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Taken on Faith? Preliminary findings of an outcomes evaluation of a faith-based welfare to work program

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Evaluating the impact of faith-based social interventions may be the most difficult task of Charitable Choice (Kennedy & Bielefeld, 2002). Churches, faith-based organizations, and small non-profits rarely have the luxury or the expertise to design and conduct evaluations. They often serve relatively small numbers of clients limiting research designs. Despite the dearth of information on the effectiveness of faith-based social interventions, they are being given increased responsibility for public welfare. The public perception is faith, religion, and spirituality are keys to addressing many of the country's social needs (Public Agenda, 2000). Belief in the effectiveness of faith-based organizations is largely taken on faith.

Despite the lack of evidence on the effects of religiously oriented social services, the administration in Washington is committed to expanding the role of faith-based organizations in every realm of policy. On December 12, 2002, the President issued two executive orders expanding access and opportunities to federal funding for faith-based organizations working on domestic and international issues. The use of executive orders to advance the faith-based initiative indicates the administration's unwavering support of religiously oriented services. This unflinching commitment to faith-based social intervention heightens the need for rigorous scrutiny and evaluation.

The outcomes of faith-based organizations do not need to be taken on faith. They can be empirically assessed using traditional methods of evaluation. This study will chronicle the process and report the initial findings of an outcome of evaluation of a faith-based welfare to work program in three North Carolina counties.

The study uses data drawn from administrative records maintained by the North Carolina Department of Social Services and Employment Security Commission. Administrative data is seen as a rich source of information for evaluating the effects of welfare reform and can be used to study the impact of faith-based social interventions (Coulton & Hollister, 1998; Griffith & Usher, 1986; Moffitt, 1996; Moffitt & Ver Ploeg, 1999, 2001).

Longitudinal statistical techniques will be used to model the impact of the faith-based intervention over time. Comparison groups will be composed of participants who experience a faith-based intervention with a second group receiving the same intervention without the religious element of the intervention. Initial findings will be reported. Discussion will focus on the process, design, and research methods and their relevance to assessing faith-based organizations.

Obstacles to Evaluation

For centuries, religious groups have fed the hungry, clothed the naked, and provided for the social well being of the people with little interest or regard to evaluation or outcomes. They provided services simply because it was their religious duty to care. This history of service provision makes churches, temples, and mosques logical partners for policy makers as they seek to shift responsibility for the poor from the federal and state levels to the community (Cnaan, Wineburg, & Boddie, 1999; Olasky, 1992; B. Wineburg, 2001; R. J. Wineburg, 1996). Congregations and faith-based non-profits contribute a great deal to public social services, but their impact remains largely unknown (Cnaan & Boddie, 2001, 2002; Kennedy & Bielefeld, 2002; Lockhart, 2001; Smith & Sosin, 2001; B. Wineburg, 2001). However, as the responsibility to meet human need is increasingly shifted to religious institutions, the necessity to understand the impact of these religiously oriented services heightens.

Evaluating faith-based social services is one of the greatest challenges of welfare reform (Kennedy & Bielefeld, 2002). Three obstacles to evaluation emerged while conducting this study: First, is the lack of trust between service providers and evaluators. Evaluation is often viewed as a punitive adversarial process rather than a mutually beneficial search for understanding. Second, language poses a significant barrier to the assessment of faith-based social interventions. The lack of clear definitions and the wide variety of religious terminology make interventions difficult to assess. Finally, there is virtually no outcome data available for faith-based interventions (Kennedy & Bielefeld, 2002). Credible data must be identified to empirically gauge the impact of religious institutions on welfare reform. Understanding the contributions of faith-based social interventions on welfare reform will require: evaluations to move

from a punitive process to partnership, the development of a common language to define interventions, and the identification of credible data.

Moving from a punitive process to partnership

The first obstacle to overcome in this evaluation was the critical stares of the faith-based practitioners. Gaining access to organizations and information can be difficult when you are viewed as an adversary interested in identifying the problems with a program. Evaluation is often viewed as a punitive adversarial process. Practitioners can be skeptical of evaluators' ability to understand or relate to their work. Evaluations can identify weaknesses or potential problems of a program, endangering funding or access to resources. However, evaluations can also strengthen programs and open doors to additional funding streams. A key to effective evaluation is developing partnerships between practitioners and evaluators (Usher, 1995a, 1995b).

There are many obstacles to developing true partnerships. As a white male evaluator representing a large research institution, I was viewed skeptically by most of the leaders of predominantly African-American faith-based organizations. Researchers call on these organizations often taking information and giving little back, making the organizations protective of their time and resources. Every organization I visited tested me to see if I could relate to and understand their work. I passed each test. While I have good academic credentials, my experience and religious background proved to be the key to gaining access to these organizations. I am a pastor, an ordained elder in an evangelical denomination, I have worked in urban churches and faith-based non-profits for the last 12 years and have been plagued by many of the same questions practitioners face on a daily basis. My experience and religious credentials shifted the evaluation from an adversarial process to a partnership. Moving evaluation from a punitive process to a partnership requires sharing similar experiences and a common language that makes the pursuit of the truth a safe partnership for better services.

Developing a common language

The second obstacle to evaluating faith-based interventions is finding a common language that adequately defines the intervention. Faith-based organizations range from small volunteer programs run out of storefront churches to sophisticated non-profits such as Catholic Charities, Jewish Family Services, and the Methodist home for Children who have contracted with federal, state, and local government for decades. Even some secular agencies use volunteers from religious organizations and have people of faith as employees. Smith and Sosin (2001) in their study of (44) faith-related agencies in Seattle and Chicago attempt to assess how closely linked or “coupled” organizations are to their religious tradition and how these linkages influence service delivery. They found sacred and secular mix in most religiously oriented organizations, suggesting the difficulty of adequately defining the nature of religious social interventions.

A second linguistic issue in assessing religiously oriented services is denominationally or religiously specific terms. Religious tradition influences how language is used. Cnaan and Boddie (2001) in their study of (1,376) congregations in Philadelphia were sensitive to the linguistic challenges of working with a variety of religious institutions. The term social programs was used in their interviews. They assert the term social programs avoids the specifically Christian notion of Social Ministry and does not suggest a government partnership in the way as the term social services. Sensitivity to religious language is crucial to the evaluation of faith-based social services.

Sharing a common language was a key for me to gain the credibility to begin the evaluation partnership. Common language allows for clear definitions of the components of the intervention and to some extent an understanding of how faith or religion operates in the intervention. Unfortunately, there is no common language when it comes to faith-based interventions. Developing a common language between researchers and practitioners will enhance the evaluation process aiding in the identification of appropriate outcomes and data to measure the impact of the organization.

Identifying credible data

Identifying credible data proved to be a major obstacle in beginning this study. Evaluating the impact of welfare reform can be challenging. Welfare recipients move frequently, often do not have

telephones, and they do not tend to respond to surveys (Kennedy & Bielefeld, 2002). To date, the majority of evaluations of welfare reform have been qualitative in nature (Lockhart, 2001; Sherman, 1998a, 1998b). While these studies provide helpful insights into how faith-based interventions work, quantitative studies must be conducted to document the impact of these interventions. The difficulty of gathering data on welfare recipients forces evaluators to look for alternative data sources.

Administrative data is seen as a rich source of information for evaluating the effects of welfare reform (Coulton & Hollister, 1998; Griffith & Usher, 1986; Moffit, 1996; Moffitt & Ver Ploeg, 1999, 2001). While the data is rich, it is limited by its administrative nature. Information on social characteristics is rarely gathered; therefore, variables on family size, intellectual ability, and parental education are not included in the data set and cannot be considered in the study (Moffitt & Ver Ploeg, 1999). Administrative records are designed for departmental record keeping and provide challenges for research. However, the data are plentiful, economical, and contain a variety of variables including income, exposure to welfare, and a variety of variables gathered longitudinally providing a good source for exploring the impact of welfare reform. Administrative data also seems like a sound source of information to assess outcomes of faith-based social interventions.

The program I was interested in evaluating was founded in North Carolina and had been in operation for at least five years when we began our discussions regarding the evaluation. Administrative data was plentiful in North Carolina so it seemed like the logical means for assessing program outcomes. The Jordan Institute for Families at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill has been gathering administrative data on all public assistance recipients in the state since 1995. Administrative records from each of the 100 county departments of social services is gathered monthly and linked to quarterly earnings data collected from the North Carolina Employment Security Commission. North Carolina has been a leader in developing databases of administrative data for use in program assessment and evaluation. All we needed to do was identify the program participants and we could compare their outcomes to public assistance recipients who did experience the intervention.

The easiest way to create a data match was to use social security numbers of program participants. Unfortunately, the program did not collect social security numbers. There was no way to make a match, lots of data and no way to identify the program participants. An alternative method had to be found to identify the program participants. A key aspect of the intervention was human capital training provided by the local community colleges. My wife taught for the community college so I realized they collect social security numbers. If I could get them to allow me to access their data, I could conduct an evaluation of the program. After about one year of conversations with the State Department of Community Colleges I was able to get social security numbers and a data match, but there was no guarantee there would be significant numbers of public welfare recipients in the file. Self reports on the applications looked bleak, in fact, only 14 people self-identified as receiving TANF or food stamps. After about one year of work, it appeared the study would not be possible.

Intervention

Using data drawn from the community colleges human resources development program seemed to be an effective means to develop a sample. The community college provided the human capital skills training for faith-based intervention as well as their own program. The faith-based intervention differed from the community colleges in that it added a 12-week Biblically based training, provided participants with mentors, and developed linkages with employers in the community to help place their graduates. Assessing earnings data would begin to get at the impact of spiritual and social capital components of the intervention.

Sample

The sample was drawn from administrative records maintained by the North Carolina Department of Social Services and Employment Security Commission. Subjects were identified through the Human Resources Development Department of the North Carolina Community College System in partnership with the Department of Social Services and the Jordan Institute for Families. Data matches were run comparing social security numbers identified through the community colleges to those of TANF and food

stamp participants in the state. Once the data matches were complete, 179 of the 281 people identified by the community college system had received some public assistance between 1995 and 2001. These numbers made a preliminary study possible.

Of particular interest was a much larger proportion of participants in the faith-base intervention (101 of 142 or 71.13%) were public assistance recipients compared to only (78/139 or 56.12%) of secular program participants. This finding seems to suggest faith-based programs may in fact be reaching the hardest to serve populations (Cnaan & Boddie, 2002; Cnaan et al., 1999).

Table 1 depicts the overall break down of the sample. The majority of the sample (56.42%) did not have earnings above the poverty line based on the federal poverty thresholds for a family of three at any point between 1995 and 2001. The largest proportion of the sample (58.1%) was drawn from two rural North Carolina counties with the remainder coming from a prosperous urban county. Women (70.39%) and African Americans (83.79%) were most likely to enroll in the two anti-poverty programs studied. The bulk of the sample were TANF recipients; however, they spent approximately half the time on welfare than the average welfare recipient in the three counties studied with a mean of 12.43 months on public assistance. There was a significant portion (56/179 or 31.28%) of the sample with no identifiers as to the public assistance program they were enrolled in; yet each of them had an earnings history. They were left in the sample and coded as unknown. This demonstrates a potential pitfall of administrative data.

A second step in the analysis was to assess the average earnings from employment for the sample. Table 2 lists the average for each from 1995 to 2001. In general, the trend was for income to increase, but it remained well below the poverty threshold. However, 2001 saw a slight decrease in the mean earnings, dropping from a high of \$8686.98 in 2000 to \$8150.21 in 2001. This would seem to suggest the recession might have impacted the low-wage workers in the hard hit piedmont of North Carolina.

Methods

Since the data were longitudinal and time is an effect way to assess the impact of a program, a discrete hazard model was used to test the likelihood of a program participant having earnings over the poverty line during the study period. Poverty was determined to be the dependent variable as the faith-based intervention specifically states overcoming poverty as a goal of the intervention.

Lifetables were run to gain a sense of the data. Figure 1 consists of the hazard plots for the chance of a person having earnings above the poverty by intervention type. In general, the odds are low that earnings will be above the poverty line. However, in year 6, the chance to have earnings above the poverty line increases significantly for participants of secular programs. When hazard rates are assessed, the likelihood of having earnings above poverty jumps to (23.16%) for participants in secular welfare to work programs, indicating the secular programs may have a stronger impact on poverty.

Discrete time model survival analysis was used to explore the likelihood of having earnings greater than the poverty level among welfare recipients. The discrete time model allows failures that occur at the same point and time to be analyzed (Allison, 1995). Since poverty rates are determined on an annual basis, the failure time would be at the close of the year, necessitating the use of discrete time models.

Earnings for 1995-2001 were analyzed so failure could occur in seven periods. A variable fail-time was created indicating if failure occurred. The data was transformed into a person-year format and logistic regression models were run to account for the discrete time. Allison (1995) suggests that the discrete time model is equivalent to the logistic regression equation:

$$\log(P_{it}/P_{it} - 1) = \alpha_t + \beta_1 X_{it1} + \dots + \beta_k X_{itk}$$

where P_{it} is the conditional probability that person i has an event at time t when $t = 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7$.

Once the data was set, discrete time models were run using Stata. Table 4 depicts the results of each discrete time model. Participating in a faith-based welfare to work program does not appear to influence a person's chance of having earnings above the poverty line. Including participation in a faith-based welfare to work program in Model E did not improve the statistical model. Two factors appear to influence a person's earnings. First, county of residence ($e^{\beta} = 2.227$, $p \leq .000$) appears to be significant.

People living in Wake County, a prosperous urban county, were twice as likely as people living in Vance and Granville counties, poorer rural communities, to have earnings above the poverty level. The second factor is the type of public assistance a person receives. The finding is counter intuitive, suggesting Food stamp recipients were about 44% ($e^{\beta} = .5595$, $p \leq .000$) less likely than TANF recipients to have earnings above the poverty from 1995-2001. It suggests further investigation is necessary.

Conclusion

There are significant obstacles to evaluating the impact of faith-based social interventions. However, it is not adequate to take their results on faith. Every effort must be made to assess their impact and determine what makes them effective or ineffective. This study suggests productive partnerships are possible, especially when we share a common language and goals. Viable data must be identified. Administrative data seems to be one legitimate option for beginning the task of assessing the impact of faith-based social services.

The search for information surrounding the impact of religious social services reminds me of a Biblical story from the book of Numbers. The Israelites were poised to enter the promise land. In an effort to assess the land, they sent out 40 spies with the charge to bring back data showing the promise of the land. Two spies brought back data, grapes and some figs, and said it was a land flowing with milk and honey. The other 38 were frightened and suggested the land was not fertile and inhabited by giants. The people believed the 38, although they produced no evidence. Instead of occupying a land they had been promised, the people of Israel were left to wonder in the desert for 40 more years. The poor have been wondering in the U.S. far to long already. It is our job as scholars, practitioners, policy makers and people of faith to ensure the poor do not wonder for another 40 years. There are obstacles, but they all can be over come and we can develop sound interventions and policies based on empirical evidence. A Hebrew poet once wrote, "faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see." Sound

evaluation can help to make us sure of the effects of faith-based and religious social interventions.

**Table 1:
Background Characteristics and Poverty Status of Public Assistance Recipients Receiving Faith-
Based and Secular Interventions
(N=179)**

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Number</i>	
	<i>Faith-Based (N=101)</i>	<i>Secular (N=79)</i>
<i>Time until earnings > poverty</i>		
0-1 year	3	2
1-2 years	9	7
2-3 years	4	4
3-4 years	7	6
4-5 years	7	6
5-6 years	7	11
6-7 years	4	1
Never earned > poverty	60	41
<i>County</i>		
Vance/Granville	53	51
Wake	48	27
<i>Demographic</i>		
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	42	11
Female	59	67
<i>Race</i>		
White	11	7
African American	83	67
Other	7	4
<i>Public Assistance</i>		
Total %*	71.13	56.12
TANF	39	44
Food Stamps Only	30	10
Unknown	32	24

*A key finding was the faith-based intervention served a much larger proportion of public assistance recipients than the secular intervention. The original data consisted of 281 people. We identified earnings histories for 179 of the 281 people who participated in Human Resources Development program of the community colleges during the study period, 101/142 or 71.13% of the faith-based program participants received some form of public assistance compared to only 78/139 or 56.12% of the secular program participants.

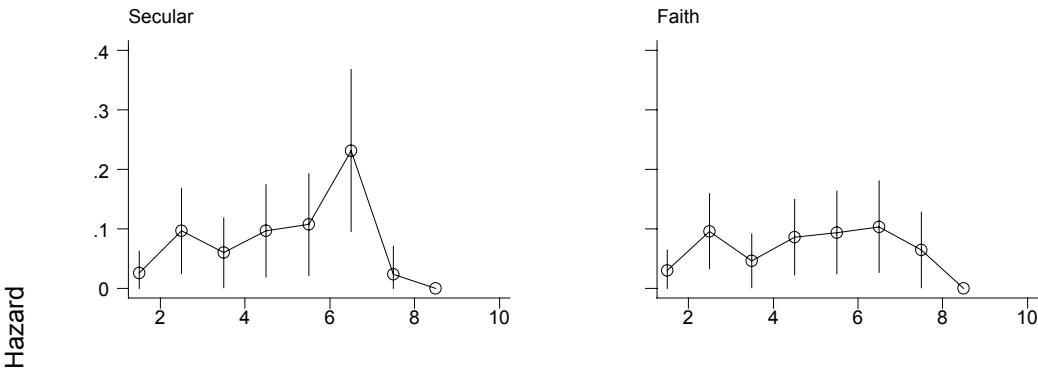
**Table 2: Average Annual Earnings for Participants in Faith-based and Secular Anti-poverty
Programs
(N=179)**

<i>Year</i>	<i>Income</i>
1995	1654.92
1996	4427.82
1997	4981.44
1998	6447.93
1999	7978.56
2000	8686.98
2001	8150.24

Table 3: Hazard Rates: Chances of Having Wages > Poverty by Intervention Type (N =179)

<i>Intervention</i>	<i>1 Year</i>	<i>2 Years</i>	<i>3Years</i>	<i>4 Years</i>	<i>5 Years</i>	<i>6 Years</i>	<i>7 years</i>
Secular	.0260 (.0184)	.0966 (.0365)	.0597 (.0298)	.0968 (.0935)	.1071 (.0437)	.2316 (.0694)	.0241 (.0241)
Faith-Based	.0302 (.0174)	.0963 (.0320)	.0460 (.0230)	.0859 (.0324)	.0940 (.0355)	.1037 (.0391)	.0645 (.0322)

Figure1: Hazard Plots for the chance of having earning above poverty by intervention type



time
Graphs by FBTx

Table 4: Results of Discrete Hazard Models of Time from First Welfare Spell to Earnings > Annual Poverty Threshold '95-'01

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Model A (null)</i>		<i>Model B</i>		<i>Model C</i>		<i>Model D</i>		<i>Model E</i>	
	β	e^β	β	e^β	β	e^β	β	e^β	β	e^β
<i>Exposure to Welfare</i>										
<i>Demographic</i>										
Gender	-	-	-.1984 (.1624)	.8201	-.2357 (.1651)	.7899	-.1417 (.1695)	.8679	-.1677 (.1852)	.8456
Race	-	-	-.0226 (.1905)	.9776	.1909 (.2072)	1.210	.0618 (.2105)	1.064	.0688 (.2119)	1.071
<i>Contextual</i>										
County					.8849*** (.1566)	2.423	.8008*** (.1598)	2.227***	.8091*** (.1616)	2.246***
<i>Public Assistance</i>										
TANF	-	-	-	-	-	-	-.5807*** (.1112)	.5595***	-.5741*** (.1128)	.5632***
<i>Faith-Based Intervention</i>										
Faith-based	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-.0600 (.1717)	.9417
Intercept	-1.580*** (.0751)		-1.421*** (.2112)		-2.917*** (.3559)		-2.266*** (.3788)		-2.238*** (.3870)	
Log Likelihood	-572.79		-572.01		-555.60		-540.97		-540.91	

(Standard error)

***P <= .000

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