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Nudges to increase completion of welfare applications: Experimental evidence from Michigan

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ABSTRACT

The Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program provides cash assistance to very-low-income families with children. Application procedures to receive TANF benefits, however, often involve substantial transaction costs likely to reduce take-up. We estimate, through a randomized controlled trial design, the effects of a detailed telephone-call reminder to increase TANF application completion in southwest Michigan, where applicants must visit a regional public employment office at least four times to be eligible for benefits. We do not find that personalizing reminder calls increased participation in the initial appointment at the public employment office. However, conditional on attending the initial session, applicants who received reminder calls before additional appointments were more likely to complete all application requirements, compared to those who did not receive reminders. Evidence suggests that reminder calls increase attendance at public employment office appointments but that personalizing such calls has limited impact.

JEL Classification Codes: D90, I38, H75, H83

Key Words: Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, nudge, welfare-to-work, randomized controlled trial, application costs

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Upjohn Institute working papers are meant to stimulate discussion and criticism among the policy research community. Content and opinions are the sole responsibility of the author.

INTRODUCTION

The Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program provides cash assistance to very-low-income families with children in the United States. Application procedures to receive TANF benefits, however, often involve substantial transaction costs likely to reduce take-up (Currie 2006; Deshpande and Li 2019; Finkelstein and Notowidigdo 2019; Moffitt 1983). In Michigan, applicants must visit a regional public employment office at least four times to demonstrate a determined effort to seek employment. The application process takes at least 28 days, and 60 percent of initial applicants fail to meet application requirements and therefore do not receive benefits. Because TANF serves some of the most vulnerable families in the United States, ineligibility for benefits may significantly reduce their household well-being.

In this paper, we estimate, through a randomized controlled trial design, the effects of a low-cost intervention to increase completion of TANF applications in a four-county region of southwest Michigan. Before their first appointment at a regional public employment office, all of Michigan's TANF applicants receive a short reminder telephone call that lists the appointment date, time, and location. In 2015, Michigan Works! Southwest, the local agency that coordinates Michigan's TANF application process for area residents, provided detailed or in-depth telephone calls to some applicants. During these calls, in addition to listing the appointment's date, time, and location (as in the phone calls normally made to applicants), callers emphasized services and employment networks the agency uses to connect applicants to employment opportunities and welcomed questions regarding orientation. Additionally, applicants who received these more in-depth and open-ended calls received reminder calls before each of the three required appointments after orientation, whereas the remaining applicants did not receive additional

reminders. We do not find that the reminder calls increased participation in the initial orientation session. However, conditional on attending the first session, applicants who received the treatment were more likely to complete all application requirements. Evidence suggests that reminder calls increase attendance at public employment office appointments but that personalizing such calls has limited impact.

Our work contributes to the literature on low-cost interventions, or *nudges*, that encourage individuals to engage in certain behaviors without altering their available options. Researchers have shown that nudges can affect a wide range of behaviors, including savings, borrowing, and investment (Duflo, Kremer, and Robinson 2011; Marx and Turner 2019; Thaler and Benartzi 2004); energy use (Allcott and Rogers 2014); and college enrollment and persistence (Castleman and Page 2015, 2016). In the work most similar to ours, Zhang et al. (2020) show that reminder letters increased compliance with wage-reporting requirements within the Supplemental Security Income program. The authors do not find evidence, however, that the specific language of the reminder letters affected wage reporting. We are the first to study the effects of a nudge to increase completion of welfare applications. Understanding how low-cost nudges within the welfare application process affect benefit receipt is of policy importance because even small changes in income could improve the living standards of very-low-income families.

BACKGROUND

TANF is a means-tested cash transfer program for families with children. The income, assets, and size of the assistance unit—which comprises children and any adults who care for them—determine households' eligibility for monthly cash assistance. States set all policy

parameters and administer TANF payments but receive about half of their funding from the federal government if they meet spending requirements and have specified portions of their TANF caseloads engaged in work-related activities, such as employment and job training. In 2013, in an effort to fulfill federal work requirements, Michigan implemented the Partnership, Accountability, Training, and Hope (PATH) program. PATH replaced Michigan's previous welfare-to-work program, known as Jobs, Employment, and Training, and mandated that TANF applicants spend several weeks demonstrating employability skills to be eligible for cash assistance.

PATH is a rigorous program designed to “identify barriers and help clients connect to the resources they will need to obtain employment” (Michigan Department of Health and Human Services 2020). Individuals who complete Michigan's online TANF application are first notified of the PATH participation requirement through a postal letter. The letter lists the date, time, and location of a group orientation session that all parents must attend at the Michigan Works! office in their county of residence the following Monday. The letter also references a 21-day application eligibility period (AEP) that will follow the orientation. It clearly informs applicants that failure to attend or reschedule the orientation session within 15 days of the notice being sent will result in application denial.

The PATH orientation session, which lasts about two hours, outlines weekly AEP requirements.¹ During the 21-day AEP, parents must engage in work-related activities for a specified number of hours per week. Specifically, one-parent households must complete 20 hours of work-related activities per week if there is a child younger than age 6 in the household, and 35 hours otherwise. Two-parent households with children younger than age 6 must complete 30

¹ TANF applicants with children younger than two months, as well as applicants who are ill or incapacitated or care for someone who is ill or incapacitated, may be exempt from PATH requirements.

hours of work-related activities per week; two-parent households *without* young children must complete 55 hours. PATH participants also are required to complete a number of activities that may count toward the weekly work requirement, such as creating a personalized employment strategy, completing a job skills assessment, and attending workshops on résumé and interview preparation. Finally, participants must attend weekly one-on-one employability interviews at their county's Michigan Works! office. Participants who fail to complete AEP requirements within 45 days are denied assistance and must restart the application process to receive TANF benefits.

On the Friday before their scheduled orientation session, PATH participants receive a short telephone call that reminds them of the orientation date, time, and location. PATH participants normally do not receive reminders before their weekly AEP interviews. Between 2013 and 2014, about 40 percent of Michigan's TANF applicants fulfilled all PATH requirements. Hence, 60 percent of TANF applicants were deemed ineligible for benefits because they failed to complete the application process. There is therefore considerable scope to increase benefit receipt through increases in completion of applications.

RESEARCH DESIGN

In 2015, the W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research collaborated with Michigan Works! Southwest to conduct a telephone reminder-call intervention. The intervention took place in Kalamazoo, Calhoun, St. Joseph, and Branch Counties, where about 500,000 individuals, or nearly 5 percent of Michigan's total population, reside. Box 1 shows that the treatment consisted of detailed reminder calls made on the Fridays preceding the orientation session and sometime during the week preceding each of the three AEP interviews. In addition to the date, time, and

location of the applicant's orientation session, this more detailed orientation reminder informed applicants as to how long orientation might last and some of the services Michigan Works! provides, including résumé preparation, mock job interviews, transportation assistance, and job training. Additionally, the caller welcomed questions regarding directions to the Michigan Works! office and the orientation session more generally. The AEP reminder call provided the date and time of the applicant's upcoming weekly one-on-one session, and the caller also welcomed questions. Applicants who did not receive the treatment instead received the typical short orientation reminder that specifies the date, time, and location of the orientation session. They did not receive reminders before the AEP interviews.

Table 1 displays characteristics of the 702 applicants who had orientation sessions scheduled between July 27, 2015, and January 4, 2016, of which 358 were randomly assigned to receive the treatment.² Applicants are, on average, 28 years old, and about 85 percent of them are female. Applicants tend to have low levels of education, as less than 3 percent hold a bachelor's degree or higher. Some 80 percent of applicants are single parents. Applicant characteristics are similar across the treatment and control groups, and no differences in average characteristics are statistically significant at conventional levels.

An additional 258 individuals applied for TANF benefits and were scheduled for orientation sessions between May 18, 2015, and July 26, 2015, before treatment assignment began. In the online appendix, we show that, on average, there are no significant differences in characteristics between individuals randomly assigned to the control group and individuals scheduled for orientation sessions earlier in 2015. Table 1 shows that including those scheduled for orientation before July 27, 2015, in the control group does not substantially change control-

² We exclude from the analyses some 25 individuals who received orientation deferrals after random assignment.

group characteristics on average, and differences in average characteristics between the treatment group and this alternative control group remain statistically insignificant at conventional levels. Therefore, we henceforth include the individuals with scheduled orientation sessions before July 27, 2015, in the control group. Results in which we restrict the control group to those who underwent random assignment are similar and can be found in the online appendix.

To understand how effects on TANF applicants in southwest Michigan may extend to TANF-vulnerable populations in other regions, Table 2 compares characteristics of individuals in the treatment and control groups to those of TANF recipients in Michigan and the United States during Fiscal Year 2015, using data on adults in TANF assistance units from the Office of Family Assistance, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2016), which samples each state's TANF population. Table 2 shows that TANF applicants in southwest Michigan are similar in age to TANF recipients in all of Michigan but tend to be slightly younger than TANF recipients in the U.S. more broadly. Some 85 percent of both TANF applicants in southwest Michigan and TANF recipients in the U.S. are female. There are stark differences in educational attainment between TANF applicants in southwest Michigan and TANF recipients in both the whole of Michigan and the United States, however. While 23 percent of southwest Michigan's TANF applicants have more than a high school degree, only 7 percent of TANF recipients in Michigan and 8 percent of TANF recipients in the U.S. have completed more than a high school education.³ We account for educational attainment in the empirical analyses, but researchers should proceed with caution in extrapolating results to TANF populations with different education levels.

³ We assign individuals in the analysis sample (but not in all of Michigan or the U.S.) as having more than a high school education if they have received an associate degree, a bachelor's degree, or some other postsecondary credential. It is possible that some individuals have completed some postsecondary education but have not received a degree or credential.

Table 3 displays success rates for orientation reminder calls across the treatment and control groups.⁴ The table shows that callers spoke with about 30 percent of applicants directly and spoke with another individual in the household for an additional 9 percent of applicants. Callers left a voicemail message with around 30 percent of applicants and were unable to contact the applicant in another 30 percent of cases. The distribution of call outcomes is quite similar across both treatment and control groups. While callers were slightly more likely to make some type of contact with individuals in the treatment group, the difference in contact rates between the treatment and control groups is statistically insignificant at conventional levels.

RESULTS

Table 4 displays the effects of the reminder-call treatment on orientation-session attendance rates. The table indicates that personalizing the orientation reminder call did not increase attendance: some 31 percent of applicants in the treatment group and 35 percent of applicants in the control group completed orientation, and the difference in attendance rates is statistically insignificant. The adjusted difference in orientation completion rates of -0.044 (again, statistically insignificant) comes from an ordinary least squares model that includes controls for age, sex, educational attainment, and family composition and is in line with the simple difference estimate.

Table 5 shows the effects of the detailed orientation call—as well as the reminders before the weekly one-on-one appointments—on rates of attendance at the AEP sessions and the

⁴ Given data limitations, Table 3 displays orientation reminder-call success rates only for individuals who underwent random assignment. We suspect that telephone-call success rates were similar for individuals who were scheduled for orientation before July 26, 2015.

completion of all welfare application requirements.⁵ Among all TANF applicants, we find no effect of the treatment on welfare application completion or on attendance at either of the first two AEP appointments. Some 17 percent of individuals in the treatment group and 16 percent of individuals in the control group fulfilled all application requirements, and the simple difference in completion rates is statistically insignificant. The statistically insignificant adjusted difference, 0.010, is nearly identical to the simple difference. Conditional on attending orientation, however, 58 percent of individuals in the treatment group and 48 percent of individuals in the control group completed all welfare application requirements. Both the simple difference, 0.100, and the adjusted difference, 0.112, are statistically significant at the 10 percent level. Among those who attended orientation, individuals who received the treatment also were more likely to attend the first two AEP sessions; the adjusted differences for attendance at the first and second sessions are 0.110 and 0.139, respectively, and both are statistically significant at conventional levels. However, estimates conditional on attending orientation are not necessarily causal. For example, the detailed phone call before the orientation session may have caused individuals in the treatment group to attend orientation who, conditional on observable characteristics, were more likely to complete all application requirements. Nonetheless, we do not find that personalizing the orientation call affected orientation completion; therefore, evidence suggests that reminder calls may be an effective tool to increase attendance at public employment office appointments.

DISCUSSION

Taken together, results suggest that reminder calls increase completion of welfare applications but that personalizing such calls has limited impact, which corroborates evidence

⁵ We exclude from Table 5 some 20 individuals who received AEP deferrals after completing orientation.

from Zhang et al. (2020). In our context, telephone calls to TANF applicants were already staff activities, so the marginal cost of implementing short calls before weekly one-on-one appointments at public employment offices was quite low. Given the low cost and simplicity of the intervention, similar measures could be implemented in other welfare-to-work programs to improve the well-being of vulnerable households.

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Table 1 Summary Statistics for TANF Applicants

Variable	Treatment	Control	Difference	Alternative control	Difference
Age	28.03	27.69	0.34 (0.600)	27.61	0.42 (0.516)
Female	0.835	0.846	-0.011 (0.028)	0.857	-0.022 (0.024)
Education					
Less than high school	0.274	0.265	0.009 (0.034)	0.251	0.023 (0.029)
High school/GED	0.489	0.491	-0.002 (0.038)	0.507	-0.018 (0.033)
Associate degree	0.031	0.052	-0.022 (0.015)	0.048	-0.017 (0.013)
Bachelor's degree or higher	0.022	0.023	-0.001 (0.011)	0.027	-0.004 (0.010)
Other credential	0.176	0.160	0.016 (0.028)	0.161	0.015 (0.025)
Unknown	0.008	0.009	-0.000 (0.007)	0.007	0.002 (0.006)
Two-parent family	0.184	0.233	-0.048 (0.031)	0.218	-0.033 (0.027)
Observations	358	344		602	

NOTE: Summary statistics for TANF applicants by treatment assignment. "Treatment" and "Control" denote observations randomly assigned to the treatment and control groups, respectively. "Alternative control" includes observations randomly assigned to the control group plus TANF applicants with orientation sessions scheduled between May 18, 2015, and July 26, 2015. "Other credential" indicates a postsecondary certificate or occupational license. Standard errors are listed in parentheses.

SOURCE: Authors' computations based on participant tracking and confidential program administrative data maintained by the W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research as administrative entity for Michigan Works! Southwest.

Table 2 Summary Statistics for TANF Applicants and Recipients in 2015

Variable	Analysis sample	Michigan	U.S.
Age			
Less than 20	0.081	0.048	0.042
20–29	0.594	0.580	0.505
30–39	0.232	0.262	0.291
40–49	0.076	0.090	0.123
50+	0.017	0.021	0.039
Female	0.849	0.949	0.849
Education			
Less than high school	0.259	0.224	0.386
High school/GED	0.500	0.707	0.539
More than high school	0.233	0.069	0.075
Unknown	0.007	0.000	0.000
Two-parent family	0.205	0.039	0.142

NOTE: Summary statistics for TANF applicants in the analysis sample and for TANF recipients in Michigan and the United States. Statistics for TANF recipients in Michigan and the United States are for Fiscal Year 2015, lasting from October 1, 2014, to September 30, 2015.

SOURCE: Authors' computations based on participant tracking and confidential program administrative data maintained by the W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research as administrative entity for Michigan Works! Southwest.

Table 3 Orientation Reminder-Call Success Rates

	Treatment	Control	Difference
Spoke with applicant	0.318	0.305	0.013 (0.035)
Spoke with someone else in household	0.087	0.087	–0.001 (0.021)
Left voicemail	0.321	0.311	0.010 (0.035)
Unable to contact	0.274	0.297	–0.023 (0.034)
Observations	358	344	

NOTE: Orientation reminder-call success rates by treatment assignment. “Treatment” and “Control” denote observations randomly assigned to the treatment and control groups, respectively. Standard errors are listed in parentheses.

SOURCE: Authors' computations based on participant tracking and confidential program administrative data maintained by the W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research as administrative entity for Michigan Works! Southwest and the Office of Family Assistance, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Table 4 Effects on Orientation Completion Rates

	Completed orientation
Treatment	0.307
Control	0.352
Simple difference	-0.045 (0.032)
Adjusted difference	-0.044 (0.031)
Observations	960

NOTE: Effects of the detailed reminder-call treatment on orientation-session completion rates. “Adjusted difference” denotes the estimate from an ordinary least squares model that includes controls for age, sex, educational attainment, and household composition. Robust standard errors are listed in parentheses.

SOURCE: Authors’ computations based on participant tracking and confidential program administrative data maintained by the W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research as administrative entity for Michigan Works! Southwest.

Table 5 Effects on AEP Session Attendance and Completion of Welfare Applications

	Unconditional on orientation			Conditional on orientation		
	Attended Week 1	Attended Week 2	Completed AEP	Attended Week 1	Attended Week 2	Completed AEP
Treatment	0.233	0.199	0.171	0.796	0.680	0.583
Control	0.238	0.192	0.163	0.704	0.568	0.482
Simple difference	-0.004 (0.029)	0.008 (0.027)	0.008 (0.025)	0.093* (0.053)	0.112* (0.059)	0.100* (0.061)
Adjusted difference	0.000 (0.029)	0.012 (0.027)	0.010 (0.025)	0.110** (0.054)	0.139** (0.060)	0.112* (0.063)
Observations	940	940	940	302	302	302

NOTE: Effects of the detailed reminder-call treatment on AEP session attendance and completion of welfare applications. “Unconditional on orientation” lists effects among all TANF applicants. “Conditional on orientation” lists effects among TANF applicants who attended the orientation session. “Attended Week 1” and “Attended Week 2” list effects on attending the first and second AEP interviews, respectively. “Completed AEP” lists effects on completing all welfare application requirements. Robust standard errors are listed in parentheses. Asterisks denote significance at the 0.10 (*), 0.05 (**), and 0.01 (***) levels.

SOURCE: Authors’ computations based on participant tracking and confidential program administrative data maintained by the W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research as administrative entity for Michigan Works! Southwest.

Box 1 Detailed Telephone Reminder-Call Intervention

<p>First component of treatment: To attend orientation</p>
<p>Orientation script read to the control group:</p>
<p>Hi, this is [name] from the Michigan Works! PATH program calling to remind you that you are scheduled for your PATH orientation this coming Monday, [date], at [time]. We are located in the Michigan Works! building at [address]. See you Monday.</p>
<p>Orientation script read to the treatment group:</p>
<p>Hi, this is [name] from the Michigan Works! PATH program in [city]. I’m calling to remind you about your PATH orientation this coming Monday, [date], starting at [time]. Orientation begins promptly and could last until [time], depending on how many people attend. We are located in the Michigan Works! service center at [address]. <i>If speaking with the person:</i> “Do you know how to get there?” <i>and explain.</i></p> <p>During orientation you’ll learn about the free employment services available to you at Michigan Works! We can help you with résumé writing, job interview skills, employment leads, transportation assistance, and education or job training opportunities. <i>If speaking with the person:</i> “Do have any questions?” <i>If leaving a voicemail:</i> “If you have any questions, please call [number].” We’ll plan on seeing you Monday at [time]. Thank you. Goodbye.</p>
<p>Second component of treatment: To attend weekly AEP appointments</p>
<p>No calls to the control group.</p>
<p>AEP script read to the treatment group before each of three weekly appointments:</p>
<p>Hi, this is [name] from the Michigan Works! PATH program in [city]. I’m calling to check in on your weekly plan and to remind you of your next one-on-one appointment on [date] at [time]. <i>If speaking with the person:</i> “Do you have any questions or concerns regarding your plan?” <i>If leaving a voicemail:</i> “If you have any questions, please call [number].” Thank you.</p>

NOTE: Detailed telephone reminder-call intervention scripts by treatment assignment. Calls were made on the Friday preceding the scheduled orientation session and sometime during the week preceding each of the three AEP interviews.

SOURCE: Information is property of Michigan’s One-Stop Management Information System for workforce development services. The control text is the script for standard practice. The treatment text is the script used for treatment calls.