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Research Summary

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Lord knows...

But what do *we* know about the effectiveness of faith-based programming?

Rob Fischer

Beginning with the Clinton Administration and greatly extended under George W. Bush, the federal government has expanded the role of faith-based providers in the delivery of a range of human services. Since 2001, the Faith-Based and Community Initiative (FBCI) has aimed to give these organizations equal opportunity with secular and larger organizations to secure federal funding for the delivery of social services. Aside from Constitutional questions, the expanded role for Faith-Based and Community Organizations (FBCOs) within the domain of federally funded human services has carried with it an increased interest in the capacity and operational effectiveness of these organizations. In the context of the limited state of current research, important questions need to be addressed about how FBCOs conduct their programs and the extent to which the programs achieve the intended outcomes. This study seeks to assess the current evidence base by examining the previous relevant reviews, highlighting noteworthy studies in the field, and conducting a synthesis of the available research on FBCO effectiveness. The analysis places a premium on examining the available evidence for the purpose of effectively informing policy and practice as it relates to the FBCI.

CONTEXT FOR RESEARCH

The FBCI is rooted in the notion of drawing on the natural capacities and strengths of FBCOs to deliver effective programming. These organizations, as indigenous entities with staff who often reside in the surrounding neighborhoods, are seen as having invaluable connections and credibility within their communities. FBCOs often have direct and consistent contact with the most needy in their communities and a stated mission to serving these needs as best they can. Also, FBCOs have established roots and connections both within the geographic area where they are located as well as within the broader faith communities.

FBCOs are recognized as having particular expertise and advantage in some areas. For example, in its narrative on the Compassion Capital Fund, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) describes FBCOs

as being “uniquely situated” to serve “families in poverty, prisoners reentering the community and their families, children of prisoners, homeless families, and at-risk youth” (DHHS, 2002). Beyond simply acknowledging expertise, however, some proponents outside of the FBCI have gone further, arguing that faith-based programs are in fact superior to the conventional alternatives in terms of effectiveness and cost. These claims appear to be based on the experiences of single studies or compelling anecdotes, rather than on a systematic review of the evidence. The dialogue about the prospective effectiveness of FBCO programming has had a tendency to outpace the actual data available, or to focus on effects for subgroups of participants. This situation underscores the need for additional research on the outcomes of FBCO-sponsored programs, and specifically in comparison to conventional programming or the absence of programming entirely.



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The study explores the evidence on the extent to which faith-based programs are more effective than other approaches.

In particular, the central question of the unique effectiveness of faith-based organizations in providing human services is also confounded by the role that religion or faith may play in the lives of individuals. Simply examining the effects of programs that have faith as an element of their delivery will not shed light on the central question. (see Figure 1). All individuals possess personal characteristics that pertain to their level of faith and their engagement in religious practice. The existing research shows that the association between religious engagement and positive behaviors and well-being is fairly clear—the relationship is significant and positive but not necessarily causative (e.g., Johnson, Tompkins, & Webb, 2002). Although religious engagement is associated with indicators of better health and behaviors, it is also plausible that the individuals who choose healthy behaviors also tend to choose religious engagement. When the notion of an FBCO program is introduced into these relationships, it becomes apparent that the individual’s choice about what services to use may reflect something about their faith disposition. Although the FBCO program may be influencing the behaviors and well-being of the individual,

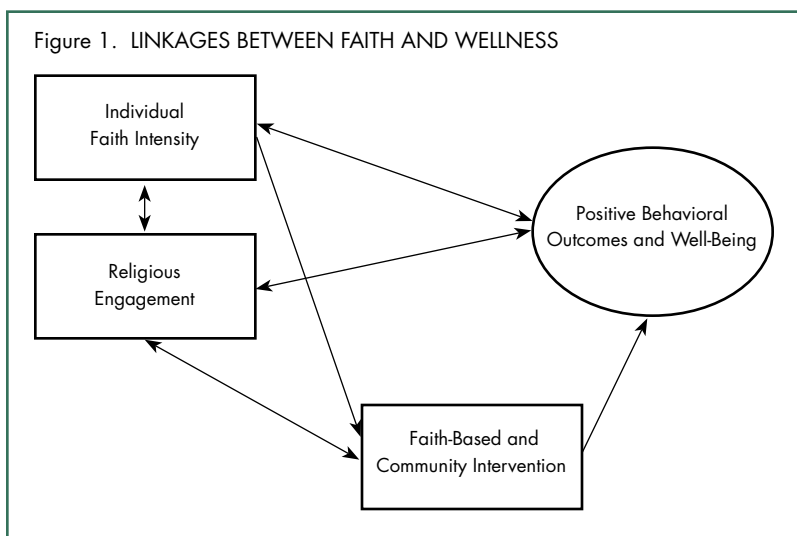
these changes may also be related to the underlying characteristics of the individuals served. In other words, there may be the problem of self-selection in faith-based programs in that those served may already be inclined toward success, compared to others in the target population.

The ability to distinguish between the effect of this so-called selection bias and true treatment effect depends heavily on the research methodology that is undertaken. In a study that specifically examined the factors associated with individuals volunteering for a faith-based program, the authors suggest that researchers can only effectively address this issue through more rigorous study designs involving a sound comparison between served and nonserved groups (Camp et al., 2006).

Beyond the characteristics of the organization there are also the characteristics of the individual program to consider. For example, an FBCO may deliver different programs that possess different levels of faith intensity, and the faith dimension at both these levels can play a role in participant well-being. Defining or categorizing programs by the presence of faith is the subject of ongoing debate.

Within these limitations, this study focuses on two key questions. First, to what extent are FBCO services effective? For the purposes here, *effectiveness* is defined as a program’s ability to have participants show progress in achieving the desired outcomes (i.e., changes in knowledge, attitude, behavior, or status). For example, do children served by a mentoring program delivered by an FBCO show fewer behavioral problems and/or improved academic performance during or after the mentoring experience? The types of studies that are relevant to address this question are those that collect data on participants using some sort of outcome measurement approach, which is often limited to pre-post (before and after) assessments on a single group of participants. Although useful, these studies routinely lack outcome data from a comparison group that would provide a benchmark of what would have happened in the absence of the program. As such, these studies can only indicate whether participants changed during the time frame of the intervention and cannot address whether the change was a result of the program’s efforts.

The second question is: to what extent are FBCO



Rob Fischer is Research Associate Professor at the Mandel School of Applied Social Sciences and Co-Director of the Center on Urban Poverty and Community Development.

services more effective than other approaches? For example, do clients served by different types of welfare-to-work programs (e.g., faith-based versus secular) show different levels of success in achieving the desired employment outcomes? The types of evidence that will inform this question are based on more rigorous evaluation designs in which meaningful comparisons can be made to a group of comparable individuals who received alternate services or usual care. This requirement is much more restrictive and the number of studies that will achieve this standard is necessarily fewer than those that will address the first question. The most conclusive designs involve random assignment to groups or other quasi-experimental approaches to creating equivalent groups.

METHODS

This study examined previous research reviews about FBCOs as well as study exemplars that illustrate particular strengths present in the literature. In addition, the study conducted a review and synthesis of the existing comparative studies on FBCO effectiveness.

The study methods used here are based on the accepted standards for research synthesis approaches (Lipsey & Wilson, 2001). With the primary focus of the review effort delineated, a search was conducted to locate as many candidate studies as possible for inclusion in the review. The search had two main components. First, the existing research reviews were examined and the studies included in each of these were culled for candidates for the present review. Second, a search was conducted of ten large electronic databases containing publications and reports in the social and behavioral sciences. The disciplines represented in these databases include anthropology, economics, law, medicine, nursing, policy studies, psychology, social work, and sociology. The search was focused using the search terms "faith-based," "community," and "evaluation" together, as well as "faith-based" and "outcome" together. Studies targeted for inclusion had all of the following attributes: (1) reported on the evaluation of a program

delivered by a faith-based or community-based organization, (2) reported quantitative data on participant outcomes relevant to the intervention (e.g., employment, substance abuse, criminal activity), (3) used a comparative study design involving a group of program participants and a group of individuals who participated in an alternate program or no special programming, (4) involved the evaluation of a human service programming effort similar in substantive nature to those targeted by the FBCI, (5) involved programming that was directed to a general population of individuals rather than a group composed of members of a religious congregation, and (6) was reported in 1990 or later. Of particular interest were studies completed after 2004 because the existing reviews by Johnson et al. (2002) and Ferguson et al. (2007) had identified the vast majority of potential studies completed through 2004. The focus of this synthesis is on studies that examine the outcomes of faith-based programs, often in comparison to secular programs with the same objectives.

Based on the search procedures, a total of 92 independent citations were generated. Once identified, copies of publications and reports were secured and examined for eligibility. In this process, particular emphasis was given to the type of research design used in the study, distinguishing between studies that used a single-group pre-post or related design and those that were truly comparative in nature (i.e., using two or more groups). A supplemental search technique was also applied by reviewing the citations and footnotes of all retrieved studies. Studies that were ultimately deemed to meet the inclusion criteria were then formally reviewed. For each of the 18 studies, the reported outcome data were collected and used to compute standardized mean effects on the key program outcomes identified by the study's authors. The effect size provides a standardized metric for comparing across studies and outcomes. Of the 18 studies, 14 compared faith-based programming of some type with either a specific secular program or generally available services delivered to the same target population.

The remaining four studies compared a faith-based program with the experience of individuals served by no specific program.

RESULTS

The review of the existing literature identified a meaningful core of studies that examined the outcomes of FBCO programming. However, only 18 of the 92 quantitative outcome studies identified used a comparative research design. Among the 18 studies identified, 13 had been included in at least one of the prior reviews. The 18 studies span six distinct target populations, with multiple studies focused on prisoners and former prisoners (8), welfare clients (4), substance abusers (2), the elderly (2), and additional studies of children of prisoners and Latino women. Sample sizes vary dramatically, as do the procedures used to construct a comparison group for the studies. The key outcomes of interest are specific to the substantive focus of the programs. Although there is some consistency within program domains (e.g., recidivism among prisoner programs), the time frames of the outcomes vary. Finally, subgroup analyses were examined in over two thirds of the studies, but these varied in scope and focus.

The results from each study were converted into standardized "effect size" units. Effect size measures the difference in the outcome between groups in a study. A zero value indicates no difference in the outcomes between the faith-based and the secular programs. Positive effect sizes indicate the outcomes were better in the faith-based group, while negative effect sizes indicate they were better in the secular group.

The overall mean effect size for the sample of studies is .205, showing overall a result favoring faith-based services. Figure 2 presents a summary of distribution of effect sizes. The overall mean effect size would be judged in the small range according to the standard offered by Cohen (1988) and in the bottom quarter of effects. Another interpretation of an effect size of .2 is that it equates to a 10% difference on a success measure between the treatment and comparison groups (e.g., 55% versus 45%). Two of the larger subgroups of studies were also examined. The eight studies of interventions with prisoners

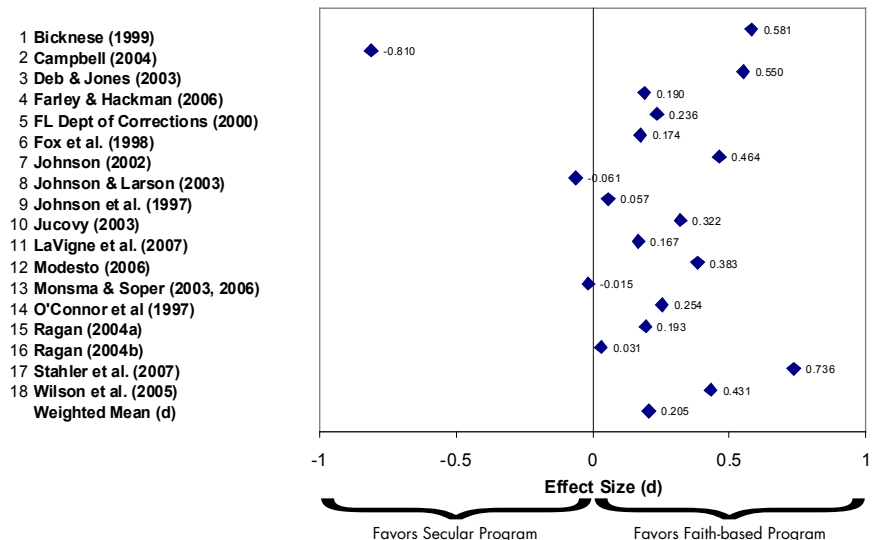
and former prisoners yielded a weighted mean effect size in the small range. The three studies of welfare-to-work programming (after removing the one statistical outlier) yielded a weighted mean effect size in the moderate range, equivalent to a 24% difference in the success rates between groups (e.g., 62% versus 38%).

The set of available studies that use a comparative design and report quantitative outcomes in sufficient detail is relatively small and is only able to support a preliminary quantitative synthesis of findings. As such, at present, the findings presented should be seen as illustrative of the kinds of beneficial impacts that FBCOs can produce across a range of substantive domains working with differing target populations. On average, the presence of faith in these programs, along with the other characteristics of the interventions, appears to result in a modest positive effect on the outcomes of interest over those observed among comparison populations.

IMPLICATIONS

Since its launch in 2001, the FBCI has dramatically increased the role of smaller FBCOs in the delivery of federally funded social services. Concurrently, there has been expanded interest in the ability of FBCOs to document their outcomes, and in identifying high-quality research to test the effectiveness of services delivered by FBCOs. Despite considerable effort and progress, the existing evidence base remains limited. A preliminary quantitative synthesis shows that the overall effect of FBCO programs, although modest in size, demonstrates that these programs tend to

Figure 2. EFFECT SIZES FOR STUDIES INCLUDED IN THE ANALYSIS



produce somewhat better outcomes compared with usual services, secular services, or no special programming. More data are needed to confirm this finding, as are data to investigate the effectiveness of specific categories of programs for defined target populations. In order to further contribute to existing knowledge in this domain, efforts should be continued in at least three areas, as described below.

Outcome Measurement and FBCO

Capacity. The available evidence suggests that because of their limited size and relative inexperience with outcomes measurement, many FBCOs need specific assistance to develop capacity to collect, manage, and analyze their data. FBCOs should strive to collect more complete and accurate data and present it in a methodologically rigorous and neutral fashion. A central implication of the capacity issue is the imperative of addressing the developmental needs of FBCOs. The recognition that FBCOs require specialized assistance in fully developing and assessing their programs has resulted in the funding of intermediary organizations to help build the capacity of FBCOs.

Rigorous Evaluation. The most promising avenues for responding to the data needs regarding FBCOs are through improving and expanding data collection practices and fielding more rigorous comparative studies to address issues of effectiveness. In the evaluation of any human service intervention, it is widely accepted that the use of randomized, well-implemented research designs leads to the most credible assessments of program impact. Experimental and quasi-experimental research designs have the distinct advantage of eliminating the role of a range of plausible intervening factors that could compete with the program in explaining impacts. To date, only one study of faith-based services using a randomized design has emerged (Stahler et al., 2007).

Deconstructing Faith. An area of great interest and debate has been in characterizing the nature of faith-based programs. The ability to assess the relative degree of faith intensity of a social service program is central to clarifying the program's theory, logic, and ultimately the key outcomes. If the role of faith is a key ingredient in the expected success of the faith-based programs, then it is

essential to better understand and measure its presence (Fischer, 2004). Faith can be both a matter of the context or environment of programs as well as part of the intervention itself, and as yet there are very limited data on this distinction.

CONCLUSION

Despite the substantial growth in the funding available to faith-based and community-based organizations over the past decade, the field of research on FBCOs remains very young and underdeveloped. As recently as 2002, the U.S. General Accounting Office concluded that the literature "...provides no information on which to assess the effectiveness of FBCOs as providers of social service" (p. 17). Although advances have been made and a productive dialogue is underway, the extent of the existing evidence base

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is insufficient as a guide for program planning and enhancement. Overall, because of the relative youth of the FBCO research field, there is a lack of systematic data on FBCO services and their effectiveness. As indicated earlier, much of the existing research on FBCO services is descriptive in nature, with a focus on programmatic models, delivery styles, and funding streams of FBCO services. However, the research in the field has expanded over time (1998 to 2007) and now includes a number of key empirical studies as well as important efforts to distill what is known about the effectiveness of existing programs. The field needs to move forward with an agenda of establishing data systems for the purposes of accountability, program improvement, and demonstrating effectiveness.

A longer version of this work appeared in *Innovations in Effective Compassion* (eds., P. Joshi, S. Hawkins, & J. Novey). *Compendium of Research Papers Presented at the Faith-Based and Community Initiatives Conference on Research, Outcomes, and Evaluation*. Washington: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Available at <http://aspe.hhs.gov/fbci/com08/>

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Research summaries from
the Center on Urban Poverty
and Community Development

Founded in 1988 as the Center on Urban Poverty and Social Change, the Center changed its name in 2006 to the Center on Urban Poverty and Community Development. The Center's commitment to addressing the issues of urban poverty remains at the core of its work, as does a commitment to social change. The new name emphasizes the means through which such change must take place.

The Center on Urban Poverty and Community Development seeks to address the problems of persistent and concentrated urban poverty and is dedicated to understanding how social and economic changes affect low-income communities and their residents. Based in Cleveland at Case Western Reserve University's Mandel School of Applied Social Sciences, the Center views the city as both a laboratory for building communities and producing change locally, and as a representative urban center from which nationally relevant research and policy implications can be drawn.

A community resource for expertise and data analysis for nearly 20 years, the Center on Urban Poverty and Community Development created the groundbreaking community data system NEO CANDO (Northeast Ohio Community and Neighborhood Data for Organizing), a web-based tool that centralizes a broad array of indicators, making it easier to overlay and analyze disparate data. Community development corporations, foundation program officers, local governments, neighborhood activists and residents, students at the Mandel School and other institutions, the media, community reinvestment professionals and academic researchers are among those who have found NEO CANDO invaluable in their work. The Center conducts extensive training and maintains a listserv so NEO CANDO users can get the most out of its vast data collection. You can visit the NEO CANDO webpage at <http://neocando.case.edu>.



**CASE WESTERN RESERVE
UNIVERSITY**
MANDEL SCHOOL OF APPLIED SOCIAL SCIENCES

Center on Urban Poverty and
Community Development
Mandel School of Applied Social Sciences
Case Western Reserve University
10900 Euclid Avenue
Cleveland, OH 44106-7164
Phone: (216)368-6946
E-mail: povcenter@case.edu

Visit us on the Web: <http://povertycenter.case.edu>
Visit the Mandel School on the Web: <http://msass.case.edu>