that aren't unique to any one community, but a handful of cities that are part of the Canadian Urban Libraries Council have joined a new safety and security working group.

Library leaders from Winnipeg, Edmonton, Calgary, Toronto and Hamilton are all part of the group, which Robertson said was formed earlier this month.

"One of the things libraries do best is sharing information and collaborating," she said. "This working group is an opportunity to do just that, better understand the needs and how we can support."

Corrections

- We initially reported that Hamilton's Central Library welcomed approximately 70,000 visitors per week, and 48,000 people visited the library last week. In fact, those are the numbers for all branches of the Hamilton Public Library; before the COVID-19 pandemic, the Central Library branch had around 25,000 visitors per week and 17,000 last week.
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