

A Note on The Level of Customer Support by State Governments: A Mystery-Shopping Approach

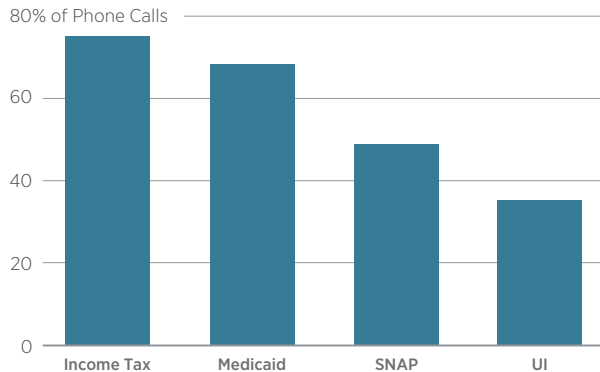
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Individuals seeking a live representative on the phone for help relating to government programs experience success at widely diverging rates across states and type of service.

Individuals seeking information about government programs often experience a paucity of customer support and an onerous application process, according to recent reports, adding additional hurdles to already vulnerable populations. These concerns have been heightened during the COVID-19 lockdowns as, for example, more than 68 million people have applied for unemployment insurance (UI) from March 15, 2020, to December 26, 2020.

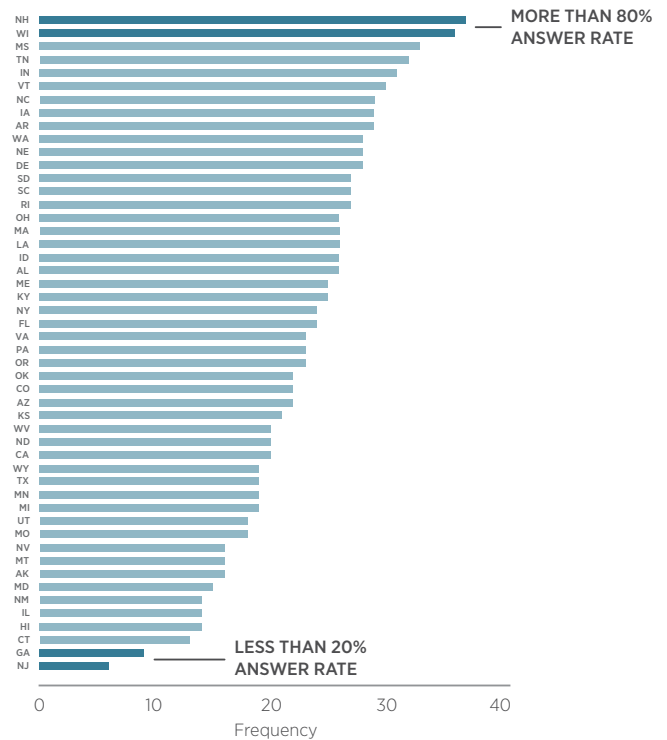
There are many potential measures of customer support for such government services as UI, Medicaid, and Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP),

Figure 1 • Fraction of Phone Calls Leading to a Live Representative by Government Office



Note: This figure documents the fraction of calls that ended with a live representative for the four different government services. Income tax help was the easiest to reach followed by Medicaid, Snap, and then UI.

Figure 2 • Frequency of Phone Calls Answered by Live Representatives Across States



Note: This figure shows the total number of live representatives reached for each state across the 40 calls that were made (10 to each of the 4 government services). This graph highlights the variation that exists in the ability to reach live representatives across the states. The highest performing states (New Hampshire and Wisconsin) yielded higher than an 80% call answer rate, while the lowest performing states (Georgia and New Jersey) yielded a call answer rate that was less than 20%.

formerly known as food stamps) as well information regarding income taxes. The authors use a mystery shopping approach to make 2,000 phone calls to states around the country and document the probability of reaching a live representative with each call. Their findings include the following:

- Significant variation across states and government programs. For example, in Georgia and New Jersey, less than 20% of phone calls resulted in reaching a live representative whereas in New Hampshire and Wisconsin over 80% of calls were answered.
- On average across all states, live representatives were easier to reach when looking for help with Medicaid or income tax filing relative to SNAP or UI.
- Importantly, the authors find that states where individuals had more success finding a live UI representative were the same states where a live representative was more likely reached for other government services. This suggests that some states are better or worse across all agencies.
- Finally, the authors do not find evidence that states compensated for lack of live phone representatives by providing better websites or online chat features.

As noted above, a significant number of Americans filed UI claims during the pandemic, often struggling with inefficient call systems that place additional obstacles to receiving timely aid. The authors' results show that there is significant variation across states in the ability to reach live representatives for UI claims and three other programs; states that have inefficient UI call systems also struggle with call systems for the other programs. The authors express hope that such research can provide more accountability for state governments to improve customer support and to better deliver services to constituents in need.