Motivational Interviewing Pilot Project
Final Report – Executive Summary

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Executive summary

Motivational Interviewing (MI) is intended to change the nature of interactions between caseworkers and their clients. It recognizes the ambivalence clients may have towards adopting employment-seeking behaviours and attempts to alter clients' motivations such that they are more inclined to follow through on their employment plans. Typically in implementing such plans, income-assistance clients interact with different caseworkers: at their income assistance office and at employment service centres. To test MI within regular service delivery for Income Assistance (IA) clients, therefore, the project sought to integrate MI into client interactions in both settings. This proved complicated to achieve, but the project's efforts to integrate MI in both settings for client interactions ensured that the project findings would apply to implementation in real-world settings.

The project adopted a randomized experimental design to ensure that a valid counterfactual would be measured: the outcomes of clients receiving MI could be compared to client outcomes when MI was not being used, thus providing a high level of certainty that the treatment rather than pre-existing differences among these two groups accounted for later observed differences in outcomes. A sample of 155 long-term IA recipients was allocated at random either to (a) a MI-stream group whose caseworkers (Employment and Assistance Workers at income assistance offices with responsibility for clients' Employment Plans – dubbed EP-EAWs – and case managers in employment services centres) would be trained in using MI or to (b) a non-MI stream control group whose caseworkers would not be trained in using MI. In all other respects the two groups were on average, statistically identical, although case managers themselves could not be randomly assigned to clients. This last feature leaves open the possibility that case manager dfferences and not the use of MI may account for the impacts attributed to program participation.

The project was delivered in British Columbia between September 2012 and March 2013, which was later than intended. It took time to determine that delivery in the originally-proposed Saskatchewan sites would not be practical. In turn, these delays to the project start up reduced the recruitment period and subsequent sample size. The small sample size was counterbalanced by the adoption of an experimental design, which in practice raises the explanatory power of a research project with a given sample size relative to a quasi-experimental approach. In MIPP, it proved possible to detect program impacts with a sample that was less than half the size originally intended.

Employment and Assistance Workers at two participating Employment & Income Assistance (EIA) offices in BC's Fraser Valley together with case managers at the equivalent local WorkBC employment service centres each received 60 hours of training in how to use MI, prior to participant recruitment, and another 9 hours of coaching during delivery of the project, from Empowering Change Inc. a leading Canadian trainer in the use of MI in employment service settings. The trained EP-EAWs set appointments to deliver MI for all participants allocated to the MI stream. At the end of interviews they were to assess clients' "stage of change" with respect to employment seeking behaviour: those at the stage of change termed "preparation" – meaning that they already had intent to take action – would be referred to WorkBC Employment Service Centres (ESCs) where receptionists were trained to allocate them to MI-trained case managers. Control group members received an immediate referral to the WorkBC ESCs, where receptionists allocated them to non-MI trained case managers.

EP-EAWs were instructed to use MI at least once, at the earliest opportunity, for everyone in the program group. This was in part to ensure the project tested the effect of MI across the whole of the target group, and in part due to researchers' concerns about the accuracy of the tool assessing clients' need for MI. Program data confirms that close to half the participants allocated to the MI stream attended their appointments with EP-EAWs and at least 20 per cent attended more than one motivational interview at some point over the period of study.

Table ES1   Impacts on participant employment and education outcomes – 3-month follow-up survey

	Control Group Mean	Program Group Mean	Difference		Standard Error
Work status at follow-up (%)					
Working part-time	2.0	9.4	7.5		(3.3)
Starting to work soon	0.0	0.0	0.0		(0.0)
Not working	98.0	90.6	-7.5		(3.3)
Compared to Baseline					
Net change of working status	-2.0	5.9	7.8	**	(2.7)
Studied in the past 3 months (%)					
Did not study	90.6	87.3	-3.3		(4.4)
Studied in a program	9.4	12.7	3.3		(4.4)
Apprenticeship, Trade school, or college dip./cert.	5.7	0.0	-5.7	*	(2.2)
PSE Degree	0.0	0.0	0.0		(0.0)
Other program (including ESL)	3.8	12.7	9.0	*	(3.8)

Sources: MIPP Follow-up Survey and Baseline Survey.

Notes: There are 55 observations in each of the control and program groups. Sample sizes vary for individual measures because of missing values. Two-tailed Student t-tests were applied to differences between the program and control groups. Statistical significance levels are indicated as: *=10%, **=5%, ***=1%.

The project found that integrating MI into client interactions significantly raised employment rates for long-term IA recipients over the three-month period, by 7.8 percentage points relative to the control group (Table ES1): the proportion in the control group working declined by 2 percentage points, from 4.0 to 2.0 per cent, while the proportion working in the MI-stream increased by 5.9 percentage points, from 3.5 to 9.4 per cent. Integrating MI also produced modest impacts on the types of education clients sought over the period. Over a longer follow-up period using administrative data, there were no significant impacts on IA receipt and very few on employment services use over the 12-month period following recruitment. Modest positive impacts on earned income disregards were seen for some months, which can be taken as a proxy for increased employment in the program group, However, inconsistent with the program theory were changes recorded via many assessment tools included in the three-month follow-up survey on employment readiness, attitudes and activities with respect to job search were found to be zero, ambiguous or negative.

Notably, the sample of long-term IA recipients targeted made very little progress towards employment, in the absence of an intervention. This is despite the project sampling only those the Ministry had designated "employment-obligated." Anecdotally, EP-EAWs and case mangers reported many to have physical or mental health, housing or addiction issues that needed resolution before employment was a realistic proposition. Quantitatively, the follow-up survey found more than seven in ten participants reported activity limitations that affected their ability to work. Health problems appeared more acute among those in the MI stream: just a quarter said their health was "good" or "very good" at the time of follow up. It would appear that many long-term IA recipients face multiple barriers to seeking work. Given the presence of these barriers, the additional MI-induced employment in this pilot may represent quite an achievement.

In sum, the project has found that the integration of MI into client interactions in IA and ESC settings is a feasible intervention but it is inconclusive with respect to its impacts. There is evidence that additional clients were able to transition into employment by virtue of being in the program group. However, alternative explanations for the modest employment impacts cannot be ruled out. The project has not determined precisely how MI increased employment, because the hypothesized increased participation in employment services as an intermediate step did not occur in the period observed. Furthermore, EP-EAWs struggled to secure clients' attendance at their scheduled MI appointments, meaning that a substantial proportion of the target group – possibly as many as half – remained untreated. A plausible explanation is that MI encouraged the more cooperative and able clients to enter the labour market directly and quite quickly, but was not immediately effective for those facing barriers in addition to their motivation to seek employment. An expansion of the current study (by adding additional months of sample recruitment or new sites), preferably with random assignment of case workers, is recommended to draw firmer conclusions about the effectiveness of integrating MI into client interactions in IA and ESC settings. From a larger sample, the validity of the many assessment tools used can be analysed and the subgroups most likely to benefit from MI can be identified.