Behavioral Interventions to Advance Self-Sufficiency (BIAS) Project: Texas Incarcerated Non-custodial Parents

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Behavioral Interventions to Advance Self-Sufficiency (BIAS): Overview

• BIAS seeks to answer: How can behavioral economics apply to human services policies and programs?

• Neoclassical economics (traditional) vs. Behavioral Economics:
  - Neoclassical Economics: well-informed; stable preferences; no problems with self-control; completely self-interested; good at making decisions that maximize well-being
  - Behavioral Economics: limited cognition; imperfect self-control; shifting preferences; procrastinate; choice overload; mental shortcuts; small factors matter

• Sponsored by ACF’s OPRE
Overview of Incarcerated NCP Program

1. OAG selects eligible incarcerated NCPs; sends letter
2. NCP receives letter; goes to law library
3. NCP fills out application
4. Law Librarian notarizes application
5. NCP mails application to OAG
6. OAG forwards application to appropriate CS field office
7. Field office staff act on application
8. CP is served
9. Attorney from field office brings application to court
10. Judge rules on order modification
BIAS methodology

DEFINE
DEFINED PROBLEM

DIAGNOSE
ACTIONABLE BOTTLENECKS

DESIGN
SCALABLE INTERVENTION

TEST

ACTIONABLE BOTTLENECKS

SCALABLE INTERVENTION

DEFINED PROBLEM

BIAS methodology
Step 1: Define Problem

• In 2011, OAG sent out 868 letters and received 266 responses (31%). Of these, 20% received modifications.

• Can the response to the program be improved with a behavioral intervention?
Step 2: Diagnose

• Data Collection Process
  - Collected materials, information about process
  - Informal conversations with prison staff in state prison
  - Analysis of management information data

• Some Key Takeaways
  - 7% of letters submitted to OAG are not notarized
  - Smaller facilities have higher response than larger
  - Average incarcerated parent owed over $18,000 in arrears; monthly order averaged $239
  - Annual interest rate of 6% is applied to all unpaid arrears
Incarcerated NCP Program Bottlenecks

- Released or moved; mail not forwarded
- Does not open or read (deliberation costs)
- Does not understand (cognitive effort)
- Decides not to act (identity; psychological distance)
- Doesn’t follow through (procrastinates; present bias; hassles)
- Doesn’t meet with Librarian (hot vs cold state)
- Doesn’t mail application (procrastinates; hassles; forgets)
- Application incomplete or not notarized; resends to NCP
Step 3: Design

- Sent teaser postcard: One week prior to the letter and application being sent
- Changes to letter:
  - Printed on blue paper
  - Simplified reading level
  - Removed the reference to the custodial parent
  - Inclusion of a checklist to support plan-making
- Changes to the application:
  - Pre-populated with information available to OAG
  - Wording changes to increase clarity
- Reminder Postcard to NCPs: Six weeks after letter had been sent to NCPs who had not responded
Step 4: Test

• Targeted Texas child support regions that had not yet received letters:
  – Abilene, Corpus Christi, Houston, Laredo, Lubbock, Paris, San Angelo, Tyler

• Developed list of 1,904 individuals eligible
  – At least one child under age of 18 on the child support case, at least one year left before paroled, no history of domestic or family violence

• Randomly assigned list, stratifying by state facility (105 facilities)
Test (cont’d)

• OAG tracking outcomes over 4 months for both groups:
  - Primary outcomes of interest: Application is submitted to the OAG; Application is forwarded to child support office for processing (rather than being sent back for more information)
  - Secondary outcomes: Child support order with downward modification; Average reduction in child support order amount

• Impact = difference between two groups’ outcomes

• Subgroups of interest:
  - Type of facility (e.g., public prison, private prison, state jail, private state jail, transfer facility, or medical facility)
  - Prison size
  - Security classification or years of sentence
Contacts

Lashawn Richburg-Hayes  
MDRC  
212-340-7598  
Lashawn.Richburg-Hayes@mdrc.org

Mary Farrell  
MEF Associates  
703-838-2723  
mary.farrell@mefassociates.com