

# Who Benefits Most from a Same-Race Mentor? Optimal Matching in Big Brothers Big Sisters\*

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## ABSTRACT

We estimate the impacts of assigning a mentor of the same race or ethnicity on the social, emotional and academic development of youth relative to assigning a mentor of a different race or ethnicity. Using variation in the relative shortage of minority mentors within the universe of Big Brothers Big Sisters matches, we find that on average youth in same-race/ethnicity mentoring relationships had no significant improvements compared to those in cross-race matches. However, Black and Hispanic youth who were assigned a same-race/ethnicity mentor had slightly higher self-perceived school ability and improved attitudes concerning risky behaviors. In contrast to previous work, we find little evidence that race/ethnicity-matching improves grades or expectations for future educational attainment. These results imply that when minority mentors are in short supply, matching on race or ethnicity at the expense of another desirable trait may not lead to improved youth development.

*JEL:* H51, I13, J26

*Keywords:* Youth mentoring, race congruence, matching, child development

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# 1 Introduction

In 2014, an estimated 4.5 million youth in the U.S. were in structured, one-to-one mentoring relationships (Bruce and Bridgeland, 2014). Youth mentoring programs are held in high regard for their positive impacts on the participants' development. Experimental evaluations of mentoring programs has shown that mentored youth have better social-emotional skills (Grossman and Tierney, 1998) and increased likelihood of completing high school and enrolling in post-secondary education (Rodriguez-Planas, 2012; Falk, Kosse, and Pinger, 2020) relative to non-mentored youth.<sup>1</sup> However, the mechanisms that produce effective one-to-one youth mentoring are less clear. Mentors may increase youth development by modeling positive emotional behavior (Hayes, Castonguay, and Goldfried, 1996), refining critical thinking skills with corrective interactions (Radziszewska and Rogoff, 1991; Vygotsky, 1978), influencing attitudes towards risky behaviors (Beier et al., 2000), or relating advice based on a shared experience. In particular, sharing a racial or ethnic identity is hypothesized to build stronger emotional bonds that lead to more positive interactions. Matching the race of K-12 students and teachers has been shown to improve student outcomes (Egalite, Kisida, and Winters, 2015; Dee, 2004; Harbatkin, 2021), but how important is a shared identity in a youth mentoring relationship?

To answer this question, we estimate the impact of assigning a same-race/ethnicity mentor on the social, emotional and academic outcomes of youth participating in the Big Brothers Big Sisters of America (BBBS) mentoring program. BBBS is the largest youth mentoring organization in the U.S., supporting over 135,000 one-to-one mentoring relationships in 2019, and has been shown to improve perceptions of scholastic ability, risk attitudes, and self-esteem of participants compared to non-mentored youth (Grossman and Tierney, 1998; Herrera et al., 2011). It is hypothesized that the success of BBBS-mentored youth is in part due to assigning a mentor of the same race or ethnicity. Furthermore, many of the youth participating in BBBS and their parent(s) express preferences for a mentor of the same race or ethnicity. But there is often a mismatch between the supply of minority youth (Littles) and minority mentors (Bigs). In 2018, 72% of youth in the BBBS program were minorities, while only 32% of volunteers were non-white.<sup>2</sup> As a result, BBBS must choose how to allocate a scarce supply of minority mentors to mentees. Therefore, it is important

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<sup>1</sup>DuBois et al. (2011) provide a thorough review of the literature evaluating youth mentoring programs.

<sup>2</sup>Based on authors' calculations.

to understand which outcomes are most improved by race/ethnicity-matching, and for which youth this premium is largest.

We use the universe of BBBS matches from 2010 to 2018 to estimate the causal effect of assigning a same-race/ethnicity (hereafter referred to as “same-race” for brevity) Big on the Little’s social, emotional and academic outcomes after a year of mentoring. We find that having a same-race Big does not significantly improve the Little’s growth in outcomes relative to those in cross-race matches. However, minority Littles experience some improvements when paired with a Big of the same race: Black and Hispanic Littles in same-race matches experience larger improvements in their risk attitudes relative to their cross-race counterparts, and Black Littles showed increases in self-perceived school ability as a result of being race-matched. Our findings support the theory that having a same-race mentor improves the self-esteem and confidence of certain youth, perhaps by sharing a background that creates a stronger relationship. These results imply that race-matching is an important dimension for youth mentoring organizations to consider when targeting the social and emotional development of minority youth. However, when the supply of minority mentors is scarce, matching on race at the expense of other important traits may not produce the fastest growth in youth.

Our identification strategy leverages the mismatch in the supply of minority Bigs and Littles to produce plausibly causal estimates despite the non-random assignment of Bigs to Littles by case-workers. The observed variation in race matching among completed matches comes from two sources. First, there is variation across local agencies in the relative supply of minority Bigs. This cross-agency variation is likely generated by neighborhood characteristics (most obviously local racial composition) that could directly influence child outcomes. Second, there is race-matching variation within an agency that arises from case-workers curating matches. Although race-matching is not randomly assigned, our discussions with BBBS administrators provide evidence that matches are made largely on the basis of race, gender, geographic proximity between the Big and the Little, and personal interests, conditional on the availability of an eligible Big. It is possible that the within-agency variation in race-matching is conditionally random because case-workers must balance all the dimensions of potential matches when selecting a Big to assign. However, if unobserved Big or Little characteristics jointly affect same-race assignment within agencies and growth in the Little’s outcomes the match would be endogenous. Ex-ante, there is no reason to prefer either source of variation. Section 2 outlines the within-agency matching process

that leads to our preferred match-level, selection-on-observables model. Key to our analysis, we use the rich set of controls available in the data to show the pre-match characteristics of the Littles and Bigs as well as Littles' outcomes do not differ substantially between same- and cross-race matches. Furthermore, we estimate a similar model at the agency level to avoid any bias from endogenous match formation, but at the cost of potentially introducing bias from contextual effects. In doing so, we demonstrate there is little evidence of bias from either source of variation, allowing us to interpret our estimates as causal.

Our paper adds to the literature on youth mentoring by identifying the causal effect of race-matching on the outcomes of youth participating in BBBS. Grossman and Tierney (1998) and Herrera et al. (2011) provide experimental evidence that BBBS mentorship improves the self-perceptions of scholastic ability, risk attitudes, and self-esteem of youth randomly assigned to mentoring relative to those who did not receive a mentor, but neither examine the impacts by the type of Big assigned. Rhodes et al. (2002) use the experimental variation in Grossman and Tierney (1998) to estimate the effect of race-matching, but the race of the Big was not randomized among the treated group. Hence, it is not clear if same-race mentoring increases Littles' development at a faster rate than cross-race mentoring or improves outcomes relative to non-mentored youth. Rhodes et al. (2002) provides a detailed explanation of the potential social and cultural costs and benefits of same- and cross-race mentor matching. Having a mentor that shares your racial or ethnic background can promote trust and aid in establishing a relationship. Mentors of a different racial or ethnic background may not be able to adequately support the youth in the challenges they face. Having successful role models of similar racial background may also empower youth — especially of minority heritage — to achieve higher levels of success themselves. On the other hand, cross-race matches can still be valuable and lead to many of the same positive outcomes as same-race matches. Racial diversity in mentoring may bridge cultural and social gaps and challenge cultural beliefs, or foster a sense of community between racial groups. Furthermore, when same-race mentors are in short supply, a cross-race match may be better for the youth than no match at all.

We also contribute to the literature on racial congruence by isolating the indirect effects of an adult mentor on the youth's self-perceived social, emotional and academic abilities. Much of the existing work is focused on educational contexts, particularly K-12 schooling. Harbatkin (2021) posits that teachers' perceptions can affect student outcomes through a direct and an

indirect channel. In the first case, teachers may leverage their authority (either consciously or unconsciously) to assign lower grades or dole out harsher punishments for misbehavior to students of a different race (Bates and Glick, 2013; Dee, 2005; Ouazad, 2014). Second, teachers may have an indirect influence on the student by appealing to their motivations and self-confidence in daily interactions, and this effect may have differential impacts by racial congruence (Van Ewijk, 2011). In a youth mentoring setting such as BBBS, the adult mentors have little to no formal authority or evaluative power over the youth, allowing us to attribute the estimated effects to the indirect channel. In contrast, studies that examine the effect of same-race teacher assignment on test scores (Harbatkin, 2021; Egalite, Kisida, and Winters, 2015; Dee, 2004) or career path choice (Kofoed and McGovney, 2019) cannot disentangle the indirect effects from the direct effects of race-matching.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows. Section 2 outlines the BBBS program, the process of matching Big to Little and the real-world constraints that produce variation in race matching that is plausibly exogenous after conditioning on a set of observed covariates. Section 3 describes the data on the universe of BBBS matches during the 2008-2018 period used. Section 4 formalizes the empirical strategies that identify the causal effect of race-matching on Littles' outcomes. Section 5 displays the results of estimating these models and discuss their implications. Finally, Section 6 concludes.

## **2 Big Brothers Big Sisters of America**

The Big Brothers Big Sisters of America (BBBS) organization is a volunteer-based, one-on-one youth mentoring organization that pairs a youth mentee (Little) and an adult mentor (Big). Founded in 1904, BBBS now has over 200 agencies across all 50 states and is currently the largest youth mentoring organization in the United States, supporting over 135,000 matches in 2019 alone. The two largest programs that BBBS operates are “community-based” and “site-based” mentoring. Site-based matches are typically organized at a specific location, such as a workplace, school, or community center and tend to have more structure imposed on them by the local BBBS office. In contrast, community-based matches spend one-on-one time in their community in activities like playing games at a park, attending a sporting event, or visiting a museum. BBBS

expects Bigs to become a role model for their Little by consistently spending time together (e.g. 3-4 times a month). Bigs are encouraged to plan activities that foster a friendship with their Little, such as going for a walk or playing a board game. BBBS does not expect Bigs to invest large amounts of money in their Little or spend time tutoring. The goal for the relationship is to inspire the Little through positive interactions and “quality time.”

Potential Littles are typically between the ages of 9 and 13 (8 and 13 for site-based matches) when entering the program, and can stay enrolled through age 18. Typically, Bigs must be 21 years or older, must pass a background check, and complete an in-person interview with a BBBS case worker. Once the Big completes the interview, their case worker matches them with a Little based on a variety of criteria that can include gender, race, shared interests, and travel time. It is common for Littles and their parent(s) to state a preference for same-gender matches, and many request a Big of the same race. However, the Little’s preferences are constrained by the relative supply of Bigs of a given race or gender. Figure 1 shows a majority of Bigs in our sample of matches are white (69%), while a majority of Littles are Black or Hispanic (66%). Figure 1 also shows that almost all matches are same-gender. Because many Littles express a preference for a same-gender Big and either party can reject the match, this suggests that many agencies experience further supply constraints by having to match on both race and gender preferences.<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, same-race Big supply constraints can vary across agencies. Figure 2 shows the fraction of Bigs and Littles participating in a match within a local BBBS agency, separated by race. A point in the upper diagonal of the plot implies Bigs of that race are relatively overrepresented at their agency compared to Littles, while a point in the lower diagonal implies underrepresentation, and a point on the plotted 45 degree line shows that the proportions of Bigs and Littles of a particular race are balanced. Figure 2 shows that in our sample, often a majority share of Bigs are white while a majority share of Littles are Black within a given agency.<sup>4</sup> However, this plot also shows that the relative fractions can vary significantly across agencies. We are able to leverage the variation in the supply of Bigs across agency to identify the causal impact of participating in same-race match.

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<sup>3</sup>We assume Littles reveal their true preferences since requesting a Big with certain qualities is costless to the Little and does not affect the probability of being matched overall.

<sup>4</sup>Anecdotally, the director of the local BBBS agency informed us that the supply of Bigs is often mismatched with the supply of Littles—most Big applicants are white and/or female and most Little applicants are minorities and/or male.

### 3 Data

Our data contain the universe of BBBS matches between 2008 and 2019. The data were supplied by BBBS, and contain information on the race, gender and age of every Big and Little that participated in BBBS mentorship in the United States. Also included are measures of the Little's socioeconomic status (number and type of guardians in the household, on free/reduced lunch) and the Big's educational attainment. Most importantly, our data set also includes the Youth Outcome Survey (YOS) which is administered to every Little upon entering the program (hereafter referred to as the baseline survey) and then again every year (12 months or school year for community- and school-based<sup>5</sup> matches, respectively) that the match continues (hereafter referred to as the follow-up survey). The YOS includes 33 categorical response questions regarding the Little's outlook on their social experience, education and school experience. These 33 questions are aggregated by BBBS into summary scores by taking the average of the component scores. BBBS generated eight summary scores: social acceptance, school ability, truancy, grades, education expectations, risk attitudes, parental trust, and special adult.<sup>6</sup>

The social experience group is comprised of social acceptance, school ability, and truancy. The social acceptance score measures the Little's perceptions of their friendships (e.g. "I find it hard to make friends"). The school attitudes measures the Little's perceptions of their scholastic ability (e.g. "I am very good at my schoolwork", and "I feel that I am just as smart as other kids"). Truancy is the Little's self-reported school absences and days late for school.<sup>7</sup>

Education contains two outcomes: grades and education expectations. Grades is the average letter grade (mapped from F-A to 1-5 correspondingly) the Little received in mathematics, reading or language arts, social studies, and science. Education expectations contains three questions regarding their prospective educational outcomes (e.g. "How sure are you that you will finish high school?").

Lastly, social experience includes risk attitudes, parental trust, and special adult. Risk attitudes measures the Little's perceptions of whether certain risky behaviors are "okay". These behaviors

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<sup>5</sup>School-based matches are a subset of site-based matches.

<sup>6</sup>YOS also includes questions on juvenile arrest but we omit these outcomes due to lack of variation; most Littles in our sample were never arrested.

<sup>7</sup>Frequencies are categorically binned 1-4, i.e. 1=no absences, 2=1-2 absences, etc.

include using tobacco, drugs and alcohol, truancy, and misbehavior (hitting someone and breaking rules in school). Parental trust measures the Little's perceptions of how often their parents respect their feelings, accept them as they are, and try to be understanding when the Little is angry. Lastly, special adult is composed of a single dummy indicating whether the Little feels that they have a non-guardian adult who "does a lot of good things" for the little.

We focus on the change in the Little's scores at the first follow-up survey from their baseline survey, administered prior to the start of their match. We omit any matches that do not have a baseline survey. BBBS did not begin administering a baseline YOS until 2010 so matches that began prior to 2010 are dropped. We further restrict the sample to matches that completed at least one follow-up survey. It is possible that matches that did not last through the first follow-up survey differ in some important way from those that did last. Table A1 tests for differences between matches that lasted through the first follow-up, and those that did not. Imbens and Wooldridge (2009) recommend using a normalized difference in means test to account for statistically significant differences that arise simply due to large sample sizes. The authors suggest that normalized differences of less than 0.25 in absolute value indicate no significant difference between two groups. We do not find evidence that these matches differ in any important ways based on observable characteristics of either the Big or the Little. Finally, our analysis focuses on "community-based" (CB) matches. The matching process for site-based (SB) programs tend to vary more by state, SB matches tend to end earlier than CB matches, and SB matches were not balanced across same-race status. The resulting sample includes about 29,000 CB matches.

## 4 Methodology

Because Bigs are assigned to Littles by a case worker, the variation in same-race matches is potentially non-random. In reality, BBBS agencies face severe shortages in the supply of minority Big applicants. Figure 2 shows the fraction of Bigs and Littles at a local BBBS agency that are in each race category. In our sample, a majority of Bigs at an agency are often white while a majority of Littles are often Black. This within-sample stylized fact coincides with the experience of case-workers we spoke to: the pool of Big applicants is predominantly white while the pool of



Little applicants is predominantly people of color.<sup>8</sup>

The lack of available minority Bigs restricts case-workers' ability to be overly selective in their assignment of a Big to the Little. Families often express strong preferences that their Little be assigned a Big who is of the same gender and race. Additionally, they commonly ask to be matched with a Big that shares common interests or has a particular level of education. These requirements further restrict the pool of eligible Bigs that match the requests of the Little. Our data support this conclusion. Figure 1 shows that almost all matches are same-gender but there is significant variation in same-race status.

The variation in same-race status among formed matches motivates our selection-on-observables empirical strategy. Conditional on the race of the Little, the probability of matching a same-race and otherwise-eligible Big depends on the local supply of applicants. If the pool of eligible minority applicants is large, the probability of being assigned a same-race Big is high and case-workers would have the freedom to match on other unobservable characteristics, potentially biasing our results. As mentioned above, this does not seem to be the case; however, we only observe the Bigs who were matched which represents a subset of the pool of applicants. If the local demographic composition of potential Bigs is endogenous to the growth in Little's outcomes, or if the probability of an eligible Big applying to BBBS is correlated with the observed characteristics of Littles in the area, our results would be biased. To combat these possibilities, we estimate multiple specifications at both the match- and agency-level. After controlling for demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of the Big and Little in each, we leverage the remaining plausibly exogenous variation in the supply of minority Bigs across agencies to identify the effect of participating in a same-race match on the Little's outcomes. We describe these methods below.

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<sup>8</sup>In particular, our contact at the local BBBS agency estimated that about 80% of Bigs applicants were white, while 80% of Little applicants were people of color.

## 4.1 Match-Level Estimation

We first identify the individual impacts on Littles of race-matching by estimating the effect of being assigned a same-race Big at the match-level. Specifically, we estimate the equation

$$Y_{iat}^F = \alpha + \beta \text{SameRace}_{iat} + \eta Y_{iat}^B + \Gamma' \text{LittleChars}_{iat} + \Theta' \text{BigChars}_{iat} + \alpha_t + \varepsilon_{iat} \quad (1)$$

for match  $i$  at agency  $a$  in year  $t$ .  $\text{SameRace}_{iat}$  indicates whether the Big and the Little in match  $i$  are of the same race,<sup>9</sup> and  $Y_{iat}^F$  denotes the value of the outcome variable at the Little's first follow-up survey. We control for the initial value of the outcome variable,  $Y_{iat}^B$ , to account for any baseline differences among Littles.  $\text{LittleChars}_{iat}$  is a vector of the Little's race and age, as well as measures of socioeconomic status, and  $\text{BigChars}_{iat}$  is a vector of the Big's race, age, and educational attainment. Finally, year fixed effects are included to account for any trends in outcomes over time.

To interpret  $\beta$  in Equation 1 as the causal effect of a same-race match, it must be the case that whether the Little was matched with a same-race Big is as good as randomly assigned conditional on the observable characteristics of both the Little and the Big. BBBS typically matches Littles and Bigs on gender and race, subject to the availability of eligible Bigs. Furthermore, BBBS contends that matches are typically made on the basis of shared interests, personalities, and conditional on a reasonable geographic distance between the Big and Little. Because of this heuristic approach to matching, we include controls for the Little's age and socioeconomic status of the Little and the Big's age and educational attainment. To the extent that these factors are correlated with any unobserved (by the researcher) match criteria used by the Little's case worker, these proxies should account for bias that occurs as a result of caseworker matching decisions.

One possible threat to identification is that Littles are assigned to same-race matches based on some unobserved match characteristics that are correlated with growth in YOS outcomes. Because Littles often fill out the baseline YOS prior to being matched with a Big,<sup>10</sup> individual case workers may be more likely to allocate same-race Bigs to the Littles with higher baseline values of

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<sup>9</sup>In the case of multi-racial individuals, we use the first listed race as their primary identity for defining a race-match. For individuals in the "other" category, we determine race congruence using the included subcategories (Asian, Pacific Islander and American Indian) rather than the Big and Little both being in the "other" category.

<sup>10</sup>In some cases the Little fills out the baseline YOS after a potential Big has been identified but prior to the initial meeting.

certain outcomes. If case workers expect Littles with higher YOS scores to grow faster or if higher scores are correlated with unobserved determinants of the Little's growth, our estimates would be biased by this strategic matching behavior. Table 1 shows the means and standard deviations of Little's YOS values by match type, the mean difference in scores, the T-statistic of the difference, and the normalized (sample size independent) difference. We find no evidence that Littles with higher baseline YOS scores are more likely to be matched with a same-race Big. Additionally, case workers may assign Littles to same-race matches based on their own demographics or socioeconomic status, or those of the Big. Table 1 also shows no significance differences in the demographics and socioeconomic status of Littles and Bigs by match type.

Because we wish to leverage the variation in supply of minority Bigs across agency to identify  $\beta$ , we do not include agency fixed effects. This introduces the potential for time-invariant bias from two sources: region-specific demographic composition and idiosyncratic agency behavior.<sup>11</sup> We account for region-specific factors that might bias our results through the inclusion of other characteristics of the Big and Little. To the extent that these characteristics correlate with the socioeconomic or demographic characteristics of the local community, the inclusion of these covariates act as a proxy for those unobserved determinants of Little's growth. In the latter case, some agencies may be more adept at developing successful same-race matches than others by following a set of idiosyncratic best practices in matching or case management. Indeed, local agencies have the freedom to deviate slightly from BBBS policies, possibly to the advantage of Littles in same-race matches. Although our discussions with the local agency did not lead us to believe that there were deviations from organization-wide policy that are correlated with the growth among Littles, we address this potential bias more systematically with an agency-level empirical model. We describe this strategy in detail in Section 4.3.

It is worth noting that participation in the BBBS program is voluntary, so there is likely selection into who enrolls in the program. For that reason, it is important to point out that we can only unbiasedly estimate the relative effects of twelve months of mentoring on outcomes for Littles in same-race matches relative to those cross-race matches, *among youth who elected to enroll in BBBS mentoring*. We cannot say what the effect of same-race mentoring is relative to a

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<sup>11</sup>Agency fixed effects would account for the former as offices serve the local community within a certain geographic distance.

counterfactual youth who did not receive any mentoring.<sup>12</sup>

## 4.2 Heterogeneity by Little Race

We re-estimate Eq. 1 interacted with dummies for each race of the Little in the match to determine which Littles are most affected by race-matching. The heterogeneous treatment effect model is

$$\begin{aligned} Y_{iat}^F = & \alpha + \beta_B \text{SameRace} \times \text{Black}_{ia} + \beta_W \text{SameRace} \times \text{White}_{ia} \\ & + \beta_H \text{SameRace} \times \text{Hispanic}_{ia} + \beta_O \text{SameRace} \times \text{Other}_{ia} \\ & + \eta Y_{iat}^B + \Gamma' \text{LittleChars}_{iat} + \Theta' \text{BigChars}_{iat} + \alpha_t + \varepsilon_{iat}. \end{aligned} \quad (2)$$

where the control set and fixed effects are identical to the average treatment effect model. The only exception is the omission of the Big's race dummies which are collinear with the Little's race dummies and *SameRace*-Little's-race-dummy interactions. In this model,  $\beta_k$ ,  $k = B, W, H, O$ , is the effect of assigning a same-race Big relative to a cross-race Big for a Little of race  $k$ .

## 4.3 Agency-Level Estimation

To abstract away from any match-level bias, we estimate the agency-level analog of Eq. (1) which takes the form

$$\overline{Y}_{at}^F = \alpha + \beta \overline{\text{SameRace}}_{at} + \eta \overline{Y}_{at}^B + \Gamma' \overline{\text{LittleChars}}_{at} + \Theta' \overline{\text{BigChars}}_{at} + \alpha_t + \nu_{at} \quad (3)$$

where  $\overline{Y}_{at}^F$  is the mean of the outcome variable in the follow-up survey at agency  $a$  in year  $t$ .  $\overline{\text{SameRace}}_{at}$  is the fraction of matches in agency  $a$  in year  $t$  that are same-race,  $\overline{Y}_{at}^B$  is the agency-year mean of the outcome variable in the baseline survey, and  $\overline{\text{LittleChars}}_{at}$  and  $\overline{\text{BigChars}}_{at}$  are agency-year means of the Little and Big characteristics include in Equation 1, respectively.

In order to interpret  $\beta$  in Equation 3 as the causal impact of a higher percent of same-race matches, the proportion of observed same-race matches at an agency in any particular year must be as good as randomly assigned, conditional on the included observables. While the agency-level

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<sup>12</sup>For estimates of the impact of BBBS enrollment see Grossman and Tierney (1998); Herrera et al. (2011); Park, Liao, and Crosby (2017).

regression model does not suffer from match-level endogeneity concerns, it is susceptible to bias from contextual factors such as differences in school spending or the local demographic composition which informs the pool of potential Bigs and Littles. Controlling for the average baseline YOS score combats bias from social factors, while the proportions of Littles receiving free/reduced lunch, Littles in a single-parent home, and Bigs in each educational attainment bin controls for socioeconomic factors. Lastly, we include the proportion of Bigs and Littles in each race category which controls for local demographic trends.

A second, related concern is that the matching heuristic used by agencies is correlated with both the fraction of same-race matches as well as the average outcome at the first follow-up survey. If, for example, agencies with a higher ratio of minority Bigs to minority Littles match promising Littles with same-race Bigs, our results would be biased. The causal interpretation of Equation 3 rests on the assumption that the matching heuristic is as good as random conditional on our covariates. As described earlier, families often express strong preferences for a Big of the same gender, same race, with similar interests and possibly a certain level of education. Agencies restrict the pool of eligible Bigs even further based on geographical closeness. Therefore, the remaining selection bias induced by case-workers after controlling for the race, gender, and socioeconomic status of the Big and Little would overall be small.

We similarly estimate Eq. 2 at the agency-level by replacing all of the variables with their agency-level means. To estimate the heterogeneous treatment effects at the agency-level, we include the proportion of same-race matches where both Big and Little Black, white, Hispanic or in the Other category.

We discuss the results of both the estimated average and heterogeneous treatment effects at the match- and agency-levels in the next section.

## **5 Results**

### **5.1 Match-Level Results**

Panel A of Table 2 contains the results of estimating Equation 1. The second to last row shows the mean of the dependent variable at baseline among cross-race matches for context. In the

match-level regressions, being matched with a mentor of the same race does not appear to impact youth outcomes relative to being matched with a mentor of a different race, with one exception: Littles who were paired with a same-race Big were 1.35 percentage points ( $p < 0.05$ ) less likely to report having a special adult in their life relative to those in cross-race matches. The lack of significant impacts on average imply there are no relative benefits to being matched with a Big of the same race. However, the literature on race-congruency suggests there are positive effects of both same- and cross-race matching. In this case, the effects might cancel out, leading to an overall effect close to zero. A final possibility is that certain youth benefit from having a same-race match while others do not. In this case, estimating the effects for the full sample might mask important heterogeneity in the same-race effect.

Panel B contains the results of estimating a model where the same-race indicator variable is interacted with a set of indicators for the Little's race. As the literature suggests, it may be the case that mentoring improves school outcomes for minority Littles when paired with a Big of the same race. Our results show this to be true in some instances. Black Littles in same-race matches saw a 0.0345 point improvement ( $p < 0.001$ ) in their self-perceived school ability relative to those who were mentored by a cross-race Big. Asian, Pacific Islander and American Indian Littles in same-race matches were less truant after a year of mentoring (-0.1655,  $p < 0.001$ ). We find no effects of race-matching on the Little's self-perceived social acceptance for any race category.

Unlike the literature on race-congruency, we find few impacts of race-matching on educational outcomes of Littles. Black Littles matched to Black Bigs had slightly lower grades (-0.0034) but this effect is imprecisely estimated. Hispanic Littles in same-race matches had slightly lower grades (-0.0473,  $p < 0.05$ ) relative to those in cross-race matches. This could be due to spending extended time with a Big whose primary language is English. Currie and Thomas (1999) show that the Head Start preschool program had larger impacts on standardized test scores for Hispanic children, and particularly Hispanic children from households where the primary language spoken was Spanish. Unfortunately, we cannot test this directly since we do not observe the Little's language ability or the primary language spoken at home. However, Table 3 shows that the effect on Hispanic Littles' grades is driven by their scores in reading, social studies and science, with no effect on math grades. These results combined with the fact that Bigs rarely spend time tutoring their Little provide suggestive evidence that improved English language ability is the mechanism behind the cross-race effects on Hispanic Littles' grades. On the other hand, Littles in the Other category

saw relatively large improvements in their grades as a result of race-matching (0.1183,  $p < 0.05$ ). Lastly, we find no effects of race-matching on the Little's expectations for educational attainment.

Turning to the outcomes related to the Little's social interactions, we find a 0.0106 point improvement in their risk attitudes of Black Littles relative to those in cross-race matches ( $p < 0.01$ ). We observe a similarly sized effect of 0.0153 for Hispanic Littles ( $p < 0.001$ ) and no statistically significant effects for white Littles or Littles in the Other category. We do not observe any statistically significant effects of race-matching on parental trust. Notably, the small relative decrease in the likelihood that a Little in a same-race match reports having a special adult in their life appears to be driven by Black Littles. Because these effects can be interpreted as the relative impact of having a same-race Big compared to a Big of another race, these results suggest that Black youth may benefit along some dimensions from having a non-Black Big.

## 5.2 Agency-Level Results

Table 4 contains results from estimating Equation 3. These results are robust to any match-level bias but are susceptible to any contextual effects not captured by our controls for Big and Little demographics and socioeconomic status. The agency-level results are qualitatively similar in most cases, only scaled by the relative size and match composition of an agency. This lends credibility to the assumption that there is a negligible amount of selection at the match level. Specifically, unless bias from geographic variation is the same direction and magnitude as the selection bias, these results would not persist across specifications. In Panel A, we find increasing the proportion of same-race matching within an agency has no statistically significant impacts on Littles' outcomes except in the case of grades. An additional one percent of pairs being race-matched would increase the average grades score by 0.002109 (0.2109/100,  $p < 0.10$ ). When scaled by the average proportion of same-race matches within an agency, the magnitudes of the estimates in Panel A are similar to those in Table 2.

In Panel B, we include the proportion of same-race matches within each race category of the Little. This allows us to examine the impacts of increasing the proportion of same-race matches within Little race subgroups. Although statistically insignificant, we find similarly positive effects on school ability for Black Littles. The significant effect of race-matching on grades is driven by white Littles in same-race matches: increasing the proportion of white-white matches by one

percent leads to a 0.004698 increase in the average grade of white Littles ( $p < 0.01$ ). At the agency level, we find that increasing the share of race-matched Hispanic Littles increases education expectations by 0.002314 points ( $p < 0.05$ ). Lastly, we find improvements in risk attitudes among Black Littles and Littles in the Other category, but no effects on parental trust or the prevalence of Littles reporting a special adult.

Taken together, Tables 2 and 4 show that race-matching generates modest improvements in the Little's self-perceptions and problem behavior, primarily among Black and Hispanic Littles. We find sparse improvements in course grades and no impacts on educational expectations, unlike the broader literature on race-congruency. This is perhaps unsurprising given that BBBS is a social mentoring program. Bigs often spend time bonding with their Little in leisurely activities rather than tutoring. Indeed, BBBS describes their program as primarily impacting the social and emotional of development of the Little. The lack of findings for educational outcomes implies that pure role-modeling is not the primary driver of race-congruence effects on tests scores, high school completion or college enrollment for minority youth. Outside of the classroom, race-matched mentoring appears to have the highest marginal impacts on the non-cognitive outcomes of youth.

## 6 Conclusion

In this paper, we estimated the causal effect of same-race mentorship relative to cross-race mentorship on the outcomes of youth who participated in BBBS mentoring for twelve months. We found that Littles who were assigned a same-race Big had almost no improvements relative to those assigned a cross-race Big, on average. But heterogeneity analysis revealed that same-race matching improved self-perceived school ability for Black Littles, Truancy for Littles in the Other category, and risk attitudes for both Black and Hispanic Littles. On the other hand, Hispanic Littles in cross-race matches had slightly higher grades after a year of mentoring, and Black Littles in cross-race matches were more likely to identify a special adult in their life.

Youth mentorship has been shown to have significant positive effects on a range of outcomes for children, and race-congruence is believed to be an important determinant of this success. We contribute to the literature on race-congruence by showing there are potential benefits to



both same- and cross-race matching. Furthermore, when full race-matching is not feasible (as is the case with BBBS) organizations must choose how to allocate the scarce supply of eligible mentors to youth. We showed that certain minority groups benefit from race-matching along different dimensions. This heterogeneity in the same-race premium as well as identifying the scenarios when cross-race benefits outweigh same-race benefits are critical for understanding how to efficiently allocate minority mentors in the presence of supply constraints. Our results suggest that policy makers in areas with higher proportions of racial and ethnic minorities, should consider the additional benefits of policies that lessen these supply constraints for youth mentoring programs. For example, the State of Colorado offers tax credits equal to 50% of donations to BBBS.<sup>13,14</sup>

Although we identified for whom same-race mentoring is most impactful, more research is needed to understand the mechanisms behind these effects. Race-congruence seems to impact Little's self-perceptions more than academic performance or attitudes towards adults. This suggests that, in the context of BBBS, mentorship improves youth self-confidence but may not impact their academic skill or perceptions of authority. This is not unexpected as Bigs in community-based matches rarely spend time helping their Little study or complete homework. In addition, we focused on the first twelve months of mentoring. It may be the case that affecting the Little's academic ability or worldview takes more than one year, and further research is needed to estimate the causal impacts on long-term outcomes. Finally, we are not able to study the impact of same-race matching in mentoring relative to no mentoring whatsoever because our data consist only of successful matches. More work is needed to make credible claims about the level effects of race-congruence compared to non-mentored youth.

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<sup>13</sup>This policy recommendation relies on the assumption that the additional resources would increase the number of minority Bigs, either through matches lasting longer (i.e. from greater support) or from having more minority Bigs enter the program (i.e. more flexibility in training and potentially recruitment efforts).

<sup>14</sup><https://www.colorado.gov/pacific/sites/default/files/Income35.pdf>, Accessed April 6th, 2021.

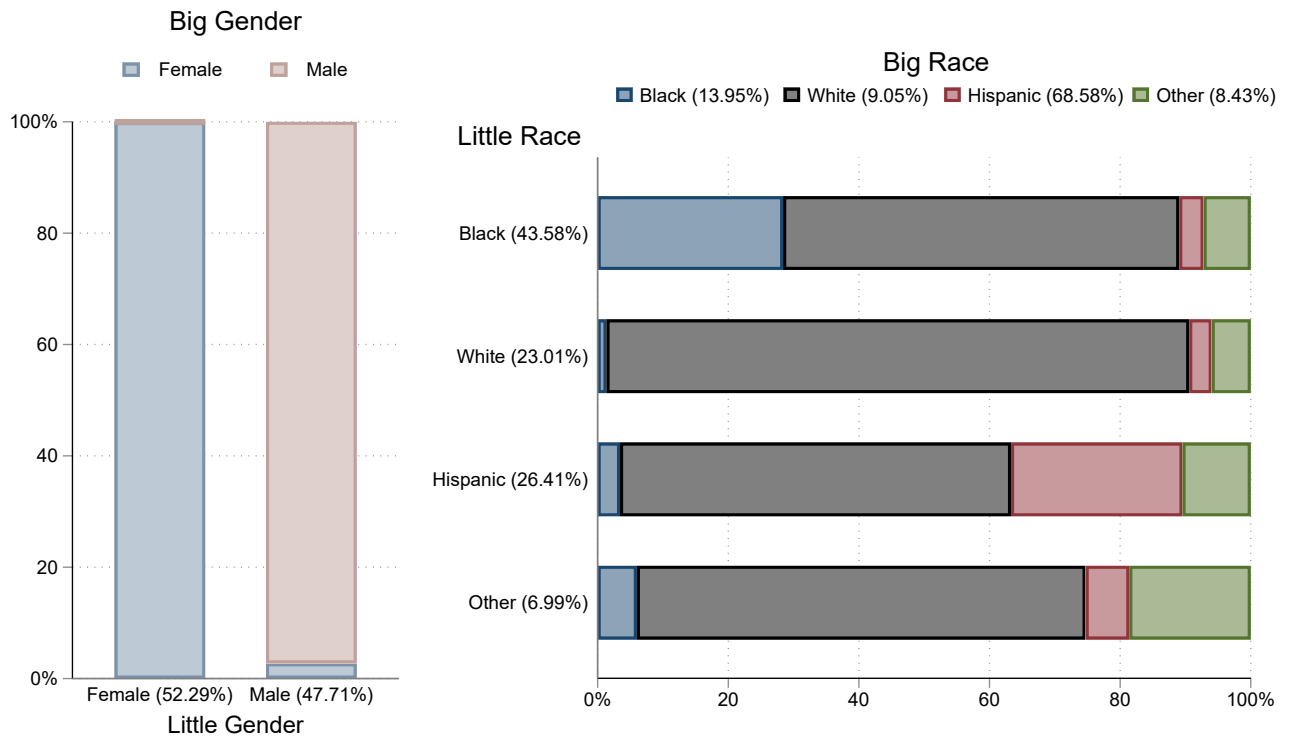
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## Tables and Figures

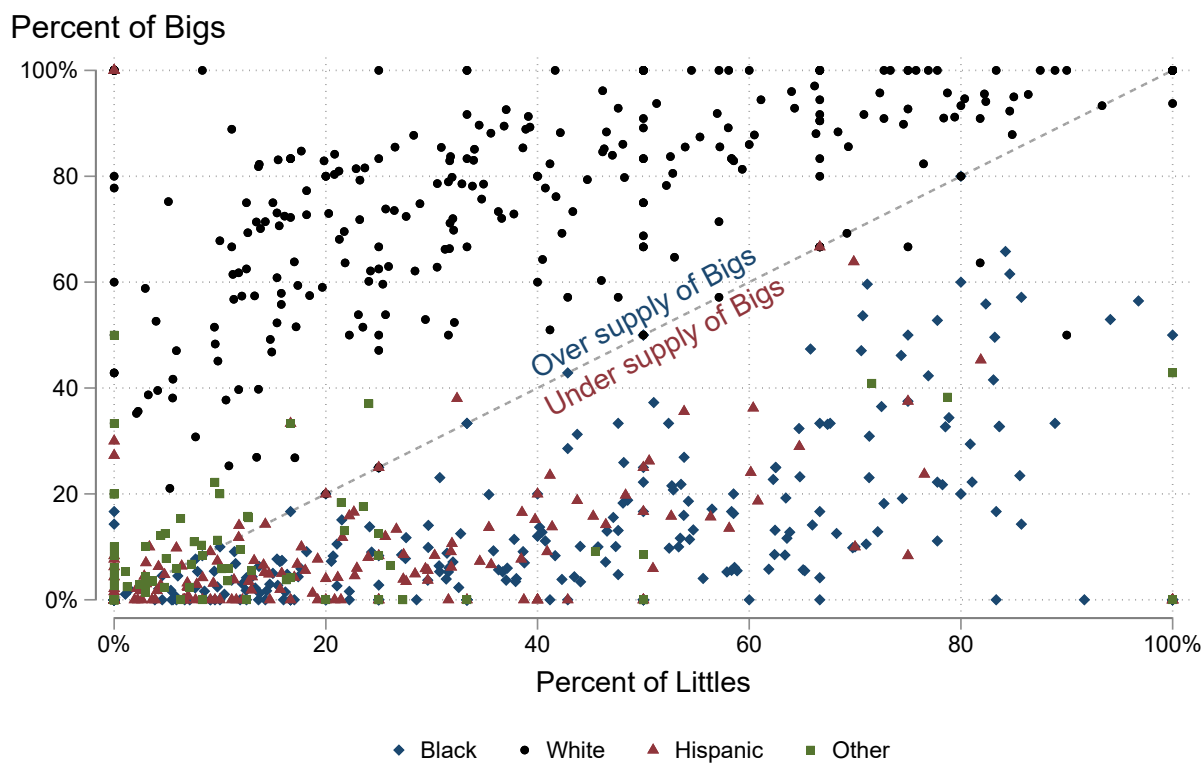
Figure 1: Percent of Matches by Big/Little Race and Gender



*Notes:* Left panel shows the percent of Littles by gender matched to female and male Bigs. Percent of full sample that are female or male Littles shown in parentheses. Right panel shows the percent of Littles by race matched to a Big of a certain race. Percent of the full sample of Littles that are of each race are shown in parentheses along the vertical axis.

Percent of the full sample of Bigs that are of each race are shown in parentheses in the legend. The Other category includes Asian, Pacific Islander, and American Indian. Within the Other-Other cell, race-congruence is defined using the associated subcategories. The height of each colored portion of the bar shows the proportion of Littles matched to a male or female Big, by the gender of the Little.

Figure 2: Variation in Racial Composition of Bigs and Littles by Agency



*Notes:* Each point represents the proportion of Bigs and Littles of a particular race within a local BBBS agency. The upper diagonal represents all of the agencies where the proportion of Bigs in a particular category is greater than the proportion of Littles in the same category, and vice versa. The Other category includes Asian, Pacific Islander and American Indian, but not necessarily the relative proportion of the subcategories.

Table 1: Same- vs Cross-Race Match Balance Table

	Same-Race			Cross-Race			Difference		
	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	T-stat	Mean/SD
<b>Youth Outcomes Survey</b>									
Social Acceptance	2.84	0.65	12,427	2.91	0.62	16,533	-0.07	-9.90	-0.08
School Attitudes	2.92	0.60	12,443	2.94	0.59	16,568	-0.01	-2.06	-0.02
Education Expectations	3.55	0.67	12,564	3.62	0.62	16,764	-0.07	-9.60	-0.08
Grades	3.70	0.80	12,414	3.72	0.77	16,510	-0.02	-2.22	-0.02
Risk Attitudes	3.85	0.26	12,507	3.85	0.27	16,692	-0.00	-0.33	-0.00
Parental Trust	3.57	0.58	12,545	3.61	0.55	16,718	-0.04	-6.22	-0.05
Truancy	2.09	0.82	12,527	2.09	0.85	16,668	-0.00	-0.31	-0.00
Special Adult (=1)	0.56	0.50	12,397	0.59	0.49	16,474	-0.03	-4.96	-0.04
<b>Little Characteristics</b>									
Male(=1)	0.47	0.50	12,653	0.48	0.50	16,882	-0.01	-1.28	-0.01
Age	11.25	1.83	12,649	11.15	1.83	16,870	0.10	4.67	0.04
Free-Reduced Lunch (=1)	0.74	0.44	12,653	0.81	0.39	16,882	-0.07	-14.34	-0.12
Single-Parent HH (=1)	0.67	0.47	12,653	0.70	0.46	16,882	-0.02	-4.39	-0.04
Two-Parent HH (=1)	0.21	0.41	12,653	0.20	0.40	16,882	0.01	2.45	0.02
<b>Big Characteristics</b>									
Male (=1)	0.46	0.50	12,653	0.47	0.50	16,882	-0.01	-1.15	-0.01
Age	37.89	12.08	12,652	36.49	11.15	16,881	1.41	10.34	0.09
Less than High School (=1)	0.01	0.09	12,653	0.01	0.07	16,882	0.00	3.17	0.03
High School Graduate (=1)	0.06	0.24	12,653	0.04	0.20	16,882	0.02	8.25	0.07
Some College (=1)	0.22	0.42	12,653	0.17	0.38	16,882	0.05	10.59	0.09
Associate Degree (=1)	0.07	0.25	12,653	0.05	0.21	16,882	0.02	6.53	0.05
Bachelor's Degree (=1)	0.43	0.50	12,653	0.51	0.50	16,882	-0.07	-11.94	-0.10
Advanced Degree (=1)	0.21	0.41	12,653	0.23	0.42	16,882	-0.02	-4.24	-0.04
<b>Match Characteristics</b>									
Match Length (mos)	34.87	19.79	12,653	34.98	19.83	16,882	-0.11	-0.48	-0.00

*Notes:* Means, standard deviations and sample sizes are calculated from the analytical sample of formed matches by same-race status. Same-race status is defined using the specific race recorded for the Big and Little. In the case of multi-racial individuals, the first listed race is used for matching. All outcomes shown are the baseline values. The last three columns are the difference in means across groups, the T-statistic of the difference and the standardized difference, respectively. The standardized difference, Mean/SD, is the difference in means divided by the standard deviation of the difference (see Imbens and Wooldridge (2009)).

Table 2: Same-Race Impacts on Little's Follow Up Outcomes at the Match Level

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
	School Experience			Education		Social Experience		
	Social Acceptance	School Ability	Truancy	Grades	Education Expectations	Risk Attitudes	Parental Trust	Special Adult
<b>Panel A: Average Same Race Effect</b>								
Same Race	-0.0088 (0.0116)	-0.0015 (0.0110)	-0.0128 (0.0154)	0.0145 (0.0151)	-0.0181 (0.0114)	0.0068 (0.0040)	-0.0125 (0.0102)	-0.0135* (0.0067)
<b>Panel B: Same Race Effect by Race of Little</b>								
Same Race × Black	-0.0055 (0.0107)	0.0345*** (0.0102)	-0.0238 (0.0150)	-0.0034 (0.0142)	0.0112 (0.0098)	0.0106** (0.0034)	0.0038 (0.0095)	-0.0271*** (0.0066)
Same Race × White	-0.0004 (0.0215)	-0.0143 (0.0196)	0.0264 (0.0266)	0.0243 (0.0266)	-0.0051 (0.0214)	-0.0075 (0.0070)	-0.0304 (0.0176)	-0.0061 (0.0110)
Same Race × Hispanic	-0.0218 (0.0148)	-0.0165 (0.0150)	-0.0406 (0.0217)	-0.0473* (0.0203)	-0.0178 (0.0154)	0.0153*** (0.0044)	-0.0219 (0.0140)	-0.0050 (0.0096)
Same Race × Other	-0.0190 (0.0353)	0.0375 (0.0370)	-0.1655*** (0.0487)	0.1183* (0.0485)	-0.0150 (0.0378)	0.0179 (0.0103)	0.0062 (0.0308)	-0.0142 (0.0230)
Baseline Mean of Cross-Race	2.9136	2.9359	2.0949	3.7190	3.6227	3.8543	3.6100	0.5915
N	28,604	28,633	28,893	28,273	29,114	28,864	28,951	28,574

Notes: \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ . Robust standard errors in parentheses. All regressions include controls for the Little's baseline outcome, gender, race, free/reduced lunch status, and single-parent home status, Big's gender and race, as well as fixed effects for the Little's age at follow up, Big's age and education at follow up, and calendar year. Panel B omits the controls for Big's race to avoid collinearity with the interaction terms and the include controls for Little's race. Baseline mean of cross-race is the mean of the outcome at baseline among the cross-race group.

Table 3: Same-Race Impacts on Little's Individual Course Grades

	(1) Math	(2) Reading	(3) Social Studies	(4) Science
Same Race $\times$ Black	-0.0087 (0.0192)	0.0036 (0.0183)	0.0009 (0.0188)	-0.0130 (0.0192)
Same Race $\times$ White	0.0283 (0.0355)	0.0007 (0.0352)	0.0203 (0.0351)	0.0406 (0.0352)
Same Race $\times$ Hispanic	-0.0173 (0.0269)	-0.0542* (0.0257)	-0.0713** (0.0260)	-0.0795** (0.0264)
Same Race $\times$ Other	0.1795** (0.0616)	0.0696 (0.0637)	0.0624 (0.0664)	0.1420* (0.0655)
Baseline Mean of Cross-Race	3.6380	3.7510	3.6648	3.8120
N	29,183	29,164	28,672	28,827

*Notes:* \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ . Robust standard errors in parentheses. All regressions include controls for the Little's baseline outcome, gender, race, free/reduced lunch status, and single-parent home status, Big's gender and race, as well as fixed effects for the Little's age at follow up, Big's age and education at follow up, and calendar year. Panel B omits the controls for Big's race to avoid collinearity with the interaction terms and the include controls for Little's race. Baseline mean of cross-race is the mean of the outcome at baseline among the cross-race group.



Table 4: Same-Race Impacts on Average Little Followup Outcomes at the Agency Level

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
	School Experience			Education		Social Experience		
	Social Acceptance	School Ability	Truancy	Grades	Education Expectations	Risk Attitudes	Parental Trust	Special Adult
<b>Panel A: Average Same Race Effect</b>								
Same Race	0.0078 (0.0640)	0.0502 (0.0825)	-0.0152 (0.0817)	0.2109* (0.0987)	0.0319 (0.0646)	0.0316 (0.0175)	0.1187 (0.0653)	0.0253 (0.0393)
<b>Panel B: Same Race Effect Within Race of Little</b>								
Same Race × Black	-0.0216 (0.0568)	0.0740 (0.0636)	-0.0050 (0.0834)	-0.0030 (0.0749)	0.0864 (0.0641)	0.0454* (0.0182)	0.0211 (0.0536)	-0.0279 (0.0399)
Same Race × White	0.0573 (0.1196)	0.0138 (0.1549)	0.0129 (0.1331)	0.4698** (0.1581)	-0.1116 (0.0946)	0.0335 (0.0317)	0.1600 (0.1071)	0.1059 (0.0747)
Same Race × Hispanic	0.0582 (0.0979)	0.1275 (0.1161)	-0.1641 (0.1363)	0.0393 (0.1471)	0.2314* (0.0929)	0.0396 (0.0312)	0.1101 (0.1018)	0.0399 (0.0585)
Same Race × Other	-0.1316 (0.2230)	0.2483 (0.2661)	0.0407 (0.2570)	0.3980 (0.2993)	0.4794 (0.2506)	0.1357* (0.0611)	0.2561 (0.2057)	-0.0872 (0.1240)
Baseline Mean of Outcome	2.8227	2.9119	2.0845	3.6496	3.5174	3.8568	3.5969	0.5655
Fraction of Same-Race Matches	0.5069	0.5066	0.5066	0.5020	0.5046	0.5046	0.5043	0.5055
N	1740	1743	1745	1735	1746	1742	1745	1739

Notes: \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ . Robust standard errors in parentheses. All regressions include controls for the average baseline score of all Littles at the agency; the within-agency fraction of Littles that are: male, in each race category, in each age year bin, on free/reduced lunch, and live in a single-parent home; the within-agency fraction of Big's that are: male, in each race category, in each age year bin, in each educational attainment bin; and calendar year fixed effects. Panel B omits the controls for the fraction of Bigs in each race bin to avoid collinearity with the interaction terms and the fraction of Littles in each race bin. Baseline mean is the mean of the outcome at baseline. Fraction of same-race matches is the average proportion of matches within an agency that are same-race.

Table A1: Balance Between Matches With and Without Follow-up Surveys

	Has Follow-up			No Follow-up			Difference		
	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	T-stat	Mean/SD
<b>Youth Outcomes Survey</b>									
Social Acceptance	2.88	0.63	28,959	2.89	0.65	43,955	-0.01	-1.71	-0.01
School Attitudes	2.93	0.59	29,010	2.90	0.60	43,976	0.03	5.60	0.03
Education Expectations	3.59	0.64	29,327	3.55	0.67	44,488	0.04	7.40	0.04
Grades	3.71	0.78	28,923	3.65	0.80	43,914	0.06	9.86	0.05
Risk Attitudes	3.85	0.26	29,198	3.83	0.30	44,228	0.02	10.83	0.06
Parental Trust	3.59	0.57	29,262	3.55	0.61	44,341	0.04	9.84	0.05
Truancy	2.09	0.84	29,194	2.15	0.85	44,155	-0.05	-8.34	-0.04
Special Adult (=1)	0.58	0.49	28,870	0.58	0.49	43,773	0.00	0.96	0.01
<b>Little Characteristics</b>									
Male(=1)	0.48	0.50	30,466	0.45	0.50	44,993	0.03	6.69	0.04
Age	11.20	1.83	29,518	11.46	1.95	44,781	-0.26	-18.17	-0.10
Free-Reduced Lunch (=1)	0.78	0.42	30,466	0.78	0.42	44,993	0.00	0.23	0.00
Single-Parent HH (=1)	0.69	0.46	30,466	0.69	0.46	44,993	-0.01	-1.38	-0.01
Two-Parent HH (=1)	0.20	0.40	30,466	0.19	0.39	44,993	0.01	3.47	0.02
<b>Big Characteristics</b>									
Male(=1)	0.47	0.50	30,466	0.44	0.50	44,993	0.03	7.42	0.04
Age	37.09	11.58	29,532	36.34	11.60	44,828	0.75	8.64	0.05
Less than High School (=1)	0.01	0.08	30,466	0.01	0.09	44,993	-0.00	-2.25	-0.01
High School Graduate (=1)	0.05	0.22	30,466	0.07	0.25	44,993	-0.02	-9.49	-0.05
Some College (=1)	0.19	0.40	30,466	0.23	0.42	44,993	-0.04	-13.42	-0.07
Associate Degree (=1)	0.06	0.23	30,466	0.06	0.24	44,993	-0.01	-2.85	-0.01
Bachelor's Degree (=1)	0.48	0.50	30,466	0.44	0.50	44,993	0.04	10.78	0.06
Advanced Degree (=1)	0.22	0.41	30,466	0.20	0.40	44,993	0.02	8.08	0.04
<b>Match Characteristics</b>									
Match Length (mos)	35.01	19.91	30,466	15.65	14.99	44,993	19.36	152.15	0.80

*Notes:* Means, standard deviations and sample sizes are calculated from the sample of formed matches by follow-up status. All outcomes shown are the baseline values. The last three columns are the difference in means across groups, the T-statistic of the difference and the standardized difference, respectively. The standardized difference, Mean/SD, is the difference in means divided by the standard deviation of the difference (see Imbens and Wooldridge (2009)).