44% of Michigan libraries are fine-free: Why they're doing it

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In February 2020, the Free Press reported that a growing number of libraries around the state of Michigan were phasing out the practice of collecting late fines for overdue books and materials.

Two years and one pandemic later, the trend has exploded. Of the 392 facilities that participated in the 2022 Michigan Public Libraries Annual Report, 173, or 44.1%, reported being fine-free, according to Joseph Hamlin, data coordinator for the Library of Michigan. That's a nearly three-fold increase over 2020, when just 60 libraries in the state reported being fine-free.

One of the most recent facilities to join the trend, the Troy Public Library officially went fine-free on April 3. But director Emily Dumas said the facility actually stopped collecting late fines much earlier.

"When the library closed in March 2020, it only made sense to postpone late fines for that period, because people weren't supposed to leave their house," she explained.

The fine-free model stuck around once the library re-opened to curbside service, because "everything was so abnormal at that point that we didn't want to throw one more thing to stress people out," Dumas said.
Like many libraries across state, the Troy Public Library became a fine-free library on Sunday, April 3, 2022 where overdue fees for books and other items are waived. Eric Seals, Detroit Free Press

When the library reopened fully in summer of 2021, Dumas and her staff looked to data from the previous year to decide whether or not to reinstate overdue fines. They were surprised to learn that removing late fines had made no impact on metrics like wait times for popular books, how long materials were being kept, or the number of materials reported lost.

"Luckily a lot of other libraries had done it at that point, too, so we could hear from them ... that it hadn't been a negative experience," she added.

Kelly Bennett, head of circulation for the Ferndale Area District Library, noticed a similar trend after her facility went fine-free in April 2021. She said the number of accounts her library sent to collections – which only occurs when an item is extremely overdue – remained constant between February 2020 and February 2022.

"It really hasn't changed patron behavior at all," Bennett said. "(A late fine) doesn't really incentivize returns; all it does is penalize people for small mistakes."

Representatives for both libraries said the fine-free model doesn't mean materials can be checked out indefinitely. In Troy, rentals are automatically renewed three times before the patron will be asked to pay a lost item fee.
"It's not like a punishment for people," Dumas said. "It's just – we never got our item back, and it does cost us."

Hamlin said that for libraries around the state grappling with eliminating late fines, the pandemic acted as a "good catalyst" for change.

"You've got all of these libraries where the hours are reduced, staffing has been reduced or changed, or they're working from home," he said. "If a patron couldn't get in there to pay a fine, how would you collect that money?"

Hamlin predicts that 90% of libraries in the state could be fine-free within the next few years if current trends continue, especially now that so many facilities have already taken the plunge. He added that for most libraries, the budgetary impact of eliminating fines has been negligible.

Jenny Marr, director of the Ferndale Area District Library, agreed, noting that revenue from late fines accounted for less than 1% of the facility's budget.

"It really has had no effect whatsoever on our bottom line," she said.

It's not just library patrons who are happy about the elimination of late fines – library staff is, too. Bennett said her team members can now focus more on positive interactions with library guests, rather than being thrust into the uncomfortable position of debt collector.

"We're spending less time talking to people about small amounts of money," she said, "and more time just casually chatting about a book that somebody's checking out."
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With the COVID-19 pandemic finally starting to ebb, Dumas said eliminating late fines is an important step toward getting folks back into the library after two long, socially-distanced years.

"We want to encourage people back in, we don't want to shame people and keep them away from the library," Dumas said. "It's about ... making sure that they feel welcome here."