

CFRP POLICY BRIEF

Volunteer Advocacy for Children in State Care: Which Texas Children Get a Court-Appointed Special Advocate (CASA)?

Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASAs) in Texas are independent and specially-trained community volunteers who are appointed by juvenile and family court judges to represent the interests of children who enter state custody after being removed from their families by Child Protective Services (CPS). CASAs develop personal relationships with the children they serve and act as “the eyes and ears” of the judge, bringing a depth of knowledge about the child’s needs and interests that CPS caseworkers and children’s attorneys may not have the time or resources to optimally develop. The CASA program is highly regarded by judges and other child welfare professionals,¹ but efforts to establish whether CASA is an evidence-based practice for improving child welfare outcomes have been inconclusive, largely due to a phenomenon called *selection bias*, which impairs the ability of researchers to isolate the effect of the CASA intervention on child and case outcomes. The Child and Family Research Partnership (CFRP), in collaboration with Texas CASA, is conducting the most robust research study to date examining CASA’s effectiveness.² This brief highlights the findings of the first phase of this project, designed to address the problem of selection bias to obtain valid, accurate findings on the unique impact that CASA volunteer advocates may have on the outcomes of vulnerable Texas children.

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Promoting positive child outcomes, and especially ensuring that every child exits substitute care to a safe, stable, and permanent home, is the overarching goal of CASA. In most communities, there are currently not enough CASA volunteer advocates to represent every child entering the state’s care, which means that decisions about which children will get a CASA are made at the discretion of the judges who oversee child welfare cases. Prior research and conversations with judicial officials indicate that judges do not typically make these decisions at random.³ Rather, judges rely on their own determinations of which children would most benefit from the additional support and advocacy of a CASA volunteer advocate.

Selection Bias: A Barrier to Evaluating Outcomes

It is precisely this use of judicial discretion in deciding when to appoint a CASA that creates the selection bias which has compromised the validity of prior research. When children are selected to receive a CASA based on non-random characteristics (such as more complicated family circumstances, higher risk, or more severe maltreatment), those children are not comparable to children who were not selected to receive a CASA, because they have systematically different characteristics. In research terms, this is called *selection bias*. When selection bias is present, the different characteristics of the cases and children who receive the intervention may be responsible for any observed differences in their outcomes, rather than the intervention itself.

The factors that increase the likelihood of CASA being appointed are indicators of more complex or difficult cases.

The Child Outcomes and Volunteer Effectiveness Study

In order to rigorously compare the outcomes of children who were appointed a CASA volunteer advocate to those who were not, the sources of selection bias must be understood and accounted for in the same population whose outcomes are being studied. The first phase of the broader Child Outcomes and Volunteer Effectiveness (COVE) evaluation is the Selection Bias Study.⁴ For this phase of the COVE study, CFRP analyzed the CPS case record data of more than 31,000 children who entered substitute care in Texas over a two-year time period (of whom 56 percent were appointed a CASA) to carefully identify the unique child, family, and case characteristics of children in Texas who are appointed a CASA volunteer advocate compared to children who are not. Understanding how children with a CASA differ from children without a CASA allows us to account for these differences when examining outcomes, laying the groundwork for the next phase of the COVE evaluation, a rigorous and unbiased apples-to-apples comparison of child and case outcomes.

CASA Volunteers are Appointed to More Difficult Cases

Key findings of the Selection Bias Study suggest that the factors which increase the likelihood of CASA being appointed are indicators of more complex or difficult cases. Controlling for child, family, and case characteristics, we find that CASA is significantly **more likely** to be appointed to:

- *Children with siblings who are also in substitute care.* Having any number of siblings in care increases the likelihood of CASA appointment compared to having no siblings, and having three or more siblings more than doubles the odds of getting a CASA. Sibling groups are often difficult to place together,⁵ which can present challenges in coordinating visitation to maintain relationships between the siblings and their parents. Cases involving large sibling groups may also require more time and attention to ensure that each child's needs are carefully assessed and that appropriate individualized services are provided.

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- *Children who experienced more types of maltreatment leading to their removal.* More types of maltreatment may indicate multiple co-occurring problems in the family, as well as greater severity in children's experiences of abuse and/or neglect prior to removal.
- *Children who are 3 or older.* Children in all age groups over 2 years old are more likely to get a CASA than children age 2 and under. Older children are often more difficult to place, are more likely to experience placement disruptions, and may have more intensive emotional or behavioral needs compared to infants.^{6,7}
- *Children whose caregivers are assessed as having more risk factors, including past or current domestic violence, and prior involvement with CPS.* A higher number of risk factors and prior CPS involvement may signal that there are more serious and/or chronic family circumstances requiring more intensive assessment, service provision, and case monitoring.
- *Children who are placed in a non-relative setting as their first placement upon entering care.* Children initially placed in a non-relative foster home or a group care setting (such as a shelter or other institutional facility) are more likely to get a CASA than children placed in the home of a family member. This may reflect the triaging of CASA services to prioritize children who have less family support upon removal.

Looking Ahead: Implications and Conclusions

These findings confirm and enhance what has been found in prior research: CASA volunteer advocates tend to be appointed to cases representing more serious or complicated circumstances among children in substitute care in Texas. This finding has two key implications moving forward:

We can now conduct a robust apples-to-apples comparison of the outcomes of children who get a CASA and children who do not.

- Texas CASA now has an in-depth understanding of the unique characteristics of the children served by volunteer advocates. Knowing the child, family, and case characteristics of the population served by CASA can be used to inform training, volunteer recruitment, and program improvement efforts throughout the state.
- CFRP is now poised to conduct rigorous research that will allow us to account for, and thereby minimize, the selection bias that has inhibited the validity of prior research. Using the information gained in the Selection Bias Study, we can now conduct a robust apples-to-apples comparison of the outcomes of children who get a CASA and children who do not. By isolating the effect of CASA on child outcomes, we can better evaluate whether CASA services improve the safety, permanency, and well-being of children in substitute care in Texas.

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The Child and Family Research Partnership (CFRP) is an independent, nonpartisan research group at the LBJ School of Public Affairs at The University of Texas at Austin, specializing in issues related to young children, teens, and their parents. We engage in rigorous research and evaluation work aimed at strengthening families and enhancing public policy.

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 - ³ Lawson, J. & Berrick, J.D. (2013). Establishing CASA as an evidence-based practice. *Journal of Evidence-Based Social Work*, 10(4), 321-337
 - ⁴ Osborne, C. & Lawson, J. (2017). *Child outcomes and volunteer effectiveness study: Selection bias study final report March 2017*. Austin, TX: Child and Family Research Partnership, Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs, The University of Texas at Austin.
 - ⁵ Shlonsky, A., Webster, D., & Needell, B. (2003). The ties that bind: A cross-sectional analysis of siblings in foster care. *Journal of Social Service Research*, 29(3), 27-52.
 - ⁶ Oosterman, M., Schuengel, C., Wim Slot, N., Bullens, R.A.R., Doreleijers, T.A.H. (2007). Disruptions in foster care: A review and meta-analysis. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 29(1), 53-76.
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