

**Congregation-Based Social Welfare Ministries in Public Housing Neighborhoods:  
Findings from Four Cities\***

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Congregations are an important element of the social welfare environment in the United States. Their involvement and influence is deep and broad, as well as historic, with programmatic thrusts including, but not limited to, addiction services, housing, and workforce development. Of course, not all congregations are involved in social welfare. But, most urban congregations, independently and collectively, are social welfare providers. As of the late 1990s, according to the National Congregations Study, 60 percent of congregations in cities generally and 55 percent of congregations in poverty neighborhoods (i.e., areas with poverty rates equal or greater than 30 percent) provide at least one social welfare service.<sup>1</sup>

Much of the survey research and public debate ignores the scope and scale of services based out of congregations located in, rather than merely concerned with or attentive to, the poorest urban communities specifically or the needy generally. Inquiring about the social welfare programs of all congregations regardless of their location devalues geography and biases any understanding of the potential of the faith sector to alleviate the conditions of the poor, as well as partner with public and private institutions.

This paper assumes that congregations physically proximate to the poor may matter most to future place- and people-based initiatives. Accordingly, its focus is on congregations located in the geographic areas of great need in cities. Specifically, this paper presents preliminary findings on the existence and determinants of congregation-based social welfare ministries proximate to the largest public housing complexes in cities. It answers three questions. What proportion of congregations near the public housing communities provides social welfare ministries? Why do some congregations engage in community outreach? What determines the number of programs congregations provide?

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Chaves, "Religious Congregations and Welfare Reform: Who Will Take Advantage of

## Data

Data for this paper come from the Faith Communities and Urban Families Project, which surveyed congregations and public housing residents from Camden, Denver, Indianapolis, and Hartford.<sup>2</sup> The congregation data was derived from responses to a mail survey of congregations located within a one-mile radius of nine public housing communities across the four cities. The questionnaire was administered by mail in 2002 to 200 Christian congregations proximate to the public housing communities, identified through windshield tours and local church directories. The response rate was 68 percent (N=136). The analysis here, however, considers data from only clergy respondents (N=122), placing a premium on knowledge of congregation information.

### **The Existence of Congregation–Based Social Welfare Ministry**

A majority of congregations located in the public housing neighborhoods of the four cities are “outreach” congregations; they provide one or more social welfare programs for their attendants or the residents from the neighborhoods of the congregations (Table 1). Nearly three-quarters (72 percent) offer, either to the community in which their congregation gathers or to the attendants of their churches, some type of social welfare ministry, service, or program beyond worship and religious education. Combined, the number of programs offered by all congregations in the public housing neighborhoods of the four cities is 358, serving youth,

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Charitable Choice?,” *American Sociological Review* 64 (December 1999): 836-846.

<sup>2</sup> R. Drew Smith, Principal Investigator for the Faith Communities and Urban Families Project, designed the research and collected the data that informed this paper. Funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Faith Communities and Urban Families Project is a multi-year applied research initiative based at the Leadership Center at Morehouse College. It gathered quantitative and qualitative data on the residents of public housing communities and congregations proximate to them in the four cities. The primary purpose of the project was to use research to foster conversations between a set of public housing residents and clergy leading congregations in their communities, resulting in action plans for strengthening interactions between faith communities and the residents of public housing in the four cities, and possibly beyond. For more on the Faith Communities and Urban Families Project, visit [www.morehouse.edu/fcuf](http://www.morehouse.edu/fcuf). Also see R. Drew Smith, *Faith-based Family Support Initiatives: Policy Implications for the Urban Poor* (Baltimore, MD: Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2000).

adults, and the elderly. Few congregations provide more than a small set of programs. Just under two-thirds (64 percent) of congregations provide less than five programs. Three is the median number the congregations operate. Six percent of congregations offer between ten and sixteen programs.

### **Determinants of Congregation–Based Social Welfare Ministry**

The provision of services by congregations is a function of multiple factors related to the character of congregations. Holding other factors constant, the most rigorous studies of congregations consistently identify two factors, composed of different dimensions, which seem to influence the provision and number of social welfare programs by congregations in the United States. They are congregation size (i.e., number of attendants and annual income) and social class (i.e., neighborhood poverty and education level of congregants and pastors).<sup>3</sup> The Faith Communities and Urban Families dataset allowed us to examine different dimensions of the two variables concerning congregation-based social services in the public housing neighborhoods.

Concerning congregation size, we looked at the relationship of reported membership size and annual income to congregation-based social welfare provision. Large congregations, because they possess an important latent resource, namely, volunteers, may be more likely to operate a social welfare ministry, as well as provide more social welfare programs, than small congregations. Moreover, congregations with higher incomes may be more capacious to provide social welfare ministries than low income-earning congregations.

As for social class, we assessed whether the education level of clergy influenced community outreach by congregations. Explicitly, we considered the possession of a college

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<sup>3</sup> Christian tradition (i.e. mainline Protestant and liberal theology) is another factor determining congregation-based social welfare in the United States. See Mark Chaves and William Tsitsos,

education by pastors as a determinant of congregation-based social welfare ministry. Higher education may provide pastors with insights into the causes of neighborhood problems and a better understanding of how to design solutions, as well as encourage an appreciation for the practice of a social gospel. If so, a college education may invite pastors to encourage their congregations to become less parochial, directing its resources to meet neighborhood needs.

Beyond congregation size and social class, we looked at attendant residency.

Congregations with high proportions of local residents among their members may better understand the needs of their neighborhoods. Either because they are needy or know those who are, local residents may have a clearer sense of the scale and scope of service deprivation in the neighborhoods. Therefore, indigenous knowledge may guide congregation practice.

Predominantly commuter congregations may possess less indigenous knowledge, resulting in lower rates of community outreach. Still, commuter congregations may also be more likely to practice community outreach. Conceptually, this is quite plausible.

Commuters to congregations in public housing neighborhoods may be mainly former residents of the neighborhoods who did not relinquish their memberships despite their migration. Therefore, commuter congregations may possess high levels of indigenous knowledge. Ignoring indigenous knowledge altogether, middle-class persons may belong to commuter congregations in the public housing neighborhoods. Seeking to “give back” resources – money, time, and service – to needy neighborhoods, even if they were never residents of the neighborhoods, commuters may add value to their worship and devotion by transferring external assistance to the neighborhoods. Thus, commuter congregations, because they have a strong commitment to serve and resources, may engage more extensively in community outreach than local congregations.

## **Congregation Size**

Generally, the congregations of the public housing communities in the four cities have small to medium membership sizes. A little more than two-thirds (68 percent) of the congregations report fewer than 500 members. The median membership size of the congregations is between 100 and 499 members. That is not to say that large congregations are absent from public housing neighborhoods. They are present. The public housing neighborhoods of each city, save Camden, possess at least one congregation that claims more than 2,000 members.

Table 2 shows the effect of membership size on the provision of congregation-based social welfare ministry. The relationship between membership size and congregation-based social welfare ministry is highly significant ( $p < .001$ ). So, too, is the relationship of membership size to the number of social welfare ministries congregations provide in public housing neighborhoods ( $p < .01$ ).

The proportion of congregations engaging in community outreach rises as memberships increase. Congregations with fewer than 100 members are least likely to provide social welfare ministries or programs. Congregations with 1,000 or more members are most likely to be outreach congregations. As for the quantity of social welfare ministries, the percentage of congregations providing more services increases with the size of congregation membership. The smallest congregations (i.e., less than 100 members) are less likely to offer the more congregation-based social welfare ministries than the largest congregations (i.e., 1,000 or more members). For instance, outreach congregations with less than 100 members do not cover a broad scope of concerns. Not a single congregation in this category offers ten or more ministries,

compared to 14 percent of the largest congregations. Yet, small congregations are far more likely to offer the fewest amounts of social welfare ministries likely than large congregations are.

The financial resources of congregations in public housing neighborhoods are modest. This is the case even though 60 percent of congregations are composed primarily of residents from outside the public housing neighborhoods. In the public housing neighborhoods of the four cities, commuter congregations do not necessarily equate with resource-rich congregations: 56 percent of them have incomes below \$50,000 per annum. Overall, the majority (84 percent) of congregations report annual revenues less than \$100,000. Of those congregations that engage in outreach via some form of congregation-based social welfare service, nearly four out of five (79 percent) have incomes below \$100,000. Moreover, 52 percent of congregations with social welfare ministries report raising less than \$50,000 annually. The amounts and prior research, however, suggest far smaller amounts for outreach.

Community outreach in public housing neighborhoods decreases as the incomes of local congregations decrease. Although the majority (60 percent) of low income-earning congregations in public housing neighborhoods offer social welfare ministry, Table 3 shows that low income-earning congregations are less likely to practice community outreach than high income-earning congregations are. Congregations earning less than \$50,000 are the most likely to not operate a social welfare program. Congregations raising \$100,000 or more annually are the most likely to provide a social welfare ministry. In short, there is a very strong, highly significant relationship between congregation income and community outreach in public housing neighborhoods ( $p < .01$ ).

Low income-earning congregations are the least likely congregations in the public housing neighborhoods to practice community outreach. However, do congregations with low

annual incomes necessarily provide fewer social welfare ministries than congregations with higher incomes? There is a there is a very strong, highly significant relationship between congregation income and the scope of community outreach in public housing neighborhoods ( $p < .001$ ). High income-earning congregations are the least likely to provide a limited set of programs. Conversely, no low income-earning congregation offers a broad selection of social welfare ministries (i.e., more than ten programs). Nine is the maximum number of programs low income-earning congregation offer public housing neighborhoods, compared to sixteen by high income-earning congregations.

### **Pastor Education**

Three-quarters of pastors from the public housing neighborhoods of the four cities attended college, with the majority staying long enough to have possibly earned at least bachelor's degrees. Pastor education is influential, but its influence is not as significant as one would expect. Table 4 shows that 76 percent of college-educated clergy report leading outreach congregations. Yet, 65 percent of pastors with only high school educations lead congregations that offer social welfare ministries. At first glance, there seems to be a relationship, with a higher proportion of congregations led by college-educated clergy engaging in community outreach. Quantitative analysis, however, suggests that there is no statistically significant relationship between clergy education and community outreach.

Clergy education does not determine whether congregations in public housing neighborhoods will engage in community outreach. Nevertheless, a significant relationship exists between clergy education and the quantity of congregation-based social welfare ministries in public housing neighborhoods ( $p < .05$ ). Congregations led by college-educated pastors provide more social welfare programs than congregations led by pastors with fewer years of formal

schooling do. Although 55 percent of outreach congregations led by pastors with college educations operate less than five programs, they are far more likely than outreach congregations without college-educated pastors to operate more programs than that number. In particular, 46 percent of college-educated pastors head congregations offering five or more social welfare ministries. This contrasts markedly from congregations lacking college-educated pastors. Thus, outreach congregations with college-educated pastors have the broadest scope of congregation-based social welfare ministries in public housing neighborhoods.

### **Congregation Residency**

Congregations are rooted and invested in the public housing neighborhoods of the four cities. The median tenure of congregations in the public housing neighborhoods is 20.5 years. That is, one-half of the congregations have been present in their current neighborhoods for at least two decades. Six out of ten congregations have been in their present locations within the public housing neighborhoods for more than twenty years, while almost two-fifths (38 percent) of congregations have been in their location for three decades or more, with many of them existing before the construction of public housing in their neighborhoods. Yet, the physical presence of congregations in the neighborhoods does not equate with residential presence within the congregations.

A minority of congregations attracts attendants who are residents of the public housing neighborhoods. Of the pastors that claim to know where their congregants live, just ten percent report that three-quarters or more of their attendants live within one mile of their churches. Another 26 percent responded that one-half or more of their congregants are neighborhood residents. Thus, few congregations in the public housing neighborhoods are “local” congregations; they are not high, nor moderate, residency congregations. Instead, congregations

in public housing neighborhoods are “commuter” congregations. City residents from other neighborhoods and suburbanites fill their pews. Although most attendants reside outside of the geographic community of their congregations, they do not necessarily reside in neighborhoods that are too different socially, economically, or physically from the public housing neighborhoods.

Table 5 shows the differences among congregations by the residency of their attendants. Generally, commuter congregations and those with an equal mix of commuters and locals seem to be the most likely to provide social welfare ministries. The majority of “local” congregations (i.e., those that draw three-quarters or more of their attendants from the public housing neighborhoods) are not outreach congregations. Nevertheless, as was the case with clergy education, quantitative analysis suggests that there really is no statistically significant difference between commuter and local congregations in terms of outreach. Furthermore, commuter congregations are no more likely than local congregations to provide more social welfare programs. The difference among congregations is not statistically significant. Consequently, congregation residency matters little to congregation-based social welfare ministry, either in terms of the provision of services or the number provided in public housing neighborhoods by their congregations.

### **Conclusion: Future Steps**

Public housing neighborhoods in the four cities benefit from the presence of congregations, for most congregations are outreach congregations, providing social welfare ministries of some type and size. Congregation size and social class, especially membership size, annual income, and pastor education, are factors that seem to strongly influence provision and

number of congregation-based social welfare ministries in the public housing neighborhoods of the four cities.

However, the analysis presented in this paper is limited. Specifically, it does not allow for much in the way of prediction and it fails to offer sufficient guidance concerning the magnitude of effect the three factors, as well as others, have on congregation-based social welfare ministries, either their existence or quantity in the public housing neighborhoods. Consequently, future steps will include multiple regression to determine the degree to which the three factors, along with a set of other possible factors such as neighborhood poverty and employment rates, influence the provision and number of social welfare ministries by congregations in the public housing neighborhoods.

Aside from the provision of congregation-based social welfare ministries, future analyses will include examinations of the program areas of outreach congregations, the size of their clientele, the characteristics of their clients, especially their membership in congregations, and the public and philanthropic support for the ministries. Furthermore, we will investigate the knowledge of such ministries by public housing residents, as well as gauge the interaction between public housing residents and neighborhood congregations, which one of the authors has done for already for Indianapolis.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> R. Drew Smith, "Churches and the Urban Poor: Interaction and Social Distance," *Sociology of Religion*, 62 (3)(2001): 301-13

## Appendix

**Table 1. Community Outreach in Four Cities**

	City			
	Camden	Denver	Hartford	Indianapolis
<b>“Outreach” Congregation</b>				
No	33%	38%	30%	16%
Yes	67%	63%	70%	84%

N=122

Note: Figures may not sum to 100 percent due to rounding.

**Table 2. Membership Size & Community Outreach**

	Number of Congregation Members			
	≤ 99	100-499	500-999	≥ 1,000
<b>“Outreach” Congregation</b>				
No	61%	25%	13%	13%
Yes	39%	75%	87%	88%

N=122

$\chi^2 = 17.101, df = 3, p < .001$

**Number of Programs**

Limited (1-4)	78%	80%	35%	43%
Moderate (5-9)	22%	18%	55%	43%
Broad (10-16)		2%	10%	14%

N=88

$\chi^2 = 16.827, df = 6, p < .01$

$\gamma = .543$

Note: Figures may not sum to 100 percent due to rounding.

**Table 3. Annual Income & Community Outreach**

	Congregation Annual Income		
	Low (≤ \$49,999)	Moderate (\$50,000-99,999)	High (≥ \$100,000)
<b>“Outreach” Congregation</b>			
No	40%	11%	
Yes	60%	90%	100%
N=90 $\chi^2 = 12.695, df = 2, p < .01$			
<b>Number of programs</b>			
Limited (1-4)	82%	59%	7%
Moderate (5-9)	18%	29%	86%
Broad (10-16)		12%	7%
N=65 $\chi^2 = 26.217, df = 4, p < .001$ $\gamma = .760$			

Note: Figures may not sum to 100 percent due to rounding.

**Table 4. Pastor Education & Community Outreach**

	Education Level of Pastor	
	High School Only	At least Some College
<b>“Outreach” Congregation</b>		
No	40%	11%
Yes	60%	90%
N=90 $\chi^2 = 1.489, df = 1, \text{not significant}$		
<b>Number of programs</b>		
Limited (1-4)	90%	55%
Moderate (5-9)	10%	38%
Broad (10-16)		8%
N=86 $\chi^2 = 8.388, df = 2, p < .05$		

Note: Figures may not sum to 100 percent due to rounding.

**Table 5. Attendant Residency & Community Outreach**

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	<b>Congregation Type (Proportion of Congregants Residing in Neighborhood)</b>		
	<b>Commuter (≤ 25%)</b>	<b>Mixed (50%)</b>	<b>Local (≥ 75%)</b>
<b>“Outreach” Congregation</b>			
No	25%	23%	55%
Yes	75%	77%	46%
N=114			
<b><math>\chi^2=4.620</math>, df = 2, not significant</b>			
<b>Number of programs</b>			
Limited (1-4)	62%	70%	60%
Moderate (5-9)	33%	26%	40%
Broad (10-16)	6%	4%	
N=85			
<b><math>\chi^2 = .819</math>, df = 4, not significant</b>			

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Note: Figures may not sum to 100 percent due to rounding.