



Increasing Program Uptake

Practical ways that behavioral
science can reduce barriers

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Introduction

A government designs a great service or program to support its residents. Although many people qualify, the program receives just a few applications. How can we increase uptake?

This is a common question the Behavioral Insights Team (BIT) has helped governments answer across many policy areas—from COVID-19 vaccine uptake¹ to public workforce recruitment.² While marketing can sometimes raise awareness of programs, encouraging people to actually make use of them may involve a series of actions that advertising alone can't address. Applying a behavioral insights lens can help identify and address these barriers.

From April 2019 to October 2021, we partnered with nine cities through Bloomberg Philanthropies' [City of Opportunity](#) program. In this innovative cohort, cities were brought together to advance the shared goal of accelerating economic mobility.

With Results for America, we helped these cities use behavioral insights to support program design, evaluate interventions, improve recruitment and retention efforts, and more. The work demonstrated just how much behavioral science has to say about making programs successful.

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Lessons: EAST framework

Many of the Economic Mobility Initiative cities were focused on increasing participation in programs to help residents save money, gain professional or educational experience, and more. We've learned a lot about practical ways behavioral insights can help improve program uptake.

Our lessons are organized following BIT's ³, which distills key insights from behavioral science into four principles for encouraging a given behavior (Make it Easy, Attractive, Social, and Timely). These lessons are summarized in Table 1 below.

Table 1.
Summary of EAST principles for program uptake

EAST principle	Explanation
Easy	Simplifying the steps to apply for a program helps increase the likelihood that people successfully complete the process.
Attractive	People are more likely to pay attention to appealing stimuli, including personalized communications and incentives.
Social	When we learn about how others behave, it can affect our own actions. A program can draw on these social connections.
Timely	It's important for a program to provide a service when people need it and are able to act on it effectively.

Make applications easy

Reducing frictions (i.e., the effort required to take an action) is a core principle of behavioral science. We have ⁴ for the elimination of “⁵ or unjustified frictions, such as excessive paperwork or repetitive forms, that make it difficult to access services.

Though often unintentional, sludge disproportionately affects those seeking support who need it most—disabled people, older adults, people from racial and ethnic minorities, and those living on low or no income.⁶ To increase program uptake, one of the most powerful things you can do is simplify everything participants interact with, especially messages and processes at the outset.



Increasing access to internships

Our work in New Orleans, LA shows that simplification works. The city's goal was to ensure that residents had more access to careers in its high-paying industries. Employers claimed that local talent, ⁷ lacked the skills and experience needed. BIT partnered with YouthForce NOLA, a high school internship program, to address this mismatch.

For the pilot, we helped them design a simpler enrollment process. As a city-funded program, they required documentation like birth certificates or legal guardianship papers, which can be hard for teenagers to acquire. Through interviews with staff and students, we identified ways to mitigate these hurdles.

Rather than require a proof of residency document, we shifted the process to have students show that they're enrolled in a public school—paperwork that is easier to obtain. With this shift, plus other simplifications (creating more accessible materials to navigate requirements and offering staff support) YouthForce NOLA saw an increase in successful applications. In BIT's interviews, students also reported that submitting documents for enrollment wasn't a barrier, a marked difference from before.



Make your program attractive to residents

Making a program attractive involves drawing attention to it and ensuring it's appealing to complete. In our partnerships with Economic Mobility Initiative cities, this looked like personalized communications and incentives.

Raising preschool attendance

As a part of its economic mobility strategy, the city of Dayton, OH created high-quality early childhood education opportunities. But in order to reap the benefits, students had to attend. During

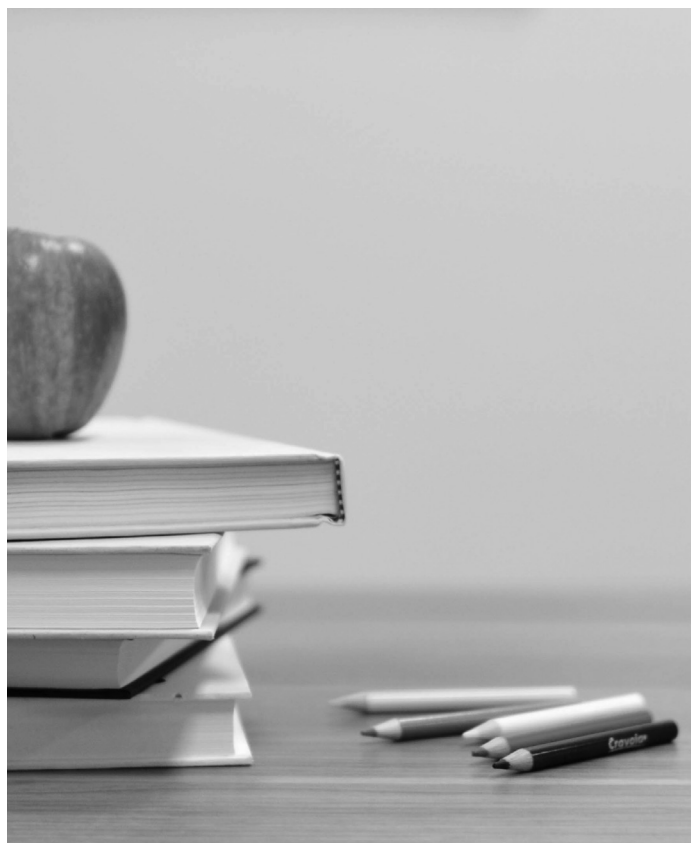
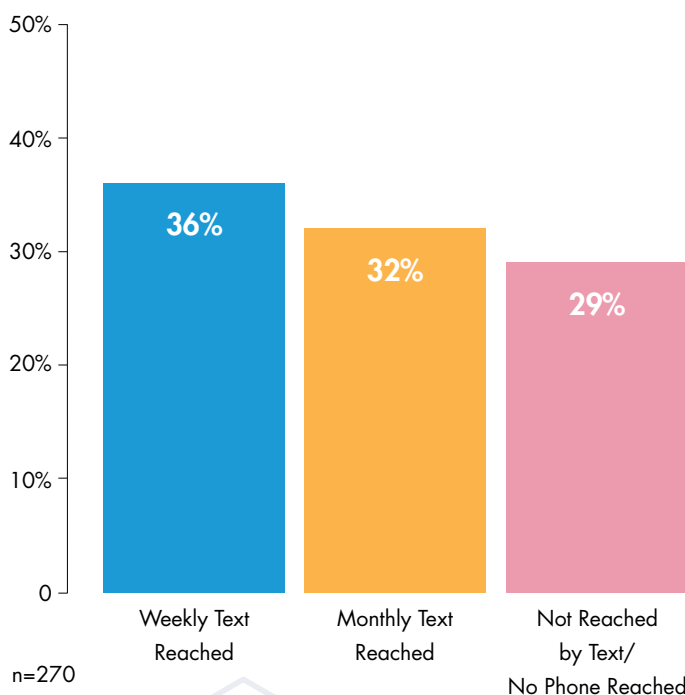
the 2018–2019 school year, only 62% of Black girls and just over half of Black boys met the ideal minimum attendance rate (nine out of 10 school days) compared to two-thirds of the city's white preschoolers.⁸

Before pandemic restrictions took full effect, we piloted SMS campaigns to encourage preschool attendance. The messages were made more attractive with personalized information—the recipient's and child's name, plus information about their past attendance. The treatment group received an SMS every Wednesday and on special occasions (e.g., snow days or holidays) while the control group got them monthly.

We found that the personalized weekly message group had a higher proportion of students who achieved or surpassed the attendance goal (see Figure 1). Though these results are promising, our conclusions are limited because the trial was cut short due to the pandemic.

Figure 1.
Average percentage of families attending more than 90% of days

All data analysis provided by Dr. Richard Stock



Growing savings

Having adequate savings is critical to weather unexpected expenses, like car repairs or losing a job. In Rochester, NY, nearly one in three residents are experiencing poverty⁹ and lack the savings to live through three months without income.

The city launched **Rochester Youth Roundtable (RYR)**, a savings program for people who qualify for the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC)—a major source of cash for households—to help address this problem. To make the program attractive to residents, RYR provided participants with a quarterly match if they saved a portion of their refund.

We partnered with RYR to conduct a randomized controlled trial evaluating the impact of three match rates (0%, 25%, and 50%) on financial wellbeing. The 50% match was the most effective.

Participants who received this incentive were less likely to drop out of the program and saved more than other groups—an average of \$327.29, just over 40% more than the 0% match group's average of \$218.35 (see Figure 2). In this case, incentives attracted participants to the program and encouraged them to persist.

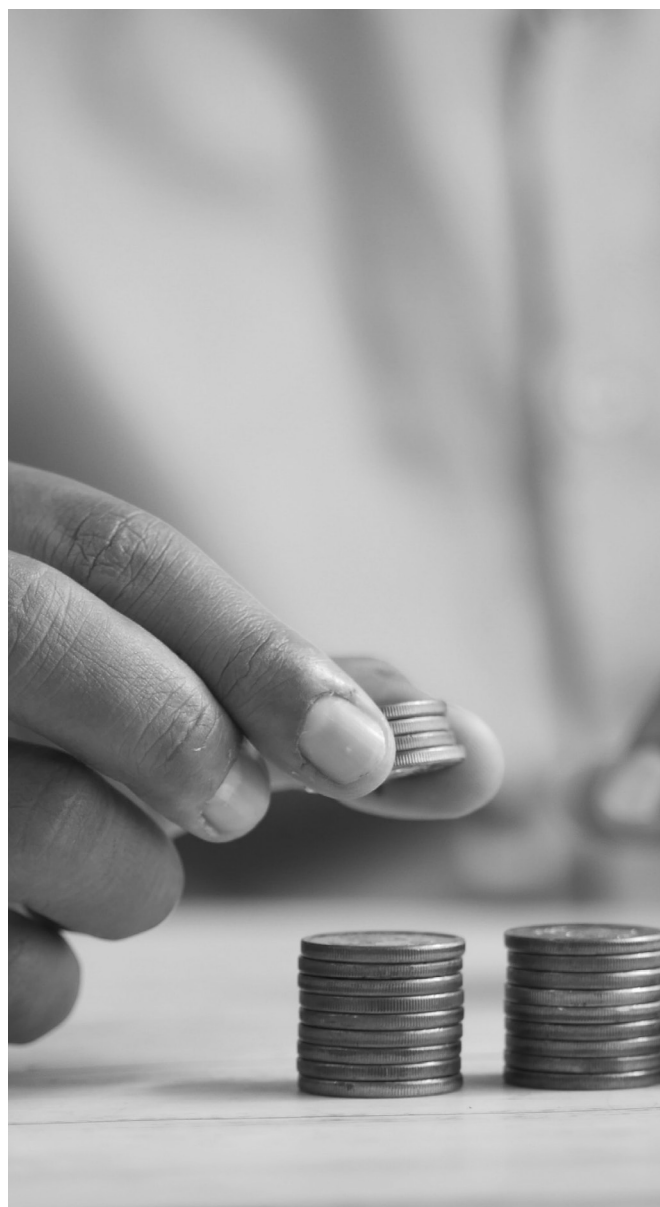
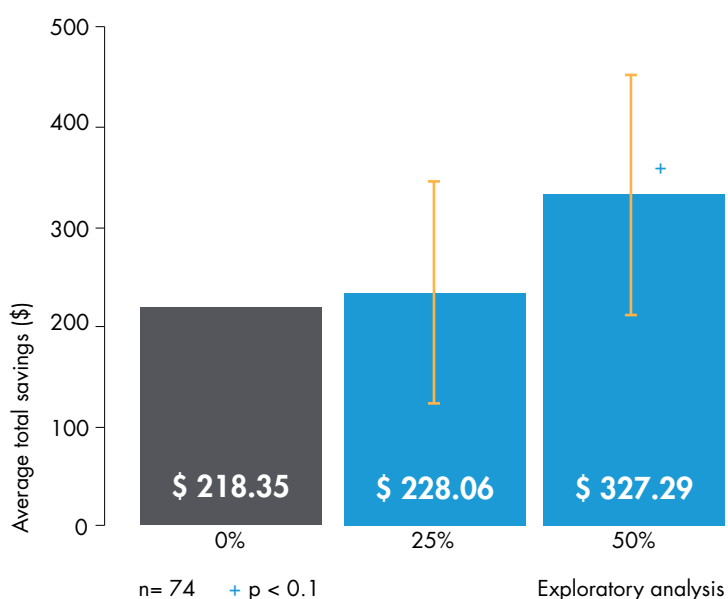


Figure 2.
Total amount successfully saved by match rate assignment



Leverage social connections

We are all embedded in social networks of varying shapes and sizes. When we see or hear about what other people do, it can affect our own actions. Programs can draw on these social connections to increase uptake.

Attaining high school degree equivalency

In Racine, WI, high-paying jobs are available, but the majority of them require a high school diploma or equivalent degree. Part of the city's economic mobility strategy is ensuring that its 10,000+ residents who lack a diploma can get one, and unlock access to those careers.

BIT partnered with YWCA Southeast Wisconsin to increase enrollment in their High School Equivalency Degree (HSED) program. The evidence-based pro-

gram already leveraged social connections by grouping participants into cohorts of 10-15 people, which fostered strong bonds between peers.

When we dug into their administrative data, we found that the program had a high retention and graduation rate—nearly 80%. Knowing that the students who enrolled tended to complete the program, we decided to focus on supporting recruitment and building wider interest.

One strategy we developed was an ambassador program. We thought that formalized word-of-mouth referrals would be effective because they leverage graduates' existing social connections and ¹⁰ (i.e., the tendency for people to give different weight to information depending on who is communicating it to them). People are inclined to listen to those they already know and like.

As part of the ambassador program, recent alumni referred close friends and relatives who could benefit from the HSED program. During the pilot, 16 people were referred and 11 went on to graduate. Though these numbers are small, they suggest that the ambassador program may be a promising steady state recruitment method.



Make it timely for beneficiaries

Timing matters. Uptake can increase if you ensure that your program is timely (i.e., provides a service when residents need it) and brings future benefits forward in time.

Expanding affordable housing

The majority of people in Newark, NJ are renters—and over a quarter of residents are experiencing poverty. As a result, housing stability

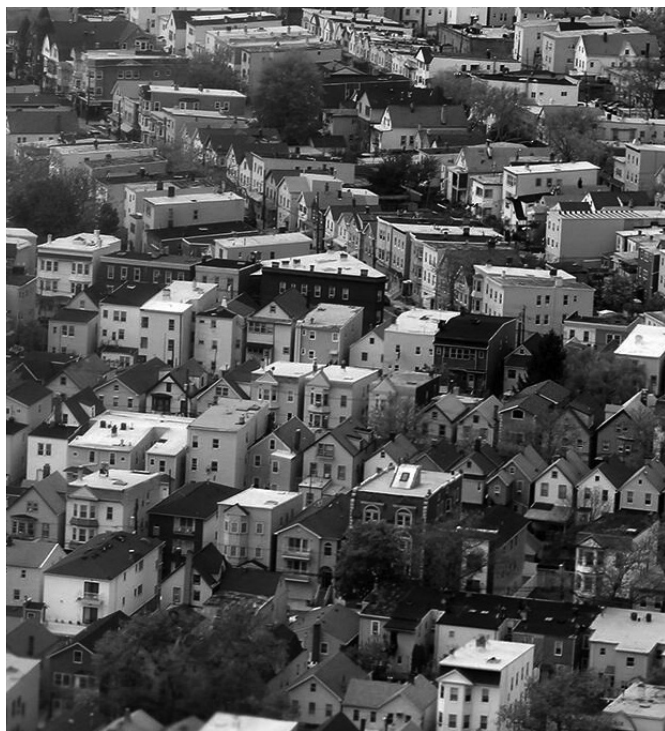
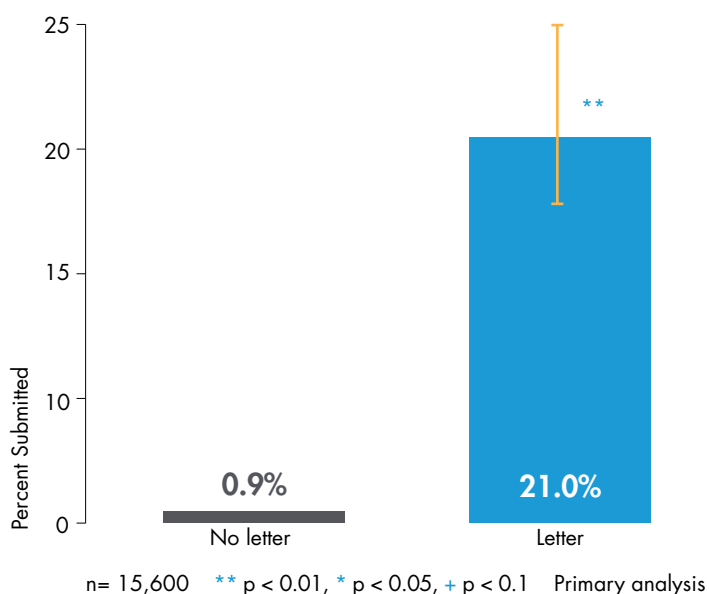
is one of the city's key economic mobility priorities. We partnered with Newark's Department of Economic and Housing Development to expand access to affordable housing.

One of the interventions we designed was a letter prompting landlords to register with the Office of Rent Control. Registration allows the Office to enforce rent control ordinances and make more affordable units available.

In addition to information about legal requirements, the letter included a call to action to register with a clear deadline of December 31, 2019. A group of 7,800 landlords received the treatment letters about two weeks before this date.

Our randomized controlled trial found that 21% of landlords who received the letter submitted their registration by the deadline, making 1,900 new affordable housing units available (see Figure 3). This finding suggests that leveraging time through a salient deadline creates a sense of urgency and encourages compliance.

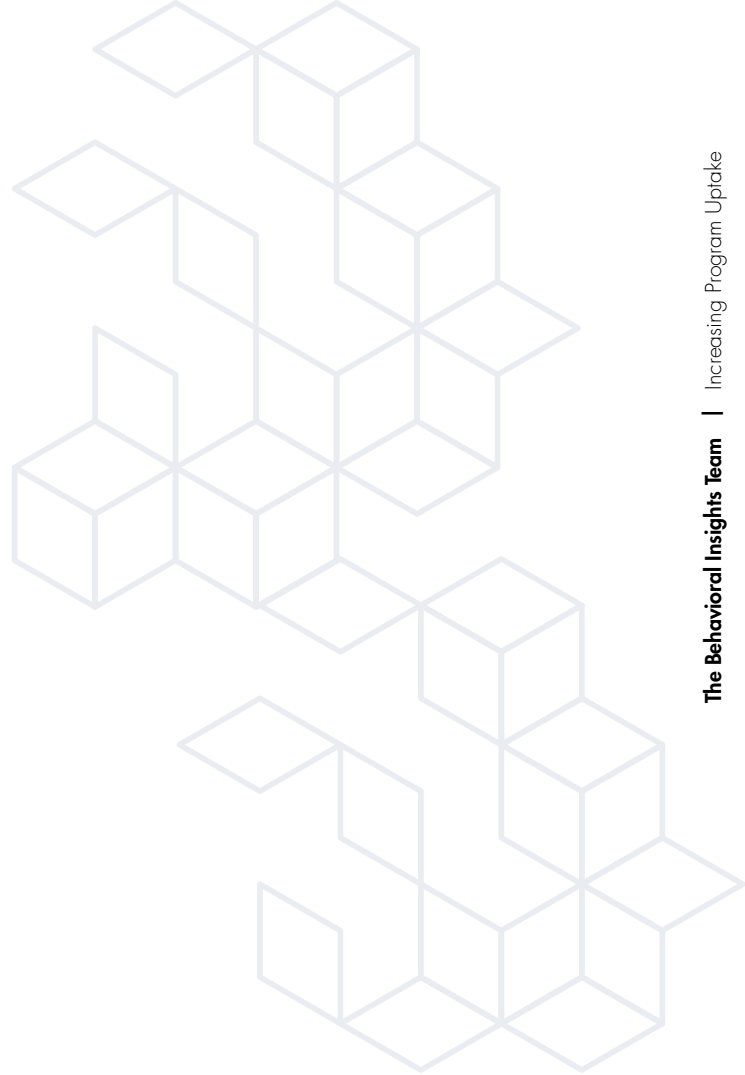
Figure 3.
Percent of landlords who submitted registration on time



Using a precommitment to save

While incentives made the ROCyourRefund (RYP) savings program attractive to Rochester residents, we also designed it to be timely. The pilot was intentionally launched while people were preparing their taxes, a few weeks before refunds would be distributed. It was during this specific time that participants were asked to pledge to save a portion of their EITC.

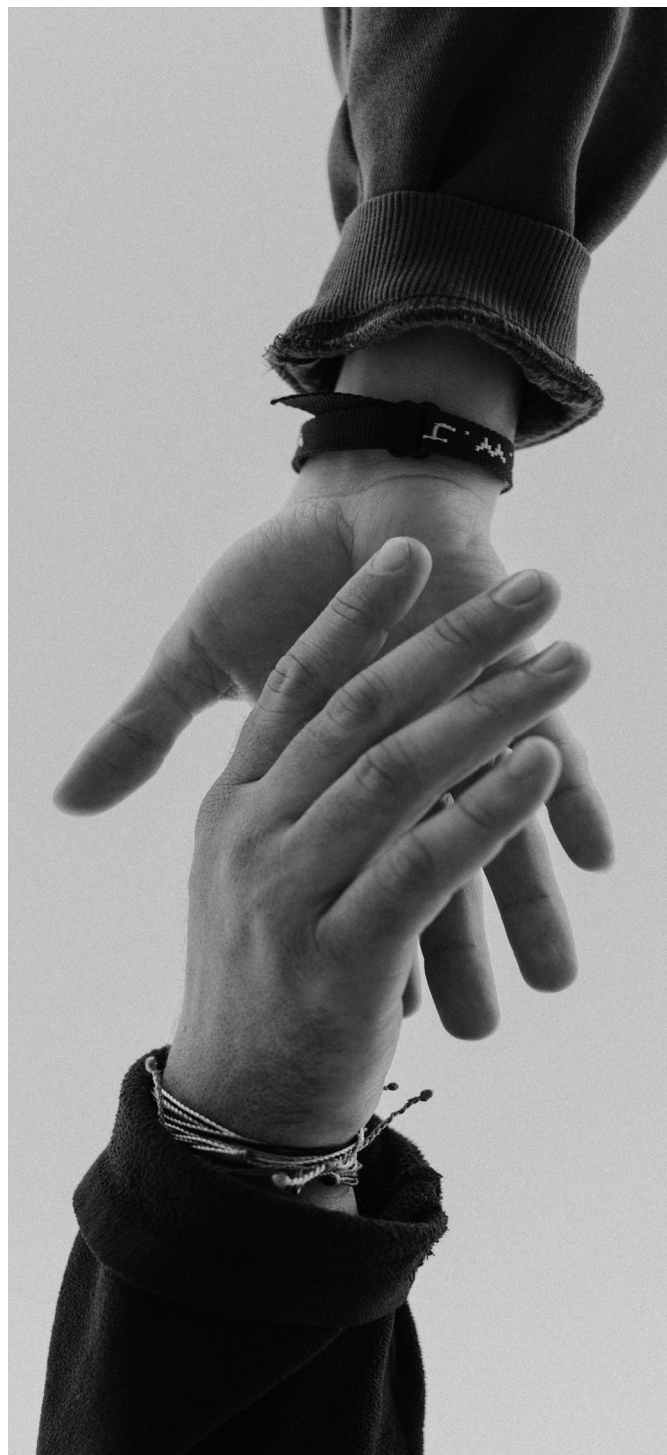
Because people already knew that an influx of cash would be coming their way, they were more receptive to planning ahead and considering the benefits of saving for the future. By making the pilot timely, we avoided the ¹¹ (i.e., people dislike loss more than they like gains of equal value) participants may have faced if they were asked to save after receiving their refund.



Apply behavioral insights to programs

Discovering a program, registering for it, and following through can be highly complex behaviors. If you have a program with low enrollment—and marketing alone doesn't seem to be solving the problem—using the EAST framework can help. By applying behavioral insights, you can reduce barriers and make signing up for your program a seamless experience for residents.

To learn more about behavioral insights and program uptake or explore partnering with BIT, please contact Michael Kaemingk at michael.kaemingk@bi.team.



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