

SIMPLIFY, NOTIFY, MODIFY
Using Behavioral Insights to
Increase Incarcerated Parents'
Requests for Child Support
Modifications

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October 2016

Executive Summary

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OVERVIEW

The Behavioral Interventions to Advance Self-Sufficiency (BIAS) project is the first major opportunity to use a behavioral economics lens to examine programs that serve poor and vulnerable families in the United States. Sponsored by the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation of the Administration for Children and Families in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, and led by MDRC, the project applies behavioral insights to issues related to the operations, implementation, and efficacy of social service programs and policies. The goal is to learn how tools from behavioral science can be used to deliver programs more effectively and, ultimately, improve the well-being of low-income children, adults, and families.

This report presents findings from a behavioral intervention, developed in collaboration with the Washington State Division of Child Support (DCS), to increase the number of incarcerated noncustodial parents in Washington who apply for modifications to reduce the amount of their child support orders. Incarcerated noncustodial parents have a limited ability to pay their child support orders each month, due to their incarceration, which can lead to the accumulation of significant child support debt.

The BIAS project diagnosed bottlenecks in the process for applying for modifications, hypothesized behavioral reasons for the bottlenecks, and designed a sequence of behaviorally informed materials to be sent to incarcerated noncustodial parents. These materials provided incarcerated parents with a series of supports at different points in time to make them aware that they may be eligible for an order modification and to move them from intention to action. The materials included all the paperwork needed to request a modification, a tip sheet providing clear and succinct guidance on how to fill out the modification request, and reminders through electronic messages.

The test focused on 827 noncustodial parents who were incarcerated in Washington State prisons and were randomly assigned to one of two groups — the BIAS group or a control group. The BIAS group received the intervention materials, and the control group experienced DCS's typical approach to interaction with incarcerated parents, which consisted of ad hoc outreach and written materials sent to parents who requested them. The intervention increased the percentage of parents requesting a modification from 9 to 41 percent, a 32 percentage point increase. Additionally, the intervention resulted in a 16 percentage point increase in the number of incarcerated parents actually receiving a modification to their child support orders.

The statistically significant impact on requests for modifications echoes the results of a prior BIAS test in Texas, which also found impacts on modification requests. Furthermore, it builds on these results by demonstrating that behaviorally informed messaging can also increase the percentage of parents who actually receive modifications to their child support orders. Finally, the intervention demonstrates the possible value of electronic messages as a tool for government agencies seeking to communicate with incarcerated populations.

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We are also grateful to the many MDRC staff members who provided guidance and feedback throughout the study. Mary Farrell (MEF Associates) and David Butler consistently provided insightful guidance throughout the project. Leigh Reardon played a critical role in the design and implementation of the intervention. Lashawn Richburg-Hayes, Nadine Dechausay, Gordon Berlin, Patrick Landers, Dan Bloom, and Michael Johns reviewed drafts of the report and offered helpful critiques throughout the writing process. We also thank Kelsey Patterson for skillfully coordinating the production of this report and Amy Taub for programming data and creating exhibits. Finally, we thank Daniella Van Gennep, who designed the report, and the publications staff at MDRC, especially Christopher Boland, who edited the report, and Carolyn Thomas and Ann Kottner, who prepared it for publication.

The Authors

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Behavioral Interventions to Advance Self-Sufficiency (BIAS) project is the first major opportunity to use a behavioral economics lens to examine programs that serve poor and vulnerable families in the United States. Sponsored by the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation of the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, and led by MDRC, the project applies behavioral insights to issues related to the operations, implementation, and efficacy of social service programs and policies. The goal is to learn how tools from behavioral science can be used to deliver programs more effectively and, ultimately, improve the well-being of low-income children, adults, and families.

This report presents findings from a behavioral intervention, developed in collaboration with the Washington State Division of Child Support (DCS), to increase the number of incarcerated noncustodial parents in Washington who apply for modifications to reduce the amount of their child support orders.¹ This request is the first step in obtaining an order modification.

This study builds on previous BIAS work in Texas that also sought to increase the percentage of incarcerated noncustodial parents seeking order modifications. Findings from the Texas study indicated that behaviorally informed outreach and more targeted messaging can increase requests for modifications.² The Washington study expands on this work. It was conducted in a different policy environment than the one in Texas and in a context where there have not been systematic efforts to increase modifications among incarcerated noncustodial parents. As with the work in Texas, this study evaluates whether a behaviorally informed set of communications and process changes can improve the modification request process. Additionally, the Washington study builds on the work in Texas by examining the number of incarcerated parents who receive modifications to their support orders.

Order Modification Policy and Process in Washington

DCS's interpretation of Washington statute is that incarceration renders individuals unemployable, and therefore qualifies incarcerated parents for a review of their child support order amount.³ Given the limited ability to pay that is associated with incarceration, maintaining the same child support orders can lead to accumulation of substantial arrearages.

Noncustodial parents' child support orders are not automatically modified upon incarceration in Washington. The onus is on the incarcerated parent to request a modification. DCS did not have a systematic method for informing incarcerated noncustodial parents that they may be eligible for a modification. Thus, parents might not know that they were eligible if they did not receive timely and clear information about modifications.

1 This report employs the term "noncustodial parent" because it is widely used by child support policymakers and researchers. However, not all parents without custody owe child support and those parents who do owe child support may have joint or sole custody of their children.

2 Mary Farrell, Caitlin Anzelone, Dan Cullinan, and Jessica Wille, *Taking the First Step: Using Behavioral Economics to Help Incarcerated Parents Apply for Child Support Order Modifications*, OPRE Report 2014-37 (Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2014).

3 Revised Code of Washington 26.09.170.

Incarcerated parents often have substantial current support obligations. DCS data showed that the average monthly order amount among this population was over \$200. Moreover, these parents frequently have thousands of dollars in existing child support debt. Before the BIAS study, a review of DCS data showed that 5 percent of eligible incarcerated parents had requested a modification following their most recent incarceration date.⁴

Behavioral Intervention

The intervention, which the research team identified through a process of behavioral diagnosis and design, involved implementing a behaviorally informed communications strategy that specifically addressed critical bottlenecks identified in Washington's current modification request process. The intervention materials sought to encourage incarcerated noncustodial parents to complete and mail the request forms for a child support order review. The team hypothesized that a series of mailed intervention materials would increase the number of parents requesting and receiving order modifications.

The communications strategy that the team implemented for the study involved several phases. In order to address noncustodial parents' limited awareness of the ability to request a modification, it began with simple, electronic messages notifying them of the opportunity for a modification and a forthcoming modification packet in the mail. Shortly after sending the electronic message, DCS staff mailed a follow-up reminder letter notifying parents to check their electronic message account so they would see the message. Following the reminder letter, DCS automatically mailed modification packets to noncustodial parents, avoiding the need for parents to request a packet. DCS also prepopulated the application with any available information, such as name, address, and case number. The modification packet included a one-page tip sheet aimed at addressing the cognitive load (or overburdened mental resources) associated with completing the packet. The tip sheet gave suggestions in simple language for how to fill out forms. It was tailored to incarcerated parents, including suggestions for how to address questions on the forms that might not have a straightforward answer. The modification packet also included a postage-paid, pre-addressed envelope to use to return the forms. Finally, DCS sent follow-up electronic messages to parents reminding them to submit the forms.

Findings

The test focused on 827 noncustodial parents who were incarcerated in Washington prisons and randomly assigned them to one of two groups — the BIAS (program) group or a control group. The BIAS group received the intervention materials, and the control group experienced DCS's typical approach to interaction with incarcerated parents, which consisted of ad hoc outreach and written materials sent to parents who requested them.

The randomization occurred between February and May 2015. The research team used administrative data to track outcomes for three months following random assignment.⁵ For example, participants randomly assigned in February were followed through the end of April.

This behavioral intervention demonstrates the potential to increase requests for order modifications among incarcerated parents. The use of a coordinated messaging strategy mapped to critical behavioral bottlenecks resulted in positive increases in requests for modifications, the percentage of requests that contained the necessary information to pass the initial stage of the process, and the total number of modifications granted.

Table ES.1 shows key outcomes from the test. The intervention increased the percentage of parents requesting modifications by 32 percentage points, from 9 percent for the control group to 41 percent for the BIAS group, a difference that is statistically significant.

⁴ This number is based on a September 2014 analysis.

⁵ In addition, the research team collected outcome data for six months post-random assignment for the first cohort.

TABLE ES.1
APPLICATION AND MODIFICATION OUTCOMES,
THREE-MONTH FOLLOW-UP

WASHINGTON STATE DIVISION OF CHILD SUPPORT

OUTCOME	PROGRAM GROUP	CONTROL GROUP	DIFFERENCE	STANDARD ERROR
Application submitted (%)	41.3	9.4	31.9***	2.9
Application forwarded to prosecutor or claims officer team (%)	33.9	7.8	26.1***	2.7
Modification granted (%)	18.3	2.3	16.0***	2.1
Sample size	411	416		

SOURCE: MDRC calculations using Washington State Division of Child Support data.

NOTES: A two-tailed t-test was applied to differences between research groups. Statistical significance levels are indicated as: *** = 1 percent; ** = 5 percent; * = 10 percent.

Estimates are adjusted for noncustodial parents' baseline corrections system facility and monthly child support obligation to increase precision.

Rounding may cause slight discrepancies in differences.

There was also a large, statistically significant impact on the number of applications that caseworkers deemed complete and forwarded to the next stage of the modification process. Eight percent of the control group completed an application and had it processed, compared with 34 percent of the BIAS group who completed an application and had it processed. This difference represents a 26 percentage point impact on forwarded applications — over a fourfold increase.

The large, significant impacts on those two most proximal outcomes translated into an impact on a more distal outcome: successful modification of an order. Two percent of the control group had a modification granted during the three months of outcome tracking, but 18 percent of the BIAS group did, resulting in a statistically significant 16 percentage point impact on modifications granted.

The findings from this test suggest that factors such as parents' lack of awareness of the process for requesting a modification, the multiple steps associated with requesting an order modification, and the complexity of these steps may be substantial barriers to incarcerated parents requesting order modifications. Moreover, the findings suggest that a behaviorally informed approach may substantially increase the number of parents requesting modifications.

Behavioral economics provides a new way of thinking about the design of human service programs and a potentially powerful set of tools for improving program outcomes. The BIAS project offers the opportunity for continued hypothesis-testing grounded in behavioral economics and takes advantage of low-cost experimentation, which can include iterative, rapid-cycle tests. In addition to this and previous research (see the list of previously published research at the back of this report), the BIAS project is publishing a final synthesis report in early 2017.

Two additional projects are building on the BIAS project. ACF's Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation is sponsoring the BIAS Next Generation project, which will expand the use of behavioral science to a wider range of ACF programs, go beyond testing simple “nudges,” include more implementation research, and develop tools to help program administrators and operators apply lessons from behavioral science to their work. Results from the BIAS Next Generation evaluations will be published as they become available to further inform this rapidly developing field. Additionally, in 2014, the Office of Child Support Enforcement launched a major initiative called Behavioral Interventions for Child Support Services (BICS). In the ongoing BICS demonstration project, MDRC and its partners are working with eight child support agencies to build on the early lessons from the BIAS project and apply insights from behavioral science to engage parents positively and improve program performance.

EARLIER PUBLICATIONS

from the Behavioral Interventions to Advance Self-Sufficiency (BIAS) Project

Cutting Through Complexity: Using Behavioral Science to Improve Indiana's Child Care Subsidy Program
2016. Dechausay, Nadine, and Caitlin Anzelone. OPRE Report 2016-03. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

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2016. Farrell, Mary, Jared Smith, Leigh Reardon, and Emmi Obara. OPRE Report 2016-02. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

Nudges for Child Support: Applying Behavioral Insights to Increase Collections
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Engaging Providers and Clients: Using Behavioral Economics to Increase On-Time Child Care Subsidy Renewals
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Taking the First Step: Using Behavioral Economics to Help Incarcerated Parents Apply for Child Support Order Modifications
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Behavioral Economics and Social Policy: Designing Innovative Solutions for Programs Supported by the Administration for Children and Families

2014. Richburg-Hayes, Lashawn, Caitlin Anzelone, Nadine Dechausay, Saugato Datta, Alexandra Fiorillo, Louis Potok, Matthew Darling, and John Balz. OPRE Report 2014-16a. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

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