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Brief Communication

The value and role of Citizen Review Panels in child welfare: perceptions of citizens review panel members and child protection workers

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Introduction

There is little question that most child welfare systems throughout the United States remain in crisis. Numerous scholars have recommended that the child welfare system might be improved by actively involving citizens and community groups (Black, 1983; Schorr, 2000; Waldfogel, 1998, 2000; Williams-Mbengue & Ramirez-Fry, 1999). As Schorr (2000) states:

... although citizens sporadically become engaged with, not to say infuriated at, child welfare agencies, in the last decades there has been remarkably little regular week-to-week engagement by lay people. . . Perhaps child welfare administrators or the officials to whom they report are too busy or too defensive to engage lay people in a true partnership. It is a mistake. Lay people need to be drawn in—given authority and candid information—if child welfare is not to be isolated in the face of what is coming (p. 130).

Federal legislation recognizes the importance of citizen input into the child welfare system as is evident in the 1996 amendment to the Child Abuse and Treatment Act (CAPTA). The amendment called for the implementation of at least three Citizens Review Panels (CRPs) in each state by July 1999 (Administration for Children and Families, 1998). According to the amendment, Citizen Review Panels were to be made up of a representative sample of the community, meet at least once every 3 months, and submit an annual report to the federal

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government outlining their activities and recommendations ([Administration for Children and Families, 1998](#)). There is also a directive that child protection agencies be cooperative in providing needed information and technical assistance to the panels ([Kot, Burner, & Scott, 1998](#)). 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.

Currently, most states have enacted some form of Citizen Review Panels in child protection. But, since Citizen Review Panels in child protection are new, the roles and responsibilities of these panels and their implementation are extraordinarily varied. The current study is a first attempt to understand the benefit and role of these panels as perceived by panel members and child protection workers.

Literature review

Only two studies have been located that examined the perceptions of citizen review panel members and child protection workers regarding the role of these panels and both studies are outdated ([Leashore, 1986](#); [Murray, 1981](#)). The 1986 study surveyed child welfare personnel who reported that external case review was in fact helpful to them. Child welfare personnel did, however, express concern about the knowledge of the case reviewers regarding the case history and their unrealistic expectations of the child welfare workers. In a similar study, [Murray \(1981\)](#) found that of the 74 workers who responded, 66% felt that the outside reviewer's comments and suggestions were helpful.

There are, however, a handful of studies that examine the use of citizen involvement in child protection. Foster Care Review Boards (FCRBs), comprised of citizen volunteers, emerged following the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980 which mandated judicial review of cases every 6 months. Sanctioned by presiding judges, FCRBs review individual child protection cases and make recommendations to the courts. There have been several empirical studies evaluating the use of FCRBs in child protection and in juvenile corrections ([Jennings, McDonald, & Henderson, 1996](#); [Jordan & Franklin, 1994](#); [Katz, 1990](#); [Lindsey & Wodarski, 1986](#); [Litzelfelner, 2001](#); [Magura & Claburn, 1978](#); [Wert, Fein, & Hailer, 1986](#)). Two of these studies ([Katz, 1990](#); [Wert et al., 1986](#)) concluded that the citizen review of child protection cases served as an impetus for children to be processed through the foster care system and placed for adoption at a faster rate than children whose cases did not have a citizen review. In the largest study of FCRBs, [Jennings et al. \(1996\)](#) found that cases that received early review by the FCRBs received more services and reached permanency more quickly than cases not reviewed by FCRBs.

[Litzelfelner \(2001\)](#) evaluated the effect of citizen review in juvenile offender cases and found that the youth whose cases went through the citizen review process had statistically fewer placement changes during the course of the study than those whose cases were not

reviewed by the citizen boards. In addition, the study found that more time elapsed between the date of the original offense and the re-offense for youth reviewed by the citizen review boards than for those not reviewed.

Although each of the aforementioned studies had a different focus and most had methodological limitations, the empirical literature does suggest that citizen input into the child protection system is in some way beneficial to the system. In addition, none of the studies indicated that citizen review was in any way detrimental to children or the child protection system.

In an attempt to add to this limited literature the authors engaged in a preliminary study that examined the opinions of CRP members and Child Protective Service (CPS) workers regarding the role and value of the citizen review panels. The study sought to address the question: Do CRP members and CPS workers differ in their opinions about the role and value of the citizen review panels?

Methods

The study was conducted in a southern state and utilized a mail survey. At the time of the study, three CRPs had been established in the state. These three panels had been in existence for about 2 years. Two were located in large metropolitan areas, and one was located in a rural area of the state. The panels all performed systemic reviews by examining county and state data of the child protection system. The survey was mailed to all citizen review panel members in the state ($n = 42$). Surveys were also mailed to child protective services workers ($n = 90$) in the same geographical regions and to personnel in the State's child protection central office ($n = 10$).

Panel members were mostly Caucasian female professionals between the ages of 35–50. Although the make-up of these panels is certainly far from “representative of the community,”

Table 1
Responses of CRP members and CPS personnel

Statement on survey	CRP member ($n = 24$)	CPS personnel ($n = 58$)	<i>t</i>
Citizen involvement in child protective services is important.	4.78	3.62	−5.18**
Children will be better protected because of the citizens review panels.	3.70	3.11	−1.93
The child protective services system in this State is in need of change.	4.48	3.68	−3.44**
The role of the citizens review panels is to actively change the child protective services system.	2.90	2.64	−.915
The role of the citizens review panels is to simply act in an advisory capacity to child protective services.	3.35	3.33	−.061
The federal law which mandated citizens review panels intended them to be advocates for obtaining more resources for child protective services from the state legislature.	2.90	3.16	1.20

Scale: 5 = strongly agree, 4 = agree, 3 = somewhat agree, 2 = disagree, 1 = strongly disagree.

** $p < .01$.

the organizers report that these were the people who stepped forward and volunteered to get the panels off the ground. The CPS respondents were also mostly Caucasian females.

Both groups (CRP members and CPS personnel) were asked to rate on a Likert-type scale six identical statements (Table 1) regarding the mandate of the citizens review panels. These statements were designed to elicit whether the two groups differed in their opinion regarding the role of the citizens review panels. In addition, participants were asked to respond to three open-ended questions. The researchers examined these comments for common responses.

Results

A return rate of 58% was obtained from both the CRP members and CPS personnel.

T-tests on the scaled questions revealed statistically significant differences between the groups on two survey items. The first “*Citizen involvement in child protective services is important*” received a higher average rating by CRP members than CPS workers indicating CRP members viewed citizen involvement as more important than did CPS workers. The second group difference was in response to the statement “*Child protective services in this state is in need of change*” with CRP members voicing more need than CPS workers. A third statement, “*Children will be better protected because of the Citizens Review Panels,*” showed a moderately high level of variance between the two groups which approached statistical significance.

In regard to the open-ended questions, the most frequent response from both groups was in regard to the question: *What are the ways that citizens and child protective services can work together most effectively?* Sixty-one percent of the CRP members’ and 67% of the CPS workers’ responses suggested a need for better education of citizens about the child protection system. This is represented by one CPS respondent who noted “. . . before the citizens groups give us their recommendations, they need to find out exactly what we do and the policies that guide us.”

The need for citizen panels to have more knowledge surfaced as the most common response to the question: *What are the barriers that prevent citizens and child protective services from working together?* Forty-eight percent of the CRP members and 60% of the CPS workers made comments which suggested that citizens lack the knowledge about CPS needed to make informed choices. In addition, 53% of the CRP members and 53% of the CPS workers reported communication as a barrier between the groups. Again, this finding indicated that the two groups were in agreement regarding the need for better communication between the CRPs and CPS. However, many survey respondents suggested that the child protection is a “closed” system that really does not allow for good working relationships with people from outside the system.

In response to the third open-ended question: *How will the child protective services system respond to the recommendations made by the CRP?* Thirty-eight percent of the citizens review panel respondents and 30% of the child protection workers commented on this question. Of those, most reported that they thought that compliance with the recommendations depended on the type of recommendations made.

Discussion and implications

This exploratory study produced several pieces of information which are useful to the continued exploration of citizen input into the child protection system. First, the difference between the citizens review panel members and child protective services staff regarding whether or not they believed citizen involvement in child protective services important is a crucial finding. If the public child welfare system and citizen groups disagree on this very basic premise, the legitimacy of citizen groups could be questioned before they even get started. The same is true for the difference found between the groups about whether or not the system is in need of change, again indicating disagreement about the value of citizen involvement in child protection. We believe that these are areas for further exploration as they raise the fundamental questions underlying citizen involvement in the public child welfare.

This pilot study, though limited in scope, points clearly to the need for citizens and child protective workers to communicate clearly about agency/community partnerships and the value of citizen participation in helping address the needs of today's families. A training program designed specifically for Citizen Review Panel members is needed to help educate these lay persons about policies, practices and the ongoing struggles involved in the work of child protection. In our study, both CRP members and CPS workers chose education as the number one way citizens can work most effectively with the system and "citizens' lack of knowledge about the CPS system" as the number one barrier to effective collaboration.

As more citizen review panels become established across the county, future research needs to examine the different models of Citizen Review Panels and their effectiveness in helping facilitate needed system changes. In addition, inquiry into the indirect benefits of citizen review panels, such as increased community awareness of child abuse and neglect, would be beneficial in understanding the importance of citizen involvement in child protection.

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