

# INCREASING ENGAGEMENT & EMPLOYMENT OUTCOMES IN WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS

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April 2024



The People Lab



HARVARD Kennedy School

In collaboration with the California Policy Lab, the Los Angeles Mayor's Office Innovation Team, and the Los Angeles Economics Workforce and Development Department (EWDD), we conducted a randomized experiment to test the impact of timely, actionable, and behaviorally informed text messages aimed at increasing job seekers' engagement with the city's workforce development services. In a 14-week intervention, job seekers received text messages reminding them to engage in job-search related activities, utilize EWDD WorkSource Center resources, and set goals related to securing employment. We then measured the effect of the text message campaign on engagement with Los Angeles WorkSource Centers and subsequent employment outcomes.

## CONTEXT

Unemployment and underemployment are strongly correlated with poverty and have been shown to negatively affect psychological well-being.<sup>1</sup> Many cities and states offer free employment services for residents. However, these resources are only effective if they are used.

Los Angeles EWDD runs 16 WorkSource Centers (WSCs) that provide free employment services to around 27,000 job seekers a year in LA County. WorkSource Centers offer specialized services including career counseling, skills workshops, resume guidance, job matching, and employment referrals to enrolled clients. However, despite this robust workforce development infrastructure, the WorkSource Centers are underutilized by Los Angeles residents looking for employment. In fact, over half of enrolled clients (56%) only visit their local WorkSource Center once after enrolling.

Motivating sustained engagement over time is a common challenge faced by many public sector agencies. While people often intend to change and maintain their behavior, evidence suggests that doing so is difficult. For instance, WorkSource Center clients may intend to apply for a certain number of jobs each week. But, job seekers—like most people—face numerous cognitive and psychological barriers that can make it difficult to remember and motivate themselves to follow through on their intentions. This intention-behavior gap may contribute to low rates of client engagement with the WorkSource Centers, as well as limited employment outcomes.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- 1 Clients who received timely and behaviorally informed text messages were 3% more likely to engage with Los Angeles WorkSource Centers than those who did not receive communications.
- 2 Clients who received text messages were 20% more likely to secure employment at the end of the study compared to those who did not receive text messages.
- 3 A majority of clients who received text messages found them helpful and expressed interest in continuing to receive similar messages in the future.

## RESEARCH

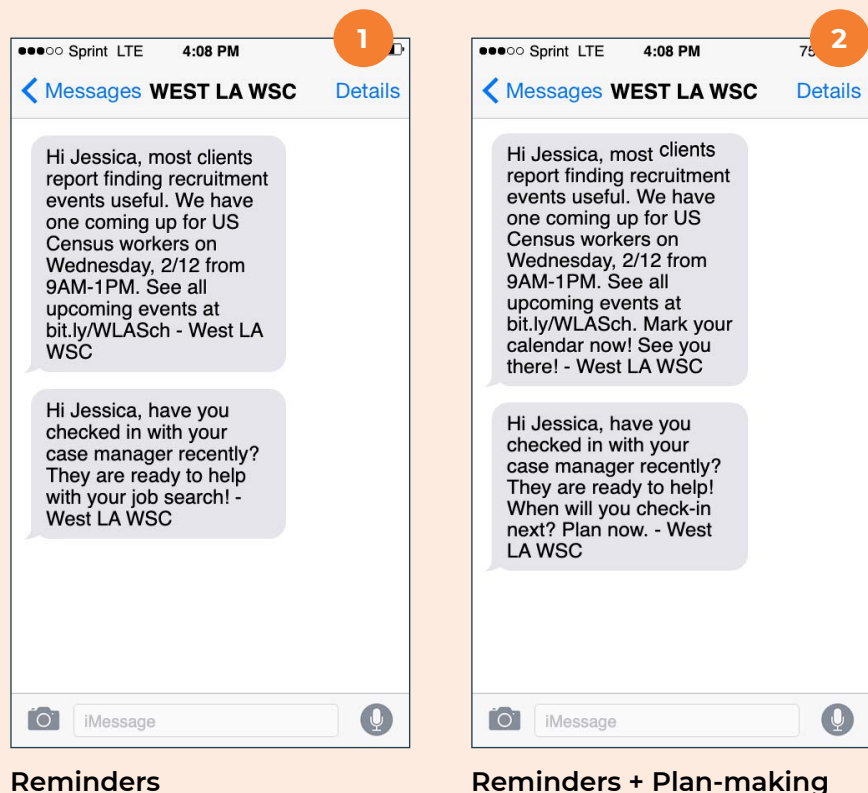
For 14 weeks from November 2019 to February 2020, we conducted a randomized experiment with 5,537 active WorkSource Center clients. Clients were randomly assigned to a control group that did not receive communication as part of the study, or one of two treatment groups:

- 1 Reminders:** Clients received weekly text messages with information about upcoming WSC events and workshops, and reminders to engage in individual job-search activities like checking in with case managers and utilizing the WSC computer centers.
- 2 Reminders + Plan-making:** Clients received the same weekly text message reminders as the “Reminders” group with additional language encouraging goal-setting and links to online plan-making forms. These messages leveraged evidence showing that prompting people to set goals and make plans can increase follow-through and help bridge the intention–behavior gap in areas like voting and annual flu shots.

At the end of the 14-week intervention, we evaluated the impact of receiving communications on employment outcomes and individuals’ engagement with WorkSource Centers. Engagement was measured as any interaction with a WorkSource Center including meeting with a case manager or attending a workshop or recruitment event. Additionally, we measured whether clients were employed in March 2020—approximately six weeks after the end of the intervention. Employment was captured in EWDD administrative data.

A second cohort was planned for January–March 2020 but was cut short due to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. This cohort is thus excluded from this analysis.

**FIGURE 1**  
Sample text messages sent to clients in the Reminders and Reminders + Plan-making groups



## WHAT WE FOUND

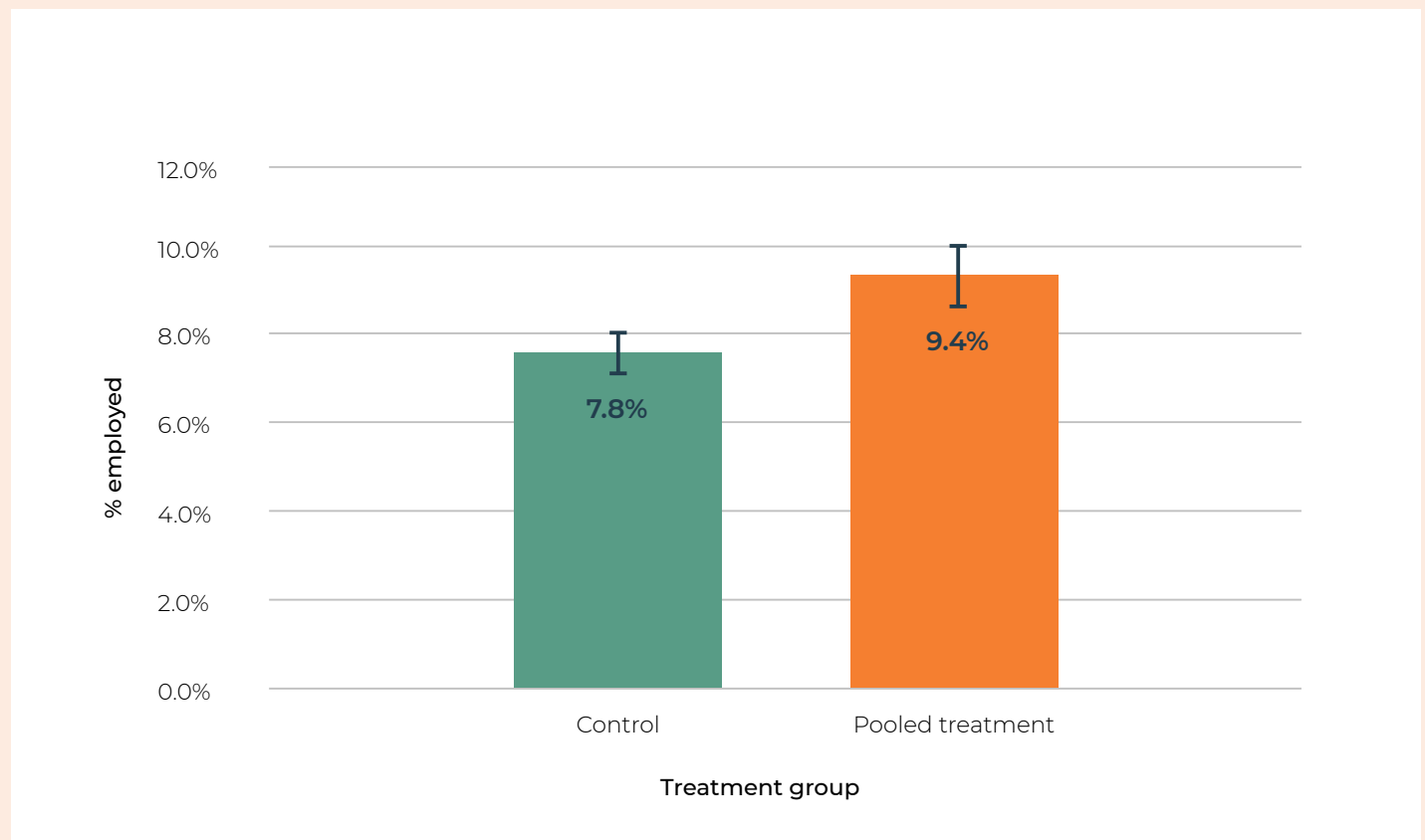
To evaluate the impact of the text message campaign, we compared outcomes between clients who were assigned to the no-communication control group and those who were assigned to either treatment group. We found that clients who were assigned to receive any communication (Reminders or Reminders + Plan-making) were 3% more likely to interact with the WorkSource Centers: 45.9% of clients in the two treatment groups interacted one or more times with the WSCs during the 14-week intervention period compared to 44.5% of clients in the no-communication control group.

Additionally, clients who were assigned to receive text messages were 20% more likely to be employed approximately six weeks after the intervention period: 9.4% of clients in the two treatment conditions were employed according to EWDD administrative data, compared to 7.8% of clients in the control group.

At the end of the intervention, we also conducted a follow-up text message survey among all clients in the experiment. Of 212 clients who were assigned to one of the treatment groups and responded to the survey, 75% remembered receiving the text messages. Of these, 80% reported finding the text messages helpful, and 82% reported being interested in enrolling in a similar program if offered in the future.

Because the second cohort was cut short, we are underpowered to detect effects between the two treatment groups on any outcomes of interest.

**FIGURE 2**  
Employment at the end of the 14-week intervention.



(total N=5,537)

## WHAT'S NEXT

A 14-week program of weekly personalized communications increased client engagement with WorkSource Centers and improved employment outcomes. Additionally, approximately 80% of jobseekers who received the communications reported finding them helpful and expressed interest in enrolling in the program if offered again. These findings suggest that job seekers may benefit from low-cost communications to prompt engagement with workforce development services and job-search-related activities. Future research could consider similar information interventions in other public sector contexts that require sustained behavior and engagement over time.

## SOURCE

1. Theodossiou, I. (1988). The effects of low-pay and unemployment on psychological well-being: A logistic regression approach, *Journal of Health Economics* 17(1), 85-104. [https://doi.org/10.1016/s0167-6296\(97\)00018-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/s0167-6296(97)00018-0)



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### About The People Lab

The People Lab aims to empower the public sector by producing cutting-edge research on the people of government and the communities they serve. Using evidence from public management and insights from behavioral science, we study, design, and test strategies for solving urgent public sector challenges in three core areas: strengthening the government workforce; improving resident-government interactions; and reimagining the production and use of evidence.



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