

ABOUT NEW YORK

Libraries Are Fining Children Who Can't Afford to Be Without Books

By Jim Dwyer

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Library fines are the first serious penalties that most children run into outside the home, and for generations, they have been education and vexation.

At age 10, Geoffrey Canada could not find a book he had borrowed from the library branch near Boston Road in the South Bronx.

There, he regularly plowed through adventure books by Robert Louis Stevenson, science fiction, the works of Poe and Kipling. He and his three brothers each got a weekly allowance of a quarter, which would have given him a shot at paying off the 2-cent-a-day fine had it not climbed to about \$1.80. His mother, raising the boys on her own, lived paycheck to paycheck.

“There was no way I was ever going to find that money,” Mr. Canada, the founder of the Harlem Children’s Zone program, said this week. “I never went to that library again.”

That was more than a half-century ago. In February, Maria, the mother of a 4-year-old boy, returned a batch of DVDs to the branch of the New York Public Library in the Washington Heights section of Manhattan. They were late. The fines were more than \$100. Her card was automatically blocked.

Her son, a late talker with special needs, had become an early, unstoppable reader who bloomed in the library. “I couldn’t bring him there and not let him borrow books,” she said. “When he asked about going, I told him it was closed or some other thing. Without exaggeration, it broke my heart.” After a meeting with the branch manager, her privileges were restored.

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In their 2015 public tax returns, the city’s three independent library systems, the New York Public Library, the Queens Library and the Brooklyn Public Library, reported collecting a total of \$5.5 million in fines.

Just as adults discover they cannot renew their driving licenses if they have too many unpaid tickets, children discover that they lose library privileges if they rack up more than \$15 in late fees. The library is the Department of Motor Vehicles on training wheels.

A recent tally found that library cards were blocked for more than 225,000 young people in the city.

That means around one in five city children with library cards cannot use them.

The social cost has become too steep, says Anthony W. Marx, president of the New York Public Library, the largest system.

“We see the blockage of fines concentrated in the poorer neighborhoods where we want kids to be reading,” Mr. Marx said. “If fines are getting in the way, we need to find solutions.”

Among a number of approaches, Mr. Marx has sought private funding for a \$10 million endowment that would create fine-free borrowing in perpetuity. The other leaders of city libraries, Dennis M. Walcott (Queens) and Linda E. Johnson (Brooklyn), say they, too, would rather be handing books to children than collecting fines from them, but have not joined Mr. Marx’s quest for an endowment.

“It’s a balancing act,” Mr. Walcott said, making the obvious point that when people hold books and DVDs too long, others are stopped from using them.

Ms. Johnson said: “You don’t want to reward bad behavior, and on the other hand, we want to make sure the people who need them the most are not blocked out.”

In Queens, young scofflaws can “read down” their fines by committing to reading a certain number of books. “We waived \$160,000 in fees this year,” Nick H. Buron, the borough’s chief librarian, said.

Branch managers can waive fees case by case — “That happens more often than we would like,” Ms. Johnson said — and in 2011, there was a citywide book-fine amnesty, instigated by Mr. Marx.

The libraries rely on the fine revenue, and many users can afford the fees.

No one is suggesting that people — including children — should not be held responsible for bringing books back.

“People talk about the moral hazard,” Mr. Marx said. “But there’s also a moral hazard in teaching poor kids that they will lose privileges to read, and that kids who can afford fines will not.”

Moreover, he said, there’s a “moral upside” of sharing, pointing out that laptops are widely available in branches in the poorest neighborhoods and that very few are stolen.

More people use the city’s libraries annually than the combined attendance of professional sports events, museums, performing arts and zoos. The library systems are seeking money to have at least one branch open in roughly every neighborhood on Sundays. The demand is one reason Mr. Marx believes that they can do better than block people who rack up fines.

“People respect us,” Mr. Marx said, “because we are respecting them.”

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