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Effectiveness of citizen review panels

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Abstract

In 1996, the U.S. congress passed legislation mandating citizen review panels (CRP) for child protective services in all states. These panels are composed of citizen-volunteers who are charged with evaluating state child welfare systems and making suggestions for improvement. Although millions of federal dollars are being used to fund these panels, no research has been conducted as to what aspects of the review process are viewed by participants in CRPs as being most effective in influencing policy. This study reports the findings of a survey relative to variables that contributed to the effectiveness of citizen review panels in a 10-state area in the Midwest and South. The findings suggest that the perceived effectiveness of panels in influencing policy is related to increased communication, an awareness of roles and limitations, legitimate collaboration, and realistic goals. Factors that impede effectiveness include lack of trust, time constraints, unclear roles, and weak communication.

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1. Introduction

Child welfare advocates have long been interested in prompting public bureaucracies to become more responsive to citizen participation in decision-making processes related to social services and income support systems for needy children (Schorr, 2000; Waldfogel, 1998). The interest in promoting greater citizen involvement in programs and policies related to the well being of children is based on policy goals related to pragmatic and community-focused objectives. It is pragmatic because it provides a mechanism for helping to ensure that state agencies are accountable to families and communities. Moreover, the inclusion of citizens in decision-making is compatible with contemporary community-

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focused initiatives designed to shift more responsibility and ownership of social problems to the local level in the process of devolution (Carlton-LaNey, Edwards, & Reid, 1999; Gilbert, 1998, 2002; Jones & Zlotnik, 1998; Tracy, 2001). Activities involved in both objectives contribute to the development of civil society through enhanced dialogue between citizen and public entities (Portes, 1998; Walzer, 1995).

Under the process of government program devolution, the pragmatic and community-focused objectives that encourage active citizen participation in associations has led to the development of what Putnam (1993) refers to as “secondary voluntary associations”, such as the citizen review panels. This type of voluntary activity is viewed by Putnam as a marker of civil society that contributes to building social capital in communities. In this context, therefore, CPRs may be said to be instruments of policy that contribute to social capital and civil society since they are characterized by volunteers actively engaged as participants in social networks that are intended to provide community input on public policy. Accepting the notion that CPRs do, in fact, perform the role of “secondary voluntary associations”, there is, nonetheless, little empirical evidence on what best enables CPRs to be effective policy instruments. This study is designed to address this problem through an initial examination of variables that appear to promote and deter the effectiveness of CPRs in selected states.

2. Background

One response to demands for increasing citizen participation that began in the 1970s was the establishment of state-based citizen review boards to review the status of children in foster homes. These grew dramatically in the early 1980s as a result of federal legislation (P.L. 96-272) that required reviews of each child in foster care every 6 months.

The foster care review boards have performed as effective lobbyists for foster children, as well as for state agencies, increasing community awareness and responsibility for child abuse and neglect cases. In addition, the review boards have engaged citizens in helping the child welfare system to collect aggregate data on children in out of home care. Moreover, because the volunteers who serve on foster care review boards are appointed by the judicial system, they are perceived as having legitimacy in terms of the court’s view of the disposition of the child (Petr, 1998).

The success of citizen review boards for foster care contributed to interest in expanding the approach to child protection (Cot, Bruner, & Scott, 1998; Waldfogel, 1998). Consequently, a contemporary development that holds great promise in this area is citizen involvement in the evaluation of state child protective services systems (Waldfogel, 1998, 2000). This has been made possible by a 1996 federal amendment to the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) that mandates states to establish at least three citizen review panels (CRP). These panels are charged to meet quarterly at a minimum and to assess how well states are addressing child maltreatment. The membership of the panel is aimed at including a broad cross-cultural representation of the community, as well as members from programs, agencies, and organizations involved with child protective services.

CAPTA initially required the panels to be in place nationally by July 1999. All CPRs are obligated to prepare an annual report detailing their activities throughout the year, as well as

reporting their recommendations to the state about how to improve protective services to children and families. Specifically, they are to evaluate the state's compliance with its own strategic plan, to insure that states are conducting reviews of child fatalities and near fatalities, and to assess whether or not the adoption and foster care systems in the state are functioning appropriately together under Title IV-E of the Social Security Act. Finally, these panels are given wide permission to evaluate any other part of the system that they deem appropriate to ensure the protection of children, including coordination with adoption and foster care systems (Administration for Children and Families, 1998; Cot et al., 1998). It should be noted that the citizen review panels are different from the Foster Care Review Boards in that they are charged with evaluating the entire child protective services system, not just foster care cases.

3. Expectations

The expectations of the CPRs include: reviewing resources; requirements and quality of policies, rules, and laws; type and extent of social services available for children and families; relationships among agencies (courts, law enforcement, schools); and state standards relative to information on what works and what does not work. In addition, CPRs are expected to examine the effectiveness of child protective services from a systemic perspective. In other words, the participants are to fully understand how policies, staff, management, and operations impact child services in the state and at community levels (Cot et al., 1998).

4. Intent of study

Until this study was undertaken, there had been no empirical investigation regarding what variables impact the effectiveness of CPRs on state decision-making processes. This results in a significant lack of information and understanding relative to what leads to successful interventions, as well as what keeps CPRs from effectively performing their mandates. Without the knowledge of what works and what does not, there is the risk of just funding one more "hollow advisory board." As one panel member has noted, "If no one is really paying attention to what we do, then this is all just a public relations scheme" (Confidential personal communication, February 12, 2001). The emotion embodied in this comment belies the frustration that many citizens feel when they give their service to a committee that is seen as ineffectual. Moreover, federal government money can be viewed as wasted on efforts that may have the intent of authentic citizen involvement, but that do not ultimately support systemic change within the federal bureaucracy being evaluated (Box, 1998). The current study attempts to address this by assessing the variables that influence the effectiveness of these boards. Toward this end the specific research questions addressed were:

1. What variables influenced the effectiveness of citizen review panels?
2. What were the obstacles to meaningful citizen participation in the child protective services system?

3. What strategies did the CRP members see as useful in assisting the CRPs to function more effectively?

5. Literature review

Although, as noted earlier, there is minimal literature specific to citizen review panels and child protective services the concept of citizen' advisory boards in public social services is not a new one. These panels have been utilized in, among others, community mental health (Morrison, Holdridge, & Smith, 1978), AIDS research (Cox, Rouff, Svedsen, Markowitz, & Abrams, 1998), and law enforcement (Barton, 1970), as well as foster care and adoption. Research on what contributes to, and impedes, the success of these citizen panels generally indicates that citizen' advisory boards are most effective when they have clearly communicated goals and objectives, when they are given access to needed information to make decisions, and when members are democratically elected to the panel (Callahan, 1999; Zander, 1993).

Other researchers on foster care citizen panels have focused on the impediment of the inequity of power between the citizen panel and the organization being evaluated. For example, Fischer (1993) posited that public administrators often cloak decision-making in scientific or other technical terms, thus thwarting legitimate consumer input. Even when citizen-consumers do have expert knowledge about a subject matter (as is often the case in child welfare), this knowledge is meaningless unless given legitimacy. As Zander (1993) noted in her discussion of nonprofit boards, "The power of experts derives from the readiness of others to perceive them as wise men or women and to ask them for information or advice. An expert has no power, however, if no one sees him or her as an expert...or no one asks the well-informed person for help in his or her area of expertise. In such a case, the expert is unheralded, ignored, and powerless" (p. 103).

In the child welfare literature, several studies have shown mixed results in measuring the effectiveness of citizen review in producing positive outcomes for children. There is even debate about whether or not external child welfare review systems on foster care and adoption are needed at all (Jordan & Franklin, 1994). However, the studies that have been done on foster care and adoption suggest that there is some benefit to external review by mandated citizen groups. For example, Jennings, McDonald, and Henderson (1996) found that the use of citizen foster care review boards led to the quicker achievement of permanency (i.e., adoption) for foster children, as well as an increase in ancillary services to them. However, Lindsey and Wodarski's (1986) hypothesis that foster care citizen review of cases would lead to permanency was not supported by their study. They note, moreover, that non-homogenous study groups and problems with case review instrumentation hampered the study. Additional studies with Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) volunteers have shown foster care review boards to be helpful in achieving positive outcomes for abused and/or neglected children (Leung, 1996; Litzelfelner, 1999; 2001; Poertner & Press, 1991).

6. Methodology

The methodology for this study replicates portions of a study conducted by Callahan (1999) who examined the effectiveness of citizen advisory panels in local municipalities in New Jersey in impacting public policy. The survey instrument and other aspects of the Callahan model were modified with her permission. In the New Jersey study, Callahan found that clearly stated goals and objectives for the advisory committees lead to more effectiveness. A democratic appointment process was also found to be a predictor of effectiveness. However, resources, staff support, form of government, consistent attendance by members, and consistent attendance by a governing board liaison were not statistically significant predictors of effectiveness (Callahan, 1999). In the current study, the survey instrument was adapted to assess which variables impact the effectiveness of citizen review panels in a 10-state area.

Through his position as Kentucky's Program Coordinator for its citizen review panel, the author recruited other state coordinators to assist with the distribution of the survey. Since there was (and is) no federal centralized point of contact for all CRP state coordinators, the researcher used a listserv to recruit CRP coordinators. This listserv was created by the CRP program coordinator in Minnesota and was subscribed to by 16-state CRP coordinators at the time of the study.

Coordinators from 10 states agreed to participate in the study: Iowa, Illinois, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Ohio, South Dakota, Tennessee, Virginia, and Wisconsin. Each coordinator who agreed to participate provided the researcher with an approximate number of total CRP members in their state. After receiving confirmation of their willingness to participate, the state coordinators were mailed the requested number of surveys along with self-addressed, stamped envelopes. They were asked to distribute the surveys in person at a scheduled citizen review panel meeting. If they were unable to do so in a reasonable time, they were asked to mail the surveys to their members. A cover letter was attached that explained the purpose of the survey, and that it was voluntary and anonymous. The study was cleared through the institutional review board at the sponsoring university.

Because some states had more panel members than others, the number of respondents from each state varied considerably (ranging from under 20 to well over 100). Cross-state comparisons could not be performed because of the low numbers in four states. Of a total of 424 total surveys distributed, 104 were returned for a response rate of 25%. Eight of the surveys were taken out of the sample due to respondents not filling out a majority of the questions on the instrument. This left 96 useable surveys for a final response rate of 23%. This low response rate is a clear limitation of the study and will be discussed later. Of the 96 respondents, 27 (26%) were male and 77 (74%) were female. The mean number of months served on the Panel was 19 months. The surveys, which included a total of 24 questions, were coded at the top to indicate which state they represented. A follow-up email was sent to all program coordinators after 1 month, reminding them of the importance of the survey.

Respondents were asked questions about the logistical functioning of their panel (i.e., whether or not they had a chairperson or a liaison with the child protective services, how often they met, and if they received financial support). Additionally, they

were asked to rate their panel on issues such as how information from the state child welfare agency was shared with them, how their recommendations to the agency were evaluated and implemented, and how their panel was viewed in terms of its ability to affect policy change within the agency. Finally, respondents were asked to list the top three strategies that could be used for child welfare agencies and citizen review panels to work together, as well as the top three obstacles preventing such collaboration.

7. Variables

The key variable, “effectiveness,” was assessed by two dependent variables: process effectiveness (the mechanisms that encourage meaningful citizen participation) and outcome effectiveness (actual evaluation and implementation of recommendations).

Process effectiveness was measured by using portions of the weighted scale of nine summed items developed by Callahan (1999). This sub-scale had a good level of internal reliability with an alpha co-efficient of 0.86. Specifically, the respondents were asked to circle a number on a Likert-type scale (Strongly Agree = 1 to Strongly Disagree = 4) that indicated their beliefs about the following statements:

- Citizens are involved in the decision-making process within the child protective services system.
- There are clearly stated goals and objectives delineated with the CRP.
- Members are aware of the goals and objectives.
- Citizen input is sought early in CPS’s planning/decision making process.
- Citizen recommendations are shared with department heads.
- Child protective services managers routinely seek citizen input.
- Information is willingly shared with the citizen review panel.
- Information is shared with citizen in a timely manner.
- Reports and recommendations from the Panel are acknowledged.

The dependent variable of “outcome effectiveness” was measured by summing responses to the statements that were also developed by Callahan. A highly effective CRP would be defined as one in which members felt their input was sought early in the planning or policy-making process, they received timely access to important information to do their work, and their recommendations were reviewed, evaluated, and implemented.

Callahan reported an alpha coefficient of 0.87 for the “outcome” effectiveness subscale noted below.

- Citizens have the opportunity to make recommendations for change before they are acted upon.
- Reports and recommendations, submitted by the citizen review panel are acted upon.
- The suggestions of the citizen’ review panels have influenced the decisions made by the child protective services system.
- The suggestions of the citizen’ review panel have been implemented by the child protective services system.

The independent variables for this study were questions about specific features and operations of the CRPs covering such dimensions as staff support, by-laws, attendance at meetings, how members were appointed to the panel, whether there was a chairperson for the panel, and if a liaison from the state child protective services system attended CRP meetings.

8. Results

Sixty-six percent of the respondents noted that their panel had a paid staff person assigned to them, while 47% said their staff person was employed by their state's child protective services system. Fourteen percent did not know who employed their staff person. Twenty-seven percent of the respondents said that their panel had by-laws, while 95% said they had a chairperson. Only a slight majority (58%) of panels met quarterly as required by law.

Reliability testing was done on the subscales that made up the dependent variable "effectiveness." The questions making up the subscale of "process" effectiveness were highly correlated, yielding an alpha level of 0.86. The subscale for "outcome" effectiveness was also highly correlated with an alpha level of 0.84.

Multiple regression analysis was conducted to determine the effect of the independent variables on the dependent variable of panel "process" effectiveness. The results are summarized in Table 1. Of the independent variables tested, the method of appointment to the panel was the only variable which was significant at the 0.05 level. This finding is consistent with that of Callahan (1999). Whether or not the panel had a staff person assigned to them came close to being a significant predictor of process effectiveness (sig. = 0.057). Together in this model, the variables explain about 17% of the variance in the process effectiveness of the citizen review panels.

Similarly, multiple regression analysis was conducted to understand the effect of the independent variables listed above on "outcome" effectiveness. As with the "process"

Table 1
Regression analysis summary for variables predicting process and outcome effectiveness

Variable	Process effectiveness		Outcome effectiveness	
	Beta	Sig.	Beta	Sig.
Frequency of panel meeting	0.019	0.880	0.078	0.530
Chairperson	0.030	0.814	-0.184	0.855
Staff	0.313	0.057	0.170	0.289
Staff Employed by CPS system?	-0.148	0.358	-0.109	0.492
Bylaws	-0.219	0.085	-0.212	0.090
Liaison attends meetings?	0.061	0.623	0.205	0.095
Consistency of membership attendance	0.024	0.857	0.041	0.750
Appointment to panel is democratic	0.304	0.012	0.285	0.017
	$R^2 = 0.167$		$R^2 = 0.190$	
	$df = 8,67$		$df = 8,67$	
	$p = 0.120$		$p = 0.064$	

effectiveness variable, whether or not panel members were democratically appointed was a statistically significant predictor of the panel's outcome effectiveness (sig. = 0.017). This model yielded an R^2 of 0.190.

8.1. Open-ended questions

Respondents were asked to comment on the ways they believed the state child protective services system and citizen review panels could work more effectively together. The suggestions fell into four general themes:

- Increased communication between child protective services and CRPs.
- An increased awareness by citizen of the roles and limitations of the CPS system (e.g., "The CPS systems is often too complex for citizen to understand").
- Use CRPs as a tool for true collaboration, not just a "feel good" exercise.
- CRPs should establish doable, concrete goals which allow for incremental change (e.g., "Break down the spectrum of the undertakings, all too overwhelming," "As with any new organization, it takes time to get the full scope fully implemented").

The survey also asked CRP members to list the obstacles that hinder true citizen/public child welfare collaboration. These obstacles fell into four themes:

- Lack of trust between citizen and the CPS system (e.g., "Territorialism").
- Time constraints: volunteer citizen felt they did not have enough time to accomplish such a huge mandate. (One respondent noted: "Membership turnover means getting new members up to speed...this is costly".)
- Lack of knowledge by both the CPS system and the CRPs regarding each other's roles.
- Poor lines of communication between the "system" and citizen.

Finally, the CRP members were asked to comment on anything else they saw as impacting the effectiveness of the citizen review panels. Their comments reflected the themes noted above. Overall assessments of the value of the CRPs ranged from tentative support ("These panels can be as effective or ineffective as the participants desire for them to be" and "I think CRP can be used very effectively if the liaison with child protection is done right") to dismissal ("It is generally a feel-good exercise promoted by political leaders..." and "Parent groups can generate far more political reaction than can a thoughtful, calm citizen panel").

Other respondents reported the need for a clear push to recruit true citizen members to the panel, not just professionals. Ethnic diversity, especially in South Dakota that has several Native American populations was also cited as an important need. The overall consensus of the open-ended responses appeared to be a "wait-and-see" attitude. Generally, respondents felt citizen review panels for child protective services were a good idea, but that significant attention should be devoted to helping the panels become true participants in protecting their state's children, not just another report-generating body. To this end, several respondents suggested passing federal or state legislation that mandates the child protective service to formally respond to CRP recommendations.

The general tenor of the open-ended responses was that the citizen were taking a “wait-and-see” approach. They noted several times that the panels were only 2 years old and that any enterprise as ambitious as a state-wide citizen review panel would need time to work through some organizational problems. Their responses indicated a willingness to engage their state’s child protective services system, but with an awareness of failures which had preceded them.

9. Discussion

Citizen review panels for child protective services, if structured correctly, can give citizen-members an authentic voice in the public child welfare arena. There are numerous pitfalls along the way, however. The findings of this study suggest that child protective services administrators and CRP members should continue to find ways to communicate and problem-solve with citizens in their community. It is through this increased discussion of each other’s roles that territoriality and miscommunication can best be avoided.

Additionally, although child protective liaisons are required to be a part of each panel, their presence should not be a perfunctory one. Instead, this research would suggest that their attendance at meetings should be consistent, thus creating a sense of trust among panel members and their child protective services counterparts.

Finally, in order to gain the true citizen voice that the federal legislation intended, it is crucial for CRP program coordinators to recruit a diverse body of professionals and non-professionals, women and men, and a cross-section of ethnically diverse members.

10. Limitations and future research

This study’s primary limitation was the small response rate (23%). This was caused by two factors: the study was done during the summer, when many people are away on vacation and attendance at CRP meetings is usually light; some program coordinators personally distributed the surveys at the meetings while others mailed them out. An additional limitation was that not all states were represented in this study. Again, this was due primarily to the logistical problems with locating state coordinators.

Future research should focus on specific outcomes of the CRPs. Since they are required only to submit an annual report outlining their activities for the year, further studies need to be done regarding whether or not these bodies are effective in producing a more responsive child protective services agency. For example, longitudinal studies could be conducted examining the number of citizen recommendations that had actually been enacted by the CPS system.

11. Conclusion

Now more than ever, citizens are being called upon to join with child protective service agencies to create a true sense of community responsibility for abused and neglected

children (Waldfoegel, 1998). Although the citizen review panels are relatively new, they provide an exciting forum for the exchange of ideas and the promulgation of best practices. However, they must be given legitimacy and power to be able to perform the tasks intended by the federal legislation. For the child welfare system to seat these panels without the intent to truly use their feedback to improve services is an injustice to the many faithful citizens who comprise them, and a disservice to the millions of children who depend on the state's protection.

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