Congregations have traditionally played important roles in community life by providing care, guidance, spirituality, and social networks to members and people in the community. They are often regarded as anchors in a neighborhood and integral parts of the local civil society. As U.S. policymakers seek new ways to address intractable social problems, congregations are being called upon to do more to alleviate social problems and assist people in need. This call to action is evident in the “charitable choice” provision of the 1996 federal welfare reform legislation, which, in part, makes it easier for religious organizations to contract with government to supply social services.

Although social welfare policies are being reoriented away from federal government programs to more locally based initiatives, little is known about the capacity of many community groups, especially religious congregations, to meet growing political and public expectations.

To begin bridging this knowledge gap, the Center on Nonprofits and Philanthropy contracted with the Greater Washington Research Center to include four questions in its April 1997 consumer survey of the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area that pertain to how individuals interact with local congregations, as described below.

Giving money is the most frequent way of interacting with congregations.

Nearly 60 percent of D.C.-area residents made a financial contribution to a local congregation during the past year (figure 1). Giving money to a religious congregation was the most common form of involvement. The next most frequent response was attending religious services. Nearly half (46 percent) of the respondents said that they attended religious services on a regular basis, that is, at least once a month. Other types of involvement with local congregations were much less common. About one in five metro area residents volunteered their time to programs offered by congregations, and one in five made a financial contribution to a religious congregation during the past year.
African Americans are most likely to attend religious services on a regular basis.

Although nearly half of all metro area residents reported attending religious services at least monthly, the rates of attendance varied considerably by race. African Americans are much more likely to attend services on a regular basis than other groups (table 1). Nearly 60 percent of blacks in the D.C. area go to services at least monthly. The rate for regular monthly attendance is higher among African Americans than for whites (41 percent) and for members of other racial groups (46 percent). Whites and individuals of other races are more inclined to attend religious services occasionally, for major holidays, or not at all. When statistically controlling for the effects of race, income, and place of residence, blacks are about three times more likely than whites, and twice as likely as those from other racial groups, to attend religious services on a regular basis.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Activity</th>
<th>All</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attend Religious Services</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>At least once a month</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occasionally (5–9 times annually)</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>14%</td>
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<tr>
<td>For holidays (1–4 times annually)</td>
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<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number</td>
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<td>234</td>
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<td>Annual Financial Contribution</td>
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<tr>
<td>Less than $250</td>
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<td>$250 to $1,000</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than $1,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Does not contribute</td>
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<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
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<td>12%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number</td>
<td>952</td>
<td>229</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$^a$: Includes Asians, Native Americans, and anyone who did not identify their race. The GWRC survey does not ask questions about ethnicity, so Hispanics cannot be identified in the survey.

Table 1

Source: The Urban Institute.

African Americans are most likely to provide financial support.

About 60 percent of all individuals surveyed indicated that they provided some financial support to congregations during the past year. But the likelihood of giving and the amount given vary by racial group.

Giving money to a religious congregation may be linked, in part, to regular church attendance. Blacks are more likely to attend religious services on a regular basis and also are more likely to provide financial support. Nearly two-thirds of African Americans surveyed made a financial contribution to a congregation during the past year, compared with about half of whites and other races (table 1). In contrast, more than one-third of whites and one-quarter of blacks said that they made no financial contribution to a congregation in the past year.

Most people who give money to religious congregations donate modest amounts. About a quarter of survey respondents said that they gave less than $250 annually. But about one in six people (16 percent) said they donated more than $1,000 per year. Black residents were somewhat more likely than whites to donate higher sums. While 16 percent of whites in the D.C. area gave in excess of $1,000 annually, nearly 20 percent of African Americans did so.

Moreover, when statistically controlling for the effects of race, income, and place of residence, African Americans remain the most likely group to provide financial support to D.C.-area congregations. Blacks were twice as likely as whites or those from other racial groups to donate funds to congregations.

Higher income residents are the most likely to volunteer their time.

Finding time to volunteer for community activities can often be difficult in the 1990s. Single parenting, work and family responsibilities, and a variety of other socioeconomic factors have created competing demands for an individual’s time and attention. Despite the multiple pressures of life, about one in five D.C.-area residents (21 percent) in our survey said that they volunteered their time to community programs offered by congregations. About half of these individuals volunteered on a regular basis (at least once a month); the other half volunteered on an occasional basis, that is, a few times each year.

A greater percentage of blacks than whites donated their time to area congregations. About one-fifth of whites volunteered at congregations compared with one-quarter of blacks.

But when holding the effects of race, income, and place of residence statistically constant, household income matters most in predicting which group will volunteer its time. That is, other factors being equal, higher income residents—those with annual household incomes above $100,000— comprise the group most likely to donate time to congregational programs.

Child care is the most used social service offered by congregations.

About one of every ten survey respondents said that they used congregation-based social services. Black residents in the metro area were more likely to use social services offered by congregations than were whites (16 percent versus 9 percent, respectively).

All groups, regardless of race, indicated that child care was the service they used most often. With more than 60 percent of mothers in the Washington area in the paid labor force, child care is in great demand. Two of every five respondents (44 percent) said that they used child care services based at local congregations.

The second most frequently used service was counseling. Nearly one in three survey respondents (28 percent) said that they received some type of...
counseling from a local congregation. Other services such as tutoring, mentoring, senior services, emergency food, housing, or clothing services were used by 1 to 4 percent of survey respondents. The comparatively larger percentages of people who use child care and counseling services may reflect the overrepresentation of middle-class households in the survey. Other research conducted at the Urban Institute has shown that the majority of congregations in the D.C. metropolitan area offer some type of emergency service to help people in need.

Implications

Two themes currently run through many of our political debates on social welfare and community involvement. First, there is concern that Americans have become disengaged, disinterested, and uninvolved in their communities. Second, there is a desire to increase citizen participation in addressing the problems of people in need. Numerous forums, such as the President’s Summit for America’s Future, are attempting to stimulate local response to community problems. Within the context of these broad themes comes a growing set of political and public expectations that local community groups, such as congregations, can reconnect individuals to their communities in hopes of ameliorating intractable social problems.

But the results of our survey provide mixed support for the notion that religious congregations can do more to rejuvenate community attachment. Although the majority of residents in and around the nation’s capital are connected in some way to religious congregations, it is not clear how easily congregations can increase citizen participation and, as a result, expand their community programs targeted at those in need. Three survey findings highlight the challenges faced by local congregations.

First, African Americans in the D.C. area are already very involved with local religious congregations.

They are more likely than whites to attend religious services with greater regularity, to provide financial support to congregations, and to volunteer their time to congregational ministries. Indeed, this finding is consistent with other studies showing that blacks report higher rates of religious participation than other racial groups. Expanding the involvement of African Americans beyond current levels may be a significant challenge.

Second, higher income residents in the D.C. area are more likely than lower income residents to volunteer their time to congregation programs.

Nearly 30 percent of people with incomes above $100,000 volunteered their time to a program run by a religious congregation, compared with less than 15 percent of those with incomes below $25,000. This finding seems to imply a trade-off between time and money. Because higher income people are more financially able to buy basic goods and services, they may have more discretionary time to volunteer in community programs. Nonetheless, increasing the proportion of people who volunteer their time is a considerable challenge, given the competing demands that most people experience in their daily lives.

Third, D.C.-area residents are more likely to give money than time to support religious congregations.

This finding is more stark when put into national context. D.C.-area residents attend religious services less often but are more likely to give financial contributions to congregations than do people nationally. Findings from the national 1994 General Social Survey, conducted by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago, showed that roughly 82 percent of Americans attended religious services at least once a year, while 78 percent of respondents in our 1997 D.C.-area survey attended religious services that often. On the other hand, D.C.-area residents are almost twice as likely as people nationwide to make large annual contributions to religious congregations. About 17 percent of residents in the D.C. area gave $1,000 or more to religious congregations, compared with 9 percent of respondents to the General Social Survey. Because the D.C. area has a higher per capita income than many other metro areas in the country, it may be relatively easy for individuals in and around the nation’s capital to be financially generous. Nevertheless, compared to a national sample, the financial support of D.C.-area residents for religious congregations appears to be quite high.

The underlying policy assumption that individuals will volunteer their time to community institutions to address social problems is not well supported by these data. At least in the D.C. metropolitan area, individuals are supporting religious congregations but are doing so through their checkbooks rather than hands-on engagement. The vision of neighbors joining together to address community needs—reminiscent of old-fashioned barn raising—falls far short of the reality of how residents in the D.C. area actually behave.

The inclination to provide financial support rather than direct volunteer service may partially reflect the changing demographics of American society. Given the work and family responsibilities that most Americans juggle in their daily lives, economic and other interests may be crowding out personal involvement in local affairs. Facing time constraints, D.C.-area residents may feel that providing funds to congregations is the best they can do. This idea has important policy implications if communities expect to rely more heavily on their voluntary infrastructures to address local problems.

Many unanswered questions remain for those proposing an expanded role for congregations in meeting community needs. How can individuals be encouraged to volunteer their time and money to help those in need? Is it possible to bring new participants into the mix or to increase involvement among segments of the population that are already active in their communities? Organizational capacity is linked to citizen involvement. Our survey results suggest that expectations about the capacity of religious congregations to do more for their communities must be tempered with the realities of how local residents relate to these institutional structures.
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The Urban Institute’s Center on Nonprofits and Philanthropy (CNP) was established in September 1996 to explore the role and contributions of nonprofit organizations in democratic societies. The work of CNP will be communicated through the dissemination of timely, nonpartisan research to policymakers, practitioners, researchers, the media, and the general public.

The National Center for Charitable Statistics (NCCS) became part of the Urban Institute in July 1996 and is the statistical arm of the Center on Nonprofits and Philanthropy. The mission of NCCS is to build compatible national, state, and regional databases and to develop uniform standards for reporting on the activities of charitable organizations. NCCS databases are available on CD-ROM, diskette, 9-track tape, or via File Transfer Protocol (FTP) in a variety of database formats. For information, call 202-828-1801 or visit our web site (http://www.urban.org/cnp).

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