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The System Librarian's Guide to Going Fine Free

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Context

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Chicago Public Library

- Large, urban library with 81 locations
- Over 1,000 employees
 - 734 full time
 - 309 part time
- Has never employed a collection agency to recover fines and fees



Fine Revenue

Year	Amount
2014	\$1,210,718
2015	\$1,236,866
2016	\$895,603
2017	\$998,934
2018	\$895,046

While a small (less than 1%) and decreasing part of CPL's budget, fine revenue was still a significant amount of money.

Reducing Barriers: Fine Amnesties

Over the past decade, CPL has held two amnesties to help patrons negatively impacted by library fines. In each case, fines (but not replacement costs) were waived across the board.

- [Blue Moon](#) (August 2012) This was CPL's first amnesty in 20 years.
- [Welcome Home](#) (February 2016)

Reducing Barriers: Policy Changes

Over the past decade, CPL has also changed policies to help patrons impacted by library fines.

- Patrons allowed to use public computers even if they owe fines (2012)
- Patrons allowed to use online resources (but not ebooks) even if they owe more than the fine threshold (2014)
- Fine threshold raised from \$1 to \$10 (2014)

Making the Case

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The bold reforms we're taking to make the Chicago Public Library system fine-free ... will end the regressive practices disproportionately impacting those who can least afford it, ensure every Chicagoan can utilize our city's services and resources, and eliminate the cycles of debt and generational poverty because of a few mistakes.

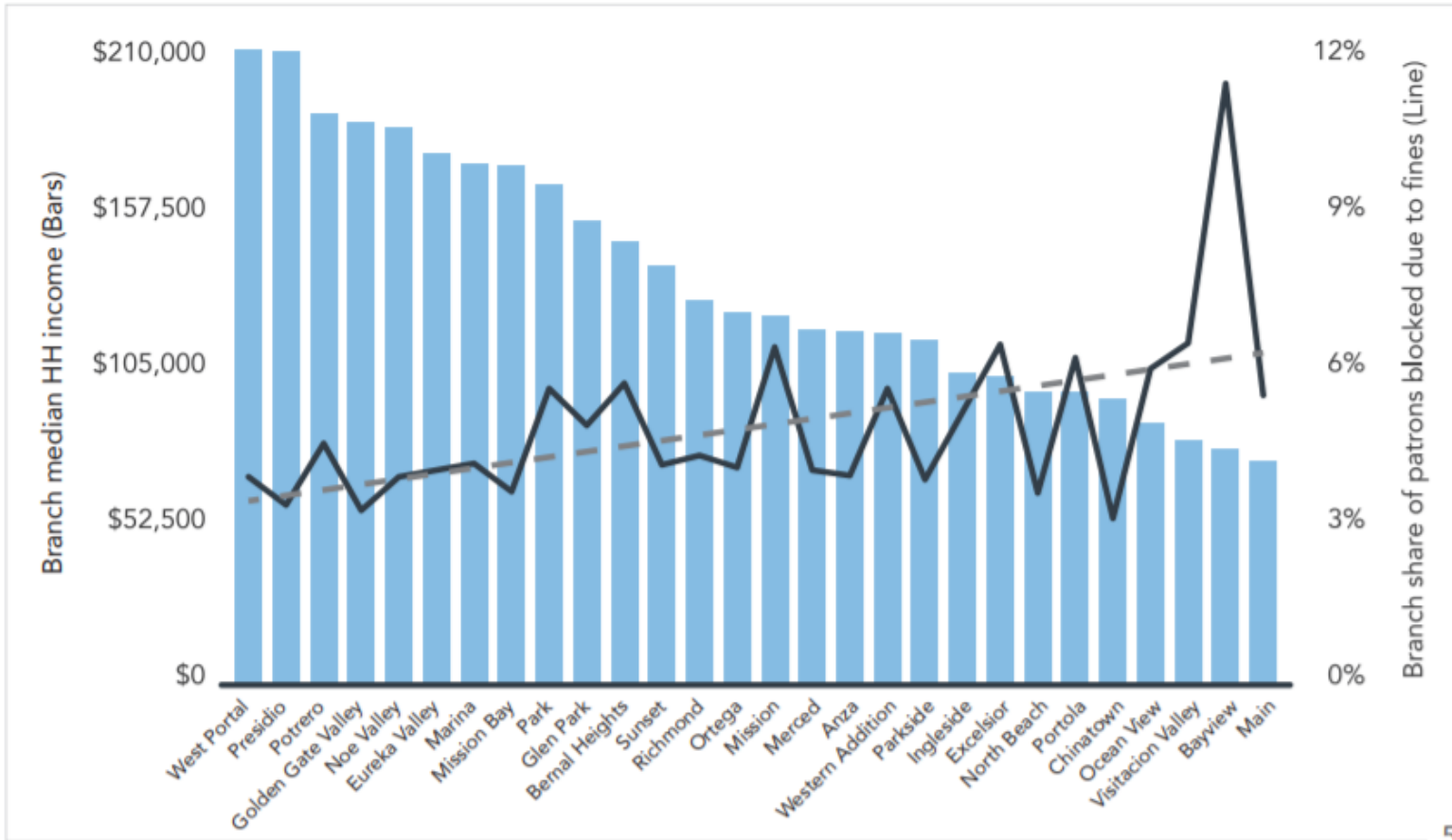
-- Mayor Lori E Lightfoot



Do fines affect all patrons equally?

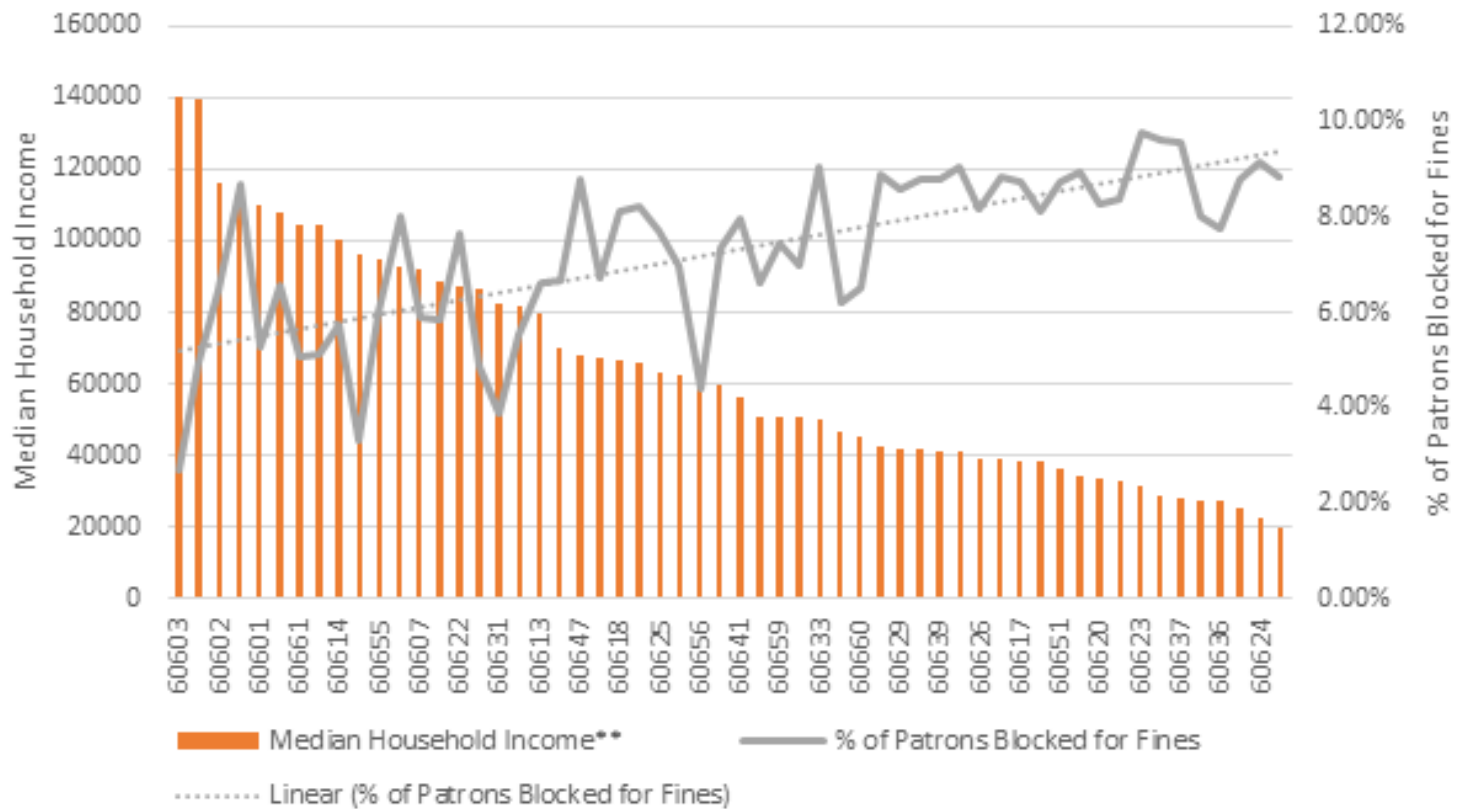
Data gathered by CPL and other libraries demonstrate that patrons in **lower income** neighborhoods are more likely to be blocked from library services due to fines than patrons in higher income neighborhoods.

In locations with lower average household income, larger shares of SFPL adult cardholders are blocked due to fines



Source: [Long Overdue: Eliminating Fines on Overdue Materials to Improve Access to San Francisco Public Library](https://sfpl.org/sites/default/files/2020-02/Fine-Free-Report011719.pdf), 2019. <https://sfpl.org/sites/default/files/2020-02/Fine-Free-Report011719.pdf>

Patrons in Lower-Income ZIP Codes are More Likely to Be Blocked Due to Fines



Source: Chicago Public Library

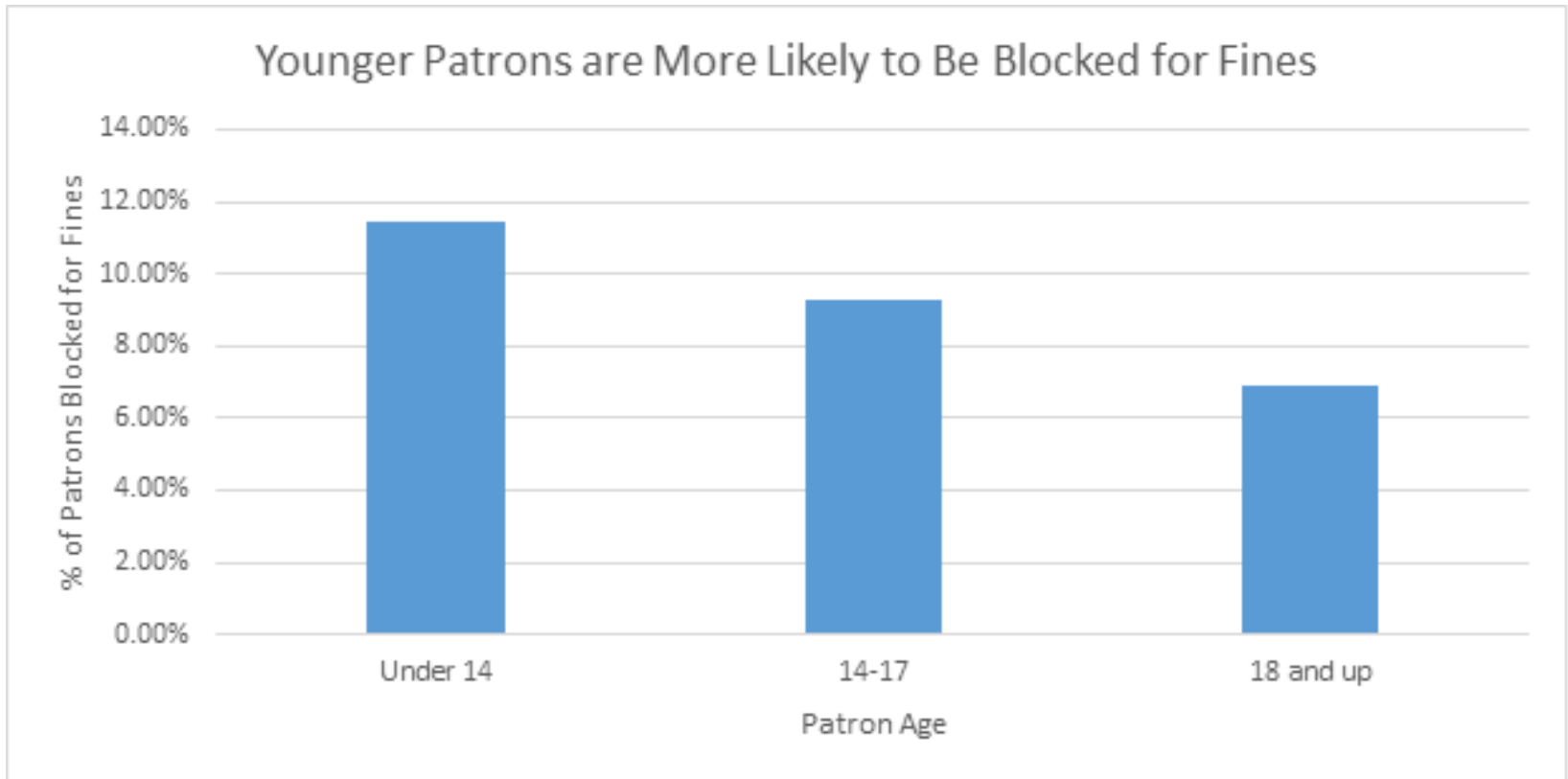


Do fines affect all patrons equally?

Data gathered by CPL and other libraries demonstrate that **children** are more likely to be blocked from library services due to fines than adult patrons.



Younger Patrons are More Likely to Be Blocked for Fines



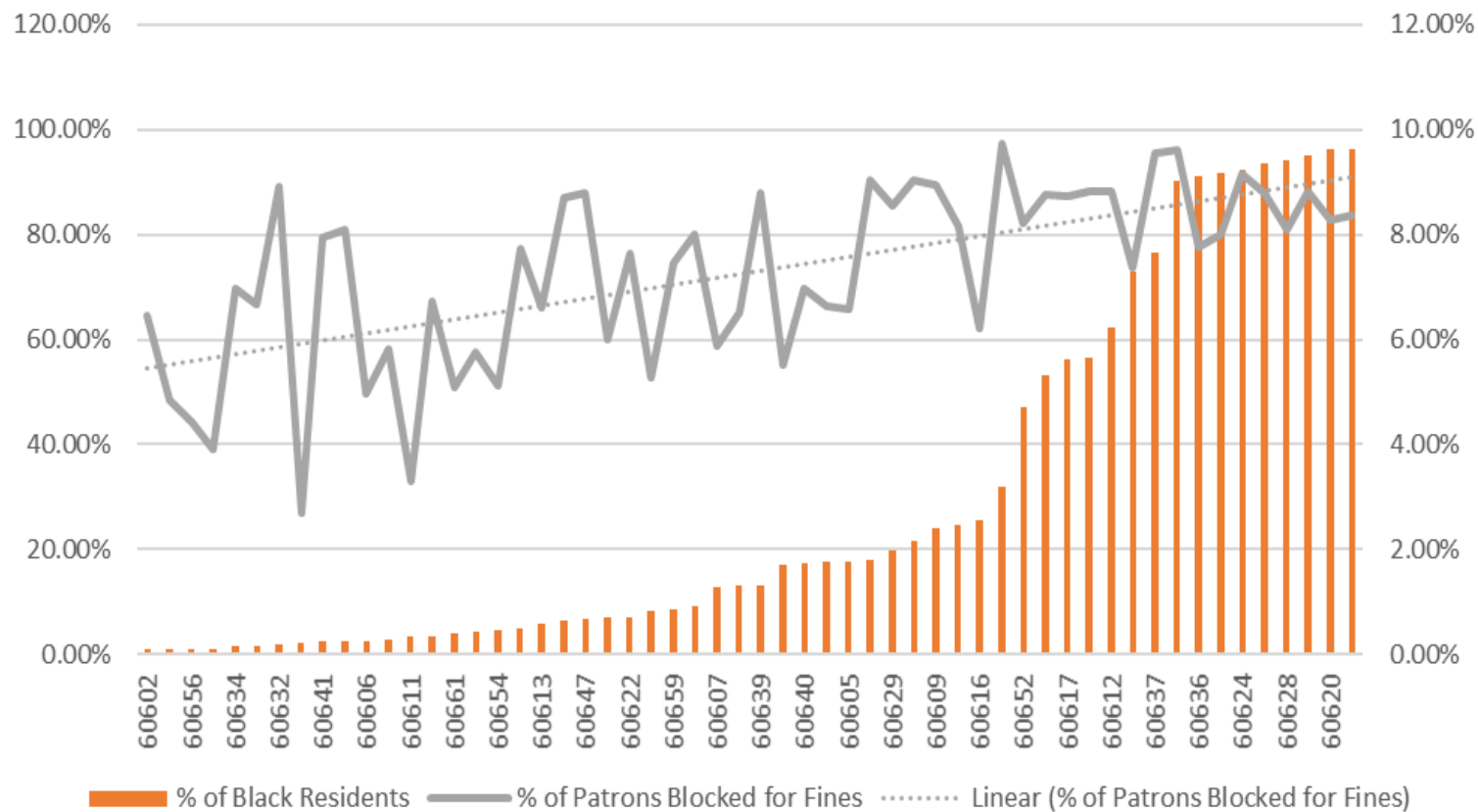
Source: Chicago Public Library



Do fines affect all patrons equally?

Data gathered by CPL and other libraries demonstrate that patrons in **African-American** neighborhoods are more likely to be blocked from library services due to fines than patrons in other neighborhoods.

Patrons Living in Mostly African-American Communities Are More Likely to be Blocked for Fines



Source: Chicago Public Library



Be Careful (and Clear) Who You're Counting

All patrons in your database? Or only those active within a specific timeframe?

If you purge patrons without fines but don't purge patrons with them, be sure that the dates you pick for your sample don't overlap with previous purges.

Be Careful (and Clear) Who You're Counting

All blocked patrons (including those blocked for unreturned materials)? Or patrons blocked for fines only?

Will questions arise if you report that 20,000 of your patrons are blocked in a pre-fine free report but then say that 10,000 patrons were unblocked in post-fine free publicity?

Making It Real

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Policy Changes

Before

After

Fines on all materials.

No fines on materials except for museum passes and ILL items. Past fines waived.

Patron billed for the item at 180 days.

Patron billed for the item at 7 days.

Patron blocked if they owe more than \$10.

Patron blocked if they owe more than \$30.

Auto-Renew

- CPL chose to turn this on to help drive home the fact that other patrons were waiting for popular items.
- We did this understanding that it would make it impossible to measure changes in on-time return rates except for hold material.

Changes to Notices

- Overdue notices at 1 and 4 days
- Bill notice at 7 days
- Fine notice at 7 days after going over max fine threshold (generally 7 days after billing)

From: notices@chicagopubliclibrary.org
Sent: Saturday, September 16, 2017 6:26 AM
To: Paul Keith
Subject: Library material due soon

Dear Test Cardenas-Oliver,

Material you have checked out is due soon. Please return this material or renew it online:
<https://www.chipublib.org/renew>

Titles coming due are:

Due Date: 9/18/2017
Title: ILSPROD test record
Format: Book
Renewals Remaining: 15

Due Date: 9/18/2017
Title: ILSPROD test record
Format: Book
Renewals Remaining: 15

Pre-Fine Free
Coming Due Notice

From: Chicago Public Library <notices@chicagopubliclibrary.org>
Sent: Thursday, September 19, 2019 8:28 AM
To: Paul Keith; paul.keith1@gmail.com
Subject: An important message about material you have out

Dear Test Card,

The following items are due soon and could not be renewed at the time this message was sent:

Due on: 9/21/2019

Title: ILSPROD test record 4

Format: Book

Note: Another patron has placed this item on hold.

Due on: 9/21/2019

Title: Kids Museum Passport National Museum of Puerto Rican Arts & Culture.

Format: Book

Note: Museum passes cannot be renewed.

CPL invested a lot of time updating the Reminder Almost Overdue template to highlight why items didn't renew.

We have renewed the following titles for you.

New Due Date: 10/12/2019

Title: ILSPROD test record

Format: Book

Renewals Remaining: 14

Post-Fine Free
Coming Due Notice
(with Auto-Renew)

From: notices@chicagopubliclibrary.org
Sent: Saturday, September 16, 2017 6:26 AM
To: Paul Keith; paul.keith1@gmail.com
Subject: Overdue library materials: 1st notice

Dear Test Card,

The following items checked out to your account are overdue. Please return these items as soon as possible or renew them online: <https://www.chipublib.org/renew>

Title: ILSPROD test record
Author: Doe, Jane.
Format: Hardcover Book
Due Date: 9/1/2017
Checked Out From: Harold Washington Library Center

Title: ILSPROD test record
Author: Doe, Jane.
Format: Hardcover Book
Due Date: 9/1/2017
Checked Out From: Harold Washington Library Center

Pre-Fine Free 1st
Overdue Notice

From: Chicago Public Library <notices@chicagopubliclibrary.org>
Sent: Tuesday, October 1, 2019 7:25 AM
To: Paul Keith
Subject: Overdue library materials: 1st notice

Dear Test Card,

The following titles checked out to your account are overdue:

Title: ILSPROD test record 2.
Format: Hardcover Book
Due on: 9/29/2019

We were unable to renew these items for you a few days before their due date, but they may be eligible for renewal now. Check online at <https://www.chipublib.org/renew>

CPL updated the Overdue template to move as much explanatory text as possible after the list of titles.

Post-Fine Free 1st
Overdue Notice

From: Chicago Public Library <notices@chicagopubliclibrary.org>
Sent: Tuesday, October 1, 2019 7:25 AM
To: Paul Keith
Subject: Overdue library materials: 2nd notice

Dear Test Card,

The following titles checked out to your account are overdue:

Title: ILSPROD test record 2.
Format: DVD
Due on: 9/26/2019

We were unable to renew these items for you a few days before their due date, but they may be eligible for renewal now. Check online at <https://www.chipublib.org/renew>

If these items are not returned or renewed by 10/4/2019, you will be billed for their replacement, and your library privileges may be suspended.

CPL updated the Overdue template to add additional language to the 2nd Overdue Notice to help patrons understand that they'd be charged for the material in three days.

Post-Fine Free 2nd Overdue Notice

From: Chicago Public Library <notices@chicagopubliclibrary.org>
Sent: Tuesday, October 1, 2019 7:25 AM
To: Paul Keith; paul.keith1@gmail.com
Subject: Your account has been charged for overdue material

Dear Test Card,

The replacement cost for each overdue title below has been charged to your account. As charges to your account exceed \$30, your account has been suspended.

Return these titles to have the replacement costs removed from your account. Please contact the library if you've already returned any of these titles or if you have questions about other charges below.

Title: ILSPROD test record 3: the subtitle makes this title rather long
Format: DVD
Due on: 09/23/2019
Replacement cost: \$35.00
Overdue fine: n/a

CPL moved the first paragraph to the Bill template so that the second sentence is only shown to patrons who have exceeded the \$30 fine threshold.

chicagopubliclib.org/fees

Post-Fine Free Bill

From: Chicago Public Library <notices@chicagopubliclibrary.org>
Sent: Sunday, October 6, 2019 6:44 AM
To: Paul Keith
Subject: Outstanding charges to your library account

Dear Test Card,

Charges to your library account exceed \$30, and your account has been suspended.

A list of charges to your account follows. Fees with a reason of “Replacement Cost” will be cleared when you return the items.

Title: ILSPROD test record 3: the subtitle makes this title rather long

Date fee charged: 09/28/2019

Reason: Replacement Cost

Amount: \$35.00

CPL was concerned about having no communication with patrons after their items were 7 days overdue (when the bill was issued), so we set up the fine notice as essentially a “bill reminder,” having it go out 7 days after the patron exceeded \$30 in fees.

Post-Fine Free Fine Notice

Database Snapshot

CPL made an abbreviated copy of our patron database to help us track the number of blocked patrons that used the library again after we went fine free.



Database Snapshot

We included in our abbreviated copy:

- Patron ID
- Barcode
- Expiration Date

Later, we discovered that it would have been helpful to capture patrons' last activity date.



Waiving Old Fines

As part of the transition, CPL decided to waive fines (except fines for museum passes and ILL) accumulated from the last amnesty. We contracted with III to do this work.



Waiving Old Fines

What we got right:

- We asked ILL to waive the fines rather than delete them so we'd have a record of what was waived.
- We asked ILL to add a free text note to every waived fine to make it easier to identify these later.

Waving Old Fines

What we got wrong:

- We didn't realize that Ill would update the last activity date when waiving the fines.
- We should have specified a location for the db analyst to use when waiving the fines.

Making Items Fine Free

- Since CPL only went mostly fine free, we had to update the fine code in most of our item records (rather than simply update the finecodes and fines tables).
- We also updated the fine codes in our item templates.



Keeping Items Fine Free

We run a nightly job to identify any item records with the incorrect fine code (since staff will occasionally select the wrong code when editing or adding an item record).

Updates to Rules with eContent Vendors

We updated our fine threshold (from \$10 to \$30) with our major eContent vendors.



Making the Case

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OPINION

EDITORIAL



RICHEY/SUNTIMES FILE PHOTO

If Chicago libraries are dropping late fees, show the proof it's best for kids

Last spring, the Chicago Sun-Times partnered with the public schools to get at least one book into the hands of at least 2,500 children as they went home for summer vacation.

We were thrilled to be a part of the program, "Chicago Reads." Nothing ensures success in life more than the ability to read. A child who can read — and who, better yet, loves to read — is half-

personal responsibility — that's the rub — and there's a good argument that people already can avoid library late fees just by getting books back on time.

If the Chicago Public Library is going to eliminate late fees, we'd like to see hard evidence, a year or two from now, that doing so has resulted in more people, especially children, using the library. We'd also like to see proof that the new

measure. If more people than ever are failing to return materials, that should be easy to measure, too.

If Chicago is going to forfeit \$875,000 a year in library fines — money that goes into the general revenue fund — let's be sure it's worth the cost.

Our general support for the new plan, presented by Mayor Lori Lightfoot, rests on a single unsettling statistic:

ability for which we should feel little sympathy? Or is it prohibitively difficult for many low income families to pay a late fee of even \$10?

The answers to those questions matter less to us than the unacceptable result — tens of thousands of Chicago's children can't check a book out of the library.

We are doing our schools no favors.

Librarians generally favor

ville and Columbus, Ohio — have eliminated late fees and report no negative consequences.

On the contrary, says Sarah Houghton, director of the San Rafael, California, public library, libraries have learned that the best way to get people to return books and other materials is to remind them, not fine them. What motivates people to return things, that is to say, is a desire to be good library citizens, not monetary penalties.

The San Rafael Library does not charge late fines for children's books and materials, but instead sends families an email three days before an item is due and a second email one day after the item was due. If they still have no luck, they send an email three weeks later stating that the patron must return the item or pay for a replacement.

"We have found that people do not keep youth materials out any longer since we've eliminated fines," Houghton said in an interview last year with American Libraries magazine. "This has been shown in library after library as they eliminate some or all overdue fines."

We definitely think best of library patrons who return stuff on time or pay a fee without whining. We're thinking in particular of Emily Canellos-Simms, of downstate Kewanee, who holds the Guinness World Record for paying the highest library book fine, \$345.14.

Canellos-Simms found a copy of book of children's poems, "Days and Deeds," in her mother's home in 2002. It had been overdue from

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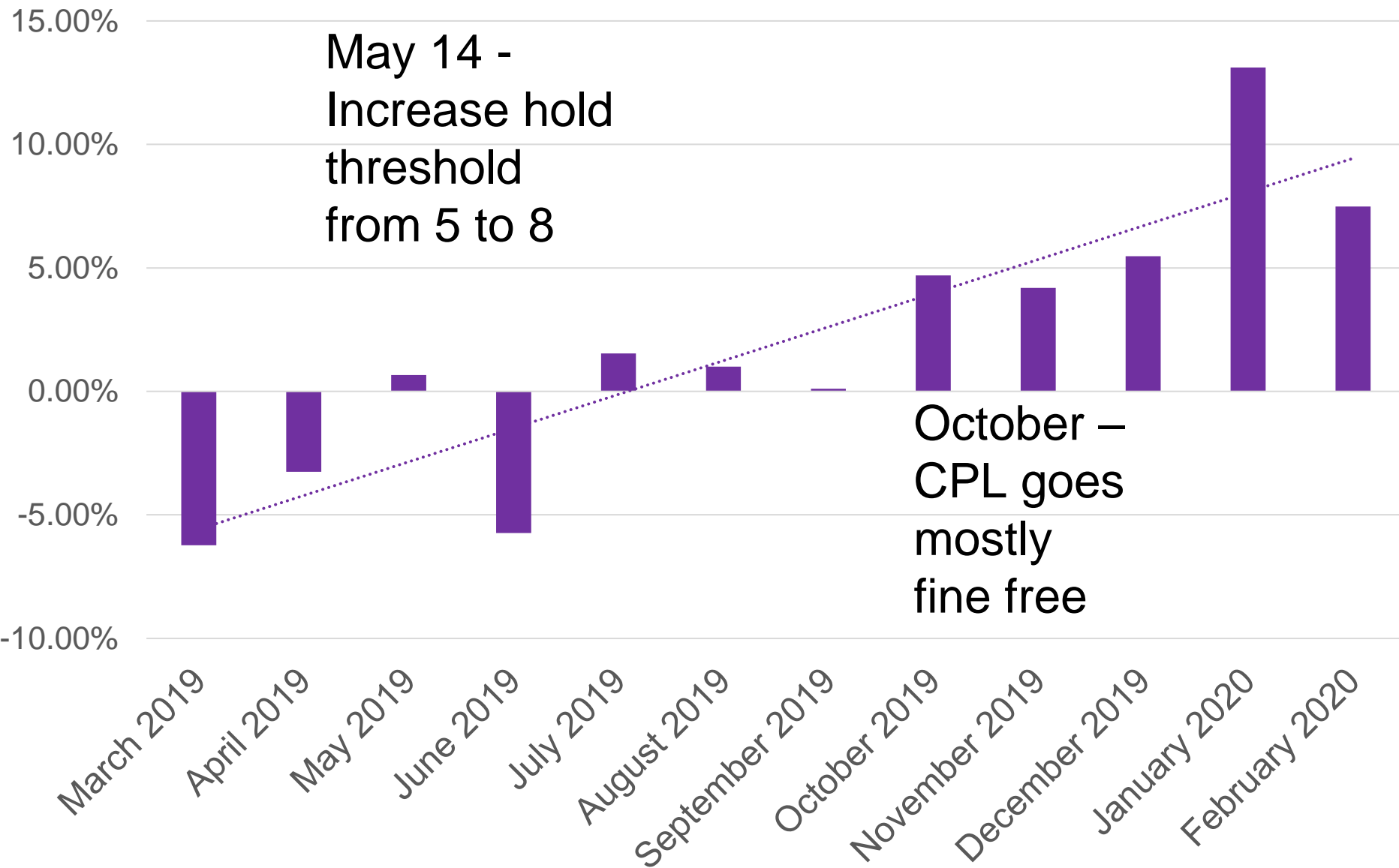
We'd also like to see proof that the new policy has not led to even more people failing to return library materials.

-- Chicago Sun-Time Editorial Board

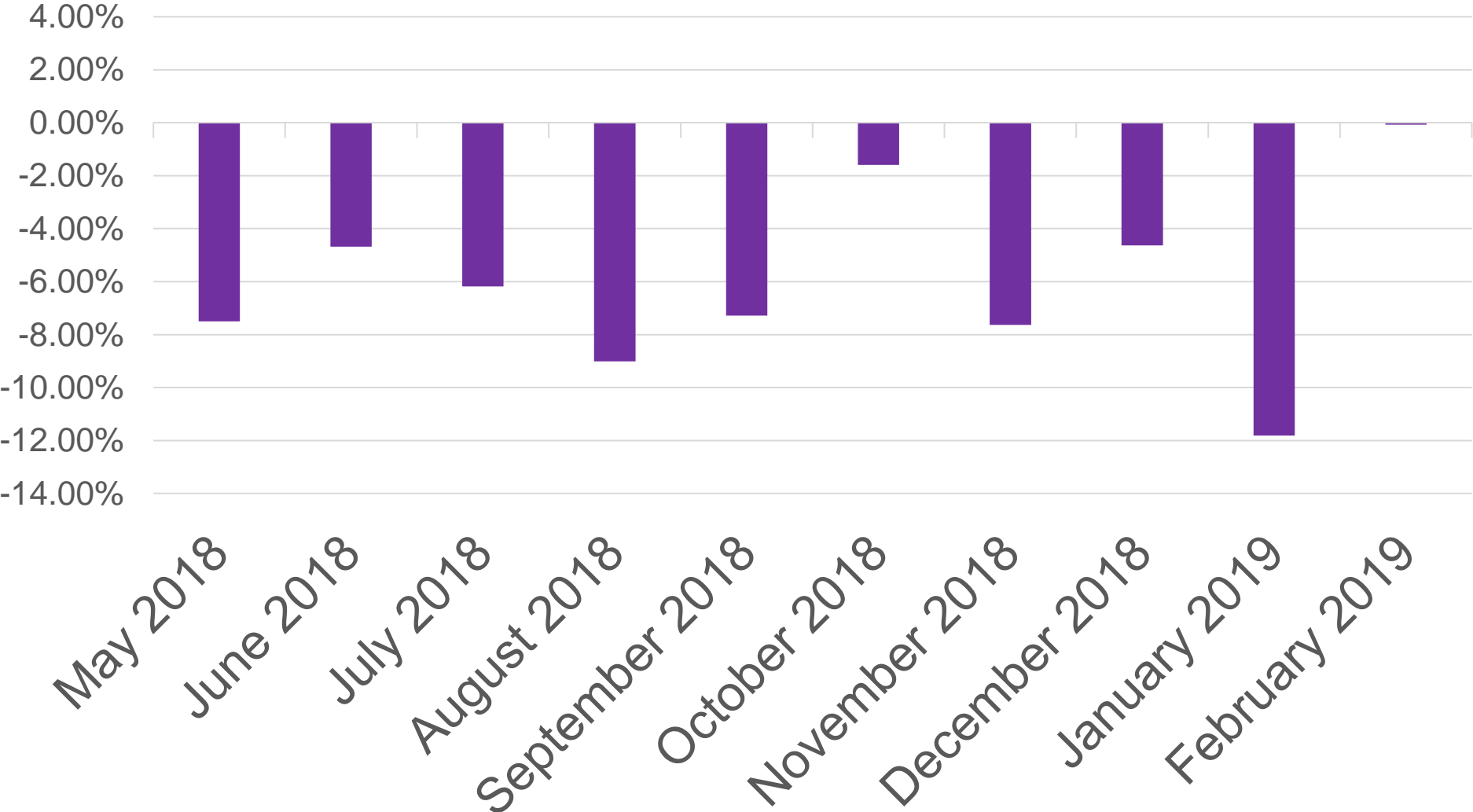
Circulation

- When measuring the effect of going mostly fine free, we've only measured initial checkouts in Polaris since:
 - Automatic renewals have led to a huge increase in renewals
 - eContent downloads were always fine free

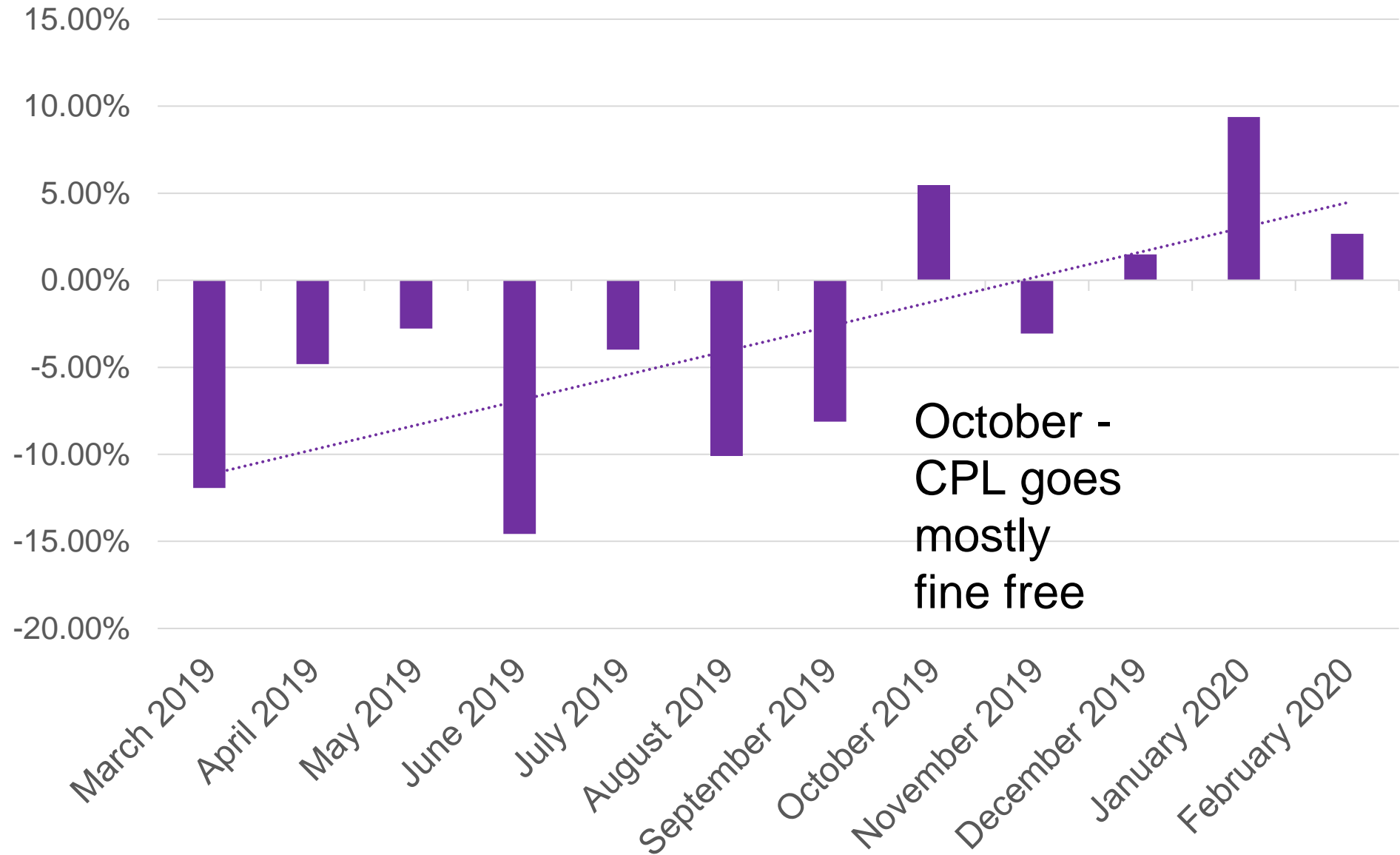
Year over Year % Increase in Base Circulation



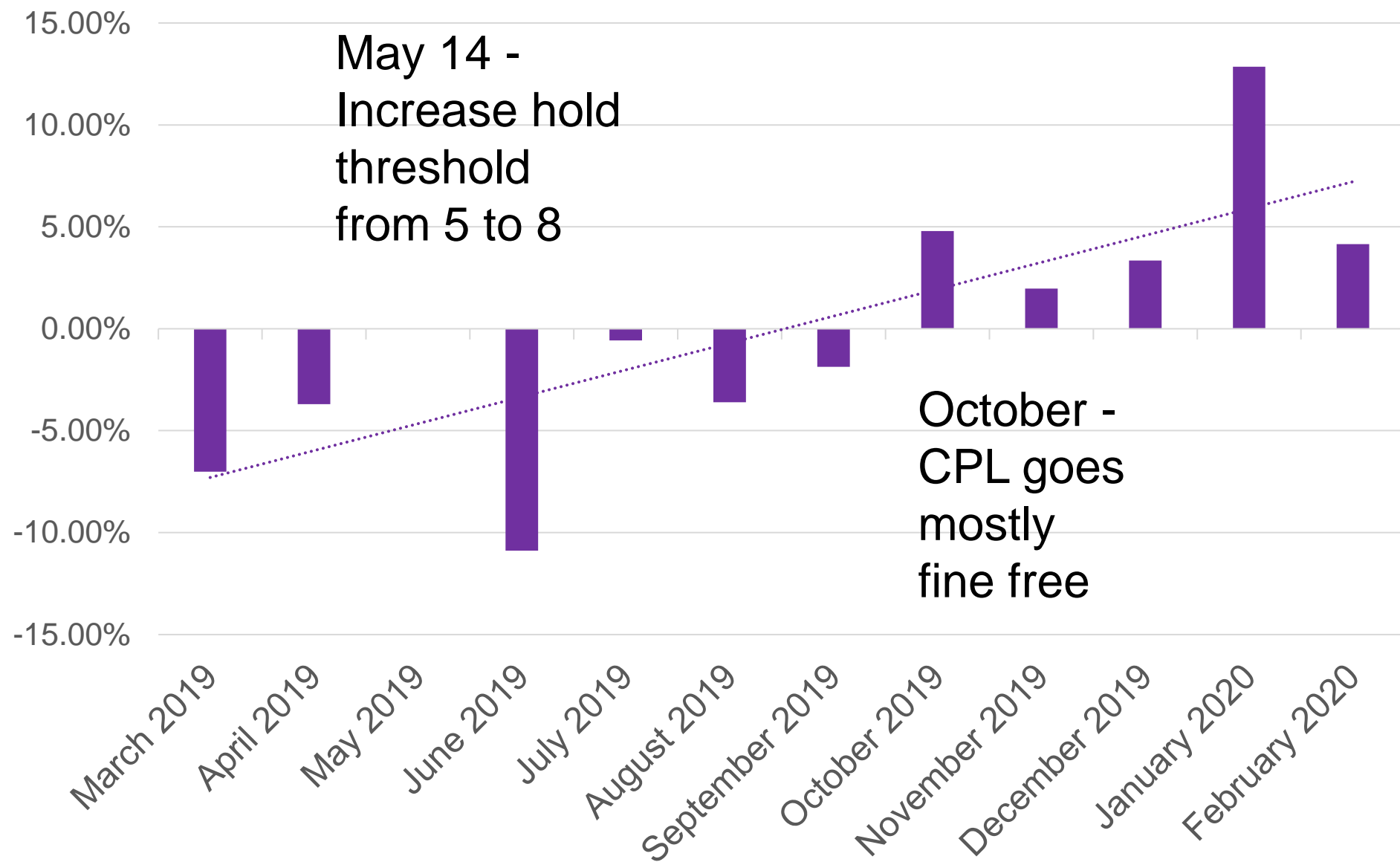
Year over Year % Increase in Base Circulation (Prior to 2019 Policy Changes)



Year over Year % Increase in Base Circulation – Patrons under 14



Year over Year % Increase in Circulation - Children's Materials



% of Items Returned on Time

Oct 2018-Feb 2019: 86%

Oct 2019-Feb 2020: 94%



% of Items Returned on Time

Oct 2018-Feb 2019: 86%

Oct 2019-Feb 2020: 94%

**These numbers brought to
you by Automatic Renewals.**

% of Items Triggering a Hold Returned on Time

Oct 2018-Feb 2019: 78.4%

Oct 2019-Feb 2020: 76.6%



% of Items Triggering a Hold Returned on Time

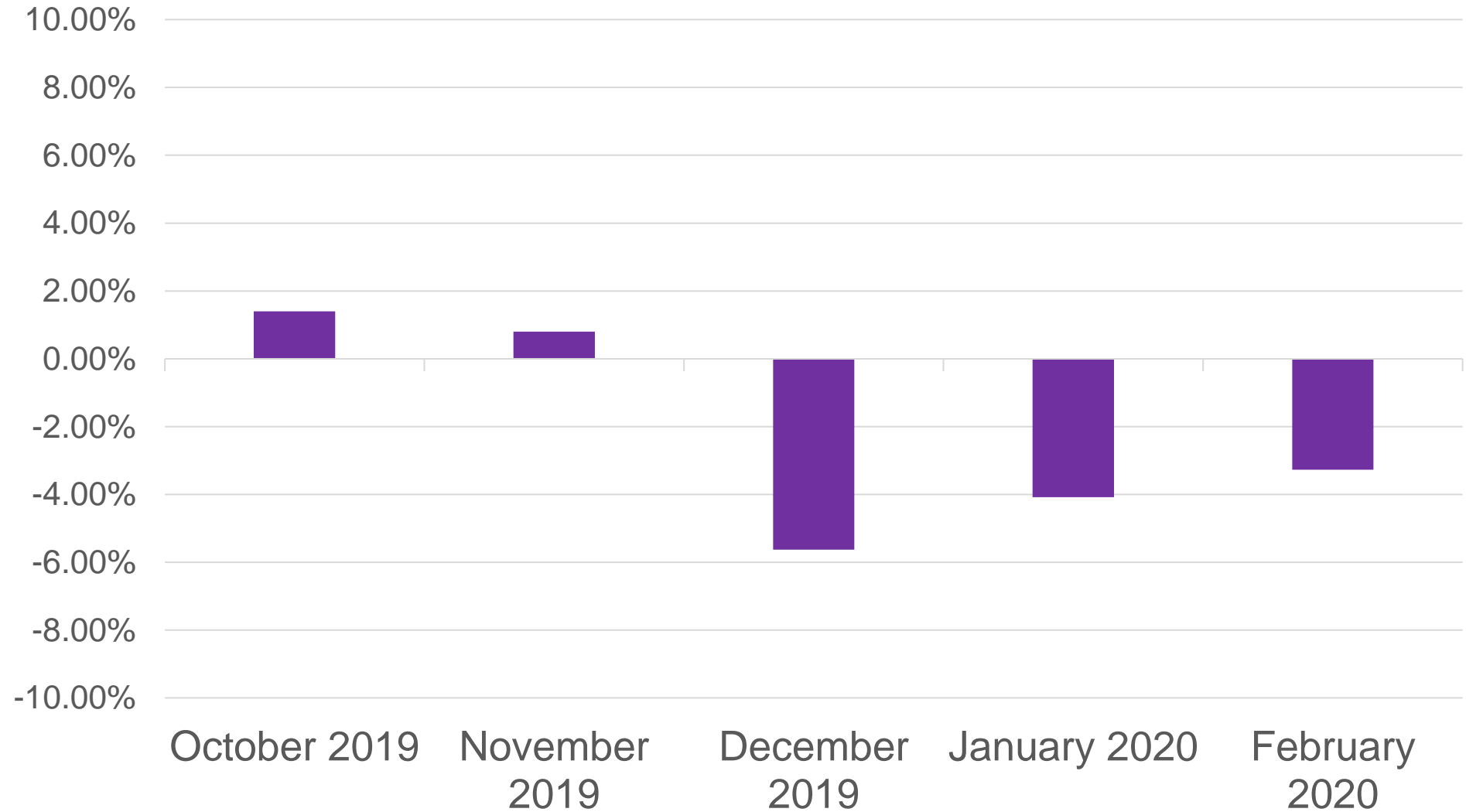
Oct 2018-Feb 2019: 78.4%

Oct 2019-Feb 2020: 76.6%

These numbers brought to you by Fine Free.



Year over Year Change in % of Items Triggering a Hold Returned on Time



Do The Changes in “On Time” Returns Matter?

Median days from time hold is placed until it arrives on the hold shelf is about the same compared with last year (but admittedly a bit longer).

	2018/19	2019/20
November	23	23
December	21	23
January	19	20
February	22	22



Average Days Holds Are in Transit Between Locations

CPL has done significant work in the past year to decrease the time it takes to transfer a hold from one location to another, and this should be **reducing the time** it takes to get a hold.

	2018/19	2019/20
November	4.77	3.92
December	5.23	3.88
January	5.72	3.81
February	7.41	4.53

*Approximately 80% of holds must be transferred between locations.



But...

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Holdings Placed

CPL increased its hold threshold from 5 to 8 pending holds in May 2019, which resulted in a dramatic increase in holds placed. We'd expect this to **increase the time** it takes to get a hold.

	2018/19	2019/20	increase
October	130884	160919	23%
November	122615	149277	22%
December	114084	143482	26%
January	144315	184123	28%

And then...

COVID-19

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The logo for the Chicago Public Library, featuring the text "CHICAGO PUBLIC LIBRARY" in a stacked, sans-serif font. Below the text is a white horizontal bar. The entire logo is set against a black quarter-circle background in the bottom-left corner of the slide.

Measures That Didn't Work Well for Us

- Long overdue material coming back
- Number of patrons using the library after their fines were cleared
- New registrations/card renewals



Is Polaris built for amnesties and fine free?

- No easy way to waive large amounts of fines by given criteria
- No way within Polaris to notify patrons that their records have been cleared
- No 2nd or 3rd billing notice

Checked out → Lost

Moving items from the ItemCheckouts table to the PatronLostItems table at billing creates a lot of headaches when you make items go lost at 7 days. For example...



Checkout → Lost

- Patron claims to have returned an item after it goes lost.
- Library wants to move a large number of lost items back to checkouts after a disaster (for example, COVID-19)
- Patrons can check lost items back out even if there are pending holds

Recommendations

- When canceling fines due to an amnesty or going fine free, waive them (rather than simply delete the transactions) so you have a record of what was canceled.
- If going only partially fine free, be sure to come up with a way to check for records with incorrect fine codes.

Recommendations

- Don't pick too many ways of measuring the success (or failure) of your policy change but also realize that not all of your measures will pan out.
- Think carefully about what data you'll need to capture for reporting purposes before you start making changes.

Recommendations

- When taking snapshots, copy as much as possible, including the entire Patrons, PatronRegistration, and PatronAccount tables.



Questions?

Paul Keith

pkeith@chipublic.org

The logo for the Chicago Public Library, featuring a black quarter-circle shape in the bottom-left corner. Inside the circle, the words "CHICAGO PUBLIC LIBRARY" are written in white, stacked vertically. Below the text is a white horizontal bar.

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