



Congregations' Social Service Activities

Mark Chaves

The 1996 welfare reform legislation envisions an expanded role for congregations and other religious organizations in our social welfare system. Federal, state, and local government agencies are implementing "charitable choice" provisions by encouraging religious congregations to seek government grants and contracts. Recent research has shown that although only about 3 percent of religious congregations currently receive government funding for social service activity, as many as one-third express some interest in moving in that direction.

This policy brief draws on data from the National Congregations Study (NCS), a 1998 survey of a nationally representative sample of congregations, to explore the role religious congregations might play in our changing social welfare system. NCS data were collected via 60-minute interviews with one key informant (a minister, priest, rabbi, or other leader) from 1,236 congregations. The response rate was 80 percent.¹

Who Will Take Advantage of Charitable Choice?

Thirty-six percent of informants believe their congregation might apply for government money to support human services programs if such funding is made available. Three subsets of congregations are particularly likely to express interest in seeking government aid.

First, very large congregations express willingness to take advantage of charitable

choice opportunities. Second, informants from 64 percent of predominantly African-American congregations expressed willingness to apply for government funds, compared with only 28 percent from predominantly white congregations. Controlling for other characteristics, predominantly black congregations are five times more likely than other congregations to seek public support for social service activities.

Third, Catholic and theologically liberal or moderate Protestant congregations are significantly more likely to apply for government funds in support of social service activities than

are theologically conservative congregations. Forty-one percent of congregations in liberal or moderate Protestant denominations said they are willing to apply for government funds, compared with 40 percent of Catholic congregations and only 28 percent of congregations in conservative denominations.

Furthermore, congregations described by their leaders as theologically and politically conservative are significantly less likely to express will-

ingness to apply for government funds even after controlling for denominational affiliation and other characteristics. This result is particularly notable because it presents a stark contrast to the political battle lines on charitable choice. On the national level, political and religious conservatives have been the strongest advocates of charitable choice initiatives; political and religious liberals have been most strongly against them. Locally, the situation is reversed.²

Congregations are more likely to provide short-term, small-scale relief of various sorts than to operate ongoing or large-scale programs.

Table 1
Congregations' Social Service Activity

Program	Participating Congregations (%)	Attendees in Participating Congregations (%)
Food	33	50
Housing/shelter	18	32
Clothing	11	18
Homelessness	8	16
Health	4	10
Education (not including religious education)	6	10
Domestic violence	4	7
Tutoring/mentoring	3	4
Substance abuse	2	4
Employment	1	2
All projects	57	75

Source: National Congregations Study, 1998.

What Services Do Congregations Perform?

The activities organizations conduct today are likely to be those they conduct in the future. The survey asked, "Has your congregation participated in or supported social service, community development, or neighborhood organizing projects of any sort within the past 12 months?" Congregations responding in the affirmative were asked to describe each project (table 1).

Fifty-seven percent of congregations, containing 75 percent of religious service attendees, report participating in or supporting social service projects of some sort. This is substantially lower than reports in previous research.³ It appears that samples biased toward larger, urban congregations may have caused previous studies to substantially overestimate the proportion of all congregations involved in formal social service projects.

Table 1 suggests that congregations favor some types of projects over others. Housing, clothing, and, especially, food projects are more common than programs dealing with

health, education, domestic violence, tutoring/mentoring, substance abuse, or work issues. Fewer than 10 percent of congregations have programs in the latter areas, compared with 11 percent for clothing, 18 percent for housing/shelter, and 33 percent for food-related projects. Eight percent of congregations report providing services to homeless people, although there is substantial overlap between this category of activity and the food, clothing, and housing/shelter projects.⁴ Taken as a whole, the results presented in this table suggest that congregations are more likely to engage in activities that address the immediate needs of individuals for food, clothing, and shelter than in projects or programs that require sustained involvement to meet longer-term goals.

The numbers in table 1 disguise a great deal of variation in the intensity with which congregations are involved in social service activity. The 33 percent of congregations supporting or participating in food programs, for example, encompasses a wide range of involvement levels, from donating money to a community food bank to supplying volunteers for a Meals on Wheels project to operat-

ing a soup kitchen. Similar variety is evident among housing programs and programs to serve the homeless.

One measure of the depth to which congregations are involved in these activities is the extent to which they administer programs under their own auspices. For each program or project reported by a congregation, the survey asked whether it was completely run by the congregation, or whether it was run by, or in collaboration with, other organizations. Looking at three of the most common sorts of programs in which congregations engage—food, housing, and homelessness services—it is clear that only a very small minority of congregations administer their own projects in these areas. About one-third of congregations with food projects operate them on their own, which means that only 12 percent of all congregations run such programs by themselves. By far the most typical pattern of involvement in social service activity is for congregations to support programs and activities operated by other organizations.

Other indicators of the depth of congregational involvement in social service activity are equally informative. Focusing on the subset of congregations reporting some degree of social service involvement, only 12 percent have a staff person devoting at least 25 percent of his or her work time to social service projects. Spending on the projects takes up, on average, between 2 percent and 4 percent of a congregation's total budget.⁵

NCS results suggest that congregations tend to participate in social service activities in their own distinctive way. The most common types of housing-related activities engaged in by congregations, for example, are home repairs or renovations for the needy. Another common type of activity intersects food and homeless programs: cooking meals for the homeless on a regular basis.

Half of all congregations say that they support social service activities via the provision of volunteers. Of congregations engaged in some level of social service activity, 90 percent

report supporting at least one activity in the form of volunteer labor from the congregation. At the same time, although providing volunteers is a common kind of congregational involvement in social services, the total number of volunteers provided by the typical congregation is rather small. In 80 percent of the congregations engaged in these activities, the number of volunteers mobilized in the past year is less than 30; the average congregation has mobilized 10 volunteers over the past year. Given this, it is no accident that the highest levels of congregational involvement are in areas, such as food and housing, where organizations are able to take advantage of congregations' capacity to mobilize relatively small numbers of volunteers to carry out well-defined tasks. Programs or projects able to adapt to this model are likely to be more successful at drawing congregations into their efforts than programs or projects for which this model is not appropriate.

Which Are the Most Active Congregations?

NCS data can help identify the congregations that are most active in the social service arena. Table 2 shows that about half of the congregations with 150 or fewer regularly participating adult members have social service programs, while 86 percent of the congregations with more than 500 regularly participating adults have them. In addition, although only about 1 percent of congregations have more than 900 regularly participating adults, these congregations account for roughly one-quarter of the money directly spent by congregations on social service activity. The largest 10 percent of congregations account for more than half of all the money spent by congregations on social services.

Religious institutions located in low-income neighborhoods tend to do more social service activity than congregations located in higher-income neighborhoods. Middle-class congre-

Program	Participating Congregations (%)		
	≤150 Participants	151–500 Participants	>500 Participants
Food*	29	51	59
Housing/shelter*	15	35	41
Clothing*	9	17	23
Homelessness*	7	14	25
Health*	3	11	14
Education (not including religious education)*	5	9	14
Domestic violence	3	10	9
Tutoring/mentoring	2	6	5
Substance abuse	1	5	5
Employment	1	3	2
Any social service project*	53	78	86
Percentage of congregations with a staff person devoting at least 25 percent of work time to social service programs*	5	10	21

Source: National Congregations Study, 1998.
* $p < .01$.

gations do more social service activity than poorer congregations, and this is true even of institutions located in poorer neighborhoods. This pattern suggests that the resources internal to a congregation are crucially important in generating social service activity. Table 3 displays this pattern for the subset of congregations located in census tracts where at least 30 percent of the people are poor.

There are two ways that congregations in poor neighborhoods might contain substantial numbers of higher-income people. Congregations might draw the higher-income people in the neighborhoods in which they are located, or they might be composed in part of people who come a distance to participate. Although 61 percent of congregations still draw at least half their attendees from within a 10-minute drive, only 20 percent of congregations draw as many as a third of their attendees from within a

10-minute walk, and 20 percent of congregations have at least a quarter of their attendees living more than a 30-minute drive away. This distinction is important in understanding congregations' levels of social service activity.⁶

Conclusion

The results described in this policy brief point to four conclusions concerning congregations' social service activities and likely patterns of participation in charitable choice initiatives. First, large congregations, politically and theologically liberal congregations, and, especially, predominantly African-American congregations are the most likely to seek public monies in support of social services.⁷

Second, although a majority of congregations participate in or support social service activity at some level, only a small minority of con-

Table 3
Social Service Activity of Congregations Located in Poor Neighborhoods, by Regular Participants' Education

Program	Participating Congregations (%)	
	<10% of Participants with College Degree	≥10% of Participants with College Degree
Food**	10	36
Housing/shelter**	3	19
Clothing	3	9
Homelessness**	4	11
Health	1	3
Education (not including religious education)	2	12
Domestic violence	4	3
Tutoring/mentoring	1	8
Substance abuse	2	3
Any social service project**	34	65
Percentage of congregations with a staff person devoting at least 25 percent of work time to social service programs*	2	24

Note: A poor neighborhood is defined as a census tract in which at least 30 percent of the people are poor. There are too few congregations in poor neighborhoods with employment programs for inclusion in this table.

* $p < .10$

** $p < .05$

gregations participate extensively in such activities either by operating their own projects or programs, by having a staff person devote at least 25 percent of work time to these activities, or by spending large amounts of money in support of these activities. Furthermore, congregations are more likely to provide short-term, small-scale relief of various sorts than to operate ongoing or large-scale programs. Expecting congregations to operate social service programs in large numbers is unrealistic since most do not currently operate such programs. A major redirection of mission seems unlikely for the vast majority of congregations.

Third, congregational social service activity, when it is more than donating money or material goods, typically involves mobilizing small numbers of volunteers to conduct relatively well-defined, periodic tasks. Keeping this in mind might help to inform efforts to increase congregations' involvement in social service.

Fourth, the fact that small percentages of congregations operate

their own programs does not necessarily imply trivial levels of contribution. There are approximately 300,000 congregations in the United States; if one-half of one percent of those congregations are deeply engaged in social service activity, this represents roughly 1,500 congregations.

Policymakers and program administrators need to know where to find these congregations. This policy brief offers only a preliminary guide to identifying the most active congregations, one that additional analysis is likely to refine. Still, it provides some indication of those that are likely to be most active, namely, large congregations that are located in relatively poor neighborhoods but whose participants are not wholly low-income.

Notes

1. NCS data collection was supported by a major grant from Lilly Endowment, Inc., and by additional grants from Smith Richardson Foundation, Inc., The Louisville

Institute, The Nonprofit Sector Research Fund of The Aspen Institute, and The Henry Luce Foundation, Inc. None of these funders bears any responsibility for the analyses, arguments, or interpretations offered herein. For more detail about NCS data and methods, see Chaves, Mark, et al. 1999. "The National Congregations Study: Background, Methods, and Selected Results." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 38: 458–476.

2. Chaves, Mark. 1999. "Congregations and Welfare Reform: Who Will Take Advantage of 'Charitable Choice'?" *American Sociological Review* 64 (6): 836–846.
3. Compare, for example, the frequencies reported in the following: Hodgkinson, Virginia A., and Murray S. Weitzman. 1993. *From Belief to Commitment: The Community Service Activities and Finances of Religious Congregations in the United States*. Washington, D.C.: Indepen-

- dent Sector; Cnaan, Ram A. 1997. *Social and Community Involvement of Religious Congregations Housed in Historic Religious Properties: Findings from a Six-City Study*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania School of Social Work; or Printz, Tobi Jennifer. 1998. "Faith-Based Service Providers in the Nation's Capital: Can They Do More?" Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute. Charting Civil Society, Center on Nonprofits and Philanthropy Policy Brief No. 2.
4. The activities in table 1 and other tables are not mutually exclusive. A congregation reporting a program to "feed and clothe the homeless" is counted as having a food program, a clothing program, and a program for the homeless. Programs described vaguely as "helping the needy" or "supporting St. Vincent de Paul" have not been coded into specific program categories. Such descriptions might frequently refer at least to food and clothing projects; therefore, the percentage of congregations engaged in programs of this sort probably is slightly understated in table 1, though not by more than about five percent-age points.
5. Compare with estimates in Biddle, Jeff E. 1992. "Religious Organizations." In *Who Benefits from the Nonprofit Sector?* edited by Charles T. Clotfelter (92-133). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
6. Multivariate analysis reveals a complex set of relationships among neighborhood social composition, congregational resources, and social service activity. Some activities are more responsive to neighborhood characteristics than to congregational resources. Others are more responsive to congregational resources than to neighborhood characteristics. Such complications aside, however, the pattern described in the main text is generally sustained in multivariate models that include controls for congregational size, urban/rural location, racial composition, and the theological/political liberalism or conservatism of the congregation. The pattern also is sustained when alternative measures of the congregation's internal social composition are used. Congregations in poor communities tend to do more, for example, when they have higher percentages of high-income families, and they tend to do less when they have higher percentages of low-income families and when they have higher percentages of people who live within a 10-minute walk of the congregation's meeting place.
7. Arthur E. Farnsley II reviewed grant applications received in response to several initiatives in Indianapolis that were specifically intended to elicit proposals from congregations and other faith-based organizations. In a city where only one-third of the congregations are predominantly African-American, two-thirds of the proposals from congregations were from predominantly black congregations. See Farnsley, Arthur E. II. 1999. "Research Note: Grant Applications from Faith-Based Organizations." Indianapolis: The Polis Center, Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis. Unpublished.

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