



The Behavioral  
Interventions for Child  
Support Services  
(BICS) Project

# TOOLS FOR BETTER PRACTICES AND BETTER OUTCOMES

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# Overview

The federal Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE) created the Behavioral Interventions for Child Support Services (BICS) demonstration in 2014. The goals of the demonstration were to use insights from behavioral science to develop interventions that could improve child support services and increase parent engagement, and to encourage the rapid-cycle testing of these strategies, leading to further improvements. In the process, the project aimed to build the participating child support programs' capabilities in behavioral science and evaluation and support these and other child support programs in replicating and implementing effective practices. Child support agencies in California, Colorado, the District of Columbia, Georgia, Ohio, Texas, Vermont, and Washington participated as grantees.

The project addressed several common operational challenges that may create barriers to the successful establishment, enforcement, and modification of child support orders. The child support process can be difficult for parents to navigate, for example, given the complex legal language and lengthy forms involved, and parents may perceive their interactions with child support agencies to be adversarial. The 22 interventions, tested by the grantees in two phases, used a range of design principles from behavioral science — for example, simplification, personalization, and reminders — to address these challenges. One program simplified the initial paperwork sent to the parents required to pay child support, providing clearer language and instructions on next steps. Another program held in-person meetings with parents to help them understand their payment options and make plans for ongoing payment. A third program assigned particular staff members to help parents navigate the process of requesting modifications of their child support order amounts and complete the necessary forms.

Findings from the demonstration include the following:

- Outreach and communication informed by behavioral science can make parents more likely to respond to outreach, attend in-person meetings, submit required forms, and make initial payments on new orders.
- Interventions directed at a specific activity, such as encouraging parents to attend a meeting at the child support office, can affect outcomes related to that activity, but will not necessarily affect other outcomes at later points in the child support process, such as longer-term payment rates.
- The interventions' effects are typically modest in size, but they are also inexpensive to implement.
- Interventions informed by behavioral science do not always have the intended effects, highlighting the need to continue testing and refining practices.

The BICS project demonstrates the significant potential for behavioral science to improve child support services for parents and staff members. Each of the participating agencies has since incorporated concepts from behavioral science into ongoing program operations. In addition, the grantees, along with OCSE, are mentoring additional states and localities as they attempt to improve their services and meet their goal of securing support for children.

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## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of the child support program is to secure financial support for children whose parents live apart. The program served over 15 million children and their families in 2017. The federal Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE) in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services partners with state, tribal, and local child support agencies to promote effective child support services. Core child support program functions include establishing paternity, establishing and enforcing child support orders, and collecting and distributing payments.

Under federal oversight, states, territories, and tribes administer the child support program in their jurisdictions, and there is substantial variation among jurisdictions (called states throughout, for simplicity) in how they do so. Guided by federal and state laws and regulations, as well as judicial and administrative structures, child support processes are typically complicated and legalistic.

These processes can be confusing and opaque for parents, which may discourage parents from participating in them. The materials, forms, and communications that parents receive often include legal terms that are difficult to understand. Overwhelmed by the legal terminology and volume of information, parents may not comprehend the steps they need to take to fulfill child support requirements. Parents may also have negative perceptions of the child support program, particularly if their initial interactions with it cast them as defendants in court cases. In this context, parents' decisions and actions may not be in their best interest or their children's, and the consequences of these actions can have long-lasting legal, financial, and emotional impacts on families.

All people tend to become overwhelmed when faced with large amounts of information. We have limited attention spans, procrastinate, avoid activities we view as punitive or that engender negative feelings, and forget to follow through on obligations.<sup>1</sup> Behavioral science sheds light on these basic human tendencies and can help explain why people act the way they do within a given system or program. This information can help program designers identify which program features create behavioral “bottlenecks,” or points in the process with notable declines in participation, and develop solutions.

OCSE created the Behavioral Interventions for Child Support Services (BICS) demonstration in 2014, awarding grants to child support agencies in California, Colorado, the District of Columbia, Georgia, Ohio, Texas, Vermont, and Washington. OCSE had several goals for BICS:

- Use insights from behavioral science to develop interventions that may improve child support services and increase parent engagement
- Encourage rapid-cycle tests that may lead to further improvements in child support services
- Build grantees' capabilities in behavioral science and evaluation methods

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Thaler and Sunstein (2008).

- Support state child support agencies in expanding or replicating successful interventions
- Provide the broader child support community with findings and lessons learned

In addition to the demonstration grants, OCSE also awarded an evaluation grant to the State of Washington’s Division of Child Support (DCS). DCS issued a contract to MDRC (in collaboration with MEF Associates and the Center for Policy Research) to form a Technical Assistance and Evaluation (TAE) team that provided overarching support to grantees in each of three phases of the demonstration (described below).

In the first of the BICS demonstration’s three phases, each grantee worked closely with the TAE team to identify a problem of interest, conduct a process to define goals called “behavioral diagnosis and design,” implement at least one intervention, and evaluate it, leading to 12 separate evaluations.<sup>2</sup> The Phase I interventions were evaluated using random assignment research designs that examined effects on short-term measures of engagement, such as attendance at meetings or payments over the few months after the intervention. The grantees had a more independent role in Phase II, using the early findings from Phase I to develop new interventions. Six of the ten interventions in Phase II were evaluated using random assignment, three were evaluated using other methods such as nonexperimental comparison groups and implementation studies, and one was not evaluated at all. In the third phase, called the Integration Phase, grantees worked closely with OCSE and the Washington Division of Child Support to develop additional interventions as well as plans for integrating elements of behavioral science into their standard practices moving forward.

This report describes the BICS interventions and their findings. It presents major operational challenges in child support and several tools informed by behavioral science that were used by the participating child support agencies to address those challenges. The report then provides an overview of findings from each of the evaluated interventions and lessons for the child support community and the broader field of behavioral science.

## **OVERVIEW OF CHILD SUPPORT AND COMMON OPERATIONAL CHALLENGES**

### **Child Support Overview**

Child support involves several core functions: (1) opening cases and, if necessary, establishing paternity; (2) establishing child support order amounts; (3) collecting and processing payments and enforcing child support obligations; and (4) modifying orders over time, if necessary. In some states, child support is managed primarily through judicial processes (involving courts and court officials) while in others it is managed primarily through administrative processes (involving state or county agencies and staff members). Some states have a combination of both. Although the specific processes vary across states, they typically have certain steps in common. The descriptions below are illustrations of these steps and are meant to reflect the child support program broadly. They may not be accurate for every state.

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<sup>2</sup> Some grantees tested more than one intervention in the first round of tests.



- **Opening cases and establishing paternity.** Most cases open when a parent applies for support directly or applies for a public benefit that triggers an automatic referral to the child support agency (for example, cash assistance through the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program, and in some states, Medicaid, food assistance through the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program, and subsidized child care). In many states, staff members attempt to locate and make contact with the custodial and noncustodial parents.<sup>3</sup> Depending on the state, this contact may consist of a phone call, a letter, an invitation to an in-person meeting, or a combination of these methods. Staff members also determine whether paternity has been established and work to establish paternity if needed.
- **Notifying parents and establishing orders.** Child support agencies make contact with custodial and noncustodial parents to begin the order establishment process, part of which involves determining the appropriate monthly order amount.<sup>4</sup> States take various approaches to this step, although parents are typically provided notice through a formal legal mechanism known as “service of process,” commonly called “service.” The service package, often delivered by certified mail — or, in some cases, by a law enforcement officer, private contractor, or in-house process server — notifies the noncustodial parent that he or she has been named as the parent of the child and that a legal proceeding has been initiated. This notice typically gives the noncustodial parent information about the pending legal action and requirements for a response to that legal action. In some states, the child support agency may invite parents to a meeting in order to try to reach agreement on the order amount. In some states the notice may include a proposed child support order amount, and if neither parent contests that amount, it goes into effect by default.
- **Collecting and processing payments and enforcing obligations.** Once an order is established, the noncustodial parent is responsible for payments. If the child support agency is aware of the parent’s employer, the agency sends an income-withholding notice to the employer and the employer will begin withholding payments from the parent’s earnings and submit them to the child support agency. If payments are not being received through income withholding, the noncustodial parent must make payments through the child support agency. The payments are then disbursed to the custodial parent.<sup>5</sup> Child support agencies have a variety of options to enforce child support orders when noncustodial parents do not pay what they owe. They can put liens on property, in which the property can be taken if the child support debt is not paid; suspend drivers’ licenses; seize personal funds in bank accounts; intercept tax refunds; or initiate civil contempt proceedings that require parents to appear in court to determine next steps.
- **Modifying orders, if appropriate.** When there is a substantial change in a parent’s income or living situation, either parent can request that the order be reviewed for possible modification. While all states have formal processes for case review and modification, those processes vary.

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3 Noncustodial parents are also sometimes called obligors; they are the parties who have been ordered to pay child support. Parents who receive child support are described as “custodial parents.”

4 All states have guidelines that are used to set order amounts based on both parents’ income and other factors. For more information, see National Conference of State Legislatures (2019).

5 When the custodial parent is receiving cash assistance, some or all of child support paid may go to the state as reimbursement for those public-assistance costs.

Usually, the modification process aligns the order with the state’s support guidelines, and it is the responsibility of the parent seeking modification to contact the agency to adjust the order.

## Common Operational Challenges

Agencies face many challenges as they establish, enforce, and modify child support orders. As BICS grantees identified problems and developed interventions, they focused on operational issues and challenges that appeared to be common to multiple child support agencies.

- **One or both parents can perceive the initial contact as adversarial.** Custodial parents may have negative views of the child support program if they receive public benefits and are thus mandated to cooperate with the program or face penalties. Noncustodial parents may also be likely to feel like child support is against them as they are commonly in the position of responding to legal and administrative actions imposed on them by the child support program. One of the first communications some parents receive from a child support agency comes as part of a service package and is framed as a lawsuit against them, casting them as litigants rather than parents and emphasizing the sanctions they will face if they fail to comply. In Georgia, for example, the summons may be delivered to the parent at home or at work by a law enforcement officer. In California, the first page of the service package names the parent as a defendant in a court case.
- **Lengthy forms and complex legal language may create confusion and avoidance.** Initial mailings or meetings with staff members often present parents with overwhelming amounts of information in terms that are difficult to understand. The Vermont service package is dense and uses legal terms such as “plaintiff,” “defendant,” and “parentage,” to describe the parents and their statuses. The forms in Ohio are similarly dense with legal terms and use the phrases such as “health insurance obligor” and “child support obligor” to refer to the noncustodial parent. Research has shown that individuals are more likely to understand and comply with information when it is provided in plain language rather than in legal language.<sup>6</sup> The length of the communications can also be a hurdle — the service package in California, for example, is 41 pages, and the package in Washington is roughly 15 pages.
- **Written communication can bury useful and relevant information.** Child support agencies may be legally required to convey a lot of information to parents, sometimes in a limited amount of space and time, and the information that parents need the most is often buried or left out entirely. In California, for example, the form that parents must review and complete if they want to request a hearing or contest an order amount does not appear until page 26 of 41 in the service package. During order establishment meetings in Texas, child support staff members make a priority of discussing the steps for setting order amounts and completing legal documents. As a result, parents may leave those meetings knowing how much they are now required to pay but not how to make payments.
- **Child support processes can be difficult to navigate.** The processes for establishing orders, modifying them, and setting up and making initial payments can be burdensome. In Vermont,

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6 Kimble (2012).

for example, the service package is sent to noncustodial parents by certified mail, which means they must go the post office if they are not home to receive it. In Colorado, there are at least eight different ways to make payments, some of which charge fees, but the staff has no set process to help parents understand or navigate these choices. In Ohio, obtaining a modification requires two rounds of paperwork from parents and can take more than three months. For the review, parents must provide W-2s and tax forms for the last three years and pay stubs for the last six pay periods, in addition to filling out an eight-page application documenting their employment, income, deductions, and health insurance.

## BEHAVIORAL SCIENCE AND THE BICS INTERVENTIONS

Policymakers and program designers often operate in a framework based on the assumption that individuals will have the time and capacity to review and understand relevant information and make informed, rational decisions, comparing the benefits and costs of their actions. If that were the case, however, the operational challenges outlined above would not present such large barriers to parents' participation in the child support process. Behavioral science has highlighted that people do not always behave as fully informed, rational actors for a variety of reasons.

Based on work in economics, psychology, and other social sciences, behavioral science offers a more realistic view of how individuals make decisions and illustrates that even small program challenges can create large hurdles to participation for the individuals the programs are designed to serve. In fact, a substantial body of research demonstrates that interventions informed by behavioral science can have effects in a variety of contexts, such as retirement savings, financial aid applications, medication adherence, child care subsidy application renewals, and healthy eating.<sup>7</sup>

In the context of child support, interaction with the program can involve multiple, lengthy steps. At each step, people may put off action and sometimes eventually forget to act. Parents may also exhibit avoidance — ignoring behaviors or information deemed unpleasant, such as punitive communications from child support or negative interactions with the other parent. All people, but especially those under financial stress, have a limited ability to navigate and engage with complicated systems, so lengthy and legalistic communications from child support may be challenging for parents to understand.<sup>8</sup>

These behavioral tendencies can have negative effects on the individuals and families involved, and on the programs that serve them, so that programs cannot carry out in practice what their policies intend. Behavioral science offers several principles that can be used to improve program design and operational efficiency. These concepts of behavioral science were used in BICS:

- **Simplification:** Shorten and streamline materials, communications, and processes when possible, given individuals' limited capacity to absorb and process complex information.

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<sup>7</sup> For example, see Bettinger, Long, Oreopoulos, and Sanbonmatsu (2012); Schwartz (2007); Madrian and Shea (2001); Volpp et al. (2008); Bhargava and Manoli (2015); Richburg-Hayes, Anzelone, and Dechausay (2017).

<sup>8</sup> Mullainathan and Shafir (2013).

- **Personalization:** Nudge people toward particular behaviors through in-person assistance or personalized written communication.
- **Implementation prompts:** Connect individuals' intentions with their actions by helping them identify and plan next steps.
- **Loss aversion:** Emphasize the losses associated with inaction, given that individuals tend to prefer avoiding losses over acquiring gains of a similar size.<sup>9</sup>
- **Identity priming:** Encourage individuals to focus on one of the many roles that define them (for example, "parent"), to motivate them to engage in behaviors associated with that role.
- **Reminders/follow-up:** Provide reminders through repeated contact, to help people overcome procrastination and barriers to taking next steps.
- **Dates and deadlines:** Make dates prominent and set deadlines to call attention to action and mitigate the tendency to procrastinate.
- **Social influence:** Promote actions by conveying how society, peers, or a person of influence would act.

## The BICS Interventions and Findings

Each of the BICS grantees developed interventions using one or more of these design principles. In most cases, materials and processes were simplified. In some interventions, the losses associated with inaction were also highlighted, and in others, individuals were primed to think of themselves as parents. Several interventions included reminders to take next steps or make payments.

In addition to behavioral science, a few interventions also used principles from the field of procedural justice, which is based on the idea that individuals' perception of the fairness of an administrative or legal process and how they are treated during the process affects how they respond to it. The central principles of procedural justice are respect, neutrality, helpfulness, individual understanding, and individual voice. This approach has produced significant increases in compliance and long-term rule-following behavior in criminal justice and judicial settings and could also be beneficial in the child support context.<sup>10</sup>

Figure 1 presents a general summary of the grantees and their interventions. The grantees are located across the country, and the interventions occur at different points in the child support process and use different methods.

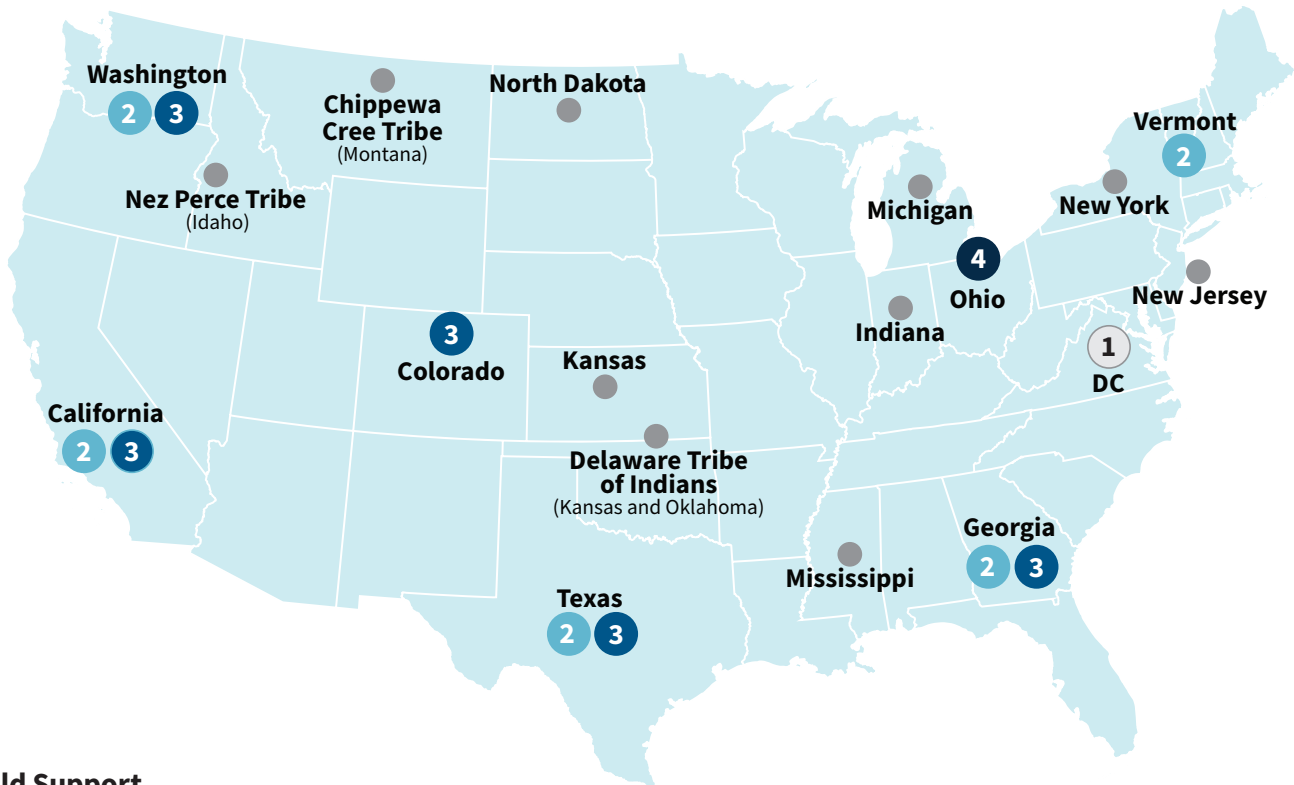
Most interventions were evaluated using random assignment designs, in which eligible cases or parents were assigned at random to the intervention group, who received the intervention, or the control group, who received business-as-usual services (see Figure 2). Random assignment

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<sup>9</sup> Tversky and Kahneman (1991).

<sup>10</sup> Berman and Gold LaGratta (2012).

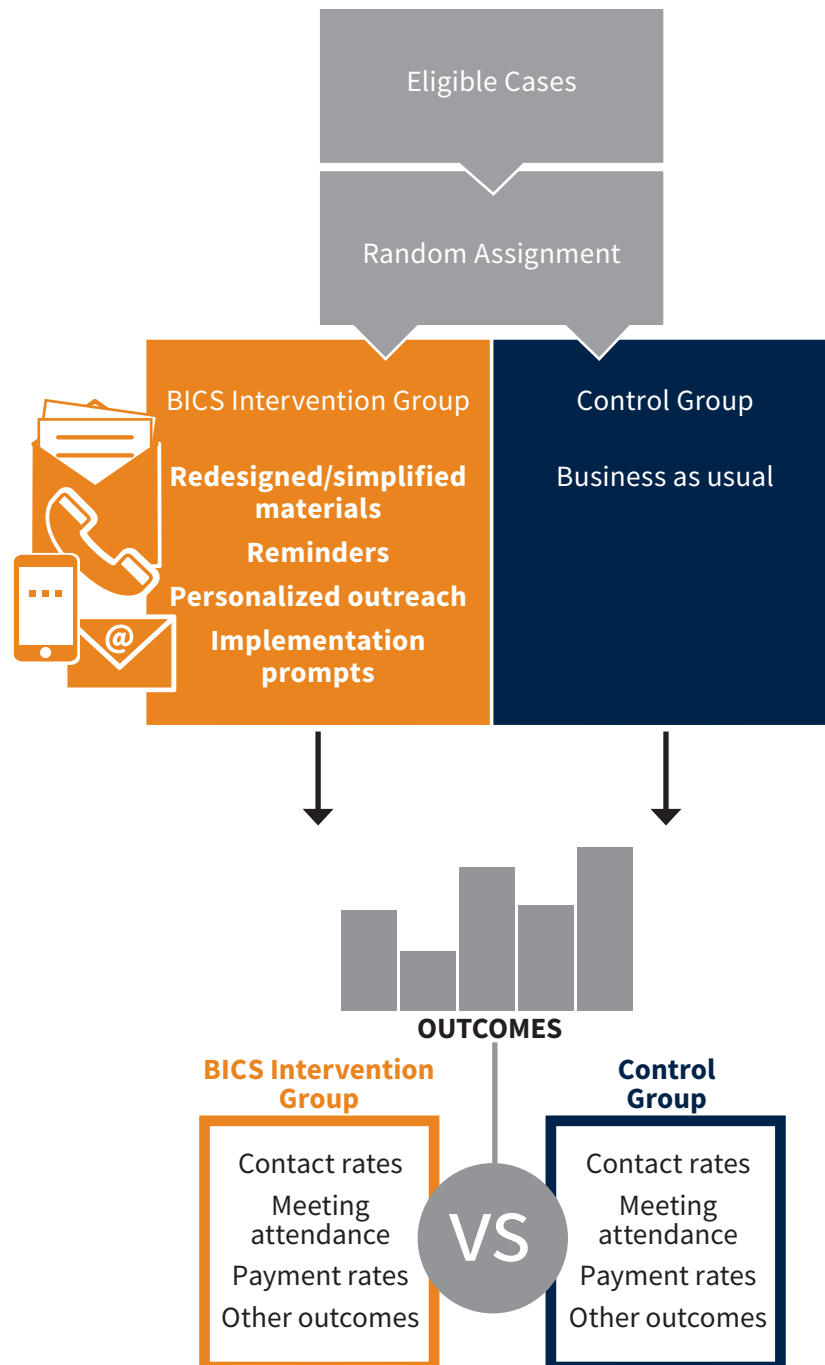
Figure 1. Map of BICS Locations



**Child Support Process Stage**

1	OPENING CASES	DC1, DC2, DC3	Custodial parent applies for child support or public assistance
2	ESTABLISHING ORDERS	CA1, GA1, VT1, WA1, CA2/SJ, TX2, VT2	Person named as noncustodial parent is “served” (receives legal documents), initiating the process to set the order amount
3	COLLECTING SUPPORT	CO1, TX1, CA2/SAC, CO2, GA2, WA2	Noncustodial parents must make payments as ordered
4	MODIFYING ORDERS	OH1/CUY, OH1/FR, OH2/CUY, OH2/FR, OH3, OH4	Orders may be modified over time to reflect changes in financial or other family circumstances

NOTE: In an effort to broaden the reach of the BICS project beyond the original eight grantees, OCSE developed the idea of establishing “BICS peer learning sites.” BICS peer learning sites were paired with grantees to develop and test interventions based on behavioral science that address operational problems of interest to them. BICS peer learning sites are discussed in more detail later in this report. They are shown on this map as dark gray dots.

**Figure 2. Random Assignment Diagram**

provides the most credible evidence of intervention effects. Each section of this report includes an impact table presenting estimated effects on targeted outcomes and other outcomes (hypothesized in advance to be affected by the intervention) for those interventions that were evaluated using random assignment. Only effects that are statistically significant, marked with asterisks, are considered effects of the intervention.<sup>11</sup> With the exception of the interventions in Washington, DC, which were not previously described in a stand-alone, published brief, findings from interventions that were evaluated using other methods are discussed briefly in the text but are not presented in the impact tables. These findings are considered suggestive only.

Each of the interventions was guided by a theory of change, which hypothesized that changes informed by behavioral science affecting a specific part of the child support process would have effects on one or two near-term, targeted outcomes. Examples of targeted outcomes include the percentage of parents who responded to outreach or who attended meetings, and the percentage of cases where parents reached agreements on orders. Most agencies in the demonstration also believed that positive effects on targeted outcomes would lead to positive effects later in the child support process and ultimately on longer-term payment rates. However, since BICS emphasized short evaluation time frames, its findings provide limited evidence on longer-term outcomes. Only a few tests estimated interventions' effects on outcomes beyond the near term or on payment rates beyond the first few months.

The project team published briefs describing each of the Phase I interventions and their findings. One-page summaries of all interventions (in Phase I and Phase II) are presented in Appendix A. The discussion below summarizes the interventions and their findings. It is organized in sections titled according to the step in the child support process in which the intervention took place. Each intervention is identified by the state abbreviation of the grantee and the order in which the grantee implemented the intervention. (For example, the first Vermont intervention implemented is identified as VT1.) Each section presents a general summary of the issue each intervention hoped to address, its central components, and its effects, if any.

### ***Opening Cases: Custodial Parent Responding to Outreach/Attending Intake Meetings***

The three interventions in this group, all located in the District of Columbia (DC), are the only ones that specifically targeted custodial parents (see Tables 1 and 2). They addressed two issues. First, some custodial parents who are eligible for child support services may not know that they are eligible and may not engage with the agency. Two of the interventions (DC1 and DC2) targeted custodial parents receiving Medicaid. These parents, whose cases had been referred to child support years ago but whom the child support agency had never reached, were eligible for services but had never applied for help to pursue paternity or child support. Because these parents' cases were relatively old, the child support agency hoped to engage with them either to close the cases or to pursue services on their behalf.

The second issue, targeted by the DC3 intervention, is that many recipients of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) are eligible for and required to cooperate with child support services but do not take all the steps necessary to start the process. In particular, despite receiving

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<sup>11</sup> Differences in outcomes between the program and control group that are statistically significant are unlikely to have arisen by chance.

**Table 1. Summary of BICS Tests Related to Opening Cases Responding to Outreach/Attending Intake Meetings**

<b>Issue</b>	<b>Goal</b>	<b>Test</b>	<b>Intervention</b>	<b>Positive Effect</b>
Many low-income single parents receiving Medicaid are eligible to receive child support services but do not engage with the child support agency.	Increase custodial parent contact with the child support agency, so the agency can either close parents' cases or provide services	DC1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Outreach letter informed by behavioral science</li> <li>• Robocall reminder</li> <li>• Postcard sent to nonresponders</li> </ul>	Y
		DC2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Same as DC 1, plus reminder texts with the option to respond by text</li> </ul>	Y
Many custodial parents receiving TANF do not attend the child support intake meeting or supply the documents necessary to start the process.	Increase the number of custodial parents who attend the intake meeting with relevant documents	DC3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Appointment letter informed by behavioral science</li> <li>• Initial and reminder texts</li> <li>• Reminders once per month for three months</li> </ul>	NA

NOTE: The final column indicates whether the evaluation of that intervention detected positive and statistically significant effects on at least one outcome of interest. "NA" indicates that the intervention was not evaluated using a randomized controlled trial. The Washington, DC interventions are discussed in greater detail than other interventions that did not involve randomized controlled trials because they have not previously been described in a stand-alone brief.

warnings of penalties if they do not comply, many parents do not attend required intake meetings or provide the paperwork needed to make their cases ready for court.

All three interventions included outreach informed by behavioral science that provided parents with information on their options and encouraged them to take the next steps. The outcomes measured for the first two tests (DC1 and DC2) included the percentage of parents who responded to outreach, the percentage who submitted applications, and the percentage of cases where paternity was established. The second test (DC2), which provided the option for parents to respond by text message, was not evaluated using a randomized controlled trial, so only the findings from DC1 are shown in Table 2. However, the results from DC2 suggest that the intervention that did include text messages may have had larger effects on parents' responses. The third intervention (DC3), targeting parents receiving TANF, was not evaluated.



**Table 2. Impacts on Selected Outcomes Related to Opening Cases Responding to Outreach/Attending Intake Meetings**

<b>Outcome</b>	<b>Intervention Impact DC1</b>
<b>Targeted outcome (%)</b>	
Custodial parents respond to outreach	3.8**
<b>Other outcomes (%)</b>	
Child support services application submitted	1.9**
Paternity established	-1.3
Net cost (\$)	NA

SOURCE: MDRC calculations are based on data from the Washington, DC Support Services Division.

NOTES: Estimates in this table are regression-adjusted, controlling for pre-random assignment characteristics.

Statistical significance levels are indicated as: \*\*\* = 1 percent; \*\* = 5 percent; \* = 10 percent.

Net costs were estimated for each of the interventions in Phase I tests except for Washington, DC and Ohio.

“NA” indicates that costs were not estimated.

### Highlighted Findings

- **Additional outreach informed by behavioral science can increase responses from custodial parents.**

The intervention that targeted Medicaid recipients (DC1) more than doubled the rate at which custodial parents made contact with the agency: 6.9 percent of parents in the intervention group made any form of contact with the agency compared with 3.2 percent of parents in the control group, for an impact of 3.8 percentage points. The second test (DC2) was assessed by comparing the outcome measures of a single group at two points in time. Offering the option to request child support services by text message increased contact from the first point in time to the second by 10.7 percentage points (not shown in the table) more than tripling the existing rate. The latter intervention was not evaluated using random assignment, so the findings are only suggestive.

- **There were minimal effects on other outcomes beyond initial contact.**

There were small increases in applications submitted but no effects on the number of child support requests submitted to court (not shown in the table) or on paternity-establishment rates. There may not have been effects on these other outcomes because no intervention elements were designed to affect these outcomes specifically. Alternatively, because these Medicaid-only cases were very old, having been referred to child support years ago, the parents may have been very unlikely to pursue support even with additional help.

■ **It is challenging to reach custodial parents whose child support cases are very old.**

An important implementation challenge for the interventions that targeted Medicaid recipients with old cases was making phone contact with parents. Many of the phone numbers on file for parents were missing, disconnected, or incorrect. Robocall reminders did not go through for many parents in the DC1 test, and only one in five parents received text messages in DC2.

***Establishing Orders: Responding to Service***

The interventions in this category also focused on early engagement, but targeted noncustodial parents after child support cases were opened (see Tables 3 and 4). Specifically, they focused on the point at which parents are served notice that a child support order is being established. The goal was to increase the rate at which parents responded to this notice, increasing their engagement in the process.

**Table 3. Summary of BICS Tests Related to Establishing Orders  
Responding to Service**

Issue	Goal	Test		Positive Effect
Many noncustodial parents do not respond to the service package, resulting in orders being set by default.	Increase the number of parents who respond to the service package by submitting Answer Forms and reduce the number of orders set by default	CA1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Revised service package with explanatory cover sheet listing next steps</li> <li>Answer Form moved forward in the service package</li> <li>Reminder phone calls</li> <li>Specialized staff members trained to deliver services to the intervention group</li> </ul>	Y
		CA2/SJ <sup>a</sup>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The same service-package modifications as CA1, but no reminder phone calls or dedicated staff members</li> </ul>	N
	Increase parent engagement in order establishment	WA1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Telephone outreach before service to provide an overview of the process, guided by a checklist</li> <li>Follow-up letter if no phone contact</li> <li>Service package cover sheet with clear instructions</li> <li>Specialized staff members trained to deliver services to this group</li> </ul>	N

NOTES: The final column indicates whether the evaluation of that intervention detected positive and statistically significant effects on at least one outcome of interest.

<sup>a</sup>This test took place only in San Joaquin County.

**Table 4. Impacts on Selected Outcomes Related to Establishing Orders Responding to Service**

Outcome	Intervention Impact		
	CA1	CA2/SJ <sup>a</sup>	WA1
<b>Targeted outcomes (%)</b>			
Answer Form submitted	3.1 **	-1.3	
Order established by stipulation/agreement	3.2 **	0.6	-1.8
Order established by default	2.1	4.0 **	1.3
<b>Other outcomes</b>			
Noncustodial parent served (%)	5 ***	4.3 **	-0.5
Order established (%)	5.3 ***	3.4 *	0.1
Paid child support, Months 1-6 (%)	2.4 **	2.4	1.0
Total payments, Months 1-6 (\$)	29 *	30	-78
Paid child support, Months 1-12 (%)	1.7		0.6
Total payments, Months 1-12 (\$)	92 **		-229
Net cost (\$)	11.06 <sup>b</sup>	NA	11.09

SOURCES: MDRC calculations are based on data from the California State Department of Child Support Services Data Repository and the Washington State Division of Child Support.

NOTES: Estimates in this table are regression-adjusted, controlling for pre-random assignment characteristics.

Statistical significance levels are indicated as: \*\*\* = 1 percent; \*\* = 5 percent; \* = 10 percent.

Cells that are filled gray indicate that impacts were not examined for that outcome.

Net costs were estimated for each of the interventions in Phase I tests except for Washington, DC and Ohio. Vermont net costs were not available due to incomplete data. (Net costs are calculated as the total cost of the intervention per intervention group member minus the total cost of business as usual per control group member.)

“NA” indicates that costs were not estimated.

<sup>a</sup>This Phase II test took place only in San Joaquin County.

<sup>b</sup>This figure is the average of the per-participant costs in Sacramento (\$7.65) and San Joaquin (\$14.46) counties. For more details on county-specific costs, see Gaffney, Fishman, and Smith (2019).

The interventions (CA1, CA2/SJ, and WA1) used outreach informed by behavioral science, simplified service package materials, and in one case made pre-service phone calls to parents. CA2/SJ tested a similar intervention as CA1, without the dedicated staff and follow-up phone calls. The states hypothesized that if noncustodial parents were more engaged, fewer orders would be set by default, more orders would be reached by agreement and would reflect parents’ ability to pay, and parents would be more likely to pay support.

All three interventions assessed effects on early engagement. In the two tests in California, the main outcome was the percentage of parents who responded to service by submitting an Answer Form, which parents must submit if they would like to request a hearing to contest a proposed order amount. In Washington, the main outcomes were the percentage of parents who requested hearings late in the process (after their orders were already established), the percentage of orders reached by agreement, and the percentage of parents who made payments.

### **Highlighted Findings**

- **Simplified communications materials may increase parent engagement, particularly among parents in groups with challenges to engagement.**

Both California interventions provided explainer sheets and moved the Answer Form to the front of the service package. Both led to positive effects on order establishment and, in one location, an increase in payment rates. However, these effects may be due to unexpected increases in the percentage of parents who received service packages in the first place, probably because staff members serving the intervention group made greater efforts to reach them. These unexpected “service effects” make it difficult to say whether the components of the intervention informed by behavioral science themselves led to increased payments. The CA1 intervention also translated the explainer sheet for parents whose primary language was Spanish, and it had very large effects for those parents. This finding suggests that increasing access through translation is an easy way to increase engagement.

- **Additional outreach and information have limitations.**

The intervention in Washington consisted of pre-service outreach and a cover sheet added to the service package. The evaluation did not find that this intervention affected engagement. There are at least two possible reasons. First, the pre-service phone calls may have been too far in advance of the process of setting orders and making payments to affect those outcomes. Parents may have needed additional follow-up calls as reminders or more assistance taking next steps. Second, the intervention may not have reached enough parents, particularly those who were less likely to be engaged. As noted in the next bullet, only about half of the parents had contact with the child support agency before being served.

- **Limited contact information can make it challenging for staff members to reach parents before service.**

In the Washington intervention, the child support agency only had valid phone numbers for about a third of parents when the intervention started, so the staff had to conduct additional research to obtain contact information. Staff members eventually reached 36 percent of the parents by phone before service, although another 14 percent of parents called the agency after receiving a voice mail message or letter.

### ***Establishing Orders: Attending In-Person Meetings***

The interventions in this category had the goal of encouraging noncustodial parents to come into the child support office for an in-person meeting, either to accept service voluntarily or to participate in an order-setting meeting (see Tables 5 and 6). These states hoped that engaging parents

**Table 5. Summary of BICS Tests Related to Establishing Orders  
Attending In Person Meetings**

<b>Issue</b>	<b>Goal</b>	<b>Test</b>	<b>Intervention</b>	<b>Positive Effect</b>
Many parents do not attend the initial order establishment meeting and do not reach agreement on orders with the other parent <sup>a</sup>	Increase the number of cases in which both parents attend an initial order establishment meeting (or modification meeting in Vermont) and reach agreement on an order	VT1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Invitation to the resolution meeting informed by behavioral science</li> <li>• Reminder calls before the meeting</li> <li>• Meeting held using procedural justice principles to help parents reach agreement on the order</li> </ul>	Y
		VT2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Similar intervention to VT1, plus \$25 transportation cards to meeting participants for gas or public transit</li> </ul>	NA
		TX2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Outreach to attend the meeting informed by behavioral science</li> <li>• Mail and email reminders</li> </ul>	NA
Few parents accept service voluntarily in the child support office	Increase the number of parents who accept service voluntarily by coming into the child support office	GA1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Redesigned initial notice encouraging parents to attend an in-person meeting to accept service, sent in an eye-catching envelope and including a calendar magnet</li> <li>• Reminder flyer one week later</li> <li>• In-person meeting using principles of behavioral science and procedural justice</li> </ul>	Y

NOTES: The final column indicates whether the evaluation of that intervention detected positive and statistically significant effects on at least one outcome of interest. “NA” indicates that the intervention was not evaluated using a randomized controlled trial.

<sup>a</sup>In Vermont, this initial meeting is referred to as a Case Manager Conference.

early would start the parents’ interaction with child support on a more positive note, reduce the number of orders set by default, and ultimately increase payment rates.

In Vermont, for example, both parents are expected to attend a case management conference at the court, but most do not. The VT1 intervention used mailings informed by behavioral science to encourage parents to come into a local office for a newly designed resolution meeting that took the

**Table 6. Impacts on Selected Outcomes Related to Establishing Orders Attending In Person Meetings**

Outcome	Intervention Impact	
	GA1	VT1
<b>Targeted outcomes (%)</b>		
Both parents participated in resolution meeting		8.4***
Order established by stipulation/agreement		11.3***
Accepted service voluntarily in person	8.2***	
<b>Other outcomes</b>		
Order established (%)	1.5	
Order set to amount lower than default amount (%)	0.6	
Total payments, Months 1-3 (\$)	15	
Net cost (\$)	9.02 <sup>a</sup>	Cost calculations unavailable

SOURCES: MDRC calculations are based on data from the Georgia Division of Child Support Services and the Vermont Office of Child Support internal management information system.

NOTES: Estimates in this table are regression-adjusted, controlling for pre-random assignment characteristics.

Statistical significance levels are indicated as: \*\*\* = 1 percent; \*\* = 5 percent; \* = 10 percent.

Cells that are filled gray indicate that impacts were not examined for that outcome.

Net costs were estimated for each of the interventions in Phase I tests except for Washington, DC and Ohio. Vermont cost calculations were not available due to incomplete data. (Net costs are calculated as the total cost of the intervention per intervention group member minus the total cost of business as usual per control group member.)

<sup>a</sup>This cost estimate is different from the Georgia cost reported in Anzelone, Timm, and Kusayeva (2018) because this estimate includes staff time as well as the cost of materials. The cost estimate presented in Anzelone, Timm, and Kusayeva (2018) presents the total cost of the materials per person for the intervention group.

place of the court meeting. Staff members who conducted the resolution meetings were trained to use principles from behavioral science and procedural justice to help parents reach a stipulation — agreement by both parents. The expectation was that if both parents attended a meeting, they would be more likely to reach an agreement that represented each of their interests and avoid a time-consuming and costly court hearing.

The GA1 intervention focused on noncustodial parents and encouraged them to accept service voluntarily by coming to the child support office for an in-person meeting, which then also followed principles of behavioral science and procedural justice.

The targeted outcome for these interventions was in-person meeting attendance (although phone participation was also allowed in VT1). Vermont also hoped to increase the number of orders established by reaching an agreement. Only the GA1 test was able to track effects on other outcomes, such as order establishment and initial payment rates.

### Highlighted Findings

- **Outreach informed by behavioral science can increase the percentage of parents who attend and engage in meetings.**

The GA1 intervention led to an increase in voluntary acceptance of service. The percentage of noncustodial parents in the intervention group who came into the child support office to accept service voluntarily was 8.2 percentage points (or 54 percent) higher than in the control group. VT1 also led to a large increase in the proportion of cases in which both parents attended a meeting.

- **Outreach combined with meetings held using principles of behavioral science and procedural justice can increase the number of parents who reach stipulation and, potentially, help them reach agreement sooner.**

The VT1 intervention almost doubled the percentage of orders reached by stipulation. The findings suggest that the intervention also sped up the agreement process. Parents in the intervention group who reached agreement did so, on average, after just one month. Parents in the control group who reached agreement did so after three months, on average. However, the intervention's effect on time to agreement is only suggestive, since it is nonexperimental.

- **Attendance at initial in-person meetings does not necessarily lead to effects on other outcomes.**

Although the GA1 intervention brought more noncustodial parents in for meetings to accept service voluntarily, it did not have effects on paternity establishment (not shown in the table), order establishment, or payment rates. There may not have been effects on these other outcomes because the encouragement to accept service voluntarily brought in parents who would have participated in establishing orders and made payments anyway, in the absence of the intervention. Alternatively, there may not have been effects because there were no intervention components aimed specifically at these other outcomes. The VT1 test did not examine effects on other outcomes as part of the formal evaluation.

### ***Engagement After Orders Are Established: Making Payments, Particularly Payments on New Orders***

Each of the interventions in this category had the goal of increasing payment rates after orders were established, and all but one focused on the first few months after orders were established (see Tables 7 and 8). As background, most child support payments are withheld from parents' paychecks, but it often takes one to three months for income withholding to begin. The main goal of these interventions was to increase payments in the first few months after orders were set, before income withholding started. Those payments provide critical support to custodial parents and children, and making payments helps noncustodial parents avoid accumulating debt and experiencing punitive enforcement actions.

**Table 7. Summary of BICS Tests Related to Engagement After Orders Are Established  
Making Payments**

<b>Issue</b>	<b>Goal</b>	<b>Test</b>	<b>Intervention</b>	<b>Positive Effect</b>
Initial payment rates on newly established orders are low.	Increase payment rates in the first few months after orders are established	CO1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In-person meeting after order establishment to discuss the consequences of nonpayment</li> <li>• A decision tree to help parents determine their payment methods</li> <li>• Payment reminders for three months</li> <li>• Wallet card with a parent's payment plan</li> </ul>	Y
		CA2/ SAC <sup>a</sup>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Explainer sheet listing required next steps</li> <li>• Action-plan implementation prompt with payment options outlined</li> <li>• In-person, phone, text, and email guidance, informed by behavioral science and procedural justice, during the first six months of the order, if needed</li> </ul>	N
		GA2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Simplified initial payment letter, followed by mailed reminders, with information on how much parents owed, how to make payments, and when payments were due</li> </ul>	Y
		WA2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Telephone outreach to review orders with parents, discuss the importance of payments, and develop payment plans with them</li> <li>• Letter informed by behavioral science laying out next steps and encouraging payment</li> <li>• Text-message payment reminder</li> </ul>	NA
		TX1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In-person meeting after order establishment to discuss the consequences of nonpayment and to help parents in selecting payment methods and making payment plans</li> <li>• Payment-information materials and a decision tree</li> <li>• A follow-up reminder call one week later to allow parents to make payments or answer any questions</li> </ul>	Y

(continued)



**Table 7 (continued)**

Issue	Goal	Test	Intervention	Positive Effect
Payment rates among parents with established orders are low.	Increase the percentage of parents who pay at least 90 percent of their order amounts each month	CO2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Payment reminders sent by text message twice per month</li> </ul>	N

NOTES: The final column indicates whether the evaluation of that intervention detected positive and statistically significant effects on at least one outcome of interest. “NA” indicates that the intervention was not evaluated using a randomized controlled trial.

<sup>a</sup>This test took place only in Sacramento County.

**Table 8. Impacts on Selected Outcomes Related to Engagement After Orders Are Established Making Payments**

Outcome	Intervention Impact				
	CO1	CA2/ SAC <sup>a</sup>	GA2	TX1	CO2
<b>Targeted outcomes</b>					
Paid support in Month 1 (%)	3.7	-3.7	3.1	4.9*	
Total payments Month 1 (\$)	16	-45**		17	
Paid support, Months 1-3 (%)	4.2	-3.2	2.2	2.2	
Total payments Months 1-3 (\$)	115**	-103**		13	
Paid 90% or more of amount due, Month 1 (%)					-2.5*
Paid 90% or more of amount due, Months 1-3 (%)					-1.8
Net cost (\$)	218.88	NA	NA	213.82	NA

SOURCES: MDRC calculations are based on data from the Colorado Division of Child Support Services, the California State Department of Child Support Services Data Repository, the Georgia Division of Child Support Services, and the Texas Office of the Attorney General.

NOTES: Estimates in this table are regression-adjusted, controlling for pre-random assignment characteristics.

Statistical significance levels are indicated as: \*\*\* = 1 percent; \*\* = 5 percent; \* = 10 percent.

Cells that are filled gray indicate that impacts were not examined for that outcome.

Net costs were estimated for each of the interventions in Phase I tests except for Washington, DC and Ohio. Vermont net costs were not available due to incomplete data. (Net costs are calculated as the total cost of the intervention per intervention group member minus the total cost of business as usual per control group member.)

“NA” indicates that costs were not estimated.

<sup>a</sup>This test took place only in Sacramento County.

States use different approaches to inform parents about their child support orders and the available methods for making payments. In some states, a proposed order amount is set by the child support staff without the noncustodial parent present. If the parent fails to respond to a letter or form indicating the proposed order amount, either by accepting the amount or contesting it, the order goes into effect by default. In this scenario, noncustodial parents may receive very little information about how to make payments or the consequences of not paying.

In other states, such as Texas, orders are set during a negotiation meeting in a local office or during a hearing at court. However, if the noncustodial parent fails to attend this meeting or hearing, the order may still be set without that parent's participation. When the parent does attend, the meeting typically focuses on the steps taken to set the order amount, and parents may not receive much information about how to make payments.

The interventions discussed in this section provided parents with information about how to pay child support in ways informed by behavioral science, through in-person meetings, phone calls, letters, easy-to-read instructions, payment-option tables, wallet cards, and reminders. In the CO1 and TX1 interventions, for example, staff members provided this information in meetings, while the GA2 intervention provided it in a simplified letter sent to parents.

The Texas intervention targeted employed parents and focused primarily on increasing payments in the first few months before income withholding began. Other states targeted a broader group of parents. Although they also focused largely on increasing payments in the first few months, states hoped these early effects would establish a long-term habit of paying, particularly if income withholding was not put in place. However, none of the interventions measured effects on longer-term payment outcomes.

### Highlighted Findings

- **Communications informed by behavioral science, particularly those delivered in person, can encourage more parents to pay support in the first few months after orders are set.**

Both the CO1 and TX1 interventions, which included in-person meetings, led to an increase in initial payments. The TX1 intervention increased the number of parents who made payments in the first month by 4.9 percentage points, or 9 percent. The CO1 intervention increased payments by \$115 during the first three months. The GA2 intervention, which provided simplified information in a letter, also increased the payment rate, but only in the second month.

- **However, outreach informed by behavioral science does not always increase payments.**

The CA2/SAC intervention led to a reduction in payments. The reasons for this effect are unclear, but it appears to be largely caused by a reduction in order amounts over time. Finally, the lack of effects in the CO2 intervention may suggest that it was not intensive enough, or that effects are more difficult to achieve for existing orders than they are for new orders.

- **Effects may vary depending on the settings in which the meetings are held and the types of cases served in these settings.**

The CO1 intervention's overall positive effect on payments reflects two offsetting effects among subgroups. The intervention led to a positive effect among parents whose meetings were held during or after administrative order establishment meetings. In contrast, it led to an unexpected, negative effect among parents whose orders were established in court (which usually means that the parents could not reach agreement in an administrative meeting). It is not clear why the intervention led to a reduction in payment rates for the latter group, but the difference highlights that the same intervention can have different effects depending on the context and the types of cases involved.

- **Agencies can integrate order establishment and payment meetings.**

The payment meetings in TX1 and CO1 lasted about 10 to 15 minutes. Some staff members felt that it would be feasible and more efficient to integrate these meetings into existing order establishment meeting. Others, however, saw value in having different staff members handle these different functions.

### ***Engagement After Orders Are Established: Modifying Orders/Registering Online***

Ohio addressed two issues related to engagement after orders had been established (see Tables 9 and 10). First, parents have the right to request modification of their orders when their financial circumstances change or when their orders have not been reviewed in the previous three years. However, the modification process in Ohio is long and involves multiple steps parents and staff members must take; moreover, many modification reviews are never completed. A parent must first apply for a modification and provide paperwork to prove eligibility. If the staff reviews the application and finds the parent is eligible, the parent is then required to complete and submit additional paperwork. This is a drop-off point for many parents.

Four of the interventions in Ohio attempted to simplify and improve the modification process by making certain parents eligible for reviews by default, simplifying the application and review paperwork needed, or providing help to parents along the way. Two of these interventions were implemented in Franklin County (OH1/FR and OH2/FR), and two were implemented in Cuyahoga County (OH1/CUY and OH2/CUY). The first intervention in each county focused on the eligibility stage: OH1/CUY made parents eligible by default and OH1/FR simplified the application paperwork. The second set of interventions focused on the review stage, once parents were deemed eligible, and included simplified paperwork, the elimination of state paperwork, and the availability of dedicated staff members to provide assistance. The targeted outcomes included the percentage of cases where modification reviews were scheduled, the percentage where required paperwork was submitted, and the percentage where modification reviews were completed. Although the state hoped that adjusting orders to reflect parents' ability to pay would ultimately lead to increased payment rates, effects on payment-related outcomes were not examined.

The second issue with respect to engagement after orders are established involves registering online. Ohio offers an online portal for child support, which is designed to let parents manage their cases more easily. However, few parents sign up to use it. The final two Ohio interventions (OH3

**Table 9. Summary of BICS Tests Related to Engagement After Orders Are Established Modifying Orders/Registering Online**

Issue	Goal	Test	Intervention	Positive Effect
The order modification process is long and complicated, and many requests for modifications are not completed.	Increase the percentage of parents who complete the modification process.	OH1/ CUY <sup>a</sup>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Orders made eligible for review by default for parents who were determined to be eligible using administrative data</li> </ul>	Y
		OH1/ FR <sup>b</sup>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Simplified application form</li> <li>• One-page overview and FAQ</li> </ul>	Y
		OH2/ CUY <sup>a</sup>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Simplified paperwork</li> <li>• Phone, text, and letter reminders to return the required paperwork</li> <li>• Elimination of additional state forms</li> </ul>	N
		OH2/ FR <sup>b</sup>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Simplified paperwork</li> <li>• One-page overview and FAQ</li> <li>• Dedicated, specially trained staff to provide outreach and assistance</li> <li>• Elimination of additional state forms</li> </ul>	Y
Many parents do not use the online tools (such as state portals, apps, etc.) available to them to help manage their cases or find information.	Increase the number of parents registered on the Ohio online portal	OH3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Outreach letter informed by behavioral science</li> </ul>	Y
		OH4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Outreach email informed by behavioral science</li> </ul>	Y

NOTES: The final column indicates whether the evaluation of that intervention detected positive and statistically significant effects on at least one outcome of interest.

<sup>a</sup>This test took place only in Cuyahoga County.

<sup>b</sup>This test took place only in Franklin County.

**Table 10. Impacts on Selected Outcomes Related to Engagement After Orders Are Established  
Modifying Orders/Registering Online**

Outcome	Intervention Impact					
	OH1/ CUY <sup>a</sup>	OH1/ FR <sup>b</sup>	OH2/ CUY <sup>a</sup>	OH2/ FR <sup>b</sup>	OH3	OH4
<b>Targeted outcomes (%)</b>						
Modification review scheduled	47.9 ***	3.5 *				
Modification affidavit returned	11.3 ***	3.1 *	2.1	16.5 ***		
Modification review completed	12.4 ***	3.2 *	1.7	15.1 ***		
Registered on portal					1.8 ***	3.9 ***
Net cost (\$)	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	NA	NA

SOURCES: MDRC calculations are based on data from the Cuyahoga County Office of Child Support Services, the Franklin County Child Support Enforcement Association, and the Ohio Office of Child Support.

NOTES: Estimates in this table are regression-adjusted, controlling for pre-random assignment characteristics. Statistical significance levels are indicated as: \*\*\* = 1 percent; \*\* = 5 percent; \* = 10 percent.

Cells that are filled gray indicate that impacts were not examined for that outcome. Net costs were estimated for each of the interventions in Phase I tests except for Washington, DC and Ohio. Vermont net costs were not available due to incomplete data. (Net costs are calculated as the total cost of the intervention per intervention group member minus the total cost of business as usual per control group member.)

“NA” indicates that costs were not estimated.

<sup>a</sup>This test took place only in Cuyahoga County.

<sup>b</sup>This test took place only in Franklin County.

and OH4) attempted to increase the percentage of parents who registered on the portal, through outreach by mail and email.

**Highlighted Findings**

- **Making parents eligible for a modification review by default led to increases in reviews scheduled and completed that were larger than the increases that resulted from only simplifying the application paperwork.**

To address the first step in the process, the OH1/CUY intervention made certain parents eligible by default and the OH1/FR intervention simplified the application form. The OH1/CUY intervention nearly doubled the number of cases scheduled for reviews; it also led to large increases in

paperwork returned and reviews completed. In contrast, OH1/FR intervention increased reviews scheduled by a few percentage points, with only similar-sized increases in paperwork returned and reviews completed.

- **Providing specialized staff members to support eligible parents in navigating the process and completing needed paperwork led to effects much larger than only simplifying the paperwork.**

To address the second stage in the process, the OH2/CUY intervention simplified the needed paperwork and sent reminders, once parents were eligible; and the OH2/FR intervention provided trained staff members to reach out to parents and help them complete the paperwork. The latter intervention led to large increases in the number of forms returned (16.5 percentage points) and reviews completed (15.1 percentage points). The former intervention, in contrast, had no statistically significant effects on these outcomes.

## **THE BICS STRATEGY FOR BUILDING THE CAPABILITIES OF CHILD SUPPORT AGENCIES**

The BICS project involved a close collaboration among the participating child support agencies, researchers, and OCSE. Each of the grantees conducted behavioral diagnosis and designed, implemented, and tested their interventions alongside the TAE team, learning the nuts and bolts of behavioral science and evaluation first-hand. As part of the BICS award, grantees were responsible for identifying a project director and assembling a team to implement and test the interventions. The project directors promoted the flow of information among the TAE team, OCSE, and the local offices, and served as sources of institutional knowledge. The implementation experience offers several lessons for other child support agencies.

### **Phases and Approaches**

There were three main phases of the BICS project. In Phase I, the TAE team led the behavioral diagnosis and intervention design, and state agencies actively participated in the process. The TAE team and each grantee used several tools to identify problems of interest that potentially hindered programs from achieving their stated goals. As part of behavioral diagnosis and design in each state, the team and grantee worked together to create a **process map** that laid out the experiences of the staff members involved in each step of the process, as well as the actions required of parents. Using data from the child support agency in that state, the grantee and the TAE team conducted a **funnel analysis** to better understand how cases moved through specific steps in the state's process. The funnel analysis showed the number of cases that made it past each step. A drop-off in the percentage of cases that made it past a given step indicated a potential problem area.

The teams then identified **behavioral bottlenecks** and **cognitive biases** through interviews with parents and staff members. These interviews helped the teams identify potential behavioral explanations for the observed drop-off points identified in the process map and the funnel analysis, and led to ideas for interventions. An example of a behavioral bottlenecks table is shown in Table 11.

**Table 11. Bottlenecks and Hypothesized Concepts from Behavioral Science**

		CONCEPT FROM BEHAVIORAL SCIENCE						
		PROSPECTIVE MEMORY FAILURE	HASSLE FACTORS	OSTRICH EFFECT	COGNITIVE OVERLOAD	PROCRASTINATION	NEGATIVE AFFECT	PROCEDURAL PLANNING
BOTTLENECK								
Notification: parents notified about case manager conference one month in advance		X	X					
Forms (in notification package): long, complicated, invasive; require notarization; usually not completed			X	X	X	X		
Scheduling: meetings set during business hours; scheduled around staff availability; no parent input; both parents must attend			X				X	X

NOTE: This table is similar to one developed as part of the multiple iterations of the behavioral diagnosis and design conducted in Vermont in Phase I.

The teams then designed interventions and launched randomized controlled trials to test whether the interventions led to desired outcomes.

In Phase II of BICS, the state child support agencies took the lead in diagnosis and design of a new set of interventions, while the TAE team provided support and guidance. Some states implemented randomized controlled trials, while others used nonexperimental methods to assess effects.

In Phase III — the Integration Phase — the child support agencies worked directly with OCSE and the Washington Division of Child Support to develop additional interventions and to integrate aspects of BICS into their standard practices. During this phase, most state agencies honed their diagnosis and design skills further and incorporated their lessons into wider practices. Examples of integration activities building on BICS tests are shown in Box 1.

### Box 1. Integrating BICS into Child Support Going Forward

**IN CALIFORNIA'S SACRAMENTO COUNTY,** leaders are using behavioral science to change internal policies and procedures in ways that take greater account of staff perspectives and experiences. For example, the local child support agency has a process to review forms and revise them based on principles of behavioral science. An organization-wide training effort took place to encourage teams and staff members to develop materials using a perspective informed by behavioral science. This perspective has even reached areas such as facilities management and staff hiring.

**IN CALIFORNIA'S SAN JOAQUIN COUNTY,** staff members involved in BICS have become strong advocates for the use of concepts from behavioral science when providing services. The agency's goal is to phase in practices informed by behavioral science in all aspects of office operations. All employees received training in Behavioral Economics 101 in April 2019. MEF Associates will provide additional training to all staff members in May 2019.

**IN GEORGIA,** the state is adapting the BICS appointment letter, reminder flyer, and magnets — materials from Phase I tests — to be used statewide. Staff members will receive training in behavioral science to help them understand why the new materials are beneficial and to explore other processes where these concepts can be used. A statewide expansion plan for Phase II materials will also be developed.

**IN OHIO,** agency changes and decisions are increasingly being viewed through a behavioral-science lens. In addition, staff members in counties that were not involved in BICS are now receiving training in concepts from behavioral science.

- **IN CUYAHOGA COUNTY,** behavioral diagnosis and design is now a central action step in an agency operational plan to help staff identify behavioral bottlenecks such as hassle factors and confusing communication. In addition, child support staff members are helping other divisions in the state Department of Job and Family Services to implement interventions based on behavioral science for participants served by TANF and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.
- **IN FRANKLIN COUNTY,** staff members assigned to work on strategic planning and new projects are trained in topics related to behavioral economics, as well as the behavioral diagnosis and design process, with the idea that they can apply that training when crafting new programs and changes to services. Demand continues to grow both within the agency and among community partners for more training and technical assistance in implementing BICS.

**THE VERMONT** Office of Child Support is building principles of behavioral science into its everyday work in areas ranging from new-employee training to its customer service unit. In addition, Vermont is rolling out statewide the resolution meetings tested in Phase I and Phase II and has extended the employer outreach to all employers receiving an income withholding order. The office's strategic plan also signals that behavioral science plays a role in daily operations.

(continued)



### Box 1 (continued)

**TEXAS** is planning to incorporate principles of behavioral science into program planning and is incorporating communications strategies and tools from BICS into ongoing practices. Staff members redesigned materials for the most recent tax-time outreach campaign using principles of behavioral science “that motivate parents to take a specific action and explain how to do it.” A Texas Child Support Division-specific toolkit with worksheets and potential applications across agency departments will be developed for use across the state. Local offices have embraced tools from the first and second interventions, such as the redesigned appointment-reminder mailers and emails, for use even beyond the intervention’s original target population.

**COLORADO** is adopting its payment intervention statewide. In addition to the existing materials that give noncustodial parents options regarding how to pay their child support, the team has developed new information for custodial parents on how to receive their payments. There is also a plan to provide small grants and regional coaching in behavioral economics to multiple counties that are interested in implementing strategies based on behavioral science.

**THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA** adopted the new BICS application packet for TANF applicants to request child support services. In addition, the child support agency sends text-message reminders where possible. All new brochures and outreach materials now use the BICS model. Special care is taken to ensure that documents are not too wordy and that processes for making contact with the child support office are clearly communicated and hassle-free.

**WASHINGTON** plans to develop behavioral-economics training for staff members with the goal of incorporating concepts from behavioral science into its work at all levels. Additional training in behavioral diagnosis and design will be designed.

## Expanding the BICS Community

In an effort to broaden the reach of the BICS project beyond the original eight grantees, OCSE developed the idea of establishing “BICS peer learning sites.” In the spring of 2018, OCSE invited interested state and tribal child support programs to join the BICS community and to develop and test interventions based on behavioral science that addressed operational problems of interest to them. These peer learning sites consisted of child support agencies from seven states (Indiana, Kansas, North Dakota, Michigan, Mississippi, New Jersey, and New York) and three tribes (the Chipewewa Cree Tribe, the Nez Perce Tribe, and the Delaware Tribe of Indians). Each of the peer learning sites expressed an interest in behavioral interventions in 2018 and volunteered to participate in affinity groups where they applied behavioral diagnosis and design techniques to their problems of interest. Peer learning sites attended several workshops with BICS grantees and the BICS Project Support Team and then tested their interventions in the final year of the BICS project. Results from those tests are being collected by OCSE and disseminated to child support programs interested in continuing to learn from the BICS project. This collaboration allowed BICS grantees to act as mentors to peer learning sites, solidifying their own knowledge of behavioral science and the approach used in BICS. Table 12 shows the topic areas of interest to peer learning sites and the original BICS grantees.

**Table 12. Peer Learning Sites**

BICS grantees were paired with peer learning sites to provide assistance with diagnosing behavioral bottlenecks and designing interventions based on problems of interest.

<b>Affinity Group Topics</b>	<b>Peer Learning Sites</b>	<b>BICS Grantees</b>
Payments	Indiana New Jersey New York	Texas Colorado
Noncustodial parent engagement	Chippewa Cree Nez Perce Tribe	California Washington State
Application and cooperation	Delaware Tribe Kansas North Dakota	Washington, DC Georgia
Complex contacts	Michigan Mississippi	Vermont Ohio

## LESSONS AND CHALLENGES IN IMPLEMENTING THE BICS PROJECT

This project can be a promising model for integrating interventions based on behavioral science into child support programs. The BICS project's unique implementation model combined strong child support leadership and dedicated staff with external training and technical assistance support (provided by the TAE team early in the project and by OCSE in the later phases). In addition, the time-limited nature of the grant funding received from OCSE to implement the project encouraged state child support agencies to focus on implementing this demonstration and make a priority of learning and knowledge sharing.<sup>12</sup> The BICS project was ambitious, launching and testing 22 interventions in five years as part of the original evaluation scope, with an additional 10 tests designed and implemented by peer learning sites. The BICS experience highlights several lessons and challenges for implementation.

- **Most interventions took longer to implement than expected.**

There were two main reasons why. First, diagnosis and design took more time than expected. In most states, identifying behavioral bottlenecks required tracking a cohort of cases over time to as-

<sup>12</sup> BICS builds on the evidence built from the earlier generation of behavioral science work in social programs in the Behavioral Interventions to Achieve Self-Sufficiency (BIAS) project, funded by the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation in the Administration for Children and Families. For more on the BIAS findings, see Richburg-Hayes, Anzelone, and Dechausay (2017).

sess drop-off at each point in the process. While in theory this tracking could be done for old cases that had already moved through the process, data for these old cases were sometimes not readily available. Some states, given the nature of their desired interventions, did not need to track cases over time to identify their main challenges and were able to use data on cases at a point in time (a snapshot assessment). But these states were the minority. The second reason implementation took longer than expected is that sample enrollment took longer than expected in most Phase I tests, almost all of which were randomized controlled trials and required large samples. Sometimes sample-enrollment projections were inconsistent with the actual flow of cases. For example, some states had fewer cases being opened than were projected based on past data or fewer cases where agencies were initiating action than had been estimated.

- **Interventions that involved changing staff practices took more effort to implement than those that involved changes to written materials.**

Some of the interventions needed more technical assistance to implement because they required state grantees to develop scripts, desk aids, and other tools informed by behavioral science that staff members could use to guide their actions. It took time to develop interventions that included such components, and it then took more management time and technical assistance to train staff members to use the tools.

- **It is important to create a culture of learning, testing, and sharing knowledge.**

The BICS project encouraged grantees to learn from administrative data, from findings from interventions, and from each other, fostering a culture designed to promote creative problem solving. The grantees joined learning-community calls to learn about tools based on behavioral science as they designed interventions. They attended BICS workshops, presented their ideas, and received suggestions about how to improve their proposed tests and learning. In the Integration Phase, grantees had an opportunity to practice the skills they learned in BICS by coaching the peer learning sites. This practice, in turn, strengthened their abilities to use those skills and to continue integrating them into their agency operations.

- **Stable leadership and staff are important.**

Several state agencies experienced staff turnover during the five years BICS operated. When an agency's project director changed frequently, it was difficult for the TAE team to build a relationship with that agency, and consequently implementation became more difficult. The loss of behavioral science knowledge in the agency also required supplemental staff training in addition to project-management transition. Staff turnover meant that new front-line staff members had to be trained to conduct random assignment and deliver interventions, which was a large demand on their time on top of their regular orientation processes. Planning for staff turnover with succession plans and creating solid knowledge-management systems and processes could reduce the disruption involved.

- **Change management in large organizations is challenging and takes time.**

Child support agencies have multiple stakeholders — from individual case managers and program directors to court staff members and process servers — and each of these stakeholder's actions and approaches can influence case outcomes. Front-line staff members and major actors in state

child support agencies and in the courts were sometimes skeptical of the new procedures and perspectives at first. In addition, while the core BICS staff members generally implemented interventions with fidelity, they often had little control over how other staff members behaved.

- **The cost of most interventions was very low relative to business as usual.**

In most states, the added costs of implementing the interventions were quite low, with most being under \$15 per participant. The costs were higher for interventions that involved in-person meetings and follow-up calls from staff members. As tested, these increased costs ranged from around \$214 to \$218. A significant portion of these additional costs was tied to new staff members hired for grant implementation. The findings from those interventions, and the experience in Georgia, suggest that they could be made less expensive if the additional in-person contact were integrated into existing meetings. Cost estimates in Texas suggest that implementing the intervention at full scale would cost around \$12.26 per participant.

## **LESSONS FOR CHILD SUPPORT AND BEHAVIORAL SCIENCE**

The BICS interventions focused on multiple stages in the child support process, providing some overall lessons and themes. The BICS project and its findings illustrate the promise and limitations of interventions informed by behavioral science.

- **Practices informed by behavioral science can be applied at relatively low cost to many child support problems, and it is likely that they will produce some positive impacts.**

The interventions targeted a range of outcomes, and most produced positive, albeit small, effects. Most were also inexpensive to implement, although they were supported with additional technical assistance and monitoring from the TAE team, suggesting that states should consider adopting approaches that led to positive outcomes and continue to develop and test new interventions. In addition, interventions targeting the modification process are a particularly ripe area for innovation.

- **Creating dedicated, specialized staff units for specific processes has trade-offs.**

There is an ongoing debate within the child support community about staff specialization. On the one hand, specialization can help staff members focus on specific tasks, reduce distraction, and increase efficiency, particularly for cases that may not require a lot of effort and are suited to a more automated approach. However, when staff members specialize based on a particular child support process, such as order establishment, cases and parents might get “lost” in the hand-off from one staff member to the next, and parents will not have a continuing relationship with, or oversight from, a single staff person. Moreover, the cases more likely to get lost may be the more challenging ones, which could benefit from an approach in which a single staff person handles the case from beginning to end. A hybrid approach might be to have specialized staff members work with less complicated cases and hand over more challenging ones to a dedicated team or staff person. In Ohio, the processes for reviewing and modifying cases were improved with greater staff specialization under BICS. Similarly, in California, the BICS intervention group had higher service rates, which may have been the result of specialized staff members providing order establishment services. Meanwhile in Colorado, administrators did not see a benefit to having specialized staff members go over explainer materials and payment options with parents during the establishment conference. Agencies can use

behavioral diagnosis and design tools to assess the right level of specialization and weigh the pros and cons of each approach based on the responses of parents and staff members.

- **Practices informed by behavioral science that are directed at a specific activity will probably affect that activity but will not necessarily have effects on other outcomes at later points in a process.**

Interventions focused earlier in the child support process (such as service or order setting) are likely to affect outcomes at those points in the process (responses to service or agreements reached) but may not affect payment rates. However, the evidence on this point is limited and comes from only a few interventions. Although most states hypothesized that positive effects on early engagement would lead to better outcomes at each step in the process, most of the tests were not designed to see if there were effects on payments.

- **Practices informed by behavioral science that are incorporated into existing child support processes rather than being applied as new and separate processes can reduce the burdens on staff members and parents.**

Several child support staff members indicated that if principles of behavioral science are to be successfully integrated into standard practices, they should be incorporated into management structures that staff members have already accepted. This integration would also signal that principles of behavioral science were now a lasting part of an agency's culture. One of the grantees created a part-time change-management position to incorporate insights from behavioral science into regular practice, which helped streamline processes but also signaled to staff members that leaders thought those insights were important.

- **In-person meetings early in the process can help set the stage for a productive, cooperative relationship between parents and a child support agency.**

The findings, along with views of participating staff, suggest that initial, in-person meetings present an opportunity for staff members to connect with parents in a more helpful manner, allowing staff members to tailor services to individual cases. For example, instead of sending overly complicated and lengthy information in the mail, staff members can use the meeting that parents are already required to attend to provide this information. Although in-person contacts are labor-intensive, costs could be minimized by using techniques drawn from behavioral science to make existing meetings more effective. For example, if administrators want to add more in-person time, they should consider adding that new time to a meeting that is already part of the process. This approach would remove the hassle factors for parents that could result from a new meeting and would allow staff members to make more of existing meetings once parents are in the room.

- **Practices informed by behavioral science cannot address nonbehavioral barriers.**

Parents do not engage with the child support process for a variety of reasons, some of which can be addressed by interventions informed by behavioral science. But many low-income noncustodial parents may not be able to pay support because of unemployment, incarceration, or very low earnings. These are not behavioral issues, and therefore cannot be solved through interventions

that draw only on behavioral science.<sup>13</sup> That said, efforts to address these and other nonbehavioral barriers can be aided by insights from behavioral science. For instance, a child support agency could use insights learned from behavioral science to increase participation in a noncustodial parent employment program.

## CONCLUSION

The BICS project demonstrates that behavioral science has significant potential to improve child support services for parents and staff members. The behavioral diagnosis and design process provides a systematic, evidence-informed approach to identify and tackle some of the problems parents and staff members in child support agencies experience. The interventions tested in this project cost relatively little and produced some gains at all points in the child support process. Moreover, the BICS project demonstrated that agencies could implement new practices, test them, and refine them as needed, in the spirit of continuous improvement. Each of the participating states has incorporated concepts from behavioral science into its program going forward. In addition, the states and OCSE are already demonstrating the ability to mentor additional states and localities as they attempt to improve their services and meet their goal of securing support for children.

Consistent with earlier research, the BICS findings demonstrated that tools such as personalization, simplification, and reminders can have significant effects on program participants' behavior, and that these tools typically affect near-term outcomes. As the field of behavioral science matures, additional research can assess when behavioral interventions are appropriate, compared with more intensive, structural changes. In addition, further research can identify and refine a new generation of tools informed by behavioral science that might lead to positive long-term outcomes.

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<sup>13</sup> For additional research, see Dubey (1995).

# Appendix A

## Summaries of the BICS Tests

# BICS California

THE BEHAVIORAL INTERVENTIONS FOR CHILD SUPPORT SERVICES PROJECT

## California Phase I (CA1) Intervention

### Increasing Parent Engagement During Order Establishment

#### Method

Randomized controlled trial. Sample of 3,906 individuals, 1,975 in the intervention group and 1,931 in the control group across Sacramento and San Joaquin Counties. Study cases were followed for 12 months using California's child support administrative records.

#### Behavioral Strategies Used

- Personalization
- Simplification
- Implementation prompts
- Loss aversion

#### The Intervention

##### DESIGN

The ultimate goal of the intervention was to increase engagement in the order establishment process as evidenced by an increase in the percentage of orders established by stipulation or hearing and a decrease in default orders. The immediate goal was to increase the percentage of parents who submitted an Answer form (used by parents to respond to service). The intervention targeted newly opened cases. Noncustodial parents in the intervention group received outreach materials informed by behavioral science, scripted phone calls, and case management from specialized caseworkers. This outreach occurred before orders were established.

##### INTERVENTION COMPONENTS

- Specialized BICS case managers trained in principles of behavioral science and procedural justice to handle order establishment
- Service package adjusted using principles of behavioral science, adding an explainer sheet as a cover sheet (in English or Spanish as appropriate) and moving the Answer form:
  - The Answer form moved from the middle of the service package to the top.
  - The explainer cover sheet provided clear instructions for parents opening the service package and suggested next steps.
- Scripted calls from specialized caseworkers after parents were served to discuss next steps
- Scripted calls after Answer forms were submitted to acknowledge parents' actions and encourage additional engagement

#### Findings

##### IMPACT FINDINGS

The intervention had an unexpected but positive impact on service rates (in part due to smaller case loads and more specialized duties among staff members serving in the intervention group), increasing the percentage of parents who received service by 5.0 percentage points, from 69.6 percent to 74.6 percent.<sup>1</sup> Other postservice impacts may result from the fact that more intervention group parents were successfully served (rather than resulting from the inter-

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<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed discussion of this unexpected finding, see Box 2 in Gaffney, Fishman, and Smith (2019).



## California Phase I (CA1) Intervention (continued)

vention itself). This increase in service rates probably occurred in part because specialized staff members provided order establishment services for intervention group cases.

The intervention found effects on outcomes including the percentage of cases with Answer forms submitted (a 3.1 percentage point increase) and the percentage in which orders were established. There was also a statistically significant \$93 — or 26.5 percent — increase in total payments on study orders in the first 12 months after random assignment. Overall establishment rates increased by 17.1 percentage points among Spanish-speaking parents and by 4.1 percentage points among English-speaking parents. The proportion of orders established in hearings or by agreement (rather than by default) increased by 21.5 percentage points among Spanish-speaking parents; there was no statistically significant effect among English-speaking parents.

The intervention had no impact on the percentage of cases in which any payment on current support was made in the first year. The proportion of current support paid was also similar between the intervention and control groups over the first 3, 6, and 12 months following study enrollment, although these three comparisons are nonexperimental.

### IMPLEMENTATION FINDINGS

The intervention components were largely implemented as planned, with three main exceptions: (1) BICS case managers in San Joaquin County made additional efforts to locate parents when they were not successfully served while case managers in Sacramento County did not (which may explain why service rates were higher in San Joaquin than in Sacramento); (2) BICS case managers in both counties did not always call parents after they returned their Answer forms if they felt the second call was unnecessary; and (3) BICS case managers in both counties incorporated intervention materials into other aspects of their work.

Staff members and managers appreciated the BICS approach, saying that it encouraged a more open flow of information between staff members and parents, increasing understanding for parents and leading to a culture shift among the BICS case managers.

### ESTIMATED NET COSTS:

- Sacramento County: \$7.65 per intervention group member
- San Joaquin County: \$14.46 per intervention group member
- Average net cost per intervention group member across both counties: \$11.06

# BICS California

THE BEHAVIORAL INTERVENTIONS FOR CHILD SUPPORT SERVICES PROJECT

## California (Sacramento) Phase II (CA2/SAC) Intervention

### Increasing Early Payment Through Outreach and Planning After Order Establishment

#### Method

Randomized controlled trial. Sample of 1,638 individuals, 790 in the intervention group and 848 in the control group, enrolled over a 13-month period. Study cases were followed for six months using California's child support administrative records.

#### Behavioral Strategies Used

- Implementation prompts
- Loss aversion
- Personalization
- Simplification

#### The Intervention

Design: The goal of this intervention was to increase the percentage of payments made in the first few months after order establishment. The intervention targeted newly established orders. Noncustodial parents in the intervention group received in-person outreach and print materials informed by behavioral science. This outreach occurred immediately after order establishment.

#### INTERVENTION COMPONENTS

- Specialized BICS case managers, trained in principles of behavioral science and procedural justice, who provided services after order establishment.
  - Case managers made scripted calls, sent text messages, and sent emails after order establishment to develop payment plans with parents or encourage them to adhere to those plans.

- For orders established in court, interviews with parents after hearings conducted by BICS case managers
  - Meetings were guided by talking points and a checklist. Case managers encouraged each parent to make and commit to a specific payment plan. Staff members filled out payment plans with parents.
- An explainer cover sheet encouraging early payment
  - The cover sheet provided clear instructions for parents with newly established orders, regardless of order type.
- Parents also received a wallet card payment plan card to fill out independently.

#### Findings

##### IMPACT FINDINGS

The intervention had no impact on the percentage of cases where payments were made in the first three months following order establishment or on the proportion of current support paid in the first six months. It reduced rather than increased total payments in the first six months by \$228. On average, control group participants paid \$1,652 while intervention group participants paid \$1,424.

It is possible that higher total payments among the control group were the result of higher order amounts. After one month, control group participants owed on average \$440 the following month, while intervention group members owed on average \$407. After six months, control group participants owed on average \$393 the following month, while intervention group members owed on average \$337. It is unclear why the

# California (Sacramento) Phase II (CA2/SAC) Intervention (continued)

difference between control and intervention group participants' order amounts grew during the follow-up period.

## IMPLEMENTATION FINDINGS

BICS case managers were more likely to identify payments as the goal of the interviews held after hearings than control group case managers. However, when researchers observed the interviews, they saw little distinction in the way the two groups of case managers approached the meeting, nor in the talking points they used. The primary distinction was that the BICS case managers emphasized payment planning and used the wallet card.

BICS case managers felt the talking points were most useful in the interview held after hearings and less useful for phone outreach. However, they also felt that even with the talking points and improved materials, it was difficult to make concrete payment plans with noncustodial parents after hearings because parents often claimed they would pay "as soon as possible" rather than committing to a specific date.

BICS staff members and parents were especially enthusiastic about the new wallet card implementation

prompts. Parents observed and interviewed after their post-hearing meetings said that they found the wallet cards helpful and would keep them somewhere prominent, as intended.

The Phase II test represented an opportunity for the county to embed a rigorous experiment within agency operations. Agency leaders took several steps to maintain experimental conditions in the office, including making sure that the caseworkers assigned to BICS cases and the control group were evenly matched based on their past performance, and physically isolating the BICS caseworkers within the office to prevent spillover. However, because staff members were not aware of the matching method based on past performance, it is possible that control group caseworkers may have expended extra effort on collections to prove that they were as "strong" as the intervention group that had been selected to implement the intervention. According to agency leaders, this byproduct of implementing an experiment may have contributed to the null and negative payment outcomes.

## ESTIMATED NET COSTS

Not calculated for this intervention.

# BICS California

THE BEHAVIORAL INTERVENTIONS FOR CHILD SUPPORT SERVICES PROJECT

## California (San Joaquin) Phase II (CA2/SJ) Intervention

### Increasing Parent Engagement During Order Establishment

#### Method

Randomized controlled trial. Sample of 2,476 individuals, 1,222 in the intervention group and 1,254 in the control group, enrolled over a 16-month period. Study cases were followed for 3 to 18 months using California's child support administrative records.

#### Behavioral Strategies Used

- Personalization
- Simplification
- Implementation prompts
- Loss aversion

#### The Intervention

##### DESIGN

The goal of the intervention was to increase parental involvement in order establishment. The intervention targeted newly opened cases. Noncustodial parents in the intervention group received the same print outreach materials informed by behavioral science as in Phase I, without the additional staff involvement.<sup>1</sup>

##### INTERVENTION COMPONENTS

- A cover sheet for the service package (in English or Spanish as appropriate), with the Answer form — used by parents to respond to the service package — moved from the middle of the service package to the top

- The explainer cover sheet provided clear instructions for parents opening the service package and suggested next steps.
- Print materials were the same as Phase I materials except for the contact information. The Phase I materials provided a dedicated phone line to the BICS case workers, while these Phase II materials directed parents to a call center.

#### Findings

##### IMPACT FINDINGS

The intervention did not affect the percentage of Answer forms submitted. While the intervention did increase the percentage of orders established in the intervention group by 3.4 percentage points, from 55.0 percent to 58.4 percent, this increase can probably be attributed to the intervention's unexpected, positive impact on orders established by default. The intervention increased the percentage of orders established by default by 4.0 percentage points, from 36.6 percent to 40.6 percent, but it had no effect on the percentage of orders established by hearing or stipulation, the targeted order types. The intervention did increase total child support payments in the first three months by \$17, on average, from \$20 to \$37. It did not increase payments over the first six months.

As was the case in the Phase I test, the intervention had an unexpected, positive impact on service rates, increasing service rates by 4.3 percentage points, from 60.5 percent to 64.8 percent. However, because there were no specialized staff members providing order

<sup>1</sup> See the earlier description of the CA Phase I intervention (CA1).

# California (San Joaquin) Phase II (CA2/SJ) Intervention (continued)

establishment services for intervention group cases, it is more plausible that this increase was due to extra efforts (conscious or subconscious) made by the process servers when serving packages with the BICS cover sheet, though this explanation is difficult to prove.

Because there is an impact on service but no impact on Answer forms submitted as there was in Phase I, it is possible that the Phase I impact on Answer forms submitted can be attributed to the efforts of the specialized BICS caseworkers (absent in the Phase II research design), and was not an incidental outcome of increased service rates alone. According to agency leaders, it is difficult to get parents to submit Answer forms. The Phase II study results suggest that modifications to the service package alone may not be enough to produce an impact in the absence of dedicated caseworkers to follow up with parents after the package is delivered.

## **IMPLEMENTATION FINDINGS**

The intervention components were implemented as planned, with one exception related to data collection: Because staff members did not routinely collect infor-

mation about incoming communication from control group parents, the impact study was not able to include that outcome measure.

Since staff members did not have to be actively involved in the Phase II test, most were unaffected by its implementation. Leaders felt the second test was successful because the new changes were more in line with how people think and, as a result, have begun educating staff members about the principles of behavioral science underlying the Phase I and II tests.

Leaders also appreciated the opportunity presented by the Phase II test to examine other agency processes (for example, the agency's call center phone tree) through the lens of behavioral science, and they reported that they feel there are clear benefits to implementing practices informed by behavioral science in those other processes in the future.

## **ESTIMATED NET COSTS**

Not calculated for this intervention.

# BICS Colorado

THE BEHAVIORAL INTERVENTIONS FOR CHILD SUPPORT SERVICES PROJECT

## Colorado Phase I (CO1) Intervention

### Increasing Payment Amounts and the Percentage of Parents Who Made Payments After Order Establishment

#### Method

Randomized controlled trial. Sample of 697 individuals, 342 in the intervention group and 355 in the control group. Study cases were followed for three months using child support administrative records; implementation, time study, and financial data; and observations collected during site visits.

#### Behavioral Strategies Used

- Implementation prompts
- Loss aversion
- Personalization
- Reminders
- Simplification

#### The Intervention

##### DESIGN

The goal of the intervention was to increase payment amounts and the percentage of parents who made payments after order establishment. The intervention focused on cases with newly established orders. Non-custodial parents in the intervention group received outreach materials informed by behavioral science. When noncustodial parents in the intervention group came to the office for the Administrative Process Action (APA) meeting, they received an enhanced in-person meeting; if they went to a court hearing, staff members attempted to administer the intervention over the phone. During the office meeting, the intervention group received personalized and simplified materials,

and if they went to the court hearing, these materials were mailed to them. They also received follow-up monitoring and payment reminders for the three months following order establishment.

##### INTERVENTION COMPONENTS

- Payment meeting with caseworker
  - The caseworker and the parent reviewed an infographic that illustrated the consequences of not making full payments. The parent was guided through an online decision tree that recommended a payment method based on the parent's payment habits, and filled out a wallet card that contained payment information and an implementation plan.
- Personalized reminders sent by text, email, or phone (depending on a parent's preference)
  - Reminders included a notification that payment was due, an indication of the parent's desired payment method, a payment-identification number, and the phone number of a caseworker who could answer questions.
- Follow-up monitoring
  - Caseworkers called parents if they missed payments.

#### Findings

##### IMPACT FINDINGS

There was a \$115 (or 19.9 percent) increase in the amount paid by parents within the first three months, from \$579 for the control group to \$694 for the intervention group. This difference is statistically significant.

## Colorado Phase I (CO1) Intervention (continued)

cant. There was no effect on the percentage of parents who made payments within three months of order establishment, which was close to 67 percent in both groups.

The effect of the intervention varied across subgroups. Among cases established through an administrative process, there was a \$197 impact on the amount parents paid and a 10.7 percentage point impact on the proportion of parents who made payments. Among cases established in court there was no impact on the amount paid and a -16.7 percentage point impact on the proportion of parents who made payments. Among parents who had more than one case, there was a positive impact of \$405 on the amount paid and no impact on the percentage who made payments. Among parents who had only one case, there was no impact on the amount paid or on the percentage who made payments.

There was no impact on the child support debt balance six months after order establishment. A nonexperimental analysis suggests that the intervention reduced the time it took parents to make their first payments and increased the use of the autopay payment method.

### **IMPLEMENTATION FINDINGS**

In some counties, caseworkers incorporated the payment meetings into the APA conferences rather than

holding them afterward. In some counties, caseworkers who conducted the APA conferences handed parents off to another caseworker, who then conducted the payment meeting. Caseworkers responded positively to the intervention, reporting that parents seemed to find the payment meetings, infographic, online decision tool, and wallet card useful. However, parents who were dissatisfied with their child support orders tended to respond negatively to the payment meeting and intervention materials.

It was not feasible to implement the intervention at court because very few parents attended their court hearings. The intervention would need to be redesigned to be implemented at court in the future. In-person payment meetings took 15 minutes; meetings over the phone took longer because caseworkers took time to describe intervention materials.

Caseworkers conducted variable outreach after the intervention. Some caseworkers sent text messages and emails and called parents to remind them to make payments each month, and some caseworkers called parents only when they missed payments.

### **ESTIMATED COSTS**

\$218.88 per intervention group participant, based on a time study conducted in three of the four counties.

# BICS Colorado

THE BEHAVIORAL INTERVENTIONS FOR CHILD SUPPORT SERVICES PROJECT

## Colorado Phase II (CO2) Intervention

### Increasing the Percentage of Parents Who Made Full Payments Each Month

#### Method

Randomized controlled trial. Sample of 5,210 individuals, 3,477 in the intervention group and 1,733 in the control group. Study cases were followed for three months using state child support administrative records.

#### Behavioral Strategies Used

- Implementation prompts
- Personalization
- Reminders

#### The Intervention

##### DESIGN

The goal of the intervention was to increase the percentage of parents who made full payments each month. Noncustodial parents in the intervention group received two-way text-message payment reminders at the beginning and end of each month if they had not made full payments.<sup>1</sup> If they had made full payments, then they received “thank-you” text messages at the end of the month. Parents in the control group did not receive additional outreach other than potentially receiving the state’s one-way payment-reminder text message, which became part of the status quo during the study period.<sup>2</sup> Some of the counties had additional outreach strategies for parents in the intervention

group, such as calling parents or sending emails, but those outreach methods varied among caseworkers and counties.

##### INTERVENTION COMPONENTS

- Payment-reminder text message
  - On the fifth of every month, parents were sent two-way payment-reminder text messages if they had not made full payments in the previous month. The messages asked if parents planned to make the payments and asked them how they planned to make payments, prompting them to choose from a list of payment options. Payment information was provided based on the selected method. A second reminder message was sent on the twentieth of the month to parents who had still not made full payments.
- “Thank-you” text message
  - Parents were sent “thank-you” text messages on the twentieth of the month if they had made full payments.

#### Findings

##### IMPACT FINDINGS

The intervention led to a 2.5 percentage point reduction in the number of cases where parents made full payments in the first month. This reduction is marginally statistically significant at the 10 percent level and was unexpected. However, there were no impacts

<sup>1</sup> If a parent paid 90 percent or more of the amount owed, that was considered a “full payment.”

<sup>2</sup> One-way texting allowed the agency to send parents reminders, but parents could not send a message back. Two-way texting allowed the agency and parents to text back and forth and was believed to be more helpful to parents because they could ask questions by text.



## Colorado Phase II (CO2) Intervention (continued)

on the percentages of cases where parents made full payments in Months 2 or 3. There was no impact on the percentage of cases where parents ever made full payments in Months 1 through 3, nor on the percentage where parents always made full payments in Months 1 through 3.

In addition, although the intervention was initially supposed to have another arm to be tested separately (consisting of outreach to employers by child support staff members), there were challenges with putting this additional component and test into operation, and the two intervention arms were combined into one for the purposes of analysis.

### **IMPLEMENTATION FINDINGS**

Due to delays in implementing the intervention and complications with data acquisition, the team did not collect implementation research data, and there are no implementation research findings to report. For example, the research team does not know the types of service referrals provided to parents by text nor how often those referrals were provided, and there are no data on the kinds of interactions that occurred between parents and technicians.

### **ESTIMATED NET COSTS**

Not calculated for this intervention.

# BICS DC

THE BEHAVIORAL INTERVENTIONS FOR CHILD SUPPORT SERVICES PROJECT

## District of Columbia Phase I (DC1) Intervention Test 1

### Engaging Parents on Medicaid

#### Method

Randomized controlled trial. Sample of 635 individuals, 318 in the intervention group and 317 in the control group. Study cases were followed for three months using agency child support records.

#### Behavioral Strategies Used

- Deadlines
- Identity priming
- Personalization
- Reminders
- Simplification

#### The Intervention

##### DESIGN

The goal of the intervention was to engage parents receiving Medicaid services. The intervention targeted unmarried custodial parents on Medicaid. Parents in the intervention group received outreach material and reminders. If a parent responded requesting child support services, that parent was sent a redesigned and streamlined child support services application. Cases were followed for three months after the initial outreach began.

##### INTERVENTION COMPONENTS

- Outreach letter informed by behavioral science that asked parents to choose between (1) establishing paternity or receiving child support services and (2) closing their cases

- Robocall reminding custodial parents to respond to the letter
- Reminder postcard
  - A postcard informed by behavioral science was sent to nonresponders that gave parents the same two choices as the initial letter.
- Redesigned child support services application
  - A simpler, shorter child support application using principles of behavioral science was sent to parents who requested it.

#### Findings

##### IMPACT FINDINGS

The proportion of parents who made contact with the child support agency increased by 4 percentage points, from 3 percent in the control group to 7 percent in the intervention group. There was a 2 percentage point increase in the number of parents who submitted child support services applications, from 0 percent in the control group to 2 percent in the intervention group. There were no significant impacts on the percentages of cases where child support petitions were generated, where legal paternity was established, or where parents requested that their cases be closed. The child support agency was able to close the cases of nonresponders after making multiple attempts to reach them, which decreased the agency's outstanding caseload.

##### IMPLEMENTATION FINDINGS

The response rate to the robocalls was very low because many phone numbers on file for parents were missing, disconnected, or incorrect. Setting up the

# District of Columbia Phase I (DC1) Intervention Test 1 (continued)

robocalls required the agency to work with outside departments, which was time-consuming. Around 3 percent of mailings were returned to sender, indicating that the address was incorrect.

## **ESTIMATED NET COSTS**

Not calculated for this intervention.

# BICS DC

THE BEHAVIORAL INTERVENTIONS FOR CHILD SUPPORT SERVICES PROJECT

## District of Columbia Phase I (DC2) Intervention Test 2

### Having Parents on Medicaid Engage with the Child Support Agency by Text Message

#### Method

A nonexperimental analysis of outcome measures before and after the intervention — a pre/post test. The 318 individuals in the sample were originally in the control group in the DC1 test. Study cases were followed for three months using Washington, DC child support administrative records. To assess the effects of this test, the means of outcome measures for the parents who were in the control group in the first BICS DC intervention (DC1) were compared with the means of the same parents in the second time period (DC2). Therefore, this analysis used a pre/post method of comparing the same population with itself at two different time periods: after the intervention of DC1 and after the intervention of DC2. This was a nonexperimental test and therefore it cannot confirm with certainty that the BICS intervention was the cause of any apparent effects.

#### Behavioral Strategies Used

- Deadlines
- Identity priming
- Personalization
- Reminders
- Simplification

#### The Intervention

##### DESIGN

The goal of this intervention was to engage parents in older child support cases where parents were receiving Medicaid services. This test targeted control group cases from the DC1 test and was implemented a few months after DC1. The intervention was an enhanced version of the one in DC1 that included texting outreach and the option to reply to the letter and postcard by text message. DC2 used the same intervention materials as DC1, except the outreach letter and postcard were adapted to invite the custodial parent to request child support services by text message. Additionally, an introductory text message was sent to those custodial parents whose phone numbers the child support agency had, and a reminder text message was sent if they did not respond. The child support agency had phone numbers for parents in only about 20 percent of the cases.

##### INTERVENTION COMPONENTS:<sup>1</sup>

- Outreach letter
  - A letter informed by behavioral science was sent asking parents to choose between (1) establishing paternity or receiving child support services and (2) closing their cases.
- Introductory text message introducing the child support agency to parents
- Reminder postcard

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<sup>1</sup> Originally, the intervention design also included robocall reminders for parents to respond to the outreach letter, but due to technical issues these robocalls never occurred.

# District of Columbia Phase I (DC2) Intervention Test 2 (continued)

- A postcard informed by behavioral science was sent to nonresponders that gave parents the same two choices as the initial letter.
- Reminder text asking nonresponders to reply

## Findings

### IMPACT FINDINGS

The proportion of parents who made contact with the child support agency increased by 11 percentage points, from 3 percent in time period 1 to 14 percent in time period 2. There was a 1 percentage point increase in the number of parents who submitted child support services applications, from 0 percent in period 1 to 1 percent in period 2. There were no changes in the percentages of cases that had child support obligations

established, where legal paternity was established, or where a parent requested that the case be closed.

### IMPLEMENTATION FINDINGS

Staff members reported that texting was simple to implement, and that it was easy to respond to text messages using a desktop interface. However, because these cases were relatively old many of the phone numbers used for the texting were not active and the text messages did not go through. Around 1 percent of mailings were returned to sender, indicating that the address was incorrect. Parents were not interviewed about this intervention.

### ESTIMATED NET COSTS

Not calculated for this intervention.

# BICS DC

THE BEHAVIORAL INTERVENTIONS FOR CHILD SUPPORT SERVICES PROJECT

## District of Columbia Phase II (DC3) Intervention

Increasing the Number of Court-Ready Cases for Parents Receiving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)

### Method

This intervention was designed as a randomized controlled trial. However, due to changes in the management information system used by the TANF office, cases were not transferred to the child support office, delaying the intervention for multiple years. Once the technical problem with case transfers was addressed, it turned out that cases appropriate for the evaluation sample were building up too slowly, and the test was cancelled.

### Behavioral Strategies Used

- Identity priming
- Loss aversion
- Personalization
- Reminders
- Simplification

### The Intervention

#### DESIGN

The goals of this intervention were to persuade custodial parents to open child support cases so that they would not lose TANF benefits, and to increase the number of parents who attended an intake meeting.

#### INTERVENTION COMPONENTS

- Outreach letter
  - The letter welcomed a custodial parent to the child support agency and provided information

about the upcoming appointment that was set up for the parent to open a child support case after he or she was referred by the TANF agency.

- Encouragement text message
  - The message described the benefits of child support.
- Reminder text messages
  - Two days before the appointment, a text message was sent asking the custodial parent to confirm that he or she would attend the appointment and inviting the parent to reschedule if not.
  - The morning of the appointment, a text message was sent reminding the parent that the appointment was that day and that he or she should bring documents relating to marriage, divorce, child support, and paternity.
- Missed-appointment message or missing-document message
  - On the day after the scheduled appointment, a text message was sent to the custodial parent asking him or her to reschedule (if the parent did not attend) or to send a clear photo of required documents (if the parent did not bring any of them to the appointment).
- Missed-appointment postcard
  - On the day after a missed appointment, a postcard was sent encouraging the parent to reschedule.
- Follow-up text message
  - About 50 days after a case was transferred to the child support office, if a custodial parent did not attend an appointment that parent received a

# District of Columbia Phase II (DC3) Intervention (continued)

text message saying that his or her TANF benefits were now sanctioned and he or she would start to lose money. Additionally, the message said that he or she could stop losing money by responding and rescheduling the appointment.

## Findings

### IMPACT FINDINGS

No analysis was conducted because of the technical issues described above.

### IMPLEMENTATION FINDINGS

There were unanticipated challenges with interdepartmental coordination that had major effects on the intervention and evaluation. The interface with the TANF

office's database did not work and ultimately led to this intervention not being evaluated.

In human services agencies, there are often major internal barriers in the process to approve work with outside vendors such as text-messaging providers. These delays should be included in the planning for rollout of an intervention that involves text messaging. The intervention components are still being implemented by the grantee, and while they are not being evaluated, staff members report that they are having positive effects.

### ESTIMATED NET COSTS

Not calculated for this intervention.

## Georgia Phase I (GA1) Intervention

### Increasing Voluntary Acceptance of Service in the Office During the Order Establishment Process

#### Method

Randomized controlled trial. Sample of 2,931 individuals, 1,463 in the intervention group and 1,468 in the control group. Study cases were followed for six months using state child support records.

#### Behavioral Strategies Used

- Deadlines
- Implementation prompts
- Loss aversion
- Personalization
- Simplification

#### The Intervention

##### DESIGN

The goal of the intervention was to engage noncustodial parents early in the establishment process and increase the percentage who accepted service in the office voluntarily. The intervention targeted people who had recently been named as parents in a child support case. Parents in the intervention group received outreach materials informed by behavioral science. If they came to the office, they also had an enhanced in-person meeting informed by principles of procedural justice.

##### INTERVENTION COMPONENTS

- Redesigned notice in an eye-catching envelope

- The hand-addressed brown envelope stood out in the mail. The notice was simpler than the previous letter and had features to support planning and highlight the financial consequences of inaction.
- Calendar magnet with personalized appointment information
  - The magnet was included with the notice as an added aid in planning.
- Reminder notice mailed days before an appointment
  - This notice included a short list of documents to bring, a map, and a phone number to call to re-schedule if needed.
- Enhanced in-person meeting
  - Specially trained staff members conducted meetings using a script and checklist to make sure they consistently incorporated principles of procedural justice and completed important meeting components.
  - Staff members were trained to help parents request a reduction in the child support order amount (called a low-income deviation adjustment) if there was evidence that the parent earned a low income or was unemployed.

#### Findings

##### IMPACT FINDINGS

There was an 8.2 percentage point increase in the proportion of parents who were served in the office voluntarily, from 15.1 percent of the control group to 23.3 percent of the intervention group. This difference is statistically significant and represents a 54 percent



# Georgia Phase I (GA1) Intervention (continued)

increase. However, there was no effect on overall cases served; close to 60 percent of both groups received service.

The effect of the intervention varied among the three offices that participated. The largest office, in an urban setting, had an 8.6 percentage point impact on the number of parents who were served in the office, and a 6.3 percentage point impact on overall cases served. The smallest office in the study, in a rural setting, had a 14.2 percentage point impact on service in the office, but a negative impact on overall cases served. It is unclear why the intervention would have decreased overall service rates there. There was no effect on either outcome in the third office, which was in a mid-sized city.

Caseworkers holding meetings with parents in the intervention group did not seem to make more requests for low income deviation adjustments compared with the control group. Average order amounts were similar between the two groups after the intervention period.

## IMPLEMENTATION FINDINGS

Random assignment processes and study protocols were mostly followed as planned.

Most administrators and staff members felt the new meeting procedure was an improvement. They found the approach “nonintimidating” and “eye-opening,” and said they believed it made parents feel more comfortable. Several parents told researchers they felt that they were treated fairly and respectfully.

## ESTIMATED NET COSTS

- The total net cost of the intervention, including staff time and materials, is \$9.02.
- The total cost of materials for each intervention group member is \$3.75, while the net cost of materials for this intervention is \$2.58.
- Most of the net cost (\$6.44) reflects the added staff costs associated with the intervention.

## Georgia Phase II (GA2) Intervention

### Increasing the Rate of First Payments Made Within 30 Days

#### Method

Randomized controlled trial. Sample of 1,788 individuals, 900 in the intervention group and 888 in the control group. Study cases were followed for three months using state child support administrative records.

#### Behavioral Strategies Used

- Deadlines
- Implementation prompts
- Loss aversion
- Reminders
- Simplification

#### The Intervention

##### DESIGN

The goal of the intervention was to increase the rate of first payments made within 30 days after order establishment. The intervention targeted cases with newly established orders for support. Noncustodial parents in the intervention group received outreach materials informed by behavioral science.

##### INTERVENTION COMPONENTS

- Redesigned notice in an eye-catching envelope
  - The larger envelope was designed to stand out in the mail. The notice was simpler than the previous letter and included the parent's name, the child's name, the amount due, and clear instructions on how to make a payment. A self-addressed envelope

with a postage stamp was included, along with a colorful payment-options flyer.

- Reminder notice mailed three to five days before the due date
  - The notice was mailed in a brown envelope and included the parent's name, the child's name, the amount owed, and instructions on how to make a payment. The notice addressed the common misconception that manual payments are not necessary until income withholding takes place. The letter was simplified and written at a seventh-grade level.
- Late-notice reminder mailed 10 days after the due date if full payment was not received
  - The simplified notice had two main messages: (1) your payment is now late, which could lead to hassles later; and (2) make contact with the office for help if you cannot make a payment right now.

#### Findings

##### IMPACT FINDINGS

The intervention did not affect on-time payments (defined as payments within 30 dates of the effective due date). Analyzing the effect on payments within 33 days of the effective payment date (to account for due dates that fell on a weekend or holiday) did not change results.

The intervention did lead to a 5.1 percentage point increase in payments in the second month after random assignment. This impact is statistically significant at the 5 percent level. There were no effects on payments in other months.

## Georgia Phase II (GA2) Intervention (continued)

The intervention led to a small increase in the average number of months in which a payment was made during the first three months, from 1.2 for the control group to 1.3 for the intervention group. This impact is statistically significant at the 10 percent level.

### **IMPLEMENTATION FINDINGS**

Very few parents used the self-addressed envelopes. The office received only a handful of self-addressed envelopes with payments.

### **ESTIMATED NET COSTS**

Not calculated for this intervention.

# BICS Ohio

THE BEHAVIORAL INTERVENTIONS FOR CHILD SUPPORT SERVICES PROJECT

## Ohio Phase I Cuyahoga Test 1 (OH1/CUY)

### Simplifying the Modification Eligibility Process

#### Method

Randomized controlled trial. Sample of 3,267 individuals, 1,633 in the intervention group and 1,634 in the control group. Study cases were followed for at least three months using administrative records from Cuyahoga County Office of Child Support Services.

#### Behavioral Strategies Used

- Simplification

#### The Intervention

##### DESIGN

The goal of the intervention was to increase the proportion of parents who reached important milestones in the modification review process: scheduling modification reviews, returning affidavits to the agency, and completing the modification review process. Cuyahoga County eliminated the first step in the order modification process — the eligibility-screening application — for parents whose eligibility for modifications could be determined using existing administrative data. Essentially, Cuyahoga started modification reviews by default for parents meeting certain criteria: (1) they were incarcerated or (2) they were inquiring about modifying orders that had not received modification reviews in the previous 36 months.

##### INTERVENTION COMPONENTS

- For some parents, removing the eligibility screening step that requires parents to fill out paperwork to demonstrate eligibility for modification

#### Findings

##### IMPACT FINDINGS

There was a 47.9 percentage point increase in the proportion of cases that were scheduled for review, from 49.0 percent in the control group to 97.0 percent in the intervention group. This increase led to effects in the second stage of the process: The proportion of cases that saw modification affidavits (another round of paperwork parents had to complete) returned to the agency increased by 11.3 percentage points, from 29.4 percent to 40.7 percent. And the proportion of cases that saw reviews completed increased by 12.4 percentage points, from 31.6 percent to 44.0 percent. All differences are statistically significant at the 1 percent level.

Descriptive statistics show that the Test 1 intervention decreased the time it took to get a review scheduled by 38.8 percent, or by 43.4 days. A nonexperimental analysis of the Test 1 cases that received modifications found that parents in the intervention group had to wait an average of 68 days after random assignment to receive new order amounts, while parents in the control group had to wait 112 days on average.

##### IMPLEMENTATION FINDINGS

Though implementation was initially challenging due to staff turnover and the county's need to make changes to its information technology to deliver the intervention, after the first few weeks the test was delivered as designed.

##### ESTIMATED NET COSTS

The county reported no increases in costs for the intervention group over the control group.

# BICS Ohio

THE BEHAVIORAL INTERVENTIONS FOR CHILD SUPPORT SERVICES PROJECT

## Ohio Phase I Franklin County Test 1 (OH1/FR)

### Simplifying the Application for Order Modification

#### Method

Randomized controlled trial. Sample of 2,565 individuals, 1,270 in the intervention group and 1,295 in the control group. Study cases were followed for at least three months using administrative records from the Franklin County Child Support Enforcement Association.

#### Behavioral Strategies Used

- Simplification

#### The Intervention

##### DESIGN

The goal of the intervention was to increase the proportion of parents who reached important milestones in the modification review process: scheduling modification reviews, returning affidavits to the agency, and completing the modification review process. Parents in the intervention group received a simplified modification application package with a redesigned, double-sided form and a one-page fact sheet that included language to encourage parents to complete the form.

##### INTERVENTION COMPONENTS

- A graphically redesigned, clarified, and simplified application form that used clearer language informed by behavioral science
  - The package included a one-page document with a simplified, four-step overview of the modification-review process on one side and Frequently Asked Questions on the other.

- It also included an easy-to-read table of eligibility requirements, with an explanation of each and an example of the documents required.

#### Findings

##### IMPACT FINDINGS

In the intervention group, 42.1 percent of modification requests had reviews scheduled, compared with 38.6 percent in the control group. The difference of 3.5 percentage points is statistically significant at the 10 percent level, and an increase of 9.1 percent over the control group. These differences carried through the review process: The intervention increased the proportion of modification requests that saw modification affidavits (another round of paperwork parents had to complete) returned to the agency by 3.1 percentage points (or a 16.4 percent increase) and increased the proportion of modification requests that saw reviews completed by 3.2 percentage points (a 14.8 percent increase). Descriptive results show that the test very modestly increased the amount of time it took for orders to complete the modification process.

##### IMPLEMENTATION FINDINGS

The intervention was largely implemented as designed.

##### ESTIMATED NET COSTS

Franklin County reported reduced costs for the intervention group compared with the control group.

# BICS Ohio

THE BEHAVIORAL INTERVENTIONS FOR CHILD SUPPORT SERVICES PROJECT

## Ohio Phase I Cuyahoga Test 2 (OH2/CUY)

Simplifying Applications for Order Modifications and Sending Reminders to Complete Important Milestones in the Modification Review Process

### Method

Randomized controlled trial. Sample of 3,895 individuals, 1,927 in the intervention group and 1,968 in the control group. Study cases were followed for at least three months using administrative records from the Cuyahoga County Office of Child Support Services.

### Behavioral Strategies Used

- Simplification
- Loss aversion
- Personalization
- Reminders
- Implementation prompts

### The Intervention

#### DESIGN

The goal of the intervention was to increase the proportion of parents who reached important milestones in the modification review process: returning affidavits to the agency and completing the modification review process. The intervention provided parents with greatly simplified modification paperwork along with reminders to complete it. Additionally, the state suppressed its own version of the affidavit for parents in the intervention group, so only one version was sent to those parents (parents in the control group continued to receive two versions — county and state — either of which could be completed).

#### INTERVENTION COMPONENTS

- Revised affidavit packet
  - A one-page modification form was sent, along with a fact sheet that highlighted the option to fast-track the modification review if both parents agreed.
- Follow-up calls
  - Approximately five days after the revised affidavit was mailed, agency staff members attempted to reach intervention group parents by phone using a script.
- Additional follow-up
  - Depending on the contact information available, intervention group parents were also sent letters or text messages or given automated telephone reminders approximately 10 days before the deadline for returning the form.

### Findings

#### IMPACT FINDINGS

The number of affidavits returned and reviews completed increased by about 2 percentage points, but these increases are not statistically significant, meaning that the differences cannot be attributed to the intervention with confidence.

#### IMPLEMENTATION FINDINGS

A nonexperimental comparison of modification requests in the intervention group showed that 60.2 percent of modification requests completed the mod-

## Ohio Phase I Cuyahoga Test 2 (OH2/CUY) (continued)

ification process when either parent was reached by phone, compared with 54.3 percent of modification requests when neither parent was reached by phone.

### **ESTIMATED NET COSTS**

The county reported no increase in costs for the intervention group over the control group. The county reported that savings from Test 1 (OH1/CUY) more than offset any costs associated with texting and reminder calls made by staff members in Test 2.

# BICS Ohio

THE BEHAVIORAL INTERVENTIONS FOR CHILD SUPPORT SERVICES PROJECT

## Ohio Phase I Franklin County Test 2 (OH2/FR)

### Simplifying Applications for Order Modifications and Offering Additional Help

#### Method

Randomized controlled trial. Sample of 1,249 individuals, 614 in the intervention group and 635 in the control group. Study cases were followed for at least three months using administrative records from the Franklin County Child Support Enforcement Association.

#### Behavioral Strategies Used

- Simplification
- Reminders

#### The Intervention

##### DESIGN

The goal of the intervention was to increase the proportion of parents who reached important milestones in the modification review process: returning an affidavit to the agency and completing the modification review process. Franklin County combined dedicated staffing with simplified materials. Parents in the Test 2 intervention group were sent a simplified four-page version of the order modification paperwork, known as an affidavit, and the same overview and Frequently Asked Questions document used in Test 1 (OH1/FR). The state suppressed the state version of the affidavit for parents in the intervention group, so only one version was sent to parents (parents in the control group continued to receive both the state and the county versions, either of which could be completed). Additionally, the county created a specialized modification unit to assist parents in the intervention group with their applications.

##### INTERVENTION COMPONENTS

- A graphically redesigned, clarified, and simplified application form that used clearer language informed by behavioral science
  - The package included a one-page document with a simplified, four-step overview of the modification review process on one side and Frequently Asked Questions on the other.
  - It also included an easy-to-read table of eligibility requirements, with an explanation of each and an example of the documents required.
- A specialized modification unit
  - These specialized staff members reached out to parents who had modification review dates set and offered them assistance to complete the forms (in person, by phone, or by email, depending on their preference)

#### Findings

##### IMPACT FINDINGS

In the intervention group, 58.3 percent of the modification requests with reviews scheduled saw affidavit packets returned, compared with 41.9 percent in the control group, an increase of 16.5 percentage points (or 39.4 percent). This difference is statistically significant at the 1 percent level. Furthermore, nearly 63.5 percent of the intervention group's modification requests completed the modification process, compared with only 48.4 percent in the control group, an increase of 15.1 percentage points (or 31.2 percent). This difference is statistically significant at the 1 percent level. A non-experimental analysis of the length of time it took to complete the process showed it took cases in the in-



## Ohio Phase I Franklin County Test 2 (OH2/FR) (continued)

intervention group slightly longer to complete the modification process than cases in the control group.

### **IMPLEMENTATION FINDINGS**

Test 2 was largely implemented as designed. In interviews, members of the dedicated modification unit reported that they felt well prepared to provide the intervention, found it professionally rewarding, and believed that it was more effective in helping parents.

### **ESTIMATED NET COSTS**

The county reported reduced costs for the intervention group compared with the control group. Because the intervention group Test 2 mailings were shorter, the county used less paper and ink. The county reallocated staff members, caseloads, and functions among its enforcement units to create the two-person modification unit. This reallocation had to be cost-neutral for it to be approved by the county administration.

# BICS Ohio

THE BEHAVIORAL INTERVENTIONS FOR CHILD SUPPORT SERVICES PROJECT

## Ohio Phase II Mailing Intervention (OH3)

Using Mailings to Increase the Percentage of Parents Registered on the State's Online Child Support Portal

### Method

Randomized controlled trial. Sample of 4,193 individuals, 1,869 in the intervention group and 2,324 in the control group. Study cases were followed for seven weeks using child support agency administrative records.

### Behavioral Strategies Used

- Simplification
- Personalization
- Implementation prompts
- Social influence

### The Intervention

#### DESIGN

The goal of the intervention was to increase the percentage of parents registered on the state's online child support portal through mailings. The intervention targeted parents who were not registered on the portal and for whom the agency did not have email addresses. Parents in the intervention group received a letter informed by behavioral science.

#### INTERVENTION COMPONENTS

- Outreach letter
  - A personalized letter demonstrating the benefits of registering on the portal was sent to parents. The letter used social influence and also provided clear instructions about how to register on the portal.

- The Cuyahoga County version of the letter used bright colors such as orange and yellow while Franklin County's letter used blue and gray.

### Findings

#### IMPACT FINDINGS

There was a 1.8 percentage point increase in the proportion of parents registered on the portal, from 1.7 percent of the control group to 3.4 percent of the intervention group. This difference is statistically significant at the 1 percent level and represents a 100 percent increase.

#### IMPLEMENTATION FINDINGS

The counties found this intervention easy to implement. There were some client contacts resulting from the calls. The intervention had a greater impact in Cuyahoga County, which also had a larger percentage of control group parents register. This difference in impacts may have occurred because Cuyahoga used bright colors in its letter while Franklin County used darker colors, or it may have occurred because the parents in Cuyahoga might be more receptive to any type of outreach. A subsequent test revealed that emails were more effective than letters at getting parents to register on the portal.

#### ESTIMATED NET COSTS

Not calculated for this intervention.

# BICS Ohio

THE BEHAVIORAL INTERVENTIONS FOR CHILD SUPPORT SERVICES PROJECT

## Ohio Phase II Emailing Test (OH4)

### Using Reminder Emails to Increase the Percentage of Parents Registered on the State's Online Child Support Portal

#### Method

Randomized controlled trial with nine research groups. Sample of 12,465 individuals, 11,099 in the eight intervention groups and 1,366 in the control group. Study cases were followed for four to five weeks using child support agency administrative records. This evaluation used a factorial design where eight versions of the email template were used to test the effects of different messages. The control group did not receive any outreach. A factorial design is an experimental design that allows a researcher to observe the effect of a specific factor on an outcome by randomly assigning individuals to different combinations of intervention components. This design also can test for interaction effects: whether the effect of one component varies depending on the presence or absence of the other components.

#### Behavioral Strategies Used

- Simplification
- Personalization
- Implementation prompts
- Social influence
- Reminders

#### The Intervention

##### DESIGN

The goal of the intervention was to increase the percentage of parents registered on the state's online child support portal through email. The intervention

targeted parents who were not registered on the online child support program portal but whose email addresses were known to the program. Parents in the intervention groups received an email informed by behavioral science. A second reminder email that contained the same information was sent one week later.

##### INTERVENTION COMPONENTS

- Outreach email
  - A personalized email demonstrating the benefits of registering on the portal was sent to parents. The email used social influence and also provided clear instructions about how to register on the portal.
  - Eight draft email templates were used, testing the effects of elements directed at three distinct concepts that have been identified as influencing behavior in some past research: attention, motivation, and implementation. The first set of elements drew parents' attention to the portal and made them more aware of it and its benefits. The second used social influence to motivate them to register, and the third provided easy implementation steps to register on the portal.

#### Findings

##### IMPACT FINDINGS

There was a 3.9 percentage point increase in the proportion of parents who registered on the portal, from 4.0 percent of the control group to 7.9 percent of the intervention group. This difference is statistically significant at the 1 percent level and represents a 98 percent increase. The factorial analysis did not conclude that any factor or combination of factors had a greater

## Ohio Phase II Emailing Test (OH4) (continued)

impact on registration rates than any other; the impact seems to be related to receiving an email rather than not receiving one.

### **IMPLEMENTATION FINDINGS**

The counties found that this intervention was not as easy to implement as the mailing intervention (see OH3) because mass emailing technology was new for them. The counties found the email intervention prompted more client contacts than the mailing intervention, probably because it was easier for someone to reply to an email than it was to call or email in response to a letter. This extra contact was an additional benefit, since it allowed staff members to speak with cli-

ents about both the portal registration and other case issues. The counties faced different constraints in determining how to deliver the email intervention. Cuyahoga County (which had a larger sample size) opted to send emails only to custodial parents, while Franklin County chose to email both noncustodial parents and custodial parents.

### **ESTIMATED NET COSTS**

Not calculated for this intervention.

# BICS Ohio

THE BEHAVIORAL INTERVENTIONS FOR CHILD SUPPORT SERVICES PROJECT

## Ohio Phase II In-Person Intervention (OH5)

Using In-Person Meetings to Increase the Percentage of Parents Registered on the State's Online Child Support Portal

### Method

The original design was to have a randomized controlled trial. However, due to process issues that were not uncovered during the diagnosis and design phase, sample build-up was both slower than expected and unevenly distributed between the intervention and control groups. As a result, the grantee did not move forward with the test.

### Behavioral Strategies Used

- Simplification
- Personalization
- Implementation prompts
- Social influence

### The Intervention

#### DESIGN

The goal of the intervention was to increase the percentage of parents registered on the state's online child support portal through in-person meetings. This intervention focused on parents who were scheduled to attend in-person hearings with agency staff members and who were not already registered on the portal. Parents in the intervention group received a scripted message and personalized instructional material for registering on the portal, both informed by behavioral science. They were also offered help if they wanted to register for the portal while they were on-site, and received follow-up text messages.

#### INTERVENTION COMPONENTS

- In-person meeting
  - Staff members had a script informed by behavioral science that they used to promote the portal.
  - Parents received a handout promoting the portal.
  - Parents were offered an opportunity to register on the spot.
  - Parents received a series of follow-up text messages reminding them to register on the portal.

### Findings

#### IMPACT FINDINGS

Data from this intervention were not analyzed because of the recruitment issues mentioned above.

#### IMPLEMENTATION FINDINGS

The two counties implementing the test faced different constraints. Franklin County determined early on that it did not have the operational capabilities to run the test as designed. Cuyahoga County opted to launch the test but determined later that the test on the whole was not viable. However, it did adopt some materials from the Phase II tests into its standard operations going forward.

#### ESTIMATED NET COSTS

Not calculated for this intervention.

# BICS Texas

THE BEHAVIORAL INTERVENTIONS FOR CHILD SUPPORT SERVICES PROJECT

## Texas Phase I (TX1) Intervention

### Increasing Payments in the Initial Months After Order Establishment

#### Method

Randomized controlled trial. Sample of 1,167 individuals, 582 in the intervention group and 585 in the control group. Study cases were followed for three months using agency child support administrative records.

#### Behavioral Strategies Used

- Simplification
- Implementation prompts
- Public/private commitment
- Reminders
- Loss aversion

#### The Intervention

##### DESIGN

The goal of the intervention was to increase payments in the initial months after order establishment. The intervention focused on newly established cases. Non-custodial parents in the intervention group attended a meeting focused on the payment process, and received a follow-up call one week later.

##### INTERVENTION COMPONENTS

- Payment meeting
  - Noncustodial parents had one-on-one meetings with case managers immediately after order establishment.

- Materials informed by behavioral science
  - During the payment meeting, case managers provided written materials to help parents understand their payment options and decide how to make payments: a welcome letter, a decision tree, a debt-accrual graphic, a wallet card, a payment-option table, and one page of details on the chosen payment option.
- Follow-up call from the case manager
  - One week after the payment meeting, case managers called parents to remind them to make payments and to answer any questions they had.

#### Findings

##### IMPACT FINDINGS

There was a 4.9 percentage point increase in the proportion of parents who made payments in the first month after order establishment (an increase from 56.5 percent to 61.4 percent). This difference is statistically significant at the 10 percent level and represents a 9 percent increase. There was no effect on the proportion of parents who made payments in the second and third months, which was close to 70 percent in both groups.

The intervention had different effects among noncustodial parents who had one child support order (the one established that day) than it did among those who had other orders, and thus had previous experience with the child support system. The intervention produced an impact of 6.5 percentage points in first-month payments among parents with just one order

# Texas Phase I (TX1) Intervention (continued)

and no impact among parents with multiple orders. Among the four regions that participated in the study, the largest region had a 9.1 percentage point impact on payment rates in the first month. In the other regions, the impacts on payment rates are not statistically significant. There were no statistically significant impacts on the total average amount parents paid in the first three months.

## **IMPLEMENTATION FINDINGS**

The intervention was adapted slightly to fit each region's population and processes. Most intervention group members participated in the payment meetings, which lasted 10 minutes on average. It was difficult for staff members to reach parents for follow-up calls.

## **ESTIMATED NET COSTS**

- \$214 per intervention group participant, almost all for additional staff time related to program implementation.
- This amount is much more than an equivalent intervention would cost if it were integrated into standard practice in the state. It would cost an estimated \$12.26 more per parent than business as usual to implement the intervention as part of standard practice.

# BICS Texas

THE BEHAVIORAL INTERVENTIONS FOR CHILD SUPPORT SERVICES PROJECT

## Texas Phase II (TX2) Intervention

### Increasing the Number of Orders Agreed to in the Office

#### Method

A nonexperimental analysis of outcome measures before and after the intervention — a pre/post test. Sample of 4,425 child support meetings scheduled with parents over three months in seven offices. Outcomes for each office were measured using agency child support administrative records.

#### Behavioral Strategies Used

- Simplification
- Personalization
- Loss aversion
- Social influence

#### The Intervention

##### DESIGN

The goal of this intervention was to increase the number of orders agreed to in the office. Parents with appointments to establish their orders in the child support office received outreach materials informed by behavioral science. For six of the seven offices, these materials consisted of a flyer in the mail; for the seventh office, the information was sent by email when email addresses were available.

##### INTERVENTION COMPONENTS

- Flyer/email informed by behavioral science
  - The flyer/email featured bright colors and included pictures of smiling kids to attract attention and put parents in a positive state of mind.

- It highlighted the consequences of not attending the meeting.
- It included quotes from parents who had attended in-office meetings about the benefits of meeting in the office rather than in court.
- It provided information about what to bring and a direct telephone number for parents to call if they had questions.
- Special child support case managers to answer calls
  - These case managers fielded calls from parents who received the flyer or email.

#### Findings

##### IMPACT FINDINGS

The pre/post test results are inconclusive. Three offices experienced increases in the percentage of appointments that led to agreements in the office, while two offices experienced reductions and two offices experienced little difference.

##### IMPLEMENTATION FINDINGS

The child support case managers fielded 395 calls from parents. The most common reason parents called was to reschedule their appointments. The next most common reasons were to update contact information, ask questions following the meeting (for those who attended), and ask questions about the process.

Among a sample of 34 parents who came to the meeting and said they had received the flyer or email, most said they would have come to the meeting even if they had not received the material. At the same time, they



## Texas Phase II (TX2) Intervention (continued)

all reacted positively to the flyer or email. Several said that it helped reduce the stress they had about the meeting and others said that it provided useful information, such as what materials they should bring with them.

Parents had positive reactions to the new design. A subset of 55 parents were surveyed and asked for examples of things that stood out as positive or negative in the materials; most of the respondents pointed out more than one positive example, and the few negative

reactions were about the child support process, not about the materials.

Fewer customers than expected called the direct phone number provided to them.

### **ESTIMATED NET COSTS**

Not calculated for this intervention.

# BICS Vermont

THE BEHAVIORAL INTERVENTIONS FOR CHILD SUPPORT SERVICES PROJECT

## Vermont Phase I (VT1) Intervention

Increasing the Rate of Agreements Reached Between Parents  
in a Meeting Outside of Court

### Method

Randomized controlled trial. Sample of 947 cases, 464 in the intervention group and 483 in the control group. Study cases were followed for at least eight months using state child support records.

### Behavioral Strategies Used

- Simplification
- Reminders
- Priming exercise
- Implementation prompts
- Personalization
- Loss aversion

### The Intervention

#### DESIGN

The goal of this intervention was to increase the participation rate in meetings outside of court and increase the rate of agreements reached between parents in those meetings. The intervention targeted cases in the order establishment stage and modification stage of the child support process. Parents in the intervention group received outreach materials informed by behavioral science, followed by a Resolution Meeting that used principles of procedural justice.

#### INTERVENTION COMPONENTS

- Redesigned initial packet in an eye-catching envelope

- A large envelope was used to stand out in the mail. A cover sheet highlighted the most important items to bring to the meeting and suggested parents place the required documents in the envelope to keep them organized. The welcome letter in the packet was simpler than the one the agency had been using before. It included a map that showed the location of the office, directions, the contact information of the case manager meeting with the parent, and a calendar image with the appointment date and time circled.
- Reminder calls five days and one day before the Resolution Meeting
  - Case managers used scripts aimed to make the calls friendly, helpful, and respectful while they reinforced the importance of attending the meeting. Parents had the option of rescheduling the meeting to fit their schedules.
- Resolution Meeting, an administrative alternative to an existing court-based conference
  - The case managers who led these meetings were trained in principles of procedural justice to increase parents' understanding of the process, provide parents with a voice, remain neutral, and be helpful and respectful. This new meeting was longer than the existing conference and was offered at more flexible hours.
- Priming exercise right before the Resolution Meeting
  - Parents were offered an optional exercise that asked a series of questions designed to get them to think about their identity as parents.

# Vermont Phase I (VT1) Intervention (continued)

## Findings

### IMPACT FINDINGS

Participation in the targeted meeting (the Resolution Meeting for the intervention group and the existing conference for the control group) by both parents increased by 8.4 percentage points, from 26.3 percent of the control group to 34.7 percent of the intervention group (a 31.9 percent increase). This impact is statistically significant at the 1 percent level. The proportion of cases where both parents reached agreement increased by 11.3 percentage points, from 12.4 percent of the control group to 23.7 percent of the intervention group (a 91.1 percent increase). This impact is statistically significant at the 1 percent level.

The length of time from the initiating action (case opening or an application for modification) to agreement decreased by 70 days among cases where agreement was reached at a targeted meeting. (This finding is nonexperimental.)

### IMPLEMENTATION FINDINGS

The intervention was mostly delivered as designed. There were slight revisions made at the beginning to make the intervention compatible with case managers' workloads. Roughly half of the parents chose not to complete the priming activity meant to precede their Resolution Meetings after learning that it was optional. Several parents told researchers they liked the new materials and found them helpful and inviting.

### ESTIMATED NET COSTS

A preliminary analysis indicated that the intervention services may have been less costly than business as usual due to a reduction in service of process for cases that were resolved or dismissed outside of court, as well as a reduction in cases being filed with the court. These anticipated savings are from OCS's perspective and are largely the result of early parent engagement and stipulations occurring earlier in the process. Precise estimates are not available due to limited data.

# BICS Vermont

THE BEHAVIORAL INTERVENTIONS FOR CHILD SUPPORT SERVICES PROJECT

## Vermont Phase II (VT2) Intervention

### Increasing the Rate of Participation in Resolution Meetings

#### Method

Nonexperimental comparison group. Sample of 578 cases, with 293 cases receiving transportation cards in Phase II and 285 cases from Phase I that did not receive the transportation cards. This study compared participation rates by both parents in the intervention group in Phase I with participation rates by both parents in the intervention group in Phase II. The study used data from child support administrative records, and data were analyzed by Veritas HHS.

#### Behavioral Strategies Used

- The intervention used all the same strategies as in Phase I, plus a monetary incentive in the form of \$25 VISA cards for transportation. Parents did not have to provide any proof of expenses incurred.

#### The Intervention

##### DESIGN

The goal of the intervention was to increase participation rates in Resolution Meetings by offering transportation cards to parents who come to the Resolution Meetings. This intervention is an iteration of the one used in Phase I.

#### INTERVENTION COMPONENTS

- Transportation card
  - In addition to the intervention components from Phase I, transportation cards for gas and public transit were provided as incentives to parents. These \$25 VISA cards were mentioned in the initial letter and reminder calls made to parents.

#### Findings

##### IMPACT FINDINGS (FROM AN ANALYSIS CONDUCTED FOR VERMONT BY VERITAS HHS)

There was a 5.5 percentage point increase in participation in two out of the three regions where the intervention was tried. (This increase is an average across the two regions.) There was a 6.1 percentage point increase in the agreements reached between parents or cases being dismissed because an action was not appropriate. (This increase is also an average across the two regions.)

##### ESTIMATED NET COSTS

Not calculated for this intervention.

# BICS Washington

THE BEHAVIORAL INTERVENTIONS FOR CHILD SUPPORT SERVICES PROJECT

## Washington Phase I (WA1) Intervention

### Increasing Early Parent Engagement During Order Establishment

#### Method

Randomized controlled trial. Sample of 1,855 individuals, 884 in the intervention group and 971 in the control group. Study cases were followed for six months using agency child support administrative records.

#### Behavioral Strategies Used

- Personalization
- Deadlines
- Simplification
- Implementation prompts
- Salience

#### The Intervention

##### DESIGN

The goal of this intervention was to increase parent engagement early in the order establishment process. The intervention targeted newly opened cases to engage parents in the order establishment process. Before orders were established, noncustodial parents in the intervention group received phone calls from specialized case managers and outreach materials informed by behavioral science.

##### INTERVENTION COMPONENTS

- Calls from specialized case managers
  - Case managers trained in principles of behavioral science and procedural justice made pre-service phone calls guided by talking points and checklists.
- Personalized follow-up letter if phone contact did not occur
  - If case managers did not reach parents by phone, case managers sent personalized follow-up letters encouraging them to call the agency.
- Service package cover sheet
  - Case managers added a cover sheet to the front of each service package sent to parents that provided clear instructions, a simple summary of the proposed order amount, and an implementation prompt about what the recipient should do next.

#### Findings

##### IMPACT FINDINGS

A higher proportion of intervention group members received consent orders than control group members (5 percent compared with 2 percent).<sup>1</sup> This difference is statistically significant. However, there was no effect on other targeted outcomes, such as the percentage of parents who requested hearings after their orders were established and the percentage of orders estab-

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<sup>1</sup> Consent orders occur when one or both parents object to a proposed order amount but the parents come to an agreement without requiring a finding by an administrative law judge. Consent orders typically occur during or immediately before a hearing.

# Washington Phase I (WA1) Intervention (continued)

lished through agreed settlements.<sup>2</sup> The intervention also did not find impacts on child support payments. There were no statistically significant impacts on average total payments or on the percentage of parents who made some payments within the first six months after random assignment. There was also no effect on timely service (the percentage of cases served within 90 days). A lack of effect on timely service suggests that, contrary to the concerns of many case managers in the agency, more active outreach approaches in advance of service did not delay the order establishment timetable.

## IMPLEMENTATION FINDINGS

The intervention components were largely implemented as planned, though rates of contact with parents were lower than expected, with approximately half of the intervention group having phone contact with a BICS case manager.

BICS case managers reported that they appreciated the more active, customer-oriented approach. They liked the opportunity to engage with customers before their orders were established, feeling that it allowed them to establish a more collegial, less adversarial dynamic.

Intervention group parents interviewed by the BICS team said they appreciated the caseworkers' ability to explain information in a clear and helpful way, but the parents did not generally report improved perceptions of the child support agency overall.

## ESTIMATED NET COSTS

- \$11.09 per intervention group participant.
- Most of the net cost (\$10.78) reflects the added labor costs associated with the intervention; printing costs were minimal.

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<sup>2</sup> Similar to consent orders, agreed settlements occur when one or both parents object to a proposed order amount but parents come to an agreement without requiring a finding by an administrative law judge. Agreed settlements typically happen before a hearing takes place.

# BICS Washington

THE BEHAVIORAL INTERVENTIONS FOR CHILD SUPPORT SERVICES PROJECT

## Washington Phase II (WA2) Intervention

### Increasing Payments in the Early Months After Order Establishment Through Outreach and Reminders

#### Method

Implementation study. Sample of 299 individuals enrolled over seven months at one field office.

#### Behavioral Strategies Used

- Personalization
- Simplification
- Implementation prompts
- Reminders

#### The Intervention

##### DESIGN

The goal of the intervention was to increase payments in the early months after order establishment. The intervention targeted parents with newly established orders. A specialized group of caseworkers called parents and sent print materials to parents to encourage them to make voluntary and consistent payments. In addition, parents who could be reached by phone and who agreed to text reminders were sent text messages prompting them to follow through with the payment plan they discussed on the call.

##### INTERVENTION COMPONENTS

- Telephone outreach immediately following order establishment
  - Specialized BICS case managers made phone calls guided by talking points and a checklist, encouraging parents to make specific payment plans and commit to them.

- Order establishment letter
  - Whether or not they made phone contact with parents, case managers sent parents a letter encouraging them to review their orders, make payments, and call or email the agency with questions.
- Reminder text message one day before payment was due

#### Findings

##### IMPLEMENTATION FINDINGS

BICS case managers made contact with about 43 percent of parents by phone or text. During implementation, BICS case managers began notifying parents by text message that they would be calling, in order to increase phone contact rates. After case managers adopted this “text-first” approach, the contact rate increased from 40 percent to 51 percent. Case managers were able to send initial text communication requests to 63 percent of parents enrolled after the “text-first” switch (57 out of 90 parents had viable phone numbers), and 37 percent of those who received text-message requests (21 out of 57) then called their caseworkers directly, before the caseworkers called them.

Overall, 9 percent of parents agreed to and were sent subsequent payment-reminder text messages (20 percent of those reached by phone).

According to the grantee project director, staff members appreciated the opportunity to give parents notice by text message that they would be calling, and felt that they were more likely to make contact with parents whom they texted first. Parents generally

## Washington Phase II (WA2) Intervention (continued)

responded positively to the calls, but staff members found that many parents wished to discuss the terms of their orders rather than making payment plans, which made it difficult to use the talking points. Staff members also found that parents who had questions about the terms of the orders or who did not agree with them were also less likely to agree to payment-reminder text messages.

### **ESTIMATED NET COSTS**

Not calculated for this intervention.



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# Earlier MDRC Publications on BICS

## **Dates and Deadlines**

*Behavioral Strategies to Increase Engagement in Child Support*

2018. Caitlin Anzelone, Jonathan Timm, and Yana Kusayeva.

## **Start Smart**

*Using Behavioral Strategies to Increase Initial Child Support Payments in Texas*

2019. Mary Farrell and Carly Morrison

## **Streamline or Specialize**

*Increasing Child Support Order Modification Review Completion in Ohio*

2019. Peter Baird and Rhiannon Miller

## **Explainers and Case Managers**

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## **Personalized Outreach**

*Testing Early Parent Engagement in Washington's Child Support Program*

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## **A Better Resolution**

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