

# I Meant to Get it Back on Time!

Countering Bias, Promoting Equity, and Improving  
Customer Service through Qualitative  
Fine Data Analysis

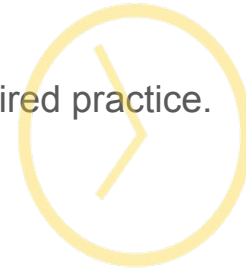
**Lisa Levesque & Kelly Kimberley**



**Ryerson University**  
**Library**

# Agenda

1. Who we are and why we did this study
  - a. Equity
  - b. Levying library fines on low circulating items is an expired practice.
  - c. Customer service
2. Methodology
  - a. Bias
  - b. Method
3. Results
  - a. Reasons for incurring fines
  - b. Academic reasons
  - c. “People” and “Health” as expensive reasons
  - d. Financial difficulty
4. Discussion



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# Lisa Levesque, MLIS, Western U, 2016

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# Equity

Equity is a major focus of Ryerson University Library. At the Library, we have increasingly been focusing on [assessment projects](#) that relate to equity.

In 2018, we worked together on a quantitative study of fine data which included a literature review. From this review we learned that [the cost of fines unequally affect individuals](#) (Dixon, 2017), [are a deterrent to Library use](#) (Morehart, 2018), and [the widely held view among academic librarians that fines are effective at prompting the return of resources lacks evidence](#) (Reed, Blackburn & Sifton, 2014). A decision was made from a place of equity, financial sense, and pragmatism to adjust fine policies.

# Customer Service



Source: [TheDigitalArtist](#), via [pixabay](#)

- Fines are a contentious issue for both library workers and patrons.
- Fines are **time consuming** for staff to process (Reed, Blackburn & Sifton, 2014; Wilson, Frazier, & Harter, 2015; Mosley, 2008) and an **unenjoyable** task.
- “Overall, there is overwhelming support for the fines and loans changes among staff... I just think circulation staff all over the country would have a **collective sigh of relief**. Because it was the worst part of the job, phoning overdues or telling people their privileges have been suspended and yet, back in the day that was our only weapon” (Reed, Blackburn & Sifton, 2014).

- Fines are **old fashioned** (Sifton, 2009) and the **moralizing and pedantic** persona they suggest does not fit with the current role of the library in enabling learning (Morehart, 2018).



Seinfeld Season 3, Episode 5 "The Library" Bookman sketch  
[https://youtu.be/ zePQavforA](https://youtu.be/zePQavforA)

# Levying Library Fines on Low Circulating Items is an Expired Practice.



Source: [Free-Photos](#), via [pixabay](#)

# Customer Service

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**LIS Grievances**

@lis\_grievances



I'll waive every fine forever, on the condition that I never have to hear another sob story about why checking your email is impossible

8:30 PM · Aug 14, 2019 · [LIS.Grievances](#)

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# Addressing Bias

Reducing bias is a major concern for all assessment activities and a particular priority here given the emotional context of fines, the desire we had to confirm our prior decisions, and our preconceptions as librarian-researchers.

How can we draw on our shared expertise without prejudicing the results?

Relevant types of bias:

- Confirmation bias
- Bias caused by personal and professional experience
- Bias caused by the emotional overtones of fines and our relationships with patrons

# Methods: Our Data Source

This study analyzed data that had been collected through the library website [fine appeal form](#). This data source is rich but not without its flaws.

A data set of 404 appeals (50 appeals from 2016, 2017, and 2018 and 257 appeals from 2019) were analyzed using qualitative coding.



Image Credit: [Archives of Ontario](https://gph.is/2mV9PAL)  
<https://gph.is/2mV9PAL>

# Methods: Bias Reduction

A codebook was developed collaboratively and shared between the three researchers that included reoccurring and standalone themes. To reduce bias, the three researchers:

- discussed their biases regarding fine data before commencing work
- used the constant comparative method to develop the codebook
- and, divided the work evenly between the three of them before regrouping to compare observations

Research question: Why do patrons incur fines?

# Methods: Nuts and Bolts

All of the software used was free or has a free version.

[Google Sheets](#) was used for the data collection, initial clean up, and collaborative coding.

[OpenRefine](#) was used to shape the data.

[Tableau](#) was used for data visualization.

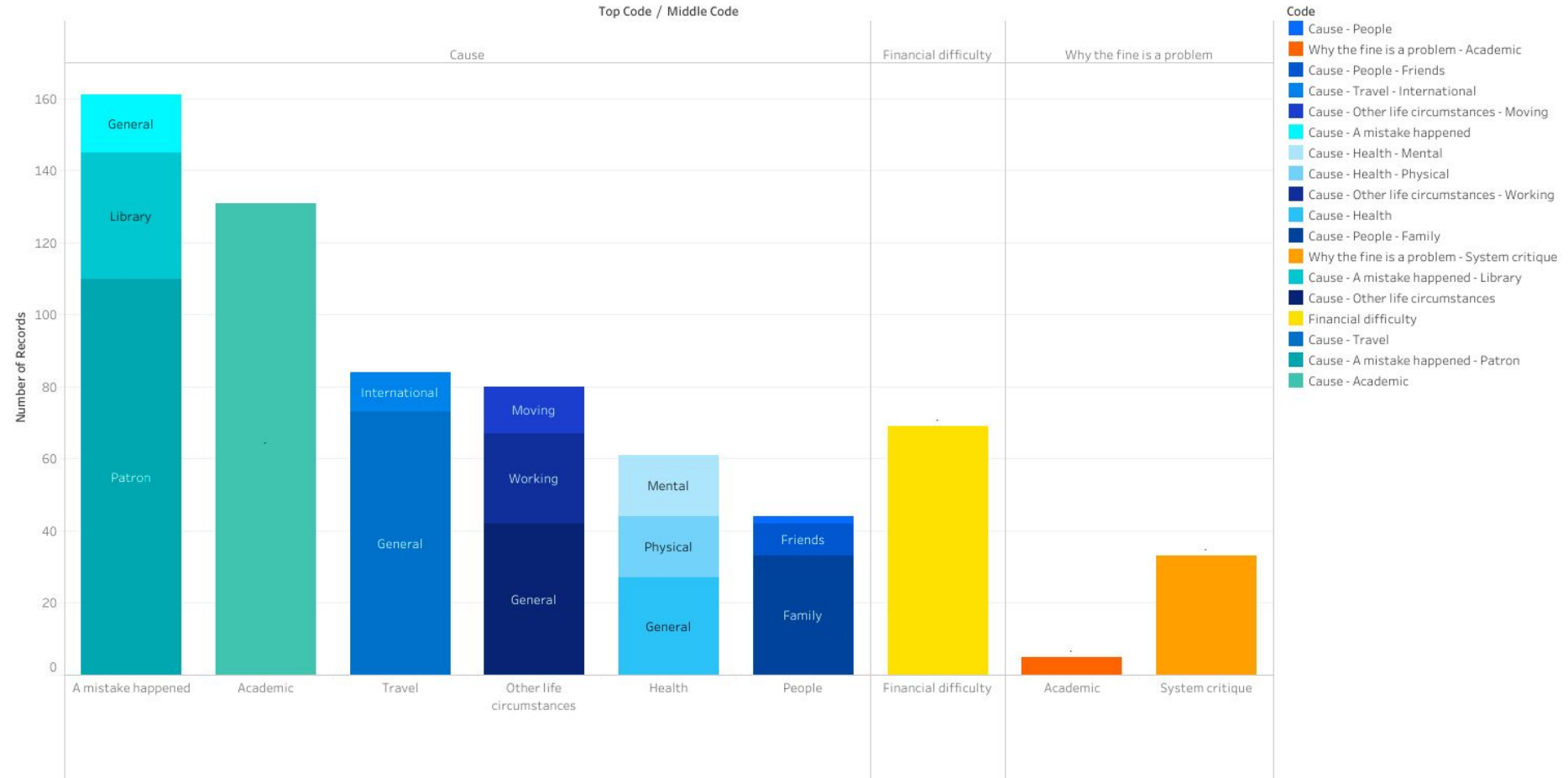


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Source: [geralt](#), via [pixabay](#)

# Fine Appeals for all Years by Code Category



# Shifting Priorities

- **Fine appeals exist on a spectrum.** Our patrons are people with full lives beyond just their academic lives.
  - “I saw my friend struggling with something. I started asking her about what was wrong. And thus began our conversation that lasted for few hours.” (coded as “People”)
- During analysis, the metaphor of **“bandwidth”** was discussed as an explanation for why patrons may incur fines when they are overwhelmed.
  - eg. A loss of bandwidth might mean that an overwhelmed patron forgets their own calculator on the day of an exam, and then forgets to return their borrowed calculator.
  - A patron wrote about dealing with both personal physical health issues and the mental health of a family member, appealing on the basis that “I am hoping that you can understand that sometimes life hits all at once and I am trying to handle the mess that it has created.” (coded as “Health”)

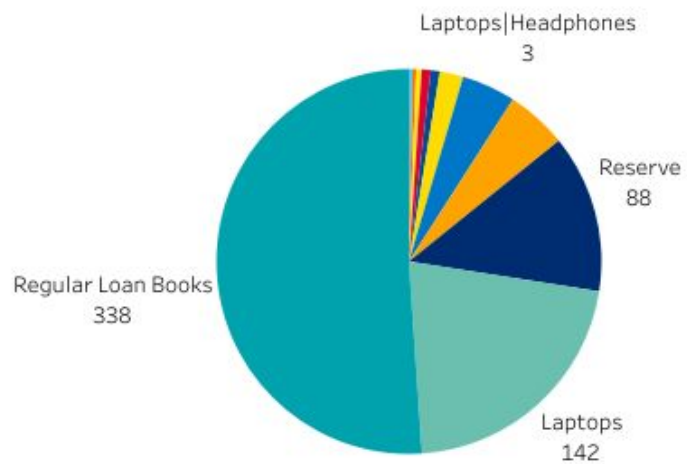
# Academic

The second most common reason found in our study that patrons incur fines is due to “academic” reasons. Patrons whose comments were coded as “academic” told us that they were busy using the materials, could not return them because of scheduling, or because they were too focused on their work to remember or prioritize the fine.

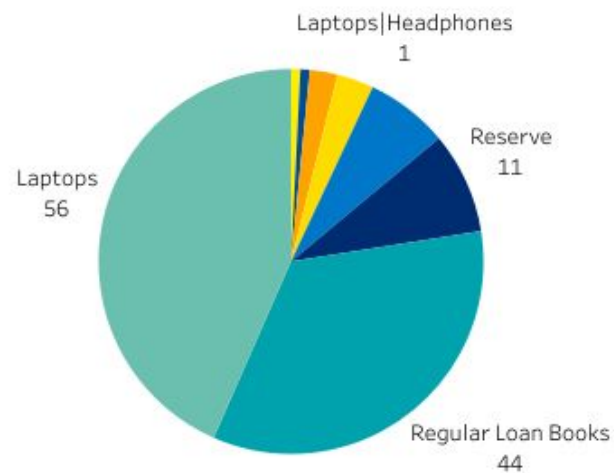
The purpose of Ryerson University Library, like all academic libraries, is to enable academic research. As most patrons are engaged in academic work, it makes sense that the fines that they incur are inevitably related. However, it may be that charging fines detracts from a patron’s academic pursuits. Critics of library fines have argued that [collecting fines limits access to library resources](#) and in this way is contrary to the purpose of a library (McMenemy, 2015; Reed, Blackburn & Sifton, 2014). Wilson (2014) provides evidence that [students are motivated to return library resources by assignment due dates rather than by fines](#). This study similarly shows that patrons are not returning items due to academic reasons.

# Fine Appeals by Resource Type

Resources: All Codes



Resources: Academic



# Financial Difficulty

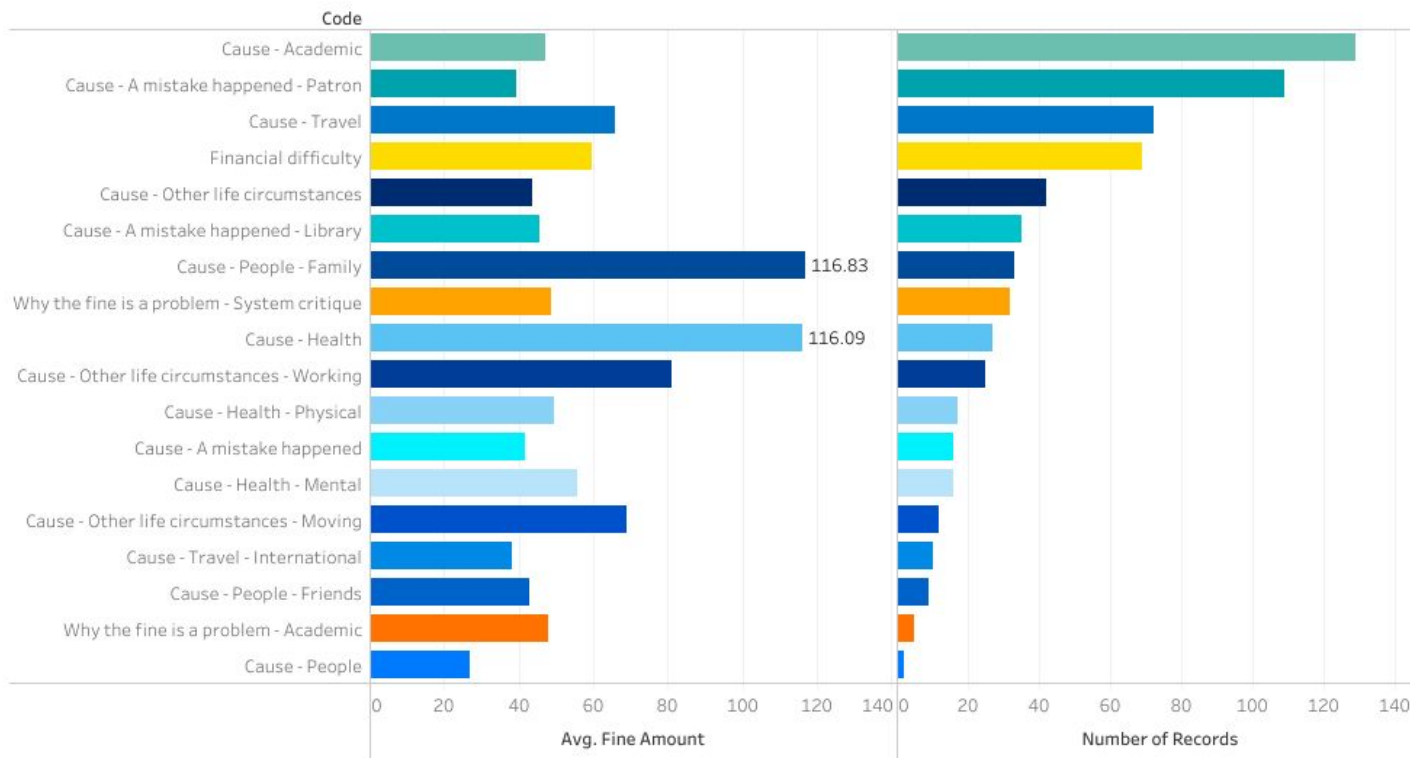
Some patrons connected their financial situation to student life more generally, citing the **high cost of tuition, program costs, OSAP delays, and that they only worked part-time or were unemployed**. One patron wrote that **“being a student is already financially tough”** without the added expense of fines. Several patrons mentioned that specific programs and program materials are expensive. Others mentioned other major expenses in their life as affecting their ability to pay the fine, including city rent and childcare.

In comparing the comments coded as “financial difficulty” to all other coded comments, there was not a major difference in average amount. **Expense is relative**, and one patron wrote that “at this time even \$10 is a lot coming out of my account.”

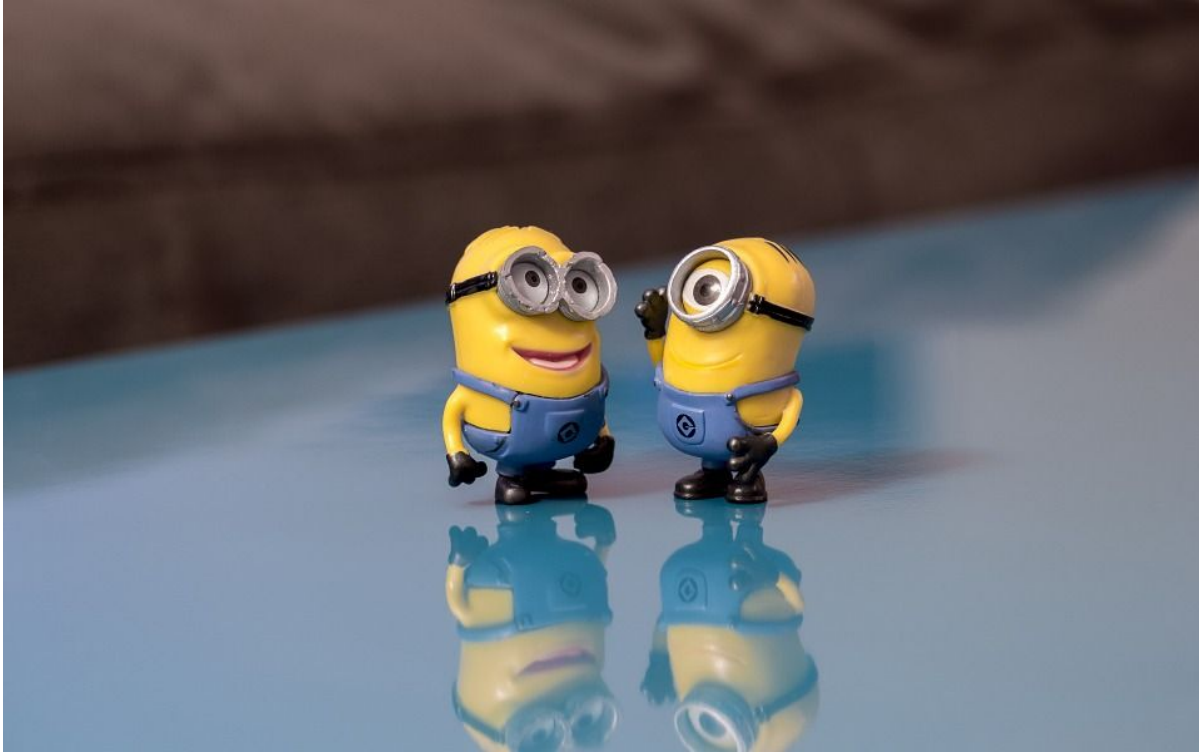
	Data Coded for “Financial Difficulty”	All Coded Data Excluding “Financial Difficulty”
Average	\$59.70	\$45.56
Median	\$40.00	\$21.00
Min	\$5.00	\$0.50
Max	\$346.00	\$1,000.00
Count	69	336

# Some fines are more expensive than others

Average Fine Cost by Code and Frequency



# Discussion



Source: [leovalente](#), via [pixabay](#)

# Bibliography

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Source: [geralt](#), via [pixabay](#)

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