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Does money motivate *prospective* foster parents? Are responses from high vs. low-income towns different? Evidence from Google advertising

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Abstract

Recruiting foster parents is a worldwide challenge. In the US, foster parents are supposed to volunteer but receive stipends to cover the cost of foster children. Thus, Foster Care agencies hesitate to highlight the Stipend in their recruitment messaging to prospective foster parents. This hesitation is to weed out extrinsically (stipend) motivated prospective parents early in the application, training and licensing process.

The first step in foster parent recruitment is to start the conversation between prospective foster care parents and foster parent recruiters.

Extant research has relied on *current or former* foster parents to find their motivations for fostering and continuing to foster. We believe ours is the first study to empirically examine whether mentioning money (stipend) early in the recruitment process makes a difference in the response of *prospective* foster parents.

The research reports Google ads data from two foster parent recruitment campaigns. These Google search ads showed when "foster parenting" related words were Googled. One ad had the word "stipend," and the other did not. We then examine differences in response between high and low-income towns. Next, we analysed differences in click behaviour over 207 days between the two versions of the ads. We then examined differences in click behaviour between residents of high and low-income towns. We used the *t*-test to test for differences in our data analysis approach.

We find no statistical difference in response between the ads that mention 'stipend' and those that do not ($t = 0.64$, $p = 0.26$). However, residents of low-income towns are five times more likely to click on a foster parent ad than residents from high-income towns, irrespective of whether the stipend is mentioned in the ad (without mentioning stipend: $t = 3.21$, $p = 0.0008$; mentioning Stipend: $t = 3.77$, $p = 0.0001$).

Key Practitioner Messages

- Foster parents are supposed to volunteer, yet they receive stipends to care for foster children. Thus, Foster Care agencies hesitate to highlight the Stipend in their recruitment messaging to prospective foster parents. This hesitation is to weed out extrinsically (stipend) motivated prospective parents early in the application, training and licensing process.
- Extant research has relied on *current or former* foster parents to find their motivations for fostering and continuing to foster.
- Ours is the first study to empirically examine whether mentioning money (stipend) early in the recruitment process, viz., at the Googling stage, makes a difference in the response of *prospective* foster parents.

- The research reports Google ads data from two foster parent recruitment campaigns. One ad has the word "stipend," and the other does not. We then examine differences in response between high and low-income towns. Next, we analysed the differences in click behaviour over 207 days between the two versions of the ads. We then examine differences in click behaviour between residents of high and low-income towns. We used the *t*-test to test for differences.
- We found no statistical difference in response between the ads that mention "stipend" and those that do not.
- However, residents of low-income towns are five times more likely to click on a foster parent ad than residents from high-income towns, irrespective of whether the stipend is mentioned in the ad.

KEYWORDS

foster care, foster parent as a professional, foster parent as a volunteer, Google ads, poverty, recruitment, stipend

INTRODUCTION

In the US, four hundred thousand children were in foster care in October 2021 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2021). Out of these, about half were in the care of non-related foster parents. Unfortunately, non-related foster parents or family foster carers are challenging to recruit and retain (US Congress Ways and Means Committee, 2024). As a result, there is an acute need for prospective foster parents who are motivated to seriously inquire about becoming foster parents and then go through the foster parent training and licensing process.

The problem of recruiting foster parents is a worldwide challenge (Colton, Roberts, & Williams, 2008). In addition, the debate on whether foster parenting is professional or altruistic work continues (Colton, Roberts, & Williams, 2008; Kirton, 2022). Altruistic volunteers put their own time and money into the causes they believe in and are intrinsically motivated. Professionals, in contrast, expect to be paid a fair market wage for their time and effort. Social Work professionals manage foster parents who, in turn, are professionally socialized like healthcare workers to be prosocial and empathic (Burks & Kobus, 2012; Miller, 2013). Consequently, when Social Workers recruit, train and manage foster parents, they try to bring a prosocial and empathic orientation to foster care. In the recruitment challenge for foster parents, this altruistic vs professional debate has led to considerable practice confusion (Kirton, 2022). This research investigates whether, at the very early stage of "Googling" foster care, prospective foster parents are inherently thinking altruistically or professionally with respect to money in foster parenting.

In the US, unlike in some European countries,[1] the foster parent is considered a volunteer and paid a stipend to cover the cost of caring for a foster child. Foster children are removed through a family court order ((Poitras, Tarabulsy, & Pulido, 2022) from their biological homes when a report of trauma, abuse or neglect occurs. According to the US Department of Health and Human Services (2023), up to 80% of foster children have significant mental health issues, while only 20% of children in the general population are estimated to have serious mental health challenges. Given the psychological fragility of foster children, it is imperative that foster parents are intrinsically motivated to serve.

Foster parents are motivated by intrinsic and extrinsic motivations (MacGregor et al., 2006; Rodger, Cummings, & Leschied, 2006). Intrinsic motivations are important for prospective parents to get through the training and licensing process. Extrinsic motivation is the foster parent stipend, which some prospective foster parents see as an income stream. Foster care agencies try to weed out the extrinsically motivated in the foster parent recruitment process.

Intrinsic motivation is critical if unexpected child behavioural challenges emerge after initial placement. If a foster parent is not intrinsically motivated, they might quit in the face of unexpected behavioural challenges from the child, leading to further trauma for the foster child (Rhodes, Orme, & Buehler, 2001). Extant research from current and former foster parents indicates that extrinsic rewards like the stipend paid to parents are a minor motivator in starting foster care. While useful, this research relies on data from *current and former* foster parents. Such an approach has a selection and rationalization problem (Cushman, 2020). In a selection sense, current or former foster parents have already demonstrated their intrinsic motivation by becoming trained and licensed and have taken care of a foster child. Thus, current and former foster parents might underestimate the altruistic qualities needed in *prospective* foster parents. Cushman (2020) explains that we rationalize our actions after the fact by adjusting our beliefs and motivations. From a rationalization viewpoint, participating foster parents might indicate what they think are socially desirable motivators

for foster parenting. Thus, research needs to provide insight into whether the stipend (money) message resonates with *prospective* foster parents new to foster parenting.

Foster care recruiters prefer to leave the stipend out of initial messaging. In doing so, they hope that foster parent candidates motivated primarily by money will be easy to weed out early in the recruiting process. The reluctance of foster care recruiters to talk about the stipend stems from two reasons—first, the salary taboo, where paid jobs have traditionally not mentioned the pay (Roman, 2015; Smyke et al., 2009), and because foster parents in the US are volunteers and should not be "profiteering." (Hardesty, 2018, p. 93).

Becoming a foster parent is a significant commitment. However, research on the journey to becoming a foster parent is sparse. Thus, prospective parents may Google their questions and take several years to complete the application process, background check and training (Benton, 2020). As they Google questions the search ads are shown that are most relevant to the search terms on the Google Search bar (Kantak, 2020).

We address the empirical question of the stipend messaging behaviour a *prospective* foster parent shows before starting a serious inquiry to become a foster parent. Our analysis involves the *t*-test to test whether ads that mentioned the stipend have a different response.

To the best of our knowledge, there is sparse research on what makes a *prospective* foster parent start enquiring about more details of the fostering process. So, first, we examine the impact of the money (stipend) message on prospective foster parents. We then explore whether residents of high-income (rich) and low-income (poor) towns differ in their responses.

Our research contributes to the foster parent recruitment and general recruitment literature (Castilla & Rho, 2023; Hanlon et al., 2021).

This research examines Google Advertising click data for search ad messages, where clicks on an ad with a specific message indicate resonance with prospective parents. The paper is organized as follows: First, we review the literature on monetary motivations for foster care. Second, we outline our research questions. Third, we present the empirical context and methodology. Fourth, we analyse data to determine (a) the impact of mentioning the stipend and (b) differences in responses between rich and poor towns. Fifth, we discuss the implications of our findings. Finally, we conclude and suggest avenues for further research while acknowledging limitations.

MONEY AS MOTIVATION IN FOSTER CARE

Foster parents receive money to cover the additional costs of a foster child. Since this is a reimbursement – it is not to be reported in the foster parents' US state or federal taxes. Nevertheless, most States pay the stipend with the regularity of a paycheck with a per-day calculation at the backend. There are wide variations among states in the compensation paid (Ahn et al., 2018; We Have Kids, 2024). These variations are individual state decisions, and the Federal Government does not insist on any specific amount from individual states. The stipend amount also varies by level of care, e.g., therapeutic foster care and advanced foster care.

Given that the foster parent cares for someone's child under the state's supervision, the state is cautious in selecting, training, licensing and monitoring the foster parent. The state might do this work through its employees or contract with qualified Foster Care agencies. Either way, the prospective foster parent is carefully screened and undergoes an invasive vetting process. This vetting process can include fingerprinting, police verification and home fire inspection for every adult member of the foster parents' household. The prospective foster parent is then trained and licensed.

The literature from current and former foster parents' studies broadly classifies the motivators (Day et al., 2018; MacGregor et al., 2006; Rodger, Cummings, & Leschied, 2006 and Table 1) for foster parents as intrinsic and extrinsic. Intrinsic motivators are altruistic motives that include (1) *Help Children-Love Children*: This could be someone who loves children and loves taking care of children. (2) *Empty Nesters*: The children have grown and left home. These empty nesters have an interest in foster parenting. They want to take care of children who need them. (3) *Wanting to adopt children/increase family size*: This motivation is for wanting to adopt children after initially fostering them. (4) *Provide company for an only child*: A foster child can be the company for an only child. (5) *Societal influences like religion*: Religiosity can motivate (e.g., Keys et al., 2017). (6) *Former foster child*: You could be a former foster child or have relatives with foster children. Having a foster connection might make one more aware of the needs of foster children. (5) *Feel Blessed and want to give back*: Foster parents feel blessed and want to give back by caring for someone less fortunate. (7) *Want to provide a stable home environment*: Foster parents see themselves as capable of providing a stable home environment. (8) *Feel responsible as the child's relative*. Feeling responsible for relatives motivates kinship care (Rodger, Cummings, & Leschied, 2006).

Extrinsic motivators include money that the foster parent receives. However, most studies with current and former foster parents suggest that money is not a prime motive for *becoming* a foster parent. Money is an essential factor in the

TABLE 1 Money as a motivator for foster parenting.

Author/s	Research questions	Empirical context	Data source current or former Foster parents?	Findings	Money related findings
Miller, Green, & Lambros (2019)	Stressors and Self-care for foster parents	Not applicable as a conceptual paper	NA	NA	Money is a stressor as reimbursement rates do not cover childcare etc.
Hardesty (2018)	Profiteering parent-commodification anxiety	Ethnographic study with agency and parents	Yes	Care work is devalued, and foster parents are suspected of making money	Care work, like foster parenting, needs to be paid market rates
Munsch (2021)	Support and Resources for avoiding disruptions in care	Interviews with Colorado Foster Parents	Yes	Disruptions could be lesser if foster kids aggressive behaviour is reduced. Also more training and support to foster parents	Foster parents who reported that money was not a problem, experienced less stress and lower chance of disruption
* Gouveia, Magalhães, & Pinto (2021).	Intention and Retention factors	49 studies PRISMA analysis	Yes	Motivation includes want to help, care-love children, expand family, self-centered motives	4 out of 49 studies mention money as a sub-factor in motivation to foster
MacGregor et al., 2006	Motivation, support and retention	Structured questions to 54 foster parents in Canada	Yes	Intrinsic altruistic motives rather than extrinsic monetary motives	Money as a means for paying for activities so that the kids do not miss
Buehler, Cox, & Cuddeback (2003)	Familial and parental factors in success	Interviews with foster parents Tennessee	Yes	Familial and parental intrinsic motivation important	Money not mentioned.

*All four studies (Denby & Rindfleisch, 1996; Howell-Moroney, 2014; Kirton, 2001; Swartz, 2004) rely on data from *current and former* foster parents.

retention of foster parents. For example, MacGregor et al. (2006, p. 358) states, "Noteworthy, no foster parents mentioned compensation as a motivator for fostering."

There is extensive literature on motivations to become a foster parent. In Table 1, we summarize the motivation literature that discusses money. The literature mentions money, reimbursement, subsidy and stipend interchangeably.

In order to identify the most relevant studies for inclusion in our review of foster parent motivations, we conducted a focused search using Google Scholar with the keywords "foster parent motivation", "foster parent recruitment," and "foster parent recruitment and retention." The goal was to capture a broad spectrum of research related to the recruitment and retention of foster parents, with a specific emphasis on studies published in Social Work journals. This approach allowed us to target highly cited and influential studies that have shaped the current understanding of foster parent motivations. We paid particular attention to articles that might guide the messaging in Google Ads. At the literature search stage, we knew that finding altruistic volunteers (Colton, Roberts, & Williams, 2008) was important. Google became ubiquitous in the last decade (Rowlands et al., 2008). Searches on Google reflect our motivations (Wu, Chuang, & Chen, 2008), and thus, we sought to find selected influential articles that covered monetary issues, both pre- and post-Google's ubiquity. From this search, we focused on selecting studies that provided empirical data or substantial theoretical contributions regarding foster parent motivations, particularly where money was mentioned as a factor. We prioritized studies that were frequently cited and published in well-regarded Social Work journals, ensuring that the literature we reviewed was both comprehensive and representative of the field. The studies included in Table 1 reflect a cross-section of this literature, with a particular emphasis on those that discuss monetary motivations either as a primary or secondary factor.

The studies included in Table 1 provide a critical foundation for understanding the role of monetary incentives in the recruitment and retention of foster parents. While the literature largely focuses on intrinsic motivations, such as altruism and the desire to help children, the discussion of money as a motivator—though less prominent—is nonetheless important. Our research contributes to this body of literature by examining how the mention of financial stipends in recruitment messaging influences prospective foster parents' initial interest, a topic that has not been extensively explored in the existing studies. By analysing Google Ads data, our study offers new insights into how financial

considerations may or may not play a role in the early stages of foster parent recruitment, thus expanding the discussion within the foster parent recruitment and retention literature.

A striking feature of the literature (Table 1) is that the data sources are current or past foster parents. The perspective of these researchers was to understand money as a factor in the retention of foster parents and the potential role of money in recruiting foster parents.

Money was a factor in the retention of foster parents and was mentioned sparsely as a sub-factor motivation in, for example, 4 out of 49 studies in Gouveia, Magalhães, & Pinto (2021).

Why the foster parent is not treated as a professional and paid accordingly is a provocative question (De Wilde et al., 2019; Hardesty, 2018) and an ongoing dilemma globally (Colton, Roberts, & Williams, 2008; Kirton, 2022). As Roman (2015) points out, everyone else in the foster care system is paid and professional. However, the foster parent is on duty 24 hours with the child and is considered an altruistic volunteer, more like a nurse (Isomäki, 2002). A prospective foster parent who shows too much interest in the stipend is considered unfit to be a foster parent (Hardesty, 2018). Since women are predominantly responsible for parenting (Hardesty, 2019; Wozniak, 1997), Hardesty ascribes this labelling to stereotyping women into "free" carer roles. The cultural message is that being paid for foster care is taboo, and the *prospective* foster parent who talks about money should be avoided. The label of "welfare queen" is attached to such people. It might well be that the cultural conditioning of money as taboo is why the money topic comes up predominantly in the literature for the retention of foster parents and not for the recruitment of foster parents.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The Government has been involved in foster care since 1919 and spends considerable effort trying to raise awareness about the need for foster parents through initiatives such as National Foster Care Month, which started in 1988 (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2023). Most recently in 2024, the US Congress passed a bipartisan bill to improve the recruitment and retention of foster parents (US Congress Ways and Means Committee, 2024).

These government initiatives are implemented by the outreach in the community by recruiters. These outreach efforts include setting up a table at a community fair or church event. In addition, existing foster parents are encouraged to recruit new foster parents, sometimes with incentives. Traditional advertising includes flyers, a banner on the street and placemats at a restaurant. Recently, digital advertising via the Internet and social media has also picked up. Digital advertising includes advertising via Google Search ads, the data source of this research.

Extant research is silent on whether money motivates prospective foster parents at the early stages of building awareness of the need for foster parents. This early stage of inquiry is Googling related questions covered in this research. It is unclear whether *prospective* foster parents are motivated to investigate foster parenting for the monetary stipend. A prospective foster parent will undertake a journey to become a foster parent before deciding to meet a social worker involved in the recruiting, training and licensing process.

Our focus in this research is to study the behaviour of prospective foster parents at the early stages of the recruitment process. We ask if mentioning money (stipend) in the early stages of the process makes a difference to the interest of the *prospective* foster parent. We then explore differences in click (interest) behaviour between high-income and low-income town residents.

To summarize, our first research question is: Does talking about money (stipend) at the initial stage make a difference in prospective foster parents' responses? Our second question is: Is there a difference in response between residents of high and low-income towns?

EMPIRICAL CONTEXT AND METHOD

Searching online is ubiquitous (Haider & Sundin, 2019). Whenever we have a question, we start with an internet search. This behaviour extends from simple questions like "lunch near me" to serious health matters like COVID-19 spread (Higgins et al., 2020).

Similarly, prospective foster parents search online for information on "how to become a foster parent" or several variations like "foster care training near me" or "foster care." Nevertheless, merely searching online indicates interest in discovering more (Fennis & Stroebe, 2015).

Internet searches are primarily on Google (Statcounter, 2024; Statista, 2023), and the Google results are presented to answer our question precisely. Google's advertising business model relies on making the searcher happy, Google algorithms are always improving to show the most relevant results to the searcher's query and underlying search intent for both organic and ad results.

TABLE 2 Aggregate impressions, clicks and click-through rates.

Ad text	Impressions (how many times shown)	Clicks (how many clicked)	Click through rate *
With "stipend"	7490	459	6.13%
Without "stipend"	8063	479	5.94%
Total	15 553	938	

*There were no significant difference in impressions ($t = 0.79$, $p = 0.22$), clicks ($t = 0.64$, $p = 0.26$) or click-through rates ($t = -0.742$, $p = 0.23$) between the two ad versions.

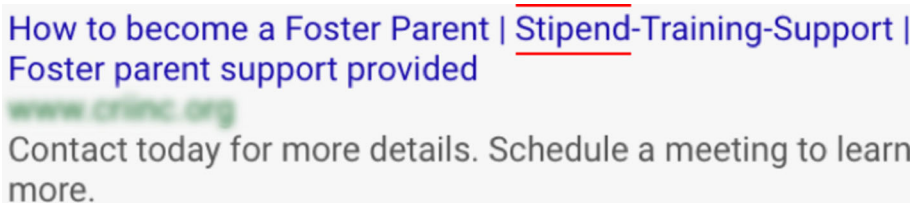

FIGURE 1 With the word "stipend" in the ad text.

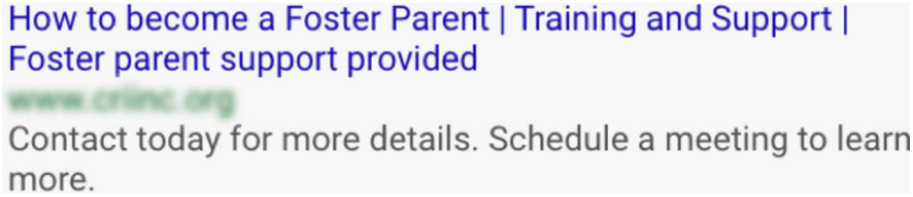

FIGURE 2 Without the word "stipend" in ad text.

These answers are arranged with the most relevant search ads marked as ads followed by organic results that try to answer the question and the search intent of the searcher. An irrelevant ad or organic result will not be shown.

Google (2024) and Stein (2021) explain that Google looks at hundreds of factors driven by the searcher's intent. The goal is to offer organic and ad results that, in Google's estimation, answer what the individual is looking for. A key part of the search text ad is what the ad's text says.

Clicking online search ads demonstrates our interest (Zhou et al., 2019). Thus, an interested prospective foster parent will search for foster care-related words and see content related to "foster care." They might then decide to click or not click on an ad shown. The ad will take them to the foster agency website with a "Become a Foster Parent" form. The Google Ads platform provides data on how many times the ads were shown (impressions) and how many were clicked (clicks).

We examined Google Ads data over 207 days for two Google Ads campaigns for a Foster Care Agency in the USA. The Ad messaging was identical for all the messages except for one change. The word "stipend" was mentioned in one ad, and in the other ad, the word stipend was not mentioned. During the 207 days the ads were shown a total of 15 553 times and were clicked 938 times (totals of columns in Table 2). The most shown ads for the study period are shown below, with the word "stipend" highlighted in Figures 1 and 2.

DATA AND ANALYSIS

Does mentioning the stipend in the ads make a difference?

The literature shows that money is never mentioned in interviews (see Table 1) as a motivator but as a retention factor by foster parents who quit or are considering quitting. Our research focuses on the initial part of a prospective foster parent's journey to becoming a foster parent. At the initial online search stage, we ask whether mentioning money (stipend) makes a difference to users clicking on foster care ads.

The *t*-test is a fundamental statistical method used to compare differences between two groups. It is particularly suitable for our research question, which seeks to determine if there is a significant difference in impressions and clicks

between two advertisements—one that mentions a stipend and one that does not. This method is well-validated in advertising research, as demonstrated by studies such as those conducted by Hu, Lodish, & Krieger (2007) and Lin (2011). The *t*-test is one of the earliest and most straightforward statistical tests employed in the social sciences (as noted in Wright, 1996). Its appropriateness lies in its simplicity and effectiveness when comparing only two groups, aligning perfectly with the questions of our study and the robustness of our findings. We present additional robustness checks of our analytical approach in the Annexure.

We compared the number of times the ads appeared (impressions) in relevant Google searches and the number of times they were clicked (clicks) between the two versions of ads shown in Figures 1 and 2.

We used the *t*-test to examine if there was a difference between the two versions of the ads and found no significant difference in impressions ($t = 0.79$, $p = 0.22$), clicks ($t = 0.64$, $p = 0.26$) or click-through rates ($t = -0.742$, $p = 0.23$) between the two ad versions (Table 2).

For the second research question examining differences between rich and poor towns, we found no statistical difference in response between the two town types across the two ad versions. Residents of low-income towns clicked five times more frequently than those in high-income towns, with this difference being statistically significant both when the stipend was not mentioned ($t = 3.21$, $p = 0.0008$) and when the stipend was mentioned ($t = 3.77$, $p = 0.0001$).

The Google Ads platform provides a variety of data reports for campaigns run on the platform. Since our primary research question was around differences in response between the two versions of ads, we looked for significant differences in variables potentially relevant to foster care. We found that age and gender were not statistically significant between those who clicked either version of the ad. Considering that we search online once we are interested in a particular question, we analyse clicks on the two different versions of the ads.

Clicking on ads can be a function of how many times the ads show, i.e., impressions. If one ad version shows more, the chance of clicks increases. In addition, clicks divided by impressions provide a CTR (Click-through rate) that is a quick measure of which ad performs better.

At first sight, the word stipend has a slightly higher click-through rate in Table 2. To investigate the data more deeply, we extracted the impressions, clicks and click-through rate data for 207 days when the ads were shown. We found through *t*-tests that the impressions, clicks and click-through rates were not significantly different between the two ad versions (n = 207). The number of times each version of the ad was shown (or impressions) was statistically no different ($t = 0.79$, $p = 0.22$ at $p < 0.05$). Clicks were not significantly different at $t = 0.64$ at *p*-value = 0.26 and thus not significant at $p < 0.05$. Neither was the click-through rate ($t = -0.742$, $p = 0.23$ at $p < 0.05$). That is, there was no difference in the number of times each version of the ad was shown. In other words, over 207 days, people who searched on Google for foster care-related words saw two versions of the ad, one with "stipend" and one without the word "stipend." In addition, there was no statistical difference in click behaviour between the two ad versions when it came to clicking on the two ads.

Thus, the "stipend" in the ad message did not improve the response from prospective foster parents.

Are higher-income vs. lower-income towns different?

We then extracted the clicks per town during the 207 days for each ad. There were 190 towns, and the state's median household income was $79 855 for towns based on the US Census data (2020). For comparison, the US mean household income was $64 994.

We split the town click data above and below the state median household income (Iacobucci et al., 2015). We define above the median as high-income towns and below the median as low-income towns. Using the median household income allowed us to split the click data into approximately equal numbers of towns.

The summary of clicks by high vs. low-income towns is in Table 3:

Once again, there was no significant difference between both ad versions by town income. In other words, low-income (with the stipend message) and low-income (without the stipend message) were not significantly different. Similarly, high-income (with the stipend message) and high-income (without the stipend message) were not significantly different.

TABLE 3 Clicks by higher vs. lower-income towns*.

Ad text	High-income town clicks	Low-income town clicks	#multiple clicks by low-income to high-income towns
With "stipend"	75	376	5.01 times
Without "stipend"	70	354	5.05 times

#"Residents of low-income towns clicked five times more frequently than those in high-income towns, with this difference being statistically significant both when the stipend was not mentioned ($t = 3.21$, $p = 0.0008$) and when the stipend was mentioned ($t = 3.77$, $p = 0.0001$).

However, we find a significant difference between the click behaviour of low and high-income towns for each ad version. A prospective foster parent in a low-income town was five times (Table 3) more likely to click on a foster care ad than someone in a high-income town, irrespective of whether the stipend was mentioned in the ad. Residents of low-income towns clicked five times more frequently than those in high-income towns, with this difference being statistically significant both when the stipend was not mentioned ($t = 3.21$, $p = 0.0008$) and when the stipend was mentioned ($t = 3.77$, $p = 0.0001$).

DISCUSSION

According to Dvalishvili, Jonson-Reid, & Drake (2024), 6% of US Children under 18 years of age enter the foster care system. Social Work research on foster parent recruitment and retention (example studies in Table 1) has primarily relied on data and sources already in the foster care system. Thus, prior literature on foster parent recruitment and retention has primarily relied on current and former foster parents.

In contrast, this research gets a glimpse of the anonymous behaviour of the general population. In doing so, we sidestep social media, which can be stressful and feel judgemental as your contacts can see what we post, what you share, or "like" (Faulhaber, Lee, & Gentile, 2023). In contrast, Google offers non-judgemental anonymity to ask questions that you cannot ask your close friends (Oset, 2023). Google tracks the searcher's actions anonymously with the business goal of advertising and showing us results relevant to our search intent. As such, there is no social judgement on what we search for or click on to see.

We had two identical ads running with one minor change. In one ad, the word "stipend" was mentioned, and the other did not. Our results over 207 days showed a total of 15 553 times and clicked 938 times (totals of columns in Table 2). We found no statistical difference in clicking between ads that mentioned "stipend" and those that did not. We split the click data into high-income and low-income towns for both ad versions. We compared high-income towns' ad clicks and found no difference between the ad versions. Similarly, there was no difference in comparing clicks between low-income towns for the two ad versions.

However, irrespective of the search ad versions, lower-income towns generated five times the clicks of high-income towns. Under these circumstances, it is surprising that *prospective* foster parents are not mainly motivated by money, even when living in lower-income communities. There are three possible explanations for this behaviour:

First, foster care needs arise more in poorer communities (Barth, Wildfire, & Green, 2006; McGuinness & Schneider, 2007; Pimentel, 2018), triggering state action for child abuse and neglect. The Child Welfare system gets involved when someone reports neglect. However, neglect can be confounded with poverty (Amorebieta & McFadden, 2022). Our method relies on prospective parents searching for foster care-related search terms on Google. Since low-income towns clicked five times high-income towns, residents of poorer towns likely have first-hand or second-hand exposure to the foster care system. Foster Children are placed as near to their schools as possible and foster parents are required to allow contact with biological parents. This process involves neighbourhoods of similar economic standing and the neighbours do come to know about foster care- at least second hand. This knowledge is in addition to media coverage of the plight of foster children (NBC, 2024).

Second, prospective foster parents could be genuinely motivated by altruistic motives (Table 1) as they start their online Google search journey to becoming foster parents. It is only after experiencing the child welfare system that they mention that lack of financial resources made them stop foster care, as extant research (Table 1) suggests.

Third, a counter-intuitive explanation is that the money taboo in foster parenting is so pervasive (Hardesty, 2018; Roman, 2015) that *prospective* foster parents do not respond to money signals (e.g., stipend) in their online behaviour. This non-response is surprising as the recruiting social worker does not know their Google search or click history.

CONCLUSIONS, FURTHER RESEARCH AND LIMITATIONS

We set out to contribute to foster parent recruitment (Castilla & Rho, 2023; Hanlon et al., 2021).

We conclude that mentioning the stipend early in the *prospective* foster parent recruitment messaging does not affect the response of interest to foster. However, poorer communities are five times more likely to respond to foster parenting outreach efforts than more affluent communities.

We attribute our findings to three potential reasons. Firstly, there's a common association between poverty and instances of child abuse and neglect. Secondly, even during their initial anonymous searches (unbeknownst to the recruiting Social Worker), prospective foster parents do not seem to be swayed by the mention of stipends in advertisements, as indicated by previous studies involving current and former foster parents. Finally, the reluctance to discuss

finances, known as the money taboo, is deeply ingrained in the US volunteer foster parent Child Welfare system, leading prospective foster parents to disregard any mention of stipends.

All three underlying reasons provide avenues for further research.

Firstly, our research was conducted in a state characterized by high income (top 20%) and high costs (top 10%) within the US. Investigating our findings on messaging about money in low-income and low-cost states presents a promising area for future research. Whether our research outcomes hold true in poorer states, remains an empirical question for subsequent studies.

A surprising discovery from our research is the fivefold difference in interest in becoming foster parents between poor and affluent communities. This heightened interest in poorer communities could be attributed to greater exposure, firsthand or secondhand, to the foster care system, consistent with Amorebieta & McFadden (2022) and Pimentel (2018). Residents of poorer communities are likely more acquainted with the necessity for foster care than those in affluent areas. Further research is necessary to align prospective parents with communities where foster parents are in demand. Psychology studies (e.g., Mattis et al., 2009) suggest that location in relatively poorer locations could spur altruism in caring for foster children. More recent studies in economics, eg., Taylor (2024) suggest that family income might have a bigger role than the stipend in the decision to foster. Both psychology and economics literature do seem to suggest that neighbours would be interested in learning more about fostering to learn more as our study suggests.

Our second speculation, which proposes that prospective foster parents are not primarily driven by financial incentives even in the early stages, prompts additional research into the training and professional development of foster parents. If intrinsically motivated foster parents receive proper training and support, as suggested by Rhodes, Orme, & Buehler (2001), it could potentially decrease the attrition rate among trained and licensed foster parents.

Lastly, it may be opportune to explore whether trained and licensed foster parents should be recognized and compensated as professionals rather than reimbursed as volunteers, as proposed by De Wilde et al. (2019), Hardesty (2018) and Roman (2015). Even if these foster parents receive a salary, they would still be recruited by Social Workers who, like healthcare workers (Burks & Kobus, 2012), are professionally socialized to be prosocial and empathic, as highlighted by Miller (2013). Therefore, our research should inform foster parent recruitment practices, both in voluntary and salaried capacities, across different countries.

Our study has several limitations to consider. These encompass individual differences among people, including those who choose to click or not to click within the same or different towns for various reasons as outlined in the annexure on Robustness Checks. In addition, we only consider the click behaviour as a proxy for interest early in becoming a successful foster parent. Further outcomes like how many after clicking do take part in training and licensing, how many remain ready to foster after licensing, or continue to foster is beyond the scope of this study and could be the subject of further research.

Despite these variations, it is somewhat reassuring that the ads were displayed a total of 15 553 times and received 938 clicks (as indicated by the totals of columns in Table 2). This suggests that a significant number of prospective foster parents encountered the ads over a period of 207 days, as they sought information on foster parenting by initiating Google searches early in their journey toward becoming foster parents.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

ETHICS STATEMENT

This study is exempt from IRB following IRB exemptions for similar work by the first author at Yale University, see Sudhir, Roy, and Cherian (2016) and Sudhir, Lee, and Roy (2021).IRB at the University of New Haven (first author of this paper) was involved.

INFORMED CONSENT

All Google ads are marked as "Ads" or "Sponsored" by Google.

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ENDNOTE

[1] France, for example, pays a salary and benefits to foster parents. See Smyke et al., 2009.In Sweden, the foster parent is paid and taxed (Hojer, 2006). The UK has a "mixed economy" of both the state and private foster agencies (Sellick, 2007). Even salaried foster parents are recruited and socialized as Social Workers who are expected to be like volunteers in terms of altruism (Miller, 2013; Tétreault et al., 2020).

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APPENDIX A: Robustness Checks

Introduction

We conducted several robustness checks to address any methodological concerns regarding the stability and reliability of our findings. These checks are detailed below to ensure that our methods are appropriate, valid and rigorous.

Methodological Justifications

Click-Through Rate (CTR) and Consumer Behaviour

Our research investigates the early stages of the prospective foster parent's online journey, specifically focusing on whether mentioning a stipend influences the click rate of ads. Research indicates that consumers are more likely to conduct extensive research early in their decision-making process, including viewing ads and organic results (Chan & Park, 2015; Cheng & Anderson, 2021). Consumers tend to engage more with ads as the decision-making process progresses, supporting our use of CTR as a measure of initial interest.

Cheng & Anderson (2021) refer to the stages of the consumers' search journey depending on their knowledge level about the product they wish to buy. We believe that our research can be visualized similarly as depicted in Figure A1:

Prospective foster parents are on a journey to become a foster parent. Early in the process, the prospective foster parent may not know what to search for and click on whatever comes up. As they become `knowledgeable, they start comparing different options and websites. When they know exactly what to search for, they tend to click on ads that specifically answer their question.

Impact of Ad Clicks and Impressions

It is essential to understand that even unclicked ads contribute to brand awareness through impressions. Studies show that impressions play a significant role in advertising success by enhancing brand recognition and recall (Draganska, Hartmann, & Stanglein, 2014). Furthermore, approximately 42% of internet users cannot distinguish between ads and organic results, and those who can differentiate are more likely to click on ads when ready to make a purchase (Ecomnewsmax.com, 2021; Lewandowski, 2017; Schultheiß & Lewandowski, 2021).

Statistical Analysis

T-Tests for Click-Through Rates

The *t*-test is a well-established statistical method for comparing differences between two groups. Our study uses *t*-tests to compare the click-through rates (CTR) of two ad versions—one mentioning a stipend and one not. This method is

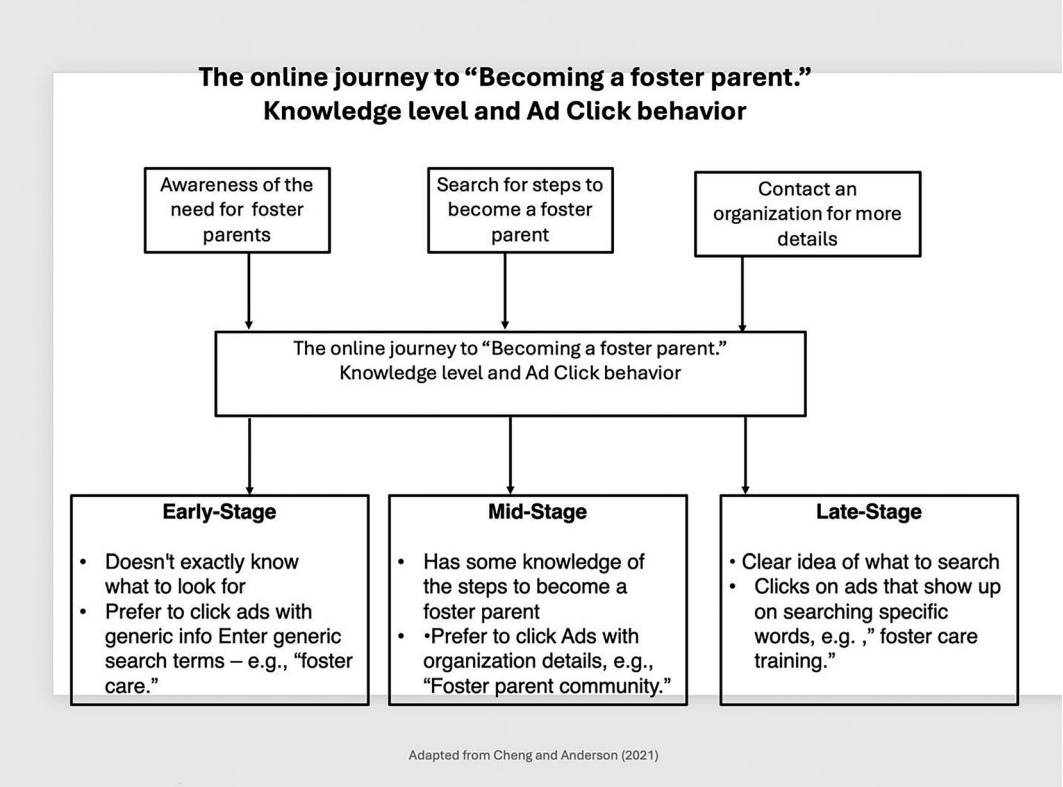

FIGURE A1 The online journey to "becoming a foster parent." Knowledge level and ad click behaviour.

appropriate for our research question, as supported by prior studies in advertising research (Hu, Lodish, & Krieger, 2007; Lin, 2011; Wright, 1996).

Time Series Analysis

To determine the stability and reliability of the CTR over the study period, we employed time series analysis techniques, including moving averages and exponential smoothing (Wheelwright, Makridakis, & Hyndman, 1998). These methods help identify underlying trends and reduce the impact of short-term fluctuations.

Descriptive Statistics and Seasonal Decomposition

We calculated descriptive statistics for the overall period and segmented by week and month. These statistics revealed significant fluctuations, with mean CTRs varying from 0.0857 in the first week to 0.2317 in the third week. Seasonal decomposition separated the CTR data into trend, seasonal and residual components, highlighting a weekly pattern with higher CTRs on weekends (Charts A1 and A2).

We performed a regression analysis with dummy variables for weekends to quantify their impact on CTR. The regression model included a constant term and a dummy variable representing weekends, revealing a slight decrease in average CTR by 0.031 on weekends compared to weekdays, though this effect was marginally insignificant (p-value = 0.058).

Stationarity Tests

To ensure data stability, we conducted Augmented Dickey-Fuller (ADF) tests for stationarity. The ADF test results showed ADF statistics of −14.628 (without mentioning stipend) and −13.327 (mentioning stipend) with p-values < 0.0001, confirming that the CTR data is stationary and stable (Hamilton, 2020).

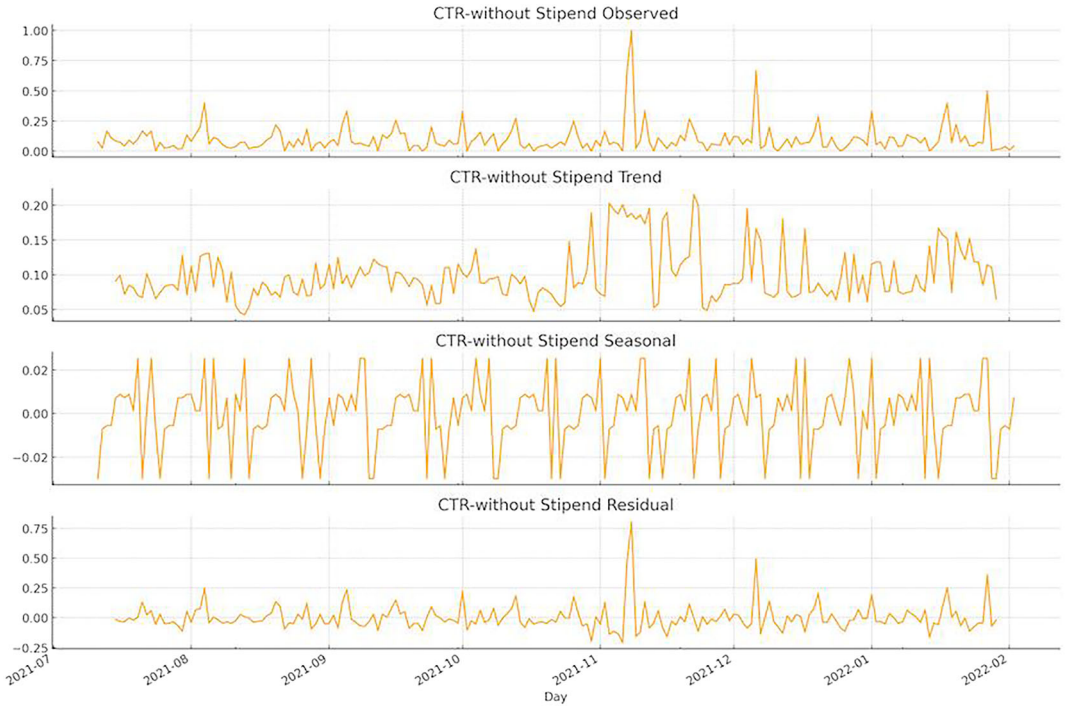

CHART A1 CTR – without stipend mentioned – 207 days trends.

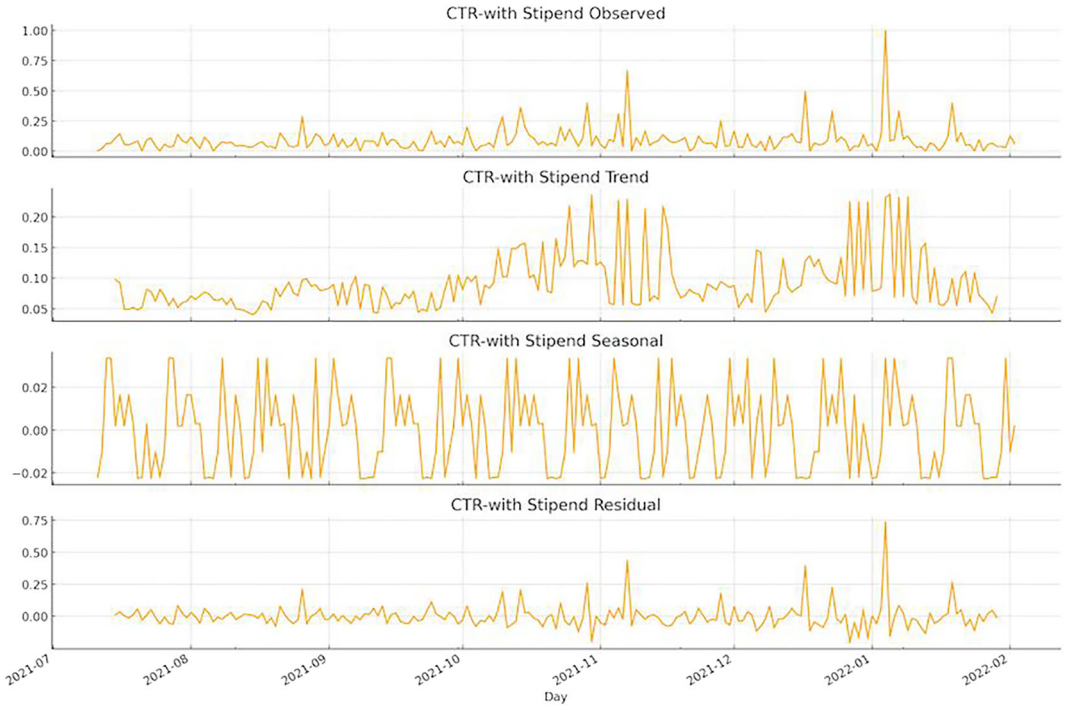

CHART A2 CTR – with stipend mentioned – 207 days trends.

Conclusion

The robustness checks presented in this appendix demonstrate the stability and reliability of our data and methods. Our use of *t*-tests, time series analysis, descriptive statistics, regression analysis and stationarity tests all support the validity of our findings. These rigorous analyses ensure that our research conclusions are based on robust and reliable data.