

CALIBER

EVALUATION OF CASA REPRESENTATION

Research Summary

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Approximately 70,000 Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) volunteer to represent the best interests of children who are involved with the child welfare system. Despite the CASA program's potential for great influence, research on CASA volunteers – their characteristics and activities – is limited. Quality research on the well-being of children represented by CASA volunteers is even more scarce. The current study combines data collected through the National CASA Association's management information system with national data on the well-being of children in the child welfare system. It provides a rare glimpse into the characteristics of CASA volunteers and their training and activities. The study also compares the services received by children with and without a CASA and describes how often CASA volunteers' recommendations are followed by the court. Finally, the study compares the well-being of children in the child welfare system with and without a CASA volunteer.

The study highlights a number of strengths in the characteristics and activities of CASA volunteers. These volunteers are well-educated and likely to be employed; their recommendations to the court are very often accepted; children assigned a CASA receive more services, as do their parents; and CASA volunteers spend a large amount of their time in direct contact with the children they represent. At the same time, the study found some challenges, including a tendency for CASA volunteers who are employed full-time (the majority of CASA volunteers) to spend less time on their cases, and the possibility of a mismatch between the services children and parents receive and the needs identified by their caseworkers.

A key strength of this study was its comparison of well-being of children in the child welfare system who had and had not been assigned a CASA. The findings of this study suggest that children who were assigned a CASA volunteer had more severe cases and a more substantial history of prior contact with the child welfare system. These dramatic differences in which children were assigned a CASA volunteer made it difficult to identify the impact of having a CASA volunteer on child well-being and case outcomes. Those who were assigned a CASA volunteer would be expected to look worse simply by virtue of their situations. After controlling for some of these risk factors, this study revealed few differences in the well-being of children who were and were not assigned a CASA volunteer but some large differences in their case outcomes. Children assigned a CASA volunteer were more likely to be placed out of home and, for some, less likely to be reunified with their families or placed in kinship care. These findings should be interpreted with caution, given the difficulty of addressing the vast differences in risk levels and prior experiences of these two groups. Still, the findings emphasize the high levels of risk encountered by children who are assigned a CASA volunteer, as well as the importance of carefully controlled studies examining the impact of having a CASA volunteer on children's overall well-being.

INTRODUCTION

Each year child welfare agencies investigate between 2.5 and 3 million allegations of child maltreatment, of which cases will be substantiated for one third of children. Working with these children are 70,000 Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA volunteers) who help children as they progress through the child welfare system and represent their best interests in court.

The current study represents an exciting opportunity to examine the short and longer-term impacts of CASA volunteers on children and families in contact with the child welfare system and to expand knowledge of CASA programs and services. With the support of the Packard Foundation, the National CASA Association (NCASAA) and Caliber Associates combined data collected through NCASAA's management information system (COMET) with data collected through the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-being (NSCAW), a federally sponsored national survey of children and their families

This study seeks to answer a number of questions about CASA volunteers and the children they serve:

- Who are the CASA volunteers, how much training do they receive, and what activities are they engaged in?
- How do the services CASA children (and their parents) receive compare to children not assigned a CASA volunteer

and to what extent are CASA volunteers' recommendations for the children accepted by the courts?

- How do children assigned a CASA volunteer differ from children not assigned one in their initial levels of risk, their well-being, and their case outcomes?

DATA

The data used to answer these research questions come from the COMET and NSCAW data sets.

Through NSCAW, data are being collected on a cohort of approximately 5,500 children who came in contact with the child welfare system between October 1999 and the end of 2000. Children in the NSCAW sample represent 100 sites across the country. Data were gathered on child and caregiver characteristics, developmental issues, risk factors, and services received.

NSCAW data collection took place in several waves: within a few weeks of a child protective services (CPS) investigation (wave 1), at 12 months following the investigation (wave 2), and at 18 months following the investigation (wave 3). A final wave of data collection will take place at 36 months following the investigation.

The final report for this study is based on analyses of data collected during the first 3 data collection periods. The sample was limited to 2,831 children who participated in all three waves of the study and whose

caseworkers supplied information on whether they were assigned a CASA volunteer between waves 1 and 2 or between waves 2 and 3. Since caseworker data on the presence of a CASA volunteer were only collected starting at wave 2, children whose cases had been closed as of wave 2 (which occurred 6 or 12 months following the close of the investigation) had to be dropped from the sample.

Through COMET, CASA programs provided both program-level and case-level data, including demographic characteristics of CASA volunteers, training and experience, specific activities and services provided to the child, and court events. The COMET database was finalized in November 2003 and includes data on cases from 25 CASA programs (N=3,774). These cases represent those children who were assigned a CASA volunteer between October 1999 and December 2000, the same timeframe being used for the NSCAW sample.

A portion of the 25 CASA programs submitting COMET data are also NSCAW sites. In the sites in which there was overlap, COMET data were linked with NSCAW data using unique child identifiers. Because there were very few matches, findings presented here are based on separate analyses of COMET and NSCAW data sets.

FINDINGS

Who are the CASA volunteers, how much training do they receive, and where do they spend their time?

Consistent with the findings of previous studies, CASA volunteers in this COMET sample tended to be female, Caucasian, college educated, and employed. Ninety-one percent of CASA volunteers were female, eighty-three percent were Caucasian, nearly two-thirds were employed at least part-time, and over 80% had at least some college education.

Among those CASA volunteers who reported receiving training, approximately forty-four hours of training had been received. This is consistent with the NCASAA training standards that recommend thirty hours of pre-service training and twelve hours of in-service training per year.

Also consistent with previous studies, volunteers in this sample spent time engaged in a variety of activities. For instance, CASA volunteers commonly interviewed the families and children, monitored the case to ensure that court orders were being carried out, and made sure that the child was receiving appropriate services. The volunteers spent the largest proportion of their time spent in contact with the child. Comparisons of the amount of time spent on cases by volunteer characteristics (sex, race/ethnicity, education) yielded one consistent finding. Compared to volunteers

who did not work full-time, volunteers who were employed full-time spent significantly less time engaged in a number of activities, including contact with the child and parents. Given that this and other studies have found that a majority of volunteers work full-time, the amount of time volunteers can devote to cases may be an important topic to discuss before making case assignments.

Another consideration in the assignment of volunteers to cases may be the characteristics of the case. This study found that the number of prior placements experienced by the child is positively related to the amount of time CASA volunteers spend per case per month. Each additional placement is associated with slightly more than forty-five additional minutes spent on the case per month.

CASA volunteers in this sample spent significantly less time on the cases of African American children than children of other races, more than one hour less per month. CASA volunteers also spent less time on average per month the longer their cases were open. It was not the case, however, that African American children's cases were open longer than the cases of other children. The reason volunteers spent less time on the cases of African American children is unclear and warrants further investigation. Factors future studies should consider include the characteristics of African American children's cases and the characteristics of the volunteers assigned to those cases (e.g., are those volunteers more

likely to work full-time). More rigorous reporting of the actual number of hours spent per month would also be important to future studies.

How do children with and without a CASA volunteer compare on service receipt, and to what extent are CASA volunteers' recommendations accepted by the court?

As previous studies have found, children with CASA volunteers received significantly more services than children without volunteers. On average, parents of children with a CASA volunteer also received a significantly greater number of services than parents of children without a CASA volunteer. There was, however, no significant difference between children with and without a volunteer in the percent of parents' or children's needs met.

This apparent discrepancy between services received and services needed may be due to the fact that the determination of whether or not a parent or child had a need for a service was made by the caseworker. It was on the basis of this caseworker report that the percent of service needs met was calculated. Given that parents and children with CASA volunteers received more services, it may be that volunteers identified additional needs and advocated for services that were not identified by caseworkers as needed. Alternatively, these findings might suggest that services are at times provided based on factors other than the needs of the child (e.g., availability).

Overall, CASA volunteers in this sample were highly effective in making recommendations to the court. In more than four out of five cases, all or almost all of volunteers' recommendations were accepted. African American and male volunteers were most likely to have all of their recommendations accepted.

How do children with and without a CASA volunteer compare on risk factors, case outcomes, and overall well-being?

One of the major shortcomings of studies to date is a lack of information on the characteristics of children who receive and do not receive CASA volunteers. Moreover, studies have failed to control for any potential differences in these two groups, which could be substantial if CASA volunteer assignments are made based on the children's current and prior circumstances.

Indeed, this study found major differences in the risk factors of children with and without a CASA volunteer. Children with a CASA volunteer were significantly more likely to be rated by a caseworker as having experienced a severe level of harm and as being at severe risk of harm. Children with a CASA volunteer also had a significantly higher number of risk factors and were more likely to have previous involvement with the child welfare system. Compared to children without a volunteer, children with a CASA volunteer were more likely to have a prior report of maltreatment, a prior investigation,

a prior incident of maltreatment, and to have previously received child welfare services.

These findings suggest that children who were assigned a CASA volunteer had far more risk factors and were in more dangerous situations, both previously and at the time of the report that brought them into this sample, than children who were not assigned a CASA volunteer. This is an essential point to consider when comparing children with and without a CASA volunteer on case outcomes and measures of well-being.

Comparisons on case outcomes and measures of child well-being revealed few differences between children who had and did not have a CASA volunteer once initial risk factors were controlled. Comparisons were made in children's cognitive and academic skills, prosocial behavior, relationships with adults, future expectations, and children's behavioral and emotional problems, with efforts to control for initial differences in risk factors. However, in some cases children with a CASA volunteer looked worse: they were more likely to be placed in out of home care and, for some, less likely to be reunified or in kin care than children who did not have a CASA volunteer. These differences were dramatic in size.

In interpreting these findings, it is important to consider the difficulty inherent in isolating the effect of CASA volunteers on the children they serve. The issue is one referred to as "selection," where the variable

of interest—here, whether children have a CASA volunteer or not—is dependent upon factors that can influence the outcome of interest (e.g., risk experienced by the child). In this study children who were assigned a CASA volunteer were typically involved in more serious cases of maltreatment and faced more risky circumstances at the time the report was made that brought them into this sample. Though extensive efforts were made to address these initial differences, it is nearly impossible to ensure they have been ruled out entirely. Indeed, the sheer size of the differences strongly suggests that selection is still a factor in these analyses.

IMPLICATIONS

Despite the inability to determine cause and effect in these analyses, these findings have important implications for the CASA program. Children participating in this program are at high risk; they have more severe cases of abuse and neglect and more extensive child welfare histories than children without CASA volunteers. As a result, volunteers who work with these children will need to be aware of the precariousness of their family circumstances and their higher levels of risk for a variety of negative developmental outcomes. The services needed by the children and families are likely to be more extensive than what would be needed for a less at-risk group.

These findings also highlight the importance of high-quality, controlled studies comparing children with and without CASA volunteers. Despite the extent of the initial

differences found between these two groups, prior studies have typically made little effort to address them. Yet, any analysis that fails to address the issue of selection is likely to understate any positive effects that having a CASA volunteer may have on a child; the selection is such that children with a CASA volunteer appear more at risk on many outcomes than children without a CASA volunteer. Even with a wide range of controls for a variety of risk factors, it is not clear that the current study was able to eliminate this issue.

Given the magnitude of this challenge, it is important that future research more clearly delineate the factors involved in determining whether children receive a CASA volunteer or not. This includes determining factors that influence which communities have a CASA program, how many volunteers are available in a community's CASA program, and who is and is not assigned a CASA volunteer.

This information could be collected in a number of ways such as through surveys of CASA program staff, supervisors, volunteers, judges; qualitative methods, including interviews or focus groups with judges, caseworkers, CASA program staff, and volunteers; or case record abstraction. A study that utilized a number of these methods would provide the richest description of the factors affecting CASA volunteer assignment. The information could then be used in subsequent studies to control for the significant and far-reaching

differences between children who do and do not receive CASA volunteers.

In addition to examining more closely the factors that influence which children are assigned a CASA volunteer, the current study suggests that a study in which children are randomly assigned a CASA volunteer may be essential to accurately testing the effectiveness of the CASA program. Since such a study would require denying some children CASA services, it is important to consider how the study could be designed to have the least impact on who receives services. Communities with a shortage of CASA volunteers and a waiting list for CASA services might be the optimal setting for such a study. By eliminating the selection issue, such a study would provide the most rigorous test of the effect of having a CASA volunteer on child and case outcomes.

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