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## Sizing Up Worker Center Income (2008-2014): A Study of Revenue Size, Stability, and Streams

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## Sizing Up Worker Center Income (2008-2014): A Study of Revenue Size, Stability, and Streams

### Abstract

[Excerpt] Since the publication of Janice Fine's path-breaking book, *Worker Centers: Communities at the Edge of the Dream* in 2006, scholars and commentators on the left and the right of the political spectrum have grappled with how to characterize these emergent worker organizations on the US labor relations scene. This chapter deepens our understanding of the nature of worker centers by examining the funding trends that underlay the wide range of experimental organizing and advocacy strategies highlighted in other chapters of this volume. Undoubtedly, to emerge and survive, these organizations need money (Bobo and Pabellon 2016). But how financially stable are worker centers? How big are they? Where does the funding come from? How do they compare to labor unions? To address some of these questions, we compiled a large collection of available data to complete the first systematic empirical analysis of worker center funding across multiple years (2008 through 2014).

### Keywords

worker centers, revenue, income, stability

### Disciplines

Labor Relations

### Comments

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# Sizing Up Worker Center Income (2008–2014): A Study of Revenue Size, Stability, and Streams

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## INTRODUCTION

Since the publication of Janice Fine's path-breaking book, *Worker Centers: Communities at the Edge of the Dream* in 2006, scholars and commentators on the left and the right of the political spectrum have grappled with how to characterize these emergent worker organizations on the US labor relations scene. This chapter deepens our understanding of the nature of worker centers by examining the funding trends that underlay the wide range of experimental organizing and advocacy strategies highlighted in other chapters of this volume. Undoubtedly, to emerge and survive, these organizations need money (Bobo and Pabellón 2016). But how financially stable are worker centers? How big are they? Where does the funding come from? How do they compare to labor unions? To address some of these questions, we compiled a large collection of available data to complete the first systematic empirical analysis of worker center funding across multiple years (2008 through 2014).

Our analysis includes the amounts and sources of revenue for more than 100 worker centers over a seven-year period (2008 through 2014). We drew from three main sources of available information to construct funding profiles for each worker center in our sample. First, we incorporated the nonprofit organizations' required annual filings to the US Internal Revenue Service (IRS)—a filing required of any organization that has nonprofit

tax-exempt status under Section 501(c)(3) of the US Internal Revenue Code. Most worker centers have nonprofit status, which enables them to access foundation, individual donor, and government funding to support their initiatives to improve the living and working conditions of low-wage workers (Fine 2011). Second, we used labor organizations' required annual filings to the US Department of Labor. Third, we gathered data from the Foundation Directory Online's compilation of foundation donations.

Our "size up" of worker center income from 2008 through 2014 complicates the dominant portrayal of worker centers as small and unstable. Most worker centers are indeed organizations with little revenue. Nevertheless, there is a wide range of revenue size among worker centers. There are even a few "giants," with revenue so high that they were statistical outliers. Worker center budgets are somewhat unstable: the past growth of a worker center's revenue typically has no bearing on its future growth. There also seemed to be no advantage for large-revenue organizations. Worker centers with large budgets were typically just as unstable as centers operating on a shoestring budget and were more susceptible to shrinking in times of economic downturn.

Our inquiry into the streams of funding that worker centers receive tells a "no one size fits all" story of diversity. Unlike labor unions, whose revenue relies almost exclusively on dues from members, worker centers craft diverse funding portfolios and get almost no funding from membership dues. Much like those of other nonprofit organizations, worker centers' revenue streams are diverse. The most common funding streams of worker centers are monies from providing program services, charitable foundation grants, and government funding. In terms of reliance, worker centers overwhelmingly depend on funding streams that are external to the organization (foundation grants, government grants, and individual donations) rather than funding streams that are internally generated, such as membership dues. Despite increased strategic collaborations between some labor unions and worker centers reported elsewhere in this volume, we find that funding from labor unions serves as a minuscule portion of worker center revenue overall.

## **OUR SAMPLE OF WORKER CENTERS**

We derive the population of worker centers in our sample from Fine and Theodore's infographic of worker centers from 2012 (Fine and Theodore 2013). We sought to collect data on each of these worker centers from the forms they are required to submit annually to the IRS, specifically the IRS 990 form (hereafter referred to as IRS 990). We did this for each worker center in every year from 2008 through 2014. Thus, the IRS 990 is both the primary source of data and the primary delimiter of our sample. The IRS 990 offers a trove of data. It includes an organization's address, the

names of officers/leaders, and other demographic information, as well as a breakdown of revenue and expenses. While there are limitations to the IRS 990 (Grønberg 2002), it is used widely as an adequate source of data on nonprofit revenue and sources of income (Froelich, Knoepfle, and Pollak 2000; Powell and Steinberg 2006).

Table 1 illustrates that for 2012, we obtained IRS 990s for 60% (104) of the 172 worker centers on the 2012 list.<sup>1</sup> Our analysis of those worker centers for which we could not obtain IRS 990s, and therefore could not include in our sample, leads us to conclude that our sample likely over-represents larger and more stable worker centers. First, a substantial portion of worker centers, 15% of the total in 2012, were not stand-alone organizations. Instead, they were “parented” by another larger organization.<sup>2</sup> Because they are a program or part of a larger nonprofit that deals with issues beyond workplace justice, we could not isolate the size and funding sources of the worker centers within the parents’ overall budgets.

Second, we confirmed that another roughly 5% of all worker centers were not required to file an IRS 990 because their revenue was so small. Organizations with 501(c)(3) status who have revenue of \$50,000 or below are not required to report financial information to the IRS.<sup>3</sup> Third, we know that relying on IRS 990s as a source of data “carries an important undercount bias” more generally (Culleton Colwell 1997; Gleeson and Bloemraad 2012; Grønberg 1993). Gleeson and Bloemraad (2012) have shown that some groups may not have enough resources to even register for 501(c)(3) nonprofit status in the first place, while others may simply not file the 990 even though they are obligated to do so. Thus, relying on

TABLE 1  
Percentage of Worker Centers by Rationale for Availability of Data

	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
% in sample (with IRS 990 data)	62	61	59	60	60	59	62
% not in sample (known rationale)	22	23	23	23	23	23	23
% parented	13	15	15	15	15	15	15
% too small	6	5	5	5	5	5	5
% religious or other exempt	3	3	3	3	3	3	3
% don't know why not in sample	16	16	17	17	16	17	15
Total %	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Total number of worker centers	152	162	166	169	172	172	172

IRS 990s carries a bias toward under-representing resource-poor organizations.

Finally, because our data collection strategy focused on a list of worker centers created in 2012, our sample of worker centers in earlier years (2008 through 2011) likely missed some worker centers that existed in these years but did not survive until 2012. For those years, our sample over-represents organizations with stable-enough funding sources to survive until 2012. For 2013 and 2014, we collected data on worker centers that existed in 2012. Therefore, our sample does not include organizations that emerged in those two later years. To minimize these effects, we report analyses based on the 2012 data, even though parallel analyses of other years confirm the trends reported for 2012.

## **FINDINGS ON THE SIZE AND STABILITY OF WORKER CENTER REVENUE**

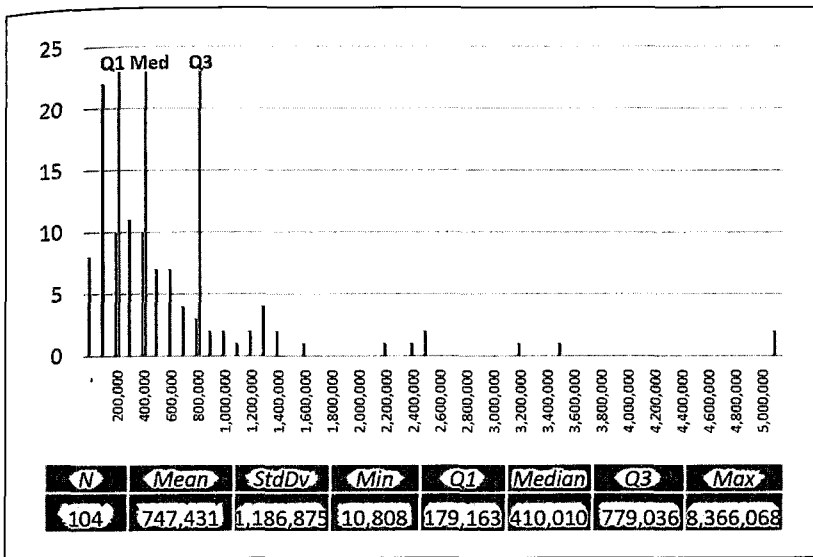
Some scholars and commentators suggest that worker centers are powerful players on the labor relations scene (Manheim 2013; US Chamber of Commerce 2014; Wong 2015). Cordero-Guzmán, Izvănariu, and Narro (2013) highlight some centers have formed sector-based networks that serve as labor market intermediaries. Others question whether most worker centers are even large enough to have a demonstrable impact beyond the individual level (Compa 2015; Eidelson 2013; Fine 2006; Rosenfeld 2006).

Here we consider just how big and stable worker center revenue is. Our data does not allow us to look at all aspects of worker center size, which would entail a more holistic consideration of factors such as membership size, numbers of individuals served, and other measures of organizational impact. Nevertheless, revenue size can undoubtedly help us understand the scope of a worker center's reach. The literature on nonprofit organizations, for instance, suggests that larger revenue can lead to increased political visibility, which increases the likelihood of evoking positive responses from policy makers (de Graauw 2016).

### **Revenue Size?**

Figure 1's histogram shows that worker center revenue tend to be low. This is true even though our sample of worker centers is likely to over-represent larger worker centers. As Figure 1 demonstrates, the modal worker center (the one with the greatest frequency) has a revenue of between \$100,000 and \$200,000. Of the worker centers in this modal range, more than half of them (12 of the 22) had revenue below \$150,000. The concentration of worker centers in this lower revenue range is further affirmed when we consider that a quarter of all worker centers in our sample had yearly revenue of less than \$179,163. Furthermore, the median revenue level for our

FIGURE 1  
Distribution of Worker Centers by Total Revenue, 2012



Source: IRS 990s.

sample was only \$410,010. These observations about the revenue streams of worker centers are consistent with Fine’s 2005 study, which showed that more than half of worker centers were small organizations with annual revenue of \$250,000 or less (Fine 2006). Low revenue is a trait worker centers share with other nonprofits, which have been characterized as “small and cash-poor” (Grønbjerg 1993: 53).

A brief comparison with revenue among more traditional labor organizations further highlights the relatively small revenue levels of the worker centers in our sample. In 2012, for instance, UNITE HERE’s Chicago Local 1 had a revenue of \$9 million, and UNITE HERE’s San Francisco Local 2 reported a revenue of \$6.4 million. A smaller UNITE HERE local in Washington, D.C., Local 25, reported approximately \$4 million in revenue for 2012 (DOL LM-2 filings for Local 1, Local 2, and Local 25; US DOL 2012a, 2012b, 2012c). If we look beyond local unions to international unions such as the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), the small revenue sizes of worker centers are put into even more stark relief. In 2012, SEIU’s reported revenue was \$307 million (US DOL 2012d). In contrast, the combined total revenue of all 104 worker centers in our 2012 sample was equal to just under \$78 million.

And yet Figure 1 also reveals how widely worker center revenue ranges. A quarter of worker centers in our sample (26) had revenue greater than \$779,036. In this largest quartile, six worker centers had revenue of less than \$1 million per year, 12 had revenue between \$1 and \$2 million per year, and eight had revenue larger than \$2 million.<sup>4</sup> These eight worker centers had impressive revenue levels: two of them had revenue of just over \$3 million, one had revenue just over \$7 million, and one's revenue exceeded \$8 million. It is these eight high-revenue cases that pull up the average revenue of worker centers in our sample to \$747,431, way above the median or mode. The identification of eight outliers is consistent with Fine's analysis, elsewhere in this volume, that some worker centers have grown into giants that still have some work that fits the definition of a "worker center" but also do organizing and advocacy work that goes well beyond service provision, organizing, and advocacy at the local level.

### **Revenue Stability?**

Worker centers' funding strategies are often characterized as unstable and unsustainable (Compa 2015; Fine 2011; Fisk 2016). Indeed, worker centers are often described as surviving on "shoestring" budgets (Estlund 2015; Greenhouse 2014; Griffith 2015), with highly unstable levels of funding year to year (Cordero-Guzmán 2015). Our multi-year panel data offers a rare opportunity to assess the stability of individual worker center revenue over time, albeit with data that over-represents those worker centers stable enough to have existed before and after 2012. We assess the stability of revenue by measuring each worker center's annual rate of change in total revenue, as other studies of nonprofits have done (Grønbjerg 1993). Worker centers with stable revenue would be those with zero to positive rates of growth from one year to the next. Furthermore, we can assess the relative stability in worker center funding by examining how well a worker center's annual revenue growth in one year predicts that of subsequent years. Table 2 presents a series of multivariate analyses that assess whether the prior year's rate of growth, adjusted for inflation, predicts the subsequent year's rate of growth, controlling for the worker center's total revenue.

The results presented in Table 2 affirm the idea that worker center revenue is unstable. In three of the five years (from 2012 through 2014, represented in columns 3, 4, and 5), the annual rates of growth do not predict the subsequent year's rates of growth. It would seem that worker centers rarely repeat fund-raising success from one year to the next. Additionally, the results for 2010 and 2011 suggest that even when there is a significant relationship between a worker center's rate of growth in a prior year and that of the following year, the effect is not in the direction of stability. For example, column 1 portrays that for every 1% increase in



TABLE 2  
The Effects of Worker Center Prior Growth on Subsequent Year's Growth  
(Adjusted for Inflation), 2010–2014

Variables	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
	2010 Growth in Real Revenue	2011 Growth in Real Revenue	2012 Growth in Real Revenue	2013 Growth in Real Revenue	2014 Growth in Real Revenue
2009 real rate of growth	-0.248* (0.139)				
2009 revenue (adjusted to 2008)	-4.38e-06 (4.33e-06)				
2010 real rate of growth		-0.166** (0.0812)			
2010 revenue (adjusted to 2008)		-3.50e-06 (4.68e-06)			
2011 real rate of growth			0.0935 (0.0856)		
2011 revenue (adjusted to 2008)			-6.48e-06* (3.52e-06)		
2012 real rate of growth				-0.0622 (0.116)	
2012 revenue (adjusted to 2008)				-3.93e-06 (4.44e-06)	
2013 real rate of growth					0.0943 (0.0756)
2013 revenue (adjusted to 2008)					1.32e-06 (3.02e-06)
Constant	15.09** (7.477)	12.53* (6.426)	15.32*** (5.188)	14.88** (6.141)	7.170 (4.475)
Observations	91	94	94	97	99
R-squared	0.053	0.051	0.044	0.012	0.019

Standard errors in parentheses.  
\*\*\*p < 0.01, \*\*p < 0.05, \*p < 0.1

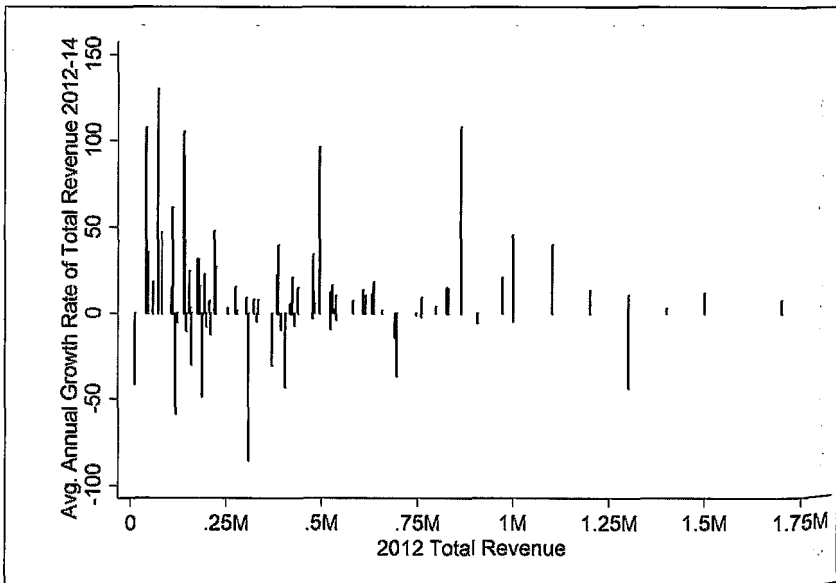
worker center revenue from 2008 to 2009, there was a 0.25% decrease in worker center growth from 2009 to 2010, regardless of a worker center's size; that is, it is precisely those that experienced revenue growth in a prior year that tended to experience less growth in subsequent years. It would seem that no good deed—in this case, that of successful fund-raising—goes unpunished at worker centers.

The results for 2010 and 2011 also raise questions about how worker center stability may relate to political or economic shocks, such as the economic recession. An economic crisis unfolded over the course of 18 months that stretched from December 2007 through June 2009 (National Bureau of Economic Research 2010). We know that the crisis affected both government and charitable foundations' ability to support nonprofit agencies like worker centers. Thus, we might anticipate an across-the-board loss of revenue for worker centers. What these results suggest, however, is that this effect was not equally felt. In fact, the recession exacted its toll on precisely those worker centers that had been flourishing at the time the recession hit. The results also raise the question of sustainability of grants. It may be that these organizations benefited from nonrenewable government or foundation grants, or that they were affected by other shocks, such as a loss of political will.

### Relationship Between Revenue Size and Stability?

We find little support for the idea that worker centers with smaller revenue were more vulnerable to shrinking than larger-revenue worker centers. Figure 2 characterizes the relationship between a group's size of revenue (in 2012) and its revenue stability in the two successive years (2013 and

FIGURE 2  
Average Annual Growth Rate (2012–2014) by Total Revenue



Note: Annual growth rate is calculated after adjusting total revenue for inflation.

TABLE 3  
Percentage of Revenue Identified by Type of Source

	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	Overall Average
Identified sources	53	58	58	65	57	62	66	59
IRS	37	44	41	43	35	41	43	40
Non-IRS	16	14	17	23	22	21	22	19
Unidentified sources	48	42	42	34	43	38	35	41
Total percentage	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Number of worker centers	94	99	98	102	104	101	105	

remaining 40% of worker center income by stream. Nevertheless, we know this funding comes from sources external to the organizations because it constitutes the income the worker centers placed in the catch-all “all other contributions” portion of the IRS 990.

Table 3 shows that we were able to identify the sources of about 40% of worker centers’ overall revenue using the IRS 990s. These forms allowed us to report the specific funding streams of income from program services, membership dues, and government grants with considerable confidence. Nonetheless, the IRS 990 did not indicate how much of “all other contributions” came from two sources that some have alleged are significant: labor unions and charitable foundations. We were able to account for nearly another 20% of a worker center’s average funding streams by examining two non-IRS sources.

We sought to uncover union funding to worker centers from the US Department of Labor’s Office of Labor Management and Standards (DOL OLMS). Unions must file yearly spending reports with the DOL OLMS that include the receiving organization’s name, the date of payment, and the purpose of payment.<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, there were no unique identifiers for each worker center in the DOL OLMS data. This made the data vulnerable to entries that were spelled differently or incorrectly, and as such may undercount levels of union funding. Nevertheless, we are confident that our efforts yielded a robust list of union contributions to worker centers.

To identify funding to worker centers from charitable foundations, we consulted the Foundation Directory Online, which is self-described as a research tool for nonprofits to find funders. A significant limitation of this source is the coverage of the Foundation Directory itself. It is likely to have

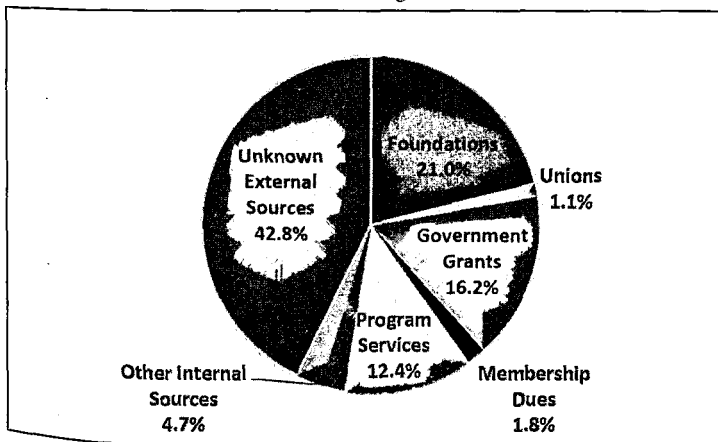
missing data because it may pull from different sources year to year. Indeed, its website states that it is “not designed for statistical or aggregate research.”<sup>8</sup> Moreover, the Foundation Directory reports grants in the year they are allocated, regardless of whether the grant was actually dispersed over multiple years. Thus, our data collection method is vulnerable to undercounting as well as overcounting foundation funding in a particular year.

Given the work of Fine (2006) and Frantz and Fernandes (2016) and the limitations of the non-IRS data sources on union and foundation revenue streams, we generally consider our estimates on these two streams to be minimum amounts. It is likely that a portion of the roughly 40% of worker center “all other contributions” revenue that remains unidentified may in fact come from foundations and unions, but a substantial portion of it certainly comes from individual donors as well. Thus, the following analysis focuses mainly on what we *can* say about the varied streams of funding using the strengths of our data set.

**FINDINGS ON WORKER CENTER FUNDING STREAMS**

As scholars of nonprofit funding have noted (Grønbjerg 1993), it is useful to look at the whole group of worker centers because macrolevel patterns affect the field the individual organizations operate within, and they can influence how groups compete and collaborate with one another. Figure 3 gives us a bird’s-eye view of the relative size of various funding streams

FIGURE 3  
Worker Center Funding Streams, 2012



Note: Other internal sources include fund-raising events, investments, and federated campaigns.  
Sources: Calculated based on IRS 990s, Foundation Directory Online, and US DOL.

in the total pie of income that worker centers collect. It reveals that worker centers rely on a diverse set of funding streams. As we might expect for any nonprofit, we found that worker centers rely to a significant degree on external, as opposed to internal, sources of funding. Internal revenue streams include membership dues, as well as less significant sources such as fund-raising events and investments. All told, the external sources add up to more than 80% of the overall pool of worker center funding for 2012. This percentage is even higher given that some “program services” income comes from government contracts rather than fees from participants. The relative insignificance of internal sources of funding underscores the degree to which worker centers look beyond their immediate community to make ends meet. This reliance on external funding sources brings to mind important questions about the extent to which reliance on external funders affects worker centers’ programmatic priorities, questions we take up below in our Directions for Future Research section.

Our analysis also suggested trends about the relative importance of various funding streams to worker center income. Here we drew on Grønbjerg’s definition of importance (1993) as an assessment of both how commonly a particular source is used (funding stream prevalence) and how dependent an organization was on a particular source (funding stream dependence).

### **Member Dues**

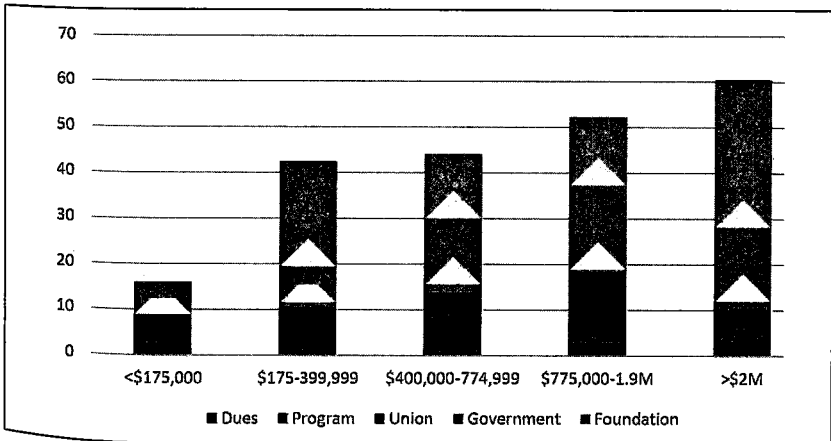
Our research confirms the predominant wisdom that worker centers find it challenging to receive member dues from their low-wage constituencies (Fine 2006; Gordon 2005). As Figure 3 illustrates, worker centers as a whole obtained merely 1.8% of their total revenue from membership dues in 2012. The dearth of resources obtained from membership dues is even more apparent if we consider the relative prevalence of dues—how this total pot of membership dues is distributed across worker centers. As the “Dues” column of Table 4 shows, the vast majority (68%) of worker centers did not receive any funds from dues. Furthermore, worker centers that did obtain money from dues were not dependent on them. Of the 34 worker centers that reported receiving any money from dues, the vast majority obtained less than 5% of their revenue from membership dues. Only seven worker centers obtained more than 5% of their revenue from dues.

Furthermore, higher-revenue worker centers were not more likely than their smaller counterparts to raise money from dues.<sup>9</sup> Figure 4 gives us a visual snapshot of how dependence on dues relates to revenue size. It confirms that the percentage of revenue that worker centers received from dues was consistently low across each of these sizes.<sup>10</sup> The first bar of Figure 4 represents the smallest quartile of worker centers.<sup>11</sup> The last two groups,

TABLE 4  
Frequency Distribution of the Revenue Percent by Funding Stream, 2012

Range	Foundation	Program	Government	Dues	Union
0	38	41	56	68	86
0.1-0.99	3	13	0	15	2
1-4	5	15	6	11	6
5-9	10	5	4	0	3
10-19	14	7	11	3	3
20-29	8	3	9	1	1
30-39	7	6	1	1	0
40-49	8	4	1	1	0
50-74	5	2	8	0	0
75-100	3	4	4	0	0
Mean	16	11	13	2	1
Minimum	1	0	2	0	1
Maximum	112	99	89	41	20
	100	100	100	100	100

FIGURE 4  
Mean Percentage of Revenue by Source and Size



represented in the last two bars, split the largest quartile of worker centers between outliers (those that report revenue in excess of \$2 million) and those that fall within the normal distribution.<sup>12</sup>

### **Program Services**

Overall, worker centers benefited much more from income for program services than from the receipt of membership dues. As Figure 3 represents, program services accounted for 12.4% of the total pie of funding received by worker centers in 2012. This finding is not that surprising given that worker centers' nonprofit status is reliant to some extent on their provision of services (although this does not require them to charge fees). The IRS 990 defines "program services" as monies received for activities that accomplish the organization's "exempt purposes" of providing relief to the "poor," "distressed," and "underprivileged."

Program service income was a prevalent source of funding among worker centers. Table 4 shows just 41% of worker centers reported no revenue from program services in 2012. This makes income from program services the second most common stream of revenue for worker centers, second only to foundations. Nonetheless, worker centers' relative dependence on program services varies widely. Table 4 illustrates that nearly 30% of worker centers received less than 5% of their revenue from program services (13% receiving less than 1%, and 15% receiving between 1% and 4.9% of their revenue). However, on average, worker centers received 11% of their revenue from program services, with six worker centers receiving more than half of their funding from program services. There were even two groups that received 99% of their overall funding from program services they provide, such as legal services and trainings.

We might expect that larger worker centers would receive a greater portion of their revenue from program services because they have more organizational capacity to provide larger-scale services. Some authors suggest that direct services can be more difficult for small worker centers (Milkman, Bloom, and Narro 2010: 11). However, it does not seem that size was a predictor of reliance on program services for our sample.<sup>13</sup> Figure 4's stacked bar chart illustrates that program services were an important source of funding across all size groupings. The top quarter (excluding the biggest eight) did receive the highest average percentage from program services (15.6%), and the percentage of revenue received from program services descends in each of the next smaller subgroupings. Nevertheless, the smallest quarter and the largest eight worker centers received a similar average amount from program services (about 7%). The evidence points to an across-the-board, albeit widely ranging, reliance on program services.<sup>14</sup>

## GOVERNMENT GRANTS

Unlike labor unions, which are not eligible for many government grants because they are not 501(c)(3) organizations, worker centers receive government grants to engage in a wide range of activities. These activities include tax preparation assistance, citizenship education and training, homelessness alleviation efforts, worker rights education, and efforts to combat labor trafficking.<sup>15</sup> Similar to funding streams of other nonprofits (Grønberg 1993), government grants are a relatively common funding stream for worker centers. As Figure 3 represents, we could confirm that more than 16% of worker center revenue in 2012 came from government grants. This is largely consistent with Fine's study (2006), which found that 21% of worker center income came from government sources.

Owing to limitations in the IRS data, the actual percentage of revenue from government grants in our sample is also likely to be higher. The monies worker centers report under the "government contributions" portion of the IRS 990 cannot include those government grants designated for program services that primarily benefit a governmental unit, as opposed to the public as a whole. Worker centers must report such government grants under "program services" rather than "government contributions." This limitation notwithstanding, 44% of the 80 worker centers that had to report whether they received government contributions obtained some type of government grant.<sup>16</sup>

The "Government" column of Table 4 illustrates how difficult it is to characterize the typical degree to which worker centers depend on government grants. The average percentage of revenue that worker centers obtained from government contributions was 13.2%, but the percentage for any given worker center ranged from 2% to 89%. Worker centers that did receive government contributions, though, tended to be more dependent on them than they were on dues or program services. Only 6% of these worker centers obtained less than 5% of their revenue from government contributions. Meanwhile, 12% of the 80 reporting worker centers (nine worker centers) received more than half of their funding from government contributions.<sup>17</sup>

Worker center dependence on this funding stream varies widely regardless of size. Even though they may have more institutional resources, higher-revenue worker centers were not more likely than smaller groups to receive government grants. Figure 4 gives us a visual representation of how the percentage of revenue worker centers obtained from government grants varied across differently sized worker centers.<sup>18</sup> The three bars representing the three largest groupings obtained a roughly similar percentage of their revenue from government, ranging from 14% for the middle group and



peaking in the next highest group at 18%.<sup>19</sup> Those worker centers with revenue from \$175,000 to \$400,000 tended to receive just under 8% of their revenue from government grants, a difference that was, nonetheless, not significant from the overall average of 15.6% for the remaining groups.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, it is a relatively small worker center in this group, with revenue of just under \$250,000, that received the highest proportion of its revenue from government grants. Thus, while government grants are an important source of funding for worker centers, the prevalence and the relative dependence of worker centers on such government grants varies tremendously.

### **Foundations**

Our limited evidence on foundation funding confirms what others have claimed: worker centers would not be able to exist, let alone flourish, were it not for grants from charitable foundations (Fine 2006; Greenhouse 2014). As Figure 3 indicates, foundation grants listed in the Foundation Directory equaled roughly a fifth (21%) of the pooled revenue for all worker centers in 2012. The true percentage is likely to be much higher given Fine's finding (2006) that 61% of worker center funding came from charitable foundations.

Furthermore, as the first column of Table 4 shows, foundation grants were the most prevalent stream of funding for worker centers. A minority of worker centers (just 38%) received no funding from foundations. Given that we suspect there were foundation grants that we could not track, we believe that deriving funding from foundations is even more common than we can show here. We would not want to read too much into the figures we have on the relative dependence of worker centers on foundation funding because we know foundations may report a multi-year grant in a single year and that the fiscal years of foundations may differ from those of worker centers. Nevertheless, a glance down the last column of Table 4 suggests that the degree to which worker centers rely on foundation grants varies just as much as their reliance on government grants.<sup>21</sup>

### **Unions**

Several chapters in this volume illustrate ways that worker centers and labor unions have partnered in recent years to advance such things as minimum-wage legislation, paid sick leave, and campaigns against large retailers. The US Chamber of Commerce and other worker center critics have alleged that some worker centers rely so heavily on union funding that they are essentially "union fronts" (Manheim 2013).<sup>22</sup> Nonetheless, our research suggests that worker centers are generally not financially dependent on labor unions.

Our research shows that the vast majority of worker centers do not receive significant funding from labor unions. Figure 3, based on DOL

peaking in the next highest group at 18%.<sup>19</sup> Those worker centers with revenue from \$175,000 to \$400,000 tended to receive just under 8% of their revenue from government grants, a difference that was, nonetheless, not significant from the overall average of 15.6% for the remaining groups.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, it is a relatively small worker center in this group, with revenue of just under \$250,000, that received the highest proportion of its revenue from government grants. Thus, while government grants are an important source of funding for worker centers, the prevalence and the relative dependence of worker centers on such government grants varies tremendously.

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membership base. Similarly, Grønbjerg (1993: 53) contends that nonprofit reliance on external funders sets up “demanding exchange relationships that restrict organizational choice.” These concerns notwithstanding, it is possible that some external grants foster the creation of new program services, which in turn can become somewhat self-sustaining internal sources of funding after the external grant runs out.

Second, future research could consider how external funders may influence organizational priorities more directly (Estey 2006; Fisk 2016). Grønbjerg’s study of nonprofits (1993: 53) characterizes many nonprofits as having “limited ability to resist efforts by funders to exert influence” because of low revenue. Others note that some external entities are not interested in nonprofits’ efforts to achieve deeper, systemwide change through organizing and agitation (Eidelson 2013). In a similar vein, Franz and Fernandes (2016) argue that some foundations place restraints on larger national worker centers that alter their ability to challenge neoliberal rationalities. They contend that, instead, these grants encourage worker centers to promote program services that foster employer alliances, workforce skills training, and business ventures. In this way, these authors portray some program services as moving organizations away from the more controversial organizing efforts designed to challenge policies and structures that hurt low-wage workers (Eidelson 2013; Franz and Fernandes 2016).

However, disagreement between nonprofit scholars on the question of how government funding affects political advocacy (de Graauw 2016) highlights the need for future research into the extent to which external funders inhibit worker centers from economic agitation and policy advocacy. In contrast to critics of external funding sources, some nonprofit scholars see reliance on government funding as boosting many organizations’ ability to engage in political advocacy effectively. For these authors, because government-dependent nonprofits need to advocate for continued government support of their efforts, they constantly build organizational resources around political advocacy that they can capitalize on (Chaves, Stephens, and Galaskiewicz 2004).

In light of the ongoing debates about worker centers’ ability to foster structural changes in the low-wage labor market, and the role of bottom-up worker voices in these organizations, future research should continue to unpack the relationship between reliance on external funding and worker centers’ financial sustainability and programmatic choices.

### **More Research on the Nature of Government Grants**

Given our finding that government grants provide an important source of funding for many (although certainly not all) worker centers, future research should endeavor to unpack what kinds of activities federal, state, and local government entities fund. Further research, for example, could

identify the types of state and local government funding worker centers receive because these state and local sources provide the majority of government funding (Umel 2006). Moreover, prior research shows that local government officials play a key and varied role in filtering money to nonprofits (de Graauw, Gleeson, and Bloemraad 2013).<sup>25</sup>

New research could also examine how government funding interacts with the social-change strategies of worker centers. Scholars, for instance, could continue to tease out how government grants relate to public-private efforts to improve the enforcement of labor standards in low-wage labor markets. The executive agencies in charge of enforcing these laws, including the US DOL, cannot ensure full enforcement of the laws on the books (Bernhardt et al. 2009; Weil 2016).<sup>26</sup> Moreover, they often do not have access to the communities that are most at risk of suffering violations (Fine 2017; Gleeson 2009). There is a growing body of literature that considers the role of community groups in labor and employment law “co-enforcement” (Amengual and Fine 2016; Demers and Sylvester 2016; Elmore 2018; Fine 2017; Fine and Gordon 2010; Gleeson 2009; Lesniewski and Canon 2016). Luce’s work, for instance, describes the ways that community organizations improved the implementation of city-level living-wage ordinances (2004). In this way, worker centers help keep government agencies accountable to the process of “making rights real” by facilitating their implementation (de Graauw 2016). Co-enforcement, of course, does not require a resource transfer between the government and a nonprofit, but, undoubtedly, funding helps facilitate these collaborations.

Scholars have identified worker center-facilitated connections between government enforcers and workers in such contexts as health and safety initiatives (Fine 2015) and the National Labor Relations Board (Lesniewski and Canon 2016). While we do not know the exact purpose of the majority of government funding, our data confirms that some worker centers obtained federal money to improve the enforcement of worker rights during the period of our study (2008 through 2014). Of the three federal grants that would enable worker centers to assist in the enforcement of worker rights (and which we could confirm on [USAspending.gov](http://USAspending.gov)), the largest was the Susan Harwood Training Grant from the US DOL’s Occupational Safety and Health Administration. Susan Harwood grants are intended to provide training and education for employers and workers in an effort to reduce health and safety hazards in the workplace.<sup>27</sup> Other workers’ rights enforcement grants from federal sources include the Environmental Justice Small Grant<sup>28</sup> and the Services for Trafficking Victims Program Grant.<sup>29</sup> Future research should comprehensively document, as some have already started to do (Amengual and Fine 2016), the nature and effects of these public-private efforts to patrol the low-wage labor market.<sup>30</sup>

### **More Research on the Nature of Program Services**

Our research revealed that revenue from program services is the most common funding stream for worker centers, but it did little to elaborate on the nature of the services offered to low-wage workers who participate in worker centers. What kinds of services are provided and which are the most common? Future research could deepen our understanding of the variety and nature of program services provided. Here, we propose one area of future inquiry, but there are many more.

Because member dues in the traditional labor union context are seen as a way to connect workers to the organization's decision making and accountability structure, one question our findings raise is the extent to which program services may be an alternative way to give workers a voice in their organizations. Do the worker centers' program service offerings result from participant requests? Do they encourage ongoing participation, or membership, in the day-to-day activities of the organization? More specifically, to what extent do program services hold the organization accountable to the community it serves? A cursory review of select worker center websites suggests that the sorts of program services range from legal help to trainings and professional development—from education about individual rights to community organizing. It is certainly feasible to imagine that some of these classes could result in strong, membership-like connections between workers and worker centers. Moreover, some income from program services comes directly from fees, which are internally generated sources of funding that could help to insulate the organization from the interference and influence of external funding sources.

Relatedly, some recent scholarship contends that worker centers should tie member dues to the program services provided. Fisk's recent work on worker centers (2016) is one example. She argues that worker centers should move toward a dues model, at least in part to increase the organization's accountability to its members rather than to external funders such as charitable foundations and government agencies. In developing her argument for the increased use of member dues by worker centers, she proposes that worker centers tie the amount of dues to the approximate value of program services the worker center is providing to the participant.

Future research, perhaps through the development of in-depth case studies, could consider the ways that worker centers' program services may, in fact, already enhance a worker center's accountability to the communities it serves, or act as a means of encouraging membership.

### **CONCLUSION**

In this chapter, we "sized" up worker center income and found that, literally, no one size fits all worker centers. While most worker centers did

indeed have little revenue, worker centers ranged widely in their revenue sizes. Indeed, our sample included a handful of giant worker centers that towered over the pack. Unfortunately, instability in their revenue size is a characteristic that fits all worker centers, big and small. Worker centers with bigger revenue seemed just as unstable as their poorer counterparts. They were also more susceptible to shrinking in times of economic downturn.

With revenue streams, we again found that worker centers cannot be characterized by one story or funding profile. Rather, our picture of diverse funding streams aligns with others who have characterized worker centers as exhibiting organizational “hybridity” (Cordero-Guzmán et al. 2013; Fine 2006). We find worker centers’ funding strategies to be as diverse as their organizing strategies discussed elsewhere in this volume. Unlike traditional labor unions, worker centers do not typically use or rely very much on membership dues. Rather, our research confirms that the lion’s share of worker center revenue comes from external sources, especially from government and foundation grants. These findings raise important questions about the relationship between funding strategies and programmatic choices at worker centers. Learning more about funding and its effects can tell us about the nature of these emergent organizations on the labor relations scene. Future research should continue to examine the evolving nature of these diverse organizations that seek justice and dignity for workers in the low-wage labor market.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Our sample of worker centers includes every worker center from the Fine/Theodore 2012 list for which we could obtain an IRS 990 for at least one year between 2008 and 2014. The IRS 990 categorized revenue streams differently before 2008, so we were not able to collect data for 2007 or earlier. Our data set ends in 2014 because it is the most recent year for which reliable data was available.

<sup>2</sup> Examples of nonprofits that parented worker centers include Catholic Charities, the Empire Justice Center, Community Partners, the Human Services Council, and the American Friends Service Committee.

<sup>3</sup> A worker center with less than \$50,000 annual revenue, for instance, needs to file only an "ePostcard."

<sup>4</sup> These eight cases are defined as outliers by the Tukey method of using the interquartile range to determine mild outliers. They are all above the cutoff for mild outliers—equal to the upper 75 percentile + 1.5 × the interquartile range of 1,678,846. Furthermore, four of these cases would constitute what Tukey called "severe outliers"—those that are larger than the upper 75 percentile + 3 × the interquartile range of \$2,578,655.

<sup>5</sup> We confirm this finding with a series of bivariate ordinary least squares (OLS) regression analyses. In all but one of the five years (2011), a worker center's size could not predict the subsequent year's growth.

<sup>6</sup> If we remove the five largest worker centers (those with revenue larger than \$3 million) from the 2012 analysis in column 3, the relationship is no longer significant. It is these largest organizations, all but one of which shrank or experienced slower growth in 2012, that appear to be driving the effects.

<sup>7</sup> These reports are publicly available either via the DOL OLMS website's "Payer/Payee" search portal or via a direct download of all union spending records for a given year. The DOL OLMS data was only available through downloading the entire yearly database. This made it extremely onerous to sift through manually, so we ran a search query using Microsoft Access.

<sup>8</sup> Foundation Center, no date. Foundation Directory Online (<http://bit.ly/2twfyjM>).

<sup>9</sup> There is no significant correlation between revenue in 2012 and the percentage of revenue derived from dues.

<sup>10</sup> There was no statistical difference in the mean percentage of revenue from dues between any single size subgroup of worker centers compared with the overall mean of the remainder of worker centers.

<sup>11</sup> The size groupings are roughly equivalent to the 2012 quartiles as represented in Figure 1 and the inner Tukey fence for identifying outliers.

<sup>12</sup> While the percentages are small, two of the outlier organizations, with revenue above \$2 million per year, collect a half million dollars in member dues each year.

<sup>13</sup> There is no significant correlation between revenue in 2012 and the percentage of revenue a worker center received from program services.

<sup>14</sup>We tested for whether the mean proportion of revenue received from program services in each of the subgroups differed significantly from the mean percentage of revenue coming from program services for the remainder of worker centers. None of these t-tests for significant difference in means were significant.

<sup>15</sup>To take a very preliminary look at the nature of the federal government grants worker centers receive, we used the USAspending.gov database. Mandated by the Federal Funding Accountability and Transparency Act of 2006, USAspending.gov is a searchable website "to give the American public access to information on how their tax dollars are spent" (<http://bit.ly/2rdZiUs>). We identified nine types of federal-level government grants to worker centers for service and education initiatives to address the myriad needs of low-income communities. These were the Susan Harwood Training Grant; Environmental Justice Small Grant, Culturally and Linguistically Specific Services Program Grant; Services for Trafficking Victims Program Grant; Fund for the Improvement of Education Grant; Low Income Taxpayer Clinics Project Grant; Citizenship Education and Training Project Grant; Supportive Housing Project Grant; and Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) Matching Grant. USAspending.gov is, however, a limited data source and does not have any information on state and local government grants.

<sup>16</sup>Out of our total 104 worker centers for which we could obtain the IRS 990s in 2012, only 80 met the revenue threshold that required they report how much they received from government grants. Organizations with revenue above \$50,000, but below \$200,000, are required to file only an IRS EZ form, which does not separate the government contributions. Some critique the IRS 990s as having potential inputting errors related to government grants (Froelich, Knoepfle, and Pollak 2000).

<sup>17</sup>These worker centers constitute outliers falling above the inner Tukey fence (here = 44%) for determining outliers from what should be the normal distribution.

<sup>18</sup>The first bar reports no government grants because this grouping includes all those too small to have to report government sources to the IRS.

<sup>19</sup>There was no significant difference in the mean of each of these three subgroups compared with the mean of the remaining worker centers.

<sup>20</sup>The t-test for significant difference revealed that the mean of 7.8% for this subgroup was significantly lower ( $t = 1.4185$ , with a  $p$  value  $> 0.10$ ) than the mean received by all other larger revenue worker centers. There was also no significant correlation between total revenue in 2012 and a worker center's relative dependence on government grants. The Pearson's correlation coefficient is 0.1160, which, with 80 observations, does not meet the threshold of significance. This makes sense intuitively when we consider that some of the largest worker centers, those with revenue over \$2 million, did not necessarily receive the highest proportion of their revenue from government grants. The largest, for instance, received just over a quarter of their resources from government grants. There were even some in this group that received no government grants.

<sup>21</sup>Similarly, we do not feel confident about coming to any conclusions on whether a worker center's size has much to do with its ability to secure foundation grants. Our research does reveal that the largest eight worker centers obtained a significantly higher percentage of their revenue from foundations (32%), and the smallest worker centers relied much less on foundations (7%). However, the group with the second highest average percentage of revenue that came from foundations, at 23%, was the group of small-to-medium-sized worker



centers (with revenue from \$175,000 to \$400,000). Furthermore, the correlation between revenue in 2012 and the percentage of a center's revenue reported from foundations was also not significant.

<sup>22</sup> Similarly, Worker Center Watch “aims to expose the direct operational linkages and funding between unions and worker centers by highlighting their tactics” (<http://bit.ly/2tBGT4n>).

<sup>23</sup> Most of these received around 30% from unions, but there was one small worker center (with a revenue that ranged from roughly \$70,000 to \$150,000 during the period) that received 65% of its revenue from unions in a single year.

<sup>24</sup> There is no significant correlation between the 2012 revenue and the percentage of revenue obtained from unions.

<sup>25</sup> These are sometimes Community Development Block Grants (CDBG), which are federally funded but locally decided (de Graauw, Gleeson, and Bloemraad 2013). de Graauw, Gleeson, and Bloemraad also show that location, and local officials, matter. Their research compares how local officials managed CDBG grant allocations in three different cities. They expose how immigrant organizations are incorporated differently depending on whether they are in a traditional immigrant gateway, a 21st-century gateway, or a new suburban destination.

<sup>26</sup> There are, for example, only about 1,000 US DOL investigators to enforce federal wage and hour law in the more than seven million establishments covered by such laws across the country (Weil 2016).

<sup>27</sup> Susan Harwood Training Grants are OSHA grants “to provide training and education programs for employers and workers on the recognition, avoidance, and prevention of safety and health hazards in their workplaces and to inform workers of their rights and employers of their responsibilities” (<http://bit.ly/2rga9NF>). For 2012, the Susan Harwood grant accounted for 10 out of 18 grants, which constitute more than half of the total federal government grant money that we were able to confirm on USAspending.gov.

<sup>28</sup> The Environmental Justice Small Grant program (<http://bit.ly/2rfL8lw>) “supports and empowers communities working on solutions to local environmental and public health issues. The program is designed to help communities understand and address exposure to multiple environmental harms and risks.”

<sup>29</sup> Services for Trafficking Victims Program Grant: State and Local Law Enforcement Assistance (<http://bit.ly/2yzeb9X>): “The primary goal of this solicitation is to provide timely, high-quality services to victims of human trafficking. ... Funding also will support efforts to increase the capacity of communities to respond to victims through the development of interagency partnerships and professional training, public outreach, and awareness campaigns.”

<sup>30</sup> While funding for worker centers to enforce worker rights is not without controversy, Gleeson (2009) shows that nonprofits play key roles in helping individuals learn about and mobilize their rights in the workplace. They can provide education in vulnerable communities and provide accessible space, which builds a relationship of trust with labor standards enforcement officials (Fine 2017; Gleeson 2009; Gordon 2005; Weil and Pyles 2005). They can also play a key information-gathering role that can help government agency personnel make decisions about their outreach efforts and enforcement targets (Bernhardt et al. 2009; Delp and Riley 2015; Fine and Gordon 2010).

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