

# Are Library Late Fees a Barrier to Equity?

## Many libraries are moving to a fine-free model. Here's why — and how to do this successfully

Aiming to attract more patrons and reduce barriers to library access, a growing number of public libraries worldwide are eliminating the fines they charged for overdue materials.

At least 200 libraries in the United States have transitioned to a fine-free model, according to the Urban Libraries Council, which maintains a map of fine-free libraries across North America. Major cities that have gone fine-free include Baltimore, Chicago, Denver, Los Angeles, Oakland, Philadelphia, San Diego, San Francisco, and Seattle.<sup>1</sup>

The fine-free library movement has picked up steam since the American Library Association passed a resolution in January 2019 urging libraries to “scrutinize their practices of imposing fines on library patrons and actively move towards eliminating them.”<sup>2</sup> The resolution asserts that monetary fines create an economic barrier to the provision of library services that affects low-income populations in particular.

This paper explores the reasons for eliminating fines in more detail, as well as the impact this has on both library revenue and the return of materials. For libraries interested in moving to a fine-free model, it will provide advice and real-world examples on how to do so successfully.

### Reasons for Going Fine-Free

It has long been assumed that imposing late fees encourages people to bring back materials before they're due. In fact, research suggests that fines have no such effect on borrowers' behavior and can actually discourage people from returning materials *at all*, because they don't want to pay the late charges they have incurred.

When patrons who have racked up late fees are barred from using library resources or avoid the library altogether because they're unable or unwilling to pay their fines, circulation suffers — and citizens lose access to critical information.

A study by Meg Johnson DePriest for the Colorado State Library reviewed numerous research papers and concluded:

**... [T]he library profession lacks data to support the argument that the presence of fines for overdue materials positively influences return rates on materials. In addition, a few research studies conclude that circulation rates among low-income families are lower due to the presence of library fines and fees. With such inconclusive evidence of the value of fines and indicators of the negative effects, ... the collection of late fees from patrons cannot be supported by hard data.**<sup>3</sup>

In light of these findings, many libraries have stopped charging late fees on some or all of their collections in an effort to remove barriers for users.

Before going fine-free, the San Francisco Public Library studied the impact of late fees and found: *“While overdue fines do not significantly affect library access for wealthier patrons, they can seriously impact the library relationship for low-income users. 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>4</sup>



While solid numbers are hard to find, anecdotal evidence suggests the fine-free movement is having its intended effect of increasing access to materials. For instance, the Chicago Public Library System reportedly had 400 more library card renewals in the month it went fine-free than in the same time frame the year before.<sup>5</sup> In Denver, 36 percent of customers whose existing fines were forgiven used a library service in 2019, says Manager of Books and Borrowing Jennifer J. Hoffman — resulting in 38,000 additional users.

Another advantage of eliminating fines is that it has made librarians’ jobs easier and more enjoyable.

*“Staff appreciate having lower-stress interactions with patrons,”* says Lori Roholt, an administrator for western Wisconsin’s MORE consortium, run by the Indianhead Federated Library System (IFLS). Nearly half of the consortium’s 49 member libraries have gone fine-free since 2017.

*“Fines are one of the less comfortable topics of discussion that library staff can have, and eliminating them has improved staff morale,”* Roholt explains. *“That has been a nice side benefit.”*

## Effects on Revenue

A common concern about going fine-free is that it will cut into library revenues. Supporters of the fine-free movement say this concern is largely overblown, because late fees generally account for a very small portion of library budgets—and it can be costly to collect these fees in the first place.

*“The income from paid overdue fines is a very low percentage of our libraries’ budgets—only 1 or 2 percent,”* says Sheryl VanderWagen, ILS manager for the Lakeland Library Cooperative in Grand Rapids, Mich., where 17 of the cooperative’s 42 member libraries have voted to eliminate late fees for at least their juvenile collections. *“It’s a fairly unstable source of revenue from year to year, which is why many of our member libraries don’t even account for this revenue in their planning budgets.”*

During the 2017–18 fiscal year, collections of overdue fines accounted for just 0.2 percent of the San Francisco Public Library’s total operating budget, public radio station KQED reports. In contrast, library employees spend an estimated 1,100 to 3,500 hours per year collecting fines, which adds up to \$64,000 to \$191,000 in staff capacity. That’s time and money that could be spent serving patrons more effectively, the system decided.<sup>6</sup>

The San Diego Public Library System eliminated late fees after an analysis by the city found that libraries were actually spending more per year on collecting fines (nearly \$1 million) than they took in from these charges (\$675,000).<sup>7</sup>

Even if it’s a small percentage of total revenue, the money lost when libraries go fine-free can, in fact, add up—and libraries might have to tinker with their budgets to make up for this lost income. Libraries that have eliminated fines have taken creative steps to make up for this lost money, such as becoming certified to issue passports and adding other revenue-generating services.

In Philadelphia, revenue from fines had already been declining, says Kaitlyn Foti Kalosy, public relations manager for the Free Library of Philadelphia. From 2012 to 2019, *“fine revenues dropped by 40 percent,”* she observes. *“This is due to several factors, including the growing use of electronic materials, which don’t generate fines but simply disappear from the user’s device at the end of the loan period.”*

Of the money that Philadelphia libraries had collected from fines, \$276,000 went to the city each year, and the city has agreed to drop that payment. The amount the library retained dropped from \$421,250 in 2012 to \$147,812 in 2019 and was used for neighborhood library and children’s programming, volunteer services, and technology. *“We believe this sum can be made up through fundraising efforts,”* Foti Kalosy says.

The Chicago library system collected about \$875,000 each year in late fees. But the loss of this revenue won’t affect its bottom line, because for years this money has gone into the city’s general revenue fund. Chicago libraries went fine-free in 2019 with the blessing of the city’s mayor, Lori Lightfoot.<sup>8</sup>

## Effects on the Return of Materials

While DePriest’s research suggests that imposing late fees has no measurable effect on whether people return library materials on time, libraries that have eliminated these fees and wiped out patrons’ outstanding debts have seen an increase in the number of overdue materials returned.

Chicago libraries reportedly saw a 240-percent increase in book returns within the first month of going fine-free.<sup>9</sup> After going fine-free in 2019, Denver libraries saw a 17-percent increase in the number of lost items returned that year, Hoffman says.

*“Our rate of on-time returns seems to have remained steady,”* she notes. *“Basically, conscientious customers remain conscientious.”*

Libraries that have gone fine-free still charge patrons a replacement fee for materials that have been overdue for a certain amount of time, and this time frame varies by institution. Most waive this charge if the materials are returned in good shape. In lieu of late fees, many institutions have implemented automatic renewals until the time at which replacement fees are incurred.

To encourage the timely return of materials, some fine-free libraries have increased the number of reminders they send to patrons. *“We now send our users a bill for overdue materials at four weeks instead of five,”* says Kathy Setter, MORE project manager for IFLS. *“And we send two overdue notices before that, which helps remind patrons to bring those items back.”*

## Keys to Success

Moving to a fine-free model represents a big change, but it can be done successfully if you approach this effort with care. Based on the experiences of libraries that have eliminated late fees, here are some keys to success.



### DO YOUR RESEARCH.

Calculate the amount of time and money you’re currently spending on collecting fines, versus how much you take in. Assess how fines affect library usage. Analyze the impact that going fine-free will have on your institution. If you decide to go fine-free, present your case to your board and local government officials. Make sure you have the necessary buy-in before you proceed.

In Philadelphia, library officials spent two years studying the issue before bringing their proposal to the city council. *“As the Free Library prepared to eliminate fines, our proposal was met with thoughtful questions from stakeholders, which our research had prepared us to answer,”* Foti Kalosy says. Framing the issue in terms of equity made for a powerful argument, she believes—and one that was ultimately successful.

Denver’s Hoffman agrees: *“I think the equity piece was likely the most compelling. An overdue fine on an item already returned and the shame associated with being reminded of it whenever visiting can be off-putting for anyone—but particularly to those struggling to make ends meet who often need library services the most.”*



### HAVE A PLAN.

If you rely on fines as a line item in your operating budget, make sure you can account for this lost revenue in other ways. Think about whether you might need to adjust your policies around loan periods, automatic renewals, reminder notices, and billing for lost items to ensure the timely return of materials.



### START SMALL.

Consider eliminating fines for certain collections at first, such as juvenile materials. This will give you time to work out any issues that may arise, and it will give you better insight into the impact the move might have if you go entirely fine-free.



### UNDERSTAND THE TECHNICAL IMPLICATIONS.

Make sure your library software can easily accommodate whatever changes you'd like to make. *"I was able to configure our ILS [Sierra] for our 40 member libraries that use it so that they could each make their own decision about whether and how to collect fines, based on their individual needs,"* says VanderWagen.



### MEASURE RESULTS.

Once you make the move, collect data on how going fine-free is affecting your circulation, returns, and library usage for various user groups. Use this information to adjust your policies if necessary, so that you can continually improve.

Going fine-free might not be the right decision for every library. But when done well, it can remove barriers to library usage while also improving customer relations and staff morale.

*"We have seen a significant drop in the number of accounts going to collections,"* VanderWagen concludes. *"And the public loves it. In our three communities that have gone 100-percent fine-free, patrons are very excited not to pay overdue fines."*

<sup>1</sup> Urban Libraries Council, "Fine Free Map." Retrieved from <https://www.urbanlibraries.org/member-resources/fine-free-map>.

<sup>2</sup> American Library Association, "Resolution on Monetary Library Fines as a Form of Social Inequity." Jan. 27, 2019. Retrieved from [http://www.ala.org/aboutala/sites/ala.org.aboutala/files/content/governance/council/council\\_documents/2019\\_ms\\_council\\_docs/ALA%20CD%2038%20RESOLUTION%20ON%20MONETARY%20LIBRARY%20FINES%20AS%20A%20FORM%20OF%20SOCIAL%20JUSTICE%20Revised%201\\_27\\_0.pdf](http://www.ala.org/aboutala/sites/ala.org.aboutala/files/content/governance/council/council_documents/2019_ms_council_docs/ALA%20CD%2038%20RESOLUTION%20ON%20MONETARY%20LIBRARY%20FINES%20AS%20A%20FORM%20OF%20SOCIAL%20JUSTICE%20Revised%201_27_0.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> DePriest, Meg Johnson. *Removing Barriers to Access: Eliminating Library Fines and Fees on Children's Materials*. Colorado State Library, 2016. Retrieved from <https://www.cde.state.co.us/cdelib/removingbarrierstoaccess>.

<sup>4</sup> San Francisco Public Library and San Francisco Financial Justice Project. *Long Overdue: Eliminating Fines on Overdue Materials to Improve Access to San Francisco Public Library*, January 2019. Retrieved from <https://sfppl.org/uploads/files/pdfs/commission/Fine-Free-Report011719.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> Bowman, Emma. "'We Wanted Our Patrons Back' — Public Libraries Scrap Late Fines to Alleviate Inequity." National Public Radio, Nov. 30, 2019. Retrieved from <https://www.npr.org/2019/11/30/781374759/we-wanted-our-patrons-back-public-libraries-scrap-late-fines-to-alleviate-inequi>.

<sup>6</sup> Hotchkiss, Sarah. "San Francisco Public Library Eliminates All Overdue Fines." KQED, Sept. 16, 2019. Retrieved from <https://www.kqed.org/arts/13866475/san-francisco-public-library-eliminates-overdue-fines>.

<sup>7</sup> Garske, Monica, and Johnson, Andrew. "City of San Diego Grants Library Fine Forgiveness to 130K Locals." NBC San Diego, April 9, 2019. Retrieved from <https://www.nbcsandiego.com/news/local/san-diego-public-libraries-overdue-fines-forgiven-barred/136052/>.

<sup>8</sup> Dudek, Mike. "Chicago Public Library to eliminate late fees, erase debt and begin automatic renewals for up to 45 weeks." *Chicago Sun-Times*, Sept. 30, 2019. Retrieved from <https://chicago.suntimes.com/2019/9/30/20890138/chicago-public-library-eliminate-late-fees-fines>.

<sup>9</sup> Spielman, Fran. "Lightfoot's decision to eliminate library fines triggers 240% increase in book returns." *Chicago Sun-Times*, Oct. 30, 2019. Retrieved from <https://chicago.suntimes.com/news/2019/10/30/20940677/chicago-public-library-no-fines-book-returns-increase-lightfoot>.