

# **The Impact of Monetary Fines on Behavior**

Jill E. Hunt, M.S.Ed., BCBA, Michelle I. Harrington, M.Ed.

Students at the Judge Rotenberg Center can earn money for academic behaviors. They can also lose money for pre-defined behaviors. In this study, we will be looking at how monetary fines impact behaviors exhibited, in the categories of aggression, destruction, health dangerous, majorly disruptive, non-compliance, inappropriate verbal and educationally/socially interfering.

## **Method**

### **Participants and Setting**

There were 79 participants in this study. All participants were school age and attended school and lived at the Judge Rotenberg Center. There were 50 males and 29 females in the study. All participants were emotionally disturbed. The money that participants earned from academic behaviors, such as completing assignments, mastering a skill, exhibiting positive classroom behaviors was able to be spent in many different ways. The money system is set up as a variable magnitude reinforcer, ranging from 1 cent to 25 dollars for lessons mastered. Participants could purchase take-out food, go shopping, attend sporting events, and concerts.

### **Measures**

All participants had specific inappropriate behaviors tracked. These behaviors are determined by their treatment team. These behaviors are broken into seven different categories. The major behavior categories are aggression, destruction, health dangerous, majorly disruptive, and non-compliance. The minor behavior categories are educationally and socially interfering and inappropriate verbal. Examples of aggression include physical aggression towards others to include attempts; examples of destruction include property destruction to include attempts, verbal threats to destroy property, throw objects, bang objects, break objects; examples of health dangerous include possession of potential weapons/items to be used to harm self; examples of majorly disruptive include swear, yell/scream, steal, sexual comments/gestures/notes; examples of non-compliance includes blatant no, refuse to follow staff directions, resist physical prompting, refuse to complete academics/chores/counseling/self-care, failure to complete assigned academics by deadline; examples of educationally and socially interfering include stop work for more than 10 seconds, laughing at inappropriate times (to exclude socially appropriate situations), not minding own business, touching others without permission; examples of inappropriate verbal include talking during the academic day without raising hand and waiting to be called on, speak in an inappropriate tone of voice, nag, disruptive noises, argue with others, rude comments, interrupt others, use of slang, mimic others. Behaviors were tracked anytime the participant was awake. Staff tracked each observed occurrence of any defined behavior. All data was entered into a database daily.

From August 31, 2016 to October 21, 2016, participants lost money for exhibiting any behaviors listed in their behavior program. The amount of money lost was determined by multiplying the

number of behaviors exhibited by a preset fine. From October 26, 2016 to December 13, 2016, there were three different types of fines for exhibiting behaviors defined in their behavior program. The first is a percentage, where the participant loses a percentage of their earned money for each behavior exhibited. The second is a tiered level, where the participant loses a specific dollar amount for each behavior exhibited until they reach a certain number of behaviors, then the dollar amount can increase. The last type of fine is the maximum penalty, where the participant loses all of their money and goes into debt the maximum amount. The type of fine used for each participant was determined by their treatment team. Fine types could be different for each behavior category. For example, aggressive behavior might have a maximum penalty fine, while inappropriate verbal behavior might have a tiered level fine.

Participants were able to view their earnings, from completing academic tasks and their fines for inappropriate behaviors from their desktop computers. Earnings from academic tasks were updated in real time, while fines from inappropriate behaviors took several days to be updated.

## **Results**

The frequency of behaviors exhibited were reduced. Aggressive behaviors went from a total of 5,549 to a total of 2,222. Destructive behaviors went from a total of 1,203 to a total of 487. Health Dangerous behaviors went from a total of 1,471 to a total of 364. Majorly Disruptive behaviors went from a total of 17,357 to a total of 4,677. Non-Compliant behaviors went from a total of 9,767 to a total of 2,488. Educationally and socially interfering behaviors went from a total of 3,004 to a total of 1,361. Inappropriate verbal behaviors went from a total of 7,404 to a total of 2,451.

The mean behaviors exhibited were also reduced. Aggressive behaviors went from a mean of 54 to a mean of 20. Destructive behaviors went from a mean of 23 to a mean of 12. Health Dangerous behaviors went from a mean of 23 to a mean of 6. Majorly Disruptive behaviors went from a mean of 145 to a mean of 37. Non-Compliant behaviors went from a mean of 101 to a mean of 20. Educationally and socially interfering behaviors went from a mean of 37 to a mean of 15. Inappropriate verbal behaviors went from a mean of 90 to a mean of 24.

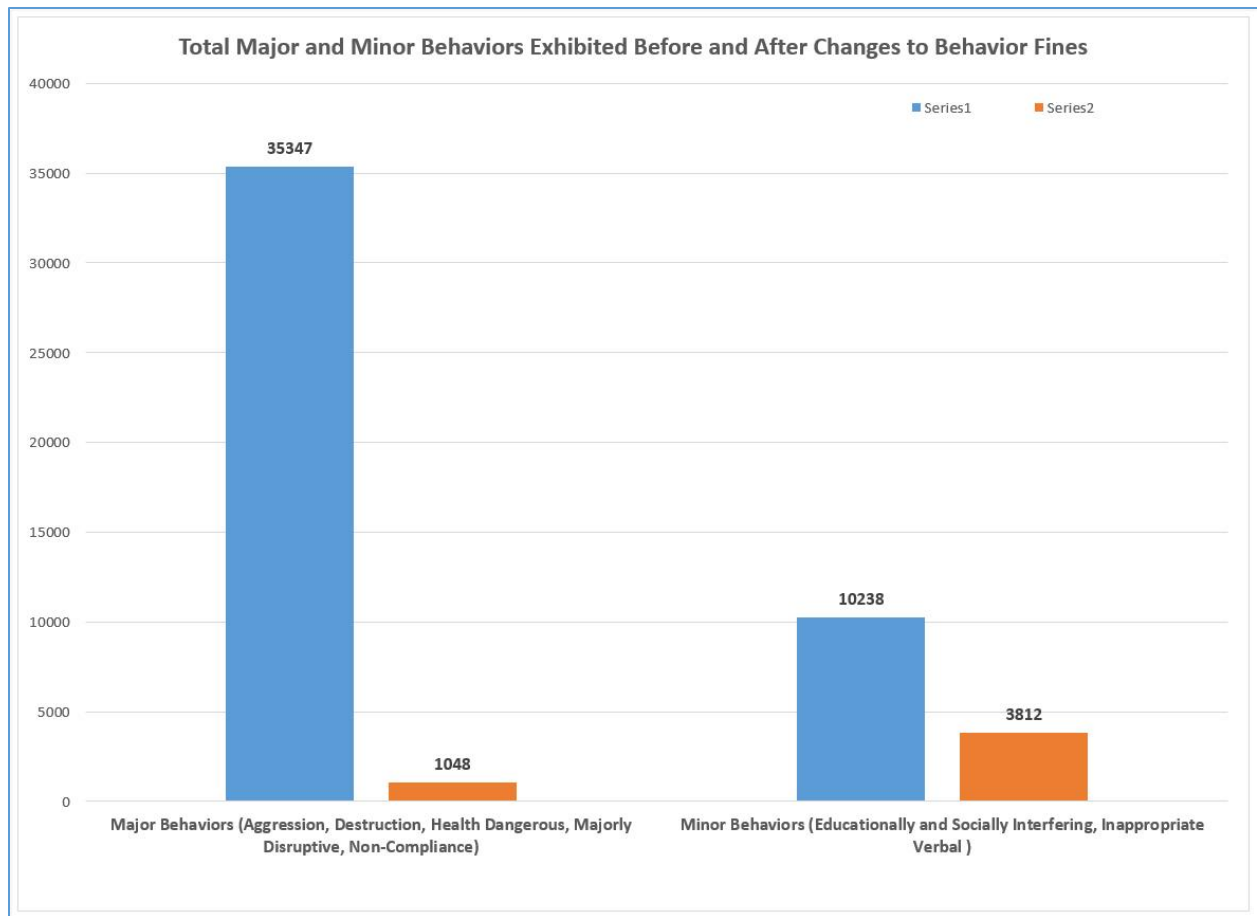


Exhibit 1

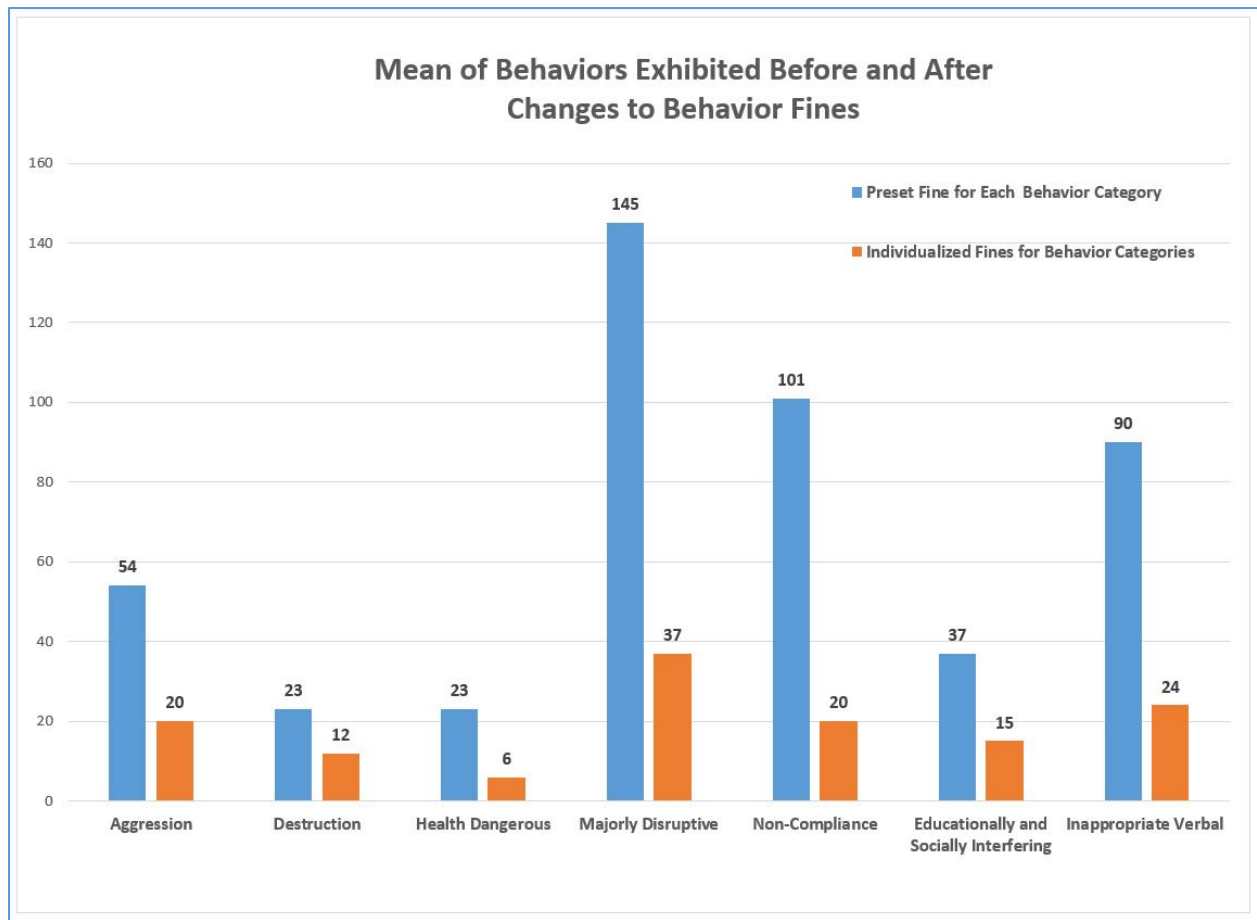


Exhibit 2

## Discussion

The use of monetary fines as a consequence for negative behaviors appears to be successful in reducing frequencies. All behaviors showed a significant reduction, whether we looked at the total behaviors exhibited or the mean of the behaviors exhibited. However there are several factors that should be considered in the reduction of behaviors. For example there is an additional length in time that the students have been in a treatment facility and the holiday home visit in December which is largely contingent on appropriate behavior. Lastly, it is important to note that all participants have individual behavior contracts in place that address major and minor behaviors, with individualized consequences. In the future additional changes to the fine system will be put in place to obtain further support that this intervention is in fact successful in reducing problem behaviors.