

Eliminating Library Fines as a form of Social Equity Working Group

FAQ

The American Library Association's position on library fines "asserts that imposition of monetary library fines creates a barrier to the provision of library and information services" (2018-2019 ALA CD#38(Rev.1/27), passed by Council at the 2019 ALA Midwinter Meetings). The association urges libraries to scrutinize their practices of imposing fines on library patrons and actively move towards eliminating them and urges governing bodies of libraries to strengthen funding support for libraries so they are not dependent on monetary fines as a necessary source of revenue. This FAQ document addresses questions that have arisen from among the membership in relation to the Council debate on the resolution on library fines. The working group hopes that the document will provide clarity and support to libraries and library workers that are considering going fine-free.

1. What exactly is meant by library fines?

- Traditionally, fines are a charge imposed by the library on borrowers who return items past their due date. For our purposes, a **fine** is any monetary penalty assessed against a patron for returning library items after their due date.

2. How does a library fine differ from a library fee?

- A **fee** is a monetary penalty assessed against a patron for damaging or losing library materials, or a fee-for a service such as for making photocopies, test proctoring, etc.

3. Do library fines prevent equitable access to resources and services?

- Research indicates **library fines restrict access to materials and services** while **evidence shows ending library fines results in an increase in patron usage of library resources**.
 - A [2013 study](#) found that low income families avoid the library because of the risk of fines and/or fees from damaged or lost books.
 - [San Francisco](#) eliminated fines, thereby increasing access and library usage.
 - The High Plains Library District ended library fines and circulation increased within six months.
 - Feedback from ASCGLA indicates that for those returning from incarceration, old fines can be a barrier to much-needed library resources.

4. Do library fines disproportionately affect low-income users?

- **Yes.** Data shows **library fines impact lower-income and diverse communities the most.**

- A San Francisco Public Library white paper showed that most blocked cards are from residents in the lowest median income areas.
- Salt Lake City Public Library found that lower income communities accounted for 14% of overall circulation but had 30% of the blocked accounts.
- [Seattle Public Library](#) is working towards fine elimination after noting branches in affluent, predominantly white neighborhoods had “significantly fewer blocked accounts” in comparison to branches in low-income communities of color.
- [Dallas Public Library’s](#) director of libraries is striving to end library fines to help low-income patrons access resources without having to choose between paying a library fine or buying food, gas, etc.
- Long Beach City College collected data that showed that library fines disproportionately affected African American students, lower income students, and students with disabilities.

5. Are library fines needed in order to teach responsibility?

- There is **no evidence supporting the claim that library fines teach responsibility or accountability.**
 - Even though there is a lack of evidence to this concept, the San Francisco Public Library addressed this issue directly in their white paper and states: “If there is a conflict between teaching responsibility and ensuring equal access, the library is duty bound to prioritize equal access.”
 - [Libraries’ missions](#) include equitable access to information but do not include teaching responsibility. While academic and school libraries may have a teaching mission, it is arguable whether teaching responsibility fits the curriculum that those libraries support.

6. Do library fines motivate people to return borrowed materials?

- **No.** In libraries that have eliminated library fines, **the return rate remained consistent** before and after the change.
 - Vernon Public Library reported the average number of days overdue dropped by 42% **after** eliminating fines

7. How much does it cost libraries to collect late fines?

- In many cases **the [overall process for fine collection](#) utilizes more resources than what is collected**, and ultimately punishes loyal patrons along with lower income and diverse populations.
 - After analyzing fine collection transactions, the [San Rafael Public Library](#) discovered every transaction used approximately ten minutes of staff time.

- The Vernon Area Public Library District asserts “the cost of staff time to handle overdue fines and of [processing the amounts](#) to more than what they’re earning back from patrons.”
- Executive Director of the Stark County (OH) District Library: “it costs 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.”

8. Does the revenue created by collecting late fines go back into the library?

- **It depends.** For some libraries, revenue collected through fines and fees does not go back into the library budget but rather to their parent institution’s general fund (county, city, university, school, etc.). For other libraries, revenue collected through fines and fees is an integral part of their budget and a reduction in revenue would result in a direct reduction in budget.

9. What about libraries dependent on revenue generated by collecting late fines?

- Although libraries may not receive funding allowing for the elimination of library fines, **relieving some of the burden created by library fines may increase access and use**, which in turn may result in additional funding.
- There are **transitional strategies** for libraries considering going fine free:
 - Phase out fines over time for certain collections/age groups etc.;
 - [Offer amnesty periods](#);
 - Explore alternatives for generating income; and
 - Use elimination of fines as an opportunity to discuss increased appropriations from library funders. Educate funders that increased funding would eliminate the need for revenue derived from fines and would increase access for the most vulnerable populations in our communities.

10. What are the technical aspects of eliminating library fines from a circulation system?

- Work within the library’s ILS to learn **through which factors you can eliminate fines**. For example, if you are only eliminating fines for youth, can you do that based on birth date or on patron type (juvenile vs. adult)? Which is better for your goals? Are the data points you’re relying on reliable and accurate? What types of manual data entry and changes to records will have to take place to remediate bad data (e.g. missing birth dates, mis-coded “home library” fields)? Consider what the impact on staff time that remediation is likely to have.

11. What does elimination of library fines look like in a consortium?

- Eliminating fines in a consortial environment is necessarily **more complex**, especially if not all members of the consortium are participating. Ideally, the consortium board would vote unanimously to eliminate fines and member libraries could take that decision point back to their parent institutions. If not, the best practice is to try to move as many members together at the same time as possible, allowing time for various parent institution approval processes. At the very least, libraries that are not eliminating fines should have as much lead time as possible to prepare for confused users asking questions about why they are still charging fines.
 - A consideration to investigate if you are part of a consortium is whether you can work in the ILS to eliminate fines only for the users or the materials of a particular member of the consortium. The ILS may require fine elimination to be all or nothing.
 - Another consideration is what to do when members of a fine-free library use materials from a partner library – what role does the fine-free library have in paying late fines for materials routed through them from other libraries?
 - Decisions need to be made on whether to eliminate fines based on materials (as owned by the library in question) or users (as registered with the library in question).

12. How can libraries let people/patrons know about new policies regarding the elimination of fines?

- Libraries can take advantage of social media, local media, and in-facility marketing campaigns.
 - Denver Public Library's efforts provide one model, including the use of direct mail, social media, and website activities.

13. Where can I find more information on eliminating library fines?

- One comprehensive resource that includes news stories, links to readings, a map of libraries that have either fully or partially eliminated fines, and additional information is the End Library Fines site: <https://endlibraryfines.info/>

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