

The Debate Over Fine Free Libraries

(Notes from panel discussion at ILA with representatives from ELA, Warren-Newport Public Library, Waukegan Public Library, Vernon Area Library).

What is the mission of the library?

- Elmhurst Public Library enriches life in Elmhurst by providing opportunities to connect, create and explore.

Do library fines support the mission?

Does evidence show that fines increase the rate of return of library items?

- There is little research on this topic
- Some studies show that only large fines impact return rates
- Rates of return in some libraries stayed the same or increased when fines were eliminated
- Vernon Area Library did study when they went fine free and evidence showed that materials came back 5 days sooner than before and that patrons were less likely to renew material (to guard against fines).
- Without good evidence on the value of fines, are there other ways to promote higher rates of return?
- Are return rates important? What is the real impact?

Library fines impact equity and access

- Some studies point to the fact that families with lower income are more likely NOT to use the library for fear of accumulating fees.
- Elderly patrons, patrons with disabilities, families with young children more likely not to use library for fear of accumulating fines.
- Evidence that when libraries eliminate fees, there is an increase in families getting or using library cards (especially for children).

- Young children from low income families rely on library access.

Eliminating library fees can improve customer service to patrons

- Many unpleasant encounters at the circulation desk are due to patrons complaining about fines or negotiating fines
- Patrons may feel ashamed when talking with library employees about fines or lost books.
- Talking about fines can be anxiety provoking for staff. Eliminating fines allows them to say “how can I help you” instead of “you owe us money.”
- More opportunity for staff at circulation desk to have engaging work rather than negotiating fines.
- How much time do the staff at our circulation desk spend talking with patrons about fines? How do they feel about these conversations?

Teaching responsibility through fines is not mission of library

- Is the mission of the library to teach responsibility or to provide access to information for the community?
- Fines are punitive and can discourage library use
- There are other ways to hold patrons accountable such as putting a hold on the library card until an item is returned.

Does library need fines to keep the doors open?

“More libraries are going fine-free. That’s good for everyone.

Washington Post, June 17, 2018. Editorial Board

An Overdue Discussion: Two takes on the library-fine debate,” Phil Morehart, *American Libraries*, June 1, 2018.

“A librarian’s case against overdue book fines”. Dawn Wacek, TED Talk.