



Fine-Free Toolkit

What, Why & How

**New Jersey Library Association -
Diversity & Outreach Section**

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Introduction

Access and equality are integral to the mission of libraries. According to the American Library Association, “The essential mission of a publicly funded library is to provide free, equal, and equitable access to information in all its forms...Just as economic issues may challenge the library’s ability to meet its mission, economic barriers may also threaten user access.”¹ In order to fulfill their mission of providing equitable access to information on a consistent scale, libraries within New Jersey and throughout the United States should consider going fine-free.

What Does Fine-Free Mean?

Over the past decade, libraries have been experimenting with different ways to address fines for overdue materials. In its simplest terms, fine-free means removing fines for overdue materials. Some publicly-funded libraries are removing fines for overdue, damaged, or lost materials while others are removing fines for overdue materials, but continuing to charge fines for damaged or lost materials. Whichever course of action a library decides to take, access should be at the forefront of decision making.

Why Eliminate Overdue Fines?

The implementation of fines has proven to discourage community members from using the library altogether. “Libraries should examine policies and procedures, particularly those involving fines, fees, or other user charges, and actively move toward eliminating any that may create potential barriers to access or academic achievement,”² states the American Library Association. As we explain in more detail below, eliminating fines is consistent with the core mission of publicly-funded libraries in encouraging racial and social equality and providing open access to information and services.

Concerns about Going Fine-Free

Many libraries are reluctant to go fine-free. Going fine-free often evokes a major shift in perception of how libraries can equitably serve their communities. The process of going fine-free may require adjusting or eliminating library policies that encourage barriers to information access. Library staff may be reluctant to support fine-free library policies that may allow patrons to “get away” with returning materials late (or at all).

¹ <https://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/librarybill/interpretations/economicbarriers>

² Ibid.

Here are some of the most common concerns about going fine-free:

- Libraries have increasingly tight budgets that depend on revenue from many sources, often including fine payments.
- There is a widespread belief that fines are an effective incentive to ensure that patrons return materials in a timely fashion.
- Libraries believe that they are teaching their patrons accountability and responsibility when fines are assessed for keeping materials past their due date.
- Some libraries have smaller collections and they rely on patrons returning materials when they are due in order to maintain consistent access to titles, especially popular titles.

Many of these concerns are based on outdated and biased perceptions of library patrons and their borrowing habits. Fines **do not** consistently encourage patrons to return materials on time. Most patrons who return items late are not doing so intentionally. In addition, “fines can be costly to enforce and often deter use of the library—especially for those with less capacity to pay, who need libraries the most”.³

Fine revenue often represents a small percentage of a library’s budget. This revenue can be recovered in other ways, such as book sales or fundraising. Many libraries that have gone fine-free have found that the small loss of revenue has had little to no impact on their operating budget.

Studies have shown that fine-free policies increase library patronage and circulation while eliminating barriers to access. Camden County Library System successfully went fine-free in 2019, which resulted in an immediate increase in circulation and item returns. Three weeks after implementation, ILS statistics indicated a favorable response to eliminating fines⁴. Here’s a snapshot of their first few weeks of being fine-free:

- 38 previously blocked patrons renewed their accounts.
- 75 items were returned by 14 patrons who were previously blocked.
- 812 checkout transactions were made by 143 patrons who were previously blocked.
- 239 overdue items were returned (significantly higher than the same time period last year).

³ Farewell to Fines. (2018). *Library Journal*, 143(12), 8.

⁴ Christou, Corilee. “Libraries Are Increasing Usage by Going Fine-Free.” *Information Today*, August 13, 2019.

Advantages of Going Fine-Free

Libraries with fine-free policies have reported:

- **Increases in library card registration**
- **Increases in circulation**
- **Increases in the number/percentage of materials returned**
- **Increases in the number of students using the library for homework**
- **Increases in staff time used for patron-focused services after the responsibility of fines-handling was removed**
- **Increases in usership overall**
- **Increases in positive association with the library among patrons, especially children and low-income community members who feel more welcome**
- **It benefits everyone in the community when all can access information, services, and materials at the library without fear of financial penalties**

A fine-free policy removes barriers to access

Studies have shown that fear of fines, even small penalties, can deter people from registering for a library card or visiting the library. A whitepaper issued by the Colorado State Library found that “the threat of accumulating fines for overdue materials and the fees associated with damaged or lost books is keeping low-income families away from libraries, or from checking out items to take home.”⁵

Fines disproportionately impact low income residents, children, and families

Rather than motivating prompt returns, fines discourage residents from borrowing materials altogether, especially if they are unable to return them during the library’s open hours. Those who could benefit the most from the library’s resources are thus discouraged from accessing them. A study in San Diego found that “[n]early half of the library’s patrons whose accounts were blocked as a result of late fees lived in two of the city’s poorest neighborhoods.”⁶ Similar data was found in studies of LaCrosse, Wisconsin; Salt Lake City, Utah; and St. Paul, Minnesota.

Fine-free policies promote racial equity

Communities of color are far more likely to be impacted by unpaid library fines, and fear of fines continues to keep users away from the library. This is particularly true in communities where English is not the first language and complicated fine structures intimidate prospective patrons.⁷

⁵ <http://spellproject.weebly.com/uploads/1/5/3/3/15331602/spellwhitepaperfinal.pdf>

⁶

<https://www.npr.org/2019/11/30/781374759/we-wanted-our-patrons-back-public-libraries-scrap-late-fines-to-alleviate-racial-equity>

⁷ <https://www.urbanlibraries.org/blog/how-eliminating-library-fees-advances-racial-equity>

Fine-free policies improve public relations

The library should be seen as a welcoming community institution that provides free and open access to information. By eliminating fines, we can free our staff to provide services and resources to the community, rather than spending valuable time attempting to collect fines. If conversations about punitive fines were dispensed with, daily interactions between staff and patrons would be positive experiences for all involved.

Many libraries, including Chicago Public Library, saw an increase in library card renewals and applications after going fine-free. A fine-free policy implies a level of trust and respect between the library and patrons. It also contributes to a sense of community responsibility and shared resources in that patrons are encouraged to return items promptly so that other patrons may use them.

Fine-free policies are clear and easy to understand

Billing for the item only when it is lost or damaged and not charging money otherwise, for example, is a policy that is clear and easier for patrons to understand than daily overdue fines that accrue at varying rates for different types of items. A fine-free policy is also one that staff can more succinctly communicate and explain.

Fines are not a sustainable source of revenue

With an increase in use of digital materials, including streaming video and audio content, fines and fees become a less reliable source of revenue, especially as patrons seek out more offerings from platforms such as Overdrive and Hoopla. Furthermore, it is not sensible to rely on funding from something we actively encourage patrons not to do.

⁸

Overall, the advantages far outweigh the disadvantages.

Libraries across the country are adopting fine-free policies, as recommended by the American Library Association. “Library fines are swiftly becoming a thing of the past,”⁹ according to *Forbes*. Forward-thinking institutions and libraries can be innovators in this regard and adopt a fine-free policy that allows them to better serve their communities.

⁸ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U-a5B6UXF2c&ab_channel=TEDxTalks

⁹ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/rachelkramerbussel/2020/12/30/why-many-libraries-are-eliminating-late-fees>

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

FAQs you can use to help address the concerns of going fine-free.

Why should my library go fine-free?

Reduction of inequities resulting from overdue fines: The library's mission is to connect people to information, resources, and programs. Fines are a barrier to access that disproportionately affect families with children and lower-income people.

Increased access to materials and services: Eliminating overdue fines furthers the mission of providing free and open access by removing barriers to the library's resources. Increasing access to the library benefits the entire community.

Overdue fines are not effective: Multiple studies have shown that small fines have no impact on return rates and may work against the goal of providing access to library resources.

Improved patrons relationships with the library: Going fine-free makes a trip to the library more pleasant for both patrons and staff. It also creates less conflict between patrons and the library.

Increased staff time and efficiency: Collecting overdue fines can be time-consuming, lead to extended conflicts with patrons, and reduce staff time engaging in other forms of public service.

What will happen to past fines?

Most libraries waive all patrons' past-overdue fines on returned items when adopting a fine-free policy.

How will libraries handle lost and damaged items? Will they remain on patrons' accounts?

Fine-free doesn't necessarily mean fee-free. Libraries can continue to charge patrons a replacement fee for lost or damaged items at their discretion.

Will the library continue to charge daily fines/late fees for any items?

Libraries that go fine-free do not have to do away with fees completely. Some libraries may opt to charge extended-use fees for items in high demand collections with limited availability, e.g. museum passes, electronic equipment, and video games. Materials that are owned by other libraries and borrowed through Interlibrary Loan may still be subject to fines based on the lending institution's policy.

What is the difference between fines and fees?

Fines are punitive daily charges applied to items not returned by their specified due date while fees are charges for library services, such as copying, faxing, scanning, printing, and material replacement costs. Material replacement fees cover the cost to the library for replacing the item or updated version of that item.

How will the library teach patrons responsibility without fines?

Although responsibility and accountability are important life skills, the job of teaching these skills does not fall under the library's mission of providing free and open access to information, services, technology, and programming.

Will the removal of fines remove patrons' motivation to return items on time?

Libraries that have adopted fine-free policies have found that the vast majority of patrons are responsible about returning materials within a reasonable time frame without the threat of fines. Studies have shown that small fines have no impact on return rates, but rather once a patron has accrued a fine on their account, they are less likely to visit the library again. Fine-free policies do not affect the return rates of materials, and library usership actually increases with the removal of fines.

If we are not utilizing fines, are we encouraging patrons to be irresponsible with library items?

Patrons are encouraged to return materials in a timely manner to the library so others may enjoy these shared resources. Materials borrowed from the library will continue to have due dates, and libraries can remind patrons accordingly. In most cases patrons will continue to be responsible for reconciling any lost items or fees on their library account by either returning the items or paying the replacement fee.

Are any restrictions placed on patrons who have overdue items?

Libraries can choose to restrict borrowing privileges, and/or limit access to online resources such as online streaming or downloadable audio and ebook services, for patrons who have items overdue beyond a reasonable period of time.

How will going fine-free affect the library's budget?

In terms of the overall budget, fines should not be viewed as a source of income for the library. Most often, revenue from fines is not actually used to replace lost materials. Fines have been used as an incentive for patrons to return their items on time, or as a reminder that borrowing privileges should not be taken for granted. Daily overdue fines are now viewed as an outdated and inequitable practice. Time and money spent on pursuing fines could be better utilized in seeking out alternative funding sources, such as grants, or advocating for increased funding for public libraries overall.

Alternative Sources of Income Used by Fine-Free Libraries

- Book Sales
- Merchandise Sales (tote bags, earbuds, coffee mugs, t-shirts)
- Office Services (copying, scanning, faxing, printing, etc.)
- Friends of the Library (FOL) Fundraising
- Notary Services
- Passport Services - this is a service offered by some libraries:
 - East Brunswick Public Library: <https://ilove.ebpl.org/passport-services>
 - Jenkintown Library in PA: <https://www.jenkintownlibrary.org/services>

Dawn Wacek, a librarian at LaCrosse Public Library in Wisconsin and a proponent of fine-free policies found that “Many [libraries] that have gone fine-free have easily made up the shortfall by other means, such as offering passport services or holding fundraisers. Some even find that the cost of collecting fines equals or even exceeds the revenue thus generated, so that eliminating them doesn't leave any shortfall to overcome.”

We only want our books back. So why charge fines?

If our goal is to get the items back to the library, how does charging fines on items returned a few days past the due date help us to achieve our goal? Fines are clearly not an incentive for patrons to return items. Users who are fined may be less likely to return materials due to their inability or unwillingness to pay.

Example Policies and FAQs from New Jersey Libraries

- **Camden County Library System (Population 506,721)**
<https://www.camdencountylibrary.org/fine-free-faqs>
- **Cape May County Library (Population 92,039)**
https://cmclibrary.org/images/PDFs/2021_09/NoFines.pdf
- **Elizabeth Public Library (Population 128,484)**
<http://elizpl.org/FineFreeLibrary.html>
- **Glen Ridge Public Library (Population 7,583)**
<https://www.glenridgelibrary.org/finefree.html>
- **Johnson Public Library, Hackensack (Population 44,339)**
<https://johnsonlib.org/fine-free/>
- **Jersey City Free Public Library (Population 262,652)**
<https://www.jclibrary.org/finefree>

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- **Monroe Township Library (Population 39,012):**
<https://www.monroetwplibrary.org/assets/2021/05/CIRCULATION-POLICY-updated-May-2021.pdf>
 - **Montclair Public Library (Population 38,676)**
<https://montclairlibrary.org/wp-content/uploads/CIRC-4-Fines-and-Fees-Policy.pdf>
 - **Ocean County Library (Population 602,018)**
<https://theoceancountylibrary.org/policies-fees-forms/fine-free>
 - **Pennsauken Free Public Library (Population 35,703)**
<http://www.pennsaukenlibrary.org/finefree>
 - **Piscataway Public Library (Population 56,923)**
<https://piscatawaylibrary.org/finefree/>
 - **Red Bank Public Library (Population 12,072)**
<https://www.redbanklibrary.org/policies-and-procedures/paying-fines>
 - **Union Public Library (Population 56,642)**
<https://uplnj.org/union-public-library-is-now-fine-free/>
 - **Westfield Memorial Library (Population 29,690)**
<https://wmlnj.org/fine-free/>

Further Reading and Resources

- **End Library Fines: Fine-Free Library Map**
<https://endlibraryfines.info/fine-free-library-map/>
- **Going Fine-Free in Georgia's Libraries Leads to Noteworthy Gains**
<https://getgeorgiareading.org/2021/07/12/going-fine-free-in-georgias-libraries-leads-to-noteworthy-gains/>
- **Indiana State Library: Fine Free Libraries – What, Why, and How**
https://www.slideshare.net/isl_pdo/fine-free-libraries-what-why-and-how
- **Library Connection, Inc. (LCI): Fine-Free Policies**
https://libraryconnection.info/documents/fine_free_policies_report_SC-2019-10-15.pdf
- **Long Overdue: Eliminating Fines on Overdue Materials to Improve Access to San Francisco Public Library**
<https://sfpl.org/uploads/files/pdfs/commission/Fine-Free-Report011719.pdf>

Video:

- **Free is Key: Library Fines and Access | Dawn Wacek | TEDxUWLaCrosse**
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U-a5B6UXF2c&ab_channel=TEDxTalks

Alternatives to Going Completely Fine-Free:

- **5 Min Librarian**
<http://www.5minlib.com/2017/09/creative-ways-to-handle-fines.html>
- **Buffalo & Erie County Public Library (NY)**
<https://www.buffalolib.org/sites/default/files/users/dcteam/new-releases/Wilson%20flyer%20all%20generic.pdf>
- **Elizabeth Public Library (NJ, prior to going completely fine-free)**
<http://elizpl.org/FAQs%20page/Read%20Down%20Your%20Fines%20Policy.pdf>
- **LaFourche Parish Public Library System (LA)**
<https://www.lafourche.org/fine-forgiveness-month>
- **Syracuse University iSchool (NY)**
<https://ischool.syr.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Overdue-Fines-Advantages-Disadvantages-and-How-Eliminating-Them-Can-Benefit-Public-Libraries.pdf>
- **Warren Public Library (PA)**
<https://warrenlibrary.org/fine-forgiveness-22/>

Other Toolkits:

- **Allegheny County Library Association (PA)**
<http://acla.pbworks.com/w/page/133102515/Fine%20Free%20Library%20Team%3Cbr%3EJenny%20Worley%20worleyj@einetnetwork.net%3Cbr%3E%3Cbr%3E>
- **North Dakota State Library**
<https://library-nd.libguides.com/publib/finefree>

Talking Points, Arguments, and Promotional Materials:

- **American Libraries Magazine: Chicago Public Library Goes Fine-Free**
<https://americanlibrariesmagazine.org/blogs/the-scoop/chicago-public-library-goes-fine-free/>
- **American Libraries Magazine: The Case for Eliminating Library Fines**
<https://americanlibrariesmagazine.org/latest-links/case-eliminating-library-fines/>
- **Boulder Public Library: Fines Free Talking Points**
<http://acla.pbworks.com/w/file/fetch/133102473/Boulder%20Public%20Library%20Fines%20Free%20Talking%20Points.pdf>
- **EBSCO: Not So Fine with Library Fines? A Look at the Overdue Debate**
<https://www.ebsco.com/blogs/ebscopost/not-so-fine-library-fines-look-overdue-debate>
- **End Library Fines: Resources**
<https://endlibraryfines.info/resources/>

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- **It's All Good - Blog Post from George Needham, Director of Delaware County Library: Killing Off Fines is Long Overdue**
<http://scanblog.blogspot.com/2006/01/killing-off-fines-is-long-overdue.html>
 - **It's All Good - Follow Up Blog Post from George Needham, Director of Delaware County Library: The (Fine) Killer Strikes Again!**
<http://scanblog.blogspot.com/2006/01/fine-killer-strikes-again.html>
 - **Not So Fine with Library Fines? A Look at the Overdue Debate**
<https://www.northjersey.com/story/news/local/2019/06/28/more-nj-libraries-eliminating-fines-overdue-books/1563118001/>
 - **OCLC: Social Library, Fines Edition**
<https://www.webjunction.org/news/webjunction/social-library-141.html>
 - **Syracuse University School of Information Studies: Five Unexpected Benefits of Eliminating Library Fines**
<https://ischool.syr.edu/five-unexpected-benefits-to-eliminating-library-fines/>

Fine-Free Template (English and Spanish):

- **Elizabeth Public Library's Editable Template**
https://www.canva.com/design/DAE-colFceM/E3Qs8u_RvsbMAg8LiMnEaQ/view?utm_content=DAE-colFceM&utm_campaign=designshare&utm_medium=link&utm_source=sharebutton&mode=preview

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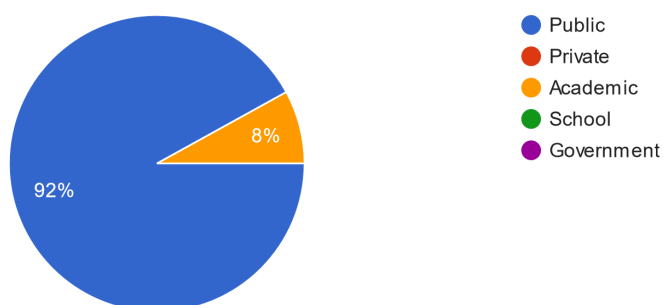
Appendix

New Jersey Fine-Free Survey Summary

Click [here](#) to view full survey results

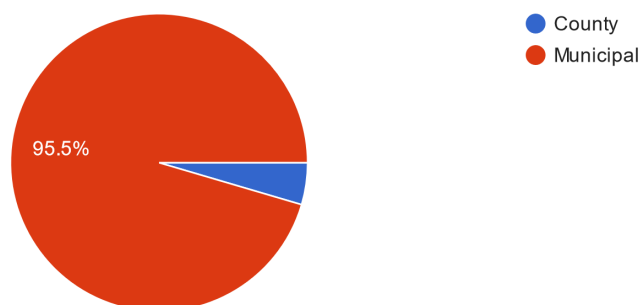
We received 50 responses, 2 of which were from a single library. Of the 49 responding libraries, 21 were fine-free. (A 22nd one, Elizabeth Public Library, has gone fine-free since responding to the survey.)

Type of Library
50 responses



92% Public Libraries (46 Respondents)
8% Academic (4 Respondents)

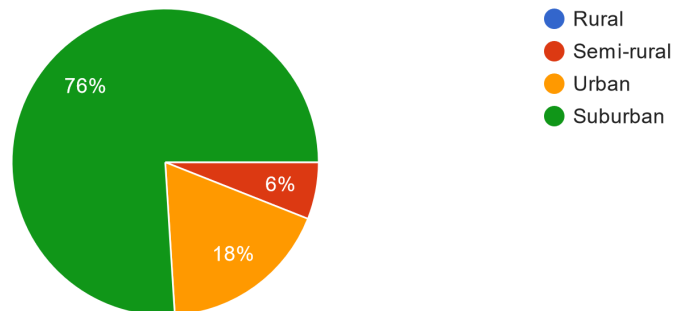
If library is public, is it:
44 responses



95.5% Municipal Libraries (42 Respondents)
4.5% County (2 Respondents)

How would you identify your community?

50 responses



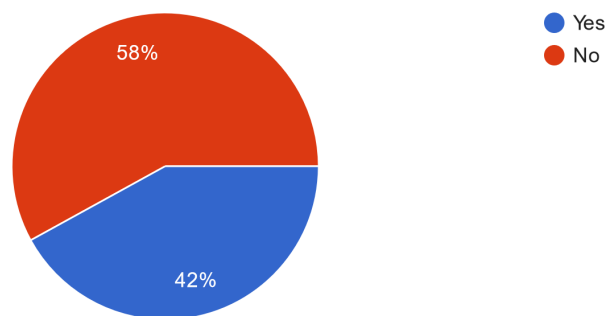
76% Suburban (38 Respondents)

18% Urban (9 Respondents)

6% Semi-rural (3 Respondents)

Is your library Fine Free?

50 responses



58% No (29 Respondents)

42% Yes (21 Respondents)

Regional Breakdown

(Total 21, plus 2 libraries that went fine-free post-survey):

Northern

1. Berkeley College Library
2. *Elizabeth Public Library (Went Fine-Free Post-Survey)*
3. Fairview Free Public Library
4. Hoboken Public Library
5. Livingston Public Library
6. Maplewood Memorial Library
7. Millburn Free Public Library
8. Millville Public Library
9. Ringwood Public Library
10. Roxbury Public Library
11. Wyckoff Public Library

Central

1. Cranbury Public Library
2. Edison Public Library
3. Evelyn S. Field Library at Raritan Valley Community College
4. Matawan Aberdeen Public Library
5. Piscataway Public Library
6. Red Bank Public Library
7. Somerset County Library System

Southern

1. Camden County Library System
2. Cherry Hill Public Library
3. Mount Laurel Library
4. *Pennsauken Free Public Library (Went Fine-Free Post-Survey)*
5. Runnemede Public Library

When asked, “How long has your library been fine-free?,” respondents answered (21 responses):

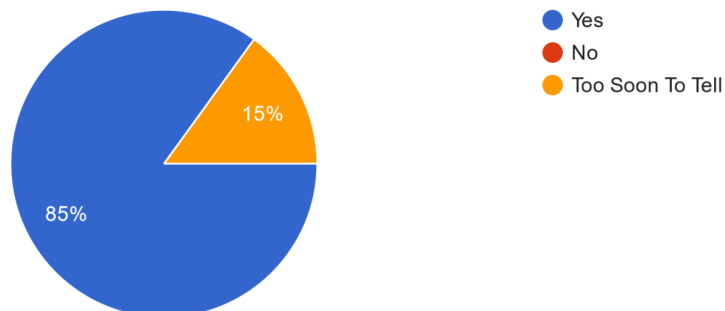
> 1 year: 8*
 < 1 year: 2
 < 2 years: 8
 < 3 years: 1
 < 4 years: 1
 5+ years: 1

* A lot of responses indicated that they were unofficially fine-free during the pandemic, but were not official until 2022. These were marked under the > 1 Year Category because it wasn't official yet.

A few also noted that only their Youth Services were fine-free, but now their entire collection is. These are marked from the time that they began with YS.

Has your experience of going Fine-Free been positive?

20 responses

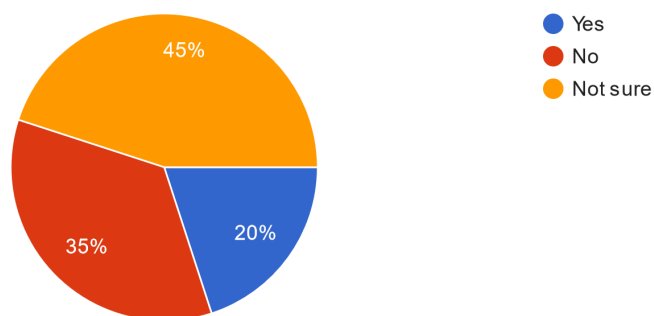


81% Yes (17 Respondents)

19% Too Soon To Tell (4 Respondents)

Have you seen an increase in circulation?

20 responses



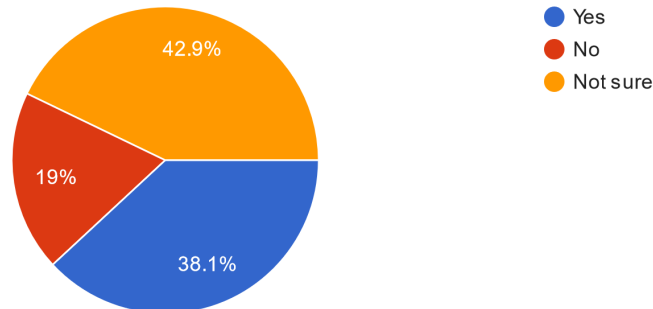
20% Yes (4 Respondents)

35% No (7 Respondents)

45% Not Sure (9 Respondents)

Have you seen an increase in library card membership?

21 responses



38.1% Yes (8 Respondents)

19% No (4 Respondents)

42.9% Not Sure (9 Respondents)

When asked, “What ways have your budget been impacted since going fine-free?” of those who answered (19 responses):

- 47% of respondents indicated that going fine-free had no impact on their library’s budget.
- 21% of respondents indicated that going fine-free had a small or insignificant impact on their library’s budget.
- 11% of respondents indicated that going fine-free had a moderate impact on their library’s budget.
- 21% of respondents indicated that they are unsure of the budgetary effects of going fine-free.

Based on the survey responses, the removal of fines did not significantly impact their respective library budgets.

- Fine payment revenue made up a very small portion of the budget for the majority of the respondents.
- Fine payment revenue decreased in many libraries due to the pandemic (prior to going fine-free).
- The removal of a significant barrier to access (fines) mitigated the loss of fine revenue.

When asked, “What benefits to your community have you seen since going fine-free?,” respondents answered (19 responses):

- Positive patron experience
- Barriers removed
- Positive patron relationships
- Library materials returned
- Easier solutions
- Less intimidation
- Decreased tension
- Patron retention
- Patron returning
- Student access uplifted

When asked, “What prompted your library to go fine-free?” (20 responses):

The majority of the responses mentioned the **reduction of barriers to access** as a strong motivator for their library to go fine-free. **50%** of participants in this survey directly mentioned reducing barriers to access in their responses.

- Library staff felt uncomfortable charging fines to patrons who are economically disadvantaged, especially during the (ongoing) pandemic.
- The pandemic prompted **15%** of the responding libraries to go fine-free.
- **20%** of respondents indicated that fines can have a punitive effect on patrons that is unwelcoming.
- Overall, the return on investment was worth the loss of fine revenue – patrons are happier and have one less thing to worry about as library users.
- **Notable Quote:**
 - “Fines are contrary to the mission of the library; there are more effective ways to ensure the timely return of materials; fines have a disproportionate effect on the youth and economically disadvantaged people”.

When asked, “Has going fine-free helped commit the library to equity? How so?” (15 responses):

Of the 15 responses, 13 libraries agreed that going fine-free helped commit the library to equity. Some of the ways listed were:

-
- Going fine-free removed barriers and risks such as prohibitive fine payments for children, low income, and challenged users.
 - Going fine-free has increased access to materials and services for everyone in the community regardless of their economic or social situation.
 - Going fine-free has offered equal access to print and digital materials for everyone in the community regardless of your ability to pay fines.

When asked, “What would you tell other libraries that are considering going fine-free?” of those that answered (16 responses):

- 43.75% of respondents used the phrases “Do it” and/or “You will not regret it.”
- 31.25% of respondents said that it reduces conflict and stress with patrons or that it improved community relations.
- 81.25% of respondents described it as being successful or having positive results, and the other 18.75% of respondents described it in neutral terms.
- Notable quotes:
 - “You will not regret it. We are not here to teach folks lessons or penalize them. If you rely on income from fines, perhaps it is time to explore new sources of funding - Friends groups, foundations, grants, donations, etc. These new explorations in finding funding are usually really positive - you'll build community relationships and/or discover a new service that you hadn't considered before from a grant opportunity.”
 - “I say, do it. Times are changing for libraries in general. Lots of good will.”

When asked, “How could libraries approach the topic with their boards, users, and local government?” respondents provided the following strategies (12 responses):

1. Use national and local data, research, and studies (Suggesting research shows fines do not work, and eliminating them will increase patron usage) (6 Libraries)
2. Use other libraries as precedents (5 Libraries)
3. Offer philosophical arguments (fines should not form the basis of balancing budgets, improved community relations, reduces conflict, reduces barriers, equitability and fairness) (4 Libraries)
4. Calculate losses to budget and how it could be recouped (3 Libraries)
5. Ease into it with automatic renewal, fine-free for children’s materials, and use that data to justify going completely fine-free (1 Library)
6. Use internal statistics (1 Library)

-
7. Go partially fine-free (i.e. still have fines for recalls) (1 Library)
 8. Create a patron survey (1 Library)
- Notable quotes:
 - “The money libraries collect in fines doesn't show that the fines are making people return things on time. People who can afford the late fees will pay them and keep using the library. People who can't afford the fees will stop using the library.”
 - “Fines should not be the basis of balancing budgets.”