

# Overdue Fines: Advantages, Disadvantages, and How Eliminating Them Can Benefit Public Libraries

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# Table of Contents

How to Cite.....	4
License .....	4
Keywords .....	4
About the iSchool Public Libraries Initiative .....	4
About the Author.....	5
Introduction.....	6
Deconstructing the arguments in favor of keeping library fines .....	8
1. Fines ensure materials are returned on time, making borrowing more fair .....	8
2. Fines supplement library budgets .....	10
3. Fines teach people to be civically responsible .....	11
Is teaching civic responsibility the library's job? .....	12
Arguments in favor of eliminating library fines.....	14
1. A Lack of Evidence .....	14
2. Fines Disproportionately Affect Lower-Income Patrons .....	15
3. Fines are punitive and are not effective in teaching people how to be better ..	17
4. Fines may not make up a significant portion of the library's budget.....	20
5. Eliminating fines may improve circulation .....	21
6. Improved Patron/Librarian relationships .....	23
Library Survey Results.....	24
Library Demographics .....	24
How does eliminating fines make a difference?.....	26
Motivations for Eliminating Fines .....	28
Disadvantages of eliminating fines .....	28
Advantages of eliminating fines.....	30
Alternatives to completely eliminating fines .....	35

Donations.....	35
Amnesty.....	36
Automatic Renewal.....	36
Conclusion .....	37
Appendix A: .....	38
Library Fines Survey.....	38
Appendix B: Libraries that completed the survey.....	40

## How to Cite

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## Keywords

Public libraries, library fines, overdue books, library surveys, library research, equity, access, library budgets, improving library services, library demographics

## About the iSchool Public Libraries Initiative

In 2018, the iSchool at Syracuse University launched a new home for public library research called the iSchool Public Libraries Initiative (IPLI), directed by Associate Professor of Practice Jill Hurst-Wahl. The IPLI predominantly focuses on public library innovation. In researching and disseminating information about public library innovation across the United States, the IPLI hopes to give libraries more opportunities to innovate and learn from one another about innovations happening across the country. In shedding light on these unsung innovations, the IPLI hopes to increase their capacity to continue innovating.

Additionally, the IPLI gives Library and Information Science graduate students a place to conduct research and create work relevant to their studies and interests. This report was created as a result of research conducted from the fall of 2019 through the spring of 2020. It was inspired by the question: what existing data supports the near-ubiquitous use of library fines in public libraries? When I was unable to find one, I started writing

this report. I wanted to create a resource for public libraries to use in assessing their use of overdue fines.

## About the Author

Sabrina Unrein is a Master's of Library and Information Science graduate student at Syracuse University graduating in May of 2020. She has worked with the IPLI for the past two years, focusing primarily on library website design and library fines. In addition to public libraries, she is interested in archives and special collections and has worked at Syracuse University's Special Collections Research Center and CNN's video archive library in Atlanta.

# Introduction

There are several cultural images that are pervasive when it comes to public libraries, many unchanging for decades. Unfortunately, one of the most well-known and perpetuated today is that the library is a punitive environment. If you are too loud, you are shushed, and if you don't bring items back on time, you must pay a fine. Many of us see these as harmful and outdated ideas. However, these preconceptions cause shame to be closely associated with libraries, despite the fact that we know they are meant to be places of equity.

A way we as librarians may be able to change the cultural perception of libraries is the wide-scale elimination of library fines. This could minimize the fear of punitive consequences in public libraries. However, it is important to acknowledge upfront that no blanket prescription will apply to every single library in the country. Each library has its own community, its own challenges, and its own values. Therefore, going fine-free may not be the right option for all libraries. This report is not meant as an indictment of any library that chooses to use fines, but serves to examine why fines are so pervasive and potential benefits libraries may reap as a result of eliminating them.

It is worth noting that this report is entering into a discussion that has been ongoing for many years. There have been articles published for decades positing the elimination of library fines and motivations for doing so. Some of the most frequently cited reports about library fine data came out as early as 1983.<sup>1</sup> The topic periodically recurs in popular publications as well, such as articles in the *New York Times*<sup>2</sup> and the *Huffington Post*.<sup>3</sup> If this discussion has been happening for over 35 years, what new information does this report bring to the table?

1 Hansel, P., & Burgin, R. (1983). Hard Facts About Overdues. *Library Journal*, 108(4), 349.

2 In San Jose, Poor Find Doors to Library Closed—The New York Times. (2016). Retrieved October 4, 2019, from <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/31/us/in-san-jose-poor-find-doors-to-library-closed.html>

3 Libraries Are Dropping Overdue Fines—But Can They Afford To? | HuffPost. (2017). Retrieved October 4, 2019, from [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/libraries-are-dropping-overdue-fines-but-can-they-afford-to\\_n\\_5913733ae4b0b1fafd0dccc2](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/libraries-are-dropping-overdue-fines-but-can-they-afford-to_n_5913733ae4b0b1fafd0dccc2)

First of all, the discussion around library fines is rapidly evolving and there are no comprehensive reports that capture the environment as it is now in 2020. This is especially relevant due to the recent national momentum toward eliminating fines in large library systems such as the Denver Public Library, the San Francisco Public Library, and the Chicago Public Library. With systems as large as these making the change, library fine elimination has made national headlines in publications such as *National Public Radio*<sup>4</sup> and *Forbes*.<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, there is something missing in the current discourse: data. Librarians love to make data-driven, evidence-based decisions, but most evidence is either old or small-scale. There is an often-cited report from 1989 titled *Managing Overdues: Facts from Four Studies*,<sup>6</sup> but it relies on data that is over 30 years old, and public libraries have changed a lot since then. Authors also frequently cite *Do library fines work?*, a study of the impact of fines on students' behavior in two academic libraries<sup>7</sup>. Not only is this a relatively small-scale study, but it does not feature public library data at all.

The popular reports informing the recent trend toward fine-elimination, including the Colorado Department of Education's whitepaper, *Removing Barriers to Access*,<sup>8</sup> and San Francisco's fine-free report,<sup>9</sup> used their own data collection, reviews of the literature, and synthesis to make their arguments. There is no one document that unifies the many arguments made both in favor of and against the use of library fines.

This report aims to draw all of these ideas into a comprehensive and accessible document. It hopes to spark new discussions in the community and help maintain the

4 *More Public Libraries Are Eliminating Late Fines To Address Inequity*: NPR. (2019). Retrieved January 19, 2020, from

<https://www.npr.org/2019/11/30/781374759/we-wanted-our-patrons-back-public-libraries-scrap-late-fines-to-alleviate-inequi>

5 Rowe, A. (2019). *Chicago Libraries' Late Fee Elimination Sparks A 240% Boost In Book Returns*. *Forbes*. Retrieved January 19, 2020, from

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/adamrowe1/2019/11/03/chicago-libraries-late-fee-elimination-sparks-a-240-boost-in-book-returns/>

6 Little, P. (1989). MANAGING OVERDUES: Facts From Four Studies. *The Bottom Line*, 2(2), 22–25. <https://doi.org/10.1108/eb025168>

7 Sung, J. S., & Tolppanen, B. P. (2013). Do Library Fines Work?: Analysis of the Effectiveness of Fines on Patron's Return Behavior at Two Mid-sized Academic Libraries. *The Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 39(6), 506–511. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acalib.2013.08.011>

8 Depriest, M.J. (2016). *Removing Barriers to Access: Eliminating Library Fines and Fees on Children's Materials*. Retrieved October 24, 2019 from

<http://www.cde.state.co.us/cdelib/removingbarrierstoaccess>

9 Cisneros, J. (2019). LONG OVERDUE: Eliminating Fines on Overdue Materials to Improve Access to San Francisco Public Library. *The Office of the Treasurer and Tax Collector*. Retrieved October 24, 2019 from: <https://sfpl.org/uploads/files/pdfs/commission/Fine-Free-Report011719.pdf>

momentum of the fine-free movement. It addresses the arguments in favor of and against fines, any evidence that supports those arguments in the current discourse, alternatives to total fine elimination, and new data from libraries that have chosen to go fine-free. It was inspired by questioning if fines are a measurably effective tool, but evolved into a discussion about equity and if library fines align with the values driving our profession.

Additionally, this report includes new research. As previously mentioned, use of library fines has already been extensively discussed. However, there has not been much investigation into libraries that have eliminated fines, and how that change has impacted their communities. Due to the rapid increase in libraries eliminating fines, it seemed important to explore a sample of libraries that have made that change. What positive and negative effects has the library experienced in the aftermath of eliminating fines for their entire community? The survey was sent to libraries across the United States, varying in location and population. Fifteen surveys were completed, and the results can be found in this report, following the discussion of the arguments for and against fines.

## **Deconstructing the arguments in favor of keeping library fines**

### **1. Fines ensure materials are returned on time, making borrowing more fair**

This seems obvious: fines are used because they help remind patrons to turn in materials on time. This should be one of the easiest arguments to defend and support with data. Unfortunately, there have been few studies conducted on the subject of library fines and their effectiveness, so there is not much available data to support this assertion.

Many libraries that have eliminated fines in recent years report just the opposite. For instance, the Chicago Public Library saw a 240% increase in returned books in the month

after they eliminated fines in September of 2019.<sup>10</sup> Salt Lake City's Public Library saw late returns drop from 9% to 4% after fines were eliminated.<sup>11</sup> Six months after fine elimination at the High Plains Library District in northern Colorado, the library saw an increase in circulation and 95% of their materials were returned within one week of their original due date.<sup>12</sup> In Hansel and Burgin's oft-cited study of public libraries in North Carolina, *Hard Facts About Overdues*, they observed "no significant difference in overdue rates between libraries that charged fines and those that did not."<sup>13</sup> Their data suggested that libraries that did not charge fines saw higher rates of overdue materials in the short-term, but lower rates of overdue materials in the long-term.

Libraries may decide that expedient returns are not as important as other factors. When the Columbus Metropolitan Library eliminated fines in 2017, they stated that they originally enforced fines "as an incentive to see those items returned by their due dates," but began to question that notion due to what they observed in the library field industry.<sup>14</sup> They determined that equitable access was more relevant to their library's mission.

Admittedly, the results are skewed toward favorable outcomes. This is because institutions such as those mentioned above are subject to selection bias; they volunteered to report data that promoted positive results of eliminating library fines. Because this is the only information that was readily available, they were included in this paper. The research conducted for this report found no reports of libraries that have eliminated fines and experienced changes in patron behavior that negatively impacted library usage or resulted in significantly higher return rates for materials.

10 Spielman, F. (2019, October 30). Lightfoot's decision to eliminate library fines triggers 240% increase in book returns. Retrieved November 5, 2019, from Chicago Sun-Times website: <https://chicago.suntimes.com/news/2019/10/30/20940677/chicago-public-library-no-fines-book-returns-increase-lightfoot>

11 Cisneros, J. (2019). LONG OVERDUE: Eliminating Fines on Overdue Materials to Improve Access to San Francisco Public Library, p. 6. *The Office of the Treasurer and Tax Collector*. Retrieved October 24, 2019 from: <https://sfpl.org/uploads/files/pdfs/commission/Fine-Free-Report011719.pdf>

12 Depriest, M.J. (2016). Removing Barriers to Access: Eliminating Library Fines and Fees on Children's Materials. Retrieved October 24, 2019 from <http://www.cde.state.co.us/cdelib/removingbarrierstoaccess>

13 Depriest, M.J. (2016). Removing Barriers to Access: Eliminating Library Fines and Fees on Children's Materials. Retrieved October 24, 2019 from <http://www.cde.state.co.us/cdelib/removingbarrierstoaccess>

14 Columbus Metropolitan Library to eliminate overdue fines beginning Jan. 1, 2017 | [www.columbuslibrary.org](http://www.columbuslibrary.org). (2016). Retrieved November 5, 2019, from <https://www.columbuslibrary.org/press/columbus-metropolitan-library-eliminate-overdue-fines-beginning-jan-1-2017>

These numbers do not directly address the idea of fairness, which is often brought up in defense of library fines and their relationship to item return rates. Some argue that they serve to make library services more equal because they ensure that there are consequences from late returns. Some see this as a protective measure for the assumed majority of people who do return books late against the people taking advantage of the system.<sup>15</sup>

This assumes that library fines are effective deterrents for lateness, which is addressed in the section titled *A Lack of Evidence*. Additionally, fines may seem fair to those who can afford to pay their fines but negatively impact lower-income patrons. Patrons feel entitled to some kind of retribution in exchange for irresponsible patrons who break the rules. However, this feeling of entitlement assumes that everyone is able to pay fines and that imposing fines makes the system more fair. In fact, it is doing the opposite. Imposing fines on all patrons is not a marker of equity. This argument is further addressed in the section titled *Fines Disproportionately Affect Lower-Income Patrons*.

## 2. Fines supplement library budgets

This particular argument is highly variant, depending on the budget of the library in question, how much they collect in fines per fiscal year, and where the money ends up. If fines support the library's budget directly, the collected funds may make up a significant part of it, and may be funding the library cannot afford to lose. Library fines also help supplement the cost of replacing items, funding programming, or the cost of the human labor of librarians who spend time dealing with overdue fine collection from patrons. This is the most demonstrative argument for the fact that no blanket prescription is right for all libraries. The library might be unable to function without the money they collect from fines.

<sup>15</sup> Jerome, J. A. 1, judy\_jerome@hotmail.com. (2012). Occupy the Library. *Public Libraries*, 51(6), 6–7.

### 3. Fines teach people to be civically responsible

One of the most frequently-made cases in favor of the use of library fines is that overdue books demonstrate irresponsibility of the patron and a lack of respect to fellow patrons. Fines serve as a reminder to patrons that there are consequences when the library's materials are not returned on time.

In his essay on library fines, David McMenemy reinforces this idea, asking "without fines, what incentives do users have to return material in a timely fashion to ensure it is available for others to use?"<sup>16</sup> He argues that fines help ensure equal access by instilling civic responsibility, stating that "every individual who uses that collection has a collective responsibility to that group of people," and "if customers do not return their items on time, this deprives other users of that resource." He goes on to state that the elimination of fines would mean eliminating a "vital function of any library that requires efficient and equitable circulation of stock." He asserts that patrons who return materials late have selfish intentions and a lack of respect for the library community, and therefore lack a sense of civic responsibility. Eliminating fines would "allow a system that allows disregard for the needs of other members".<sup>17</sup>

Under this logic, one must assume that patrons feel inclined to be civically responsible only if there is a threat of punishment when they are not. As put by Anthony Marx, CEO of the New York Public Library, people respond to the idea of fine elimination as if it imposes a "moral hazard" on society at large.<sup>18</sup> Without the threat of punishment, what motivation do citizens have to be responsible library patrons?

A key misunderstanding in the discussion of eliminating fines is the idea that it will eliminate all patron responsibility in kind. Removing fines does not mean removing all

<sup>16</sup> McMenemy, D. (2010). On library fines: Ensuring civic responsibility or an easy income stream? *Library Review*, 59(2), 78–81.

<https://doi.org/10.1108/00242531011023835>

<sup>17</sup> McMenemy, D. (2010). On library fines: Ensuring civic responsibility or an easy income stream? *Library Review*, 59(2), 78–81.

<https://doi.org/10.1108/00242531011023835>

<sup>18</sup> The case against library fines—According to the head of New York Public Library—Quartz. Retrieved October 4, 2019, from <https://qz.com/1158839/the-case-against-library-fines-according-to-the-head-of-the-new-york-public-library/>

consequences or even removing all monetary consequences for not returning library materials. In most systems that have eliminated fines, patrons who fail to return items within a given timeframe will be charged for the replacement of the missing items. The replacement fee is waived when the item is returned, even if it is past its due date. The item was ultimately returned, so there is no need to punish the patron. Therefore, removing overdue fines is meant to offer more flexibility in book returns and does not remove all responsibility from patrons.

## **Is teaching civic responsibility the library's job?**

A more important point to address in this argument is the idea of libraries being responsible for teaching civic responsibility in the first place. Is this one of the library's key functions? Furthermore, if it is, does its obligation to teach civic responsibility outweigh its commitments to equal access for all patrons? Equitable Access to Information and Library Services is one of the American Library Association's (ALA) key action areas, which they describe as "guiding principles for investment of energy and resources" in the organization.<sup>19</sup> Equity is also featured in other guiding documents, such as in the ALA's stated Core Values of Librarianship.<sup>20</sup> ALA's mission states that one of its goals is to help librarians and libraries "ensure access to information for all."<sup>21</sup> Teaching patrons how to be civically responsible is notably absent from these documents.

These points are not intended to dismiss the importance of responsibility, especially when interacting with resources shared by an entire community. They are, however, intended to weigh the significance of denying access to patrons that have been branded as irresponsible, and therefore as deserving of punishment or deprivation of library materials entirely, against the significance of a patron returning an item late.

19 American Library Association. (2007, April 19). Key Action Areas. Retrieved November 4, 2019, from About ALA website:

<http://www.ala.org/aboutala/missionpriorities/keyactionareas>

20 American Library Association. (2006, July 26). Core Values of Librarianship [Text]. Retrieved November 4, 2019, from Advocacy, Legislation & Issues website:

<http://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/corevalues>

21 American library Association. (2010, August 4). A.1 Mission, Priority Areas, Goals (Old Number 1). Retrieved November 4, 2019, from About ALA website:

<http://www.ala.org/aboutala/governance/policymanual/updatedpolicymanual/section1/1mission>

Are library fines effective tools for teaching civic responsibility? Take, for instance, the San Francisco Public Library. In a report put out by the Office of Treasurer and Tax Collector, in collaboration with SFPL, “more than one-third of library patrons hold debt on their account at any given time.”<sup>22</sup> The Phoenix Public Library, who eliminated fines in November of 2019, stated that before eliminating fines, “103,975 [cardholders], or 10 percent, were blocked from checking out materials because they had \$25 or more in fines.”<sup>23</sup> Given statistics like that, one could conclude that turning in a library book late is a common mistake that anyone could make, and many people do make frequently. This argument is much more rational than the idea that one-third of all SFPL patrons and at least 10% of Phoenix Public Library patrons are irresponsible and disrespectful people.

Furthermore, libraries that have eliminated fines have not experienced a complete loss of patron responsibility. According to the High Plains Library District in northern Colorado, which eliminated fines in 2015, “the fear that fines were the only thing between civilization and chaos has proved unfounded: 95 percent of materials are returned within a week of their due date.”<sup>24</sup>

The data provided above is limited and is not intended to represent incontrovertible evidence that library fines do not teach civic responsibility. However, it is intended to question the idea, as it is one of the most frequently cited arguments in favor of the use of fines, and has been largely unsupported by data. Perhaps it feels like library fines should work, or do work, to curb patron behavior toward goodness. But if all that stands between the library and complete moral bankruptcy are fines, then fines aren't really teaching people how to be good anyhow. Being civically responsible does not mean simply acting good out of fear of being punished for wrongdoing. If patrons act irresponsibly when they are not threatened by the system, then have they learned to fear punishment, not to be responsible.

22 Cisneros, J. (2019). LONG OVERDUE: Eliminating Fines on Overdue Materials to Improve Access to San Francisco Public Library, p. 27. *The Office of the Treasurer and Tax Collector*. Retrieved October 24, 2019 from: <https://sfpl.org/uploads/files/pdfs/commission/Fine-Free-Report011719.pdf>

23 Phoenix Public Library to stop charging late fees in November. (2019, September 11). Retrieved October 4, 2019, from <https://www.abc15.com/entertainment/events/phoenix-public-library-to-stop-charging-late-fees-in-november>

24 Graham, R. (2017, February 6). Long Overdue: Why public libraries are finally eliminating the late-return fine. Retrieved October 31, 2019, from Slate Magazine website: <https://slate.com/culture/2017/02/librarians-are-realizing-that-overdue-fines-undercut-libraries-missions.html>

# Arguments in favor of eliminating library fines

## 1. A Lack of Evidence

The pervasive nature of library fines suggests that there is evidence to support their effectiveness. However, there is a lack of data to support whether or not they actually work. More often than not, the justification for library fines seems to have stemmed from assumptions or feelings rather than explicit facts supported by research and data collection.

The existing writing in support of library fines must rely on data that is small-scale or old. Most proponents of library fines use Hansel and Burgin's 1981 and 1983 reports "Hard Facts About Overdues" and "More Hard Facts on Overdues." Among their findings, they reported that "libraries that don't charge fines tend to get their books back more slowly, but ultimately get more of them back; they have higher overdue rates in the short run, but lower overdue rates in the long run." Additionally they state that "libraries that restrict overdue patrons do significantly better at getting materials returned," and that "the higher the daily fine the faster the books come back."<sup>25</sup> Perhaps their most compelling conclusion of all was the fact that there are no easy answers; studies like this are difficult to conduct, and the complexity and diversity of library systems and communities make it difficult to draw large-scale conclusions based on these studies alone.<sup>26</sup>

In addition to not taking a concrete stance on the effectiveness, or lack thereof, of library fines, one cannot ignore how old these studies are. No comparable study has been done between 1983 and now, in 2020. While these findings may have once presented sufficient, valid evidence to support fines much has changed since these studies were conducted. Libraries do not run the same way they did in 1983. Similarly, the role of the library and the library's relationship with its patrons may have also shifted

<sup>25</sup> Little, P. (1989). MANAGING OVERDUES: Facts From Four Studies. *The Bottom Line*, 2(2), 22. <https://doi.org/10.1108/eb025168>

<sup>26</sup> Hansel, P. (1983). Hard facts about overdues. *Library Journal*, 108(4), 350.

in the interim 37 years, and punitive action against patrons, particularly those from lower-income backgrounds, may not be as acceptable as it once was.

Another study used in support of the impact of library fines is *Do library fines work?: Analysis of the effectiveness of fines on patron's return behavior at two mid-sized academic libraries*. This study was conducted in part due to the lack of evidence to drive librarian decision-making in terms of fining patrons.<sup>27</sup> The study concludes that library fines are effective, but concedes that the use of fines may damage patron perception of the library, and may contribute to barriers to access. It is notable that this study focused on academic libraries, which function differently than public libraries. The sample size for this study is rather small, and therefore difficult from which to draw definitive conclusions.

With data this small-scale and potentially outdated, it is difficult to claim that there is a sufficient amount of data available to support the use of library fines. Librarians likely base their opinions in support of library fines on their own values and experiences working in the library. Personal experience and data collected by the library are both valuable in determining what is right for their community and their library and may be the determining factor in whether a library system uses fines. However, it is clear that in the current literature there is no strong, wide-scale evidence that supports the claim that library fines are effective for all of the reasons people use to defend them.

## 2. Fines Disproportionately Affect Lower-Income Patrons

While there is a lack of evidence to support library fine effectiveness, there is evidence that suggests library fines disproportionately affect lower-income patrons. A fine might seem like a small penalty for some. However, for many patrons, the consequences of returning books late is too cost-prohibitive, even if the initial checkout is free. Many

27 Phelps, S. F. (2015). Library Fines Make a Difference in Academic Library Book Return Behaviour. *Evidence Based Library and Information Practice*, 10(3), 96. <https://doi.org/10.18438/B8H89K>

large cities leading the movement toward going fine-free have cited this as one of their main motivations.

For instance, in Seattle, “the branches with the highest proportion of accounts blocked for overdue fines are all in parts of Seattle that are both poorer and more diverse than the city as a whole.”<sup>28</sup> Similarly, in San Francisco, “patrons across all branches accrue fines at similar rates, but locations serving low-income areas have higher average debt amounts and more blocked users.”<sup>29</sup> New York City is not a fine-free library system. However, prior to its fine forgiveness program, according to the NYPL’s CEO, “20% of our 400,000 juvenile and young adult patrons had blocked library cards; nearly half of those were concentrated in the poorest quartile of our branches.”<sup>30</sup>

Logistically, this makes sense. Lower-income families have less disposable income, making it harder for them to pay off any fines they might accrue. In many cases, libraries will restrict access to materials once a patron has reached a certain total of accumulated fines. This further disproportionately targets lower-income households, who likely cannot afford to purchase books. Therefore, when a library cuts off a lower-income patron from the library, they may be cutting off any access they have to books, movies, periodicals, or the many other unique items that libraries offer.

For patrons who have more disposable income, “fines are often not a meaningful deterrent” for returning items past their due date.<sup>31</sup> As well-stated in Slate’s article *Long Overdue*, “for middle-class patrons, [fines] may feel like a slap on the wrist, or even a feel-good donation,”<sup>32</sup> but not everyone shares that privilege. The consequences of overdue fines are too high for some patrons, which can affect library behavior and

28 Kroman, D. (2019). *Library fines hit Seattle’s lower-income neighborhoods hardest*. Retrieved October 4, 2019, from <https://crosscut.com/2019/03/library-fines-hit-seattles-lower-income-neighborhoods-hardest>

29 Cisneros, J. (2019). LONG OVERDUE: Eliminating Fines on Overdue Materials to Improve Access to San Francisco Public Library, p. 5. *The Office of the Treasurer and Tax Collector*. Retrieved October 24, 2019 from: <https://sfpl.org/uploads/files/pdfs/commission/Fine-Free-Report011719.pdf>

30 *The case against library fines—According to the head of New York Public Library—Quartz*. (n.d.). Retrieved October 4, 2019, from <https://qz.com/1158839/the-case-against-library-fines-according-to-the-head-of-the-new-york-public-library/>

31 Cisneros, J. (2019). LONG OVERDUE: Eliminating Fines on Overdue Materials to Improve Access to San Francisco Public Library, p. 20. *The Office of the Treasurer and Tax Collector*. Retrieved October 24, 2019 from: <https://sfpl.org/uploads/files/pdfs/commission/Fine-Free-Report011719.pdf>

32 Graham, R. (2017, February 6). *Go Ahead and Return That Book Late—Libraries Are Doing Away With the Overdue Fine*. Slate Magazine. <https://slate.com/culture/2017/02/librarians-are-realizing-that-overdue-fines-undercut-libraries-missions.html>

usage. Some patrons never check out items due to fear of accruing fines.<sup>33</sup> In some instances, libraries will send patrons with unpaid fines to collection agencies, further punishing them.<sup>34</sup>

This goes against much of what libraries today have come to stand for. Equity, diversity, and inclusion are some of the American Library Association's biggest priorities as a professional organization.<sup>35</sup> There is much discussion in the professional literature, as well as in the education of future librarians in Master's programs, of the library's role in its community. Libraries are intended to be places of equitable access for all. Therefore, should libraries enforce policies that are, by design, inequitable, and may effectively ban lower-income patrons with too many fines from access, all in the name of "fairness"?

### 3. Fines are punitive and are not effective in teaching people how to be better

As discussed earlier in this report, there is a lack of evidence to support library fines as effective tools for getting patrons to return items on time. While some of the evidence does point in that direction, there haven't been many studies done to support this claim. If they are not being used as friendly nudges toward civic responsibility, it is difficult to view them as anything other than punitive, as if seeking retribution either for the library as an institution or on behalf of the "more responsible" patrons who do not accrue fines.

David McMenemy, who ultimately argues in favor of the use of fines, summarizes the issue very well in his editorial piece *On Library Fines: Ensuring Civic Responsibility or an easy income stream?* He states,

The term fine is pejorative in nature; we associate it with punishment. We are fined when we do something wrong, something outside of the

<sup>33</sup> *In San Jose, Poor Find Doors to Library Closed—The New York Times*. (2016). Retrieved October 4, 2019, from <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/31/us/in-san-jose-poor-find-doors-to-library-closed.html>

<sup>34</sup> *It's Not Fine to Not Pay Your Fine » Public Libraries Online*. (2016). Retrieved January 19, 2020, from <http://publiclibrariesonline.org/2016/05/its-not-fine-to-not-pay-your-fine/>

<sup>35</sup> JGRAY. (2008, June 13). *Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion* [Text]. Advocacy, Legislation & Issues. <http://www.ala.org/advocacy/diversity>

expected public standard. Is it then correct and proper for the profession to perpetuate a system that places such a punishment on a library community, be it public or educational? Does such a system deter users who see it as a negative that overcomes any potential benefits in using the collection?<sup>36</sup>

McMenemy ultimately concludes that the punishment fits the crime, as a system without punishment is “a system that allows the disregard for the needs of other members.”<sup>37</sup>

The issue of fines as punishment is also discussed in *Putting a Sacred Cow Out to Pasture: Assessing the Removal of Fines and Reduction of Barriers at a Small Academic Library*. The authors, librarians at Vancouver Island University, eliminated fines due to their inherently punitive nature. They assert that fines, the proverbial sacred cow, have been upheld due to strong feelings in the library community, not evidence-based decision making. They break down the issue simply: the issue of library fines pertains to the library’s relationship to their patrons. Either they decide to take the “enforcer or tax collector role,” potentially at the detriment of library usage in general, or they decide against it.<sup>38</sup>

While McMenemy concludes that the potential loss of patronage is worth risking in order to collect library fines, the librarians at Vancouver Island University decided it was not worth the risk. They argue that libraries now, possibly more than ever, are socially threatened by those who do not see the library as relevant. The library has too much to lose, and “holding a threat above the heads of borrowers” does not serve the library’s

36 McMenemy, D. (2010). On library fines: Ensuring civic responsibility or an easy income stream? *Library Review*, 59(2), 78.

<https://doi.org/10.1108/00242531011023835>

37 McMenemy, D. (2010). On library fines: Ensuring civic responsibility or an easy income stream? *Library Review*, 59(2), 78–81.

<https://doi.org/10.1108/00242531011023835>

38 Reed, K., Blackburn, J., & Sifton, D. (2014). Putting a Sacred Cow Out to Pasture: Assessing the Removal of Fines and Reduction of Barriers at a Small Academic Library. *The Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 40(3–4), 276. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acalib.2014.04.003>

image. Furthermore, in relying on library fines to support library operations, “VIU library would be tacitly supporting student failure.”<sup>39</sup>

Many uphold library fines as a symbol of a patron’s respect for the library, meaning that returning items late is demonstrative of a patron’s lack of respect and inherent irresponsibility as a citizen. However, the threat of punishment should not be the thing curbing patron behavior, and there are many other ways patrons can demonstrate respect for the library as an institution. As described in SFPL and the Office of Treasurer and Tax Collector’s fine-free report, “patrons can practice responsible behavior by using the library, reading books, sharing communal spaces, and making sure materials get back to the library. Rather than a permit for irresponsible behavior, fine elimination is a way to ensure all community members continue to have opportunities to practice those skills.” They described the punitive nature of fines as one of their motivations for wanting to remove fines. They wrote, “overdue fines do not turn irresponsible patrons into responsible ones, they only distinguish between patrons who can afford to pay for the common mistake of late returns and those who cannot.”<sup>40</sup>

Even if one feels that fining patrons is appropriate for getting books back and enforcing responsibility at the risk of deterring some patrons from using the library, it appears that it is not a very effective form of punishment with the intent to curb patron behavior. Before the New York Public Library’s fine forgiveness program, 20% of juvenile and young adult patrons had blocked library cards because of too many fines.<sup>41</sup> In the Phoenix Public Library system, over 10% of their patrons had blocked cards because of fines.<sup>42</sup> Given statistics such as these, does it seem like fines are doing their job, making

39 Reed, K., Blackburn, J., & Sifton, D. (2014). Putting a Sacred Cow Out to Pasture: Assessing the Removal of Fines and Reduction of Barriers at a Small Academic Library. *The Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 40(3–4), 275–280. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acalib.2014.04.003>

40 Cisneros, J. (2019). LONG OVERDUE: Eliminating Fines on Overdue Materials to Improve Access to San Francisco Public Library, p. 27. *The Office of the Treasurer and Tax Collector*. Retrieved October 24, 2019 from: <https://sfpl.org/uploads/files/pdfs/commission/Fine-Free-Report011719.pdf>

41 *The case against library fines—According to the head of New York Public Library—Quartz*. (n.d.). Retrieved October 4, 2019, from <https://qz.com/1158839/the-case-against-library-fines-according-to-the-head-of-the-new-york-public-library/>

42 *Phoenix Public Library to stop charging late fees in November*. (n.d.). Retrieved October 4, 2019, from <https://www.abc15.com/entertainment/events/phoenix-public-library-to-stop-charging-late-fees-in-november>

patrons more responsible, or are they simply excluding a significant number of their patrons from certain library privileges?

Going fine-free might result in more effective means of motivation to ensure timely returns. This argument against fines as an effective means of punishment comes from *If We Charge Them, Will They Come?* The authors, two librarians from the University of Massachusetts, questioned whether or not fines were effective deterrents. They describe their hypothesis as “tying a price to book tardiness should curb unwanted behavior,” and fines serve as “a price to soothe the shame of being late.”<sup>43</sup> Without the ability to wave away guilt with money, patrons face social consequences that are not so easily soothed. Wood and Almeida assert that patron responsibility will stem from “respect for policy and nothing more,” and that “patrons [would] choose not to betray social norms by disappointing” other patrons. This helps the library’s image, turning it away from its traditional image of punishment, and will make “librarians appear kind and accommodating” and “merciful, even when it is merely policy.”<sup>44</sup> Isn’t this kind of social contract a more effective way for patrons to display their civic responsibility, and not just behavior motivated by fear of punishment?

#### 4. Fines may not make up a significant portion of the library’s budget

This will vary from library to library. As mentioned in the introduction, there is no singular prescription that will apply to all libraries. It is difficult to argue against a library that receives a significant part of its budget from the fines they collect. However, it did appear to be a motivating factor for many library systems when they decided to go fine-free. Several of these institutions discussed this as a motivating factor in news publications about their decision.

43 Wood, E., & Almeida, J. (2017.). *If We Charge Them, Will They Come?* 56(3), p. 159.

44 Wood, E., & Almeida, J. (2017). *If We Charge Them, Will They Come?* 56(3), p. 159.

In The San Francisco Public Library “\$333,129 collected in overdue fines in FY 2017-2018 represents 0.2 percent of the total operating budget,”<sup>45</sup> which they argue was likely the same amount spent on human labor in the “employee time consumed by communicating with patrons about fines and engaging in transactions...administrative costs and collections contracts.”<sup>46</sup> The Seattle Public Library collected about “\$1.1 million a year in overdue fines. That’s about 1.3 percent of its \$80.9 million budget for 2019.”<sup>47</sup> Phoenix Public Library “fines reportedly account for \$200,000 a year, which is less than one percent of the library’s annual budget.”<sup>48</sup> In the Detroit Public Library System, the library collected “about \$30,000 in fine payments — less than .1 percent of its total budget.”<sup>49</sup>

These are just a few examples, and all of the aforementioned library systems are large. Therefore, it is not the most representative sample of the ratio of budget and fines. However, research later in this report shows evidence that this trend proves true in smaller library systems, too.

## 5. Eliminating fines may improve circulation

The elimination of fines could benefit not only patrons but the library as well. One of the ways in which the library could benefit is an increase in circulation. This result makes sense: if patrons are no longer afraid to use the library’s collections, they might be more willing to check out books. Similarly, patrons whose fines have been forgiven might return to the library and check out materials again. Clearly, they were interested in or

45 Cisneros, J. (2019). LONG OVERDUE: Eliminating Fines on Overdue Materials to Improve Access to San Francisco Public Library, p. 6. *The Office of the Treasurer and Tax Collector*. Retrieved October 24, 2019 from: <https://sfpl.org/uploads/files/pdfs/commission/Fine-Free-Report011719.pdf>

46 Cisneros, J. (2019). LONG OVERDUE: Eliminating Fines on Overdue Materials to Improve Access to San Francisco Public Library, p. 25. *The Office of the Treasurer and Tax Collector*. Retrieved October 24, 2019 from: <https://sfpl.org/uploads/files/pdfs/commission/Fine-Free-Report011719.pdf>

47 Kroman, D. (2019). *Library fines hit Seattle’s lower-income neighborhoods hardest*. Retrieved October 4, 2019, from <https://crosscut.com/2019/03/library-fines-hit-seattles-lower-income-neighborhoods-hardest>

48 *Phoenix Public Library to stop charging late fees in November*. (n.d.). Retrieved October 4, 2019, from <https://www.abc15.com/entertainment/events/phoenix-public-library-to-stop-charging-late-fees-in-november>

49 *Detroit Public Library eliminates overdue fines*. (2019). Retrieved October 4, 2019, from [http://www.deadlinedetroit.com/articles/23160/detroit\\_public\\_library\\_eliminate\\_overdue\\_fines](http://www.deadlinedetroit.com/articles/23160/detroit_public_library_eliminate_overdue_fines)

needed to check out materials in the past, so the removal of any barriers to entry might lead to higher circulation.

This is more than just a thought experiment or optimism. When the High Plains Library District eliminated fines in 2015, they “saw increased circulation six months after fine elimination.”<sup>50</sup> More specifically, they saw an increase of 16% in their children’s department alone.<sup>51</sup> Similarly, “The Salt Lake County Public Library experienced an 11 percent increase in the number of monthly borrowers and a 14 percent increase in the number of items borrowed in the year after they eliminated fines.”<sup>52</sup> It is worth acknowledging that these numbers were not collected in a vacuum. Libraries are complex ecosystems, and as a result, the increases may not be entirely due to the elimination of fines. That being said, one could safely assume it is at least a contributing factor.

Many libraries that still use fines do allow fine forgiveness for children and teens. A notable example of this is the New York Public Library, who forgave fines for all patrons under the age of 18 in October of 2017.<sup>53</sup> Of the 41,000 young people who used the library in the month following the amnesty, 11,000 of them had not used the library in the past year. As put by the CEO of NYPL, Anthony Marx, “we know 11,000 kids and teens have rekindled their relationship with reading, learning, and libraries...we expect numbers to continue to increase as we continue to get the word out about the program.”<sup>54</sup>

50 Cisneros, J. (2019). LONG OVERDUE: Eliminating Fines on Overdue Materials to Improve Access to San Francisco Public Library, p. 17. *The Office of the Treasurer and Tax Collector*. Retrieved October 24, 2019 from: <https://sfpl.org/uploads/files/pdfs/commission/Fine-Free-Report011719.pdf>

51 Graham, R. (2017, February 6). Long Overdue: Why public libraries are finally eliminating the late-return fine. Retrieved October 31, 2019, from Slate Magazine website: <https://slate.com/culture/2017/02/librarians-are-realizing-that-overdue-fines-undercut-libraries-missions.html>

52 Cisneros, J. (2019). LONG OVERDUE: Eliminating Fines on Overdue Materials to Improve Access to San Francisco Public Library, p. 17. *The Office of the Treasurer and Tax Collector*. Retrieved October 24, 2019 from: <https://sfpl.org/uploads/files/pdfs/commission/Fine-Free-Report011719.pdf>

53 NYC Libraries Announce Fine Forgiveness for Kids and Teens | *The New York Public Library*. (n.d.). Retrieved January 20, 2020, from <https://www.nypl.org/blog/2017/10/19/fine-forgiveness>

54 *The case against library fines—According to the head of New York Public Library—Quartz*. (n.d.). Retrieved October 4, 2019, from <https://qz.com/1158839/the-case-against-library-fines-according-to-the-head-of-the-new-york-public-library/>

## 6. Improved Patron/Librarian relationships

Fine-elimination could lead to improved patron interactions. When thinking about library fines, one might not initially imagine the potentially tense interactions that can be associated with fine collection. Some library systems circumvent this possibility by providing online payment options, but other libraries may not be able to afford this feature. These interactions are undoubtedly undesirable for both patrons and librarians and could lead to uncomfortable, if not damaging, interactions. Having to deal with the negative consequences of these painful conversations may contribute to burnout or anxiety among library staff. This is something that librarians in most large public libraries have to contend with. According to a Library Journal survey conducted in 2017, “98.0 percent of large-sized libraries have to train their staff on how to handle collecting and enforcing fines.”<sup>55</sup>

Many publications have highlighted the benefit of improved patron and librarian relationships when writing about eliminating fines. Eliminating fines can improve the public image of librarians and staff and foster general feelings of goodwill toward the library as an institution. As discussed by the librarians at the University of Massachusetts who wrote *If We Charge Them, Will They Come?*, “the absence of fines is implied trust...The goal of lending resources is to further social progress. This intent, unobscured by penalty, evokes trust because it is supportive of the collective.”<sup>56</sup> The American Library Association’s 2017 president, Julie Torado, described the move toward fine elimination as one of the many ways “to maximize access and positive relationships between libraries and patrons.”<sup>57</sup>

55 Cisneros, J. (2019). LONG OVERDUE: Eliminating Fines on Overdue Materials to Improve Access to San Francisco Public Library, p. 24. *The Office of the Treasurer and Tax Collector*. Retrieved October 24, 2019 from: <https://sfpl.org/uploads/files/pdfs/commission/Fine-Free-Report011719.pdf>

56 Wood, E., & Almeida, J. (2017). *If We Charge Them, Will They Come?* 56(3), p. 160.

57 *Libraries Are Dropping Overdue Fines—But Can They Afford To?* | HuffPost. (2017). Retrieved October 4, 2019, from [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/libraries-are-dropping-overdue-fines-but-can-they-afford-to\\_p\\_5913733ae4b0b1fa1d0dccc2](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/libraries-are-dropping-overdue-fines-but-can-they-afford-to_p_5913733ae4b0b1fa1d0dccc2)

# Library Survey Results

As a part of this report, I thought it was important to hear about the experiences of libraries that have chosen to eliminate fines. I was interested in data, such as how much of their budget previously came from fines, if they saw changes in library usage after the shift, their motivations for eliminating fines, and the advantages and disadvantages they experienced after making the change.

The survey was completed by 15 libraries in 12 different states within the United States. They eliminated fines at points varying between early 2015 and the middle of 2019. The libraries varied greatly in both size of community served and budget. While there is room for growth in the number of respondents, as well as the breadth and depth of questions asked, libraries that completed the survey offered interesting and compelling answers from their experiences. As the surveyor, I ultimately found the qualitative responses about the first-hand experiences of the librarians to be the most illuminating part of the survey, but I'm including both qualitative and quantitative data in the results below.

## Library Demographics

### When the library eliminated fines

Year fines were eliminated	Number of libraries that eliminated fines
2015	1
2016	0
2017	3
2018	6
2019	5

## Library budgets

<b>Budget Range</b>	<b>Number of libraries in that range</b>
<\$1,000,000	1
Between \$1,000,001 and \$10,000,000	5
Between \$10,000,001 and \$25,000,000	3
Between \$25,000,001 and \$50,000,000	4
Over \$50,000,000	2

**Population versus number of locked accounts at time of elimination (from libraries who answered both questions)**

<b>Library Name</b>	<b>Library population served</b>	<b>Number of locked accounts</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Columbus Public Library	1,292,000	~43,890	~3%
San Diego Public Library	1,420,572	Over 174,000	~12%
Denver Public Library	705,439	20,287	2.9%
St. Paul Public Library	309,180	47,294	15%
Kent District Library	395,000	2,045	<0.10%
Contra Costa County Library	1,144,863	116,740	10%
Enoch Pratt Free Library	620,961	26,000	4%

**Maximum amount allowed in fines before account privileges locked**

<b>Dollar amount</b>	<b>Number of libraries</b>
\$5	3
\$8	1
\$10	7
\$15	1
\$20	2
\$25	1

**How does eliminating fines make a difference?**

Of the libraries who responded to the survey, two-thirds reported an increase in the total number of items borrowed in the fiscal year following the change. 40% reported an

increase in the total number of library visits. While many of them did not track average wait times for items on hold, two reported no change to wait times, and two reported an increase of one to two days of wait time, on average. 33% saw an increase in the number of new accounts opened at the library in the fiscal year after eliminating fines.

It is important to note that eliminating fines may not be the sole reason for these changes, as libraries are complex systems and there are a myriad of factors that influence library attendance and borrowing patterns. However, as the surveyor, I determined the changes noted above were significant enough to mention.

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*“Not spending dollars to collect dimes.” - Nancy Kreiser from the Contra Costa County Library, describing an advantage to fine elimination*

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It may seem like an obvious statement, but in giving up fines, libraries are giving up money. One might assume that libraries rely heavily on fines for supporting their budgets. This was not the case for many of the libraries that have eliminated fines, meaning that they could afford to lose that revenue in exchange for the benefits of not fining their patrons. However, one cannot assume this is true for all libraries, which might be the motivating factor for why so many libraries continue to implement fines.

**Percentage of total budget that was collected by fines**

<b>Percentage Range</b>	<b>Number of libraries</b>
Between 0% and 0.5%	3
Between 0.51% and 1%	7

Between 1.01% and 1.5%	1
Between 1.51% and 2%	4
More than 2%	0

## Motivations for Eliminating Fines

One section of the survey asked the librarians to rank the following motivations from 1 to 5, from most aligned with the library's motivations for eliminating fines, to least aligned:

- The library wanted to remove barriers to access.
- The library wanted to improve staff morale.
- The library wanted to improve patrons' relationship to the library.
- The library wanted to free up staff to do other work.
- The total amount collected from fines was small.

14 out of 15 libraries stated that their top motivation was removing barriers to access, and the second most important factor was improving their patrons' relationship to the library. The one library that did not answer in that order put patron relationships first and removal of barriers to access second. This suggests that the libraries were predominantly concerned with the social justice aspects of removing fines, and felt motivated by those implications over the more operational sides of eliminating fines. This speaks to earlier sections of the report, specifically the ones that detail how fines are increasingly being seen as inequitable and punitive rather than a necessary practice. These sentiments are further echoed below, in the section where libraries expressed their personal experiences in their own words.

## Disadvantages of eliminating fines

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*"...we can use every penny we can get each year. That said, I think the **advantages definitely outweigh the***

***disadvantages.***” - Jeana Gockley from the Joplin Public  
Library

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Half of the libraries surveyed either left this section of the survey blank or specifically stated that their library has not experienced any disadvantages from making the change yet.

Not surprisingly, reduction in revenue was the most-cited disadvantage to eliminating fines. 6 out of the 15 libraries surveyed cited this as the main disadvantage. In the words of Jeana Gockley from the Joplin Public Library, “we can use every penny we can get each year. That said, I think the advantages definitely outweigh the disadvantages.”

Four librarians cited confusion as a disadvantage to the change. There are several sources of this confusion. Overdue fines are recognized as a component to library functionality, and the transition could be confusing to patrons who expect to be fined. The librarians at the High Plains Library District elaborated to say that their institution still charges for damaged and missing items, which patrons might not understand when they hear that their library is fine-free. Libraries such as the Sun Prairie library still have fines attached to their specialized collections, which is another point of confusion for patrons. However, these instances demonstrate that being a fine-free library does not mean that all materials need to be fine-free, or that the elimination of fines means the elimination of consequences.

An anxiety about eliminating fines that has been discussed earlier in this report is longer hold times. While some libraries’ statistics demonstrated shorter or unaffected hold times, three libraries mentioned longer hold times as a potential disadvantage to being fine-free. However, when describing increases in hold times, each of the libraries expressed that this is a hypothetical effect, or that the increases have been slight. Therefore, the potential increases in hold times a library might experience is not big enough of a change to detract from the benefits of eliminating fines.

There were two unique disadvantages cited by only one library each. The first was mentioned by Holly Jackson at the Portneuf District Library. She described pushback from more traditional patrons and staff members who thought that the elimination of

fines would lead to a breakdown in the system. In her words, “they believed that no fines would result in anarchy and no items coming back.” However, their library has not found this to be the case, and feedback about the change has been mostly positive.

The other disadvantage was also related to the patron response to the change. The library expected fine elimination to lead to increases in circulation and library usage, which is a benefit that has been cited by several libraries who have gone fine free. Evidence suggests that this is a possible result of the change. However, this library did not see much of a difference as a result of the change, which was, understandably, disappointing.

## Advantages of eliminating fines

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*“Overdue fines are a regressive method of raising revenue, **they hurt the most those who can afford them the least**, create stress-filled interactions, and require significant amounts of staff time to manage.” - David Seleb from the Oak Park Public Library*

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While the libraries that were surveyed, for the most part, cited the same handful of disadvantages to the change, their responses to the advantages of the change were extremely varied. Almost every library had a unique perspective on this, and found different benefits for their library system. This demonstrates how overwhelmingly positive the change can be, and how it can impact communities of various sizes and budgets. There were several major benefits cited by many libraries, but it is the unique experiences they mentioned that illuminate how much of a difference the shift away from library fines could make.

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*“...fines have become a privilege and — **not only do they not work** — they actually encourage people to keep materials*

*longer if they can afford it." - Annette Birdsall, Director of the  
Tompkins County Public Library*

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The one advantage that many libraries described was how eliminating fines helps eliminate barriers to access. As stated by David Seleb from the Oak Park Public Library, "overdue fines are a regressive method of raising revenue, they hurt the most those who can afford them the least, create stress-filled interactions, and require significant amounts of staff time to manage. Having a fine free library eliminates unnecessary barriers to service and improves access for everyone, especially for more vulnerable or marginalized community members." This point is elaborated on by Annette Birdsall, the Director of the Tompkins County Public Library. She said, "it's libraries recognizing that this is a social equity issue, that fines have become a privilege and — not only do they not work — they actually encourage people to keep materials longer if they can afford it. If you can afford it, you pay your fines, you don't feel guilty and you support the library. We love people to support the library. We don't love that it was a privilege and that people who couldn't afford fines stopped using the library altogether."

In addition, two libraries specifically mentioned removing barriers to access of information and literacy resources for children. Increased access for children can be a particularly motivating factor for change. Randall Goble shared this anecdote from the Kent District Library: "A story was shared by one of our branches this year where a woman had recently gotten out of an abusive relationship. She asked staff if anything could be done with her large fines to allow her children to use the library again. And when staff waived the fines with the blessing of administration, she cried."

Another frequently mentioned advantage was how it would affect library staff. Five libraries mentioned that not having to deal with fines would make library jobs less stressful because they have significantly decreased, if not eliminated, negative interactions with patrons. According to Holly Jackson from the Portneuf District Library, "we now have very few negative interactions at our front desk and we have 100% less time being spent on sending late item/fine notifications." Tension has decreased between librarian and patron interactions because they no longer need to ask them for money or deny them access because of fines. As stated by Jennifer Schlossberg from the

Tompkins County Public Library, "it allows their transactions to be about reading and books, and not a discussion about owing \$.50 or \$5.00."

Four of the libraries mentioned an increase in staff time to do other work, and how time-consuming fine collection used to be. According to Randall Goble from the Kent District Library, "the library spent an estimated \$150k of our payroll dollars on staff time dealing with fines (either collecting the payment or manually waiving them). This staff time could be better focused on providing excellent, positive library service, instead of on negative interactions around fines."

The remaining advantages were mentioned by only a small number of libraries but demonstrate the variety of positive outcomes that librarians have observed since making the change.

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*"Is a library's mission to teach responsibility, or is it a library's mission to provide information and learning experiences?" -  
Holly Jackson from the Portneuf District Library*

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### More aligned with the real mission of the library to provide information

Three libraries mentioned that imposing fines on patrons is in direct opposition to the mission of the library. One librarian, Holly Jackson of the Portneuf District Library, was forced to confront the motivations behind library fines when asked this question: "Is a library's mission to teach responsibility, or is it a library's mission to provide information and learning experiences?" According to Nancy Kreiser from the Contra Costa County Library, this change has also led to "a heightened awareness of equity and the impact of barriers. We continue to question policy and procedures from this perspective and are implementing change on an on-going basis."

### Increased goodwill

Three libraries specifically mentioned increased goodwill as a noted benefit. This is closely tied to the ways in which patrons perceive and interact with the library, but is a

specific type of sentiment that implies an increase in warm feelings and trust in the library as an institution.

### Better service to patrons

Four libraries mentioned that their staff are now better able to serve their patrons now that they don't have to worry about the repercussions of handling fines. As stated by Randall Goble at the Kent District Library, "staff time could be better focused on providing excellent, positive library service, instead of on negative interactions around fines." Nancy Kreiser from the Contra Costa County Library echoed this point, stating that staff can focus on the "value of service versus the value of enforcing the minutiae of rules."

### Improved morale

While the survey itself included a section on whether or not the library was motivated to eliminate fines by the prospect that it may improve employee morale, one library specifically mentioned it again in the short answer section.

### Better use of resources

Three libraries specifically mentioned that this shift would lead to better application of library resources. While one library's use of the phrase "better use of resources" was vague, another library specifically mentioned that patrons were better able to learn about and take advantage of library resources on offer, and the third mentioned that children have more access to literacy resources in the library. This phrase could also refer to how the library allocates its own resources, or as put by Nancy Kreiser from the Contra Costa County Library, "not spending dollars to collect dimes."

### Increase in item returns because there is no fear

In the words of Holly Jackson at the Portneuf District Library, "we see more items being returned instead of kept when the patrons don't fear fiscal punishment." If this proves true in other libraries, then patrons may experience shorter hold times on average as a result. Additionally, libraries may experience fewer permanently lost items.

### Staff doesn't have to deal with money as often

If libraries are not frequently collecting fines, there is less need for librarians and staff to handle money. Two librarians mentioned this benefit. One specifically mentioned that less staff time spent handling money means fewer accounting mistakes made in the library's till.

### Patrons may still donate money if they are able

The Portneuf District Library mentioned that they still get monetary donations from patrons who can afford to give. Patrons who may have viewed the library fine as an opportunity to donate money to the library still have the opportunity to do so, without the negative repercussions of punishing those who were unable to make such a "donation" in exchange for access.

### Good PR for the library

Two librarians highlighted that eliminating fines can lead to good PR/good advertising on the library's behalf. It is a notable event likely to garner the attention of local media, and contributes to the larger narrative happening around the momentum of the movement. It can also be used as a tool to re-invite patrons to the library who may have been discouraged from coming due to fear of fines, too many fines, or the other issues that can be associated with overdue fines.

### Less concern over borrowing limits

Patrons no longer need to fear racking up extremely high fines for having a large quantity of items past their due date. The Jefferson County library mentioned that in their library, DVDs carry a one dollar fine per day late, and a patron can have out 10 DVDs at a time. This means 10 DVDs one day late carried a 10 dollar fine, almost half of the total allowed limit before borrowing privileges were revoked. Patrons no longer need to fear borrowing many items at one time. Similarly, libraries do not need to worry about setting high borrowing limits in terms of item quantity, at least in terms of the repercussions that overdue fines used to carry.

### Increased lost book revenue

The Joplin Public Library mentioned seeing an increase in revenue from lost book fines. This demonstrates that patrons are responsible when it comes to paying for the replacement of lost items, and implies that accruing large fines did not directly correlate with the morality or responsibility of the patron.

### Renewed appreciation for the library

While this reason resembles that of goodwill, it is also connected to library publicity. The librarian who mentioned renewed appreciation explicitly mentioned this attitude being expressed by local businesses and civic leaders. This could mean new opportunities for collaboration and outreach between the library and its community. This sentiment was also seen in other responses about patrons returning to the library after an extended period away. The librarians at the Saint Paul Public Library noted an increase in circulation and active users after over five years of consistent decreases. The Contra Costa County library also mentioned circulation increases, which they had not experienced since 2011.

## Alternatives to completely eliminating fines

If nothing else, I hope this report has made it clear that library fines are a complex, multifaceted issue. There are no easy answers that will work for every library. If going totally fine-free is not possible for your library, there are other options. Many libraries across the country have found creative ways to forgive fines for their patrons without eliminating fines completely.

### Donations

Libraries can collect a variety of items to help decrease patron fines. However, there is a major drawback to collecting donations in exchange for fine forgiveness. Patrons who cannot afford to pay their fines likely do not have the disposable time or income to donate items to charity, and may, in fact, be the ones in need of those charitable resources. However, this does provide an opportunity for patrons who are able to

contribute to charitable causes, which help provide them with feelings of goodwill and community engagement. Included are several examples of library systems that have conducted donation drives for various things, such as winter clothing, canned goods, blood, and time, and may serve as inspiration if this is more achievable for your library.

[Library Fun Run Clears the Fines of Nearly 300 Patrons](#) - Great Falls, MT

[Pay Off Library Fines with Canned Goods](#) - Corpus Christi, TX

[Red Cross Blood Drive - Library Fines Waived for Donors](#) - New Canaan, CT

[Sock Donations](#) - Red Bluff, CA

## Amnesty

[One Time Amnesty](#) - New York Public Library

Rather than eliminating fines for good, library systems can implement an amnesty program. Systems such as the New York Public Library have done one-time amnesty for patrons under the age of 18, which gives them a "second chance" at using library resources and materials. Amnesty programs can be applied to patrons of all ages.

Similarly, you can eliminate fines just for children and teenagers. Many library systems that have not eliminated fines entirely have stopped imposing overdue fines on patrons under the age of 18. This is because they are more likely to be beholden to their parents, who have more control over the frequency of library visits and are more likely to have money to pay fines than their children do. This helps foster feelings of goodwill to the library at a young age and does not limit access to materials for children who may have no other means of getting books and learning resources.

## Automatic Renewal

Updates to library notification and renewal systems may help patrons. Automatic renewal programs, such as the one implemented in Marshalltown, Iowa, automatically

renew items that have no other patron holds on them. This gives patrons more flexibility in returning items and does not require the patron to renew the materials themselves.

[Automatic Renewal Program](#) - Marshalltown, IA

## Conclusion

There is no blanket recommendation that will work for every library. Public libraries all function a bit differently from one another, and are influenced by librarians, staff, their budgets, and their communities. This report is not meant to criticize any libraries still using library fines. However, it does ask that libraries question their motivations for using fines. Is there evidence driving their usage? Does our confidence in the reliability of fines come from data, or does it stem from tradition?

The intent of this report is to serve as a conversation-starter for libraries to address library fine usage. It is meant to provide context from the existing literature to help support or refute the long-standing arguments surrounding the topic of fine usage. I hope that it provides useful resources and discussion points to help libraries reflect on the use of overdue library fines, especially as more libraries across the country choose to remove them.

# Appendix A:

## Library Fines Survey

For the fiscal year prior to the library eliminating fines:

- What was the library's budget for that period?
- What was the total amount collected in fines in that period?
- Did the fines collected go to the library's budget?
- How much were patrons charged for late items, per item, per day? Your response can be broken down by item type and/or loan type, if necessary.
- What was the maximum amount in fines a patron could accrue before library privileges were locked?

Please rank the following reasons for eliminating fines, in order from most aligned with your library's motivations, to least aligned to your library's motivations.

- The library wanted to remove barriers to access.
- The library wanted to improve staff morale.
- The library wanted to improve patrons' relationship to the library.
- The library wanted to free up staff to do other work.
- The total amount collected from fines was small.

If you collect data for the following metrics, provide numbers for the fiscal year prior to fine elimination:

- Average return rates of items
- Number of items borrowed
- Total library visits
- Total number of new registered users
- Average wait time for a hold request

Additionally, provide numbers for the fiscal year after fine elimination:

- Average return rates of items
- Number of items borrowed
- Total library visits
- Total number of new registered users
- Average wait time for a hold request

What is the numerical population of the community your library serves?

What was the total number of library accounts that were locked due to library fines at the time fines were eliminated?

How many library accounts did the library have when fines were eliminated?

From your library's experience, describe the advantages of having a fine-free library.

From your library's experience, describe the disadvantages of having a fine-free library.

## Appendix B: Libraries that completed the survey

Library Name	State
Oak Park Public Library	IL
Columbus Public Library	OH
High Plains Library District	CO
Joplin Public Library	MO
Jefferson County Public Library	WA
Portneuf District Library	ID
San Diego Public Library	CA
Denver Public Library	CO
Sun Prairie Public Library	WI
Tompkins County Public Library	NY
Saint Paul Public Library	MN
Kent District Library	MI
Contra Costa County Library	CA
San Mateo Public Library	CA
Enoch Pratt Free Library	MD