

Make Your Case to Eliminate Fines: Three Assessment Strategies

Different types of libraries need to use different strategies to innovate through policy change. This poster summarizes three different approaches to assess library fines that provide well-founded evidence for why fines should be eliminated. All three of these approaches have been undertaken at Ryerson University Library. They were used to study why fines are incurred and their effect and to argue effectively for a change in our fine policy, eliminating fines on regular monograph loans.

Qualitative research is useful for librarians that need evidence grounded in **patron voices**, which are emotional, impactful, and based in lived experience. This type of study can be used by librarians to expose and correct **inequity** occurring at their libraries. As many libraries already collect fine appeals, secondary data analysis eliminates time-consuming data collection, meaning that more energy can be invested in analyzing this rich data source.

A literature review is strategically useful for librarians who do not have the capacity to conduct original research or as a starting point for why further assessment is needed. There is **compelling evidence in the literature** for why fines should be eliminated: namely that they are ineffective, harmful, and replaceable. An environmental scan could be completed in conjunction with a literature review to effectively argue for success in fine policy changes at peer institutions.

For libraries that are dependent on fine **revenue**, analyzing evidence of falling fine revenue and falling print circulation creates a strong argument for eliminating fines. This approach draws on evidence that can be presented to library administration to argue that fines no longer make fiscal sense, especially for small libraries that sacrifice staff time and community relationships for limited funds.

Quantitative

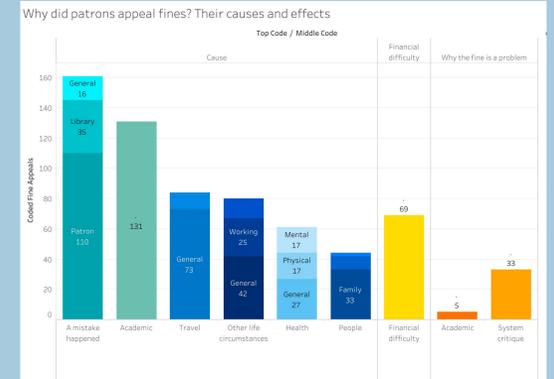
Method: Quantitative analysis of fines can be undertaken using ILS patron data, circulation statistics, and financial data for year over year comparisons.

Results: These datasets at Ryerson University Library showed that circulation is decreasing over time and with it, fine revenue. Examining patron data and the reason for fine incursions showed that if fines were eliminated for regular overdue monographs but maintained in other cases (including reserve items, technology, and replacement costs) that the loss of revenue would not affect the Library in a significant manner. The minimal loss of fine revenue, when considered in relation to the negative environment for staff who process fines, was a compelling case for library administration.

Qualitative

Method: Qualitative analysis of fine appeal data can be undertaken at libraries that collect this data and analyzed using spreadsheets and data visualization software. Bias in the study design can be minimized by using a team-based approach, engaging with bias through conversation, and using elements of grounded theory.

Results: In the fine appeal data, patrons told us about the challenges of academic life and their financial difficulties. Many of the challenges they faced, coded into reasons for incurring a fine such as "A Mistake Happened," are unavoidable; having fines is not effective at preventing patrons from forgetting their locker combination, dealing with subway delays, or getting caught at work. The second most common reason for incurring fines was that patrons were using the resource for academic purposes. In this case, charging fines is a barrier to access and limits scholarly work. This study also found that fines are disproportionately expensive for patrons with health and family concerns, which is a major equity issue.



This stacked bar chart shows the reasons for fine appeals, by top code (Cause of the fine, Financial difficulty impact, and Why the fine is a problem) and subcodes.

Literature Review

Method: A literature review was conducted in LISTA to systematically find all articles on the topics of the effectiveness of fines and fine elimination. Academic libraries were the focus of this research, although there is more literature that exists on public library fine elimination.

Results: The results of this review showed that that fines are inequitable and a barrier to access. Librarians believe that fines are effective but there is limited evidence in the literature to support this (Reed, Blackburn & Sifton, 2014; Wayne, Frazier & Harter, 2015). This belief may stem from the history of the library as a moral teacher (Graham, 2017), and enforcing fines can create a "draconian" image of the library (Sifton, 2009). There are other effective and less harmful means at prompting the return of materials, such as email reminders (Sung and Tolppanen, 2013; McMenemy, 2010; Morehart, 2018). Fines are harmful because they unequally affect patrons and it is too often the case that "those who are least able to pay fines are those who accrue them" (Sifton, 2009). Eliminating fines has been shown to have positive effects on library use and morale for both patrons and staff (Reed, Blackburn & Sifton, 2014).

Graham, R. (2017, February 6). *Go Ahead and Return That Book Late—Libraries Are Doing Away With the Overdue Fine*. Slate Magazine. <https://slate.com/culture/2017/02/librarians-are-realizing-that-overdue-fines-undercut-libraries-missions.html>

McMenemy, D. (2010). On library fines: Ensuring civic responsibility or an easy income stream? *Library Review*, 59(2), 78–81. <https://doi.org/10.1108/00242531011023835>

Reed, K., Blackburn, J., & Sifton, D. (2014). Putting a Sacred Cow Out to Pasture: Assessing the Removal of Fines and Reduction of Barriers at a Small Academic Library. *The Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 40(3), 275–280. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jacalib.2014.04.003>

Sifton, D. (2009). The Last Taboo: Abolishing Library Fines | Partnership: The Canadian Journal of Library and Information Practice and Research. *Partnership: The Canadian Journal of Library and Information Practice and Research*, 4(1). <https://journal.lib.uoguelph.ca/index.php/peri/article/view/935>

Sung, J. S., & Tolppanen, B. P. (2013). Do Library Fines Work? Analysis of the Effectiveness of Fines on Patron's Return Behavior at Two Mid-sized Academic Libraries. *The Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 39(6), 506–511. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jacalib.2013.08.011>

Wilson, D., Frazier, C., & Harter, D. (2015). Circulation Policies in Major Academic Libraries. *The Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 41(6), 798–803. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jacalib.2015.08.019>