

About US



Putting Behavioral Science in Action to Improve Programs

Every day, administrators struggle with elements of their programs that do not work the way they were intended to. For example, people do not use available services or supports, or they drop out of programs designed to help them reach important goals such as graduating from college, saving for retirement, or finding a new job. These behaviors stem from familiar human tendencies, including procrastinating, forgetting, being overwhelmed by too many choices, and taking mental shortcuts.

Mathematica Policy Research helps make social programs and policies better by designing and testing promising solutions that can help people make better choices. Working closely with clients every step of the way, Mathematica researchers take a multifaceted approach to address the bottlenecks that keep programs from being as effective as they can be by identifying feasible, promising strategies based on the principles of behavioral science.

THE STEPS WE TAKE TO PUT BEHAVIORAL SCIENCE IN ACTION

Understand the context. We work with clients to fully understand the challenges they want to address and carefully diagnose the behavioral bottlenecks that contribute to the problem.

Collaborate to design and implement a response. We collaborate to design behavioral interventions that respond to the program context and available resources; we also provide support for frontline staff to implement the intervention.

Collect evidence to test the impact. We conduct rigorous, low-cost, embedded experiments and other tests to determine whether the program enhancement works, and then determine how to scale and share the findings.

Mathematica has a core staff of economists, psychologists, and other social scientists with training and expertise in behavioral science. We complement these capabilities with our extensive knowledge and expertise on a wide range of social programs, their systems and procedures, their target populations, and a deep knowledge in designing and conducting evaluations—expertise we have gained over nearly 50 years of assessing the effectiveness of policies and programs to improve public well-being.

Examples of Behavioral Science in Action

Strengthening marriage and relationship education. For the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), Mathematica researchers are designing and testing the effectiveness of text reminders to encourage couples to consistently attend Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education group sessions.

Using communications to move families toward self-sufficiency. Working with administrators and staff, Mathematica designed and tested changes to communications and other nudges to help recipients of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families understand program rules, complete required activities, avoid sanctions, and achieve self-sufficiency.

Making shopping for schools easier in the era of school choice. School choice initiatives have expanded options for students and their families, but parents sometimes find it hard to make effective choices. For the U.S. Department of Education, Mathematica researchers are testing how best to share school choice information so parents find it easier to use and understand.

Changing defaults for opioid prescribing. For HHS, Mathematica experts are examining the effects of changing opioid prescribing defaults in electronic health records on prescribers' behavior.

Using nudges to promote job retention after injury or illness. For the Office of Disability and Employment Policy at the U.S. Department of Labor, Mathematica researchers examined the bottlenecks that can contribute to job loss for people who develop a work-limiting condition. We also identified a range of strategies informed by behavioral science to help workers keep their jobs.

Providing incentives in employment and training programs. For the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Mathematica is evaluating the effects of participation incentives offered within Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Employment and Training pilot projects, specifically on participants' employment, earnings, public assistance dependency, and other outcomes.

Behavioral strategies to support self-regulation and goal attainment. For HHS, Mathematica researchers identified self-regulation skills that can help people attain employment-related goals and recommended a range of behavioral strategies that could help them strengthen or access key self-regulation skills in order to achieve those goals.

Using text messages to promote maternal and child health. For the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, Mathematica researchers are evaluating the effectiveness of a text messaging campaign to reach Medicaid and Children's Health Insurance Program recipients and members of other disadvantaged populations. The goal is to improve their knowledge about their health, connect them with critical health resources, and encourage them to adopt healthy behaviors.

To learn more about Mathematica's work in applying behavioral science to public programs, please contact Amy Johnson, offering lead, at AJJohnson@mathematica-mpr.com.

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