Title Registration for a Systematic Review:

Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) as an Intervention for Improving Key Child Welfare Case Outcomes: A Systematic Review

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- Crime and Justice
- Education
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Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) is a national network of nonprofit organizations that train and support community volunteers to serve as child advocates representing the best interests of foster children in the U.S. dependency court system (Piraino, 1999). CASA volunteers provide case recommendations independent of judges, attorneys, social workers, therapists, family members, or others who might be involved with a child’s case. CASA volunteers typically serve one child at a time, and they often represent that child for the life of the case (Piraino, 1999). Since 1977 when CASA was established in a single jurisdiction in Seattle, Washington, it has expanded to a network that includes 75,000 volunteers in 49 states, serving an estimated 240,000 children in 2010, according to the National CASA Association (2011).

CASA is highly regarded among child welfare professionals and in the judiciary (Berliner & Fitzgerald, 1998; Collins-Camargo et al., 2005; Leung, 1996; Litzelfelner, 2008; ORS, 2005; Weisz & Thai, 2003). In one study (Collins-Camargo et al., 2005), the vast majority (88 percent) of judicial officers described CASA as helpful in securing additional services for children, and well over three-quarters indicated that they felt CASA volunteers have a positive impact on children’s outcomes. Another survey of over 500 judges showed that the majority of judges use the input that CASA provides in their decision-making, and find that CASA is useful and effective in monitoring cases and considering the best interests of children (ORS, 2005). This finding is echoed in other studies utilizing survey research, with judges and other child welfare professionals reporting overall high satisfaction and regard for the performance of CASA volunteers in advocating for children (Berliner & Fitzgerald, 1998; Leung, 1996; Litzelfelner, 2008; Weisz & Thai, 2003).

Looking beyond the positive regard that CASA enjoys among professionals, there is the issue of outcome effectiveness. Do children who are represented by CASA have better case and permanency outcomes than those who are not? The popularity of CASA among judicial professionals and the child welfare community is not alone sufficient to endorse CASA as an effective practice that improves child outcomes. Since the ultimate goal of the child welfare legal system is to ensure safety, permanency, and well-being, it is reasonable to ask whether the benefits of CASA intervention extend to producing better outcomes, as is claimed by the National CASA organization (NCASAA, 2001).

On their website, National CASA asserts that there is “evidence of effectiveness” related to CASA as an intervention for improving child outcomes. Specifically, National CASA asserts
that children with a CASA volunteer have the following improved “key outcomes” compared to children who do not have a CASA volunteer: 1) more likely to be adopted; (2) less likely to re-enter foster care after leaving; (3) less likely to be in long-term foster care; (4) more likely to have a permanency plan; (5) receive more services; (6) spend less time in foster care; and (7) have fewer placements (“Evidence of Effectiveness,” n.d.). National CASA (Waxman et al., 2009) also asserts improvements in child-level well being outcomes (i.e. better school performance and more protective factors).

The effectiveness of CASA as an intervention for improving child welfare case outcomes is an important question that has implications for policy and practice. In any environment, CASA agencies struggle to maintain adequate funding, as evidenced by the limited capacity that often results in wait-lists to receive services. In the current economic climate, CASA agencies are fighting all the harder for limited funding. At the same time, funders are increasingly calling for demonstration that programs are effective. Currently, there is no clear evidentiary basis to indicate whether CASA is an effective intervention program.

The objective of this review is to clarify and synthesize the existing research on CASA’s effectiveness as an intervention.

**OBJECTIVES**

The objective of this review is to determine whether Court-Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) is an effective intervention for improving key permanency and case-level outcomes for foster children in the U.S. The review will examine studies that compare the outcomes of foster children who receive CASA services with the outcomes of foster children who are served by traditional child welfare services without a CASA advocate.

The specific questions that will be answered in pursuit of this objective are listed below under their domains of interest:

1. **Permanency Outcomes**
   1.1. Are children who have a CASA volunteer less likely to be in long-term foster care than children without a CASA volunteer?
   1.2. Are children who have a CASA volunteer more likely to attain a permanency outcome of adoption than children without a CASA volunteer?

2. **Case Duration**
   2.1. Do children with a CASA spend less time in the dependency court system than children without a CASA?
   2.2. Do children with a CASA spend less time placed out-of-home than children without a CASA?

3. **Placement Stability**
3.1. Do children with a CASA volunteer who are placed out-of-home have fewer placements while in care than children without CASA?

4. Recidivism

4.1. Are children with a CASA less likely to be re-referred to child welfare, or to re-enter foster care after leaving, than children without a CASA?

EXISTING REVIEWS

To our knowledge, only one prior review of CASA effectiveness has been conducted. Youngclarke, Ramos & Granger-Merkle (2004) published a narrative review examining the impact of CASA. In this review, the authors attempted to systematically locate all published and unpublished studies that had comparatively examined the effectiveness of CASA programs in the U.S. since 1977. Their search process resulted in 20 included studies, and their review concluded that there were tentative indications that children with CASA representation did as well or better than children without CASA on a number of process and outcome variables. While there are certainly some strengths of this prior review, notably the systematic search process that yielded numerous unpublished studies, the review is almost 10 years old and is not without shortcomings.

First, while the authors of the Youngclarke et al. review used explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria to examine all published and unpublished comparison studies on CASA up to the date of its publication in 2004, several comparative studies of CASA outcomes have been conducted since then, including one study with a large sample size that examines relevant outcomes of interest (Caliber, 2004). In addition, the Youngclarke review included two studies that do not appear to meet the review’s inclusion criteria. One study (Duquette and Ramsay, 1986) did not separate the CASA group from the non-CASA (attorney) group in the analysis, and one study (Weisz & Thai, 2003) had no objective measures of child outcomes (i.e., only survey responses). Further, the Youngclarke et al. review is narrative, with no meta-analytic effect size computation. The included studies were synthesized using a “vote-counting” approach, and there were numerous instances of findings being “counted” as evidence even where the original study showed no statistical differences between groups.

Finally, the authors’ conclusions seem to overstate the evidence in some instances. For example, the authors conclude that reduced recidivism/re-entry is “the most profound finding” of their review. However, only three studies were evaluated on this outcome variable (Abramson, 1991; Poertner & Press, 1990; Powell & Speshock, 1996). Two of these found (Abramson, 1991; Poertner & Press, 1990) no difference between the CASA and non-CASA groups, yet all were “vote-counted” as evidence of effectiveness and the authors concluded that the effect of CASA on recidivism was “consistent” and “large”. Thus, although a prior “systematic review” has been conducted, and though the authors caution that the findings are not conclusive, their assertions of CASA effectiveness in improving outcomes does not seem to be fully supported by the evidence included in the review.
In addition to the Youngclarke et al. (2004) review, two of the present authors conducted a recently published initial review and analysis of the literature (Lawson & Berrick, 2013). This critical analysis found that assertions about the effectiveness of CASA as an intervention are very tentative at best, with equivocal and even contradictory findings prominent across existing studies. The review also found that the methodological quality of the literature base warrants caution in asserting strong conclusions, as selection bias, small sample sizes, and questionable design and analysis appear to be widespread.

The proposed review aims to update and improve upon the prior published work on CASA effectiveness by using systematic review methods and meta-analytic techniques to provide a systematic, transparent, and less biased estimate of the effects of CASA on key child welfare outcomes to inform practice and policy.

**INTERVENTION**

The intervention to be examined in this review is CASA. As stated above, CASA is a US national network of non-profit organizations which train and support community volunteers to serve as child advocates representing the best interests of foster children in the U.S. dependency court system. The intervention occurs when a family/dependency court judge elects to appoint a Court-Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) to a child in state custody through the child welfare system.

CASAs are lay volunteers from the community who receive special training in mentorship, advocacy, foster care, and the child welfare system prior to being eligible to receive cases. CASAs typically only serve one child at a time, resulting in a normal “caseload” of one, though sometimes CASAs may have more than one case, or serve multiple children in a sibling group. Some of the specific activities of CASAs that are theorized to promote positive outcomes are: fact-finding about the case, attendance and reporting at court hearings, and case monitoring through regular contact with the child and the caseworker (Piraino, 1999).

The appointment of a CASA can occur at any point during the case. CASAs normally remain as the child’s advocate until the case is dismissed from the court system. There is no standardization of when the intervention is administered (because CASAs can be assigned at any time), nor how long it lasts (because cases are widely variable in duration, ranging from days to years).

The comparison condition is foster care without a CASA volunteer. “Usual care” in the child welfare system is for children to have both a child welfare agency social worker and a guardian-ad-litem (GAL), who is usually a court-appointed attorney. Children in the intervention condition have both of these plus a CASA volunteer.
Finally, it should be noted that there are a few studies (e.g., Abramson, 1991; Wert, 1886) that examine interventions that clearly employ the CASA model of lay volunteer representation, but which are not called CASA (or were not called yet CASA at the time of the study). The interventions described in these studies are considered completely equivalent to CASA, both by National CASA and by prior reviewers.

**POPULATION**

The study population eligible for inclusion is children (under 18) in the United States who are in the custody of child welfare agencies through the family court system. Though CASAs are occasionally appointed to other populations (such as youth in juvenile detention), studies examining effects on non-child welfare populations will be excluded from the review.

**OUTCOMES**

The primary outcome variables are key child welfare indicators used at the state and federal levels to measure the performance of child welfare agencies. They pertain directly to the experience of children in the child welfare system, and therefore are important both to the study population and to those who make intervention decisions (e.g., judges, funders, child welfare agencies). The specific outcomes of interest for this study are:

- Permanency outcome
- Case duration
- Placement stability
- Recidivism (i.e., re-referral to child welfare or re-entry to foster care after leaving)

**STUDY DESIGNS**

This review will include all studies that use an experimental or quasi-experimental study design to examine the effectiveness of CASA (or CASA-equivalent programs) with respect to the outcome variables of interest.

CASA cases often have more severe maltreatment allegations, more extensive prior child welfare involvement, ongoing case difficulties such as placement breakdowns, or more family risk factors present (Abramson, 1991; Caliber, 2004; Litzelfelner, 2000; Poertner & Press, 1990; Siegel et al., 2001; Waxman, 2009).

These demonstrated differences in case complexity between treatment and control conditions indicate a strong likelihood of selection bias resulting in non-equivalent groups in many studies. Thus, to be eligible for inclusion, baseline equivalence of the analytic sample
must be demonstrated, or statistical controls must be used in the analysis to control for any between-group differences at baseline.

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ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

• **Content:**

Jennifer Lawson and Jill Duerr Berrick both have extensive content expertise on CASA. Ms. Lawson regularly worked in collaboration with CASA during her practice career in the child welfare system. Dr. Berrick leads a program in the UC Berkeley School of Social Welfare to facilitate MSW students becoming CASA volunteers. Both researchers have collaborated with California CASA on prior research efforts and consulted on outcome-tracking enhancements to the administrative database used by California CASA agencies.

• **Systematic review methods:**

Brandy Maynard received her initial formal training in Campbell systematic review methods at a Campbell Collaboration training held in 2008 and has received ongoing training over the past two years at the Campbell Collaboration Colloquia. In addition, Dr. Maynard has completed a Campbell systematic review on the effectiveness of indicated truancy interventions and is currently in process of two additional Campbell reviews with the Education Coordinating Group. In addition, Dr. Maynard has conducted other systematic reviews that have been published or are currently under review in peer-reviewed journals. Ms. Lawson received methods training at the 2013 Campbell Colloquium.

• **Statistical analysis:**

Dr. Maynard has previously completed a Campbell systematic review using meta-analytic techniques and has another meta-analysis currently under review in a peer-reviewed journal. Dr. Maynard received formal meta-analytic training through the Campbell Collaboration training and colloquia and as part of her doctoral training. Ms. Lawson received methods training at the 2013 Campbell Colloquium. All three researchers are trained in statistical analysis.
**Information retrieval:**

All three researchers are knowledgeable in information retrieval, will consult with a social sciences librarian at U. C. Berkeley, and also look forward to feedback during the protocol review process from the information retrieval specialist with Campbell.

**POTENTIAL CONFLICTS OF INTEREST**

Jill Duerr Berrick and Jennifer Lawson were previously engaged in planning a primary research study on CASA in California. The project (active from January 2011 to December 2012) was funded by the Walter S. Johnson foundation and was intended to be a randomized controlled trial to study the effect of CASA on case outcomes. The study was not executed because the researchers were unable to obtain approval from judges and agencies in enough jurisdictions to gather a sufficient sample size for the study.

With approval from their funding source, Dr. Berrick and Ms. Lawson subsequently used a portion of the study funding to consult with California CASA on changes to the CASA administrative database to implement changes that would allow for better tracking of individual child outcomes in multiple domains over time for children referred for CASA services.

Ms. Lawson and Dr. Berrick have published a (non-systematic) critical analysis of the CASA literature.

**FUNDING**

The current review is not funded. There are no planned funding applications.

**PRELIMINARY TIMEFRAME**

Note, if the protocol or review are not submitted within 6 months and 18 months of title registration, respectively, the review area is opened up for other authors.

- Date you plan to submit a draft protocol: **15 January, 2014**
- Date you plan to submit a draft review: **15 January, 2015**

**DECLARATION**

**Authors’ responsibilities**

By completing this form, you accept responsibility for preparing, maintaining, and updating the review in accordance with Campbell Collaboration policy. The Coordinating Group will provide as much support as possible to assist with the preparation of the review.
A draft protocol must be submitted to the Coordinating Group within one year of title acceptance. If drafts are not submitted before the agreed deadlines, or if we are unable to contact you for an extended period, the Coordinating Group has the right to de-register the title or transfer the title to alternative authors. The Coordinating Group also has the right to de-register or transfer the title if it does not meet the standards of the Coordinating Group and/or the Campbell Collaboration.

You accept responsibility for maintaining the review in light of new evidence, comments and criticisms, and other developments, and updating the review every five years, when substantial new evidence becomes available, or, if requested, transferring responsibility for maintaining the review to others as agreed with the Coordinating Group.

**Publication in the Campbell Library**

The support of the Coordinating Group in preparing your review is conditional upon your agreement to publish the protocol, finished review and subsequent updates in the Campbell Library. Concurrent publication in other journals is encouraged. However, a Campbell systematic review should be published either before, or at the same time as, its publication in other journals. Authors should not publish Campbell reviews in journals before they are ready for publication in the Campbell Library. Authors should remember to include a statement mentioning the published Campbell review in any non-Campbell publications of the review.

**I understand the commitment required to undertake a Campbell review, and agree to publish in the Campbell Library. Signed on behalf of the authors:**

**Form completed by: Jennifer Lawson**

**Date: 14 July, 2013**
References


