

LINCOLN CITY LIBRARIES

Impact of Fine Free at Lincoln City Libraries

After One Year of Implementation, FY 2022 -2023

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1. Why Go Fine Free?

Lincoln City Libraries (LCL) enacted a fine free policy on September 1, 2022, in recognition of the impact that fines played in limiting library usage among low-income families and caregivers.

Overdue fines often unintentionally create a barrier to access for many residents. The practice of assessing fines has long been justified as an effective prompt for borrowers to return materials in a timely manner, allowing all to enjoy the library collection. Research has shown that while many users incur late fees, the ability to pay them depends greatly on income. Those who are able to pay can keep visiting and borrowing, however, those who are unable to pay, simply stop using the library—and in many instances fail to return overdue materials. Experience and data from other fine free libraries (see: Colorado Department of Education: *Removing Barriers to Access*, 2016) showed that the rate of return is not higher when people are fined for overdue materials.

Removing the administration and receipt of fine payments is an additional staffing efficiency with less time needed for receiving payments and crediting accounts. It also improves staff-patron interactions and removes sometimes tense and confrontational encounters—all creating a more positive library experience.

Lincoln City Libraries first established a fine free policy for overdue children's items in 2019, and subsequently, there was not a *noticeable* decline in materials availability or an increase in the rate of loss of items, however, data was not monitored nor collected during the succeeding years (2020-2022) due to the volatility and unreliability of library usage and data during the COVID pandemic.

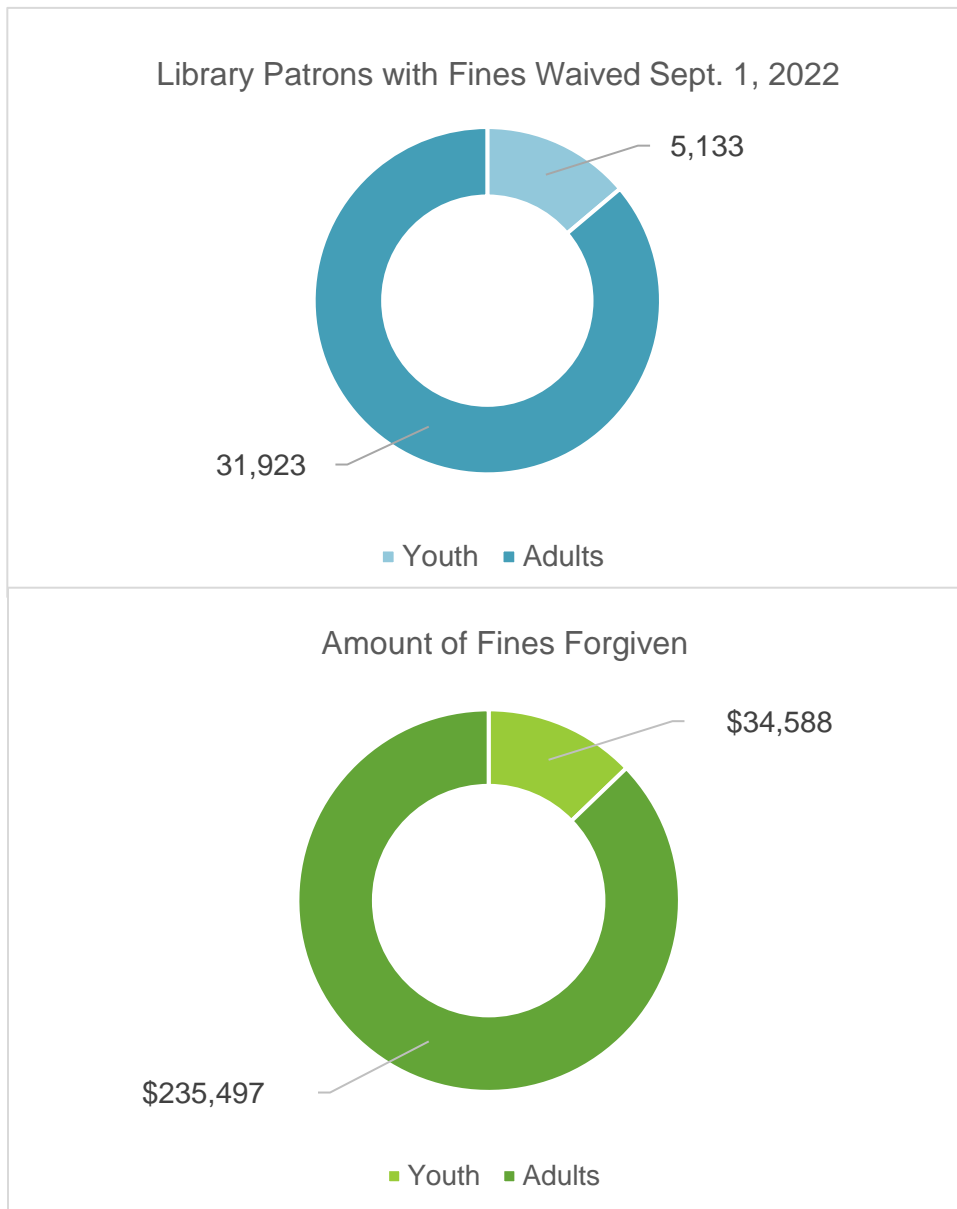
Beginning in September 2022 and monthly thereafter, LCL's Support Services team collected data in several key areas to measure the effect of fully removing fines for overdue items. The following data and charts help provide a general overview of the first year without fines. LCL will continue to collect and report key data points to identify trends and determine solutions when appropriate for improving access to collections.

After one year since going fine-free at Lincoln City Libraries, our collected data shows no identified loss in service—materials are returned at nearly the same rate prior to the change and hold fulfillment times were comparable to the previous year. The best part: *patrons missing in action are returning to the library*. New card registrations increased in 2022–2023 at a rate not seen since 2016.

Ryan Wieber
Library Director

2. Direct Immediate Impact – Fines Forgiven

On September 1, 2022, 37,000-plus library customers had all fines removed from their accounts. The waived amounts included a combination of recent charges and long outstanding assessments—some overdue accounts went back seven years. Only fines were removed, and charges for lost or damaged materials remained on accounts as customers are still responsible for returning those items or paying for them. The amount waived totaled \$270,085.



3. Library Use

Service population (2020 Census):

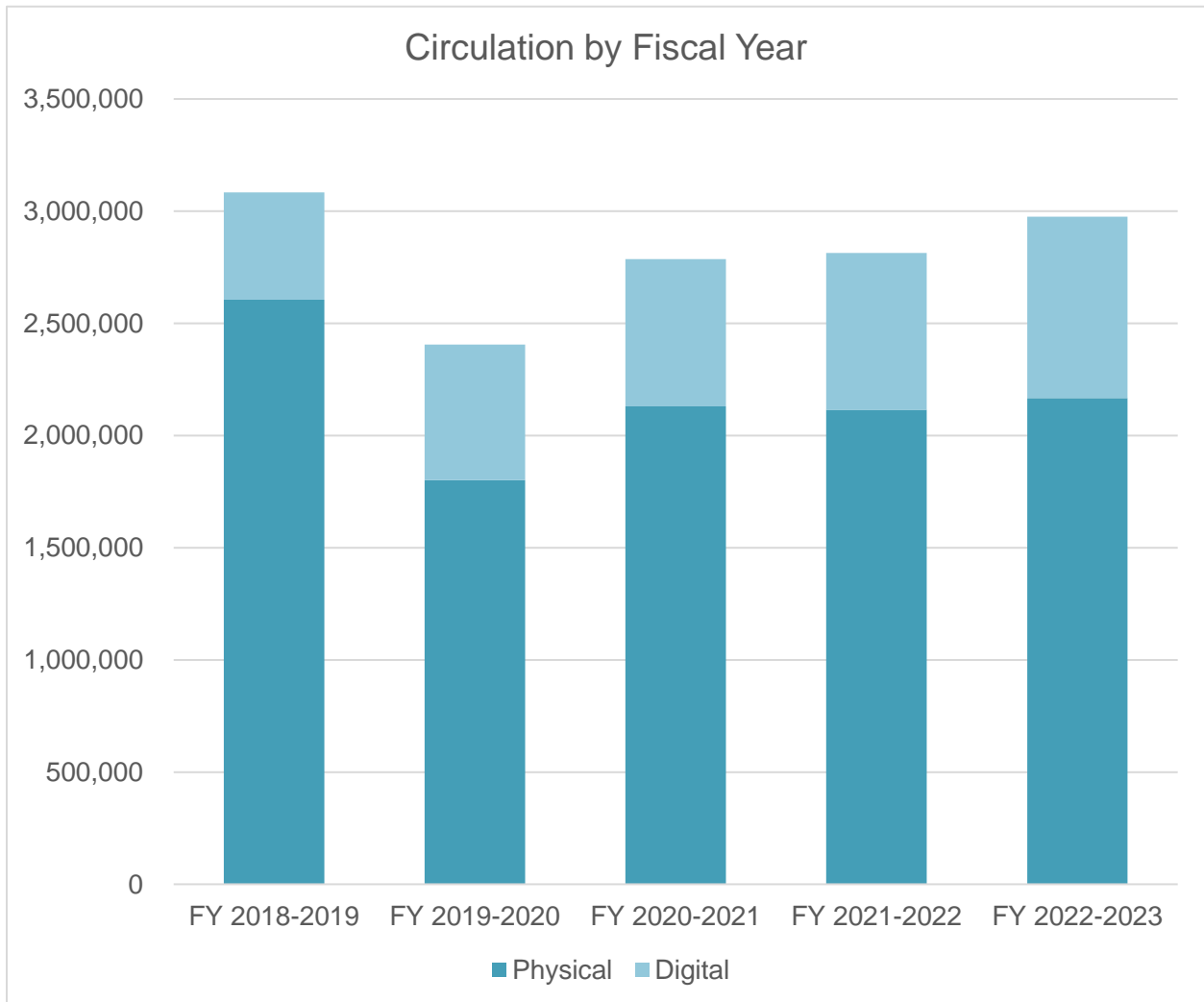
City of Lincoln: 291,082

City + Lancaster County: 322,608

Library Visits:

2022-2023: 785,119

2021-2022: 691,228



4. Holds

The number of **Holds Placed** by customers increased by 3.05% for the year, which corresponds with other library activity increases as compared to the COVID-affected year 2021-2022.

*The number of **Holds Filled** also increased over 2021-2022—and at a greater growth rate than the number of holds placed-- which is contrary to a common assumption that a fine free policy may encourage more items to be returned late, therefore causing delays in fulfilling requested holds.*

There was also a slight improvement in the **Holds Fulfillment Time** as compared to 2021-2022. In 2022-2023, 76.17% of all holds were filled within the first week, a .9% increase over the previous year.

Holds Placed and Filled by Fiscal Year

	Holds Filled	Holds Placed
FY 2021-2022	287,283	343,510
FY 2022-2023	303,756	353,999
Percent change	5.73%	3.05%

Change in Holds Fulfillment Time from FY21-22 to FY22-23

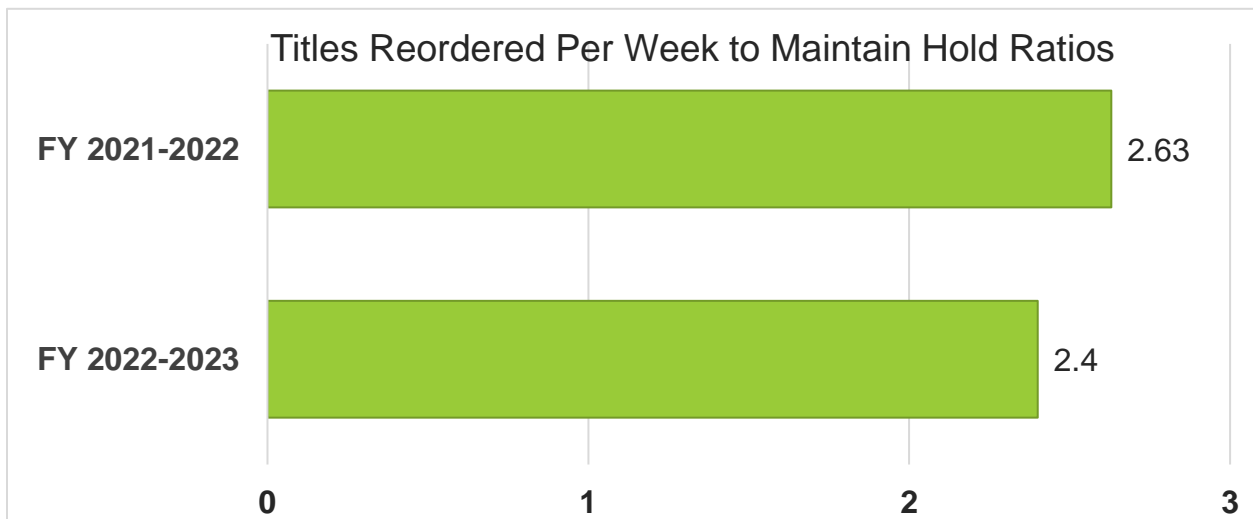
	Same Week	2nd week	3rd week	4th week+
FY 2021-2022	75.27%	4.18%	3.18%	17.37%
FY 2022-2023	76.17%	4.39%	3.03%	16.42%
Difference	0.90%	0.21%	-0.16%	-0.95%

Holds fulfillment is affected by delayed publication, delayed delivery of titles by vendors, and suspended holds.

5. Holds Ratios

The library strives to keep the wait time for popular titles to a minimum length of time. One way to monitor Holds activity and ensure wait times are not overly long—and still remain within budgeted amounts for the year is to purchase additional copies when holds exceed predetermined thresholds. For example, for popular and in-demand titles, a new copy is purchased for every fifth, new hold placed. Weekly reports provide timely monitoring of holds placed and holds ratios, and orders are placed weekly to adhere closely to maintain a consistent ratio and keep wait times for materials to a minimum. LCL tracks additional copy orders on a weekly basis.

The chart below shows that for the year 2022-2023, titles ordered per week to maintain hold ratios *decreased* as compared to 2021-2022. One might expect that by removing fines, fewer people would return materials on time, holds for items would increase, wait times would become longer, and the library in an effort to reduce wait times and maintain hold ratios would order more copies—and spend more budget on additional copies. That did not appear to be the case for FY 2022-2023.

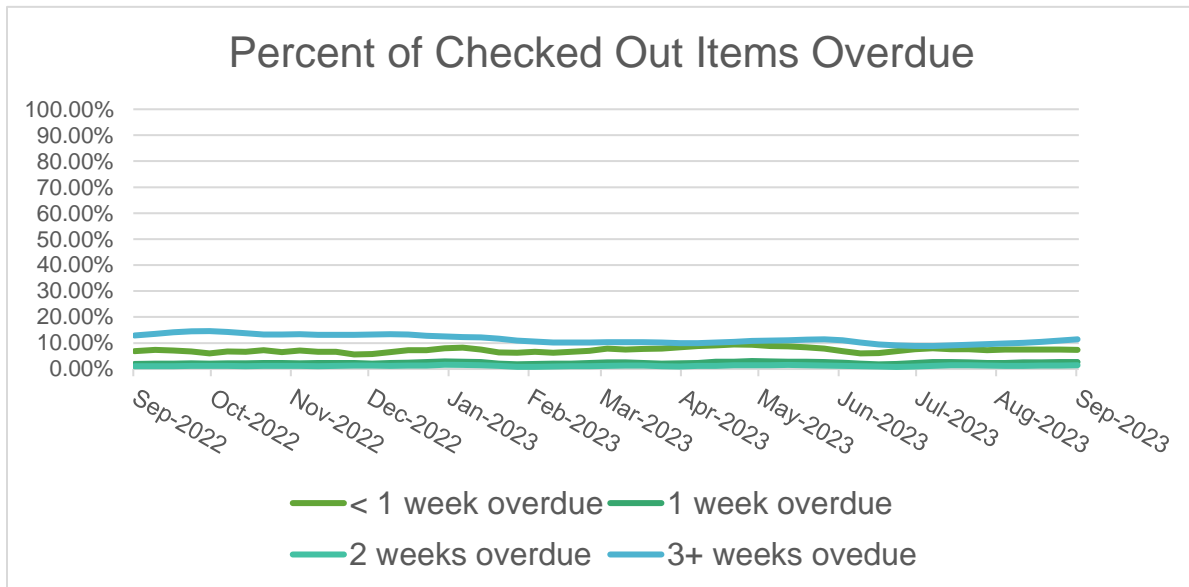


6. Returned Items and Items Overdue

	FY 2017-2018	FY 2018-2019	FY 2019-2020	FY 2020-2021	FY 2021-2022	FY 2022-2023
% Returned in FY	49.22%	57.65%	64.76%	74.88%	70.49%	74.90%
% Returned after 1 year	9.29%	10.19%	13.24%	8.17%	9.60%	*6.17%
% Returned after 2 years	0.91%	0.91%	1.01%	0.78%	0.14%	
% Returned after 3 years	0.49%	0.77%	0.58%	0.07%		
% Returned after 4 years	0.29%	0.47%	0.13%			
% Returned after 5 years	0.25%	0.03%				
% Returned after 6 years	0.06%					
% Returned to date	60.50%	70.02%	79.71%	83.90%	80.23%	81.07%

*FY 23-24 through October

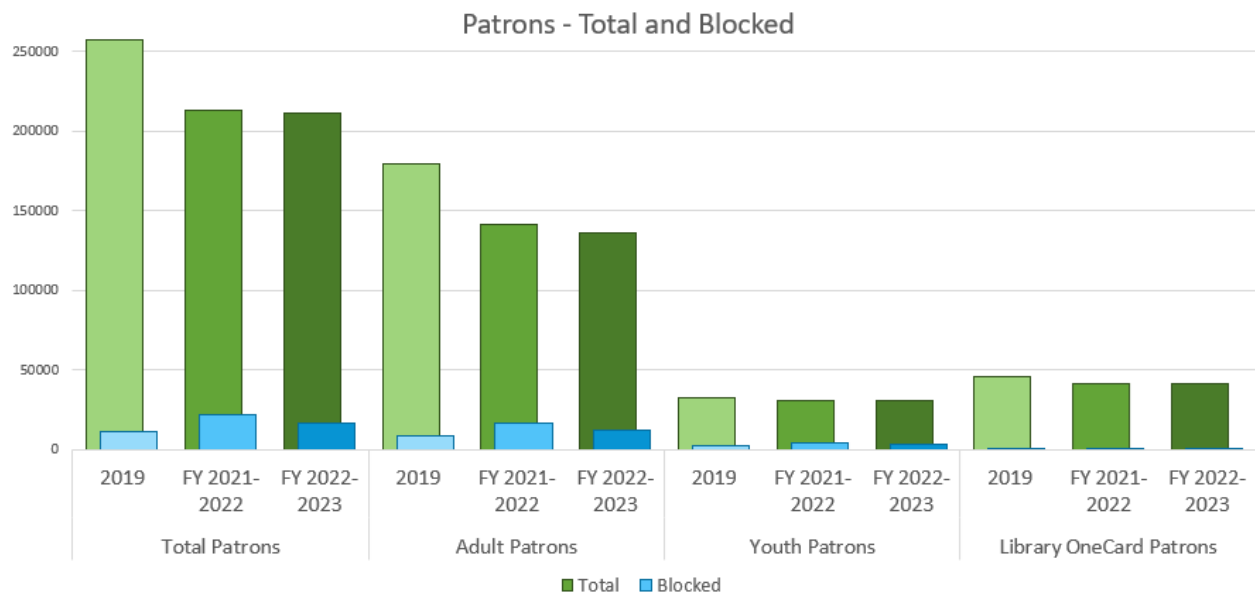
The chart above shows the percentage of materials returned in each current FY and in subsequent years. The percentage of materials returned in FY 2022-2023 is similar to the same rates as the previous two fiscal years, when fines were in force.



- On average, 16% of items checked out are 1 week or more overdue.
- Less than 13% of items checked out are over 3 weeks overdue. Items are automatically set to “Lost” by the library catalog at 3 weeks overdue.
- There was not a significant change in the percent of items overdue. The percent of items overdue at the end of FY 2022-2023 was 0.04% less than the end FY 2021-2022.

7. Patrons Blocked Due to Overdue Materials

The following chart compares the three most recent fiscal years (not including COVID years 2019-2020 and 2021-2022) and examines total number of patrons vs. blocked patrons. A patron account becomes blocked due to a balance owed of over \$50.00. Note: a significant drop in patron accounts occurred in April 2022 when 61,536 long-inactive accounts were purged. Of note is the decrease in blocked accounts during fine free 2022-2023 compared to the previous year, most likely due to the non-accumulation of fines past the \$50.00 block threshold. This is also encouraging, as a common assumption is that the library would see more blocked accounts in a fine free environment due to a burgeoning non-return of materials by patrons. This, however, was not the case in 2022-2023.

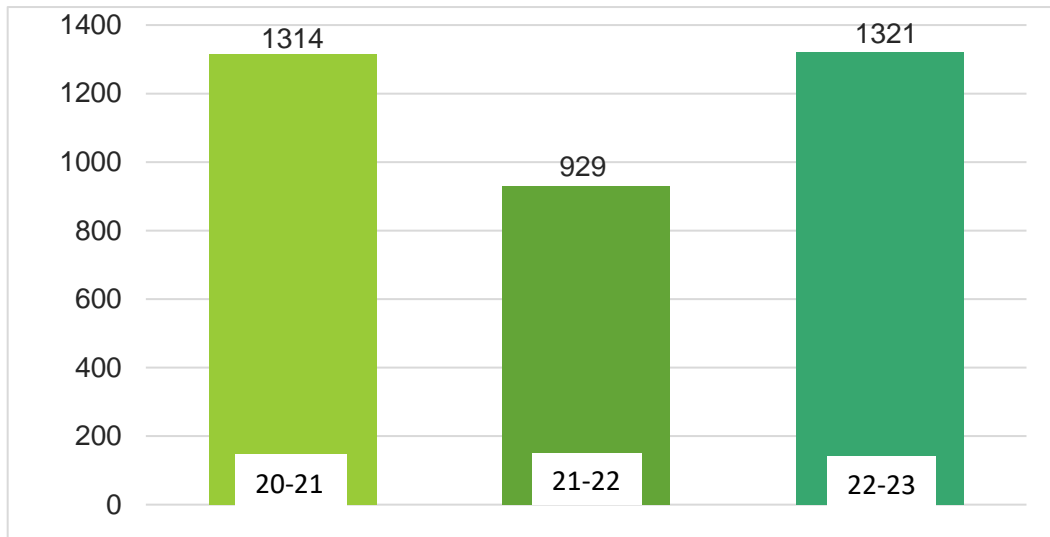


	After Eliminating Fines on Youth Items in 2019	FY 2021-2022	FY 2022-2023
% Total Blocked Patrons	4.46%	10.19%	8.01%
% Blocked Adult Patrons	4.80%	11.79%	8.60%
% Blocked Youth Patrons	7.39%	14.70%	12.17%
% Blocked Library OneCard Patrons	1.13%	1.43%	1.58%

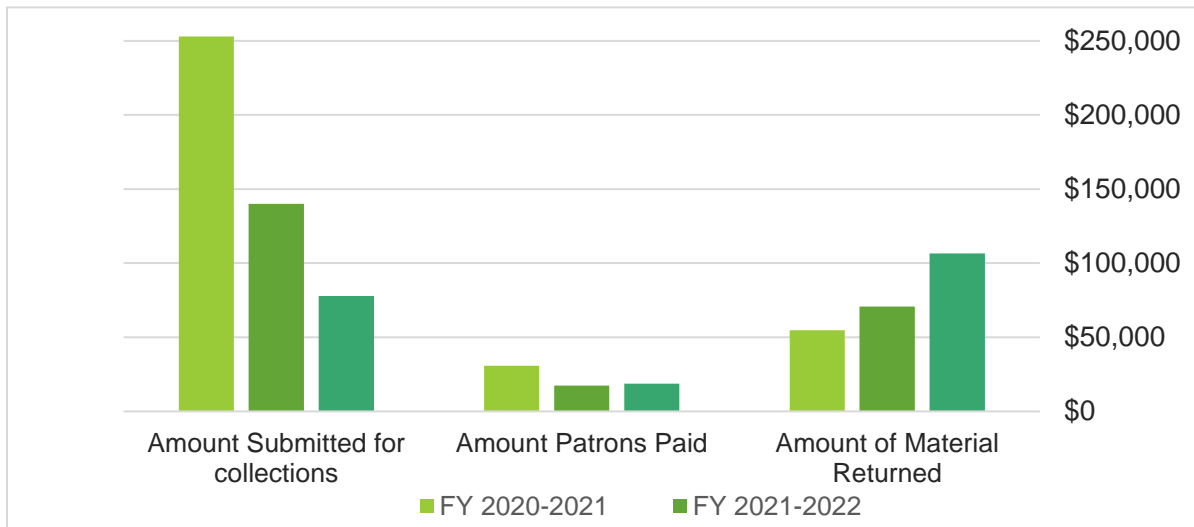
➤ April 1, 2022 - 61536 inactive user records were removed

8. Collections

Many libraries across the country utilize third-party collections services as an effort to encourage patrons to return long overdue materials or recover costs of items that have not been returned. Unique Management Services is one such company and is contracted by LCL to assist in this recovery. It is both a cost savings measure in staff time, and an effective attempt to recoup materials or costs.



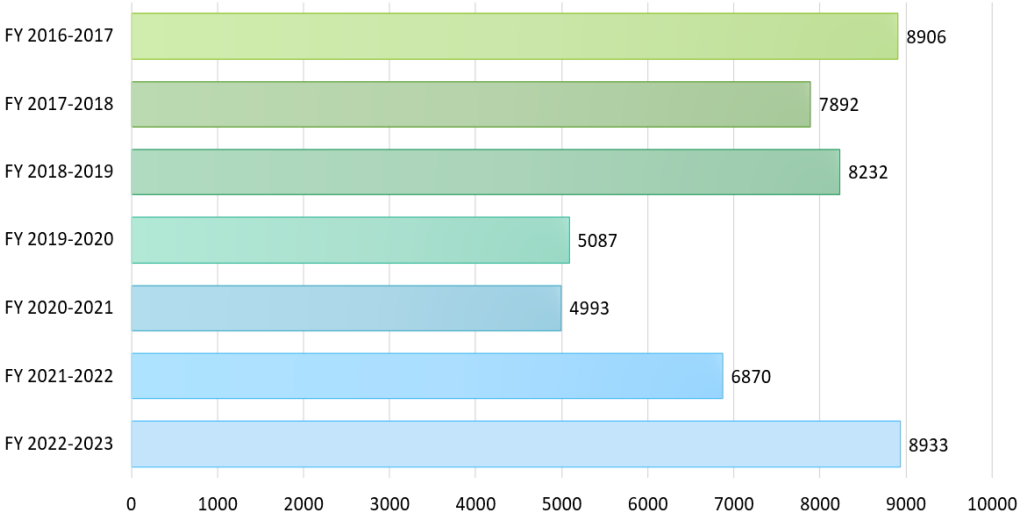
Number of Accounts Submitted for Collections



The number of accounts submitted in FY 2022-2023 (top) was on par with FY 2020-2021 but the total monetary amount of those accounts was far lower, and the value of items returned was much higher.

9. New Card Registrations

New Library Patron Registrations by Fiscal Year



New library card registrations in 2022-2023 were the highest since 2016-2017 and represented an 8.5% increase in new library accounts over the last non-COVID year of 2018-2019.

10. Key Observations

- Placement of Holds increased by 3.05%; **fulfillment of Holds increased** by 5.73%
- In 2022-2023, 76% of holds were filled the same week, a .9% increase over the previous year. Less than 17% of holds took more than 4 weeks to fill, also a minimal improvement compared to 2021-2022.
- The number of accounts submitted for collection services was on par with FY 2020-2021, but the total amount of those accounts was far lower, and the value of items returned was much higher.
- The percentage of **returned items was higher** in 2022-2023 than any of the previous 5 years, indicating that being fine free most likely encouraged patrons to return materials even if late, without worry of fines. This may also indicate a higher volume of returns from previous years.
- There was not a significant change in the percentage of items overdue. The percentage of items overdue at the end of 2022-2023 was 0.04% less than the end 2021-2022.
- New library card registrations in 2022-2023 were the **highest** since 2016-2017 and represented an 8.5% increase in new library accounts over the last non-COVID year of 2018-2019.
- Perhaps one of the most significant outcomes: the percentage of patron-blocked accounts for both children and adults **decreased**.
- Area to improve: LCL will enhance the patron notification process for overdue materials by increasing the number of automatically scheduled notifications to better alert patrons who are on the verge of having their accounts sent to collections. This should result in fewer accounts going to collections and more overdue items returning quicker.