Impact Evaluation on Allegheny Family Screening Tool Released

PITTSBURGH – An evaluation of the Allegheny Family Screening Tool (AFST), a predictive risk modeling tool designed to improve the accuracy of child maltreatment hotline call screening decisions, has been completed by Stanford University (principal investigator: Jeremy Goldhaber-Fiebert).

Key among its findings, the report concludes that implementing the AFST and accompanying policy changes improved the accuracy of maltreatment referral screening decisions (i.e., which referrals to 'screen-in' for investigation) and reduced racial disparities in case openings between black and white children.

The design and implementation of the Allegheny Family Screening Tool was a multi-year project that included community and stakeholder meetings to solicit input, an intentional procurement process, an ethical review, a validation study, and independent and rigorous process and impact evaluations.

This new report, Impact Evaluation of a Predictive Risk Modeling Tool for Allegheny County's Child Welfare Office, is the result of an 18-month-long evaluation of the tool's indirect and direct effects on the maltreatment screening process, including decision accuracy, workload, and consistency.

The Stanford Research team found that implementation of the tool saw no adverse consequences and increased the accurate identification of children who needed further intervention services, without increasing the workload on investigators. Researchers also documented reductions in racial disparities in case openings following investigations, resulting from modest but statistically significant increases in cases opened for white children coupled with declines in the rate at which black children were screened in for investigation.

"We implemented the AFST at the end of a lengthy community engagement process in the hope that we could improve accuracy of decision-making at our child welfare's front door, when call screening staff decide whether to investigate a situation that has come to our attention," said Marc Cherna, Director of the Department of Human Services (DHS). "We are encouraged that the AFST has shown positive results by increasing accuracy, while preserving clinical judgement, and we believe that it has great potential as we continuously strive to improve our ability to keep children safe."

The findings of the impact evaluation will help to guide DHS in making additional improvements to the AFST and adaptations to its implementation. In November 2018, an updated version of the AFST (AFST Version 2) was released with significant enhancements to the original tool and accompanying changes to policy and practice. The county will continue to fund an independent evaluation by Stanford University, which will observe AFST Version 2, follow its impact on practice, extend the results in time, and expand the outcomes evaluated to include home removals.

"Allegheny County committed to an independent evaluation of this tool from the start, demonstrating their commitment to knowledge building and transparency," said Rhema Vaithianathan, Co-Director of the Centre for Social Data Analytics, Auckland University of Technology, Auckland, New Zealand, which, through a competitive process, was awarded a contract to develop the AFST for the county.

"For the child welfare field at large, the evaluation offers invaluable information and guidance, as more and more agencies consider predictive analytics to support better decisions. We often hear about concerns that predictive analytics might worsen racial disparities, so we are pleased the evaluation finds that the AFST can support decisions that actually reduce racial disparities in the child welfare system."

A summary of the Impact Evaluation can be found here: Impact Evaluation Summary of the Allegheny Family Screening Tool

The full Impact Evaluation can be found here: Impact Evaluation of a Predictive Risk Modeling Tool for Allegheny County's Child Welfare Office

A comprehensive packet featuring the impact evaluation and other reports relevant to the development and implementation of the tool can be found here: Developing Predictive Risk Models to Support Child Maltreatment Hotline Screening Decisions

Section links for additional information:

Allegheny Screening Tool - Frequently Asked Questions and Answers

Allegheny County Predictive Risk Modeling Tool Implementation: Process Evaluation

Ethical Analysis: Predictive Risk Models at Call Screening for Allegheny County

Ethical Analysis: Predictive Risk Models at Call Screening for Allegheny County - DHS Response

Developing Predictive Models to Support Child Maltreatment Hotline Screening Decisions: Allegheny County Methodology and Implementation, Version 1

Allegheny Family Screening Tool: Methodology, Version 2

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