
Refining Relationship: Milwaukee Public Library and Community Reflection

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ABSTRACT

The goal of the administrative team of the Milwaukee Public Library (MPL) is to create policies that ensure successful use of the library services and collections on an uninterrupted basis by all the members of their community. The team has pursued strategies over a period of years to address potential barriers to use caused specifically by overdue materials and subsequent fines. The latest of these strategies produced a data set, available to MPL through the shared Milwaukee County Federated Library System, that allowed authorized MPL staff, in partnership with the School of Information Studies of the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee (SOIS), to engage fine-constricted patrons in a review of library policies. Utilizing a telephone survey and focus groups, MPL/SOIS identified a constellation of issues that affect patrons' use of the library beyond the single question of fines to engage the broader question of the impact of policies. Patrons indicated a desire for more communication strategies initiated by the library and an elimination of the collection agency and the associated fee, as well as a concern about who benefits from the fines that are collected. They also identified an underlying value for the library that supports that use. This dialogue produced a study that extends beyond simply the elimination of “barriers to use” to a more affirmative approach of supporting not just access, but relationship between the library and their patrons.

I love the library and I want to be able to go.
—Focus group 2 member

INTRODUCTION

The goal of the current administrative team of the Milwaukee Public Library (MPL) is to create policies that ensure successful use of the library services and collections on an uninterrupted basis by all the members of their community. The team has pursued strategies over a period of years to address potential barriers to use caused specifically by overdue materials and subsequent fines and fees. This project investigates policies that impact service delivery to Milwaukee city patrons through the analysis of circulation practices. In coordination with the administration of the library, faculty and students at the School of Information Studies at the University of Milwaukee advanced patron surveys and focus groups that emphasized the perspectives of the patrons in this analysis of the impact of circulation policies and practices. It is one study in a line of research initiatives within the profession of public librarianship that have addressed the concepts of “fines,” “fees,” and “barriers to use” as well as “social justice.” The MPL patron survey was conducted in 2018 and the focus groups in 2019. It is the latest in a series of policy initiatives within the library.

The inquiries have their roots in the strategic plan MPL 2020, approved by the Milwaukee Public Library Board in 2013. Most notably, during 2014–15, an internal committee investigated MPL processes for fines and fees. The committee successfully updated old practices and wrote new policy to be used by all staff when evaluating patron fines. This project included guidelines for frontline staff to waive fines without managerial intervention and presented a formal process to dispute fines. MPL also took the significant step of creating ongoing data collection points so they could track fine and fee metrics.

In October 2016, a fine forgiveness initiative offered all MPL patrons the opportunity to clear their records by simply returning overdue materials. The program lasted for three weeks. MPL staff tracked registered cards, returned materials, and types and totals of waived fines and fees. This strategy produced a data set, available through the Milwaukee County Federated Library System (MCFLS) integrated library system, Sierra, that allowed authorized MPL staff to actively engage fine-constricted patrons in a review of library policies. The key question for the MPL administration focused on why patrons who had gone through the process of clearing their records ended up “blocked” from using the library again because of a new accumulation of fines.

Using a telephone survey and focus groups, MPL and the research team identified a constellation of issues that affect patrons’ use of the library. Patrons indicated a desire for more communication strategies, an elimination of the collection agency and the associated fee, as well as a concern about who benefits from the fines that are collected. They also identified an underlying value that supports that use. This dialogue between the institution of the library and the end users of the library produced a study

that extends beyond simply the elimination of “barriers to use.” It suggests a more affirmative approach of supporting not just access but engagement.

Within this research report, the term “fine” refers to a predetermined charge associated with materials that have not been returned to the library by an established time. The term “fees” refers to charges to a patron based on charges for services external to the library. “Barriers to use” indicates those policies and practices that interfere with the ability of library patrons to avail themselves of library services. “Social justice,” as used within this research, indicates equitable access to resources in support of life and shared liberty.

Discussion in the Field

The issue of fees as barriers to use has long been a concern of professional librarians, if not always the local politicians. In 1999, John Jaeger wrote that “the recent debate about user fees in public libraries has lasted over twenty-five years and still continues to be an emotional and heated one” (1999, 49). Twenty years later, the engagement on the issue of library fines again roils the professional waters. Some see the elimination of fines as a social justice issue (<https://endlibraryfines.info>). For Chicago Public Library, the elimination of fines in October 2019 aligned with a series of efforts by Mayor Lightfoot to eliminate regressive fines and fees policies across the city that unfairly impacted lower income residents (Chicago Public Library 2019). Others assessed the economics of fine practices holistically (Jones 2017). For some, fines and fees are integral to the funding of library operations.

The Columbus Metropolitan Library in Ohio does not depend on income from fines to support its operating budget. Their Board of Trustees voted in 2016 to eliminate fines on overdue materials beginning in January 2017. It was a final step in a process begun in 2012, which had included reductions in fine rates, the introduction of auto-renewal for materials, and the elimination of fines on children’s cards. Columbus did, however, retain the charge for materials declared lost due to failure to return the item (Columbus Metropolitan Library 2016). The distinction between fines for materials that are determined to be overdue and replacement charges for materials that have been determined to be lost, based on circulation policy, matters in the larger discussion of “barriers to use.” For Columbus Metropolitan Library, material is determined to be lost when it has not been returned thirty-five days after the date it was due (Columbus Metropolitan Library 2016). Columbus Metropolitan Library also continued the use of a materials recovery agency to “pursue debts from lost or damaged items” (Columbus Metropolitan Library 2016). The “collection agency” is a service purchased by many public libraries and, as will be seen with the MPL patrons, affects patrons’ perceived relationship with their library.

Columbus Metropolitan Library was not the first to eliminate fines on overdue materials, but their decision was a high point in a simmering concern about library fines among library professionals. Bexley Public Library, Westerville Public Library, Worthington Libraries, Grandview Heights Public Library, and Upper Arlington Public Library, all in Ohio, soon followed (Proctor 2019). The initiative took on momentum, as more libraries in more states pursued similar policies that, at their base, eliminated fines on overdue materials.

The professional publication *Library Journal* (*LJ*) surveyed a random selection of public libraries in 2017 to map the shifts in fines and fees policies and received 454 responses (Dixon 2017). They found that the income from fines and impact on library budget was a significant part of the assessment in the library's decision-making process: "A substantial majority of public libraries continue to depend on fines and fees for some portion of revenue, with 92 percent of survey respondents reporting fine collection for late returns. Eighty-eight percent of small libraries collect overdue fees, and 98 percent of large libraries, serving populations over 100,000, do so. Not all libraries charge fines for every type of material—for example, some (five percent) do not charge fines for juvenile materials—but libraries almost universally charge late fees for DVDs" (40). These numbers have changed since the report was written, but it still indicates the common practices among public libraries that have been in play for decades. Dixon reported that monthly revenue from fines was roughly proportionate to the size of the system. Libraries serving populations under 25,000 reported an average of \$449 in fines collected each month, libraries serving from 25,000 to 99,000 reported an average of \$2,691, and libraries serving over 100,000 reported an average of \$9,788. Based on responses to this survey and the number of libraries in the United States, *LJ* projected the annual amount of money collected in monthly fines at approximately \$11.8 million (40–41). This total is not insignificant.

Of libraries, 61 percent also accept other ways to satisfy fines without monetary payment, although alternatives are less common in large systems, where just 37 percent offer such approaches; they may also have a broader range in fees. Options include activities such as food drives, participation in programs in which patrons—usually children or teens—can "read down" their fines, or acceptance of donations representing a portion of the fine. Money collected is allocated to the general fund in about three-quarters of libraries. According to Jenny Paxson of Webster Public Library in New York, "The money we get from fines helps us through the year. We use it as operating costs." This suggests that fines are built into the local governmental budgeting process. However, some libraries maintain authority over the use of the funds; the Central Arkansas Library System, for instance, donated a week's worth of fine collections to help those affected by the extreme flooding in Louisiana earlier that summer (Dixon 2017, 42). For MPL, fines are transferred to the city general fund, and this,

as will be discussed later, was an issue for the patrons who participated in the focus groups about fines.

For many library staff members, the process of collecting and enforcing fines can prove stressful. The time spent collecting these fees can use up hundreds of dollars in staff time from library budgets. Some libraries have found that the effort expended to enforce fines is not worth the small amount charged per day (Dixon 2017, 42). As an example, San Diego Public Library reported that the library collects approximately \$675,000 each year in overdue fines. When evaluating the staff time in each location to charge and accept the fine, the daily deposit process, the review by the account clerk in the library business office, and the review of that work by yet another account clerk, the conservative total cost of collecting the fines was \$1,054,576 (Jones 2017, 5). This total is also not insignificant.

For MPL, the reinvestigation of circulation policies and procedures emerged from a new strategic plan that emphasized service to underserved populations and targeted “lapsed users”—those who had been library users and had stopped coming. As more data became available to inform the discussion, the questions turned to barriers to use and the elimination of charges for overdue materials.

Milwaukee Public Library

MPL is located in the city of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, within Milwaukee County on the western shore of Lake Michigan. It was established in 1878, and in 1898 the central library moved to its current location, which it shared with the Milwaukee Public Museum until the mid-1960s. The main library is located on the east side of the city, in the central downtown area. Twelve neighborhood libraries expand library services across the city. According to the 2018 annual report, the operating budget was \$23,206,425. The library had a circulation of 2,456,559 items and received 1,809,317 visits to physical locations. The report indicates that three out of four city residents have an MPL library card (MPL 2018). Per the Institute of Museum and Library Services, MPL employs 88.75 librarians and a total of 315.25 staff (Institute of Museum and Library Services 2018).

MPL serves a city growing in diversity. Milwaukee is the largest city in the state of Wisconsin, with a population of approximately 592,000 in 2018; the population has fluctuated between a high of 628,000 in 1990 to a low of 572,400 in 1999 (U.S. Census Bureau 2020). According to the “Milwaukee Citywide Policy Plan” (Department of City Development 2010), it is a minority-majority city, with 88 percent of Milwaukee County’s minority population. While all minority populations have increased, the Hispanic population has grown markedly, increasing by 8.8 percent over a period of twenty-five years to total 15.1 percent of the population (15).

At the time of this research, the city librarian was Paula Kiely and the deputy library director for public services was Joan Johnson. The public service area manager for the Central Library was Rachel Arndt. Milwaukee

Public is a member of the Milwaukee County Federated Library System (MCFLS), which includes fourteen suburban libraries as members as well as MPL. The MCFLS system director is Steve Heser. System offices are located on the lower level of the MPL central building. Kiely, Johnson, Arndt, and Heser composed the workgroup that launched the research initiative tied to the MPL fine forgiveness program.

Registration and Fine Program

Circulation policies in use at MPL are available at the MPL website, http://www.mpl.org/about/library_policies.php. The policies related to patrons' use of library resources include the following:

- Circulation policies and additional fees and charges
- Fee dispute form (also in Spanish)
- Overdue fines and fees policy
- Schedule of overdue fines, maximum charges, fee thresholds, and grace periods

Generally, materials circulate for three weeks, with the exception of CDs and DVDs, which circulate for one week. A maximum of one hundred items may be held by a regular patron at one time, of which twenty may be general media (CDs, DVDs, records, videocassettes, etc.); "non-regular" patrons include new borrowers and temporary residents. Two patron-initiated renewals are allowed on most materials, and the overdue charge is fifteen cents per day. There is a three-day grace period, but on the fourth day all fines accrued from the due date become active. The maximum fine is five dollars per item, which, while a low cap, also triggers blocks, or a restriction of library privileges, against a patron's card in the system. Fines do not accrue on print materials owned by MPL for seniors or for youth / young adults. The five-dollar maximum applies across the board to all MCFLS members, but other MPL policies do not, which creates confusion for patrons and potential conflicts with staff (MPL 2019, 2).

The description of fines and fees details other related charges, the most significant for the participants in the focus groups being first the charges for lost books, which is the cost of the replacement of the item plus a five-dollar processing fee, and then the referral to the collection agency for materials deemed long overdue/lost, which incurs a fifteen-dollar processing fee to recuperate the cost to the library of the use of the agency. Even if the items are returned, the processing fees are not refunded to the patron (MPL 2019, 2).

The fine forgiveness campaign was authorized by the MPL Board of Trustees and ran from September 26 to October 9, 2016. Staff were trained to emphasize positive interactions with the patrons and to support data collection. MCFLS was involved in the planning of the initiative to ensure the data set would be valid and supportive of evaluation. There

were ten thousand participants, and MPL forgave over \$360,000 in fines. What raised questions for the administrative team was the high rate, and quick incidents, of relapse—patrons with fines forgiven who were quickly blocked again. Were fines the problem? Working with the data in the cohort, the initial investigation sought to answer the following questions:

- How many patrons with no fines had been blocked again?
- When did these patrons become blocked again?
- How did the data compare with the larger Milwaukee library user population?

Research Project

The MPL/SOIS research team pursued a two-pronged strategy to identify the elements that most affected patrons' use of library materials and in particular the timely return of circulated items to the library. When patrons came into an MPL location to have their fines forgiven, each transaction within the Sierra ILS for the waived fine was tagged with a specific payment type set up in advance to identify them as part of the program. As fines were waived, staff were instructed to apply that special payment type to keep track of the transactions within the Sierra database.

After the fine forgiveness period ended in late 2016, the MPL/MCFLS team collected the patron numbers associated with these tagged transactions and created the initial cohort. These were patrons who had participated in the fine forgiveness initiative and had many of their fines waived. The team then narrowed their scope even further to focus on only those patrons who had *all* of their fines waived, leaving a zero balance on their library account. This group was free and clear of any fines and started anew with a blank slate.

Using the Sierra ILS "Create Lists" tool, the team was able to follow these patrons and collect data on their returns behaviors by using fields tracking their last active circulation date (the date they last used their card for any library-related purpose) and others that identified if/when they were blocked from library resources a second time. This subgroup of patrons who became blocked again—831 in total—became the focus of inquiry for the research team.

When compared to the broader population of library users experiencing blocks within ninety days of registration for a card, the percentage was almost 2 percent higher. This also raised concerns about why those who had made the effort to clear their records would become blocked again so quickly. The concerns led to a commitment to investigating the why.

The team pursued a two-stage approach engaging the patrons in discussion of the values that informed their library use practices. The first stage was a telephone survey, which produced a low but not insignificant number of participants, and then the focus groups. One focus group was

drawn from those who were blocked but remained clear; the other group was drawn from those who were blocked again. The first attempt to meet with the reblocked group was unsuccessful, so there was a follow-up attempt.

The research project was conducted with the approval of the Institutional Review Board of the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee. Student reviewers had received ethical training in subject privacy. At no point was anyone interested in what materials were in circulation, nor were participants in any of the research initiatives required to provide any personal information. However, during the course of discussion, some personal information was revealed and was incorporated into the analysis only if it was of significant value and generalizable. Responses remained anonymized outside the project team. Focus group participants were fully informed of their rights as members of a research initiative before the beginning of each of their discussions, and each participant signed notifications of the intended use of the information gathered from the meeting. Participants in the focus groups received a gift card.

METHODOLOGY: TELEPHONE SURVEY

Using the database created from the relapsed cohort, library staff sent a notice to the patron three weeks before the telephone survey began and advised them that the library would call for follow-up information about their library experience. Shengang Wang, a doctoral student with the School of Information Studies, built the survey out using the free version of the tool SurveyMonkey, which compiled the results as they were entered by the interviewer. The script of questions is available as appendix A.

The information about the blocked cohort extracted from this database included names, addresses, phone numbers, and email addresses. Some de-duping and interpretation was required. One of the telephone interviewers observed, “Names in call lists were frequently difficult to discern: patrons to call were listed variably (in caps) as ‘surname_givename’ and ‘surname_givename__midinitial,’ while their parents’ names (if/when applicable) were recorded as ‘surname_givename’ and ‘givename_surname.’ Call lists would have been better prepared without all text in capital letters, and with a consistent naming function” (Teel 2018). As the lists were drawn from the database, this observation highlights the value of consistency in data entry.

Calls were made during working hours to the numbers on the list. There were cases where the numbers were nonfunctional or duplicates. Each interviewer had a spreadsheet of potential contacts, and they worked through the list in order, from top to bottom. Each patron record was reviewed to determine its current status. If items had been returned or paid for, there was a variance in question 2 to account for the change in status.

If contact with the patron was not made, the date and time of the call were recorded on the working spreadsheet and the interviewer moved onto the next contact. If contact was made, the caller moved to a scripted greeting, then worked their way through the Qualtrics survey, recorded the survey information, and checked the entry off the list by entering the total fine in the designated area. For the second attempt to the same number, callers recorded the date and time of the call again on the spreadsheet. With this call, they left a message: “This is Milwaukee Public Library calling you regarding a customer survey. We will attempt to call you again.” During any contact with a patron, if a patron declined to participate, the caller thanked them for their participation, ended the survey, noted the completed call on the spreadsheet, and saved the incomplete survey.

The survey process was supported with an escalation process as well. If a patron wished to speak with a manager for more information regarding the survey, they could be transferred to the public service area manager to leave a message; she would then return their call. If a patron had general library card questions or concerns, they would be transferred to the Registration Desk after the survey was completed. If a patron had specific questions related to fines, fees, collection agency charges, or other specifics of past-due accounts, they would be transferred to the circulation supervisor or the public service area manager.

FINDINGS: TELEPHONE SURVEY

The survey netted forty-six responses, with most patrons answering all questions. While the total number may be small compared to the larger potential data set, the consistency of the responses suggests an internal reliability. Forty out of forty-five responses to the inquiry for an explanation of the delay in returning items boiled down to “I forgot.” One of the interviewers reported, “Regarding sub-question 1 (delay in returning items): every single person I spoke with reported they’d just simply forgotten to return their items—whether in conjunction with another option or singularly” (Teel 2018).

When asked about the charge of fifteen cents per day for overdue print materials, thirty-six of forty-six found the charge to be fair, and eight found the charge to be too high. For DVDs, there was more variance, as twenty-three found the fee of a dollar per day fair, but eighteen found it to be too high. MPL subsequently modified the DVD circulation policies and standardized the DVD fines at fifteen cents a day. Asked about the ability to renew items two times, thirty-seven thought it was fair, and five found it to be not enough time. Forty-four out of forty-six patrons affirmed a need for their family to have access to the library. For a clear majority of the patrons surveyed, it appeared the library policies were not the dominant issue, but access to the library mattered.

While the findings of the survey suggested that the circulation policies themselves were not barriers to use, it failed to indicate what could help the administration address their intention of ensuring uninterrupted use of the library by their patrons. The next step in addressing that value was focus groups drawn from the relapsed patrons and also, as a control group, those who did not become blocked again after their fines were waived. The findings from the focus group discussions introduce new values to consider for MPL than the survey and, by extension, may indicate alternative paths of patron service for other libraries.

METHODOLOGY: THE FOCUS GROUPS

MPL mailed invitations to the members of the reblocked group to participate in the research. The research team incentivized participation in the focus groups with offers of food for the dinner hour, child care for those adults with children who needed it, a waiver of any outstanding fines, and fifteen-dollar gift cards. The focus group meetings were held in the Martin Luther King branch library, which had sufficient meeting space, parking, and access to public transportation.

Of the letters mailed to the reblocked group, which the research team tagged as group 1, 30 percent were returned, and no one showed on the initial date indicated in the letter. MPL also sent invitations to members of a control group—those patrons who had been blocked at one point, cleared their fines, and did not return to blocked status. The library offered the same incentives. Those letters received thirty-eight positive responses, with an indication of significant child care need. In actuality, only fourteen adults showed, but child care was required for twelve children; some older children were present for the discussion. Child care was provided by the Office of Early Childhood Initiatives of the City of Milwaukee, which hired former Milwaukee Public School staff to provide the service. The cost to the library was \$210. The meal offering was pizza, salad, water, and cookies for dessert and was served buffet style. Patrons were provided with a privacy notice related to the research project and were asked to sign the notice, indicating that they understood the level of risk involved, which was minimal (see appendix B).

The discussions were digitally recorded with the understanding of the participants. Recorders were placed at the northern and southern ends of the table to ensure all voices were heard. These recordings provided the direct quotations used in the findings of the focus groups.

After the meeting with focus group 2—those who had cleared fines and maintained unblocked status—the MPL administrative team decided to try again with that group that became blocked, and so contact was reinitiated. As a result, three people indicated they would attend the meeting, and those people did end up participating in a discussion. For purposes of differentiation, this was group 3.

FINDINGS: FOCUS GROUPS

Focus groups are semistructured discussions with the anticipated outcome that the group dynamic will steer discussion to those areas that indicate shared concerns. While group 1 never materialized for this project, group 2 was quite animated and engaged all the behaviors that a researcher hopes will emerge in such a discussion: stimulation as energy in the room increased, which led to “snowballing” around various ideas, and then a synergy triggering a broader scope of consideration around the topics that had been raised for discussion (Verma 2014).

During the seventy minutes the members of the community engaged each other, and the researcher, in a discussion of what the library meant to them, three main themes emerged:

The collection agency and the fees associated with it were viewed as a barrier between the patrons and the library.

The patrons requested more communication with staff and from the administration.

Patrons expressed concerns with “who benefits” from the library fines, and a particular concern that funding was being used to subsidize city initiatives like the Brewers baseball stadium, a controversial topic in Milwaukee.

Other topics also emerged in group 2, such as charging the full price for a lost used book, the charges to teachers using teacher cards when materials are borrowed from another non-MPL library, and the privacy rights—or not—of children. For group 3, communication was also an issue, along with the cost of DVD fines and the variance of service hours. Both groups indicated a disinclination to affirm the elimination of fines altogether, expressing concern that such a policy would be exploited and materials would not be returned for the use of others. One woman in group 3 did observe, however, that eliminating fines might be a good thing “for young mothers”; others in the group concurred.

The discussion with group 2 began with an inquiry about how the participants had learned of the fine forgiveness program initially. One reported that she heard about it on the radio, two others that they learned of it at their libraries. One wondered if the fine forgiveness occurred on a set schedule, and another participant answered, “No, it’s been like ten years since the last time they did it.”

Asked what kept them from coming to the library, one participant noted, “I didn’t come to the library because the fines racked up on a missing book my grandchild checked out on my card. Once I found the book and brought it back, they worked with me to reduce the fines.” Another shared that “fines on videotapes kept me from the library.” There was a consensus that the fines on DVDs were high, and they were satisfied to learn that the fine structure for DVDs had been reduced as a result of the

findings of the telephone survey. But some participants reported that the collection agency kept them from using the library.

The Collection Agency

Like many public libraries, MPL makes use of a collection agency to either stimulate the return of materials or recover the cost of lost materials. The agency is Unique Management Systems (UMS); the referral for collection costs the library nine dollars per item. Certain fees for patrons also attach to the use of the agency. The MPL “overdue fines and fees” policy states,

Cardholder accounts are turned over to a collection agency approximately sixty days after an item’s due date. In order to recover the cost of referral, a \$15.00 processing fee is added to the cardholder’s account. This fee cannot be waived.

When library items are returned after referral to the collection agency, overdue fines, processing fees, and the collection agency referral fee must be paid in order to fully clear the account. (https://www.mpl.org/about/library_policies.php)

Sixty days after the due date appears to be a short time frame for the incurrence of even further fees, but the library reports it collects approximately \$30,000 a year through the agency. Neither is this an insignificant amount. However, the patrons expressed strong resistance to the use of the collection agency. When asked what keeps people from paying fines, a number responded that it was the addition of the collection agency fees. They indicated the time frame was too tight, and the inflexibility of a “\$25” fee too high (the fee is actually fifteen dollars). One participant observed, “Collection fees? Nah, we’re not payin’ that. Collection fees hit back burner.” He also added that the collection fees indicated there was “no rush now.”

Given the policy about fines and fees once an external agency is involved, there was no longer any opportunity to work directly with the library on negotiating fines and fees. A young mother in group 3 observed, “Milwaukee really works with you around your fines . . . whereas [suburban library] doesn’t.” Another asked, “Could someone put in volunteer hours to pay off fines? Not just kids but adults too,” while another participant suggested, “I could come in to help people with their resumes . . . I do that every day. They could tap into people’s skills. Especially for young families . . . it would help out.” Members of group 2 also suggested a formal strategy for working off fines as a way for children to learn responsibility. The desire for room to negotiate a resolution to the accumulation of fines was preferred to the imposition of an external authority such as the collection agency.

Communication

As the discussion about the ability to “work off” fines in lieu of referral to a collection agency demonstrates, the ability to communicate needs

and negotiate resolutions was paramount to these two groups. The members also expressed a desire for more communication from the library. They found the reminder notices—the “to be due” announcement—a plus. Group 2 discussed the issue of the digital divide, noting electronic notices, emails, and text messages are good, but not everyone is tech savvy, and suggested a print “opt in.” One participant from group 3 shared that she never received anything in the mail, and then also noted that she was listed two different ways in the library database. Given that 30 percent of the notices to this group were returned by the post office, relocation is an issue in maintaining a relationship, and not one the library can address independently.

However, given the digital environment, other participants wondered if it were not possible for the library to send out weekly alerts when materials are past due. One patron lauded the value of the library phone app, County Cat, and spent some time explaining it to other participants who were unaware of the service. They also engaged on the topic of parental notifications of their children’s materials: was there a way to notify parents when their children had materials due? They were willing to forgo knowledge of the exact titles for simple notifications of materials due.

Group 2 also discussed the value of a “Did you know?” email alert that could explain library services available to patrons, as not everyone is aware of all library policies and how they are implemented on a day-to-day basis. They suggested that the notifications did not have to be long, just focused on one thing, to help keep library users informed about library practices. Some felt that would be more useful to them than a library newsletter.

Members of both group 2 and group 3 expressed an appreciation for the opportunity to discuss their perspectives in the focus group. They wondered if more group discussions might not be possible on a regular basis. One participant from group 2 observed, “Communication—we all should work as a team—kids, parents, library.”

Fines and Where They Go

Members of neither group 2 nor group 3 expressed significant support for the idea of eliminating fines on materials. One participant observed, “I think it’s necessary to have fines because people will take advantage of that,” and another concurred, stating that fines are “very necessary—an incentive to return books.” A member of group 3 felt, “Well, they [library] have to get revenue somehow.” But the question of who benefitted from the fines was an issue.

One participant asked, “Does the money go to the city?” If so, she felt there should be no fines. However, other patrons felt differently. “If the money is going back to the library, then I can be an advocate [for fines],” stated one. Another suggested, “I’m happy to pay a fine—sort of—but are these fees associated with Brewers stadium? If the fines are going to the

library” he was willing to continue them. Patrons recognized that the fines were generally of their own making; one participant observed, “I would have them [books] in my car and drive around with them for five days.”

Patrons did express a need for a sense of latitude in addressing the fines. “Fines may be a barrier if you don’t have much money . . . could the fines go away if the book comes back?” one asked. Someone observed, “We want to encourage children to appreciate and value what we have in the library . . . value the book.” Then, another participant, recognizing that children can sometimes trigger the blocks on patron cards, suggested, “Work with us while we work with them [children],” thereby again inviting the library into relationship with the patron and their family. Everyone in group 2 agreed that teachers should have far more latitude in the circulation and return of materials they used for teaching.

DISCUSSION

The results of the telephone survey appeared to indicate that library patrons were not unduly concerned about library circulation policies, except the policies related to the borrowing of DVDs. The largest number of fines within the fine forgiveness cohort did attach to the DVD format—6,695 out of 14,527 total, as of January 2018 (Public Library Association 2019). This concern held true within the focus group discussions, and MPL addressed this finding quickly. Print books were, however, a close second, at 6,479 overdues.

Within the focus groups, discussions of policies were more nuanced. First, when asked what kept group participants from using the library, they readily acknowledged that accumulated fines and a blocked status as a result prevented them from visiting, thereby affirming those analyses that argue fines are a barrier to use. However, the patrons’ own solutions did not focus on the elimination of fines as much as a loosening of policies, elimination of certain practices, and more relational strategies to advance issue resolution.

Patrons in both group 2 and group 3 shared that the circulation period of three weeks was too short. “The shorter loan periods aren’t always a good match with my lifestyle,” said a patron from group 2. They indicated an interest in automatic renewals, which are not currently in place at MPL. As observed earlier, they were also interested in flexibility in addressing issues of overdues. Group 2 was adamant about the elimination of the collection firm, as once this external agency was involved, negotiation with the library about how to resolve issues around outstanding fines and fees was off the table. Patrons view the collection agency as an interloper in their relationship with the library, and that relationship was significant to the participants of the focus groups.

These findings are limited to one city, but they do suggest a broader scope of investigation when evaluating strategies for enhanced public ser-

vices. As these patrons suggested, active engagement matters. The participants in this project also indicated that fines are indeed a challenge to address. They acknowledged that those who face financial hardship should not also suffer hardship through the policies of the library. However, their suggestions proposed new policies that would soften the standard practices that drive fines and fees up and focus on strategies that enable the return of the materials. These patrons believed that they had some ideas about how to ensure that and hoped the library would see them as partners in that process.

This project suggests that the issue is not just overdue fines. Eliminating fines may be of value, but that does not address the issue of the impact of fees, which had more impact in Milwaukee than the fines actually did. Patrons wanted to know where the money went—who benefitted from the fines? The participants indicated interest in “reminder” notifications about circulation policies and practices that could serve to keep the library fresh in their minds, so they would be less likely “to forget” to return the materials.

What is most relevant about this research project, however, is what the librarians learned from asking the patrons what they thought. It was different than the inquiries shaped by the librarians for the telephone survey. While the survey did provide some information about fines on media, it was the relational process—the focus groups—that stimulated the broader themes that can actually inform revisions of policies and subsequent practices. The open discourse allowed the patrons to orient the engagement toward the topics they considered more significant, and so created a broader scope of potential strategies for the library to consider.

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APPENDIX A

MPL telephone survey script

Greeting:

Hello, I'm calling from Milwaukee Public Library. We sent you a letter a few weeks ago about a survey we are working on. Are you willing to take a # minute survey to help the library understand our customers better?

If no: Thank you for your time. Record the contact on the list.

If yes: Thank you, I will record your answers and no personal information will be shared.

Proceed to question 1.

Questions

1. When you came to the library in 2016 for fine forgiveness, what was the main reason you wanted your card activated?
2. What library items or services did you use when your card was re-activated?
3. What prevented you from returning items?
4. How frequently would you use the library if there were no fines on overdue items once they are returned?
 - 1—Never
 - 2—Sometimes
 - 3—Often
 - 4—Always
 - 5—Would not impact my decision to use the library.
5. How frequently would you use the library if there were charges for items that were never returned?

- 1—Never
 2—Sometimes
 3—Often
 4—Always
 5—Would not impact my decision to use the library.
6. What would make it easier for you to use the library?
7. Are you willing to participate in a group discussion about library fines and fees?
1. *If yes:* We will mark that on our list and contact you in MONTH with the details.
 2. *If no:* thank you for your time today.

Closing:

Thank you for your participation in the survey. Your answers will remain anonymous. You will be entered into a drawing for a \$100 gas card. If you win, the library will contact you after MONTH DAY. Can we give you a call at this number?

If no answer, leave message:

Hello, I am calling on behalf of Milwaukee Public Library with a survey. We will attempt to contact you again.

Additional questions we might want to know but are very open ended. *Is there a way to make these questions into drop down menus?*

- What can the library do to help users return items?
- What is the easiest way for you to return library items?
- What do you think is most useful thing that the library offers?

APPENDIX B

Focus group privacy agreement

This is a notice concerning your privacy rights and assurances related to the Milwaukee Public Library / UWM School of Information Studies research project underway here. There is minimal risk to the participants engaging in this research project. We want to ensure that you understand that:

- The discussion will be recorded only for research purposes.
 - The recording will be protected in a private office.
 - Once the relevant information is recovered from the recording, the recording will be destroyed.
 - No transcript of the recording will be retained, however, some statements made during the discussion may be used as indicators of a patron's perceptions of the library within the report of the research.
 - MPL will not receive a copy of the recording.

- No personal information will be used as a result of this research, and no one will have the ability to identify any statements made by any one person.
- No one is required to answer any question.
- You have the right to leave at any time, however, gift cards will be available at the end of the discussion.

By signing below, you indicate that you understand your privacy rights as expressed above.

Signature

Date