



Former Stockholm child protection cases as young adults: Do outcomes differ between those that received services and those that did not?

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Abstract

This study reports on outcomes in young adulthood for previous CPA clients, by examining the prevalence of teenage parenthood, criminal offences, hospitalizations for psychiatric diagnoses, and self-support problems in a representative sample of subjects born 1968 to 1975, that resided in Stockholm (Sweden) their entire childhood, from birth to age 18. In this sample, 161 were previous CPA service receivers (service group) 110 were referred to the CPA during childhood but did not receive services (non-service group), and 1961 never had any known contact with the CPA (majority population). Almost every second man (45%) and woman (45%) in the service group had at least one negative outcome, compared to 37% of the men and 25% of the women in the non-service group, and 14–21% of the men and 7–12% of women in the majority population. Multiple regressions suggest that the impact of CPA services was scant, accounting for 1–14% of the variance of outcome variables. The results point to the potential value of including unsubstantiated cases of child maltreatment in follow-up studies of child protection clients. Implications for the findings are discussed.

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1. Introduction

This study reports on adult outcomes for former child protection clients in Stockholm, comparing a group of children that received interventions with a group that were only referred and investigated by child protection authorities (CPAs) but never received any services, and comparing these two groups with a general population sample.

During the last 50 years, there has been a dramatic increase in awareness and concerns about child abuse and neglect in western countries. Also during this era, we have witnessed a historical broadening of the concepts abuse, neglect and child maltreatment although they have eluded attempts of creating conceptual clarity (Gough, 1996). Subsequently, CPAs in western countries have tended to grow in size and scope, not the least through legally mandated reporting of child maltreatment by professionals working with children and families (e.g., Ainsworth, 2002). In the US, reports of abuse and neglect to CPAs tripled between 1976 and 1992 (Albert & Barth, 1996). While CPAs have been given increasingly larger case loads of referrals, requiring thorough and resource consuming investigations in order to substantiate alleged maltreatment (Ainsworth, 2002), empirical knowledge about outcomes and effects of services provided has remained weak (e.g., MacDonald, 2001).

Research suggests that substantiation and decision processes in CPAs may contain considerable diagnostic disorder. Several studies have reported few differences between children placed in out-of-home care compared to children receiving no or other services by the same agency (e.g., Andersson, 1984; Berridge, 1985; Lindsey, 1992; Packman, 1986). Results from a US study by Leiter, Myers, and Zingraff (1994) also indicate that children in substantiated and unsubstantiated referrals share many predicaments in childhood age, and that short-term outcomes for these groups tend to be similar. Their study included more than 2000 randomly selected children reported to CPAs in North Carolina. After controlling for a number of independent variables, including poverty, they found mostly no differences in school and delinquency outcomes between children in substantiated and unsubstantiated referrals. Most outcomes in both groups were considerably worse compared to a general population sample.

2. Long-term outcomes for former “child protection cases” in the literature

Research paints a bleak picture of outcomes in late adolescence and young adult years of former CPA clients who have been objects of interventions. Scandinavian studies have repeatedly found high excess risks of suicide and premature death (Anderson, 1976; Andreasson, Allebeck, & Romelsjö, 1988; de Chateau, 1990; Hjerm, Vinnerljung, & Lindblad, 2004; Romelsjö, Kaplan, Cohen, Allebeck, & Andreasson, 1992). Similar results have consistently been reported in mortality studies on adult former foster children (Barth & Blackwell, 1998; Hjerm et al., 2004; Vinnerljung, 1995; Vinnerljung & Ribe, 2001). Most follow-up studies on foster care alumni using other outcome measures have found rather discouraging results, looking for example at education (e.g., Cheung & Heath, 1994; Courtney, Piliavin, Grogan-Taylor, & Nesmith, 2001; Vinnerljung, Öman, & Gunnarson, in press) and crime (Bohman & Sigvardsson, 1980; Courtney, Terao, & Bost,

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