

BICS

THE BEHAVIORAL
INTERVENTIONS
FOR CHILD SUPPORT
SERVICES PROJECT

PERSONALIZED OUTREACH Testing Early Parent Engagement in Washington's Child Support Program

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The Behavioral Interventions for Child Support Services (BICS) project aims to improve federally funded child support services by increasing program efficiency, developing interventions informed by behavioral science, and building a culture of rapid-cycle evaluation. MDRC led technical assistance for the BICS team, partnering with MEF Associates and the Center for Policy Research. The BICS project is funded and managed by the federal Office of Child Support Enforcement in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The grantees are California, Colorado, the District of Columbia, Georgia, Ohio, Texas, Vermont, and Washington. The evaluation contract is overseen by the State of Washington's Division of Child Support in the Department of Social and Health Services.

OVERVIEW

State child support programs secure financial support for children whose parents live apart. Establishing paternity, establishing orders, and collecting and distributing payments are core child support program functions. Many child support programs are interested in engaging parents in the order establishment process.¹ In particular, engaging parents early on in this process may help programs ensure that orders are based on accurate financial information and can help improve the timeliness and regularity of payments.

In the state of Washington, the Division of Child Support (DCS) is responsible for establishing and enforcing child support orders. In the current order establishment process, DCS staff members rarely speak to parents when calculating proposed order amounts. The first contact most parents have with DCS is often during “service of process” (or, put simply, when a parent is “served”).² Service of process in the context of order establishment is a formal procedure in which DCS provides legal documents to a parent outlining the proposed amount the parent will be required to pay each month.³

- 1** Throughout this brief the term “parent” is used to describe someone who has been named as the noncustodial parent in a child support case. Noncustodial parents are also sometimes called obligors; they are the parties who have been ordered to pay child support. In this brief, a parent who receives child support is specifically described as a “custodial parent.” When the brief refers to “parents” involved in the intervention, these are only noncustodial parents, but when it refers to “both parents,” “either parent,” or “all parents,” custodial and noncustodial parents are included.
- 2** Throughout this brief, the terms “service,” “serve,” and “served” are only used in reference to the official delivery of legal documents rather than the more common usages related to providing assistance. “Services” is used in this brief only in the phrase “child support services,” which refers to the array of activities provided under the child support program, and in agency titles.
- 3** DCS first attempts to use certified mail to send documents, and if the documents are not successfully delivered, it relies on process servers or sheriffs.

According to an analysis of DCS data, payments on newly established orders are low.⁴ In addition, 75 percent of the orders included in that analysis were established by default, meaning the parents did not actively engage in the child support process before their proposed order amounts went into effect.

The BICS team heard from DCS staff members a belief that parents' distrust of the child support agency may make them less willing to comply with their orders. For the BICS intervention, therefore, DCS aimed to foster a more cooperative relationship with parents during the order establishment process, in order to increase collections in the short term and ultimately to obtain more regular payments in the longer term. The intervention included several components: a specialized unit of caseworkers; pre-service outreach phone calls; a follow-up letter to parents who could not be reached by phone; and a new cover sheet for the service package.

To test the intervention, DCS randomly assigned more than 1,800 parents with new child support cases in Washington to one of two groups: intervention or control. Control group parents received business-as-usual conditions, while those in the intervention group received the new process.

There was limited evidence that the intervention increased parent engagement in the order establishment process. In addition, the intervention did not improve payment outcomes in the first six months following random assignment as DCS and the BICS team hypothesized it would. There are several potential explanations for the lack of impacts on payment outcomes. For one thing, there was no specific call to action related to making payments included in this intervention. For another, DCS made contact with a relatively low percentage of parents in the intervention group (54 percent), which may have reduced the effects of the intervention. It may also be that nonpayment is due to issues that are not behavioral in nature, such as a parent's inability to pay or poor relationship with the custodial parent.

On a positive note, the intervention did not have any negative impacts on service efficiency. Before the intervention, many staff members expressed concerns that calling parents in advance of service could lead them to evade service and would delay the order establishment process. However, study results show that the pre-service outreach efforts did not make it more difficult to serve parents within 90 days.

Though there is limited evidence of measurable impacts on key outcomes, the caseworkers involved in the intervention and state agency leaders liked this new approach. Agency leaders felt that the experience showed it is possible to train staff

⁴ The BICS team analyzed 8,780 cases associated with 7,951 parents opened between October 2013 and October 2014 and found that only 24 percent of parents made any payments in the first six months after their orders were established.

members to implement an approach informed by behavioral science. The specialized BICS caseworkers who volunteered to deliver the intervention saw it as an opportunity to take a more active, customer-focused approach to case management and found that parents they called were generally receptive to their efforts.

The following sections provide more background on the existing order establishment process, the intervention's design, results from the study, implementation findings, and lessons and next steps.

THE EXISTING PROCESS

In Washington, new cases are created in the child support system when a parent applies for child support services from DCS or when a custodial parent applies for public assistance and indicates the other parent is out of the household. Child support orders in Washington are established through either an administrative or a judicial process. Across all cases, order establishment is roughly split between the two processes, but in cases where parents have lower incomes, and especially in cases where the custodial parent receives public assistance, orders are more likely to be established through the administrative process. The BICS intervention focused only on new administrative cases.

New cases are set up by an intake staff member, and then an automated system assigns them to caseworkers at one of the nine field offices statewide. The caseworker assigned the case attempts to identify a valid address for the parent, determines the parent's income based on available information, and calculates a proposed order amount based on both parents' incomes.⁵

This proposed order amount can have long-term implications. If DCS successfully serves both parents and neither parent contests the proposed amount, this amount becomes the monthly child support obligation by default. There can be negative consequences for setting the obligation either too high or too low relative to the parent's ability to pay. If DCS has overestimated the parent's ability to pay, the parent may not be able to pay regularly or in full, causing the parent to fall into debt and creating instability for the custodial parent and child(ren). If DCS has underestimated the parent's ability to pay, the custodial parent and child(ren) will not receive the appropriate amount of support.

5 Usually caseworkers calculate proposed order amounts using parents' recent earnings as shown in government databases, but they estimate income for parents with little or no earnings history. For example, a caseworker will often assume a parent works 40 hours per week at minimum wage and calculate a proposed order based on this assumption. Either parent can also provide income documentation or information about his or her contribution to a child's medical and health care, and that documentation or information can influence the proposed order amount. However, in interviews with the BICS team, DCS staff members said that it is uncommon for either parent to actively volunteer information, particularly if the parents have low incomes.

After calculating the proposed order amount, the caseworker generates a service package for each parent. The service package includes the proposed order amount, worksheets explaining how the amount was calculated, and a hearing-request form. Either parent can submit the hearing-request form in order to contest the proposed order amount.

All parents have three options when they receive the service package:

- 1 Call the caseworker.** A parent who calls his or her caseworker after service but before the order is finalized can gain several potential advantages. The caseworker can:
 - Modify the proposed order amount if either parent provides additional relevant information⁶
 - Initiate a request for a hearing with an administrative law judge if the parent does not agree with the proposed order amount
 - Facilitate a settlement process in which both parents agree to a final order without a judge's involvement
 - Refer a parent to outside resources such as employment services, training, or legal services that can help with access and visitation issues
- 2 Request an administrative hearing** using the hearing-request form in the service package. At the hearing, the parent can present new information or learn more about the case with an administrative law judge present.
- 3 Do nothing.** If a parent does not request a hearing or call the caseworker within 20 days, the notice becomes an order by default.

The service package is typically the first contact between DCS and a parent. According to DCS staff members and leaders, very few caseworkers make contact with parents before service to obtain income information or to verify the information already in hand. Several staff members expressed concerns to the BICS team that calling parents before service could alert them of the impending child support obligation and that they might then try to evade service. Such evasion could slow the order establishment process, since successful service is an essential step.

6 Examples of relevant information include evidence of self-employment or other work not reflected in government databases, or any factors that would justify setting the order amount very low or even at zero (such as if the noncustodial parent was incarcerated or was receiving Supplemental Security Income benefits, which are designed to help aged, blind, and disabled people with little or no income).

Even when parents are served successfully, both DCS staff members and parents told the BICS team that parents in the administrative establishment process are often unaware that their orders have gone into effect until enforcement actions begin (for example, when DCS sends an income withholding order to the parent's employer to start withholding child support payments from the parent's wages).

INTERVENTION DESIGN

For this BICS intervention, DCS identified the goal of fostering a more cooperative relationship with parents during the order establishment process in order to improve their perception of DCS. DCS staff members and leaders felt that building a more positive relationship would increase collections from parents with newly established orders in the short term and lead to more regular payments in the longer term.

After DCS identified this goal, the BICS team and DCS used a process called “behavioral diagnosis and design” to develop an intervention. Through interviews with staff members and analysis of DCS data, the BICS team mapped out the steps involved in order establishment and identified “behavioral bottlenecks.” Behavioral bottlenecks are points when parents and staff members may face psychological and behavioral tendencies that get in the way of a desired or intended behavior. The BICS team also interviewed a small number of parents during this process. The interviews with staff members and parents also supported DCS leaders' theory that the order establishment process was creating an adversarial relationship between parents and DCS, potentially negatively affecting child support payments. The intervention designed by the BICS team focused on addressing the following bottlenecks:

- **The materials parents receive are long and complex.** The service package and other written communications parents receive from DCS are roughly 15 pages long and include a combination of detailed worksheets for calculating order amounts and legal forms with dense text. Parents may not understand how the order establishment process works or what they can do if they disagree with a proposed order amount.
- **The tone of the materials creates an adversarial relationship.** Interviews with staff members and parents suggested that the service package (and sometimes even the fact that they have an open child support case) often comes as a surprise to parents and that the language in the service package feels punitive. This perception can create an adversarial relationship between DCS and parents, which in turn may cause parents to withdraw from the process.
- **Parents do not always perceive that they have an opportunity to participate in the process.** DCS's limited interaction with parents can also lead the

agency to propose order amounts based on incomplete information. In interviews, some parents indicated that they felt their proposed order amounts did not reflect their life circumstances. The BICS team also found that parents were often unaware that there were steps they could take to try to alter a proposed amount.

In response to these bottlenecks, the BICS team sought to design an intervention to simplify and personalize information presented to parents, clearly explain parents' options and next steps in the process, clarify the consequences of inaction, and build trust between parents and DCS. The intervention included four components, also summarized in Figure 1:

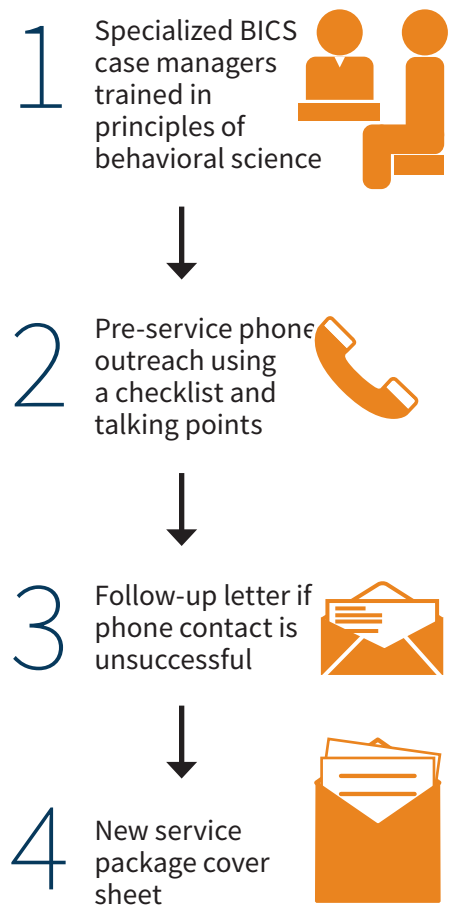
1 BICS Caseworkers

- The intervention was delivered by five specialized BICS caseworkers. These caseworkers received special training in principles of behavioral science and procedural justice.⁷ They focused on establishing and enforcing orders for the intervention group.

2 Phone Outreach to Parents Before Service

- **Pre-service phone calls guided by talking points and a checklist informed by behavioral science.** The BICS team developed a checklist and talking points for BICS caseworkers to follow to ensure they delivered consistent messages. The talking points provided an overview of the establishment process and stressed DCS's neutral role in the process. The materials provided

Figure 1. Intervention Components



⁷ “Procedural justice” refers to the idea that people’s perception of a process and how they are treated during it determines how they respond to it. The five central components of procedural justice are the neutrality of the process, voice and participation, respect, understanding, and helpfulness. For more information, see Emily Gold La Gratta and Elise Jensen, “Measuring Perceptions of Fairness: An Evaluation Toolkit” (New York: Center for Court Innovation, 2015).

tips for how caseworkers could explain what information was used to calculate the proposed order amounts. The checklist also encouraged caseworkers to pause at multiple points to ensure parents understood what they had heard, and directed caseworkers to emphasize that they wanted to make the process as fair as possible. On these calls, BICS caseworkers described the service package they would be sending by certified mail and encouraged parents to sign for it as the immediate next step.

- **Three required call attempts.** If the BICS caseworkers were unable to reach the parent on their first try, they made at least two additional attempts at various times of day.

3 Personalized Follow-Up Letter If Phone Contact Did Not Occur

- If parents did not answer by the third call, BICS caseworkers sent them a follow-up letter encouraging them to call DCS (Figure 2). Personalized language addressed parents by name and encouraged them to “have a say” in their order amounts to ensure they felt greater control over the process. In addition, the letter described how important and easy it was to call a caseworker, and it attempted to simplify the process and reframe the relationship between DCS and parents as a helpful one.⁸ The letter included a deadline for responding to give parents a sense of urgency. In addition, the letter included language intended to increase the salience of the messaging, making the consequences of inaction prominent and easy to understand. Specifically, it noted that if parents did not respond by the deadline, caseworkers would move forward in calculating their proposed order amounts and preparing their service packages.

4 Service Package Cover Sheet

- BICS caseworkers added a cover sheet to the front of each service package sent to parents in the intervention group (Figure 3). The cover sheet provided clear instructions, such as “read this first.” It also included a simple summary of the proposed order amount and a list of steps the recipient should take next. Personalized language reframed the relationship between the caseworker and parent as one of assistance and helpfulness. The cover sheet clearly presented the income information on which the proposed order amount was based and the consequences of inaction. It encouraged parents to call DCS for answers to their questions.

⁸ DCS also translated printed intervention materials into Spanish, Somali, and Vietnamese (the three most common languages other than English spoken by parents on DCS’s caseload).

Figure 2. Intervention Follow-Up Letter

Personalization

Michael, have a say in setting up your child support amount.


Hello Michael,

My goal is to create a fair child support amount that takes your current situation into account. **Act now!** I want to make sure we have the correct information about you.

I'm trying to get ahold of you to talk about your child support for Jackson and Olivia.

Please call me at **1-800-442-KIDS** by

Take the next step:



Call me directly at **1-800-442-KIDS** by August 15, 2016 so I can make sure you have a say in the process.


It's easy to reach me directly.
Have your case number ready. It is: XXXXXX

I look forward to working with you,
Tina S.

Saliency

! If you do nothing

- Child support is a legal process and will move forward whether you provide input or not.
- If you do not provide input, your child support amount will still go into effect.
- **Call me today so I can help walk you through this process.**



Washington State
Department of Social
& Health Services
Transforming lives

1-800-442-KIDS

DSHS 00-405 (05/2016)

Figure 3. Intervention Cover Sheet

READ THIS FIRST.

Hello Michael,

I want to work with you to make sure your child support amount is correct and fair.
Act Now!

I am sending you these documents because you have been named parent of Jackson and Olivia on a child support case.

- Your proposed child support amount is \$XXX.
- This amount is based on your monthly income of \$XXXX.

Take the next 3 steps:

<p>1. </p> <p>Look at your proposed child support amount:</p> <p><small>*This is the amount you will be required to pay each month if you do not respond.</small></p> <p><i>Does this look correct?</i></p>	<p>2. </p> <p>Review pages 2-3 to make sure the information we used is correct.</p> <p><small>*This includes income, health care, daycare, and some other expenses.</small></p>	<p>3. </p> <p>Call your DCS case worker. 1-800-442-KIDS</p> <p><small>*Help me take your life circumstances into account and talk about the next steps in the process. You can also dispute your proposed order amount.</small></p>
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It's easy to reach me directly. Have your case number ready! It is: XXXXXX.

Your DCS case worker is: Tina S.
1-800-442-KIDS

! If you do nothing

- By signing for this notice, a legal process has started.
- The process will move forward even if you don't call, but it's in your best interest to call me as soon as possible.
- This order will go into effect 20 days from the date you signed for this package. **Call me today to have your voice heard.**

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1-800-442-KIDS

DSHS 00-401 (05/2016)

Personalization

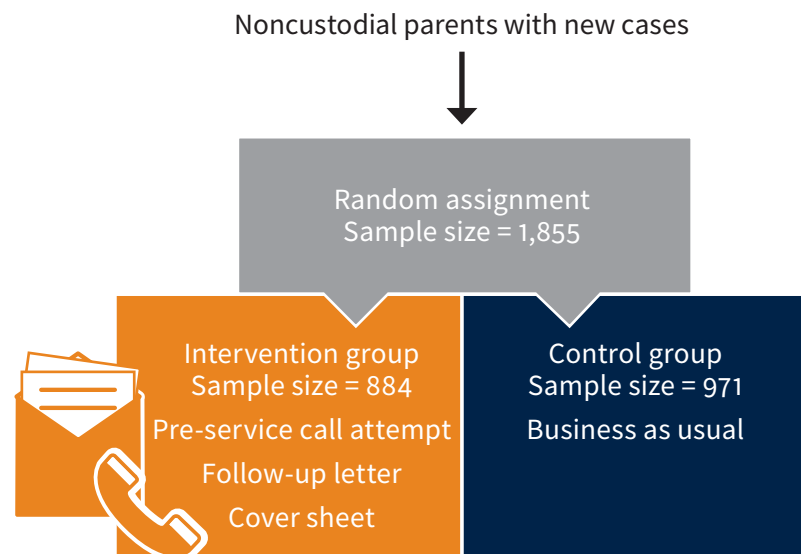
Simplification

Salience

RESULTS

To test the intervention, DCS randomly assigned parents with new child support cases into one of two groups: intervention or control (see Figure 4).⁹ Cases assigned to the control group received business-as-usual conditions, while cases assigned to the intervention group received intervention conditions. Box 1 provides more details on the study sample, research methods, and data sources.

Figure 4. Washington Intervention Process Overview



To estimate the impact of the intervention, the BICS team compared the outcomes of intervention group members with the outcomes of control group members. In order to determine whether the intervention increased parents' engagement in the order establishment process and the timeliness of payments, the study focused on near-term order establishment and payment outcomes.

- **Hearing requests.** DCS and the BICS team hypothesized that if parents engaged in the process, there would be fewer parents who requested hearings after their orders were already established. Such a finding would show that parents now

⁹ As mentioned above, the study only included cases handled through the administrative process, meaning it excluded judicial cases. It also excluded interstate cases, foster care cases, cases in which a tribal association existed for either parent or the child, cases where paternity was at issue, and cases in which there was a concern about domestic violence between the parties.

Box 1. Data and Methods

The sample consisted of 1,855 parents with new administrative child support cases meeting the study criteria between May 2016 and July 2017. There were 884 parents in the intervention group and 971 parents in the control group. Random assignment was initially conducted based on the last digit of the noncustodial parent's case-identification number. However, in September 2016 DCS began using an automated tool based on random number generation to conduct random assignment. The baseline characteristics for the sample members randomly assigned using the two methods are similar, and the two methods produced similar impact findings.

To estimate the impacts of the intervention, the BICS team analyzed child support administrative records for all sample members. The impact analysis compares the average (mean) outcomes of intervention group members with the average outcomes of control group members. Because the two groups were randomly assigned, any statistically significant differences between the two groups' outcomes can be attributed to the intervention.

The following data sources were used in the analyses presented in this brief:

- **Child support administrative records.** The research team obtained data on child support orders established and child support payments from DCS. Total payments and the percentage of cases with any payments made were tracked for six months after random assignment. The study focused on payments on current support only — that is, it did not include payments on child support debts, if they occurred. Outcomes other than payments — including rates of service within 90 days, hearings requests after orders were already established, and types of orders established — were tracked for three months.
- **Study tracking data.** BICS caseworkers used a web-based tracking tool that DCS designed to track their interactions with parents assigned to the intervention group. It recorded information on the dates when BICS caseworkers attempted to call parents, the rates at which they successfully reached parents, and whether they sent parents BICS printed materials. These data help to show how the intervention was implemented and were used to estimate the cost of the intervention.
- **Staff-time study.** BICS caseworkers recorded how they spent their time over two weeks of April 2017. These data were used to estimate the net cost of the intervention per person (the additional time and material costs spent on intervention activities relative to comparable, business-as-usual activities).

(continued)

Box 1 (continued)

The study team then multiplied these per-person costs by the quantity of each intervention component delivered to the intervention group as shown in the study tracking data.

- **Cost information.** DCS provided staff salaries and printing/paper costs to help the BICS team estimate the cost of the intervention.
- **Site visits.** The BICS team conducted four site visits to DCS headquarters and field offices between 2015 and 2016 to understand how orders were established in the business-as-usual condition, and later to monitor and document how the intervention was implemented. During these visits, the team met with child support staff members involved in the order establishment process. Visits to the field office where the intervention was implemented included observations of BICS caseworkers placing pre-service outreach calls.
- **Parent interviews.** Before the intervention began, the BICS team conducted interviews with five parents whose orders had been recently established to understand their experiences. Later, the BICS team also interviewed nine intervention group parents by phone to understand how the intervention was implemented and to learn their perceptions of the child support program.

understood their right to a hearing and acted on it (if they wanted to do so) *before* their orders went into effect.

- **Consent orders or agreed settlements.**¹⁰ DCS and the BICS team also expected increases in the percentages of parents who obtained consent orders or agreed settlements. Both of these outcomes indicate parental involvement during establishment, in contrast with establishing the order by default.
- **Payments in the first six months.** DCS and the BICS team hypothesized that the intervention would increase payments in the months following order establishment.

10 Consent orders and agreed settlements 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. Agreed settlements typically happen before a hearing takes place, whereas consent orders typically occur during or immediately before a hearing.

- **Timely service.** DCS and the BICS team tested whether the intervention affected the number of parents served within 90 days. As mentioned above, many DCS staff members expressed concern that pre-service contact would make it more difficult to serve parents in a timely fashion. However, the BICS team hypothesized that the intervention would not make service more difficult. Seeing a negative impact or no impact on this outcome would support this hypothesis: If the percentage of intervention group parents served within 90 days was approximately the same as the control group, it would demonstrate that earlier contact with parents did not make it harder to serve them in a timely manner.

The intervention did not produce impacts on most order establishment measures. There is limited evidence that the intervention increased parents' engagement in the order establishment process, as measured by an increased rate of consent orders or agreed settlements and a decreased rate of hearing requests. A higher proportion of intervention group members than control group members received consent orders (5 percent compared with 2 percent), and the difference is statistically significant, meaning that it can be attributed to the intervention with confidence. However, there are no statistically significant differences in the percentages of cases established through agreed settlement. There is also no statistically significant difference in the percentage of parents who requested hearings after their orders were established.¹¹

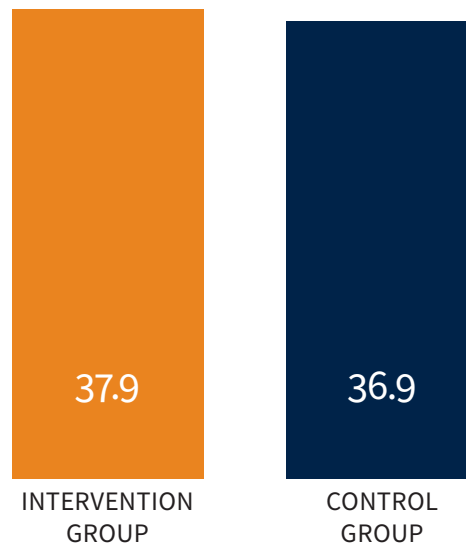
The intervention did not produce an impact on child support payments. As seen in Figure 5, there are no significant differences between the intervention and control groups in near-term payment outcomes.¹² Slightly more than a third of both the intervention and control groups (38 percent and 37 percent, respectively) made at least some payments on their monthly obligations within the first six months after random assignment. This difference is not statistically significant. In fact, the average total payments made in the first six months of the intervention were higher for the control group (\$433) than the intervention group (\$354), but this difference is also not statistically significant.¹³

11 The study also analyzed whether differences between the intervention and control groups in order amounts or times to order establishment (measured by the percentages of orders established within 180 days) may have influenced the lack of impacts. However, the analysis revealed no statistically significant differences between the two groups.

12 Figure 5 includes all sample members whether or not their orders were (1) established within six months or (2) established but set at zero dollars per month.

13 The study also analyzed the percentage of current support collected among members of the intervention group and the control group. This nonexperimental comparison between members of the intervention and control groups whose orders were established revealed that control group members paid a higher percentage of their current support, though the difference is not statistically significant (23 percent of current support paid by intervention group members compared with 33 percent paid by control group members).

Figure 5. Percentage of Parents Who Made Any Payment on Current Support, Months 1-6



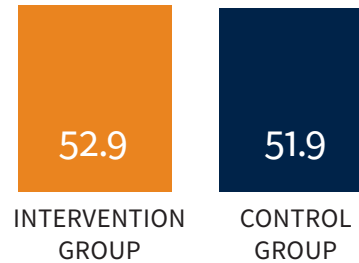
SOURCE: Calculations based on data from the Washington State Department of Child Support.

NOTES: Statistical significance levels are indicated as follows: *** = 1 percent; ** = 5 percent; * = 10 percent. The total sample size is 1,855 parents, with 884 parents in the intervention group and 971 parents in the control group.

The intervention did not reduce the number of cases served in a timely manner. Figure 6 shows that there is no significant difference between the intervention and control groups in the percentage of cases served within 90 days (53 percent of the intervention group and 52 percent of the control group were served within 90 days). This finding suggests that, contrary to the concerns of many DCS caseworkers, more active outreach approaches in advance of service did not jeopardize the order establishment timetable.

The BICS team also examined effects for subgroups defined by the gender of the noncustodial parent, the custodial parent's public-assistance status (that is, whether or not the custodial parent received public assistance), and the noncustodial parent's past earnings. In general, there were no statistically significant differences in impacts across these subgroups.

Figure 6. Percentage of Parents Successfully Served Within 90 Days



SOURCE: Calculations based on data from the Washington State Department of Child Support.

NOTES: Statistical significance levels are indicated as follows: *** = 1 percent; ** = 5 percent; * = 10 percent. The total sample size is 1,855 parents, with 884 parents in the intervention group and 971 parents in the control group.

IMPLEMENTATION

According to the BICS team's observations and discussions with DCS staff members and leaders, the intervention was largely implemented as planned, though making contact with parents was often difficult. This section details the implementation of the intervention, staff and parent perspectives on implementation, and a summary of the costs to implement the intervention.

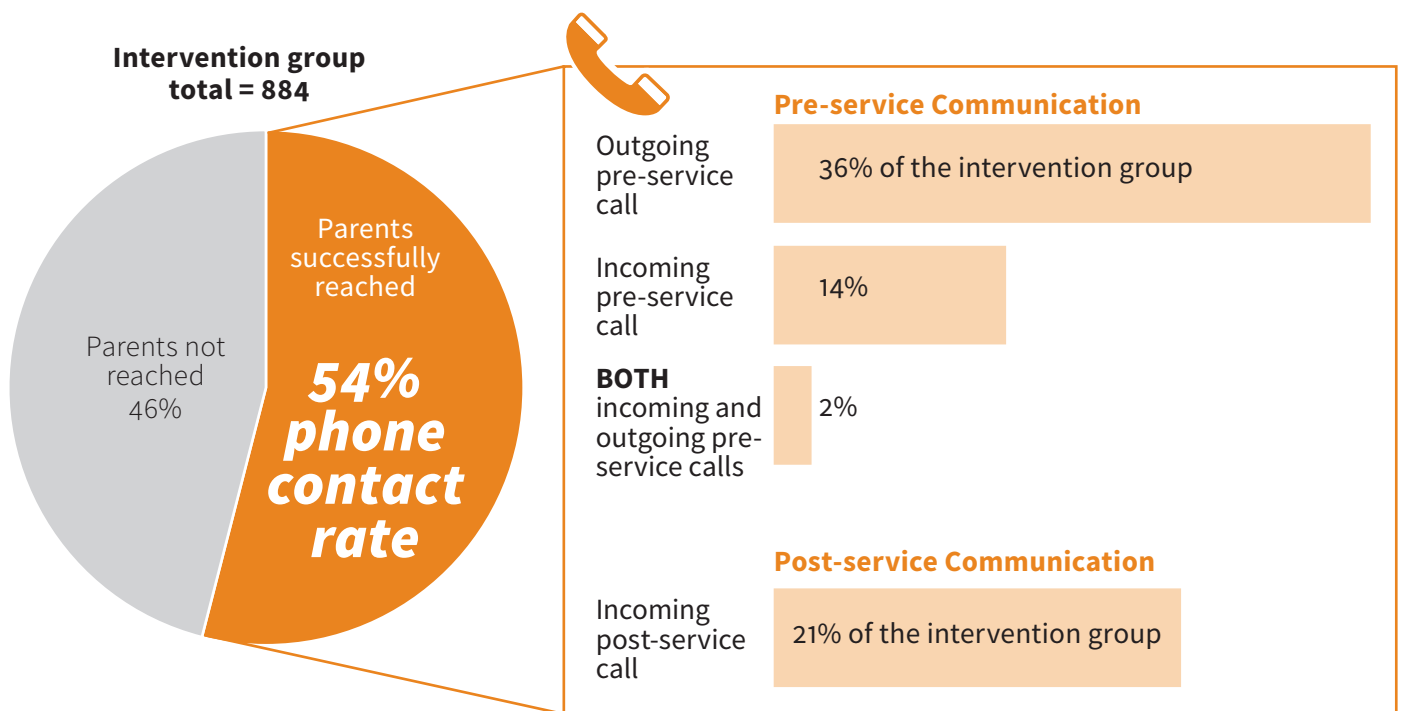
Staff members who delivered the intervention were enthusiastic about having had the opportunity to increase their contact with parents early in the order establishment process. They appreciated being able to address parents' questions and concerns about Washington's child support program. Interviewed parents said they appreciated the approach of the BICS caseworkers, though this approach did not appear to influence their overall perceptions of DCS.

Although there was little contact information available for many intervention group members, caseworkers attempted to reach most of them. Only 35 percent of intervention group parents had valid phone numbers available in their case records, or phone numbers that could be located quickly when their cases were initially assigned to BICS caseworkers. However, BICS caseworkers conducted additional research and, when they could find phone numbers, tried to reach as many parents as possible. Overall, caseworkers attempted to call 82 percent of intervention group members.

More than half of intervention group parents were reached during the study period. As shown in Figure 7, BICS caseworkers made contact with 54 percent of the intervention group at some point. BICS caseworkers reached 36 percent of intervention group members through outgoing calls before service. Another 14 percent of parents in the intervention group called their BICS caseworkers after receiving either a voicemail or the follow-up letter. In addition, 21 percent of intervention group members called their caseworkers after they received the service package.¹⁴

Participating staff members appreciated the more active, customer-oriented approach. BICS caseworkers, who volunteered for this assignment, liked having the opportunity to engage with parents before their orders were established. In

Figure 7. Telephone Contact with the Intervention Group



SOURCE: Calculations based on data from a web-based tracking tool the Washington State Department of Child Support designed to track interactions with intervention-group parents.

NOTE: The call categories shown here do not sum to the total number of parents reached by phone because the same parent can appear in more than one category.

¹⁴ The BICS team was not able to measure pre-service contact rates for members of the control group. Staff members interviewed before the intervention said that pre-service phone contact with parents was very rare; most parents who called DCS did so only after receiving the service package.

interviews, they reported feeling that it allowed them to establish a more collegial, less adversarial dynamic. They found the intervention group parents they spoke with were receptive to the early engagement efforts. BICS caseworkers thought that their conversations with intervention group parents were also more cooperative after cases were established and moved to the enforcement stage.

Pre-service calls did not typically yield new information that influenced the proposed order amounts. DCS anticipated that pre-service calls might result in information that could inform proposed order calculations. For example, DCS hoped caseworkers might obtain more accurate income information from parents with irregular earnings histories. However, BICS caseworkers reported that pre-service calls with parents rarely resulted in changes to proposed order amounts, and that parents mostly provided information on informal support or visitation arrangements. DCS policy precludes caseworkers from changing proposed order amounts based on these factors, but this information could be considered by an administrative law judge if either parent requested a hearing after service occurred. BICS caseworkers emphasized the hearing request option for parents who shared this type of information. The increase in consent orders may also be related to parents providing additional information at or immediately before hearings with administrative law judges.

Parents interviewed by the BICS team had a variety of reactions to the intervention. The nine intervention group parents interviewed by the BICS team did not generally report positive perceptions of DCS. Some parents did not remember a pre-service call, and some interpreted a lack of ongoing communication from DCS as a lack of interest in their circumstances. Some parents felt the communication they had had with their specific caseworkers was positive. There were several aspects of the intervention that parents reported appreciating, including the ability to connect to their caseworkers by phone and how their caseworkers stressed neutrality and the importance of making contact with the caseworker if the parent's circumstances changed. However, most parents were frustrated by their order amounts and they felt that the agency processes that led to these amounts were unfair. Most parents felt their interactions with DCS had been stressful overall.

Pre-service contact with parents took time, but it did not typically delay the service process. BICS caseworkers found that making phone calls before parents were served was more labor-intensive than their usual procedures, and increased the amount of time they worked on new cases, since they waited to send the service package until they had made multiple attempts to reach a parent. However, the finding that the intervention had no impact on the time it took for parents to be served indicates that parents may have been more responsive to service packages, resulting in no change in the average amount of time between when a case opened and when successful service occurred.

Intervention costs were low and largely reflected increased staff time. The BICS team estimated that the net cost of the intervention was \$11.09 per intervention group member. This estimate includes the cost of the extra time that staff members spent attempting and conducting pre-service calls, preparing and sending follow-up letters, and preparing service packages with the added BICS cover sheet. The estimate also includes the costs of training staff members in the BICS intervention protocols and the costs of printing intervention materials. Most of the net cost (\$10.78) reflects the added labor costs associated with the intervention; printing costs were minimal.

LESSONS AND NEXT STEPS

This intervention sought to increase parents' engagement in the order establishment process. DCS made fostering a more cooperative relationship with parents during the order establishment process its goal for this intervention. DCS staff members hoped achieving this goal would increase parents' trust of the child support agency, which may make parents more willing to comply with their orders.

The lack of impacts on most order establishment outcomes shows that this intervention had limited success in changing parents' behavior early in the order establishment process in the ways DCS and the BICS team hypothesized. It is also possible that the intervention may have had reduced effects because caseworkers only succeeded in making contact with 54 percent of the intervention group.

This intervention did not produce impacts on payments in the first six months, which indicates that the approach taken in this intervention does not necessarily translate into improved child support payments. There are several potential explanations for the lack of impacts on the payment outcomes. These results may be due in part to the lack of a specific payment-focused call to action or a clear implementation prompt related to making payments.¹⁵ Another possibility is that non-payment is due to issues that are not behavioral in nature, such as parents' ability to pay. Finally, the low contact rate may have also dampened payment outcomes.

This intervention did show that calling parents early in the process did not make it harder to serve them order establishment documents, contrary to the assumptions of many DCS staff members. It is an important program goal of child support agencies to serve parents effectively and quickly, so that they can establish orders and begin collecting payments. The results of this intervention demonstrate that early outreach does not make it more difficult to successfully serve parents in a timely manner.

¹⁵ Implementation prompts, which are prompts to make a plan or take action, were included in BICS interventions in Texas and Colorado, for example. Briefs summarizing both of those interventions are available on the OCSE BICS website: www.acf.hhs.gov/css/grants/grant-updates-results/bics.

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