

Eliminating Fines: Key Arguments and Links to Articles/Research

Links to Articles and Research

- [Why public libraries are finally eliminating the late-return fine](#)
 - “For low-income users, however, it can be a prohibitively expensive penalty. With unpredictable costs hovering over each checkout, too many families decide it’s safer not to use the library at all. As one California mother told the New York Times last spring, “I try to explain to [my daughter], ‘Don’t take books out. It’s so expensive.’ ”
 - “The good news is that librarians are noticing. Since 2010, districts in northern Illinois, Massachusetts, California, and Ohio—to name a few—have eliminated some or all late fines.”
- [The End of Overdue Fines?](#) (Article in Public Libraries)
 - The Vernon Area Public Library (VAPL) in the northwest suburbs of Chicago eliminated overdue fines this past August, and ELA Public Library, a neighbor of VAPL, followed suit in September. They are modeling their policy on Algonquin (IL) Public Library (another neighbor) and their decision to remove overdue fines in September 2014. VAPL noted that Algonquin, nearing its one-year anniversary of instilling the policy, has had no adverse effects. In fact, it’s only increased the goodwill of patrons towards the public library. Since introducing the no overdue fines policy, VAPL has also received only positive responses from their patrons and the community at large.
 - The big question is whether or not this becomes a drawback as far as funding for the library itself and whether or not patrons will actually bring items back without the incentive of fines. VAPL details some of their answers to this on their website at <http://vapld.info/fines>. It appears that fines only amount to less than 1% of their total annual budget. VAPL also states that the cost of staff time to handle overdue fines and of processing the amounts to more than what they’re earning back from patrons. And just because overdue fines are eliminated does not mean that patrons will not have consequences for not returning items.
 - Patrons are motivated to return items because others are waiting and because there is a due date, not because of a dime per day overdue policy. Beyond that, library cards will be suspended two weeks after patrons do not return their items. Along the way, reminder emails and letters for the items to be returned are sent out, and patrons always have the option to renew the item to avoid it becoming overdue in the first place.
 - Library Bill of Rights. Although not specifically referring to overdue fines, they do state that: “All library policies and procedures, particularly those involving fines, fees, or other user charges, should be scrutinized for potential barriers to access.”

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- We want to make the library institution as accessible as possible for anybody. We want the poor to be able to come in and lift themselves up; we want the youth to be able to feel unhindered to come into the library and enjoy our programs and materials.
- [Removing Barriers to Access - white paper for the Colorado State Library](#)
 - The Colorado State Library recommends public library administrators and governing bodies eliminate library fines, and reconsider fees for lost or damaged items, on children's materials, and other items as deemed appropriate for local service.
 - Fines are punitive, not educational incentives.
 - Damaged and lost material is an inevitable aspect of library use, particularly with very young children, and needs to be considered the cost of doing business with the library's young patrons.
 - The profession has little empirical evidence that charging fines results in greater circulation of library materials, or indeed the return of items in a timely manner.
 - The administrative costs, including equipment rental, collection contracts, and staff time associated with collecting funds from patrons, often equals or exceeds the revenue earned from library fines and fees.
 - At a time when libraries struggle to remain relevant and increase library use, it may be counterproductive to enforce policies that are punitive in nature and further the stereotype of libraries as authoritarian institutions to be feared. Librarians have an opportunity to play a meaningful role in the lives of children and families in their communities. By eliminating library fines and fees, particularly on children's materials, public libraries become more welcoming to children and families. Early literacy skills are crucial to school readiness, so it is important that parents and caregivers from all income-levels in our society have access to materials they can use daily in the home to practice reading, singing, talking, writing, and playing with their children.
 - Children's librarians are thrilled when they see families checking out a stack of picture books, and families should be encouraged to do so, rather than be fearful of the late fines and book damage fees that might accrue. Based on the research, these user-friendly policies will bring more community members into the library, especially the low-income populations who need libraries the most.
 - "The threat of accumulating fines for overdue materials and the fees associated with damaged or lost books is keeping low -income families away from libraries, or from

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checking out items to take home (Zhang, 2013).

- Whether the intended function of library fines and fees is to encourage the prompt return of materials, to supplement the library budget, or to teach patrons responsibility, overdue fines and replacement fees on children's materials can negatively affect the borrowing habits of members of our community who need the library the most"
- Administrative costs associated with collecting fines and fees can surpass the revenue they generate. Vernon Area Public Library (Illinois) is just one library that has eliminated overdue fines and fees that amounted to less than one percent of their budget and cost far more to collect (Pyatetsky, 2015) .
- High Plains Library District (Colorado) eliminated late fines on library materials and found the financial repercussions to be "neutral" because they were able to eliminate costly credit card technology on their self-check machines (J. Reid, personal communication, April 26, 2016). Staff time and money -collecting technology are expensive, and when the amount generated by charging fines is compared to the costs associated with collecting them, it becomes clear charging fines for revenue may not make sense.

Thus, treating all library patrons equally by assessing a fine for late materials is inequitable: it disproportionately affects low-income families.

With regard to fees for lost items, in "Breaking Barriers: Libraries and Socially Excluded Communities," DeFaveri (2005) described a situation in which a mother was charged \$25.00 for a lost picture book. The author asks members of our profession to contemplate the long-term consequences of choosing to collect \$25 in the short term: Will this family be comfortable returning to the library?

Yet, as Holt and Holt (2010) observed, "Reacting to fines and the cost of lost books, or just fearing such expenses, parents and caregivers in poor families may make a rational decision to not allow their children to get a library card or to check out books that might get lost" (p. 51). The SPELL research (Zhang, 2013) confirms this assertion.

After determining that charging fines was costing more than the revenue it brought in, Gleason Public Library (Illinois) stopped charging fines and saw no significant difference in the amount of time people were keeping materials (West, 2012). The library director, Angela Mollet, said having a "fine-free" policy was in keeping with the library's mission: "What role do fines play in a library? I want to encourage people of all ages to read, to discover, to be curious, and it doesn't make sense to put up any barriers that might prevent that" (West, 2012,)

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Upon learning that parents and guardians of young children reported library fines to be a barrier to visiting the library, the district eliminated fines on all late returns of materials (excluding DVDs). The main objective of the policy was to increase circulation of children's materials, and the board and administration wished to bring new users into the library. Six months after fines were eliminated, overall circulation was up, and 95% of their materials were returned within a week of the due date

Staff members of libraries are pleased with the policy change, as they have far fewer unpleasant interactions with patrons about fines, and have more time to accomplish their other duties. The financial effect on the institution, as indicated earlier, has been labeled "neutral." In order to determine if late return of items was affecting the experience of patrons waiting for items, the district examined circulation data and found no increase in "patron disappoints." While patrons might be slightly slower at returning items, this is not negatively affecting the experience of other users of the library.

- [We're Fines Free! | Addison Public Library](#)
 - Fines make up only .07% of our budget – a number that is dropping every year.
 - You support us with your taxes. We would like to make using the library a less stressful, more accessible experience for the entire community, no matter what a household's financial circumstances.
 - This community has built a beautiful library, filled it with educational and entertaining materials, and employed knowledgeable, helpful staff. There should be as few barriers as possible to its use by all.
 - Addison Public Library is not the only library to go fines-free; at least six other Illinois libraries have stopped charging overdue fines as well. This New York Times article explains some of the reasons behind this movement. People are still responsible for the items they check out. If items are kept longer than 14 days past the due date, the user account is blocked from any further use and the items are charged to that account at full replacement value. The account will remain blocked until the items are returned, in acceptable condition, or paid for. We are very excited to be able to provide a fines free library for the Addison community. We hope to see even more guests coming through the front door to enjoy all that is on offer. Part of our strategic plan is to create a welcoming, accessible space. We feel that ditching overdue fees takes us one step closer to the goal.
 - [Fees Schedule | Addison Public Library](#)
- [Columbus getting rid of fines](#) (Columbus Metro Marketing Collateral)

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- Why is Columbus Metropolitan Library getting rid of overdue fines? Our goal is to make sure our customers can enjoy all the books and services the library offers. Overdue fines can prevent some customers – especially kids – from checking out books and other materials. We don't rely on the money we receive from overdue fines to run the library.

- [Columbus libraries to eliminate overdue book fines | NBC4i.com](#)

- "Removing barriers to get more materials into the hands of more customers brings us closer to achieving our vision of a thriving community where wisdom prevails," said CEO Patrick Losinski."

Rather than imposing fines, the library will instead block library cards of patrons with materials 21 days or more overdue. If an overdue item is not returned 35 days after its due date, it is deemed lost and the customer is charged a replacement fee. That fee would be removed if and when the customer returns the item.

Customers with cards blocked for long overdue materials are still able to access eBooks, reserve meeting rooms, use public PCs and other library services.

Other Ohio library systems that have eliminated fines include the Delaware County District Library (except AV materials, since 1986), and Worthington Libraries (since October 2016). Additionally, Stark County District Library went fine-free in 2014.

- **Spell Research Project:**

[Eliminating Fines -- spell research methodology and findings.pdf](#)

- Finding -- fines are one of the biggest barriers. Two of the communities, Colorado Springs and Aurora, are large urban areas; the other two, Fort Lupton and Leadville, are rural areas. All four have a large low-income demographic. The survey was available in English and Spanish. In total, 223 valid surveys were collected.

- [Early literacy fine reduction](#)

- Parents frequently check out several items at a time for their children. Studies have shown that having access to lots of books is an important predictor of reading success. By reducing fines, enabling families to check out more early literacy materials.

- **Discussion on Library Listserv:** [\[OPLINLIST\] "No-Fine" Libraries](#)

- "The Mercer County District Library started "No Fine" in April of this year to start off National Library Week. We decided to charge no fines for all items including movies. So far it has gone quite well. Patrons and staff have been very receptive of the idea.

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I've seen an increase of lost items being returned to the library which is exactly what I wanted to see. The number of overdue items has remained about the same since we went stopped charging fines. The main incentive we have to get patrons to return items is that their accounts are limited or blocked if they have so many overdue items. If they have 3-9 overdue items, they are limited to 10 checkouts total. If they have 10 or more overdue items, their account is blocked from checking out items. I believe that these situations have rarely occurred since we fine free. The few patrons that have been limited or blocked have been more than willing to return their items once they know they won't be charged anything for bringing them back. "

- **Discussion on Library Listserv [\[OPLINLIST\] "No-Fine" Libraries](#)**

- "We have found that patrons return overdue items an average of 7.8 days past the due date. However, if an item is on hold for another patron, they return requested items a half day sooner on average (7.4 days). The same number of "abusers" exist now as before we started no fines – 250 patrons out of 105,000 active patrons. The incentive to return library materials remains the same – if they are not returned, you must pay for the item. We have found that 97% of patrons return their items on time or within an average of 7.8 days overdue.

We are using hard data, not anecdotal stories -- which anyone who works the front line will have. We realized we were setting up all of our rules for the 3% who abuse their public library. We also found that only 8-11% of our collection was "in use," in the homes of residents who own the materials. We realized we aren't a book storage company and we wanted to remove what we could identify as barriers to use.

The board and administration are very pleased with the results of the experiment and plan to continue to offer no fines. I would encourage anyone thinking about a no-fines policy to begin by checking what percentage of their collection is checked out. Then you will know if there may be barriers that need to be removed to promote use."

- **Discussion on Library Listserv [\[OPLINLIST\] "No-Fine" Libraries](#)**

- "What it does do is provide a barrier to library services, particularly for the people whose economic situations make our services most valuable. Eliminating fines not only let us stop punishing our poorer patrons, it also clarified our priorities and eased the work on the staff: because we care about the materials, not the penalties, staff had the freedom to waive fines but not lost material charges. This can be confusing both to the staff and to the patrons. Now, balances against patron accounts are only lost material charges, which go away completely when items are returned."

- **[Late fees overdue for a change - Times Union](#)**

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- "A lot of people will just walk away from that and not use the library again," Kirkpatrick said. "The last thing we want is to have people, especially children, cut off from services at the library."
- [Rochester Public Library eliminating overdue fines for](#)
 - "Further, a study of other libraries across the country who have eliminated fines show an increased use of the library by children."
- [The end of library fines in Lafayette Parish? | KLFY](#)
 - "The fines penalize people, and we've found through the years that they penalize the young kids and low income people the most," Elberson continued. "People feel guilty. They want to use the library, but they have fines. We want those people to come back and use the library. We don't want people to have to be scared."
- [Good QandA on Eliminating Fines- From Cape Elizabeth Council Packet 2013](#)
 - "More books seem to be coming back, time overdue does not seem to be any different. We recently shortened our notice schedule from 7/14/21/60 days to 3/7/14/28 days and this has made a bigger impact on returns than lack of overdue fines. The biggest impact was removing the negativity from nearly every transaction, and the impression that families would not be penalized for lateness when all items had been returned in good condition. "

Changing your circulation period to 21 or more days helps even more because it decreases overdue items. We just migrated to a new ILS that has a 3-day courtesy notice before the due date and have seen another reduction in overdues. The people who check out and never return will do that anyway, whether or not there are fines. There is some research that shows overdue fines are not statistically effective in increasing returns on time or at all.
- [Is the lifting of library fines long overdue? | csmonitor.com](#)
 - It takes an incredible amount of staff time to collect 50 cents, to monitor it, and send out notices. We weighed the actual costs of collecting fines against the revenue brought in and decided it was kind of a wash."
 - "Young families borrow a great deal of items," says Kathy Killeen, director. "They've got a lot of pressure on them. If they're a week behind, they don't have to pull out their wallet. It just takes that onerous element of libraries out of our exchanges with people."

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- [All are forgiven: Vernon Area library halts fines for overdue books](#)

- "The Ela Area Public Library in Lake Zurich is next. Officials there plan to eliminate assessing late fees starting Sept. 2. Select libraries in Ohio, Missouri, Massachusetts, Colorado and other states have eliminated fines, too. Sari Feldman, president of the American Library Association, acknowledged that fines and fees can be barriers preventing people -- especially poorer people -- from using library services. And as libraries become places people turn to not just for books but also for community events, job-search assistance and other programs, finding ways to reduce those barriers is important, she said."

And the manpower needed to answer questions about fines and process them wasn't worth the money coming in, Savage said. Through research done earlier this year, officials also discovered late fees didn't encourage people to return books and videos on time. "People bring things back because they're done with them," Savage said. "Or they bring them back because they're due."

- [No more late fines at the library? | Articles | News | OakPark.com](#)

- "Library Board President Matt Baron said the change, which wouldn't go into effect until June 1, aims to bring greater equity to low-income patrons who are at greater risk of losing access to library materials because they're unable to pay the fines.

Library Director David Seleb said his goal is to eliminate barriers to the library and that overdue fines are part of an outdated model. "It's always assumed that library fines are a discouragement to patrons keeping materials that are overdue," Seleb said. "Frankly, that's never been demonstrated to be true." "It's going to do away with one of the biggest points of friction between the staff and the public," he said. A library board memo says fines are a "regressive method of raising revenue: they impact the most those who can least afford them."

Similarly, Vernon Area Public Library eliminated fines a year and a half ago and has experienced an increase in overdue items, but the amount of time the items remain overdue has decreased dramatically. Cynthia Fuerst, Vernon Area Public Library director, said the items that are overdue but coming back sooner, noting, that the average number of days items are overdue has dropped 42 percent on average. "Under our traditional model, [overdue] items were an average of 19 days late; now, they're being returned 11 days late [on average]," she said.

She said first-time checkouts are up, though, because patrons have "more comfort checking out materials because we're not nickel and diming them." "No one wants to shake down a busy family or a stressed out student for a pocket full of change," Fuerst said. "It just wasn't the kind of customer experience we wanted to provide."

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- [Two Fineless Years, A History, Analysis, and Evaluation](#) (research from 1972)
 - The two-year experience of the Alameda County Library System without fines for overdue materials has been successful, in agreement with most of the other public libraries that have tried it. The benefits that were hoped for have been realized in practice.
- [Overdue fines to be eliminated at the Stark County District Library - News - The Repository - Canton, OH](#)
 - ""The old way of thinking was, 'This is our stuff and we have to protect it.' The new way of thinking is that, 'This is your stuff and how can we help you (access it),' "

[We] discovered that it cost more money in staff time for the tracking, collecting and accounting of the overdue fines than the \$188,000 the district collects in penalties each year. She said they also found that the fines tend to penalize the library's loyal customers the most. She said figures show that more than 90 percent of the district's 102,700 active cardholders owe less than \$25 in fines.

Wilson has found 19 other libraries that have eliminated fines, including Delaware County Public Library, which stopped charging fines for most materials in 1986. "It's not a new idea," she said. "It's just new to us."

"We (libraries) spend so much time pursuing fines and it generates so much animosity, bad customer service situations and stress for staff arguing over 10-cent fines," said Lowery, a former police officer who has served as New London's director since 2008. "Is it really worth it with the amount of stress staff goes through? Is it worth it to punish a patron who is a couple of days late for a couple of nickels and dimes? There's a certain percentage of people who, no matter what the fine is, are not going to bring it back," she said.

What's been the most positive, she said, is the environment that being fine free has created for her nine part-time employees and the people they serve. "It's just a much less stressful situation," she said. "(Employees) are not arguing with people over fines, they are not getting screamed at. It's a happier, friendlier place."

She also said the Friends of the Library, a separate organization that funds the district's summer reading programs, has collected a large number of donations by putting "guilt jars" on the counter at the circulation desk for borrowers who still feel they should be punished for keeping materials too long. "They have collected much more money since we did that than we would have in fines," Lowery said.

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- [Fine \(Free\) and Dandy: Libraries Say Good-bye to Overdue Charges - Illinois Library Association](#)

- "The idea fell in line with achieving one of our strategic goals of improving customer service. We felt that eliminating fines would reduce the number of negative interactions between patrons and staff, remove barriers to service allowing blocked patrons to come back to use the library, and foster goodwill in the community," Evidence suggests that this approach might be more, or at least equally, effective as fines. After running a circulation report of long overdue materials shortly after implementation of the fine-free program, Ela discovered that only four patrons out of over six hundred still had items overdue. "I call that a win," maintains Womack.

Now, they no longer see the library as a place that induces stress and creates penalties for transgressions, and they immediately sent a thank you to show their gratitude for the change in policy—just one of many positive interactions now that fines are gone for good.

It produced an unexpected boost in staff morale. "Staff like not having to deal with fines," he said. Because management is no longer putting staff in the position of being the bad guy whose role entails collecting money in their transactions with the public, the "interactions with patrons have been less negative."

- [In San Jose, Poor Find Doors to Library Closed - The New York Times](#)

- "We still have a digital divide." "The kids who are barred from the door of the library are the ones we most desperately want to reach," he said. In some immigrant neighborhoods, Ms. Bourne said, "there is a fear of government interaction. As soon as people hear there is the potential for being penalized by the government, they want to stay away from that service."

Given the choice between paying fines "and putting food on the table and a roof over the children's head, it's a no-brainer: It is better not to check out library books." In a little-known policy objective, it calls for "the removal of all barriers to library and information services, particularly fees and overdue charges." "Public libraries would not have existed for centuries if most people didn't follow the rules," said the association president, Sari Feldman. "We are also very attentive to creating a barrier-free environment that enables all people to use libraries and have equitable opportunity in our country." She added, "Accumulating fines for families whose income is, on average, \$30,000 a year with monthly rents at \$1,600 for a one-bedroom apartment is much more of a burden.

- [When you don't tell the truth to customers . . . – Stephen's Lighthouse](#)

- I know that I have heard of some studies showing that:

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- Libraries are unusual in their use of fines as an intended ‘motivator’ for good behaviour. Hmmm. I wonder if that works?
 - Fines have the opposite effect by causing some books to be returned very late or not at all. Overall they delay the return of books and have a negative effect on key markets like families, teens and children.
 - Individual fine forgiveness requests can put people in challenging economic circumstances into embarrassing situations of having to be cap-in-hand supplicants to desk staff in the public setting of the library.
 - Fine forgiveness events (days, weeks, months) often result in overall circulation increases after the events when people no longer fear having fines accruing in the library’s system.
 - Who else uses fines? Police, parking officers, . . . These are for infractions of the law, not the rules.
- **Urban Libraries Council Webinar:**
 - [Library Fees: To Forgive or Forget | Urban Libraries Council](#)
 - Join us and hear from San José Public Library Director, Jill Bourne, as she discusses the reliable and sustainable amnesty program she and her team developed with their Mayor in order to better serve low-income neighborhoods and provide realistic fine policies and processes. Learn from Andrew Medlar, Assistant Chief of Technology, Content & Innovation at Chicago Public Library, about CPL’s commitment to provide broad access to all Chicagoans in order to minimize barriers to the library’s collections, programs, and services. Andrew will discuss how regular evaluation of fine policies, along with news-making city-wide amnesty programs, have empowered Chicagoans with knowledge, learning, and valuable experiences. And last but not least, DC Public Library’s Director of Public Services, Manya Shorr, will share how and why the library completely eliminated fines, fees and amnesty programs to meet local and national directives, and what has come of this intentional and valued decision.