

Text Reminders for Initial Court Hearings

Reducing failure-to-appear rates with text messages

Agency: Superior Court of Monterey County (California)
Trial Duration: 2/1/17-4/30/17
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Context

The failure-to-appear (FTA) rate for initial court hearings in Monterey County Superior Court misdemeanor cases has been problematic. Reducing FTAs would decrease the number of warrants issued and the number of jail days served by individuals under pretrial release.

Key Finding

Text messages may be a promising method for reducing FTA rates.

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Background

Tracking and processing people who fail to appear for court appearances uses valuable resources. A collaborative effort of the Superior Court of Monterey County, Monterey County District Attorney's Office, Sheriff's Office, Probation Department, and Public Defender's Office tested text-message reminders of initial court appearances for reducing failure-to-appear (FTA) rates.

Trial Design

People charged with a misdemeanor and booked through the Monterey County jail were informed about the possibility of receiving text-message reminders for their initial court hearing. 59% of eligible people agreed to participate, and 210 were randomized to condition; half were randomized to text-message reminders (intervention) and half to business as usual (control). People in the intervention group received a text-message reminder in both English and Spanish the evening before their initial court appearance. The control group did not receive any reminders.

Results and Implications

Due to scheduling, about a third of participants randomized to condition were eliminated from the analyses because they did not receive a court date during the trial period. As such, 69 were included in the text group, and 66 in the control group. Primary analyses show a trend towards lower FTA rate for the intervention group as compared to the control group ($p=.10$); the test would have had greater power to detect significant differences if the sample size hadn't been reduced. Of interest, secondary analyses suggest some compelling directions for further exploration and future trials: DUI charges and Spanish speakers may benefit more from text messages.

Text Message Trial Results



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