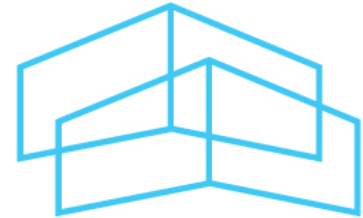


I Meant to Get it Back on Time!

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

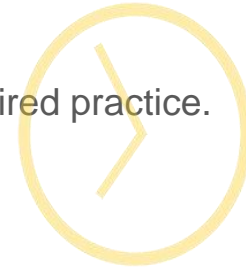
2. Methodology

- 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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Source: [Wokandapix](#), via [pixabay](#)

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 affects 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>

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



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

Customer Service



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](#)

4 Retweets **46** Likes

Addressing Bias

Reducing bias is a major concern for all assessment activities and a particular priority here given the emotional context of fines, our desire to resist simply confirming 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: Bias Reduction

A codebook was developed collaboratively and shared. To reduce bias, we three researchers:

- discussed our 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 us before regrouping to compare observations

Denscombe, M. (2014). "Grounded theory." In *The good research guide: For small-scale social research projects* (5th ed., pp. 106-121). Open University Press.

Research questions

Why do patrons appeal fines?

Why do patrons incur fines?

Our Data Source

Weaknesses

Fine appeals are a small subset of fine incursions.

All students who incurred fines had an equal opportunity to appeal a fine in theory. In practice this likely differed.

There is the potential tendency for exaggeration.

Strengths

Fine appeals relate directly to fine incursions.

This rich data source is readily available as it is already collected through the [fine appeal form](#). Secondary data analysis reduces survey fatigue.

It is clear from the difficult and personal details disclosed to the Library through the Fines Appeal Form that patrons wish for us to hear them and in some cases adjust our policies.



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

Methods: Nuts and Bolts

All of the software is freely available.

[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.

We chose freely available software so that other libraries could easily run a version of this study using their own on hand appeal data.

Data Nuts and Bolts

A data set of 404 appeals were analyzed using qualitative coding, resulting in 671 coded data points.

2016 - 50 appeals

2017 - 50 appeals

2018 - 50 appeals

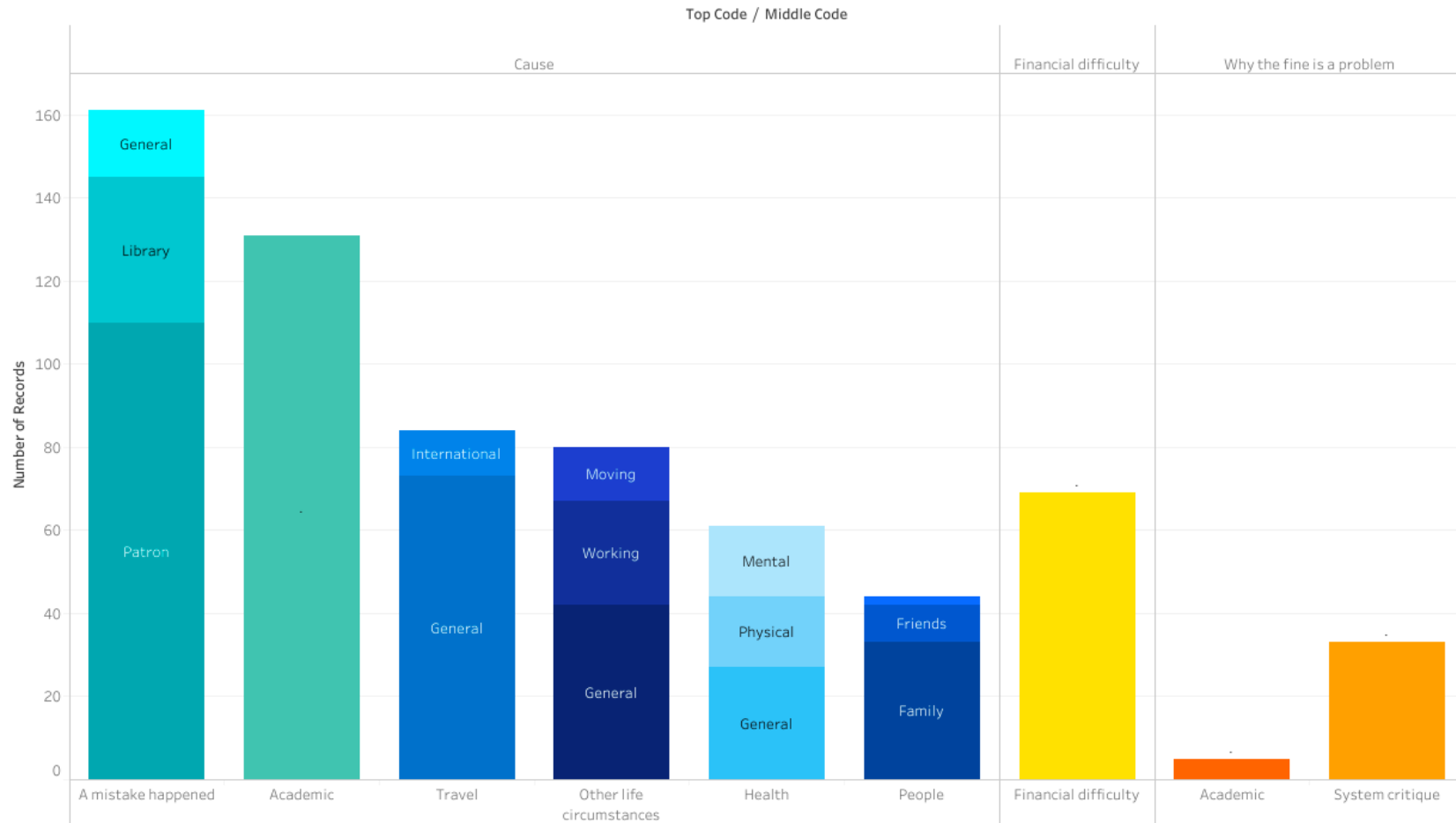
2019 - 257 appeals

Sets of data from different years were used to provide a historic comparison. Did the data change from year to year? It did not.



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

Fine Appeals for all Years by Code Category



Codebook

TopCode	Sub1	Sub2	Definitions and inclusion/exclusions	Examples
Cause (Why they got the fine)	People	Family Friends	Includes any mention of friends or family Includes deaths of loved ones	"I was dealing with helping a close friend who was suffering from depression and school throughout the semester." "I have recently experienced heavy stress with news of illness in my family" "for the fall term I had a newborn and it was hard to come to campus."
	Health	Physical Mental	Includes any health issues for the patron or their people. These can be counted separately if listed separately. Mental health includes stress	"I had to return to [city 4 hours away] for a family medical emergency." "My mental health was negatively impacted due to a medical condition flare up."

Shifting Priorities

- **Fine appeals exist on a spectrum.** Our patrons are people with full lives beyond just their academic lives.
- During analysis, the metaphor of “**bandwidth**” was discussed as an explanation for why patrons may incur fines when they are overwhelmed.
 - 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.**”

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.

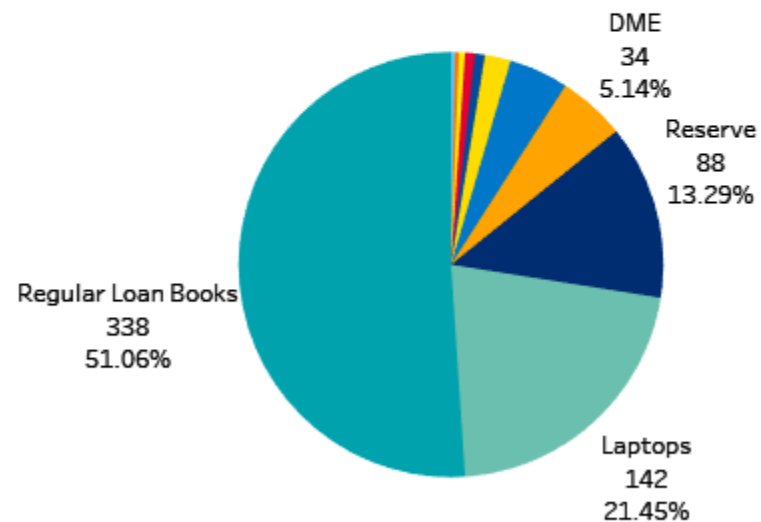
Example: “I lost track of the time, I was working on my assignment. I am so sorry.”

Academic

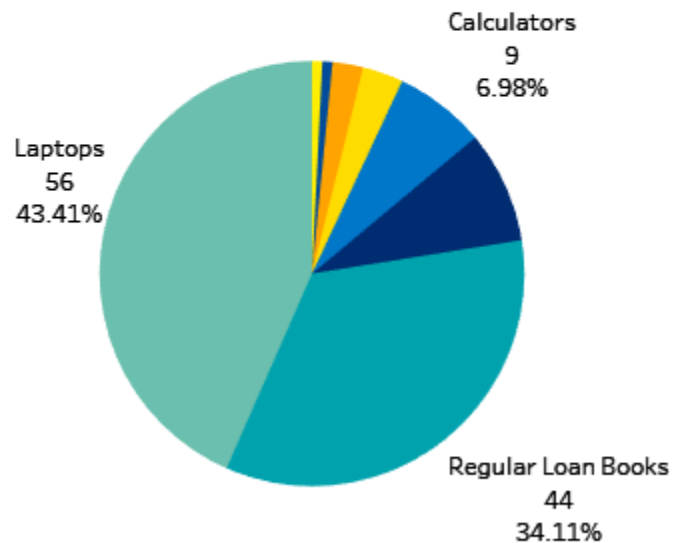
The purpose of Ryerson University Library, like all academic libraries, is to enable academic research. As most patrons are engaged in academic work, it makes sense that the fines that they incur are inevitably related. However, it may be that charging fines detracts from a patron's academic pursuits. 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.

Financial Difficulty

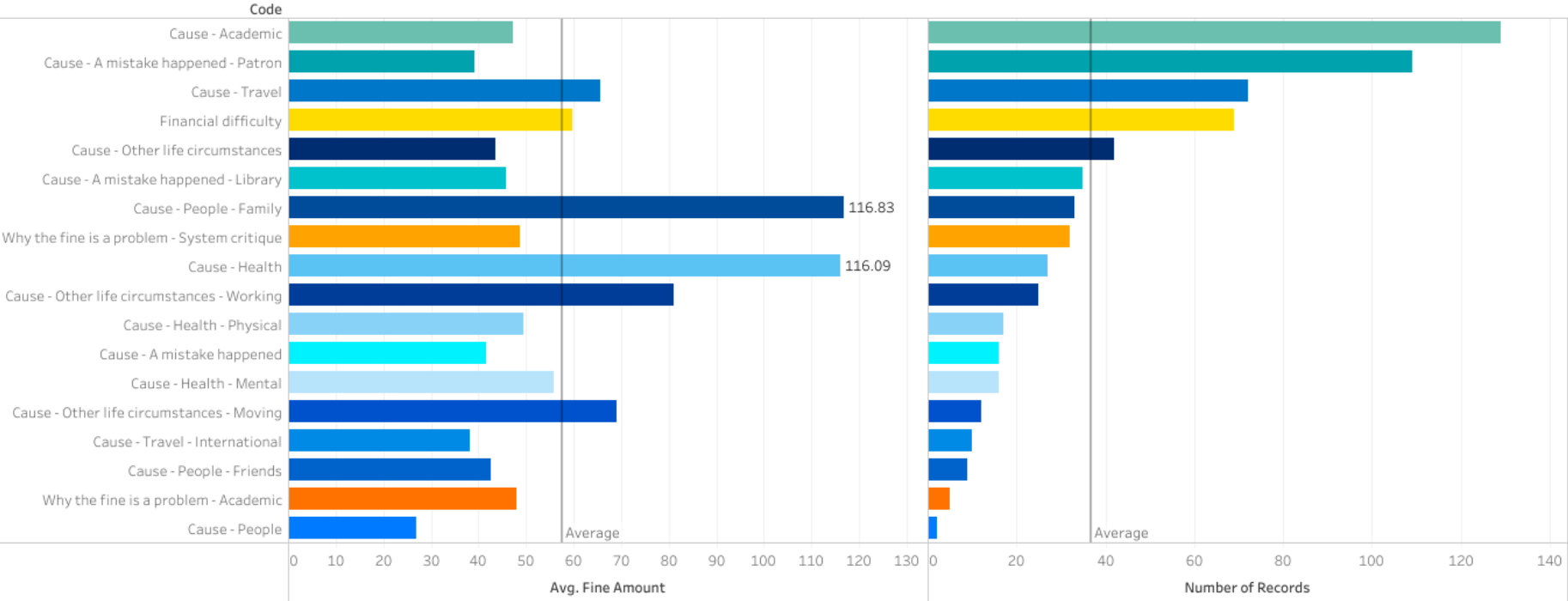
In comparing the comments coded as “financial difficulty” to all other coded comments, there was not a major difference in average amount.

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



Reflections Following Fine Policy Changes

- Fines on regular overdue monographs were eliminated during the Fall of 2019
- Buy in from staff
- Gratitude from patrons
- Navigating system changes to support the policy.

Reflections on this study during COVID-19

- Working off site
- Deferring fines in light of the bigger picture
- Envisioning new spaces and new services
- Equity - keep listening

Discussion



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

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

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