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# Are U.S. Congregations Patching the Social Safety Net? Trends from 1998 to 2012

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*As social services become increasingly privatized amid a federal policy environment that provides a means-tested, temporary social safety net, there is potential for a larger contribution by congregations as a social service provider. Using data from a nationally representative sample of religious congregations collected in 1998, 2006, and 2012, we examine whether congregations have increased social service activity over time using three measures of service provision, and whether provision varies by the congregation's community-level context. Controlling for organizational capacity, we find that after the Great Recession, congregations are more likely than before to engage in broad social services and to engage in "core" services that address basic economic needs. We find the trend differs by the poverty status of the congregation's neighborhood, with congregations in high-poverty neighborhoods less likely to provide services in 1998 than congregations in low-poverty neighborhoods; after the recession, not only are significantly more congregations in high-poverty neighborhoods providing services than in 1998, they have closed the gap with congregations in low-poverty neighborhoods and are equally likely to be providing any services regardless of neighborhood poverty. Our findings highlight the importance of social*

*service measurement to determine the prevalence of congregation-level service provision and suggest that the role congregations play in providing services may be substantial, but it may still be an inadequate substitute for the public safety net.*

*Keywords: Congregations, social safety net, social services*

At the turn of the 20th century, the predominant providers of the social safety net were private entities, primarily those with a religious focus (Katz, 1996). Over the course of the century, the locus of assistance changed to the government as the primary provider, with private agencies sometimes supplementing the government (Sosin, 1986). By the end of the century, however, the focus again shifted, with many arguing that governmental provision of social services had become inefficient and ineffective (Carlson-Thies, 1997). One emerging arrangement was for the government to provide funds to nonprofits to deliver services (Lynn, 2002). Recently, secular and religious nonprofits have both increased their role in delivering services (Allard, 2010; Boddie & Cnaan, 2006), and low-income families use a mix of public and private agencies for basic needs (Allard, Wathen, & Danziger, 2015; Wu & KeeganEamon, 2007). Social policy has attempted to encourage congregations to become social service providers. The 1996 welfare reform included a provision (Charitable Choice) that explicitly allowed the government to contract with formal religious organizations—though relatively few congregations have accessed federal funding (Chaves & Wineburg, 2010).

To what extent are congregations providing social services in response to community needs? And are some congregations more likely to provide services? On the one hand, it may be that congregations in areas of high economic need may be most likely to see individuals with difficulties and be motivated to provide material assistance. On the other hand, the economic resources of congregations come from the contributions of their members, so congregations in high-poverty areas may have the fewest resources with which to work. As a result, it is unclear whether congregations in high-poverty areas would be more

or less likely to provide services, and whether this changed in response to the recession. This is particularly salient in the context of the Great Recession of 2007–2009, as neighborhoods and individuals faced increased economic difficulties. However, relatively little is known about the types of material assistance congregations provide, and whether they were more likely to do so after the Great Recession after considering the capacity of members. This paper examines trends in the likelihood of congregations providing material assistance between 1998 and 2012, and the characteristics that predict service provision.

## Background and Previous Literature

### *Previous Research on the Provision of Social Services by Congregations*

Many congregations provide social services, and they serve an important role in the social safety net. In a case study examining the role of religion in social services, staff members (responding both at congregations and in secular non-profit organizations) identified both the flexibility of congregational funds and moral prerogative as drivers of the significant role of congregational social service provision (Garlington, 2017).

However, accurately estimating these activities in congregations is challenging. Chaves and Tsitsos (2001) made a pioneering attempt at a national estimate by interviewing congregations referred by individual respondents to the nationally representative General Social Survey in 1998. They estimated that 58 percent of congregations in the United States were involved in at least one social service program. Similarly, a regional study of congregations in Philadelphia led to an estimate of 45–49 percent of congregations providing social services (Botchwey, 2007).

In contrast, other studies find service provision to be nearly universal among congregations. Ammerman's (2001) regional surveys and interviews found that 87 percent of congregations in seven regions (urban and rural) had at least one "community connection" or partner outside of the congregation to which they contribute space, volunteers, material goods, or money. Cnaan (2006), like Botchwey (2007), also examined congregations in Philadelphia,

but found a much higher estimate of 88 percent (versus 45–49 percent) involved in the direct provision of social services.

Some research has attempted to make sense of these diverging estimates. Perhaps congregations in urban areas are more likely to provide services than those in rural areas (Unruh & Sider, 2005). Different study methods also lead to different estimates. For example, Cnaan (2006) argues that his estimate, based on in-person interviews and prolonged engagement, is more accurate than surveys because surveys do not ask questions that elicit good data on a congregation's provision of social services. Because congregations provide (directly or through a partner) a wide range of services, estimating how many congregations provide "services" depends on definition (Ammerman, 2001; Unruh & Sider, 2005). In addition, congregations' roles vary from "short term and fleeting," such as one-time fundraisers, to regular and intensive, such as year-round shelter programs (Chaves & Tsitsos, 2001, p. 669). Some congregations provide direct care themselves, and others indirectly support a partner social service agency (Ammermann, 2001). When measures of expenditures and staff coverage on social services are used as a proxy for "long-term and face-to-face" services, only about 10 percent of congregations provided them in 1998 (Chaves & Tsitsos, 2001, p. 669).

### *Predictors of Social Services*

Survey estimates suggest that the most common services are the provision of food, clothing, and shelter (Ammerman, 2001; Chaves & Tsitsos, 2001; Garlington, 2017). Since these activities are related to meeting immediate needs, is community need an important predictor of service provision? The prior research provides mixed results. For example, Botchwey (2007) found that congregations in low-resource neighborhoods in Philadelphia were more likely to provide social service programs than those in neighborhoods with high resources. Similarly, Chaves and Tsitsos (2001) report a positive relationship between congregation social service provision and neighborhood poverty. Approaching the question from an economic exchange perspective, Hungerman (2005) used denominational records and county administrative data to estimate that a one-dollar

decrease in welfare spending related to the 1996 welfare reform legislation (which Hungerman interprets as an indicator of increasing unmet need) results in a 40-cent increase in charitable spending among Presbyterian churches.

However, other research shows little effect of neighborhood need. In an early study, Sosin (1986) finds no clear relationship between nonprofits (including religious nonprofits) providing services and low levels of public provision, which he interprets as increased need. Most recently, Gillooly and Allard (n.d.) find that the provision of social services by congregations is associated with measures of community need only when a congregation's capacity for providing such services increases. Similarly, there is a strong positive relationship between a congregation's annual budget and the number of community partners with which it provides social services, suggesting that the provision of social services may be driven more by congregation capacity than by community need (Ammerman, 2001).

In addition to congregation capacity, some research has considered the effect of congregation's religious tradition and racial composition, particularly in light of racialized U.S. congregational demographics. National surveys suggest predominantly African American congregations are no more likely to provide any social services than majority white congregations (Chaves & Tsitsos, 2001). However, Brown (2008) finds that majority African American congregations are more likely to provide services he describes as having "long-term benefits," such as job training and tutoring, rather than "short-term benefits," such as food banks and thrift shops, compared to predominantly white, Asian, or Latino congregations (p. 102). Cavendish (2000) used a nationally representative survey of U.S. Catholic parishes to compare differences by race within the same denomination, and found that predominantly African American parishes are significantly more likely to provide social services than parishes that are predominantly white.

Denomination tradition has been a fairly consistent predictor of social service, where mainline Protestant denominations (e.g., Episcopal, Lutheran, Methodist, Presbyterian) are more likely to provide any services than Catholic congregations, or conservative or evangelical Protestant denominations (e.g., Baptist, Pentecostal) (Chaves & Tsitsos, 2001). However, the gap may

be closing: recent estimates find that evangelical congregations have had the largest increase in proportions of congregations providing social services, from 28 percent in 1998 to 52 percent in 2012 (Fulton, 2016). Less is known about service provision among Jewish, Islamic, or other non-Christian congregations.

### *Trends over Time*

Given that both neighborhood and congregation characteristics affect the provision of social services, has service changed in response to secular trends in neighborhoods and congregations? Chaves and Anderson (2014) find several major trends in congregational change from 1998 to 2012: first, congregations are becoming more ethnically diverse, with an increase in the proportion of congregations made up predominantly of people of color, a decline in entirely non-Hispanic white congregations (from 20 percent of all congregations in 1998 to 11 percent in 2012), and an increase in congregations where no single ethnic group comprises at least 80 percent of congregants (from 15 percent in 1998 to 20 percent in 2012). Second, individual congregations are declining in size, but the average person is part of a larger congregation—indicating a concentration of members among large congregations. Third, more congregations are independent (not affiliated with a specific denomination) and denominational congregations have weaker denominational ties. This decrease in affiliation is also reflected in population-level surveys.

The Pew Research Center (2015) found that 16.1 percent of Americans were “unaffiliated” with a particular denomination in 2007 versus 22.8 percent in 2014; in the same period, the percentage of Americans identifying as Catholic declined from 23.9 to 20.8 percent, and as Mainline Protestant from 16.1 to 14.7 percent, while those identifying as a faith other than Christian (e.g., Jewish, Muslim, Hindu) increased from 4.7 to 5.9 percent. Taken together, these trends might suggest declines in service provision over time. First, the declining size of many congregations may mean that the proportion of congregations providing services is declining. Second, the denominational group most likely to provide services (mainline Protestant denominations) is generally shrinking.

In terms of neighborhood characteristics, the need for social services has also been changing. The welfare reform legislation of 1996 eliminated open-ended entitlement to cash assistance for low-income, single-parent families and established time limits and work requirements (Blank, 2002). Along with other changes (the increase in the Earned Income Tax Credit, for example), the current policy approach emphasizes work supports and in-kind benefits over cash assistance. The emphasis on work may lead to significant financial difficulties for those who face challenges finding regular employment at a living wage, and the emphasis on in-kind assistance may mean families have less cash for household bills not covered by in-kind supports (Brodkin, 2003; Cancian, Haveman, Meyer, & Wolfe, 2002). As a result of these changes, responsive congregations may shift the services they provide to replace basic needs that could have previously been filled via a public safety net (food, clothing, assistance with rent or utilities, or assistance with paying some required bills). Given that federal poverty policy increasingly prioritizes earnings, congregations may also be more interested in providing job training or educational assistance designed to help participants find stable employment.

The policy context regarding religious organizations has also been changing. Welfare reform created new funding opportunities for nongovernmental social service organizations, including religious congregations through the Charitable Choice program (Cnaan & Boddie, 2002). A place for congregations as sites of social services was further institutionalized when President George W. Bush opened the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives (Chaves & Wineburg, 2010), a program that has been renewed by both the Obama and Trump administrations. Faith-based organizations, including congregations, that receive federal funding cannot discriminate in providing funded services by religion nor require religious participation—though some controversy remains about whether adequate accountability measures are in place to ensure compliance (Gilman, 2007). While grants to faith-based organizations for social services have been proclaimed as an important part of federal spending (Gilman, 2007), it has not become normative for congregations: among congregations providing any social service, only an estimated 5.8 percent reported applying



for a government grant in 2012 and only 1.9 percent received government funding for social services (Chaves & Eagle, 2016).

The Great Recession of 2007–2009 provided a wide-scale test for a safety net focused on supporting work, with soaring unemployment, lowered wages, and declines in housing values (Hardy, Smeeding, & Ziliak, 2015; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016). The two groups of predictors of congregations' provision of social services, neighborhood and congregation characteristics, might create countervailing forces. On the one hand, increased need during the recession could lead to increased social services. But contemporary changes in congregation size and makeup, plus income decreases for congregants during the recession, could lead to decreased capacity. Notably, while charitable donations decreased overall during the Great Recession, financial contributions to both congregations and food banks stayed constant or even increased over the recession (Reich, Wimer, Mohamed, & Jambulapati, 2011).

In summary, prior research shows that many congregations provide social services, though the estimates vary widely. The varied estimates may be due to a lack of clarity on what counts as a social service. Research also provides mixed findings on whether key drivers of provision are community need (for example, being in a high-poverty area), or congregation characteristics, or both. While there has been some research examining trends, this research generally stops before the Great Recession, which could have had significant effects both on the ability of congregations to provide services and the need for them to do so. In this paper, we focus on time trends in the provision of services and the characteristics of congregations providing services. We make two important contributions. First, we constrain the definition of social services to those most likely to respond to social need and we include a proxy for intensity of services to better understand changes over time. Second, we expand previous analyses by including data before and after the Great Recession, as a natural test for how congregations responded to increased need given other secular trends.

## Method

We use data from the National Congregations Study (NCS), a survey of approximately 4,000 religious congregations in the United States. The NCS sample was drawn from the 1998, 2006, and 2012 waves of the General Social Survey (GSS), a nationally representative sample of noninstitutionalized English- and Spanish-speaking adults. GSS respondents were asked if they attend religious services at least once per year, and those responding affirmatively were asked for the name and location of their congregation. These identified congregations comprise the NCS sampling frame, which is nationally representative of religious congregations. NCS staff conducted 45- to 60-minute interviews, in-person or by phone, with key informants from each participating congregation, typically a lead clergy member or senior staff member. Response rates ranged from 80 percent in 1998 to 73 percent in 2012 (Chaves, Anderson, & Eagle, 2014). Interviews covered a wide variety of topics, including the demographics of congregants, the congregation's physical space, worship services, finances, staffing, and congregation volunteering and social activities. We use congregation-level weights constructed by NCS investigators in our descriptive and regression analyses, which adjust for the GSS sampling frame, the possibility of multiple nominations of the same congregation by GSS respondents, a panel component added in the 2012 NCS interview, and an intentional oversampling of Hispanic congregations within the GSS (Chaves & Anderson, 2014). Our analytic sample includes 4,071 congregations, representing approximately 1.2 million congregations nationally.

### *Measures*

*Social service provision.* NCS respondents were asked, "Has your congregation participated in or supported social service, community development, or neighborhood organizing projects of any sort within the past 12 months? Please don't include projects that use or rent space in your building but have no other connection to your congregation." Respondents were asked for open-ended program descriptions, categorized into 20 types of service activities by NCS investigators, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Description of Social Services and Core Services Measures

	Social Services	Core Services
Programs that feed the hungry	X	X
Programs targeting the homeless or transients	X	X
Programs to help people obtain jobs	X	X
Services for victims of rape or domestic violence	X	
Clothing or blankets, including rummage sales	X	
Disaster relief	X	
Nonreligious education programs	X	
Programs for senior citizens	X	
Programs targeting physical health needs	X	
Home-building, repair, or maintenance	X	
Programs directed at immigrants, migrants, or refugees	X	
Programs for children or youths	X	
Programs for prisoners or families of prisoners	X	
Substance abuse programs	X	
St. Vincent de Paul programs	X	
Programs for college students or young adults		
Cleaning highways or parks		
Programs targeting men or women in particular		
Habitat for Humanity projects		
Programs targeting people outside the United States		

These are not mutually exclusive categories; for example, meals for people experiencing homelessness is categorized as both a meal program and a program for the homeless. Using these service categories, we create two types of social service provision measures: (1) *social services*; and (2) *core services*. We define social services as a general measure of service activity intended to capture longer-term, community-based engagement in service provision. For these reasons, we exclude short-term activities such as Habitat for Humanity projects and projects with an international focus. Core services is a narrower category, related to helping the homeless, providing food, and assisting with employment or jobs programs—as the need for such services is most likely to increase in response to the Great Recession. (In a robustness check, we include a broader set of services, including clothing, Habitat for Humanity, home repairs, and health; results were substantively similar.) Table 1 shows our

operationalization of services that count as *social services* and *core services*. Our third outcome variable, *program staff*, identifies congregations that report a staff member with more than 25 percent of time on social service provision as a proxy for the level and intensity of a congregation's service involvement. However, because programs can be provided effectively by volunteer staff, this is an imperfect proxy.

Trends are incorporated with indicator variables measuring the year of the survey, 2006 and 2012 (compared to our base year, 1998). We have a dichotomous measure for high-poverty neighborhoods, indicating a census tract poverty rate of 30 percent or higher. We also measure whether the census tract is urban, rural, or suburban. We control for several characteristics of the congregation: congregation size (logged); income per congregant (in 2012 dollars); and congregation denomination split into 4 categories of historical tradition (Roman Catholic, Non-Christian, Liberal, and Conservative). We base denomination on a five-category indicator the NCS aggregates, though we model the effect of race separately from tradition so manually collapse the NCS "Black Protestant" category into either Liberal or Conservative based on denomination. Finally, we include characteristics of congregants, including: percentage of adults with a college degree; and predominant racial/ethnic composition. We create mutually exclusive categories for predominant composition using a threshold of 80 percent of regular adult participants for: White, Black, Latino, Other race, and No predominant race/ethnicity.

### *Analytic Strategy*

Our research questions examine whether social service activity has changed over time and whether this varies by the economic needs of the congregation's own surrounding community. We use straightforward logit regression models, one for each of our three binary outcomes of providing *social services*, *core services*, and having dedicated *program staff*. We use year fixed effects to assess time-related trends, omitting 1998 as the reference year. Finally, to examine whether high poverty is increasingly associated with social service activity over time, we interact year with neighborhood poverty status.

### Missing Data

Eight of the congregation characteristics used in our analyses were missing from at least one observation, the most common of which was report of the congregation's annual income (21 percent missing). Other characteristics, such as congregation size and racial composition, were missing for less than 5 percent of all congregations in the sample. Fewer than 5 percent of the sample respondents did not report information for our three outcomes of interest. To allow for use of the full sample, we used Stata's MI program to impute data for all observations and all variables; we created and merged 50 data sets using a chained equations approach. (In a robustness check, we used only complete cases; with substantively similar results.)

## Results

Table 2 displays weighted descriptive statistics of our sample at each cross-section. The prevalence of *social services* decreases between 1998 and 2006, from 50 to 40.9 percent; between 2006 and 2012 it increased to 56.7 percent. The proportion of congregations reporting engagement in *core services* also decreases between 1998 and 2006 before increasing by 2012, from 35–26–42 percent (an overall increase of 20.6 percent). While having staff dedicating at least 25 percent of their time to social service activity is a less prevalent form of service engagement than providing services, the proportion of congregations reporting *program staff* more than doubled between 1998 and 2012 from 6.7 to 13.9 percent.

The characteristics of congregations have also changed over time. The proportion of congregations in high-poverty neighborhoods increases during the survey period from 12.0 to 17.1 percent. Congregations are less likely to be in rural areas in 2012 than in 1998. Congregation-level demographic characteristics and trends show that the average congregation size is relatively stable, though the standard deviation indicates that there is increasing dispersion, with a few large congregations and many smaller ones. Average total income increased consistently over this period, but the median increased between 1998 (\$85,000) and 2006 (\$109,000) before declining by 2012 (\$95,000).

Table 2. Characteristics of the Sample

	1998 %/Mean (SD)	2006 %/Mean (SD)	2012 %/Mean (SD)
<i>Service provision</i>			
Provide social services	50.0	40.9	56.7
Provide core services	35.0	26.2	42.2
Provide program staff	6.7	10.9	13.9
<i>Congregation characteristics</i>			
Located in high-poverty neighborhood	12.0	14.1	17.1
<i>Urbanicity</i>			
Urban	41.8	44.1	50.9
Rural	43.3	32.6	31.3
Suburban	14.9	23.3	17.8
Congregation size	190 (11)	187 (10)	181 (15)
Total congregation income	\$192,534 (96,514)	\$228,182 (123,702)	\$341,575 (126,559)
Total congregation income/congregant	\$1,019 (4,047)	\$1,673 (5,147)	\$2,972 (4,705)
<i>Denomination</i>			
Roman Catholic	7.3	6.0	5.5
Non-Christian	4.9	3.1	6.7
Liberal	26.3	19.6	20.3
Conservative	61.5	71.3	67.5
<i>Congregant characteristics</i>			
Congregants with college degree	25.8	28.3	32.5
<i>Predominant congregant race &amp; ethnicity</i>			
White	70.7	62.9	57.0
Black	16.9	23.6	21.2
Latino	1.5	2.2	6.0
Other race	4.7	1.9	1.2
No predominant race/ethnicity	6.2	9.4	14.6
N	1,230	1,517	1,324

Note.—All descriptive statistics use congregation-level weights.

Table 3. Estimating the Effect of Time and Congregation Characteristics on Social Service Contexts

	Model 1 Social Services		Model 2 Core Services		Model 3 Program Staff	
	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE
Trend (compared to 1998)						
Year-2006	0.67**	(0.10)	0.62**	(0.09)	1.55†	(0.39)
Year-2012	1.50*	(0.24)	1.54**	(0.25)	1.85*	(0.49)
<i>Congregation Characteristics</i>						
High-poverty neighborhood	0.74	(0.15)	1.01	(0.21)	1.20	(0.35)
Urbanicity (compared to suburban)						
Urban	0.91	(0.18)	0.85	(0.17)	1.12	(0.35)
Rural	0.87	(0.18)	0.69†	(0.14)	0.85	(0.27)
Congregation size	1.71**	(0.13)	1.64**	(0.11)	1.31*	(0.14)
Congregation income/congregant	1.00	(0.00)	1.00	(0.00)	1.00	(0.00)
Denomination (compared to Conservative)						
Roman Catholic	1.09	(0.26)	1.31	(0.32)	0.91	(0.39)
Non-Christian	1.44	(0.54)	0.94	(0.35)	1.06	(0.75)
Liberal	3.19**	(0.55)	2.74**	(0.43)	1.35	(0.35)
<i>Congregant Characteristics</i>						
% with college degree	1.79†	(0.57)	1.65†	(0.49)	1.28	(0.58)
Predominant race & ethnicity (compared to White)						
Black	1.42†	(0.29)	1.18	(0.25)	1.75†	(0.51)
Latino	0.29**	(0.09)	0.25**	(0.10)	2.03	(1.21)
Other race	0.55	(0.20)	0.55	(0.21)	1.11	(0.67)
No predominant race/ethnicity	1.32	(0.31)	1.20	(0.27)	4.03**	(1.20)

N = 4,071

Note.—Exponentiated coefficients; Standard errors in parentheses. †  $p < 0.10$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$

Approximately two-thirds of congregations identify as conservative, and the proportion of Catholic and Liberal congregations decreases between 1998 and 2012. In the average congregation, about one-third of congregants had a college degree, a proportion that increased over time. The proportion of predominantly Black and Latino congregations increased, with predominantly white congregations declining, which is perhaps related to the decline in the proportion of rural congregations.

In Table 3, we present results estimating the association between congregation characteristics and the Great Recession on *social services*, *core services*, and *program staff*, with a special focus on the time trend, captured in the year indicator variables. We find evidence of time trends for all three indicators of service provision in Model 1. While congregations were substantially less likely to engage in social service provision in 2006 than 1998, by 2012 (after the Recession) they were not only more likely than 2006, they were also more likely than in 1998. We find a very similar time trend when examining core services, as shown in Model 2: congregations were less likely to offer core services in 2006 compared to 1998, but more likely in 2012 than both 1998 and 2006. In contrast, compared to 1998, the odds of having program staff were marginally higher in 2006 and statistically significantly higher in 2012. For all types of service provision, these results are similar to the simple descriptive statistics, suggesting that controlling for other factors that were changing over time does not change the basic time trend: congregations were more likely to provide social and core services and to have program staff in 2012 than 1998, controlling for other changes.

Location in a high-poverty neighborhood is not associated with the odds of either type of service provision or the presence of program staff. We find no strong evidence that a congregation's urbanicity, income per congregant, or congregant educational level is predictive of social service or core service activity, though some coefficients are marginally significant. Congregation size is consistently positively associated with all three measures of service provision; this is not surprising given that size likely reflects organizational capacity.

Denomination and the congregation's racial and ethnic composition are associated with multiple types of social service



activity. We find that liberal congregations have approximately three times the odds of engaging in social and core services relative to conservative congregations. Coefficients for other congregation categories are small and not significantly different from conservative congregations. Using predominantly white congregations as the reference group, Latino congregations have reduced odds of engaging in social or core services, while those whose members are predominantly Black are marginally more likely to offer social services and to have program staff. Congregations with no predominant race have 4 times the odds of reporting having program staff relative to predominantly-white congregations.

In addition to examining the time trend in whether congregations engage in social service activity, we are also interested in whether the likelihood of these types of engagement vary by the needs of the congregation's own community. Using location in high-poverty neighborhood as a covariate in Table 3, our estimates suggest that location in a high-poverty neighborhood is not associated with the odds of engaging in social service or core service activity. But we are also interested in whether this association may vary by year in response to changing community needs, so we estimate the same models shown in Table 3 with interaction terms for survey year and congregation's location in a high-poverty neighborhood. The results, displayed in Table 4, show a differential time trend for social service and core service provision among congregations in high-poverty neighborhoods; in contrast, there is no evidence for a differential time trend in program staff (the interactions are not statistically significant). The coefficients from Table 4 are used to generate Figure 1, which shows the predicted probability of providing social services and core services, with all characteristics set at their mean value except for neighborhood poverty and year. The first set of bars shows those congregations in high-poverty neighborhoods were predicted to be less likely to offer social services in 1998 (36% to 52%). While provision of social services was less likely for congregations in both types of neighborhoods in 2006 than 1998, the differential between low- and high-poverty neighborhoods did not change. By 2012, after the recession, neighborhood poverty shows a different relationship with the provision of social services. In low-poverty neighborhoods, the

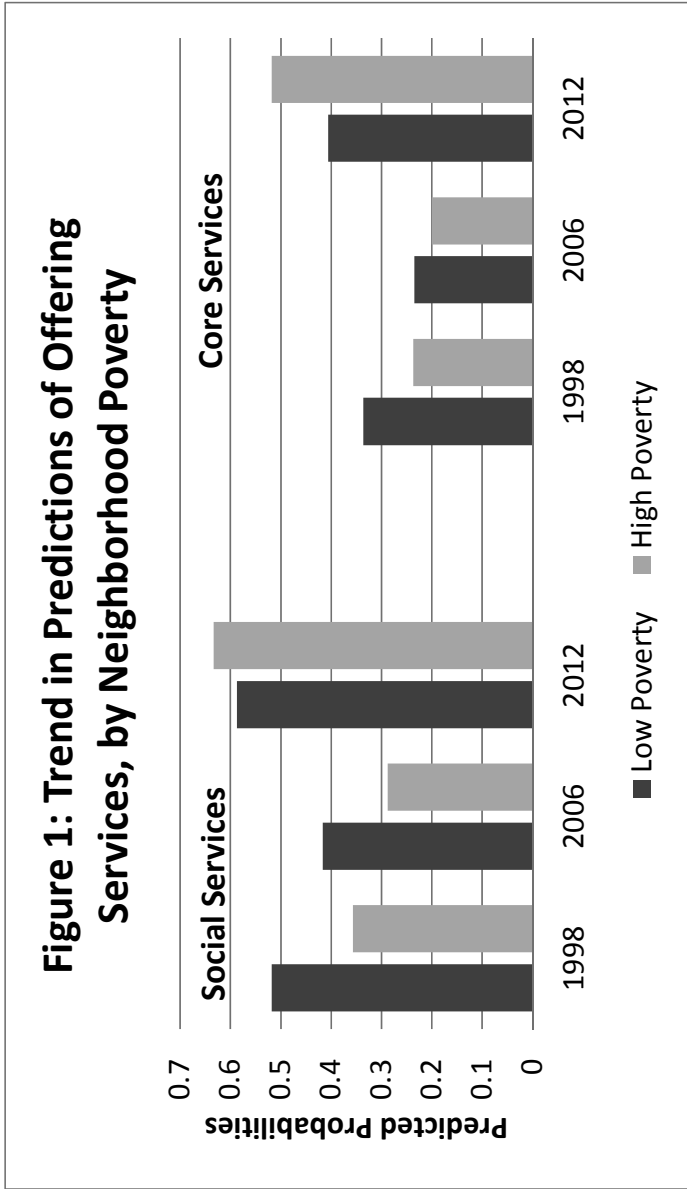
Table 4. Estimating the Effect of Time and Congregation Characteristics on Social Service Contexts, by High-Poverty Neighborhoods

	Model 1 Social Services		Model 2 Core Services		Model 3 Program Staff	
	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE
Trend (compared to 1998)						
Year-2006	0.66*	(0.11)	0.61**	(0.10)	1.59	(0.47)
Year-2012	1.32	(0.23)	1.36†	(0.23)	2.21**	(0.65)
High-poverty neighborhood	0.51*	(0.15)	0.61	(0.19)	1.95	(1.00)
Interactions						
Year-2006 * High-poverty neighborhood	1.09	(0.45)	1.33	(0.56)	0.81	(0.53)
Year-2012 * High-poverty neighborhood	2.34†	(1.08)	2.55*	(1.20)	0.38	(0.27)
Other congregation characteristics						
Urbanicity (compared to Suburban)						
Urban	0.92	(0.18)	0.86	(0.17)	1.10	(0.35)
Rural	0.88	(0.18)	0.69†	(0.14)	0.84	(0.27)
Congregation size	1.70**	(0.13)	1.63**	(0.11)	1.32**	(0.14)
Congregation income/congregant	1.00	(0.00)	1.00	(0.00)	1.00	(0.00)
Denomination (compared to Conservative)						
Roman Catholic	1.11	(0.27)	1.33	(0.33)	0.89	(0.39)
Non-Christian	1.50	(0.57)	0.98	(0.37)	1.00	(0.71)
Liberal	3.19**	(0.55)	2.73**	(0.43)	1.36	(0.35)
Congregant characteristics						
% with college degree	1.81†	(0.58)	1.67†	(0.49)	1.26	(0.58)
Predominant race & ethnicity (compared to White)						
Black	1.43†	(0.29)	1.18	(0.25)	1.73†	(0.51)
Latino	0.27**	(0.09)	0.24**	(0.09)	2.17	(1.28)
Other race	0.53†	(0.20)	0.53†	(0.20)	1.18	(0.71)
No predominant race/ethnicity	1.33	(0.32)	1.22	(0.27)	4.00**	(1.19)

N = 4,071

Note. —Exponentiated coefficients; Standard errors in parentheses. †  $p < 0.10$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$

Figure 1. Trend in Predictions of Offering Services, by Neighborhood Poverty



probability of offering social services was statistically the same in 2012 as it was in 1998 (59% to 52%). In contrast, in high-poverty neighborhoods, there is a greater likelihood of offering social services in 2012 than in 1998 (63% to 36%). For high-poverty neighborhoods, not only are social services more likely in 2012 than in 1998, but the lowered likelihood associated with being in a high poverty neighborhood has been overcome.

The next set of bars shows that the patterns in the probability of offering core services are generally similar to offering social services. Although not all coefficients are statistically significant, the general story is a decline in providing core services between 1998 and 2006 in both types of neighborhoods, with a rebound between 2006 and 2012, with those in high-poverty neighborhoods significantly more likely in 2012 than those in low-poverty neighborhoods. Thus, there is some suggestive evidence here that congregations responded to community-level need by increasing engagement in social service and core service provision after the Recession.

### Limitations, Discussion, and Future Research

Our findings should be set in the context of the limitations of this research. First, the data source we use contains three cross-sections; this allows us to answer whether congregational provision of services differs at three points in time but does not enable an analysis of whether particular congregations began (or stopped) offering services. Second, the question on social service programs changed slightly between 1998 and 2012, such that the core services measure may be underestimated in 2012. We do not think this is particularly problematic, because the number of congregations affected is small (13 percent of respondents in 2012 could be undercounted, demographically similar to other congregations except more likely to be Conservative). Third, the data are best suited for an examination of whether a congregation provides services, not the duration or intensity of services. (Our measure of intensity is only based on dedicated staff, so excludes volunteers and staff responsibilities below the 25 percent threshold.) Fourth, our proxy for neighborhood need is crude and related to only the census tract of the congregation: individuals in need can cross neighborhood boundaries in search of

help. Finally, we only have the congregation's report of whether it provides services, without information on availability or quality from the perspective of vulnerable families themselves.

Understanding how and if economically vulnerable individuals get help, and whether this help is effective, are critically important areas of inquiry. The providers of assistance have changed over the last 20 years. Public sector provision has declined some—in part on the rationale that other organizations would step in, and that faith-based organizations in particular would provide basic social services (Boddie & Cnaan, 2006; Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, 2009). Is there evidence that congregations have begun to do so?

We find that the number of congregations providing at least one social service and at least one core service decreased from 1998 to 2006 but then by 2012 had increased to a higher level than 1998. There is no detectable decline from 1998 to 2006 for a crude measure of intensity of provision, having dedicated program staff; however, similar to the other measures, provision is higher in 2012 than in 1998. These findings have implications for disentangling some of the discrepancies in the prior research: whether congregations are stepping up or not may depend to some extent on the types of services we consider as “stepping up.” Our primary interest here is not in general services, but in the core services that are designed to meet basic human needs. Our results suggest that congregations are beginning to step into this gap: the proportion of congregations offering some type of core service increased from 35 to 42 percent during our study period, and the increase remains even controlling for potentially confounding factors. The increase in core service provision between 2006 and 2012 is especially important given that this was a period that covered the Great Recession, with heightened need for services that are part of the basic social safety net. However, future research needs to drill down to understand more about the types of services provided, and, especially, the extent to which these are available, generous, and of high quality.

Our results differ somewhat from those found in the previous literature, in part because we use different measures of service provision. Our results suggest that the way service provision is measured can change the conclusions: if we are concerned about the provision of social services or core services,

we see a significant decline followed by an increase in provision, but for intensive services as measured by staff, there is only an increase. The trend for social services and core services also differs between low-poverty and high-poverty neighborhoods, while for staff provision, the time trend is not different for low- and high-poverty neighborhoods.

Our second question focused on the characteristics that predict service provision, with special attention to whether those in high-poverty neighborhoods are increasingly more or less likely to provide services after the recession. Previous research has tended to emphasize the economic capacity of congregations as more critical than need (e.g., Gillooly & Allard, n.d.; Sosin, 1986). Similarly, we find a consistent positive relationship between congregation size and the provision of services.

However, our work suggests that service provision does not merely depend on resources. We did not find a relationship between service provision and the average income per congregant. After the recession, congregations in high-poverty neighborhoods are more likely than they had been previously to provide services and as likely to provide services as those in lower-poverty neighborhoods. A broad conclusion from our findings is that congregations may be responding to the needs around them—to the extent that they are able to do so.

The conclusions of prior research on the ability of private agencies (including, but not limited to congregations) to make up for pull-backs in the public sector has generally emphasized the limitations of the private sector and a spatial mismatch: areas of high need have few private providers (Allard, 2010). Our conclusions here, however, suggest congregations in areas of high need may be beginning to step into the gap. It is not yet clear whether their provision of service can begin to replace public provision, let alone meet the need. Depending on congregations to fill the gap created by what the public sector no longer provides seems to be hoping for something that has not yet been demonstrated: congregations are providing support, but there is no evidence yet that they can replace public provision.

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