

Citizen Review Panels for Child Protective Services: A National Profile

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Citizen Review Panels (CRPs) for Child Protective Services are groups of citizen-volunteers throughout the United States who are federally mandated to evaluate local and state child protection systems. This study presents a profile of 332 CRP members in 20 states with regards to their demographic information, length of time on the panel, and attitudes regarding the variables that promote and hinder collaboration between the panels and state child welfare agencies.

Results indicate that the average review panel member tends to be a professional, middle-aged female with an advanced degree. Better communication (between child protective services and the CRPs) and clearer goals/objectives for CRPs were the most cited suggestions of how CRPs and child welfare agencies can work together. Lack of funding and the defensiveness of the child welfare agency were seen as the top obstacles to such collaboration. Policy implications and avenues of further study are discussed.

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This study profiles Citizen Review Panel (CRP) for child protective services (CPSs) members from 20 states. These panels are comprised of citizen volunteers who assist with the federal mandate to evaluate the CPS systems in their states. The panels are required to submit an annual report to the federal children's bureau each year that outlines the panel's activities and makes recommendations to the state child protective system to strengthen its services. Comprehensive information about the make-up and operation of these CRPs is missing from the literature.

Among other provisions, Public Law 104-235, a 1996 amendment to the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA), called for the implementation of at least three CRPs in each state by July 1999 (Administration for Children and Families, 1998). According to the law, a CRP was to be made up of a representative sample of the community, meet at least once every three months, and submit an annual report to the federal government outlining their activities and recommendations (Administration for Children and Families, 1998). There was also a directive that child protection agencies be cooperative in providing needed information and technical assistance to the panels (Kot, Bruner, & Scott, 1998). In summary, the legislation provided the panels with a broad mandate:

1. To insure that the state was in compliance with the state CAPTA plan
2. To assure that the state was coordinating with the Title IV-E foster care and adoption programs
3. To assess the CPS agency in its compliance with the review of child fatalities
4. To evaluate any other piece of the CPS system which the Panel deemed important

In 2003, CAPTA (now called the Keeping Children and Families Safe Act of 2003) was reauthorized. In addition to the mandate

already described, panels are now also required to review the practices of the child protection system in addition to policy and procedure. Additionally, they are to engage in "public outreach" and the state child welfare agency must respond in writing to the panel's recommendations within six months.

Currently, most states have enacted some form of CRP in child protection. However, states were allowed to use existing panels (e.g., foster care review boards or child fatality review boards) if these existing boards could perform all of the duties described above (Kot, Bruner, & Scott, 1998). The roles and responsibilities of these panels and their implementation have been extraordinarily varied. For example, the state of Kentucky formed three CRPs in July 1999 and hired a full-time program coordinator to assist with their tasks. However, other states have offered only token assistance to panels by requiring a child welfare staff person to coordinate the panels in addition to other job responsibilities. Some states produce copious annual reports while other states do not fulfill the federal requirement of submitting an annual report.

Review of Literature

Although there is minimal literature specific to CRPs 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 community mental health (Morrison, Holdridge, & Smith, 1978), AIDS research (Cox, Rouff, Svedsen, Markowitz, & Abrams, 1998), and law enforcement (Barton, 1970), for example. Research 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).

Furthermore, although some form of citizen participation in public child welfare has been around since at least the 1970s, only a few studies have examined the effectiveness of such involvement.

The movement to open the child welfare system to public scrutiny and collaboration came to fruition in the 1980s with the implementation of Foster Care Review Boards. These boards were created as a product of the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980, which required states to review the cases of children in foster care at least once every six months. Although there are a number of Foster Care Review Boards throughout the nation, the exact number is unknown.

Additionally, citizens have been involved with the Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) program in which volunteers are trained to represent children in the court system. In the year 2000, there were over 58,000 CASA volunteers in the United States representing 229,000 children (Casanet.com).

Litzelfelner (2001) gives an excellent overview of the effectiveness of CASA programs in terms of positive outcomes for children. She notes that, in general, children who receive CASA services “do as well or better on various key outcomes and process variables than children without CASA’s” (p. 7). These variables include length of time to permanency, case closure rates, stability of placement for the children, the rate of reentry into the foster care system, and number of court appearances.

However, at least one study has shown mixed results in the usefulness of citizen review in producing positive outcomes for children (Lindsey & Wodarski, 1986). There is even debate about whether external child welfare review systems are needed at all (Jordan & Franklin, 1994). The argument against such citizen participation is that it is no more than a “feel good” exercise carried out by citizens when what is actually needed is a complete overhaul of the child welfare system in the United States.

Nonetheless, studies have been conducted which suggest that there is some benefit to external review. 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. Other studies have concluded that

citizen review of cases can serve as an impetus for children to be processed through the system quicker and be available for adoption sooner (Byrnes, 2002; Katz, 1990; Wert, Fein & Hailer, 1986). These studies appear to be limited, however, by methodological flaws, including small sample sizes and the lack of a control group.

Lindsey and Wodarski (1986) produced an experimental study in which foster care case reviews were conducted by citizen review panels as well as by child protective agency personnel. Numerous outcome variables were evaluated, including permanency and parental contact data. The authors hypothesized that the citizens review process would push children more rapidly through the foster care system and lead to a greater level of permanency. Their findings did not bear this out, however. There was little difference between the two groups. The authors note that there were serious limitations with the study, including non-homogenous study groups and different instruments being used for case review.

In one of the largest studies of foster care review boards, Jennings et al. (1996) studied several variables which were attributed to healthy outcomes for foster care children, including permanency of placement, services planned and provided, number of and time in placements, and completeness of the written plans. The authors studied the impact of citizen foster care review that was initiated 14 to 45 days after a child entered the court system. Although their findings were mixed in regard to case outcomes, they concluded the data were close to being statistically significant and therefore should be seen as a support for the citizen review process.

The subjects of citizen panel members' and workers' perceptions are even more limited. Leashore (1986) found that most public child welfare workers reported external case review was helpful to them, although they did express concern about the case reviewer's lack of knowledge regarding the case history and unrealistic expectations of the child welfare workers.

A similar finding was made by Murray (1981). The author found that out of the 74 workers who participated in her study,

66% of them felt that the outside reviewer's comments and suggestions were helpful to them.

Research on CRPs for CPS

Only two studies have specifically examined the federally mandated CRPs for child protective service. In a small exploratory study of a southern states' CRPs, Jones, Litzelfelner, and Ford (2003) surveyed 24 citizens review panel members and 58 child welfare personnel to determine their perceptions of the citizen involvement in child protection.

Using a brief survey, they found that there was a statistically significant difference between the two groups in terms of responding to two questions: "Citizen involvement in child protective services is important" and "The child protective services system in this state is in need of change." The CRP members more strongly agreed with both of these statements than did the child welfare personnel.

Additionally, both groups were asked about the best ways that the child welfare system and citizens could work together and the obstacles that prevented this working relationship. "Better education about each others' roles" was cited most often as the best way to work together and "lack of communication" was seen by both groups as the most common barrier.

Another study (Jones, 2004) used data from 104 CRP members in four states regarding which variables impacted their perceived effectiveness of the panel. 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 impeded effectiveness included lack of trust, time constraints, unclear roles, and weak communication.

Method

The current study surveyed the members from 20 state CRPs to determine their perceptions of whether they are being used as true

partners in improving their states' child protection systems. The 20 states who volunteered for the study responded to a request through a national citizens review panel listserv. The respondents also were asked about their access to needed information, their involvement in the policymaking process, and other variables that have shown to be important in the consideration of effective citizen participation.

Instrumentation

The Citizen Review Panel Perceived Effectiveness Survey (CRPPES) is a 54-item survey developed to assess respondents' perceptions regarding the effectiveness of their CRPs. In addition to demographic information, the CRPPES collected data on perceptions of other variables that the literature has identified as being important to the effectiveness of citizen participation. These included access to information, needed resources such as a staff person and by-laws, and perceived influence on policymaking decisions within state child welfare agencies.

Sample

A total of 664 anonymous surveys were mailed to CRP members in 20 states. State coordinators were asked how many CRP members they had in their state. It was determined that there were 664 members who were eligible to receive the survey. A self-addressed stamped envelope was attached to each survey and a real stamp was used in order to increase the response rate (Dillman, 2000). The respondents received the survey in one of two ways: either their names and addresses were released to the researcher and they were mailed a survey directly, or a packet of surveys was distributed to the state program coordinator who ensured that they were distributed. In the study, 13 of the 20 state coordinators opted to distribute the survey themselves. Although this limited the ability to follow up with specific panel members by mail, it did not decrease the response rate for these states. Their average response rate was 52% with a range of 32 to 70%.

For the respondents who received a survey in the mail from the investigator, a "pre-notification letter" was sent to them one week before the survey was mailed. Additionally, a follow-up letter was mailed two weeks after they received the survey. Four states released the e-mail addresses of their members and a follow-up e-mail was sent by the investigator to potential responders reminding them to return the survey. These potential respondents received not only a pre-notification reminder and follow-up letter, but an e-mail reminder as well. The overall response rate for those mailed questionnaires was 47%.

There were 333 surveys returned. One survey was missing considerable data and was discarded, leaving 332 useable surveys for the sample. The overall return rate was 50%.

The response rate for each state varied considerably and is illustrated in Tables 1 and 2. The two methods employed to distribute the surveys was not optimal; however, it was decided that this was the most efficient way to reach the largest number of CRP members. Although Dillman's method (2000) was used in eight of the states, the states where it was not implemented showed a

TABLE 1

Response by State Where Members Were Mailed Surveys Directly

STATE	TOTAL NUMBER SENT	RETURN	PERCENTAGE
Arkansas	44	8	18%
Georgia	9	4	44%
Idaho	38	26	68%
New Hampshire	14	6	43%
New York	31	16	52%
Tennessee	34	21	62%
Wisconsin	26	16	62%
Wyoming	29	8	28%
TOTAL	225	105	47%

TABLE 2

Response by State Where Surveys Were Distributed by State Program Coordinator

STATE	TOTAL NUMBER SENT	RETURN	PERCENTAGE
Alabama	40	28	70%
Florida	35	24	69%
Maryland	38	12	32%
Michigan	44	20	45%
Minnesota	44	30	68%
New Mexico	45	31	69%
Nevada	5	3	60%
North Carolina	60	21	35%
Ohio	21	13	62%
South Carolina	28	14	50%
Washington	60	21	35%
West Virginia	19	10	53%
TOTAL	439	227	52%

slightly higher return rate (see Table 2). This could be because the potential respondents already had a relationship with the program coordinator who distributed the surveys.

Demographic Data on Panel Members

Most of the respondents were females (75%), which is typical of most volunteer organizations (Zander, 1993). The mean age of the respondent was 52 years—also typical (Zander, 1993)—and the average time spent on the CRP was 36 months. The panel members in the study represented a well-educated group with the mean years of education being 17.24 (equivalent to a master's degree).

It should be noted that three of the states in the study—New Mexico, Florida, and Maryland—had a form of CRP in place before 1999, the date when each state receiving CAPTA money was required by law to establish at least three CRPs. Thus, it is likely that

some of the respondents in these states had been on panels several years prior to their being designated "Citizen Review Panels." New Mexico and Florida are among the five states where panel members have served the longest. The average length of service was almost three years and the range was approximately 13 to 75 months.

Respondents were asked about their employment. Nearly 40% percent identified themselves as working in the social services field. This is not a surprising finding considering the focus of citizens review panels. Of the respondents, 13% identified themselves as "retired" and 15% said they were in the education field. Overall, the profile of respondents in this study describes females over 50 years of age who were in the social services profession and who had obtained a master's degree.

Descriptive Data on Panels

This was a "first look" at national data surrounding CRPs; thus, differences between individual states were not analyzed. However, in addition to individual panel member data, information on the specific CRP was also obtained. Respondents were asked how often their panels met (the panels are required by law to meet at least quarterly); whether the panel had a budget, bylaws, or a chairperson; whether they had a paid staff person who assisted them and if that person was employed by their state's child welfare agency; whether they had a liaison to their state's child welfare agency (this is also required by Public Law 104-235) and, if so, how often that person attended their meetings; and whether the panel respondent received training for his or her role as a panel member.

Most of the respondents (66.3%) indicated that their panel met at least monthly, which is more frequently than the law requires. Of the sample, 24% said that their panel met quarterly; 9% said that the panel met annually or "other."

Although most panels had a chairperson (91.6%), most did not have bylaws (65.7%) or a budget (82.5%). Panels without budgets could possibly be explained by the large variation in how panels are funded. Although states receive money through CAPTA, there

is no specific language requiring states to support the panels at a certain monetary level. State child welfare agencies have chosen to support their CRPs in a variety of ways, ranging from providing in-kind support (i.e., photocopying services, mailing) to funding a full-time staff person and allocating funds to assist the panels.

Of the respondents, 8% indicated that their panel had a paid staff person who assisted them in their work and 77% percent said that their panel had a liaison staff assigned from the state child welfare agency, even though this liaison is a specific requirement of Public Law 104-235. Of the respondents, 69% said that the liaison attended the panel meetings "every time," and only 1% said that the liaison "never attends." It is possible, though unlikely, that some respondents' panels had a liaison and the respondents did not know it. The federal legislation that mandates CRPs has a clear directive to states that they must provide a liaison to these groups.

In the surveys, 79% either strongly agreed or agreed that their panel had clearly stated goals and objectives, 74% had received training as part of an orientation to the panel, and 65% these respondents were satisfied or very satisfied with the training they had received to prepare them to be a panel member.

Additional questions were asked in the survey to evaluate other areas of interest. A diversity of backgrounds and perspectives is important for community volunteer boards because it gives the board a more holistic approach to the task of the board (Zander, 1993). The law that sets CRPs in place is clear in its directive that they should be representative of the community in which they reside. Since child welfare systems touch all sectors of society, it can be reasonably assumed that Congress intended CRPs to be racially diverse. Thus, respondents were asked to give their opinion about the item, "My citizens review panel is representative of my community in terms of race and ethnic backgrounds, different perspectives, a mix of professionals and nonprofessionals, and so on." Of the respondents, 63% either strongly agreed or agreed with this statement, while 32% percent either strongly disagreed or disagreed with it.

A true “citizens” review board should also be accessible to all citizens in the community (Arnstein, 1969; King & Stivers, 1998). Accordingly, respondents were asked their opinions about the statement, “Appointment to my citizens review panel is open to all citizens in my community.” While 63% of the respondents also strongly agreed or agreed with this statement, 23% strongly disagreed or disagreed.

Finally, the issue of panels making recommendations (or not) to child welfare agencies was explored. The goal of Public Law 104-235 was to encourage citizen groups to make recommendations for improvement of child protective services in their states. This aspect of the legislation is important because it attempts to prevent the panels from becoming just a hollow exercise (Webler & Tuler, 2000). CRPs should be making ongoing recommendations to the child welfare agencies in their states, primarily through the vehicle of their annual reports. In this study, 70% of the respondents said that their panel made recommendations which were either implemented as presented or modified and then implemented. However, 30% of the respondents said that either they did not have the chance to make recommendations, or that their recommendations were ignored or acknowledged but then ignored. Of the respondents, 43% indicated that their recommendations were modified and then implemented, and 27% said that their recommendations were implemented as presented.

Open-Ended Questions

In addition to answering forced choice questions, respondents were asked to respond to two open-ended questions: “What are your top three suggestions for how citizens can work more effectively with the child protective services system to ensure better outcomes for families and children?” and “What are the top three obstacles that prevent citizens and the child protective services system from working together?”

Of the 332 surveys returned, 295 (89%) of them contained responses to the open-ended questions. The responses to the first question could be easily grouped into 10 general categories (Table 3).

TABLE 3

Open-Ended Suggestions for How Citizens (CRPs) Can Work More Effectively with Child Protective Services (CPS) (n = 268)

RESPONSE	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE
Better communication between CPS and CRPs (i.e., through memos of agreement)	59	22%
Clearer goals and objectives for the panel	42	16%
CRPs need to be more educated about the roles of CPS	42	16%
A more diverse membership on the panel (including parents, nonprofessionals, and ethnic minorities)	29	11%
Increased funding (including staff support) for CRPs	25	9%
Better training of CRP members	18	7%
Increased advocacy role for CRPs	17	6%
Education of state legislators regarding the role of the CRP	14	5%
Education of the public regarding role of CRP	13	5%
Increased collaboration between statewide CRPs	9	3%

Regarding the question of how citizens can work more effectively with the child protective services systems, nearly a quarter of the respondents (22%) suggested a more formalized process of communication between the two. A "memorandum of agreement," in which each party spells out their roles and responsibilities, was mentioned a number of times as a tool to enhance communication.

A need for clearer goals and objectives for the panels (16%) was also suggested. Further, the theme of education was recurrent throughout the open-ended questions. Respondents suggested that CRP members should become better educated about the role of child protective services (16%), and that state legislators (14%) and the public (13%) need to become better educated about the role of the CRPs.

In the second question, respondents were also asked to identify the obstacles that prevent CRPs and CPS agencies from working together. The respondents chose “Lack of Funding or Resources” as the biggest obstacle to a collaborative relationship with CPS. This response represented nearly a quarter (21%) of the entire response set (Table 4).

As discussed earlier, no specific federal mandate requires state child welfare agencies to support the panels financially. The agency is required only to supply staff support at the request of the panel, and this is not clearly defined (i.e., some states have full-time program coordinators while others receive only part-time assistance). However, for the panels to meet the mandate set forth in Public Law 104-235, it is important they receive some assistance in doing so.

TABLE 4

Obstacles That Prevent Citizens Review Panels (CRP) and Child Protective Services (CPS) From Effectively Working Together (n = 300)

RESPONSE	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE
Lack of funding/resources for CRP	63	21%
Defensiveness of child protective services agency (e.g., manifested through hidden agendas)	50	17%
Inconsistent meeting attendance by panel membership	45	15%
Lack of communication/feedback (i.e., no “official” response to the annual report)	34	11%
Lack of understanding between CPS and CRPs regarding each other’s roles	26	9%
Lack of clear direction or purpose for panel	20	7%
Bureaucracy of CPS too complex to navigate	18	6%
Political turmoil within the CRP’s state government	18	6%
Lack of CRP’s power to effect real change within the system	13	4%
Lack of information provided to CRPs (usually due to confidentiality concerns)	13	4%

As with the suggestions given for working more effectively together, the themes of lack of education and communication appeared again as obstacles. Of the respondents, 17% felt that the defensiveness of the child welfare agency prevented the panels and the agency from working together, and 11% cited lack of communication and feedback as a barrier (i.e., no response to the annual report of the panel); 15% complained about inconsistent attendance from panel members, 9% mentioned the lack of understanding about roles between CPS and the child review panels, and 7% said that there was a lack of clear direction or purpose for the panel. Of the respondents, 12% complained either about that the bureaucracy of the CPS or the turmoil within state government. And 4% bemoaned the lack of power to effect real change, while 4% were unhappy about the lack of information provided to CRPs.

Limitations of the Study

As with any project that relies on the collection of data from a mailed survey, this study carried several limitations. Although 332 surveys were obtained from CRP members in 20 states, this is only a portion of the total number of citizens who comprise the panels throughout the United States. It was not possible to determine exactly how many total volunteers are serving on these panels nationally, so it cannot be said that the findings of this study are representative of CRP members in other states.

A possible contaminant to the data was the presence of four states which use their Foster Care Review Boards as CRPs. These boards focus primarily on reviewing individual foster care cases. However, as designated CRPs, they should be doing systemic evaluation of their child welfare systems. This study did not analyze data from Foster Care Review Boards separately; therefore, it is unknown if they in fact do systemic evaluation of their child welfare systems.

Discussion

This was the first large-scale study of CRP members. The demographic information obtained from panel members was not surprising and confirms what previous research had found regarding the makeup of volunteer boards (King & Stivers, 1998; Zander, 1993). Although the federal legislation that sets CRPs in place requires them to be “representative of their community,” most of the respondents in this study were Caucasian females who held professional degrees and positions. This finding points directly to the need for targeted recruiting of minorities and nonprofessionals to fill the ranks of CRPs. It can be surmised that those with a professional background (especially in social work) may more readily understand the complexities of state child welfare systems, but the opinions of the “outsiders” to the system lend a richness to the discourse that is lacking.

Nearly three-quarters (74%) of the respondents said that they had received training prior to beginning their duties as a CRP member, and 65% said they were either “satisfied” or “extremely satisfied” with the training. Although the specific content of this training was not obtained and should be explored in a future study, the fact that most of the citizens review panel members received training is a hopeful indicator about their ability to competently evaluate child protective services in their state.

Finally, the study used open-ended questions to elicit suggestions for ways in which CRPs can work more effectively with the agencies that they are required to evaluate. This is an important area of exploration because of the federally mandated nature of CRPs. In short, states have no other choice but to comply with this mandate in order for them to continue receiving federal money. Moreover, previous research has shown that citizen panels and state agencies who cannot work together run the risk of creating a hollow and time-consuming experience for all involved (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2000; King & Stivers, 1998). It is imperative then that policymakers find ways for the CRPs and state agencies to cooperate in improving child protective services.

The citizens in this study gave excellent suggestions in this regard, including the idea of a memorandum of agreement between the panel and state agency, increased education between the panels and the agency regarding each other's roles, and panels that are more diverse, which would include foster parents and nonprofessionals. In keeping with the finding of the need for more collaboration between the panels and the child welfare agency, this study also suggests that these two entities need to improve communication with each other. Several of the respondents said that the communication between the CRP and CPS was crisis-oriented rather than frequent and open. They listed possible solutions to this problem, including regularly scheduled joint meetings, collaborative retreats, and memoranda of agreement.

The logistics of implementing CRPs in such geographically vast states as Alaska or Wyoming also needs to be considered when discussing barriers to participation. As mentioned earlier, states are only required to provide support to CRPs upon their request. There are no monies attached to this directive, so factors such as travel distance, location of meetings, and reimbursement for travel expenses could also play a part in participation.

Future Research

Although the current study provided a "snapshot" of CRP members and their opinions, there is a need for further study of these federally mandated groups. For instance, this study only sought the opinions of the CRP members themselves. A missing piece of the puzzle is how public officials view citizen panels. Thus, future investigation should focus on the perceptions of child welfare administrators in terms of how they view the effectiveness and role of CRPs.

Another area of future study is how and if the recommendations of CRPs are implemented by the CPS system. Numerous authors have decried launching of "citizen panels" by public officials only to have the work of these panels marginalized or ignored (Box, 1998; King & Stivers, 1998; Lynn & Kartez, 1995). The thousands

of citizen volunteers who are working throughout the nation to improve the plight of abused children deserve to have their recommendations heard, evaluated, and if appropriate, implemented by the child welfare agency. A more in-depth study should be conducted of CPS administrators to learn what recommendations from the panels in their states have been implemented. If recommendations were not implemented, it would be interesting to find out why.

A final area for future exploration is the area of “outcomes” for children and family. If the CRPs in the nation are to work as intended by Congress, there should ultimately be improvement in the child welfare system. This improvement could feasibly come in the form of decreased child maltreatment, increased permanency for foster and adoptive children, and improved worker morale and retention. These types of variables have been explored before (e.g., see Jordan & Franklin, 1994; Lindsey & Wodarski, 1986; Litzelfelner, 2001), but their application to CRPs for child protective services would be particularly beneficial. This study would need to come in the form of a longitudinal design, which would call for the cooperation of citizens and child welfare administrators in identifying agreed upon measures of citizen effectiveness in improving the child protective system. Systemic improvement in the child protection system is the ultimate goal of CRPs; however, there is still much to learn about how they affect our nation’s child protection systems.

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