

# The Washington Post

## The Post's View

Opinion

**More libraries are going fine-free. That's good for everyone.**



The central Enoch Pratt Free Library in Baltimore. (Barbara Haddock Taylor/Baltimore Sun)

By **Editorial Board**

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IN AN ERA when e-books and new forms of entertainment have threatened to drive down library use, public libraries are increasingly looking to modernize and innovate. Some have turned to e-books or digital literacy programs to reach more patrons. Others have opted for a different approach: They have gotten rid of the pesky late fees that drive borrowers away.

Last week, the Enoch Pratt Free Library in Baltimore announced it was eliminating fines on overdue books and materials. Though borrowers are still responsible for replacement costs for lost items, the Pratt erased \$186,000 in outstanding penalties for 26,000 borrowers and reinstated 13,000 users whose cards were previously blocked due to unpaid fines.

In doing so, it joined a growing number of libraries across the country that have decided to go fine-free.

Eliminating these fines serves a laudable purpose: The policy can expand access to library services among groups that might otherwise struggle to return materials on time or keep up with payments, including low-income families, people with disabilities and the elderly.

In some cases, as patrons return, fine-free policies can actually work to improve library circulation — and even the library's bottom line. The Pratt, for example, relies on library fines for less than a quarter of a percent of its annual budget, a figure it believes it could largely save in reduced staff time collecting and processing fines.

Proponents of library fines argue that they incentivize borrowers to return books on time and teach personal responsibility. But there is little evidence that fines have any effect on the timely return of library materials. In fact, much of the existing research suggests that they do not affect overdue rates and instead deter readers from borrowing materials in the first place. Libraries have also found that fines heavily affect low-income families and children, excluding the very patrons who rely on libraries the most.

Not every library can afford to follow in the Pratt's footsteps and jettison fines altogether. Many library systems depend heavily on income from fines to cover their regular expenses.

Others might find it more viable to eliminate a subset of fines, such as fines on children's books.

Regardless, the experiences of libraries that have successfully implemented fine-free programs offer food for thought for other networks. Perhaps the days of relentless overdue notices and droves of blocked users are coming to an end.

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