

# Public Libraries and Library Fines

Traditionally, public libraries have collected fines for library items that are returned after the due date and have charged replacement fees for items that have been lost or damaged. Library fines have been considered a deterrent to late returns, damage or loss of items. However, fines can also be a deterrent to a library user to access the resources of a public library. An alternative to fines is suspension of borrowing privileges until the resource is returned.

During the initial response to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, as public libraries were physically closed, many public libraries waived fees. This was to encourage community members to stay home and not feel compelled to immediately return materials, particularly recognizing those community members who under increased financial pressure and concerned about incurring fines.

As libraries re-opened, and in response to their communities, many have made decisions to extend a fine-free policy.

## Re-evaluating Library Fines

A fine-free policy may focus on eliminating late fees, eliminating fees on lost materials and on implementing alternative strategies for encouraging the return of library materials, such email reminders or longer loan periods.

Some public libraries have waived fees universally, while others have taken a more targeted approach. Brampton Public Library received the 2019 Ministers Award for Innovation<sup>i</sup> for its initiative to eliminate fees for children's materials.

For many public libraries, eliminating library fines is a strategy to better align with the core mission of the public library – to serve communities. Library fines and the anxiety prompted by the threat of fines are a deterrent for people accessing library materials and using the library. This is particularly a concern for people in low-income households.

In Ottawa, the public library found that “people with low incomes avoid checking out materials to prevent fines.”<sup>iii</sup> Ottawa Public Library staff found the majority of users whose accounts had been blocked (suspended due to fees owing of more than \$50) were located in low-income neighbourhoods and 43% of library users with accounts in collections were identified as members of visible minorities.<sup>ii</sup> Additionally, they found that 34% of all accounts with fines were held by children and teens and 3,500 children and teens had accounts that had been blocked due to fines.<sup>ii</sup>

## What's the impact?

- Research demonstrates that the removal of fines has resulted in more items being returned to the public library, reducing the amount that public libraries must spend on replacement materials and the effort of collection charges for lost or stolen materials<sup>iii</sup>.

- Managing a public library fines program has administrative costs, including significant staff time.
- While all revenue contributes to supporting the public library, net revenue from fines is a very small percentage of the library budget (roughly 1% – 2% of an annual library budget).
- The financial value of revenue generated by late fees is balanced against the larger value of encouraging more library use generated by eliminating late fees.

### Other considerations:

- Library fines often strain relationships between staff and patrons.<sup>iv</sup>
- The policy decision to implement or remove fines can be changed depending on the needs of the community. For example, Windsor Public Library eliminated fines in January 2012 on a trial basis and re-established late fees in 2013.
- Public libraries are effective in advanced budget planning in implementing the decision to eliminate fees. Hamilton Public Library<sup>v</sup>, for instance, introduced their fine-free policy as a pilot project on March 15, effective until December 31, 2021. This 18-month pilot project will allow the library to study the community and financial impacts of the fine-free campaign and make decisions about long-term policy accordingly.

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<sup>i</sup> Alfaro, Mario. 2020, February 7. "Brampton Library Has Been Recognized for Its Children's Fine-Free Materials Initiative." <https://bramptonist.com/brampton-library-has-been-recognized-for-its-childrens-fine-free-materials-initiative/>

<sup>ii</sup> Delamont, Kieran. 2020, Oct 30. "Long overdue: Why more Ontario libraries are going fine-free" <https://www.tvo.org/article/long-overdue-why-more-ontario-libraries-are-going-fine-free>; Ottawa Public Library. 2020, Oct 13. "Report to Ottawa Public Library Board: Materials Recovery Model. <http://ottwatch.ca/meetings/file/661186>

<sup>iii</sup> Unrein, Sabrina. (2020). "Overdue Fines: Advantages, Disadvantages, and How Eliminating Them Can Benefit Public Libraries." Syracuse, NY: iSchool Public Libraries Initiative at Syracuse University. <https://ischool.syr.edu/five-unexpected-benefits-to-eliminating-library-fines/>

<sup>iv</sup> Unrein, Sabrina. (2020). "Overdue Fines: Advantages, Disadvantages, and How Eliminating Them Can Benefit Public Libraries." Syracuse, NY: iSchool Public Libraries Initiative at Syracuse University. <https://ischool.syr.edu/five-unexpected-benefits-to-eliminating-library-fines/>

<sup>v</sup> CBC News. 2020, July 14. "Hamilton Public Library ends fees for youth, waives for all during the pandemic." <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/hamilton/hamilton-library-fees-1.5649304>; Hamilton Public Library. 2020. "Fines and Fees." <https://www.hpl.ca/articles/fines-and-fees>