



Fine Elimination: Factors to Consider

Summary

This report is intended to provide a starting point for Library Board discussion about the potential elimination of fines at Canton Public Library. The elimination of fines is a policy and financial/budgetary decision that can only be made by the Library Board. If the Library Board wishes to pursue this, the Circulation Policy will be revised and brought to a future board meeting for approval. We are not requesting Board action at this time.

It outlines the current fine schedule and practice, and reviews the common considerations presented in recent reports, popular articles and research (to the extent available). These common considerations include: the purpose of fines, the impact of fines on different demographic segments, the impact on relationships between patrons and staff, budgetary impact, and advocacy by professional library associations.

This report does not provide a specific recommendation for action; it is intended to provide an overview of the fine-free landscape for Library Board discussion and, if there are questions or requests for further details, library staff will provide the information and answer those questions.

Background

Library fines are currently levied by Canton Public Library per day overdue, based on the type of material. Books and non-fiction DVDs are billed \$.20/day, and feature DVDs and games are billed \$1.00/day, with a maximum fine per item of \$5.00. A complete schedule of fines is included as an appendix to this report. Patrons with more than \$20 in overdue fines may not check out items.

The same schedule of fines is levied for materials borrowed by patrons from reciprocal libraries.

It is important to note that fines are distinct from fees. The library charges the following fees for damaged and lost items:

- A replacement fee equivalent to the price of the item at the time it was ordered,
- A processing fee of \$3,
- An additional billing fee of \$1 for items kept past 21 days, and finally
- A collections fee of \$10 for patrons who exceed \$35 in combined fines and fees, and who have not paid within 45 days. No patron is sent to collection exclusively for fines, but fines may make up a portion of the \$35 total.

Fines may be waived or reduced at the discretion of the circulation staff. Fees for damaged or lost items may also occasionally be waived, however the collections fee is only waived at the direction of the Circulation Services Department Head or Supervisor.

A summary chart of revenues for the last several years, and the projection for this fiscal year, is included later in this report. Revenue from fines has been decreasing since the implementation of new courtesy features by the library in 2018 and 2019.

Patrons are provided a courtesy notification of impending due dates on checked-out materials two days prior to the date due. Since 2018, patrons have the option of text notifications in addition to email and phone notification.

As of May 2019, items that do not have holds waiting are automatically renewed up to 4 times. Patrons may also request a special loan period for an item, as long as it has no holds, at their initial check-out.

Patrons receive overdue notifications 4 days after an item is due, and again at 10 days. On the 21st day after an item is due, if it has not been returned, the patron will get a notice that the item is being billed to their account.

Considerations

- Purpose of fines

The intent of the current policies and practices for fines at Canton Public Library is to encourage on-time returns. Fines have historically been understood as providing a meaningful incentive to patrons to return materials by their due dates, and thereby make those materials available to the maximum number of interested patrons in a timely fashion.

There has been a recent trend towards fine elimination in public libraries across the U.S., and many Michigan libraries have followed suitⁱ. While there are not many recent evidence-based studies about the impact of fines on patron return behaviorⁱⁱ, there have been many popular articles and single-system reportsⁱⁱⁱ which tend to be in favor of library fine elimination. In considering this type of self-reporting it is important to note the presence of selection bias – only those systems with positive results tend to report out. This type of reporting may or may not accurately reflect common outcomes.

Recent popular articles and reports tend to focus on three intended functions of library fines:

- Encourage on-time returns
- Penalize for keeping items out of circulation (Encourage availability of materials)
- Encourage personal responsibility

Generally, system self-reports tend to emphasize the increase in book returns once fines are eliminated, improvements to access (quantified by citing smaller numbers of blocked patron accounts following the policy change), and also to highlight anecdotal stories of positive return-to-the-library experiences shared by individual patrons.

There are also a number of popular articles in professional library publications in recent years that debate the pros and cons of library fines^{iv}. In addition to the above, these articles also tend to note that more traditional patrons may expect and desire that those who keep materials past their due dates be punished for depriving other patrons of access, and breaking their social contract with the library. This idea that patrons who are diligent in following the borrowing rules may be upset by elimination of fines is something that has been brought up as a concern by Canton staff in discussions on this topic.

- Demographic impact

One major theme in articles about fines in recent years has been the disparate effects and perceptions of fines for different demographic sectors. Unlike the discussions around the effectiveness of fines in driving patron return behavior, there is evidence that suggests library fines disproportionately impact lower-income patrons. Many large cities, such as San Francisco, Seattle and Chicago, have cited this as one of their main motivations in eliminating fines.

For a family with less income, it can be difficult to pay off fines that accrue, and it may not seem worth the risk of the initial check-out. This has a further disproportionate effect in that these families are also less likely to be able to independently afford the materials, computer access, and other resources which the library provides, so that chilled access to library resources in practice removes these entirely from the families reach.

Vice versa, a family with more income may not experience a fine as a deterrent or barrier. They may even perceive it positively, as a “donation” of sorts towards an institution they cherish.

Outside of income, there is again less evidence-based literature. However there is at least one recent report on race and libraries^v that suggest fine practices with a high-level of discretion, such as the one in place at Canton, have the potential risk of disparate effects on patrons of color. This seems worth stating given the difference in responses by ethnicity in the Community Needs Assessment conducted by Cobalt Community Research for Canton in 2019.

The Community Needs Assessment included two questions related to fines:

- 24. Please note the main barriers that keep your household from using the library more often? (Mark up to 3.)
- 26. Which four potential library services would make the library experience better for you and your household? (Mark up to 4.)

For question 24, no one reported that fines were a barrier to library access. Given the argument made in many of the large city reports, it is interesting to observe that the Canton survey responses related to overdue fines did vary by income, with it being slightly higher in rank for lower income and highest income brackets, and less important for those with middle-tier income.

For question 26, 5% of survey participants selected “eliminating overdue fines” as a service that would improve their experience of the library. This is low in comparison to other options presented (9th out of 12), however, it is important to note that responses more closely corresponded to ethnicity than anything else, followed by age. Looking only at non-white-identified respondents, “eliminating overdue fines” moves up in importance to 6th out of 12. For Black/African American patrons specifically, it ranked 3rd out of 12. Complete response data for this question is included as an appendix to this report for your reference.

- Impact on relationship between patron and staff

Another major theme in discussions about library fines is the stress it places on library staff, and the tone of these interactions for patrons. This topic is discussed at length in *LONG OVERDUE: Eliminating Fines on Overdue Materials to Improve Access to San Francisco Public Library*^{vi}. While this and similar self-reports are widespread, again there is little evidence-based research to back up these arguments.

For Canton, public perception of the library has been consistently very positive, as reported in the Community Surveys completed in 2019 and earlier, in spite of the presence of fines.

Staff have not reported significant stress as a result of patron interactions around fines. Very few staff members have directly advocated for fine elimination, however when it has been discussed, a number of circulation staff do think it would be wonderful to never have to discuss fines with patrons. Those that support the idea of fine elimination primarily focused on a desire to support families in need, not the stressful nature of the interactions.

When we returned to the library after the initial closure for Covid-19, staff were instructed to waive fines on a regular basis where reasonable so that they did not have to handle money as frequently. While staff reacted positively, it does not appear to have significantly altered the quantity of fines being collected in practice. This may be because there are also staff who view waiving fines as “letting the patron get away with something,” similar to the more traditional patrons noted under “purpose of fines” above.

- Budget impact
 - Direct

Fines are a source of revenue for the library. While fine revenue has been declining as noted above, it is still significant.

Year	Fines Revenue
2018	\$94,740.60
2019	\$56,800.00
2020*	\$16,479.41
2021 (projected)	\$30,000.00

*As a result of COVID-19 closure, materials were automatically renewed regardless of holds, between March and September of 2020, resulting in no collection of fines during this period. Many fines were also waived during the initial re-opening process, as noted in the section above.

- Indirect (staffing, notifications)

While we do not routinely track the amount of staff time and resources devoted to fine processing, it is a routine part of the day for staff at the checkout desk. In practice, collecting fines only adds a moment to each interaction. For patrons with fines on multiple cards there potentially would be a meaningful amount of time saved, however this is a minority of the fine interactions we see.

Billed item(s) and processing fee(s) are typically a much lengthier topic of conversation with patrons than fines. Patrons who are billed for items are usually not very happy about the charge. Elimination of fines does have the potential to make these conversations more challenging, because waiving all or some fines also present on the account is often part of the negotiation towards persuading a patron to pay for the replacement cost of billed items. For example, a patron with a \$40 charge, \$10 of which is fines and \$30 of which is associated with a damaged item often is more amenable to and feels better about paying the \$30 if they know the \$10 is being waived.

Elimination of fines also potentially could increase the amount of patrons who are sent to collections, since the account would no longer be blocked from new check-outs when the patron accumulates \$20 in fines. Additionally, for lost items, the patron would not necessarily be aware that the amount they owed exceeded the \$35 collections threshold until after the 21 day mark because this amount is not billed for a lost item until that point. Maintaining our current notifications practices at the 2 days prior, 4 and 10 days after marks even in the absence of fines could help mitigate this risk.

- American Library Association and Michigan Library Association

In 2019, the American Library Association issued a Resolution on Monetary Library Fines as a Form of Social Inequity^{vii} which “urges libraries to scrutinize their practices of imposing fines on library patrons and actively move towards eliminating them.”

The Michigan Library Association does not currently take a position on fines.

Appendix A

Borrowing Schedule

Item Type	Item Limit	Loan Period	Fine/Day	Holds	Renew
Book Discussion Kits	-	60 days	\$1.00		
Books, Large Print, Audiobooks, Storytime Kits, Puppets, CDs, Nonfiction DVDs	-	21 days	\$0.20		
DVDs	-	7 days	\$1.00		
Magazines (Back Issues)/Comics	-	7 days	\$0.20		
Video Games	5	7 days	\$1.00		
Lucky Day Books/CDs	2	7 days	\$0.20		
Lucky Day DVDs	2	3 Days	\$1.00		
Cd Players*	1	21 days	\$5.00		
Magnifiers*	1	21 days	\$5.00		
* CPL or PDL Library Card Holders Only					

Appendix B

Community Needs Assessment, Question 26 Responses

26. Which four potential library services would make the library experience better for you and your household? (Mark up to 4.)

Possible responses:

- Home delivery of materials
- Smart phone/tablet device support
- In-library use of special equipment (laminator, etc)
- Media creation (podcast, video green screen, etc)
- Notary public
- Test proctoring
- Video conferencing
- Personalized reading/viewing suggestions
- Reservable study rooms
- Eliminating overdue fines
- Simplified logins for electronic media
- Library super fan experiences

Percent of respondents who included “Eliminating overdue fines” in their “top four potential library services would make the library experience better for you and your household,” by demographic.

Ethnicity	American Indian or Alaska Native	-
	Middle Eastern/North African	20%
	Asian Indian	13%
	Other Asian	17%
	Black/African American	31%
	White	3%
	Hispanic	13%
	Other	14%
	Prefer not to answer	15%

Age Group in Home	0-4	-
	5-14	11%
	15-19	9%
	20-34	5%
	35-54	9%
	55-74	5%
	75 or older	8%

Household Income	\$25,000 or less	-
	\$25,001 to \$50,000	7%
	\$50,001 to \$100,000	4%
	Over \$100,000	7%

Endnotes

ⁱ <https://www.freep.com/story/news/local/michigan/2020/02/12/michigan-library-overdue-fine-late-fee/4677904002/>

ⁱⁱ There are several frequently cited studies from the 1980s - Little, P. (1989). MANAGING OVERDUES: Facts From Four Studies. *The Bottom Line*, 2(2), 22–25.; Hansel, P., & Burgin, R. (1983). Hard Facts About Overdues. *Library Journal*, 108(4), 349; etc – and one from 2013 that focused specifically on two academic libraries - 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.

ⁱⁱⁱ For example:

- Depriest, M.J. (2016). Removing Barriers to Access: Eliminating Library Fines and Fees on Children’s Materials. Retrieved from <http://www.cde.state.co.us/cdelib/removingbarrierstoaccess>
- Spielman, F. (2019, October 30). Lightfoot’s decision to eliminate library fines triggers 240% increase in book returns. Retrieved from Chicago Sun-Times website: <https://chicago.suntimes.com/news/2019/10/30/20940677/chicago-public-library-no-fines-book-returns-increase-lightfoot>
- The case against library fines—According to the head of New York Public Library—Quartz. Retrieved from <https://qz.com/1158839/the-caseagainst-library-fines-according-to-the-head-of-the-new-york-public-library/>

^{iv} For example:

- Morehart, P. (2018, June 1). An Overdue Discussion: Two takes on the library-fine debate. Retrieved from the American Libraries Magazine website: <https://americanlibrariesmagazine.org/2018/06/01/library-fines-overdue-discussion/>
- Epstein, S. (2017, December 19). To Fine or Not To Fine. Retrieved from the Public Library Association Online website: <http://publiclibrariesonline.org/2017/12/to-fine-or-not-to-fine/>

^v Advancing Racial Equity in Public Libraries Case Studies from the Field - Government Alliance on Race and Equity. https://www.racialequityalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/GARE_LibrariesReport_v8_DigitalScroll_WithHyperlinks.pdf

^{vi} <https://sfpl.org/uploads/files/pdfs/commission/Fine-Free-Report011719.pdf>

^{vii}

http://www.ala.org/aboutala/sites/ala.org.aboutala/files/content/governance/council/council_documents/2019_ms_council_docs/ALA%20CD%2038%20RESOLUTION%20ON%20MONETARY%20LIBRARY%20FINES%20AS%20A%20FORM%20OF%20SOCIAL%20JUSTICE%20Revised%201_27_0.pdf