

Removing Late Fines: Increasing Equity of Access in Libraries

Samantha Shandy

University of Denver

Introduction

The intersection between library fines and the way it impacts equity of user access is a prominent issue in libraries today. Due to the evidence in support of removing fines, many libraries have adopted a policy in which many or all fines are eliminated, and have in turn seen an increase in user access, while maintaining a steady rate at which items are returned. With fines no longer a barrier to access, library patrons are able to utilize library materials and services without fear of accruing fines due to circumstances that are sometimes beyond their control, thus resulting in a more positive relationship between patrons and their local libraries.

This literature review covers the prominent themes that arise when dissecting the issue of library fines. Themes include: the reasons in favor of removing this long-standing policy, the “three myths” that have propelled library fines through the years, the demographics most-affected by fines and their potential elimination, alternative programs that have been tested to bridge the gap between issuing fines for late fees and doing away with fines altogether, and considerations included by the author to support future research regarding the removal of library fines to increase equity of access in public and academic libraries alike.

Review of Literature

Pros of Removing Fines

There are four main points brought up in the articles which discuss the pros of removing late fines in libraries. First and foremost, implementing such fines goes against one of the core values outlined by the American Library Association (ALA), which promotes “the removal of all barriers to library and information services, particularly fees and overdue charges.” This

argument makes the compelling point that fines are considered a barrier to access, and therefore have no place being utilized in a library.

There is then also the stigma carried by libraries that still enforce late fines, which in itself is enough to put a barrier between patrons and library services, particularly with those that cannot afford to chance the consequences of a late fine. Unsurprisingly, this generally includes patrons that fall within the low-income bracket, as well as children and teens. What happens is libraries find that they are essentially serving and supporting those that can afford the risk of accruing late fines. Fines are a punitive barrier between a potential user and library resources. I believe Lisa Peet summarized it best in her account of why fines should be removed, stating “The most compelling reason, of course, is the need for everyone in a community to have access to the library, regardless of their ability to pay” (Peet, 2018).

The third point in favor of alleviating late fines is that librarians are able to spend less time collecting fines (Wilson, Frazier, & Harter, 2015), and more time focusing on other aspects of librarianship that actually benefit the community . They also have the opportunity to have more positive interactions with customers, rather than spending time informing a customer nearing the end of their time in the library at the checkout counter that in fact, they will not be allowed to take home any more materials until they pay off their fines.

Lastly, potential and previous users have an incentive to come back! When a library removes their late fines policy, they commonly wipe the slate clean, so to speak, and forgive all prior late fines on patrons' accounts. Pairing that with community outreach to extend the welcoming news, library users have a second chance to build a strong and supportive connection with their local library that is free of penalties. In the research study conducted by Wilson, Frazier, & Harter (2015), it was concluded that in tandem with removing fines and seeing fewer

issues with patrons returning books, librarians commented that the most noticeable difference was the “goodwill that [removing fines] generated with patrons”.

The Three Myths

Throughout the articles collected for this literature review, the reasons why late fines are still prevalent in libraries were time and time again brought to the surface for dissection. Three leading arguments proved the most common, the first of which is that libraries rely on late fines to generate revenue. This is an all-too-common misconception, as the research gathered from the literature reviewed revealed that the typical percent of overdue fines that make up a public or academic library’s budget is less than one percent (Sung & Tolppanen, 2013). What’s more is that library budgets include late fines in the first place, which identifies that libraries are relying on patrons to accrue late fines in order to ensure that income targets are met (McMenemy, 2010). The costs that go into collecting the fines – staff time needed to mail/email/text overdue notices, fees amounted from processing payments made via credit cards, fees accrued from collection agencies, etc. -- depreciate that revenue even further.

The second myth is that library fines ensure that circulation materials are returned on or before their due date. In fact, library fines simply deter patrons from checking out library items to begin with, thus creating the false conclusion that library fines create a more stable collection. High Plains Library District is a great example of debunking this myth, when after they eliminated nearly all late fines, their rate at which library materials were returned within a week of their return date held steady at ninety-five percent (Johnson, 2018). The use of sending courtesy notices when items are nearing their due date of past due proved just as effective in research studies (Phelps, 2015), with the added bonus that negative perceptions of the library were no longer prevalent (Sung & Tolppanen, 2013).

The third and most controversial myth is that by enforcing late fine policy, libraries are teaching patrons about the value of collective responsibility. In the article “Removing Barriers to Access: Eliminating Fines and Fees for a Win-Win for your Library and Teens” by Beth Crist (Colorado State Library Youth and Family Services Consultant) and Meg DePriest (Colorado State Library Consultant), they present the argument that teaching responsibility should not fall on libraries in the first place, as it goes outside the scope of the library’s core purpose to create a community hub focused on inclusion and equitable access, and instead acts as a “punitive barrier” that further pushes already-vulnerable populations further away from resources they oftentimes depend on, such as internet access, school materials, and safe community spaces.

Removing Fines for Specific Groups

The first group that normally gets relieved of late fines is children. Though children are able to get their own library card separate from their guardian, their ability to return materials in a timely manner is directly affected by their guardian in many cases, due to transportation, schedules, or many other factors beyond their control. Their ability to pay for late fines is also oftentimes out of their power, as most children are reliant on their parents or guardian for financial costs because they are too young to generate their own income. Holding children to the same standard as adults in terms of late fine policies seems ludicrous once laid out, yet the extreme alternative of denying a child their own library card violates their right to intellectual freedom. Therefore, it is no surprise that late fines related to children’s library cards are the first to be lifted.

The second and thirds groups are teens and senior citizens. Similarly to children, teens and senior citizens may be dependent on others to transport to the library, and therefore may not be able to return materials in before or on the due date. The demographic that has benefited the

most from the reduction or removal of library fines are teens, especially teens that fall into the low-income household bracket, as their percentage of involvement in programs and checking out materials showed the greatest increase, with some libraries quoting the rise to be as great as forty percent! (Crist & DePriest, 2018)

One demographic I see missing from this tier is patrons that fall into low-income household categories (although there is overlap if patrons are also a part of any of the other three categories). College students, for example, would not fit in to any of the three categories (child, teen, senior citizen), yet poverty can (and in many cases – does) strike them all the same. If removing fines for specific groups is done in tiers, there is potential to advocate for this fourth group that has otherwise gone unrepresented.

Alternative Programs for Fine Reduction

Several libraries included in this literature review had trials periods of implementing alternative methods of reducing library fines for patrons, and with mixed results. A positive example of this practice can be seen in the article *The Last Taboo: abolishing library fines* (Sifton, 2009), where it is mentioned that in some jurisdictions abolishing fines is simply not an option at this time or in the foreseeable future, so instead, libraries have the ability to incorporate regular amnesties in exchange for nonperishable food bank items. One such example is the Pemberton & District Public Library in Pemberton, British Columbia. They have since gone fine-free, but originally had a program that offered patrons the opportunity to pay down fines by donating nonperishable food bank items. Since going fine-free, they have adjusted the policy to include the option to donate nonperishable food bank items toward lost fees – which don't accrue until the patron has reached the limit of three holds for an item, and received three notices by the library that the items are overdue. After twenty-one days, the item goes to lost and the patron is

billed for the cost of replacing the item. Pemberton & District Library has received a steady flow of donations (from those with lost fees and from the general public who simply appreciate the switchover) since implementing this design, and in turn it has offset the small amount of revenue lost from late fines and lost fees. Most importantly is that the “goodwill to be gained from the community, while not always measurable, can offset such losses” (Sifton, 2009)

A less successful attempt can be recognized using this same program design. While it proved successful for Pemberton & District Library, that is unfortunately not always the case. The major factor to look at is the demographics of the community in which the library is in. In less affluent areas, it would make little sense to implement this type of program because it would be trading one scarce resource (money) for another (food). This reasoning is why there are other alternative programs to reduce fines in libraries that are not able to make the switch, such as reading-down fines. This program can generally be seen implemented for children and teens, but does not often include adult users. While it is a step in the right direction, it also serves as a disadvantage to users who have library fines but cannot afford to spend time at the library to read down their fines due to other commitments.

Conclusion

Library fines act as a barrier to potential users, and this movement of developing fine-free libraries is underway. No longer can institutions elect to maintain late fines by referring to revenue needs, circulation reinforcement, or collective responsibility (Crist & DePriest, 2018). While I understand that lifting late fine policies by population category may be necessary for some libraries depending on jurisdiction, I advocate for lifting the policy as a whole, for all patrons, to eliminate the barrier to access altogether, and to reinstate an equitable environment for all populations of library users.

Considerations

There needs to be more narrative focused around measuring patron-outlook regarding imposing fines versus removing fines. The primary objective of the paper entitled *Students' Perception of Charging Fines for Overdue Books: Case of Islamia College of Science and Technology* (Bhatt, 2011) was to determine the attitudes students had regarding library fines at their college, which was an uncommon approach that I had not seen anywhere else in my research of this topic. For this college (located in Jammu and Kashmir, India), their research concluded that students perceived fines as necessary, (although shameful and a form of punishment), and believed that without fines materials would not be brought back in a timely manner, or even at all. It should be said that in the United States, we have focused much of our research on the data to support the three myths behind upholding late fines, and from that it is true for us that library fines in the U.S. are unnecessary in order to practically circulate library materials. With that in mind, I strongly suggest that we follow in the footsteps of the Islamia College of Science and Technology by studying attitudes and how they are affected by imposed library fines. Although a lot of information can be extrapolated through data, recording first-hand experiences and opinions from library patrons gives another layer to this push for eliminating late fines. Since libraries serve the public, it only makes sense to include their voice when advocating for change.

There is little information including the trends in technology and how it is changing the way patrons check out materials. I included the article "Putting a Sacred Cow Out to Pasture: Assessing the Removal of Fines and Reduction of Barriers at a Small Academic Library" because the small academic library they study is Vancouver Island University, which is classified as an access institution, serving a population that is predominately non-traditional. Circulation

and revenue trends both concluded that the usage of physical materials is in a steady decline, which means electronic materials (with impose no late charges) are highly favored, and therefore removing late fees increases the number of in-person interactions, and positive interactions at that (Reed, Blackburn, & Sifton, 2014). More information on how advances in technology will affect library usage will benefit how libraries will perceive the importance of maintaining positive library interactions.

Designing and implementing alternative programs that are ongoing in cases where eliminating fines is not possible at this time is another area that needs more research and analysis. Taking it a step further, surveying patrons and community members to include them in designing programs to decrease overdue fines until the vision of a fine-free library could come to fruition would be an even greater step toward equity and inclusion. A focus group made up of members across a wide scope of demographics (*especially* including those who are not currently library patrons) would help ensure an equitable outcome that would have the support of the community and increase patron satisfaction.

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