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An Overdue Discussion

Two takes on the library-fine debate

By [Phil Morehart](https://americanlibrariesmagazine.org/authors/phil-morehart/) | June 1, 2018

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Whether to charge fines for overdue materials is a hot-button topic. The issues are many: Some libraries have halted the practice, citing concerns that fines keep patrons away, while other libraries have kept them in place as vital revenue streams. Fines are also used by some libraries as a method to teach personal responsibility, while other libraries consider that lesson outside the realm of librarianship. We spoke with a librarian on each side of the debate.

Point:



<https://americanlibrariesmagazine.org/2018/06/01/library-fines-overdue-discussion/fines-paxson-jennifer/> Jenny Paxson, readers' advisory librarian, Webster (N.Y.) Public Library

Does your library charge fines? We do charge fines at Webster Public Library.

How are the collected funds used? We use the funds—\$71,000 collected from fines annually—as part of our operating budget. Without them it would be difficult to run the library.

Do fines discourage patrons from using the library? I believe for some people they do. Many of our patrons come in and are happy to pay their fines as they want to help support the library—they understand that it's part of their responsibility as members. For those who are discouraged, I feel it impacts mostly those with high fines. We forgive fines for people who are

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<http://www.ala.org/news/member-news/2019/06/submit-your-library-promotional-materials-2019-pr-xchange-event-ala-annual>

The **PR Xchange Event** at **ALA Annual Conference** offers visitors the opportunity to view and take home **sample promotional materials** from libraries across North America. Approximately **1,000 attendees** visit the PR Xchange each year. The event will also showcase the winners of this year's PR Xchange **Awards Competition**. All libraries are invited to mail their promotional materials to **arrive by June 12**. See the **LLAMA** website for **mailing instructions and labels**. <http://www.ala.org/llama/sites/ala.org>

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experiencing extenuating circumstances—a death in the family, financial hardship, a hospital stay—and work to help them out by eliminating the fines altogether or reducing them by half, depending on the situation and whether we've helped them in the past. I think those who are discouraged are probably those who don't want to come to us and ask for help.

Do fines encourage personal responsibility by making patrons return items on time to avoid a fine? Should that be the library's role? I think it does and it doesn't. If people think there are consequences for not returning items on time, then they will return them when they are due. Without consequences, some people will hold onto items. For some people it doesn't matter: They will willingly take late fees so they can finish a book or movie. It's not our role to teach responsibility, but I'd like to think we encourage people to share materials among themselves.

Have you considered eliminating fines? We have considered eliminating fines for children's materials. We investigated this with our circulation supervisor and discovered that 40% of our fines were from kids' cards. In the end, we decided it would result in too big of a hit to our revenue, but we did decide to eliminate fines for board books.

Counterpoint:



(<https://americanlibrariesmagazine.org/2018/06/01/library-fines-overdue-discussion/fines-houghton-sarah/>) Sarah Houghton, director, San Rafael (Calif.) Public Library

Does your library charge fines? San Rafael Public Library charges overdue fines only for adult materials. Children's and teen materials fees were eliminated about two years ago.

How are collected funds used? Fines collected on adult materials go back to the City of San Rafael's general fund bottom line.

Has your library been affected by the loss of revenue? In approving the elimination of youth fines, San Rafael City Council agreed that the loss of revenue (approximately \$7,000 per year for our city of 60,000 residents) was an acceptable cost to encourage youth reading and library use. The library's budget was not reduced in any way.

Do fines discourage patrons from using the library? Fines absolutely discourage people from using the library, especially those in the community who could most benefit from library services. What we see in our community is that people slowly rack up overdue fines over time—hitting the \$10 maximum, after which point the account is locked until the amount owed is brought under \$10—and then simply stop using the library. This happens across age groups, but predominantly in those neighborhoods that are socioeconomically disadvantaged. This results in the people with the least money in our community—the ones who need a library the most—not being able to use the library.

Do fines encourage personal responsibility by making patrons return items on time? Should that be the library's role? We have found that people do not keep youth materials out any longer since we've eliminated fines. This has been shown in library after library as they eliminate some or all overdue fines. So, no, I would not say that fines encourage people to return items on time. It is not the library's role to teach responsibility to any age group. That lesson is best left to families and communities to decide on themselves. The library's role is to encourage lifelong learning, exploration, and innovation.

Do you use any alternate methods to encourage patrons to return materials in a timely manner? Patrons receive an email three days before an item is due, another email one day after the item was due, and a subsequent follow-up three weeks after the due date that states they need to return the item or pay for a replacement. Reminding people of due dates ahead of time seems the most effective way to encourage timely returns.

Have you considered eliminating all fines? San Rafael Public Library would like to continue exploration of eliminating fines on adult materials so that they match children's and teen materials. The trick is convincing city council. ■

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