

Just Appointment Nudging For Behavioral Health Care

Intro [00:00:01] RTI International's Justice Practice Area presents Just Science.

Intro [00:00:09] Welcome to Just Science, a podcast for justice professionals and anyone interested in learning more about forensic science, innovative technology, current research, and actionable strategies to improve the criminal justice system. In episode four of our Innovations and Corrections season Just Science sat down with Dr. Sam Scaggs, research criminologist and corrections expert at RTI International, to discuss how automatic appointment reminders help justice involved individuals better navigate probation mandated behavioral health care management appointments. For those involved in the criminal justice system missing a mandatory appointment, such as a court date, treatment service, or parole visit, could have serious legal consequences. To help clients manage these obligations, researchers piloted an automated digital appointment reminder system, which provides users with quick and concise information about upcoming behavioral health management appointments. Listen along as Dr. Scaggs describes a two phased approach for developing the system, preliminary results about the efficacy of appointment reminders, and the broad applications that this technology could have in the future. This episode is funded by RTI International's Justice Practice Area. Some content in this podcast may be considered sensitive and may evoke emotional responses or may not be appropriate for younger audiences. Here's your host, Peyton Scalise.

Peyton Scalise [00:01:19] Hello and welcome to Just Science. I'm your host, Peyton Scalise, with the Justice Practice Area at RTI International. Today, we are excited to speak with Dr. Sam Scaggs. Sam is an expert in corrections and reentry, and today he'll be discussing his work regarding a research study focused on creating behavioral nudges for people involved in the criminal legal system. Welcome to the podcast, Sam.

Samuel Scaggs [00:01:38] Thanks so much for having me, Peyton. Excited to be joining today to share a little bit about my research.

Peyton Scalise [00:01:43] To kick us off. Sam, could you provide us with some background on what led you to focus on this topic of nudging people involved in the criminal legal system into compliance?

Samuel Scaggs [00:01:51] Sure. Yeah. So, this is part of a National Institute of Justice funded research project. And just to take a step back, you know, people impacted by the criminal legal system have multiple obligations and mistakes for not meeting these obligations can be extremely high for them. So, the criminal legal system, you know, as we can imagine, can be very complex, knowing what one needs to do to comply with the courts conditions of their supervision if they're on probation or parole. And now, on top of that, involvement in the justice system can be very traumatic for people, regardless of whether they committed a crime or they're, a victim of a crime. Automated appointment reminders can further the goal of, you know, informational equity for justice of all people. Most of my work is focused on people who have committed crime or sentenced to probation. But, I mean, these could also be very useful for, victims of crime involved in the system as well. But the idea of, like, behavioral nudges is, is not new. And so, these types of nudges have included, postal mail, phone calls and text messages that notify, remind justice involved people to attend appointments that could lead to additional sanctions if missed. So, these might be scheduled court dates, probation appointments, and then behavioral health appointments that are required by the courts or their community supervision officer. But the messages usually provide recipients with very simple

information the date, time and physical address of their appointment and the contact information of the agency or office scheduling the appointment. But, you know, in the past decade, a small a growing body of research has investigated the use of these automated appointment reminders in the criminal legal system. And generally, people have a lot of appointments, and in some cases, these are made several months in advance. So, reminders just allow people to make arrangements to attend these very important appointments that they might need to ask off of work or find transportation or arrange for childcare. So, if given enough advance notice, automated reminders provide recipients with just enough information to make these appointments. Systems impacted people have many of the same obligations that non systems involved people do. But then they also have these other obligations such as showing up to court, checking in with their probation officer if they're under community supervision.

Peyton Scalise [00:04:00] Thanks so much, Sam. I know that some of our listeners may not be familiar with the importance of appointment attendance within the criminal legal system. So, could you just provide us with some background on why this is an issue worth investigating?

Samuel Scaggs [00:04:11] The focus of my research is, you know, reminding people under community supervision about their probation mandated behavioral health care management appointments. By not attending these appointments, these individuals risk not receiving the care management and treatment that they need. That could help them in getting, you know, the resources and services that could help them. And they can also be sanctioned by their probation officer or other criminal legal system actors for noncompliance, the consequences of which could mean receiving a technical violation, revocation of their probation term, or potentially incarceration. So, the stakes are very high for these individuals. Mobile phones, have the potential to be effective in reaching people with these, what we call informational content nudges. So, lack of treatment compliance is a major issue in the criminal legal system, and it's attributed to the system level barriers to program receipt and lack of client motivation and readiness to change. For the most part, people keep their mobile phones on their person, so it can be a sure shot way to get them the information they need sooner. The alternative? To not remind them or to remind them using mail or a phone call. However, for something like this to work. It's critical to design it in a way that pulls up to date information on a person's appointment each day. So, without that daily refresh, we run the risk of sending people outdated appointment information.

Peyton Scalise [00:05:29] What can you tell us about the research that you and your colleagues have conducted on automated appointment reminders within the criminal legal system?

Samuel Scaggs [00:05:35] Sure. Yeah. So, the iCare study stands for the Interactive Computer Assisted Recovery Enabler, but we call it iCare for short. But this study is the first to design, implement and assess the use of an automated appoint reminder tool to nudge people on probation to attend their behavioral health care management appointments. Again, this work is funded by the National Institute of Justice and involves a randomized, controlled trial of the Automated Appointment Reminder system to essentially randomize receiving these automated appointment reminders a week and a day before their care management appointment, versus being assigned to the control group, which would receive appointment reminders as usual from their care manager or probation officer. But to develop the actual reminder system, we subcontracted with public benefit company called Up Trust, and they've done a lot of work with developing automated appointment reminders in the court space, so sending defendants the date and time of

their court date. And then we've also partnered with Coastal Horizons, which is a behavioral health care management organization that works with the North Carolina Department of Adult Correction to provide that behavioral health care management. But the iCare study itself included two broad phases. So, the first phase was to develop the eye care reminder tool. And then the second phase was to deploy and assess this tool among Coastal Horizon's clients. And something that I didn't mention earlier is just that Coastal Horizons is the Treatment Accountability for Safer Communities provider in the eastern half of North Carolina. And so, they work with people on probation in the eastern half of the state. The first step in the study, which we, you know, consider a user centered design approach for creating this tool, RTI staff sought input from Coastal Horizon's clients and care managers via focus groups and interviews. And the purpose of the focus groups and interviews was to learn more about the client's access to and use of cell phones and their opinions and suggestions on potential tool content and features. And just to give a concrete example of this, we initially started this study thinking that we would go out and we would push all these questions to clients and study participants. And after talking with the clients and the care managers in these focus groups, we learned that, you know, all that they wanted to receive was the date, the time, the location, the contact information. So, it was very simple. And so, we were able to simplify what we were proposing to launch.

Peyton Scalise [00:07:59] Was that phase one?

Samuel Scaggs [00:08:00] So that was just phase one. So, for phase two we deployed a randomized control trial. And it was deployed in 53 counties in North Carolina. We had just over a thousand people that were enrolled in the study. And enrollment ended back in November of 2023. And now we are, you know, we're receiving data on outcomes for appointment attendance, their care management termination. We are in the process of getting criminal justice data from the North Carolina Department of Adult Correction.

Peyton Scalise [00:08:28] Wow. That's amazing. I'm sure that's a lot of data to handle and go through, but exciting as a researcher to have that much at your fingertips.

Samuel Scaggs [00:08:35] Yeah, we're very excited about it. We're already seeing some positive results with respect to reductions and no shows to an initial appointment, what they call an intake appointment. Yeah. So, what we're finding is basically that, you know, if you can get people to attend that first appointment, they're likely to attend their you know, subsequent checking appointments. And so, while there is a substantial reduction and no shows to that first appointment, there's a little difference between our treatment and our control group with respect to check in appointments. But nine out of ten people in both groups show up to their check in appointments. So again, it kind of goes back to that point where if you can get folks to show up for their first care management appointment, they're able to get assessed by the task care manager, and they're able to determine if they do, in fact, need that care management treatment. They're also able to kind of get their contact information, which again, is really critical for something like this to work. We can't send people out of date or incorrect reminders about behavioral health care management appointments.

Peyton Scalise [00:09:34] Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. And I can almost see like from just a human behavior standpoint, getting to meet with that care manager. It gives you a sense of accountability, or it helps you to build that relationship where you then want to keep coming back, versus if you were never to meet that person, who cares if you miss your appointment, you know? So, I can definitely see how that works. And one question I

had for you is around keeping up to date contact information on the specific population. Was that an issue that was discussed at all by like the care managers that you had involved in the your focus groups?

Samuel Scaggs [00:10:04] So that was something that we discussed with Coastal Horizons early on in the project. And so, it becomes less of an issue once they've had their initial appointment. And the reason for that is because the North Carolina Department of Adult Correction will refer somebody to task. And so, at that point, it can be challenging to know if it's their phone number or their family's phone, you know, their significant other phone number. Coastal horizons did not have regular contact with them. I think it'd be more difficult for them to keep track of changing phone numbers, but because they're meeting with them on a monthly basis, if somebody changes their phone number, they're able to update that in their system.

Peyton Scalise [00:10:40] That's great. And it also brings up another thought I had about involving support person or like a family member in these reminders as well. Was that ever a consideration or in one of our previous episodes that we talked about innovative technologies and probation and parole. We talked about how important, like having that familial social support is to someone's successful reentry. And so, I was just curious if that was ever something that you guys thought about.

Samuel Scaggs [00:11:04] I think it's a good point. And, you know, something worth discussing with this group. We had to be very careful about what we included in the message. This was a task and Coastal Horizons are HIPAA protected, covered entities. We really did have to be careful not to like you know, out somebody.

Peyton Scalise [00:11:22] Yeah violate HIPAA any of those things.

Samuel Scaggs [00:11:24] Yeah. That was something that we tried to be mindful of early on in the process when designing the system. One of the things we did learn in the focus groups is that clients of task often do share their phones with a family member. Another thing we learned was that they don't always block messages from popping up on their banner. So, we definitely tried to be very intentional about, you know, providing just enough information for the people to know what they needed to do and get there. Some prior research in this area has included potential sanctions. If they didn't comply with the conditions or they didn't attend their appointment. We did not do that with our study. It was really just the contact information, date, time and how to get to the appointment.

Peyton Scalise [00:12:05] With the HIPAA, protected entity, how you were able to get their partnership and get the data, like, what did that even look like?

Samuel Scaggs [00:12:12] Well, the first thing we did was we had to execute what's called a business associate agreement with the covered entity, in order to be able to acquire any type PHI from task. So that was one thing that we had to do. And so, in addition to like our data transfer agreement that specifies all the information that we're going to receive, we also had to do this or execute this business associate agreement. So, anybody who's interested in working with a covered entity would probably need to go through that process. If they're getting PHI or protected health information from them. We essentially had to submit a waiver of a HIPAA waiver in order to get the data, which, you know, we were able to do that because there was no other way for us to acquire this information without introducing coercion. So, we couldn't consent people into the study by showing up at a task office and just consenting people. And we also couldn't have the care

manager's consent them in because that could have been seen as coercion. So yeah, there were a lot of steps along the way that we had to take in order for this to get off the ground.

Peyton Scalise [00:13:15] I'm sure that was a lot of fun going back and forth with RTI's IRB.

Samuel Scaggs [00:13:19] And the other thing that created a wrinkle was, I mean, this happened with probably every project that I know about, but the pandemic definitely impacted referrals that the Department of Adult Correction made to task, at least for a little while there. But that, I mean, that happened across the country, like agencies kind of exercised social distancing practices. And so, for a little while there, we kind of were on a pause because we just couldn't enroll people. I think the other big takeaway here is there are more similarities than differences between people who are involved in the system and those who are not. And I think this technology is in that same vein where, you know, people who are not involved in the system would get appointment reminders for the dentist or doctor or whatever. I mean, this is that same technology, only it's used with justice involved persons.

Peyton Scalise [00:14:07] So the behavioral health component of a person's probation and parole, it's not always like tied to their specific crime. Right. Is this more geared towards like people with substance use disorders that they're getting treatment for like what's the I guess population?

Samuel Scaggs [00:14:21] Yeah. So, somebody is referred by the North Carolina Department of Adult Correction to Treatment Accountability for Safer Communities or Task. Basically, what could happen is that they're referred by a probation officer to task, and then they attend their intake appointment. And what they do is they give them an assessment and it is for mainly substance use or, you know, mental health considerations. And so, task could assess somebody is not having a substance use need. And then they're basically discharged. So that's what typically works. A probation officer in North Carolina will refer somebody to. And then it's important to get them to that first appointment. And that's why it's critical that if you can get them to that appointment, they're likely to show up to subsequent appointments, or they're likely to be in communication with their care manager to let them know that they're not going to make it. It's critical for that assessment. Then also just to build rapport with the person.

Peyton Scalise [00:15:15] That makes a lot of sense. That's what I was imagining as it was probably mainly for like substance use disorders or co-occurring, you know, mental health things of that nature. So that makes a lot of sense.

Samuel Scaggs [00:15:25] I mean, working with a, a HIPAA covered population was definitely challenging. But I mean, as I mentioned already, we could randomize people to this iCare group versus reminder as usual group. What we learned in the focus groups is that care managers may end up reminding people about their appointments. What we learned through some primary data collection later on is that that doesn't always happen. And so that really just emphasizes the need for something that's automated.

Peyton Scalise [00:15:52] I'm sure, too, that care managers have insane caseloads.

Samuel Scaggs [00:15:55] They don't show up to their appointment. Essentially, what happens is the care manager has to communicate with the probation officer, letting them

know that, you know, so-and-so didn't show up for their appointment. Sometimes they have to get re-referred to task, and again, sometimes they'll get violated. So, it ultimately saves work on the CM. And then also the probation officer's plate. Just because somebody is not compliant that just creates more work for them.

Peyton Scalise [00:16:21] That's so interesting Sam. I can't wait to see what comes out of phase two and the impact those findings will have. Do you know when our audience can anticipate seeing those findings published?

Samuel Scaggs [00:16:29] We have a paper published in the American Probation and Parole Association's journal. It's called Perspectives. This paper describes the design and development of this notification system. We're also working on a few manuscripts to present findings from the assessment phase of our study. And so, we're hoping that those will be published later this year.

Peyton Scalise [00:16:48] Awesome. Sam, is there anything else that you'd like the audience to know regarding automated appointment reminders?

Samuel Scaggs [00:16:54] I think they could be used more often. You know, my work with iCare has focused on a specific subset of justice involved individuals. So those who are mandated to attend behavioral health appointments as part of their probation. But this technology could be used to provide other justice involved populations with information about their court appointments, their probation appointments, obligations, expectations, and so on. Alternatively, as I alluded to earlier, it can also be used to provide victims of crime with information about their court cases, their expectations, and so on. Again, I think this work just acknowledges that the criminal legal system can be very complex, and this is just an opportunity to provide people with more information about what's expected of them in their obligations, on top of everything else that, you know, people who are not involved in the system have to be concerned with.

Peyton Scalise [00:17:44] Well, that's all we have time for today. Thank you so much for your time and for sitting down with Just Science to discuss automated appointment reminders in the criminal legal system.

Samuel Scaggs [00:17:52] Thank you for having me. I really appreciate the opportunity to talk with you today.

Peyton Scalise [00:17:55] I'd also like to thank you, the listener, for tuning in today. If you enjoyed today's conversation, be sure to like and follow Just Science on your podcast platform of choice. I'm Peyton Scalise and this has been another episode of Just Science.

Outro [00:18:08] This episode concludes our Innovation and Correction season. Up next, we have special release episodes for 2024 Sexual Assault Awareness Month. Opinions are points of views expressed in this podcast, represent the consensus of the authors, and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of its funding.