

eliminating late fines

IMPROVING ACCESS TO YOUR LIBRARY



SAINT PAUL
PUBLIC LIBRARY

SEPTEMBER 2018

The background image shows the interior of a large, modern library. The ceiling features exposed wooden beams and several pendant lights. Large, multi-paned windows on the right side allow natural light to fill the space. In the foreground, several wooden tables are arranged, with people sitting at them, engaged in reading or study. Bookshelves filled with books line the walls. The overall atmosphere is quiet and studious.

**public libraries are the people's
university and we need to make
sure they are accessible to everyone.**

- ELLIOT WARREN, BERKELEY PUBLIC LIBRARY

project background

- For years, Saint Paul Public Library staff have been talking about eliminating late fines as a way to make the library more accessible to everyone in Saint Paul.
- In 2018, Library staff led 6+ months of research on this topic, including interviews with community members.
- Based on this research, the Library and Mayor Carter have proposed eliminating late fines.

project findings



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history of efforts to increase access

- + Fine-free children's materials
- + No fines on Library Go cards
- + Read-down option



19%

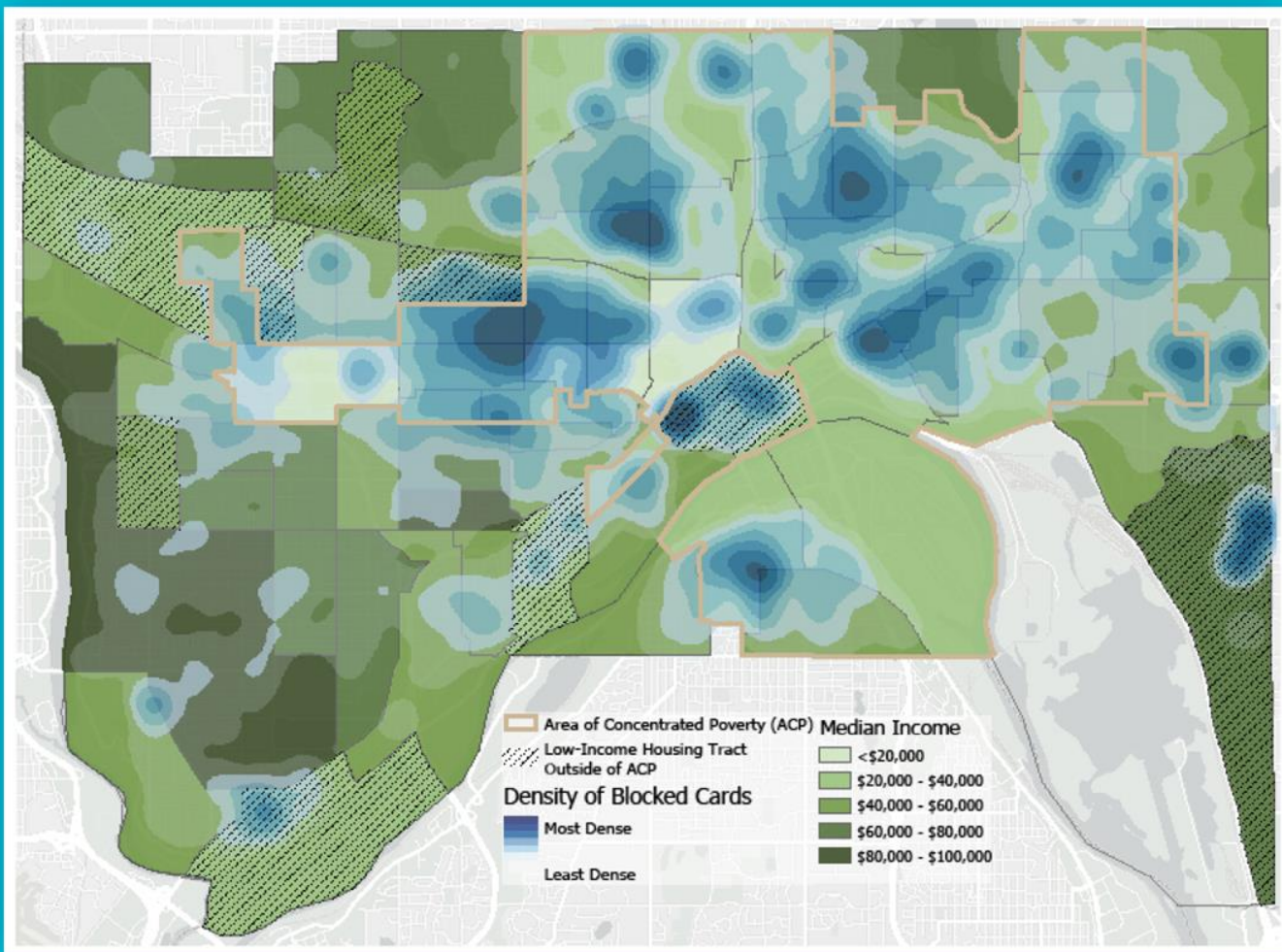
Even after those efforts, **nearly 1 in 5 cardholders are currently blocked.**

That's 19% or 51,000 people.



34%

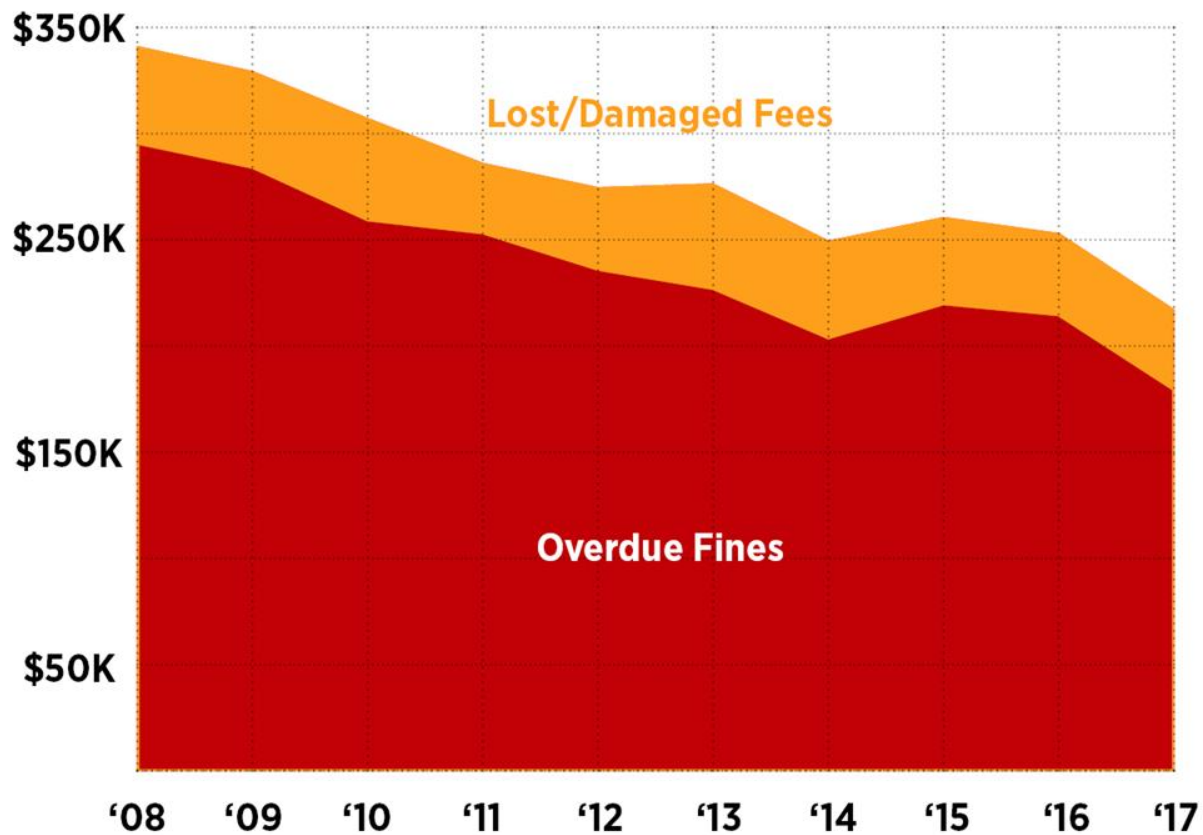
**Cards registered at
Rondo are blocked.**



Percentages of blocked cards are higher in economically-challenged neighborhoods.



Children's materials are returned at similar rates to other materials, even though they don't have fines.



**Fines are not
a sustainable
form of revenue
for the Library
budget.**

lessons learned from other libraries




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Library systems have a range of options, from incremental to transformational, when seeking to increase access and remove barriers.



**Libraries
across the
country are
going fine-free.**



“We’ve shut off access to the library when one of our staunchest principles is trying to provide the widest access that we can.”

- PATRICK LOSINSKI, COLUMBUS PUBLIC LIBRARY CEO

late fines are not effective



“The scant research on the value and impact of library fines and fees does not indicate a clear benefit of administering these policies, and they may be costly to enforce.”

- Removing Barriers to Access (Colorado State Library white paper)


collecting fines is expensive.

If we estimate that Saint Paul Public Library frontline staff spend 10% of their time on fine-related transactions, it would amount to over 12,000 hours and \$250,000 in staff time.

in fine-free libraries, people still return items.

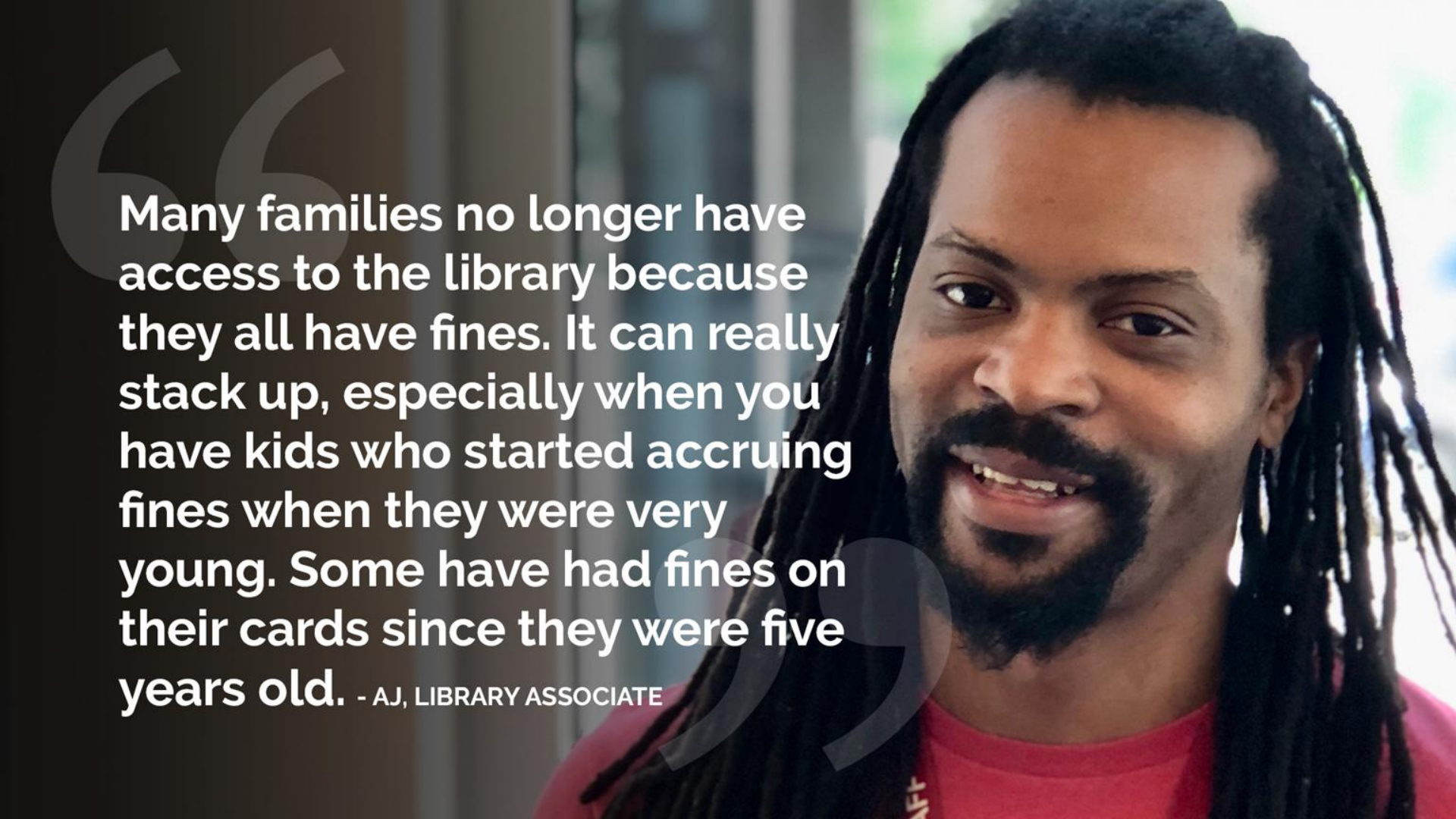
Accounts are blocked from checking out once items have been billed. Library users are still expected to pay for lost items and damaged items.

what do library users & staff say?




It's a difficult conversation for us. You can tell the person has a gut-sinking feeling when faced with fines. We are service-oriented. Fines prevent people from wanting to use the Library and create an unfriendly environment.

- JENNY, LIBRARY ASSOCIATE



Many families no longer have access to the library because they all have fines. It can really stack up, especially when you have kids who started accruing fines when they were very young. Some have had fines on their cards since they were five years old. - AJ, LIBRARY ASSOCIATE



Having worked at all library branches, I've noticed a stark difference in the number of people unable to check out materials due to fines at different locations. Fines are an equity issue preventing access to the library.

- PANG, COMMUNITY SERVICES COORDINATOR

A close-up portrait of a Black woman with dark hair, smiling warmly. She is wearing a blue top and a necklace with small, sparkling stones. A large, semi-transparent quote graphic is overlaid on the left side of the image, featuring a large opening quotation mark and the text of the quote in white. The background is slightly blurred, showing what appears to be an indoor setting with a yellow door.

“

**Transportation and mobility
can sometimes become an
issue. For our family, fines can
add up very quickly because
of these mobility issues.**

- RICE STREET LIBRARY PATRON

**“My child (who has disabilities)
racked up fines on my library card
years ago. After paying them a
few times, I gave up this last time
and stopped checking things out.
I miss the library.”**

**“[Stop] charging late fees -
institut[e] a system that is more
effective and does not drive the
people who need libraries most
away through shame or inability
to pay.”**

“I really love the library and it makes me sad that I haven’t been able to make use of it because of this policy on fines.”

“You are an important part of our community. Keep up the good work. The city should fund the libraries to keep fees low so all families have access.”

our public service promise:

The Saint Paul Public Library
belongs to the people of Saint Paul.

resources

[Removing Barriers to Access, Colorado Department of Education \(2016\)](#)

[Imagining Fine-Free Future, American Libraries Magazine \(2018\)](#)

[Doing Fine\(s\)?, Denver Public Library \(2018\)](#)

[Long Overdue: Why public libraries are finally eliminating the late-return fine, Slate \(2017\)](#)

[More libraries are going fine-free. That's good for everyone, Washington Post \(2018\)](#)

Find additional articles and research at sppl.org/fine-free.