

What's new?



January 2022

Behavioural Science Aotearoa (BSA) works to help justice sector participants make better choices and ensure Aotearoa's justice system puts people first. Understanding how people make decisions, and the barriers they face, is the first step to ensuring justice policies and practices work effectively.

"One moment caller": Reducing the pain of being on hold

When people phone the Ministry of Justice Collections call centre, they may hang up before they speak to an operator. This is an important problem because when someone has a fine and can't get through to pay, their debt is left unresolved and can occur further penalties. Therefore, BSA trialled different phone hold messages, to encourage people to stay on hold longer during busy times.

One reason for encouraging callers to stay on the line is to improve the rate of fine payments. In December 2020, people owed the Ministry of Justice \$567 million in fines. One way to pay a fine is by calling the Ministry of Justice. However, 8% of people (28,000) hang up before they can speak to someone. The BSA team ran a trial to encourage people to wait on the phone for longer.

Over the course of three months, we tested different types of messages people heard while they were on hold. The most effective message was called the progress condition.

People may hang up because waiting on hold is frustrating and can feel like you're not getting closer to speaking to someone. The messages in the progress condition stressed to the listener that they were making progress on the call. These messages said things like "you're almost there" and "the queue behind you is growing".

People who heard the messages in the progress condition were more likely to stay on hold compared to those who heard the usual messages. We estimate that using these messages would mean that each year around 3,000 people who would previously have hung up will now stay on hold and speak to an operator, helping people to avoid further enforcement actions and late fees.

"This is the first trial that we are aware of that has used behavioural science to change behaviour while people are on hold. So it was exciting to find that the messages people hear can influence how long they stay on hold for"

Jared Pickett, *Advisor, Behavioural Science Aotearoa*

Māori Wardens reduce Warrants to Arrest

BSA are working with Māori Wardens and Eastern District Police, on a new initiative, Whāriki Haumarū, to encourage people with Warrants to Arrest to attend court. Early evidence suggests people are more likely to attend court when they are contacted by Māori Wardens.

When a person fails to appear at court, a warrant can be issued for their arrest, and their court case must be rescheduled, meaning the person, their whānau, and victims have to wait longer for an outcome.

There are about 600 Māori Wardens in Aotearoa who volunteer their time to support their communities. During the initiative, two Māori Wardens made phone calls to people with active warrants, reminding them of the Warrant to Arrest and asking them to attend court.

Māori wardens have strong connections with the local community and are able to build rapport and communicate effectively. When calling people, the wardens use a script that we have designed together that blends behavioural science ideas (such as procedural justice and implementation intentions) and Te Ao Māori principles (such as whanaungatanga, pono and manaakitanga).

The trial lasted six months and initial results are positive. Those who were contacted by the Wardens were 27 percentage points more likely to make a voluntary appearance compared with people who could not be contacted (42% made a voluntary appearance, compared to 16% for those who were not contacted).

As well as reducing the number of people arrested by Police, this initiative has reduced police time spent on processing, transportation and paperwork relating to Warrants to Arrest.



Māori Wardens, Zita Smith of Ngāti Kahungunu and Josie Kewley of Tūhoe at the launch of Whāriki Haumarū

BSA were finalists in the Plain English Awards

Every year the national Plain English Awards are held to acknowledge public organisations (including government agencies) who work hard to create clear communication.

This year BSA and the Ministry of Justice implementation team were one of three finalists for the best Plain English legal document for our work on Temporary Protection Order cover sheets.

 **Plain English Awards**
Finalist 2021

Protection Orders are formal legal documents and can be difficult to understand. As a result, many people don't understand what they require them to do.

The aim of the coversheet is to help respondents understand what's expected of them and reduce accidental breaches, as well as inform applicants of their rights.

“Overall, this is an admirable attempt at simplifying a rather complicated aspect of the law. Importantly, it is also audience appropriate. The goal is simply to give the reader the information you would wish to have if you were in that position”

Jan Bowen, *Plain English Awards judge*

How to have effective virtual meetings

We aim to help make work life simpler and more effective. That's why we have developed an ongoing series of how-to guides using behavioural science. In our latest guide we provide some principles on how to improve virtual meetings.

How do we connect with each other while online? How do we brainstorm effectively? How do we avoid zoom fatigue?

Some answers to these questions can be found here: [Guide to virtual meetings](#)



The future of BSA

BSA was created with two years' funding to apply behavioural science to the justice sector. In those two years, we have increased fine repayments by at least \$1 million per year, benefitted 6,300 people per year by helping them avoid additional fees due to overdue fines, fed directly into decisions around settings under the COVID-19 Alert Levels and the accompanying public communications, and contributed to a Justice system that is more effective and one that focuses on helping people.

We are delighted to announce that we have received funding in Budget 21 to continue our work for a further two years. We will move from the Ministry of Justice to the High Impact Innovation Programme at Ara Poutama Aotearoa (Department of Corrections) and will continue to work across the justice sector to understand people better so we can make our justice system work for them.

What else are we working on?

We have a number of projects on the go. Here's a taster of what we're working on – get in touch for more information Helen.Aki@justice.govt.nz

- **Encouraging people to attend court**
 - BSA is leading a workstream on the Criminal Process Improvement Project (CPIP) to reduce failures to appear at court. We are improving the way we send text reminders to people, redesigning the notice of bail and serving process, and improving the court summons form and how it is served by Police.
- **Using Procedural Justice principles**
 - BSA are supporting Police on a range of projects using procedural justice. These projects focus on the way police interact with the public, and how the characteristics of these interactions shape the public's views of the police and their willingness to obey the law.

What we're reading / listening to

Rationality: What it is, Why it seems Scarce, Why it Matters: by Steven Pinker

- Blurb from the book: "Humans today are often portrayed as cavemen out of time, poised to react to a lion in the grass with a suite of biases, blind spots, and illusions. But cognitive scientist and rational optimist Steven Pinker argues that this cannot be the whole picture. A list of the ways in which we are stupid cannot explain how we're so smart - how we discovered the laws of nature, transformed the planet, and lengthened and enriched our lives. Indeed, if humans were fundamentally irrational, how did they discover the benchmarks for rationality against which humans fall short?"

Jesse Signal on the Two Psychologist Four Beers podcast

- This podcast features Jesse Signal's new book 'The Quick Fix: Why Fad Psychology Can't Cure our Social Ills'. This book explores about how psychologists and the media often hype up some new shiny finding (such as power posing or grit) and pose it as the solution to some complex social problem.

Who are we?

Almost everything done within the Justice Sector involves human behaviour, whether it is requiring people to pay their fines, supporting people to stick to their parole conditions, or preventing crimes. We often expect people to respond predictably to laws or incentives without considering all the factors that can inform behaviour, including culture and the environment.

BSA work collaboratively across justice sector agencies to understand human behaviour in order to improve service and policy design. The team has expertise in psychology, criminology, economics, data analysis, research, evaluation and te ao Māori capability. Interventions are tested via trials, so that the impact of changes are measured.

If you'd like to know more about what we're up to or find out how we can assist you with your business or policy issues, please email BSA@corrections.govt.nz

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