

**THE EFFECTIVENESS AND TRUSTWORTHINESS OF FAITH-BASED AND
OTHER SERVICE ORGANIZATIONS: A STUDY OF RECIPIENTS'
PERCEPTIONS**

Robert Wuthnow, Conrad Hackett, and Becky Yang Hsu

Department of Sociology

Wallace Hall

Princeton University

Princeton, NJ 08544

wuthnow@princeton.edu

chackett@princeton.edu

byang@princeton.edu

**THE EFFECTIVENESS AND TRUSTWORTHINESS OF FAITH-BASED AND
OTHER SERVICE ORGANIZATIONS: A STUDY OF RECIPIENTS'
PERCEPTIONS**

Abstract

Drawing on a new community study of more than 2,000 residents of low-income neighborhoods, we examine information about the kinds of service organizations respondents have contacted for assistance and the perceptions of these respondents about the effectiveness and trustworthiness of those organizations. We compare contact with and perceptions of faith-based organizations, nonsectarian organizations, government agencies, hospitals, and churches and employ a method that takes account of respondents' varying portfolios of service providers. The results indicate that faith-based organizations differ significantly from congregations in the kinds of recipients who seek help from them and resemble public welfare recipients in the extent of financial need and scope of family problems. The results also indicate that recipients' evaluations of the effectiveness and trustworthiness of their portfolio of service organizations are lower when they have sought assistance from public welfare agencies and higher when they have sought assistance from congregations, but are not significantly affected by having contacted faith-based or nonsectarian organizations.

Considerable interest in faith-based organizations (FBOs) that provide social services to the needy in their communities has been generated since passage of the Charitable Choice provision of the 1996 welfare reform legislation and in conjunction with the formation of the Health and Human Services Center for Faith-Based and Community Initiatives under the Bush administration (Cnaan, 1999; Diulio, 2002; Pipes and Ebaugh, 2002; Chaves, 1999).

The few attempts that have been made to assess the effectiveness of FBOs have focused either on specific organizations already presumed to be particularly effective or on specific outcomes that are easily measurable, such as recidivism or responses to drug treatment.

However, the question of service agency effectiveness is more complicated than is sometimes recognized. One of the leading arguments in the nonprofit organizations literature suggests that nonprofits exist particularly to provide services that cannot be easily or economically measured: aesthetic appreciation provided by arts organizations, worship provided by religious organizations, and love and companionship provided in nursing homes are examples (Weisbrod, 1988). From this perspective, a readily measured outcome, such as recidivism among juvenile delinquents or successful recovery from surgery, may be more atypical than typical. What the typical service agency provides is likely to be more complex and difficult to measure, such as emotional and spiritual support, reassurance, information about parenting and childrearing, or helpful referrals to other agencies. Another complication is that studies purporting to measure the effectiveness of FBOs must carefully consider which comparison groups are at issue

and whether selection factors may introduce biases among the recipients seeking assistance from different kinds of organizations. Although random assignment of subjects to different programs is a logical solution to this problem, it is not one that can be accomplished for most kinds of service needs in real life. Yet another complication is that people in need of assistance are likely to have multiple needs and for this reason seek help from multiple organizations, relying as it were on a portfolio of service suppliers just as they do on income packaging to meet their economic needs (Anderson-Khleif, 1978; Duncan, 1984; Harris, 1993, 1996; Knox and Bane, 1994; Edin and Lein, 1997). Thus, measures of the effectiveness of one kind of organization must take into account the full portfolio of organizations from which recipients may be obtaining assistance.

Our approach addresses these methodological considerations by focusing on how recipients of service organizations view their experiences with these organizations. Specifically, we take into account the factors that influence the kinds of organizations from which recipients seek assistance and then examine recipients' perceptions of the effectiveness of the organizations from which they have sought assistance. We also examine recipients' perceptions of the trustworthiness of the people they dealt with at these organizations. We resolve the problem of comparison groups by soliciting information from people who sought assistance from different kinds of organizations and from people living in the same neighborhoods who did not seek assistance from any service organization. Finally, our approach handles the matter of people seeking help from multiple organizations by asking respondents to rate the effectiveness and trustworthiness of all the organizations from which they sought assistance and by including these responses in our analysis of the data.

DATA AND METHODS

We analyze data from the Lehigh Valley Trust Survey which was conducted between January 16 and March 20, 2002, among 2,077 respondents in the Lehigh Valley in northeastern Pennsylvania. The objective of the survey was to obtain information from a representative sample of lower-income residents in a sufficiently concentrated geographic area that contacts with specific service agencies could be examined. To achieve this objective, the target population was defined as the fifteen inner-city census tracts with the lowest median household incomes according to the 1990 U.S. census.

At the time of the survey, there were 25 service organizations that provided nearly all the social services to low-income residents of the Lehigh Valley. One of these was a government agency (public welfare department), two were hospitals, 11 were FBOs, and 11 were NSOs. The classification of organizations into these categories was based on interviews with agency directors. For each of the 25 organizations, respondents were asked: “Please tell me if you or someone in your household contacted it for assistance during the past two years.” In those instances where the organization had more than one location, respondents were asked to indicate the location at which they had sought assistance. At the end of the list, respondents were also asked to indicate if they had sought assistance from any other service organizations in the community and if they had “been in contact with a religious organization in the area, such as a church, synagogue, mosque, or temple, for assistance in the past two years.”

For each organization that a respondent indicated having contacted for assistance, the respondent was then asked: “How would you rate (name of organization) in terms of its effectiveness in meeting your needs—would you give it a grade of A, B, C, D, or F for

its effectiveness?” and “Thinking about the people you dealt with at (name of organization), did you feel you could trust them a lot, some, only a little, or not at all?” To take consideration of the fact that respondents typically had sought assistance from more than one organization (the mean among the 1157 respondents who had sought assistance was 2.5), we computed the mean effectiveness score and the mean trust score for each respondent who had sought assistance from any organization. These scores serve as the main dependent variables in the analysis after having examined the correlates of seeking assistance from different kinds of organizations.

The independent variables we examined include female, black, and Hispanic (each treated as dummy variables), age in years, family income in thousand dollars, years of education, number of children in the household, and annual church attendance (calculated as total number of times per year). We also included a list of family problems that respondents or someone in their household might have experienced in the past two years.

For the analysis, we calculated log odds ratios from logistic regression models for the questions about contact with organizations, including separate models for having contacted any organization and for each of the four kinds of service organizations and for congregations. For mean effectiveness and mean trust scores, we computed ordinary least squares regression models differing in terms of how many of the independent variables were included. To determine if mean effectiveness and mean trust scores were affected by the kind of organizations the respondent had contacted, we included dummy variables for each of the four kinds of service organizations and for congregations. Thus, the principal test of whether FBOs differ from other organizations in terms of perceived

effectiveness and perceived trustworthiness is whether having contacted the various kinds of organizations is significantly related to mean effectiveness and mean trust scores.

Descriptive information on the variables used in the analysis are shown in Table 1.

[Table 1 about here]

RESULTS

The results in Table 2 show the characteristics of respondents that were associated with their having contacted any service organizations and particular kinds of organizations for assistance in the previous two years.

[Table 2 about here]

Several of the findings about FBOs are worth underscoring. First, they do attract people who attend church more often, and this distinguishes them from NSOs; however, this relationship is not strong, and it is weak in comparison with the coefficient for congregations. In short, FBOs do not attract only those who are faithful church goers and they do not seem to be reaching the same kinds of recipients as churches. Second, FBOs appear to be about as likely to attract people with serious family problems as NSOs or the public welfare department (and somewhat more so than churches). Third, FBOs are about as likely as the public welfare department to draw people with low incomes and are notably more likely to do this than churches (or NSOs). Thus, it appears that FBOs are not merely catering to people who have fewer or less serious needs than those who go to government agencies. Finally, there appears to be some division of labor in the Lehigh Valley at least between NSOs, which appeal strongly to Hispanics, and FBOs, which appeal more distinctively to African Americans.

The models in Table 3 include the same dependent and independent variables as Table 2, but permit inspection of the ways in which different kinds of family problems may encourage people to seek assistance from the various kinds of agencies. The data show that seeking assistance from the public welfare department is most strongly associated with having job problems, food problems, utilities problems, and medical problems. Not surprisingly, medical problems are the strongest predictor of seeking assistance from hospitals, but depression and alcohol related problems are also associated with seeking this kind of assistance. Seeking assistance from congregations is associated with having medical problems. Contacting NSOs for assistance is most strongly associated with job problems and utilities problems. And contacting FBOs is most associated with utilities problems, food problems, depression problems, medical problems, and job problems. In terms of their overall profile, then, FBOs are the kind of private organization that most closely resemble the public welfare department. The kinds of needs that cause people to seek help from FBOs also appear to be rather different from those encouraging people to contact congregations for assistance.

[Table 3 about here]

In Table 4, we see how the specific kinds of assistance which people have sought relate to the kinds of organizations from which they have sought assistance. The results are most easily made sense of by examining which kind of organization is the most strongly associated with each kind of need. For instance, seeking assistance from the public welfare department is most strongly associated with seeking financial assistance, followed by FBOs and NSOs. For food and shelter, the strongest associations are with public welfare, followed by NSOs and FBOs. None of the organizations are significantly

associated with seeking legal aid. For aid in finding jobs, the strongest association is with NSOs (probably because one organization in particular specialized in this). Not surprisingly, hospitals are most closely associated with seeking medical assistance. Emotional assistance is most closely associated with seeking help from FBOs, followed by NSOs and hospitals; child-related assistance, with FBOs; and spiritual aid, with churches, followed by hospitals and FBOs. It is apparent from these results that FBOs differ fairly dramatically from churches: whereas seeking assistance from churches is associated only with seeking spiritual assistance, FBOs are associated with seeking financial assistance, food and shelter, emotional help, and child-related assistance as well. The R^2 for public welfare is again highest, suggesting that public welfare agencies specialize rather strongly in drawing people with financial needs and in need of food and shelter. In contrast, FBOs and NSOs are more diverse in the kinds of needs that draw people to seek assistance from them.

[Table 4 about here]

Turning next to the results for effectiveness (shown in Table 5), we see in Model 1 that mean effectiveness scores tend to be lower among African Americans (marginally significant), higher among older people, higher among people with higher income, lower among people with more family problems, higher among people with informal sources of support, and higher among people who attend church more often. Mean effectiveness scores are unrelated to gender, being Hispanic, level of education, number of children, and the number of organizations from which assistance was sought. These results suggest that perceptions of effectiveness are most affected by one's resources (especially income) and by the extent of one's problems; i.e., the harder a person's problems are to

address, the less likely that person is to say the organizations from which he or she sought assistance were effective. Model 2 in Table 5 shows the relationships between effectiveness scores and having sought assistance from various kinds of organizations. We see that having sought assistance from the public welfare department is associated with a significant reduction in mean effectiveness ratings, whereas having contacted a hospital or congregation is associated with a significant increase in mean effectiveness scores, and relatively speaking, contact with FBOs and NSOs is associated with average effectiveness scores (i.e., no significant positive or negative relationship). As seen in Model 3, these relationships remain when the previously considered demographic variables are included in the equation.

Models 3 through 6 provide reassurance that these differences among kinds of organizations are not simply a function of the kinds of assistance for which recipients had sought help. These models also suggest that effectiveness ratings are most likely to be lowered by seeking financial aid or assistance with finding a job, whereas they are likely to be higher among people who had sought spiritual assistance. Models 7 through 9 largely suggest the same conclusions, showing that the relationships for the various kinds of organizations remain significant when the various kinds of problems are included in the equations and that job problems, rent and utilities problems, and depression are associated with lower effectiveness ratings. In addition, being a victim of crime also appears to be associated with lower effectiveness ratings.

[Table 5 about here]

Table 6 presents the results for mean trust scores examined in relation to the same sets of variables as for mean effectiveness scores, but also including measures of

generalized trust, local trust, and self trust. Model 1 shows that being African American is associated with giving lower mean trust scores, as is having a greater number of family problems. Level of education is marginally related to giving higher trust scores. Having received informal assistance from friends and family is associated with higher trust scores, as is each of the broader measures of trust. In Model 2, which includes the broader measures of trust, having sought assistance from the public welfare department is associated with lower mean trust ratings and having sought assistance from a hospital or church is marginally associated with higher trust ratings. In Model 3, though, it appears that these differences in mean trust ratings are largely a function of other factors, especially being African American and having received assistance from friends and family. Models 4 through 6 show that mean trust scores vary only slightly with having sought different kinds of assistance, and the same is true in Models 7 through 9 when different kinds of problems are examined.

[Table 6 about here]

DISCUSSION

These results provide some support for assertions in the literature which suggest that FBOs have a significant place to play in social service delivery, but suggest caution about other assertions. The arguments that gain greatest support are those suggesting that FBOs attract a diverse constituency of people with serious needs and that they play a positive role in addressing those needs. Our results show that the same kinds of needs that propel people to seek assistance from public welfare departments also encourage them to seek assistance from FBOs. These needs are more diverse than those that encourage people to seek help from congregations and, despite the fact that church goers are more likely to

seek assistance from FBOs than people who attend religious services infrequently, church going is not strongly associated with who seeks assistance from FBOs. In addition, mean effectiveness and trustworthiness scores are relatively high for FBOs, and seeking assistance from FBOs is not related to lower effectiveness scores as is the case with seeking assistance from public welfare. On the other hand, there is little support in these results for the hypothesis that FBOs may be more effective than NSOs, at least not in terms of how they are perceived by recipients.

Our results suggest that FBOs have a distinct role to play in service provision apart from that of congregations and, in this respect, raise considerations about the role of congregations. If churches do not serve the more acute needs that FBOs do, they nevertheless appear to play an indirect role in meeting the needs of lower income residents. Insofar as financial and health problems raise spiritual and emotional needs, congregations play a role in addressing these needs. And, insofar as people include congregations in the portfolio of organizations from which they seek assistance, their perceptions of the effectiveness and trustworthiness of service organizations are likely to be more positive.

Further research is needed to see if our results hold for other communities and for other portfolios of service agencies. In such research, it appears valuable to elicit the responses from the recipients of these agencies and to consider the fact that they seek assistance from multiple sources. The effectiveness of FBOs needs to be examined taking into consideration the diverse needs they address and by making comparisons with other kinds of organizations.

REFERENCES

- Anderson-Khleif S. 1978. Income Packaging and Lifestyle in Welfare Families. Rep. Family Policy Note 7, Joint Center for Urban Studies for MIT and Harvard University, Cambridge, MA
- Barrett ME, Simpson D, Lehman W. 1988. Behavioral Changes of Adolescents in Drug Abuse Intervention Programs. *Journal of Clinical Psychology* 44: 461-73.
- Ben-Sira Z. 1980. Affective and Instrumental Components in the Physician-Patient Relationship: An Additional Dimension of Interaction Theory. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 21: 170-80.
- Berrien J, McRoberts O, Winship C. 2000. Religion and the Boston Miracle: The Effect of Black Ministry on Youth Violence. In *Who Will Provide? The Changing Role of Religion in American Social Welfare*, ed. MJC Bane, Brent; Thiemann, Ronald, pp. 266-85. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Bianchi S. 1999. Feminization and Juvenilization of Poverty: Trends, Relative Risks, Causes, and Consequences. *Annual Review of Sociology* 25: 307-33.
- Bush GW. 2002. Remarks on the welfare reform agenda. pp. 295-9. Washington, D.C.: Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents.
- Chaves M. 1999. Religious congregations and welfare reform: Who will take advantage of "charitable choice"? *American Sociological Review* 64: 836-46.
- Chaves M. 2001. Religious congregations and welfare reform. *Society* 38: 21-7.
- Cnaan R. 1999. *The Newer Deal: Social Work and Religion in Partnership*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Cnaan RA, Boddie SC. 2002. The invisible caring hand : American congregations and the provision of welfare. New York: New York University Press.

Desmond D, Maddux J. 1981. Religious Programs and Careers of Chronic Heroin Users. *American Journal of Drug and Alcohol Abuse* 8: 71-83.

DiIulio J, Jr. 2002. The New Civil Rights Struggle. In *Wall Street Journal*, pp. A16. New York.

Duncan GJ, University of Michigan. Survey Research Center. 1984. Years of poverty, years of plenty : the changing economic fortunes of American workers and families. Ann Arbor, MI: Survey Research Center Institute for Social Research University of Michigan.

Edin K, Lein L. 1997. Making ends meet : how single mothers survive welfare and low-wage work. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

Ellison C, George L. 1994. Religious Involvement, Social Ties, and Social Support in a Southeastern Community. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 33: 46-61.

Furstenberg F. 1993. How Families Manage Risk and Opportunity in Dangerous Neighborhoods. In *Sociology and the Public Agenda*, ed. WJ Wilson. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

Greenley J, Schoenherr R. 1981. Organization Effects on Client Satisfaction with Humaneness of Service. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 22:211-33.

Harris KM. 1993. Work and Welfare Among Single Mothers in Poverty. *American Journal of Sociology* 99: 317-52.

Harris KM. 1996. Life After Welfare: Women, Work, and Repeat Dependency. *American Sociological Review* 61: 407-26.

- Hillman A. 1998. Mediators of Patient Trust. *Journal of the American Medical Association* 280:576-88.
- Hodgkinson V, Weitzman M, Kirsch A, Noga S, Gorski H. 1993. From Belief to Commitment: The Community Service Activities and Finances of Religious Congregations in the United States. Findings from a National Survey. Washington, D.C: Independent Sector.
- Ilchman W, Katz S, Queen E, II, eds. 1998. *Philanthropy in the World's Traditions*. Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Jang SJ, Johnson B. 2001. Neighborhood disorder, individual religiosity, and adolescent use of illicit drugs: a test of multilevel hypotheses. *Criminology* 39: 109-43.
- Johnson B, Larson D, Pitts T. 1997. Religious Programming, Institutional Adjustment and Recidivism Among Former Inmates in Prison Fellowship Programs. *Justice Quarterly* 14: 145-66.
- Johnson B, Tompkins RB, Webb D. 2002. *Objective Hope: Assessing the Effectiveness of Faith-Based Organizations: A Review of the Literature*, Center for Research on Religion and Urban Civil Society at University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA.
- Knox V, Bane MJ. 1994. Child support and schooling. In *Child Support and Child Well-Being*, ed. IM Garfinkel, Sara; Robins, Philip. Washington, DC: Urban Institute Press.
- Lichter D, McLaughlin D, Ribar D. 1997. Welfare and the Rise in Female-Headed Families. *American Journal of Sociology* 103: 112-43.
- MacLeod J. 1987. *Ain't no makin' it : leveled aspirations in a low-income neighborhood*. Boulder: Westview Press.

McAllister D. 1995. Affect-and-Cognition-Based Trust as Foundations for Interpersonal Cooperation in Organizations. *Academy of Management Journal* 38: 24-59.

McLanahan S. 1985. Family Structure and the Reproduction of Poverty. *American Journal of Sociology* 90: 873-901.

Moffitt R. 1992. Incentive Effects of the U.S. Welfare System: A Review. *Journal of Economic Literature* 30: 1-61.

Molm L, Takahashi N, Peterson G. 2000. Risk and Trust in Social Exchange: An Experimental Test of a Classical Proposition. *American Journal of Sociology* 105: 1396-427.

Monsma SV. 1996. When sacred and secular mix : religious nonprofit organizations and public money. Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield.

Musick M, Wilson J, Bynum W. 2000. Race and Formal Volunteering: The Differential Effects of Class and Religion. *Social Forces* 61: 1539-70.

Orr J, Miller D, Roof WC, Melton JG. 1994. *Politics of the Spirit: Religion and Multiethnicity in Los Angeles*. Los Angeles: University of Southern California.

Park J, Smith C. 2000. "To Whom Much Has Been Given...": Religious Capital and Community Voluntarism Among Churchgoing Protestants. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 39: 272-86.

Perry M, Mackun P. 2001. *Population Change and Distribution: Census 2000 Brief*. U.S. Census Bureau.

Phillips D, King E. 1988. Death Takes a Holiday: Mortality Surrounding Major Social Occasions. *The Lancet*: 728-32.

Piliavin JA, Charng H-W. 1990. Altruism: A Review of Recent Theory and Research. *Annual Review of Sociology* 16: 27-65.

Pipes PF, Ebaugh HR. 2002. Faith-based coalitions, social services, and government funding. *Sociology of Religion* 63: 49-68.

Price J, Leaver L. 2002. Beginning treatment. *British Medical Journal* 325: 33-5.

Putnam RD. 2000. *Bowling alone : the collapse and revival of American community*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Richard A, Bell D, Carlson J. 2000. Individual Religiosity, Moral Community and Drug User Treatment. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 39: 240-6.

Rossi P, Wright J. 1993. *The Urban Homeless: A Portrait of Urban Dislocation*. In *The Ghetto Underclass: Social Science Perspectives*, ed. WJ Wilson. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

Rotolo T. 2000. A Time to Join, A Time to Quit: The Influence of Life Cycle Transitions on Voluntary Association Membership. *Social Forces* 78: 1133-61.

Schoenbach V, Kaplan B, Fredman L, Kleinbaum D. 1986. Social Ties and Mortality in Evans County, Georgia. *American Journal of Epidemiology* 123: 577-91.

Smith D. 1994. Determinants of Voluntary Association Participation and Volunteering. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 23: 243-63.

Smith S, Sosin M. 2001. The varieties of faith-related agencies. *Public Administration Review* 61: 651-70.

- Snow D, Anderson L. 1987. Identity Work Among the Homeless: The Verbal Construction and Avowal of Personal Identities. *American Journal of Sociology* 92: 1336-71.
- Testa M, Astone NM, Krogh M, Neckerman K. 1993. Employment and Marriage among Inner-City Fathers. In *The Ghetto Underclass: Social Science Perspectives*, ed. WJ Wilson. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.
- Tyler T, Degoey P. 1996. Trust in Organizational Authorities: the Influence of Motive Attributions on Willingness to Accept Decisions. In *Trust in Organizations: Frontiers of Theory and Research*, ed. RT Kramer, Tom, pp. 331-56. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Uslaner E. 2002a. Religion and Civic Engagement in Canada and the United States. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 41: 239-54.
- Uslaner E. 2002b. *The Moral Foundations of Trust*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Weisbrod BA. 1988. *The nonprofit economy*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Weissbourd R. 2000. Beyond "Villages": New Community Building Strategies for Disadvantaged Families. In *Who Will Provide? The Changing Role of Religion in American Social Welfare*, ed. MJ Bane, Coffin, Brent; Thiemann, Ronald. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Wilson WJ. 1987. *The truly disadvantaged : the inner city, the underclass, and public policy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Wineburg RJ. 1993. Social Policy, Community Service Development, and Religious Organizations. *Nonprofit Management and Leadership* 3: 283-97.

Winkler A. 1994. The determinants of a mother's choice of family structure. *Population Research and Policy Review* 13: 283-303.

Winship C. Forthcoming. End of a Miracle? Crime, Faith, and Partnership in Boston in the 1990's. In *The Public Influence of Black Churches*, ed. RD Smith