

SUMMARY ANALYSIS OF "SEARCH AND MATCHING FOR ADOPTION FROM FOSTER CARE"



Introduction

The research paper "Search and Matching for Adoption from Foster Care" by Ludwig Dierks, Nils Olberg, Sven Seuken, Vincent Slaugh, and Utku Ünver examines two primary methods used in the U.S. foster care system to match children with adoptive families: family-driven search and caseworker-driven search.

The study employs a novel game-theoretic search-and-matching model to compare these methods and assesses their efficiency in improving adoption outcomes. The authors also provide empirical evidence from a Florida child welfare agency that transitioned to caseworker-driven search, demonstrating a notable improvement over a benchmark created from statewide case data.

Background and Problem Statement

In the U.S., over 70,000 children in foster care await permanent adoption. Traditional search methods rely on families responding to agency announcements (family-driven search), while some agencies have shifted to caseworker-driven search, where caseworkers proactively reach out to potential families. The effectiveness of these methods remains a critical question for policymakers, given the long-term negative consequences faced by children aging out of the foster care system without permanent placements.

Methodology and Theoretical Model

The authors develop a dynamic game-theoretic model to compare the two search strategies. The model incorporates:

- Dynamic entry and exit of agents: Children and families join and leave the system over time.
- Uncertainty in match compatibility: Not all interested families are ultimately suitable for a child.
- Search costs and preferences: Both families and caseworkers incur costs when evaluating potential matches, influencing their decisions.

The model finds that equilibrium states exist under both search approaches, forming a lattice structure similar to traditional two-sided matching markets. Theoretical results show that caseworker-driven search generally leads to more efficient outcomes, reducing wasted search efforts and benefiting both children and families.

Key Findings



1. Caseworker-Driven Search Outperforms Family-Driven Search

- Theoretically, caseworker-driven search equilibrium outcomes are never worse than family-driven search outcomes and can be strictly better.
- Caseworker-driven search reduces inefficiencies caused by overwhelming caseworkers with too many inquiries for highly desirable children while failing to generate interest in harder-to-place children.



2. Impact of Family Patience and Search Costs

- If families are impatient (i.e., unwilling to wait long for an ideal match), caseworker-driven search benefits all children.
- Higher market thickness (more available families) can paradoxically reduce child welfare in family-driven search due to increased competition and search burdens but has a positive effect in caseworker-driven search.



3. Empirical Validation: Florida Case Study

- A Florida child welfare agency switched to caseworker-driven search in 2018.
- The adoption probability within two and three years outperformed statewide benchmark by 45%.*
- The approach streamlined caseworker efforts and improved child-family compatibility.

**Most recent findings as of April 2026*

Policy Implications and Recommendations

The study suggests that shifting toward caseworker-driven search could significantly enhance the efficiency of the foster care adoption process. Recommendations include:

1. Investing in technology-driven matching tools to aid caseworkers in targeting suitable families more effectively.
2. Re-evaluating policies requiring responses to all family inquiries, which can burden caseworkers and delay placements.
3. Scaling caseworker-driven search nationwide, given its demonstrated effectiveness in empirical studies.

Conclusion: Improving Outcomes for Children with a Goal of Adoption

Casework Search Methodology Leads the Way

The paper provides a strong case for adopting caseworker-driven search as the preferred method for matching children in foster care with adoptive families. By reducing inefficiencies, prioritizing compatibility, and leveraging caseworker expertise, this approach offers a promising pathway to improving adoption outcomes and reducing the number of children aging out of the system without permanent homes. The study's theoretical and empirical findings make a compelling argument for policymakers and child welfare agencies to reconsider current search methodologies in favor of a more proactive, structured, and efficient system.

For more information about Family-Match or to request the full academic paper, you can contact:

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