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A Study of Counties for Big Country CASA Expansion

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the need for Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) to expand to surrounding counties. These counties include Taylor (where BCC is housed), Callahan, Coleman, Fisher, Jones, and Shackelford. Using a descriptive design, this study uses public data from the Texas Department of Family Protective Services (TDFPS) to analyze data from counties with CASA (Taylor County) and without a CASA (the surrounding counties). Various descriptive analyses were conducted to examine major foster care outcomes of the counties for ten years (2011 through 2020) such as permanency outcome (exit), length of time in care, and number of placements. The results show that there are counties that could possibly benefit from CASA expanding to their counties. These counties are Coleman, Jones, and possibly Callahan. The county and foster care size of Shackelford and Fisher do not justify expanding.

A Study of Counties for Big Country CASA Expansion

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the School of Social Work

Abilene Christian University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Science

By

McKensie Lane Hardin

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This thesis, directed and approved by the committee for the thesis candidate McKensie Hardin, has been accepted by the Office of Graduate Programs of Abilene Christian University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

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In loving memory of my precious mother-in-law, your endearing words of love and encouragement were, and will continue to be, missed.

To my family and friends,

I am forever grateful for the love and support each of you have shown me during this time. To my parents, siblings, and in-laws, you were always there to push me to stay the course and breathe through the stress. To my wonderful husband, you were there for all the tears, late and sleepless nights, and the many rants. To my friends who were always ready with special words of encouragements, I am so blessed to have so many people in my life who push me to succeed and have unwavering faith in me.

.

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A special thank you to everyone at MSU, ACU, and Big Country CASA that had a hand in molding the social worker I am and instilling best practices that will be with me throughout my career. There have been so many distinguished examples of social workers that have allowed me to receive an exceptional education on a career path we are all passionate about.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

As of 2019, 437,283 children were in the foster system in the United States with the children spending a median of 14.7 months in care (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2020). Of those children, 57% had a permanency plan of reunification with a 49% reunification outcome, and 27% had a goal plan of adoption with a 25% outcome of adoption (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2020). Of the children in foster care, 34% were in care for less than a year and 30% were in care for one to two years. In Texas, there are 51,417 children in the foster care system (Texas CASA, 2021). Foster care children are a vulnerable population with a voice that is not often heard.

In order to empower this vulnerable population, the Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) organization was implemented. CASA is a nonprofit organization with a mission statement that promotes advocacy for children in foster care to receive an opportunity for permanency and safety (National CASA/GAL Association for Children, 2020). CASA began in Seattle, Washington, in 1977 and now has a total of 950 CASA programs spread across the United States (Cary et al., 2020; Weisz & Thai, 2003). A CASA volunteer is a voice in court to speak for the child on behalf of the child's best interest (Lawson & Berrick, 2013). CASA served over 270,000 of those children in foster care with 93,300 advocates (Cary et al., 2020). Of the 51,417 children in the Texas foster care system, 30,432 children have a CASA advocate (Texas CASA, 2021).

Research on CASA is commonly arranged as comparison group studies; more specifically, they are broken into a CASA group and a non-CASA group. Although the studies are constructed in the same way, the results are inconsistent. There are some studies that found CASA to be effective while others found CASA was not. However, there are consistent results that show professionals believe CASA is a positive and impactful organization. The previous literature does not provide conclusive information to determine the effectiveness of CASA. There are many limitations that support the discrepancy, such as uncontrollable factors in the foster care cases and small sample size. This has created a research gap due to conflicting evidence.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

The implications of this study could be used for Big Country CASA (BCC) to determine the needs of the surrounding counties. This study seeks to answer if Taylor County has experienced positive outcomes since implementing CASA and if a substantial demand exists in surrounding counties for BCC to expand to their foster care systems. These answers provide BCC with the information they need in order to provide the best service to children in foster care. In the same way, this information could provide other counties justification of a CASA program.

CASA and Policies

The Texas Family Code §§107.001 (2019) states that a guardian ad litem (GAL)/CASA is appointed to a child in order to represent their best interest. Code §§107.002 states a CASA should conduct investigations, acquire copies of relevant records, and perform duties required by the court. CASA relies on volunteers in order to seek out the goals of their mission (National CASA/GAL Association for Children, 2020). Advocates spent 5.5 million hours serving children in 2019 in order to lower negative outcomes in their children's lives that coincide with being in foster care (National CASA Association for Children, 2020). Pilkay and Lee (2015) stated that negative outcomes for foster youth include homelessness, early pregnancy, criminal activity, and emotional/behavioral problems. CASA states that a child with an advocate will reach permanency 1.8 months earlier in order to limit the amount of time they are in

foster care and thus limit these negative outcomes (National CASA Association for Children, 2020).

CASA strives for normalcy for the foster children they serve. Whether this is finding normalcy in foster care or with their parents, the amount of time in care and placement changes could limit disruption as well as make life simple for the child. All of the variables are centered around outcomes (Waxman et al., 2009). Intended outcomes include a safe permanent home for children in foster care. In addition, the end goal is to have the child in care for a short amount of time while staying in the same placement (Waxman et al., 2009). The outcome desired in a case is for the child to find a permanent home with the hope being reunification.

Evaluation of CASA

The two types of research on the CASA organization are counties served and the resources offered there and program evaluations on outcomes. Jagers et al. (2018) and Felix et al. (2017) focused their research on what counties were served and the resources being offered there. Felix et al. (2017) contacted 36 CASA supervisors and was only able to collect 12 surveys. Jagers et al. (2018) used snowball sampling to receive 473 surveys from CASA/GALs. When researching the type of counties in which CASA can be found, Jagers et al. (2018) found that more services were offered in places of high poverty but that fewer services were offered in areas with higher minority rates. However, it was found that the services offered in those counties matched with the services that CASA and judges recommended (Jagers et al., 2018). CASA is placed in regions that require more resources (Felix et al., 2017; Jagers et al., 2018). Due to this, Felix et al. (2017) found that CASA was not as effective in rural towns as they were in urban areas.

Cary et al. (2020) discovered what services or resources were given to children and families by CASA advocates. Those services were found to be case monitoring, achieving housing and associated services, serving youth and their parents, and assisting with being sent to another state to live with a relative (Cary et al., 2020). In relation to permanency, children zero to fifteen were more likely to have reunification or adoption as the permanency goal and 16- to 21-year-olds had Another Planned Permanency Living Arrangement (APPLA) as their permanency plan (Cary et al., 2020).

Additionally, Lawson and Berrick (2013) used past articles to determine whether CASA was a possible evidence-based practice. The data were highly varied in findings, with some studies showing that CASA was effective and some showing it was not (Lawson & Berrick, 2013). However, Lawson and Berrick (2013) also found that CASA cases included many different factors that resulted in more severe cases. These cases take a longer length of time and permanency is not always as clear or attainable (Lawson & Berrick, 2013). Because of the difference in findings, Lawson and Berrick (2013) found that CASA could not be considered an evidence-based practice.

Evaluation of the Effectiveness of CASA in the United States

As has been stated, empirical research has been conducted to examine the effectiveness of CASA in the United States, and the findings varied. Pilkay and Lee (2015) and Abramson (1991) both studied permanency and length in care and arrived at a similar outcome. Both studies found that permanency was most likely to be adoption with a longer time in care (Abramson, 1991; Pilkay & Lee, 2015). On the other hand, Calkins and Millar (1999), Gershun and Terrebonne (2018), and Peterson (2005) researched length of time in care and total number of placements. They each found CASA was

linked to a shorter time in care with fewer changes in placements. Litzelfelner (2000) also studied the difference in permanency; however, he came up with a different conclusion. This study showed there was little difference, if any, between having a CASA advocate and not having one at all (Litzelfelner, 2000). Given that foster systems and CASA implementation may be different across different states, this review reports empirical findings from studies of the Texas systems.

Evaluation of the Effectiveness of CASA in Texas

This literature has identified there were three studies specifically conducted in Texas (Osborne et al., 2019; Osborne et al., 2020; Waxman et al., 2009). Waxman et al. (2009) conducted an empirical study to examine the longitudinal effects of CASA for children in the Harris County Court system by comparing major outcomes between a treatment group and a comparison group. The treatment group consisted of children who in juvenile court with judge appointed volunteers. The comparison group was randomly selected from children in custody of the Texas Department of Protective and Regulatory Services (TDPRS) for a year. The groups were matched based on type of abuse, gender, and age. The children's cases were followed for three years from case files in local TDPRS to measure some outcome variables such as social services for children, protective factors, permanence, caregivers' family functioning, and children's self-esteem (Waxman et al., 2009). Children stated that CASA was more likely to offer neighborhood resources, acceptance, positive attitudes, value goals and achievements, and control deviant behaviors. It was found that CASA was effective in permanency goals with fewer placements and a shorter time in care (Waxman et al., 2019).

Osborne et al. (2020) completed the largest study on CASA by including the entirety of the Texas foster care system as their sample (excluding only around 2,000 children for missing or insufficient data). The children were divided into groups of children without a CASA (control group) and children that received a CASA (treatment group). A propensity score was given to each child that represented the probability of receiving a CASA advocate and then inverse probability weighting (IPW) was used for analysis. The researchers found that the treatment group had a greater chance of adoption than reunification or kinship placement.

In order to examine selection bias in CASA being assigned, Osborne et al. (2019) conducted an empirical study that included all children in the Texas foster care system that received a CASA advocate and compared to those that did not receive an advocate. This study explored the characteristics of the children, their family, and their case to establish why a CASA advocate was appointed to a certain case. The study found that CASA cases were more complex and severe than cases without an advocate.

Perceptions of CASA

Another approach to examine the effect of CASA is based on the opinion of judges and other foster care professionals. Leung (1996) and West et al. (2015) compared opinions of judges that had a CASA program with judges that did not have a CASA program. It was found in both studies that judges that implemented the program in their county praised CASA on their effectiveness; on the other hand, the judges without the program were not in favor of implementing CASA (Leung, 1996; West et al., 2015). Weisz and Thai (2003) sent surveys to judges and guardians ad litem (GALs) in order to determine if CASAs were more effective than GALs and caseworkers. It was determined

that CASA advocates were preferred due to several reasons (Weisz & Thai, 2003). The reasons were CASAs visited children more often, investigated more (which offered more information), and submitted a more thorough case report (Weisz & Thai, 2003).

Similarly, Litzelfelner (2008) surveyed judges, parents (biological, adoptive, and foster), caseworkers, and attorneys to come to a similar conclusion. It was found that each group of people stated more CASAs should be appointed to cases (Litzelfelner, 2008). He also found that if anyone had discrepancies with CASA it was not related to the program but an individual advocate (Litzelfelner, 2008).

Conclusion of the Literature Review

There are some mixed findings on the effectiveness of CASA. CASA seems to be favored among judges and other foster care professionals; however, an undivided decision cannot be conducted for other aspects of CASA. Previous research provides corresponding information on the characteristics of the counties in which CASA serves. Although there is agreeable research on the services provided by CASA, the results on permanency and length in care are varied due to case characteristics.

Although there are some studies on CASA, there are some limitations of each study including sample size. Osborne et al. (2019; 2020) can be considered the most valid due to the larger sample size. Having a Texas population, the sample sizes consisted of 68 programs or 32,349 children (Osborne et al., 2019; 2020). Because Waxman et al. (2009) specifically looked at Harris County, its random sample size was 1,643 children and began to lessen over the three-year period. The remaining studies continued to have a smaller sample size. In addition, each study compared CASA cases to non-CASA cases.

Some used current cases (Cary et al., 2020), while others used previous research (Gershun & Terrebone, 2018).

Although there is agreeable research on the services provided by CASA, the results on permanency and length in care are varied due to the case characteristics. In order to bridge the gap in previous research, this study attempts to compare major foster care outcomes between counties that have a CASA and those that do not. Outcome variables that are commonly used throughout the literature to determine the effectiveness of a CASA program include permanency plan, outcome, length of time in care, and number of placements. These variables are used to determine the effectiveness of CASA for many reasons. The result of this comparison can be used to determine if a county that has not used CASA may need to consider introducing a CASA.

CHAPTER III
METHODOLOGY

Research Design, Population, and Sample

The purpose of this descriptive study is to examine the outcomes between counties with and without CASA to determine if those counties need CASA. By doing so, it compared the difference in foster care outcomes from counties that do not have a CASA program with Big Country CASA (BCC). The population that the study focused on are county foster care systems in Texas. With Texas totaling 254 counties, only 35 of those counties do not currently have a CASA program (Texas CASA, 2021). The study used purposive sampling to include Taylor County, where BCC is located, and its surrounding counties (Fisher, Jones, Shackelford, Callahan, and Coleman). All six counties are in Region 2.

Measures and Procedures

This study measured outcome variables that are commonly used throughout the literature to determine the effectiveness of the CASA organization. These outcome variables were accessed via public data sets (TDFPS 2021c). These data sets contain the outcome variables for the past ten years. In addition to outcome variables, this study also examined characteristics of the county.

Foster Care Outcomes

Many of the variables from the data sets focus on outcomes. The following includes the definition of each variable.

- The “number of children in foster care” refers to the number of children that are in the foster care system in each county. These children are in TDFPS custody whether this is temporary or permanent (TDFPS, 2021b).
- The “length of time in care” refers to how many months a child spends in the foster care system. The time begins when TDFPS is appointed custody and ends when it is terminated (TDFPS, 2021c).
- The “number of placements” refers to how many different homes a child lived in while in care. These placements can be kinship (fictive or kin), foster, or adoptive (TDFPS, 2021b).
- “Permanency outcome” is reached when the department no longer has custody, which could be from termination or the child turning eighteen. Outcome, or exit, can be reunification, relative as a permanent managing conservator (PMC), adoption, and/or aging out. If “other” is listed, this means their exit reason is missing, they are in independent living, or custody was not reached (TDFPS, 2021b).

Characteristics of the Counties

In order to make the comparison more relevant, this study collected basic information about the sample counties from Region 2. The information included the population of the county the type of cities (metropolitan versus nonmetropolitan). The

Texas Department of State Health Services (2014) describes metropolitan areas, or urban areas, as a population of 50,000 or more in the central area combined with 100,000 or more in the region.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected to determine if the counties need CASAs. These data were collected from online websites, and no special access to the data was necessary. Therefore, this study has approval (Appendix A) from the Abilene Christian University International Review Board under non-research/non-human research determination. The majority of the data came from different areas of the Department of Family and Protective Services website and the Texas government website.

Basic descriptive statistics were conducted to present the characteristics of the selected counties. The trends during the past ten years in each outcome variable were compared between the information from Taylor County and the remaining counties. This study examined whether the surrounding counties would benefit from CASA expanding.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

Characteristics of Counties

In order to understand the differences in the foster care cases among the counties, an understanding of the differences in the counties' characteristics have to be acknowledged first. Taylor County, where BCC is held, has the largest population size with 131,515 people in 2010 and growing to 138,034 in 2019 (United States Census, 2019). This makes Taylor County significantly larger than the surrounding counties. Out of the surrounding counties, Jones and Callahan have the highest number of people with approximately 20,000 (20,192 in 2010 and 20,083 in 2019) people in Jones County and approximately 14,000 (13,545 in 2010 and 13,943 in 2019) in Callahan County. These three counties are also all considered metropolitan counties, and the remaining three are not (DSHS, 2014). Coleman County's population for both 2019 and 2010 were less than 10,000 while Fisher and Shackelford were less than 5,000 (United States Census, 2019).

Similar to total population, Taylor County greatly surpasses the total number of foster children in their county in comparison to these other counties. The data at hand show an increase in the number of foster children in Taylor County over the past ten years. From 2011 to 2014, Taylor County had approximately 300-350 children in foster care (TDFPS, 2021b). In 2015, that number rose to 513 and continued its upward trajectory until it reached 858 children in 2020. This same pattern can almost be seen in Fisher and Jones Counties but on a smaller scale. For Jones County, there were 39

children in care in 2017, but this number jumped to 73 in 2018. Compared to 2011 to 2016, the number of foster children was significantly less. There lowest recorded year was 2012 with 11 children in foster care. The TDFPS website will not quantify a number if it is five or less children. When this occurs, that specific year will be labeled “one to five.” For Fisher County in 2011 and 2016, this “one to five” label was placed. From 2012 to 2015, the statistics show there were 6 to 7 children in care, but this then greatly increased to 13 and 16 in 2017 and 2018, respectively. However, the total number dropped to below ten once again for both 2019 and 2020. Callahan and Coleman Counties’ total number of foster children did not have a specific rise or fall across the ten-year span. Callahan County fluctuates between 20 and 35 children in care while Coleman County ranges around 20 to 50 children. Callahan had two outlier years in 2013 and 2014 (15 and 12 respectively) with a low number of children in care. However, Coleman County rose in the number of children in care with 71 children in 2011. A pattern cannot be provided for Shackelford due to no data being present from 2011 to 2013; however, between the years of 2014 to 2020, there were fluctuating numbers falling between five and ten children in their care.

Types of Exits

TDFPS divides exits into seven different types: custody to relatives without PCA (permanency care assistance), family reunification, relative adoption consummated, non-relative adoption consummated, youth emancipation, custody to relatives with PCA, and other (TDFPS, 2021c). For the purpose of this study, custody to relatives with and without PCA, relative and non-relative adoption consummated, and youth emancipation and other were combined. Taylor County’s total exits for the ten-year span of 2011

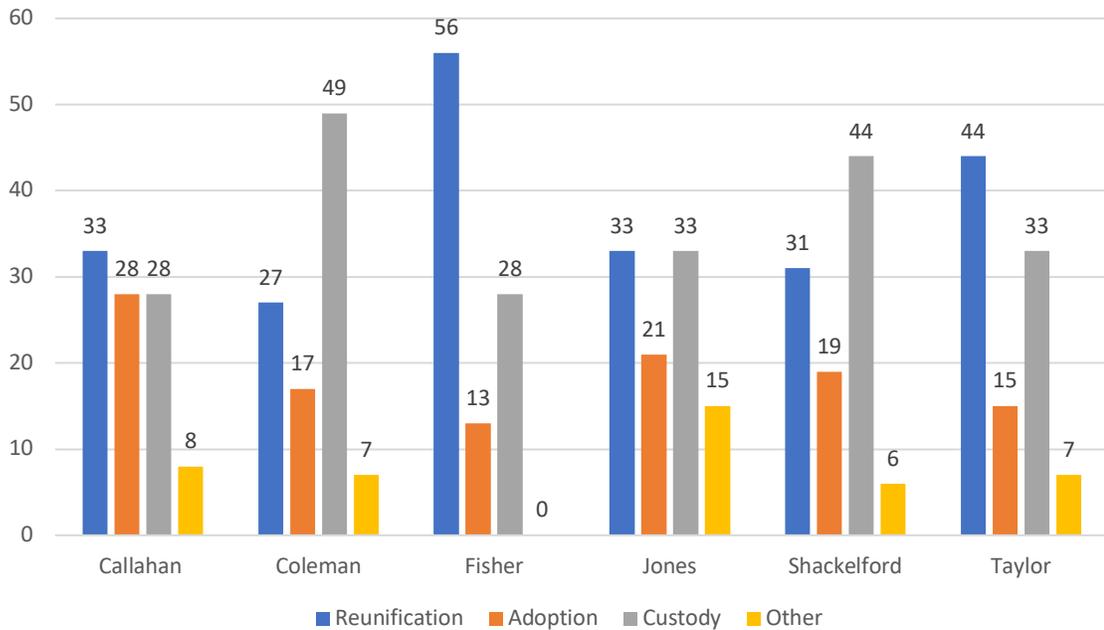
through 2020 were 2,062 exits. This total is significantly larger than all of the surrounding counties that produced a combined total of only 397: Callahan at 87, Coleman at 150, Fisher at 32, Jones at 112, and Shackelford at 16. The total of each grouping was then taken over the ten-year span for each county and then their percentages were calculated to determine what type of exit was the most common. (See Figure 1). The figure reflects that Fisher and Taylor have higher rates of reunification than the other groupings. Coleman and Shackelford have higher custody rates than the other exit type groupings.

From 2014 to 2017, Coleman had fewer than 10 exits for the entire year with two of those years having no reunification, only custody and adoption. Coleman has many years when they had 15 to 20 children exit care for the year. In 2011, they had a large number of children exit—43 children—with only a 37% reunification rate. For the ten-year span, Callahan stayed under 15 children exiting care every year. Their highest reunification rate was 2019 at 75% with only four exits, while the lowest year for reunification was no reunification in 2014 (two exits) and 2016 (one exit). In 2011, Callahan had the most children leave care (15) with a 47% reunification rate. Jones County has had a significant increase in exits over the ten-year span. In 2011, they had six children exit with a reunification rate of 17% and by 2020 they had 31 exits and a 29% reunification rate. For the majority of the ten years, Jones County had low reunification rates. Their highest—50%—were for the years 2012 (two exits) and 2019 (24 exits). Fisher County typically has five or fewer children exit care, with the exception of 2019 at 11 exits. Out of the 32 children that exited care in Fisher County, 18 of those children had reunification as their exit type. Shackelford had zero exits for the years 2011

to 2015 and again in 2018. For 2016, five children exited care, and all five children were reunified. This is the only year the children in Shackelford had reunification as their exit type. In Taylor County, 2011 to 2015 had fewer than 200 children exit care each year. From 2016 to 2020, Taylor County rose from 221 exits to 326 exits. Their lowest reunification rate was 36% in 2011 with 117 exits, and their highest rate was in 2015 at 51% and 170 exits.

Figure 1

Percentage of Exits



Length of Time in Care

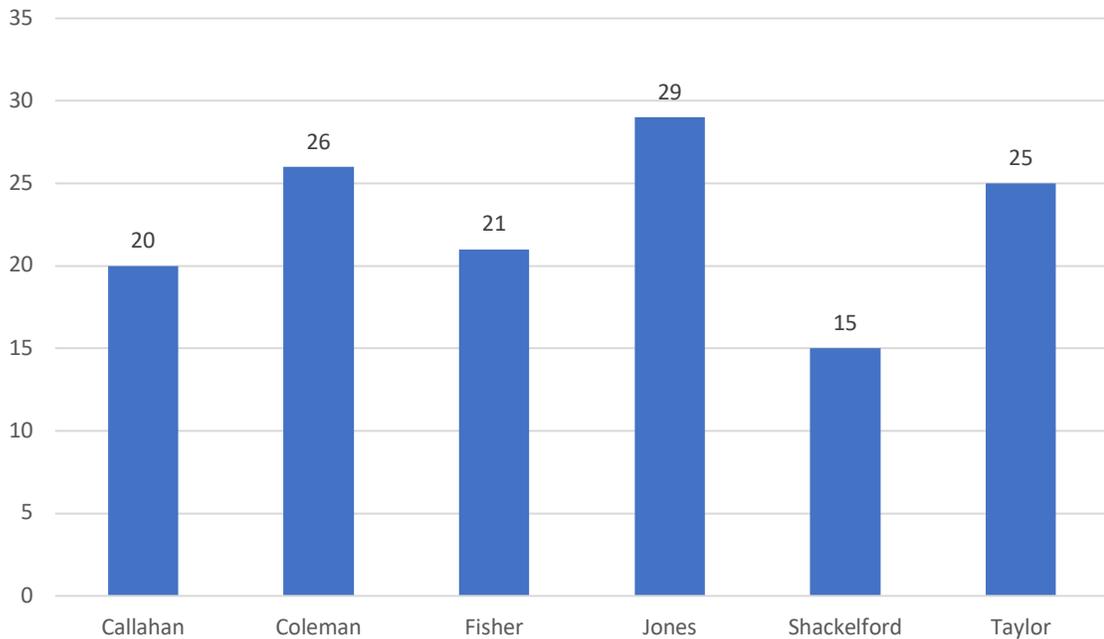
Similar to types of exits, the length of time in care was calculated using the average months in care over the entire ten-year period. For the majority of the counties, the average months in care are approximately in the same range (See Figure 2). The data

show the children in Jones County spend the longest time in care (29 average months) while the children in Shackelford spend around 15 months in care (TDFPS, 2021c).

Many of the surrounding counties have years when their length of time in care is relatively longer than the remainder of the ten years. For example, Callahan County had one exit in 2014 with 57 months in care. That is almost five years for a child to be in care. In 2018 and 2019, children in Callahan spent an average of 15 months in care with one of those years having 13 exits and the other only having four. Coleman has many years in which children spend around 30 to 35 months in care; however, the longest average time in care was in 2017 at 43 months in care with eight exits. This is drastically different than 2018, which had 17 exits and an average of 14 months in care. Jones County's longest time in care was the year 2012 with only two exits. One of those exits only spent 11 months in care; however, the second exit spent 120 months in care to bring the year's average to 66 months in care. In 2011 and 2019, children spent an average of 15 months in care in Jones County. In 2011, Jones had a total of six exits, and 2019 had 24 exits. Fisher County's shortest average time in care was less than a year at seven months in 2015, which had five total exits. On the other hand, their longest time in care was in 2011 with one exit at 52 average months in care. Similar to Fisher, Shackelford's shortest time in care—six months—was in 2016, with five total exits. Their longest average time in care was in 2020 at 21 months in care and two exits. Taylor County's longest average time in care was in 2017 at 32 months in care from a total of 271 exits. The shortest time in care was in 2011 at 21 months with 117 exits.

Figure 2

Average Months in Care



Average Number of Placements

In regard to the number of placements, the total average across the ten-year period is fairly consistent across the six counties. Shackelford is the only county that does not have an average of three placements (See Table 1). However, four of the five surrounding counties each have one or more year(s) that contain an increased number of placement changes. For example, Fisher had an average of nine placement changes in 2011, and Callahan had seven in 2014. In the table, zero indicates no exits for that specific year with the exception of Fisher in 2015, which had a total of five exits and an average placement change of zero.

Table 1*Average Number of Placements*

	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	Average
Callahan	3	3	3	7	3	5	2	1	2	1	3
Coleman	4	2	2	4	3	2	6	2	3	2	3
Fisher	9	0	6	3	0	0	4	1	2	1	3
Jones	3	3	5	5	2	2	2	2	2	3	3
Shackelford	0	0	0	0	0	2	1	0	2	2	2
Taylor	3	3	2	2	3	3	3	3	2	3	3

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to compare the outcomes between counties with and without a CASA to determine if those counties could benefit from a CASA. In order to accomplish this goal, the data were studied and compared in many different ways. To determine a need, the study examined if the surrounding counties had a considerably sized foster care system, reunification as their exit type, extended time in care, or numerous placement changes. When discussing expansion in the literature, Litzelfelner (2000) believes that the CASA programs could be a crucial tool in building a better child welfare system. On the other hand, data also show that judges are apprehensive to the idea of implementing a program in their county; therefore, BCC should begin to break down those potential barriers in the surrounding counties (West et al., 2015).

When compared to Taylor County, the surrounding counties do not have an extensive foster care system. Their total population, number of children in care, and number of exits were all substantially smaller than those of Taylor County. However, the data for Jones County show that their total number of children in foster care and exits are rising every year. Although Callahan, Coleman, and Jones have a comparable number of total number of foster children, their population size differs greatly from each other. The data cannot show if the low population has a high number of foster children or if the high population has a low number of foster children. Even though Shackelford had the lowest

totals, their reunification is not the highest exit type. This is the same with Coleman and Jones County.

Among the six counties, the average time in care and the average number of placements did not have a major difference regarding the ten-year average. On the other hand, the surrounding counties had at least one year during the ten-year period that the totals for both categories were higher than the other years. Taylor County had consistent averages in all ten years for both areas. A factor that can affect this difference is the total number of exits. For example, Jones County had only two exits in the year 2012 with one exit lasting almost a year and the second lasting ten years (TDFPS, 2021c). When a child remains in care for an extended period, this typically coincides with multiple placement changes. This could explain why many of the surrounding counties had years with a high number of placement changes. Complex cases have a greater effect on totals for smaller counties than those of larger counties.

Although this study did not show removal rate, removals could be a reflection of the bias and values of the community. In rural counties such as Fisher, Shackelford, and Coleman, those aspects could be more profound than in urban areas. The same can be said for the number of investigations and intakes in those counties. There is no way to interpret those in the data. In the same way, there are no data that show the reasoning behind a child's investigation or removal.

Data on the impact of BCC in Taylor County cannot be determined. Due to BCC only covering 50% of the total number of foster children in Taylor County, data cannot determine which cases had an advocate and which did not. Therefore, there is no way to

determine what impact, if any, that BCC has had on Taylor County since 2015. Due to this, BCC cannot be effectively evaluated.

Implications

The findings of the study determine whether there is a need for CASA in the surrounding counties. Based upon the findings, both Coleman and Jones Counties would most benefit from BCC expanding to their counties. This conclusion is based on Jones having a substantial growth in children in foster care as well as a low reunification rate over the course of this ten-year span. Jones County could also benefit from BCC's services, as it also has the highest average of months in care. As for Coleman County, their total of children in foster care is high with the number of exits rising every year and a significantly low reunification rate. Shackelford and Fisher do not have a substantial number of children in foster care to justify BCC expanding to their counties. Lastly, Callahan County has a shorter length of time in care in comparison; however, their reunification rate could improve in comparison to the remaining exit categories. Callahan could possibly benefit from BCC expanding to their county; however, it is not imperative.

In regard to research, this study proposes the need for future research that should be completed. The rate of investigations and intakes should be analyzed and compared to the total number of foster children as well as number of exits. In the same way, removals should also be analyzed. This data should also be compared to the data of BCC to determine their impact since 2015. However, there is still no way to determine which cases were CASA cases and which were not.

Limitations

This study could not determine the efficiency of BCC in Taylor County for several reasons. BCC does not cover Taylor County entirely due to the lack of volunteers participating in their mission; therefore, the data from TDFPS does not accurately reflect BCC's impact. In addition, there are other factors outside of BCC's control that positively or negatively impacted the foster care system. Because of this, the current study only focused on outcomes in regards to the needs of the surrounding counties. BCC only covers around 50% of the foster children in Taylor County and cannot be fully evaluated with the data being shown.

Similar to the existing research limitations, foster care cases have complex factors that are uncontrollable and unforeseeable. These factors influence the length of time in care, exit type, and number of placements. The more complex cases could result in a longer time in care, multiple placements, and an exit type that is not reunification.

Due to the limitations of this study, the findings should be interpreted cautiously. Future studies should include the counties number of removals, investigations, and intakes. These totals should be compared to total number of foster children and total number of exits. Even though it cannot be fully evaluated, a study should be conducted using the TDFPS and CASA data collectively. Despite the limitations, this study will aid BCC in bridging county gaps and advocating for the abused and neglected children in the surrounding counties.

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APPENDIX

Institutional Review Board Approval Letter

ABILENE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY
Educating Students for Christian Service and Leadership Throughout the World
Office of Research and Sponsored Programs
320 Hardin Administration Building, ACU Box 29103, Abilene, Texas 79699-9103
325-674-2885



Dear McKensie,

On behalf of the Institutional Review Board, I am pleased to inform you that your project titled

(IRB# 21-039) is exempt from review under Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects as:

- Non-research, and
- Non-human research

Based on:

If at any time the details of this project change, please resubmit to the IRB so the committee can determine whether or not the exempt status is still applicable.

I wish you well with your work.

Sincerely,

Megan Roth

Megan Roth, Ph.D.
Director of Research and Sponsored Programs