
Separation of Church and Aid

Investigating How
Religious Institutions
Provide Assistance to
Salvadoran Immigrants
in the D.C. Area

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Introduction

This capstone examines the mechanisms through which churches in the Washington, D.C. area act as providers of social insurance for Salvadoran immigrants and their families. The inspiration for this project arose from the personal opinion of this author that public assistance in the United States is inadequate. Far too many individuals are allowed to go hungry, homeless, or are perpetually faced with the possibility of abject indigence.

While these problems undoubtedly plague American citizens, the situation is exacerbated for immigrants. Particularly in the case of undocumented immigrants, there is little or no recourse to mitigate the threat of poverty. This study therefore aimed to investigate the importance of the charitable work of religious institutions for immigrants in general and for undocumented immigrants in particular¹. It should also be noted that the specific focus on Salvadoran immigrants was decided upon because, in terms of national origin, Salvadorans comprise the single largest group of all immigrants in the Washington metropolitan area (see Data & Analysis).

The secondary objective of this study was to examine how the current economic recession has impacted the need for assistance within immigrant communities. As unemployment rates have increased dramatically over the past 18 months,² two issues have become of particular concern for this population. The first and most obvious issue is that decreased income levels endanger the welfare of individuals and their families. The second, less obvious issue is that unemployment causes inordinate difficulties for those attempting to achieve or renew legal immigration status, and, by extension, to apply for public assistance.

¹ While this was a point of deep interest for the author, this question yielded little to no data. This is largely because most immigrant ministries maintain a policy of not inquiring into immigrants' citizenship or residency status. Thus, none of the individuals interviewed were able to expound upon the different experiences of these groups.

² The unemployment rate was estimated to be 9.7% in March 2010. From: "United States Unemployment Rate," <http://www.tradingeconomics.com/Economics/Unemployment-rate.aspx?Symbol=USD>.

The literature examining the importance of religious organizations for immigrants in the United States spans over two centuries of history. With respect to the religious life of the earliest waves of immigrants, the literature focused largely on the cultural continuity provided by ethnic-European churches and the role of religious organizations as the *sole* providers of social insurance before the emergence of any viable public assistance. For example, William Herberg (1960) suggested that immigrants' level of religiosity (as measured by church attendance and participation in religious activities) very rarely diminished after arriving in the United States because churches were so absolutely integral to their daily life. Of utmost importance to many immigrants was the ability of church communities to provide cultural continuity in the face of disruptive shocks caused by international migration. Essentially, churches were able to attract and retain congregants by being a bastion of cultural familiarity, and were thus in a position well-suited to the long-term provision of aid.

For the purposes of this study, it is most instructive to focus on the literature examining the period after the passage of the 1965 Immigration Reform Act. After this watershed, the patterns and composition of migratory flows into the U.S. became markedly different from previous eras. Accordingly, the findings of the literature differed. Oscar Handlin (1973) applied the framework of Herberg's 1960 thesis to observations of post-1965 migration. The Handlin and Herberg thesis (see Herschman, 2006), asserts that, for at least some immigrant groups, levels of religious commitment (e.g. membership to a single church, religious service attendance, observance of holidays and participation in church-organized events) are *higher* in the United States than they were in their country of origin. Handlin cites the Korean-American Christian community as the epitomic example of a group which tends to intensify religious participation after arriving in the United States. As of 1984, approximately 50% of all Korean immigrants in

the U.S. were affiliated with Christian churches prior to immigration, while about 70% of first-generation-American Koreans reported affiliation with ethnic-Korean churches (Hurh & Kim, 1985).

More recently, Cecilia Menjívar (2003) performed a comparative study evaluating the role of Catholic and Evangelical churches in the lives of Salvadoran immigrants in Phoenix, San Francisco, and Washington, D.C. throughout the 1990s. Menjívar found that both Catholic and mainline Protestant churches in the U.S. played vital roles in the lives of immigrants fleeing El Salvador during the Civil War from 1980 through the early 1990s. These religious institutions became primarily responsible for providing aid to asylum seekers because public assistance was unavailable, inadequate, or difficult to access (Menjívar 24).

Menjívar (2003) is of primary importance to the present study in that it provided a framework for its design and focus. Specifically, the use of interviews as the principal means of data collection was based off of the methods used by Menjívar. Additionally, the effort to determine the perceived importance of church-provided services to immigrants (see Research Methods) is a modified version of a research question posed in her study.

During the spring of 2010, twelve semi-structured interviews were conducted with employees and volunteers from ten religious institutions in Northern Virginia and Washington, D.C. Nine of these participants were directors of Protestant immigrant ministries, one was the volunteer coordinator for a Protestant immigrant ministry, one was the director of legal services at a Catholic charity, and the remaining individual was an intake assistant at this same charity.

In light of the previously-discussed literature on “new” immigration, it was expected that Salvadorans who regularly receive assistance from religious institutions (particularly material aid) would demonstrate particularly high levels of religiosity and would be committed members

of those churches' congregations. This hypothesis was not supported by the results of this study. Instead, participants' responses indicated that immigrant ministries are primarily providers of social insurance, and that religious practice is often completely divorced from the process of providing aid.

Indeed, the entire focus of this study ultimately shifted in response to what the interview data indicated about this subject. The research questions initially centered on four broad topics which, upon review of the literature, were expected to encompass the most salient aspects of participants' responses. These topics included the material resources of which new immigrants are most in need; the adequacy or inadequacy of public assistance to immigrants; the network of assistance that exists among churches; and, the effect of the current economic recession on charity work. Once the interviews were conducted, however, it became apparent that only one of these categories (the effect of the current recession on charitable organizations) adequately categorized any of the predominant themes and recurring responses gathered from participants. Thus, the following four themes became the new foci of this study's findings: (1) immigrant ministries' paramount focus on teaching English as a second language, (2) the distinctive features of the populations most frequently served by immigrant ministries, (3) the social dynamics of ministry-immigrant relations and, (4) the obstacles faced by churches and other charitable organizations in providing aid during an economic recession.

The third theme in the foregoing list is of greatest interest to this author. With respect to the social dynamics of ministry-client relations, this study detected a latent but pervasive sense of segregation between the churches which provide the greatest amount of assistance³ and those

³ This designation was determined via comparison with other churches in the region. Those churches which were deemed as providing the greatest amount of assistance were those which reported being able to provide aid to the greatest number of individuals and having the widest variety of services. Interestingly, these tended to be the churches with the largest congregations.

who are perceived to be the most disadvantaged immigrants. Specifically, seven participants from very active immigrant ministries singled out Salvadorans as a particularly difficult group with which to establish connections or to integrate into the wider church community. Some of the directors indicated that the reasons for this division is that Salvadorans display a seeming lack of interest in learning English or adapting to the dictates of American life. By most ministry directors, Salvadorans as a whole were described as being less educated, having very low levels of English competency and being less willing to learn English or to venture outside of their cultural enclaves.

It is the opinion of this author that the directors' proclivity toward stereotyping the entire Salvadoran population may contribute to a failure to deliver adequate social services to this group. Salvadorans are likely to sense these prejudices, while volunteers and language instructors may feel that their efforts are futile. Ultimately, Salvadorans may be discouraged from seeking assistance from the organizations that are best-equipped to provide it.

Literature Review

Those who choose to immigrate to the United States in search of better economic opportunities or to escape dangerous conditions in their home country face a seemingly insurmountable set of challenges. This assertion becomes truer yet when an immigrant has not been able to enter the country through legal means, and remains marginalized “illegal” status. To someone who cannot turn to public assistance when in financial desperation, the prospects of homelessness and starvation become imminent. From a humanitarian perspective, the potential for this type of suffering suggests that there is a dire void in the American social safety net. Historically, this void has been at least partially filled by religious institutions.

This literature review will provide a context for the current study, which examines how Protestant and Catholic churches in the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area act as providers of social insurance to Salvadoran immigrants. This review will proceed by first providing a brief overview of the historical role of churches in the lives of immigrants in the United States during two periods. The first period encompasses the mid-19th to mid-20th century, prior to the passage of the Immigration Reform Act of 1965. The second period consists of the years after 1965, during which the patterns and composition of migratory flows into the U.S. became markedly different. The differences in immigration during these two separate eras resulted in definite variations in immigrant-church relations, as well as in the nature of discussion in the literature. The next sections describe the role of government in religiously-oriented charity work, and discuss a few of the reasons why churches are invariably left to bear the costs of providing assistance to both documented and undocumented immigrants. Finally, the discussion takes on a much narrower scope and specifically addresses the case of Salvadoran immigrants in the U.S., and why the relationship they maintain with Washington, D.C. churches merits further study.

The Role of Churches in Immigrant Lives prior to 1965

From the late 19th century until the mid-20th century, Protestants, Catholics, Eastern Orthodox Christians and Jews, almost all of European origin, formed the core of immigrant groups in the United States (Warner, 1993). Keeley (1991) theorized that immigrant life during this era was characterized by high poverty rates in part because of the rapid nature of immigration. The seemingly unchecked in-flow of migrant workers during this period—totaling to about 17 million individuals— quickly expanded the size of the labor force in competition for low-skill employment, and created a class which was extremely vulnerable to destitution. Keeley emphasizes the utter indispensability of religious organizations and private charities in the absence of any significant public assistance programs; not only were those organizations responsible for keeping many immigrant groups from suffering some of the worst effects of poverty, but they also were the only viable source of aid for American citizens in need. Figures provided by Lindert (2004), in his historical review of public assistance in the U.S., indicate that during the seventy-year span from 1850-1920, the provision of government aid to the poor, a task which was primarily left to municipal governments, never exceeded one-sixth of one percent of Gross National Product (GNP). In contrast, in 1995, before the repeal of Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) and the ensuing cuts in public welfare spending, aid to the poor consumed about 4% of GNP.

The literature devoted to pre-1965 migration into the U.S. tended to focus at least as much on the role of churches in providing cohesive ethnic communities as it did on the role of churches in providing social services. Warner (1993) describes a phenomenon of strengthened religious identity among immigrants in response to moving to a society which was vastly more religiously pluralistic than their country of origin. Organized religion became a vehicle for the reinforcement of native languages and national identities among certain immigrant groups, as

they tended to congregate in churches and synagogues on an ethnic basis. Warner provides the example of Scandinavian immigrants, for whom Nordic languages became an integral part of religious practice in their ethnic-Lutheran and Baptist churches around the turn of the 19th century.

This function of churches— facilitating the formation of immigrant communities with similar linguistic and cultural backgrounds—became a crucial avenue for the provision of economic assistance. Ethnically-similar congregations formed communities in which the pressure to assimilate to the dominant, English-speaking culture were almost wholly absent (Hirschman, 2006). It became significantly easier for immigrants to accept aid in this context, because they were not confronted with the sense that they had accepted charity from institutions which ascribed to the dominant culture. Doing so could be conceived as relegating one's own culture to an inferior status (Friedland & Alford 1991).

Based upon his observations of the religious behavior of pre-1965 migrants, William Herberg (1960) suggested that immigrants' level of religiosity (as measured by church attendance and participation in religious activities) very rarely diminished after arriving in the United States; rather, immigrants sought to re-create the religious experiences in which they routinely partook in their native country. This, he postulated, was due to the ability of church communities to provide cultural continuity in the face of disruptive shocks caused by international migration. Essentially, churches were able to attract and retain congregants by being a bastion of cultural familiarity, and were thus in a position well-suited to the long-term provision of aid.

The Role of Churches in Immigrant Lives after 1965

After the passage of the Immigration Reform Act (1965), patterns of migration changed drastically. In the absence of country-of-origin quotas, which had intentionally favored European

immigrants, immigration from Asia, particularly from the Philippines, Vietnam, China, Korea and India, increased by nearly 40% by the 1980s. During this period, the percent of Mexican, Central and South American immigrants coming into the United States remained roughly constant, but absolute numbers of each group increased in each decade (Ebaugh & Chafetz 2000).

In the literature examining this new wave of immigrants, the religion question has returned with slightly different nuances in focus. Oscar Handlin (1973) applied the framework of Herberg's 1960 thesis to observations of post-1965 migration. The Handlin and Herberg thesis (see Herschman, 2006), asserts that, for at least some immigrant groups, levels of commitment to a single church, religious service attendance, observance of holidays and participation in church-organized events are higher in the United States than they were in the country of origin. Handlin cites the Korean-American Christian community as the epitomic example of a group which tends to intensify religious participation after arriving in the United States. As of 1984, over half of all Korean immigrants in the U.S. were affiliated with Christian churches prior to immigration, while about 70% of first-generation Koreans reported affiliation with ethnic-Korean Christian churches in the United States. In another survey of Korean-American religiosity, it was found that 83% of church-affiliated Korean-Americans reported attending church once a week or more (Huh & Kim, 1984).

To be sure, levels of religious commitment vary across immigrant communities. Sanchez (1993), in his study of Mexican-American immigrants, found that in the early-1990s, more than 80% of Mexican American immigrants identified as Catholic, but only about 40% regularly attended mass. Sanchez concludes that immigrants appear to be resistant to adopting religious affiliation if they were either completely unaffiliated with a religious institution in their home

country, or they were only nominally affiliated. In support of this thesis, Sanchez cites the fact that most immigrants from Germany, Italy, and Poland around the turn of the 20th century were nominal Catholics before migrating, but many discontinued any religious practice or affiliation once they arrived. Additionally, Woo (1991) found that Chinese immigrants displayed even less religious inclination, and maintained rather faithless communities both in their home country and after arriving in the United States. Despite fervent conversion efforts by American Protestants, only 2-3% of Chinese immigrants became practicing Christians.

Given that, in only a few cases does immigration to the United States lead to a definite intensification of religious practice, it is clear that not all immigrant groups retain the same relationship with local churches and fellow parishioners. A few broad factors have been cited as contributors to these differences, including variation in “congregational involvement, community demographics, local resources, leadership, theological orientation and client base” (Pipes & Ebaugh 2002; 65). Where retention of congregants in ethnically-based churches is high, however, there is a persisting theme: these churches strive to cater to the social and economic needs of their congregants (Menjívar 2003; Bodnar 1985). Beyond material aid, these churches perform the fundamental service of information distribution by providing an essential avenue for congregants to learn about affordable housing options and social and economic opportunities (Bodnar, 1985). Without these services, the task of succeeding in the dominant culture becomes exponentially more difficult.

Government Aid to Churches

The question of whether to accept private funding or public assistance is not only salient to immigrants in need, but also to the churches on which they so often rely. A number of religious institutions are entitled to, and receive, government assistance to supplement independent revenue and donations. Since Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF)

supplanted AFDC in 1996, welfare law has allowed churches greater access to federal funding in order to assist needy parishioners. This portion of welfare law, dubbed the “charitable choice” provision, does not allow churches to maintain complete discretion over the distribution of aid and is laden with eligibility requirements regarding who may receive government funds (Pipes & Ebaugh 2002).

Given the complicated legal restrictions binding funding under the charitable choice provision, many coalitions are reluctant to receive government support. Beyond restrictions on how funds can be utilized, most religious organizations find the logistics of accepting government aid overwhelming; they would rather not bear the additional costs and administrative burdens required to effectively use funding. Most churches would simply rather not depend on the government, and, if they do accept its aid, they “prefer grants that fit their existing programs and do not want to develop programs in response to current funding priorities that could later evaporate”(Pipes & Ebaugh 2002; 65). Dually, churches fear the possibility that heavy involvement with the government could discourage donations and volunteerism from their congregations, which are an absolutely integral resource in the effort to provide aid (Pipes & Ebaugh 2002). In short, religious institutions are largely reluctant to engross their service provision in politics, and would rather focus on humanitarian priorities.

Government Aid to Immigrants

Provisions in TANF essentially left the question of who would receive public assistance to the State governments. At the State level, it is decided whether immigrants—documented and undocumented—will be entitled to any assistance, or whether they will be shunned from the system as a result of decreased federal funding. The end results of this legislation have been variable: some states chose to relax funding restrictions as they apply to immigrants and their families, some maintained the status-quo, and others restricted access (Nesbitt, 2001).

However, it appears that the effects of welfare reform go beyond what is actually codified in state law. George Borjas (2001) found that, even in cases in which eligibility for immigrants was either preserved or was later restored by subsequent legislation, many immigrant families choose not to enroll in programs which would allow them to receive cash transfers, public health-care plans, occupational training or supplemental nutritional assistance. It is postulated that this effect is caused by confusion and fear wrought by the “chilling effects” of the welfare legislation (Borjas, 2001; 370). Thus, the burden borne by churches in the effort to provide social insurance to immigrant congregants is often unaffected by the availability of government programs.

The Salvadoran Case

In light of the preceding literature, Salvadoran immigrants provide a particularly interesting case with which to study the social insurance role of churches for two reasons. First, religious affiliation with both Catholic and Protestant churches has historically been very high among Salvadorans residing in El Salvador. Second, churches became an indispensable source of aid both to Salvadorans seeking respite from the Civil War and to those pursuing asylum in the United States. Hence, it is not surprising that Salvadoran immigrants retain especially high levels of religiosity (and sometimes intensify their religiosity) after arriving in the U.S. (Menjívar 1999; 2003).

Cecilia Menjívar (2003) performed a comparative study evaluating the role of Catholic and Evangelical churches in the lives of Salvadoran immigrants in Phoenix, San Francisco, and Washington, D.C. throughout the 1990s. Menjívar notes that both Catholic and mainline Protestant churches in the U.S. played integral roles in the lives of immigrants fleeing El Salvador during the Civil War from 1980 through the early 1990s. These religious institutions

provided aid to asylum seekers in lieu of public assistance from the United States federal government, which was either unavailable, inadequate or difficult to access (Menjívar 24).

Despite a litany of differences in their approaches to assisting immigrants, Menjívar notes that both Catholic and Protestant churches exhibited an avid commitment to helping their immigrant congregants achieve their personal goals and adjust to life in the United States. Regarding the Evangelical churches featured in the study, Menjívar found that most clergy based their approach on biblical authority and emphasized the importance of “personal choice and individual strategies for any projects they undertake”(23). Alternatively, Catholic churches tended to take an interventionist role by creating the type of supportive infrastructure which is necessary to navigate the legal landscape in the U.S. The Catholic Church operates on a much greater scale than any one Protestant denomination, and thus has the capacity to organize nationally-coordinated migration networks and sanctuaries for immigrants, regardless of their legal status. Although the Catholic Churches generally possess more resources as a result of their sprawling connections, Menjívar found that both types of churches acted as effective sources of aid and provided their congregants with services such as language classes, educational seminars on religious and practical topics (e.g. financial planning), temporary food assistance, rent subsidies and guidance in finding employment.

Examination of the congregants’ testimonials regarding their experiences with their churches provides valuable insight into the exact nature of the church’s role in Salvadoran immigrants’ lives. Menjívar documents the sentiments of one Salvadoran woman in Washington, D.C. Of the prospects for improving her situation in the United States, she insists “we must do something about this, but at the same time, pray...As the saying goes, *A Dios rogando y con el mazo dando* [Praying to God but at the same time, working]”(32). This idea suggests why

religious institutions may be such a successful avenue for reaching immigrant communities, and, more importantly, why religious institutions be an avenue with no conceivable substitute.

Religious communities are simply paramount in the lives of many Salvadoran immigrants.

In the words of another woman quoted in Menjívar's study, the church is one entity which can be depended upon in a foreign and uncertain landscape. As discussed by Herberg (1960), the church is a symbol of comfort evocative of one's home in a foreign place. Even if one is not particularly religious, as was one man who admitted to remembering God only when he "had a rope around his neck" (29), the church is still an indispensable resource. This is so in part because it actively *welcomes* immigrants. In this respect, church-provided assistance is much preferable to support from the municipal or federal government in the U.S., which is heavily regulated, restrictive and requires interaction with individuals who seem to hold a skeptical view even of immigrants who are fully qualified to receive public assistance.

Potential for Future Study

The foregoing literature does not explicitly address how churches act to compensate for the inability of public assistance to be made available to all those who work and reside in the U.S. regardless of their citizenship status. Although many studies reserve partial focus for this phenomenon (see Menjívar 1999; 2003; Bodnar 1985), none of the literature presently available approaches the social insurance role of churches as their primary role for immigrants who are members of them. Essentially, this study will aim to determine if the church effectively acts as a substitute for government-provided social insurance, and if this role holds more importance for at least some immigrants than its social or spiritual functions.

The study will examine the social insurance role of ethnic-Salvadoran churches in the lives of Salvadoran immigrants in Washington, D.C. during the months of March and April of 2010. While Menjívar (2003) performed a comparative study examining the role of churches in

Salvadoran immigrant lives in Washington, D.C. (as well as in Phoenix, Arizona and San Francisco, California), her explicit focus was not social insurance. Rather, Menjívar also lent her study to a discussion of how churches facilitated both assimilation into the adopted culture, and social networking with peers who shared similar histories of immigration. Moreover, the data she examined spanned throughout the 1990s, which was generally a time of economic expansion in the U.S. This present study examines a period of economic recession, which can be expected to lead to divergent findings from Menjívar's study.

Providing Context for the Present Study

In studying the role of churches in the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area as providers of social insurance to Salvadoran parishioners, it is essential to appreciate the context in which this study is being performed. This section will proceed by first summarizing the scale of Salvadoran immigration into the U.S. over the past several decades, and then by evaluating the economic climate those immigrants are now facing in the current recession.

From 1970-79, the total number of Salvadorans who obtained legal permanent resident status in the United States was slightly fewer than 30,000. After violence and political turmoil overtook the country in the early 1980s, that number more than quadrupled, to 137,418. As political and economic conditions deteriorated throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Salvadoran out-migration became a necessary move for survival; in the last decade of the twentieth century, 273,017 Salvadorans earned legal permanent resident status in the U.S. (Department of Homeland Security, 2009). Other contributors to migratory flows include the granting of asylum to those who face imminent danger in their home country (which rarely make up more than several hundred persons), and the granting of Temporary Protected Status for any number of reasons. This latter type of migration occurred in 2001, when a succession of two devastating

earthquakes struck El Salvador, killing over 1,000 people and leaving hundreds of thousands more homeless. In response, many of those displaced persons were granted TPS by the United States Government. Seven years later, in October of 2008, TPS was extended for approximately 220,000 eligible Salvadorans who still resided in the U.S. after their initial 2001 move. These individuals will retain TPS status until at least September 9, 2010 (Seelke & Myer, 2009).

These statistics, while they give a sense of the scale by which immigration out of El Salvador has increased over the last several decades, do not include those who reside illegally in the U.S. By its very nature, flows of illegal immigration are exceedingly difficult to document or estimate, and so it is perhaps more reliable to assess parameters which provide indirect estimates. Approximately 1.8 million native El Salvadorans (nearly 25% of the country's total population) live outside of El Salvador's borders, many of whom have chosen the United States as their destination (CIA World Factbook, 2010). Moreover, Seelke and Myer (2009) estimate that nearly \$4 billion in remittances were transferred from the U.S. to El Salvador in 2008, which constituted 22% of Salvadoran GDP for that year.

Salvadoran presence is particularly strong in Washington D.C., due to the well-established migration networks established during the last three decades (Menjívar 1999; 2003). Individuals from El Salvador and those who are borne to native Salvadoran parents now form the largest single immigrant group in the Washington metropolitan area (Schifferes, 2007). These data suggest that there are ample opportunities for the formation of ethnic-Salvadoran churches in the Washington region, and that this population may provide helpful elucidation in the discussion of the role of churches as providers of social insurance.

The Role of Churches in the Current Recession

It is estimated that approximately 19% of all undocumented immigrants in the United States are employed in the construction industry, and that 14% of construction workers are

undocumented immigrants. More specifically, between 20 and 36% of workers in “low-skill” trades were found to be undocumented immigrants (Golden, 2009). These data, however, are not representative of findings pertaining solely to the Washington metropolitan area. Here, undocumented immigrants were found to compose 55% of workers in low-skill trades in construction (Golden, 2009). While data on the exact composition of the labor force in construction (in terms of country of origin) is not available, Terry Repak (1994) found that over 80% of Salvadoran immigrants arriving in the U.S. during the early 1990s were seeking jobs to comport with the skills they already possessed in one of several areas, including secretarial work, teaching, production assembly and construction.

The potential significance of high levels of employment of undocumented immigrants in the construction industry becomes clearer when it is considered that the construction workforce has suffered gravely in the current recession. As measured in terms of total number of individuals employed, the construction workforce was markedly smaller in January 2010 than it was in January 2009. According to estimates released by the Associated General Contractors of America, the District of Columbia and 38 states endured “double-digit percentage drops in construction employment” from 2009 to the first quarter of 2010 (Turmail 2010). Since public assistance is clearly not available for undocumented immigrants who lose their job due to cyclical downturns, the burden placed upon private charities, including churches, is certain to increase.

A Brief Overview of TANF and SNAP Eligibility Requirements

Prior to the 1996 passage of Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), Legal Permanent Residents (LPRs) were eligible for welfare benefits comparable to those of citizens. Furthermore, states were not allowed to restrict access to federal programs solely based on immigration status. However, when Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) was authorized by PRWORA, and replaced the old welfare program (Aid to Families with Dependent Children), benefits to noncitizens were severely diminished. Much stricter terms of eligibility were put in place in order to decrease the availability of means-tested public assistance to LPRs, asylum seekers, refugees. Those who reside in the United States without legal documentation remained completely ineligible for public assistance under TANF.

Although the states retain a degree of discretion when it comes to determining which categories of immigrants are eligible for which benefits, a few basic federal rules must always be followed. Specifically, LPRs are barred from receiving TANF benefits for the first five years after entering the United States.⁴ After these first five years, it then becomes a state decision to determine eligibility. Moreover, LPRs who have: (1) established a “substantial work history” (Wassem 2), which is generally considered to be at least 10 years of work documented by Social Security or other employment records, or (2) served in the military (or are the immediate family member of someone who has served in the military) are eligible. Finally, refugees and asylum-seekers are eligible for TANF five years after arrival, regardless of entry date. Those who are designated “non-immigrants,” either because they are temporary residents or they are unauthorized “aliens,” are completely barred from TANF receipt.

⁴ According to PRWORA, this is only true if an immigrant entered the U.S. on or after August 22, 1996 (the date PRWORA passed).

In the case that LPRs are ineligible for TANF, they may still be able to receive state-funded benefits. In 2002 and 2003, The Congressional Research Service conducted a two-part survey to determine TANF eligibility of immigrants on a state-by-state basis. Thirty-four states, including Maryland and Virginia and the District of Columbia responded that they had elected to provide TANF to LPRs after the expiration of the five-year bar. Thirty-five states had elected to provide benefits to immigrants who were present in the United States on or before August 22, 1996.

In order to receive food assistance as an immigrant (for which the federal program is Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP), an individual must qualify according to certain conditions. All those who were granted asylum under Section 208 of the Immigration and Naturalization Act (INA), were admitted as refugees under Section 207 of INA, and those who are LPRs with a military connection are eligible for SNAP without a waiting period.⁵ A qualified alien may still be able to receive food assistance (with a waiting period) if he or she has accomplished 10 years (or 40 quarters) of work while in the United States, or has accomplished less than 40 quarters of work, but meets other specific conditions.

⁵ Also eligible without a waiting period are: Amerasian immigrants under 584 of the Foreign Operations, Export Financing and Related Program Appropriations Act.

Research Methods

Overview

This study examines the role of churches and religious organizations as providers of social insurance for Salvadoran immigrants in the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area. For this study, twelve interviews were conducted with employees and volunteers from ten religious institutions in Northern Virginia and Washington, D.C. Nine of these individuals were directors of immigrant ministries at Protestant churches, one individual was the volunteer coordinator for an immigrant ministry, one was the director of legal services at a Catholic charity, and the remaining individual was an intake assistant and paralegal at this same charity.

It should be noted that *immigrant ministries* are entirely separate entities from the division of the church responsible for weekly religious sermons and the meeting of congregations. Very frequently, immigrant ministries do not even emphasize overt religious messages when communicating with those who seek aid from them. Moreover, the Catholic charity of which the legal services division was a part, is a national organization dedicated to providing a variety of free or low-cost services to immigrants and destitute individuals.

Procedure

In this study, four topics were of primary interest: the material resources of which new immigrants are most in need; the adequacy (or inadequacy) of public assistance to immigrants; the network of assistance that exists among churches; and, the impact of the current economic recession on charity work. In order to gather data with respect to these topics, twelve interviews were conducted in a semi-structured style. Participants were asked some combination of 17 research questions, but the order and exact wording of those questions depended upon the responses of the individual being interviewed. In order to provide the details and the qualitative depth that are required of a study of this sort, participants were frequently encouraged to

expound upon accounts of personal experiences. Due to the time constraints imposed by this style, however, most interviews were not able to include all 17 questions.

Six of the interviews, which occurred simultaneously in a focus group, were tape-recorded and transcribed. The six remaining interviews were not transcribed, but detailed notes were taken throughout the entire interview process. All participants are identified only by the use of their first names, which have been changed in the interest of privacy.

Questionnaire

I. Resources to immigrants

- a. What resources are new immigrants most in need of? Which of these are you best-equipped to provide?
- b. Of your services which are in greatest demand, approximately how many individuals and families are you able to serve each month?
- c. Are the services you offer to people who are unable to access state help different from those who are able to access it? How so?

II. Public assistance

- a. How do you view the role of your church in the lives of those who may not have access to any public financial or educational resources?
- b. Do you encounter individuals who are legally entitled to state assistance but do not seek it?
 - i. If so, what are the reasons for this choice? (As you view them).
- c. In your view, are there inadequacies in the public assistance available to documented immigrants?
- d. What is your view of government aid to religious institutions?

i. Does this church receive any government aid to deliver charitable services?

e. In your view, how has welfare reform impacted immigrants' ability to access government assistance?

III. The network of assistance

a. What other institutions (governmental or otherwise) assist you in the effort to provide aid to your congregants?

b. What does the support network that legal immigrants have available to them look like if they choose to become a member of your congregation? And for undocumented immigrants?

i. What does their network look like if they are not a part of your (or another, similarly supportive) congregation

c. Does your church do any work to facilitate communication among immigrants in the U.S. and friends or family members who still reside in El Salvador?

d. Does the church become a social networking vehicle for individuals to find peers with similar backgrounds and experiences?

e. How does this affect immigrants' experiences in the United States?

IV. The state of assistance in the recession

a. Has the need for assistance changed since the fall of 2008? If so, which services are in greater demand? Which have become less-frequently demanded?

b. How has your ability to provide aid fared?

c. Have donations diminished?

Data and Analysis

During the course of the interviews, it became apparent that the four initial areas of focus did not encompass the most relevant themes in participants' responses (see Research Methods). Hence, the findings section is organized according to the four themes this author finds most salient. These are (1) immigrant ministries' paramount focus on teaching English as a second language, (2) the distinctive features of the populations most frequently served by immigrant ministries, (3) the social dynamics of ministry-immigrant relations and, (4) the obstacles faced by churches and other charitable organizations in providing aid during an economic recession.

The Ministries' Role in Teaching English as a Second Language (ESL)

Each of the interviews was begun with the question: in your experience, of what resources have you found new immigrants to be most in need? The overarching message gleaned from all responses was that immigrants are in dire need of proficiency in the English language if they do not already possess it. English was viewed as an absolutely essential tool for two purposes: to gain stable employment and, to gain acceptance into American social networks.

Immigrant ministry directors view the acquisition of English language skills as absolutely indispensable to one's welfare in the United States. A few leaders explicitly expressed the sentiment that an individual can only be functional for a relatively short period without gaining English fluency. One director, Paul, described the immigrant population as being divided into two broad categories: those with an "ethnic subculture already in place for them," and those who have to form social networks independently because they do not already have contacts in the United States who speak their language and share their culture.

For the first group, Paul described a situation of relative ease after arriving in the United States. This group has access to fellow countrymen and perhaps even friends and family with

whom they can share their experiences. They speak in their native language, and never feel compelled to adapt to life in the U.S. in any dramatic way. The challenge for this group is to break away from the comfort of their ethnic enclave and ultimately try to integrate into wider society. After spending several years separated from American society, however, this process can be extremely difficult. This director claimed to have worked with individuals who had been in the U.S. for ten to fifteen years, but had gained “virtually no language proficiency.”

Paul identified these individuals as the single most difficult to teach. They seem to have a much greater propensity toward frustration, and rarely attend a semester of classes from start to finish. The director lamented the fact that he never seemed to have the same level of success with this group of immigrants as he did with newly-arrived immigrants. Long-term U.S. residents who make a belated attempt to learn English only make “limited progress,” but rarely move beyond that. Moreover, it is Paul’s personal opinion that these individuals never demonstrate the same upward mobility as their counterparts who choose to improve their English immediately upon arriving in the United States.

Alternatively, there are those with no subculture. This group is forced to gain language skills and build social networks “the very instant they arrive” in the U.S. Paul believes that it is for this group that church programs can have the most significant impact in easing the adjustment to American life. He believes that this group tends to be better-educated in general, and that they usually have already had some instruction in English. It is often merely the struggle to get that knowledge “from brain to tongue.”

While Paul was unable to give an estimate on the proportion of each “type” of student attending ministry-run English classes in the area, it is clear that there is no shortage of demand from the immigrant population general. The number of students attending English as a Second

Language (ESL) programs ranged widely by church, with most churches serving 100-200 students, but one church serving more than 3,000. Moreover, the variety of classes offered depends on resources available within each church, but most programs offered at least two levels of instruction, including beginner and advanced.

The commitment of immigrant ministries to providing English language instruction is a testament to their belief in the utmost importance of this service. Most immigrant ministries in Northern Virginia operate in a network through which they can provide a greater number and wider variety of classes. They regularly provide inter-church referrals for students who try to register after the capacity for a given class has already been reached. Indeed, the very capacity at which classes are capped is evidence of the ministries' commitment to maintaining an intimate, student-oriented learning environment. According to the majority of interviewees, most classes are limited to twelve students or fewer.

Moreover, many churches recommend that their students take advantage of the different times at which classes are offered by the various institutions in their area. For example, Elizabeth, the director of a Presbyterian ministry, highlighted the ability of some students to attend classes 5-6 times per week at two or three different churches. In this way, she asserted, students could “make real progress” in a relatively short period of time. Moreover, receiving instruction exclusively through churches may cost a student “around \$50⁶ per semester”, as opposed to the “hundreds” they might pay at the local community college.⁷

⁶ The estimate of \$50 per semester is a direct quote from one interviewee. However, the actual figure would depend on which classes a student chose. Most directors estimated the cost of their classes at about \$10-\$15 per semester (excluding books), while those whose classes included the cost of books were between \$20 and \$30 per semester.

⁷ Tuition at Northern Virginia Community College (Alexandria campus) for 125 hours of intensive English language instruction in the summer, 2010 term was \$1,250. (See: <http://www.nvcc.edu/future-students/esl/acli/iep/hpl/index.html>) By comparison, interviewees in this study estimated that students could receive just over 200 hours of instruction for about \$50 by taking several church-run ESL courses concurrently.

Most directors agreed that they had some difficulty with student retention. Attrition is particularly prevalent after breaks (most classes follow the schedule of the local public schools), but it was not certain whether this is a matter of intentionally dropping out, or simply one of student confusion. Interestingly, the directors noted that evening classes, which are most commonly offered for the beginner-level courses, have the highest rates of attrition.

Services Other than ESL Instruction

Second to language skills, ministry directors and coordinators noted the need for instruction in simply functioning according to the dictates of American life. One director referred to the need for a “mentor” for every immigrant, while another alluded to the need for a “cultural guide.” Carol, the director for a Presbyterian ministry, lamented the lack of a resource to provide instruction for some of the most seemingly mundane practices of daily life, but she was unsure about how such a service could practically be extended to everyone in the immigrant community. With respect to the problems that continually plague new immigrants, Carol offered the example of the deceptively simple concept of looking up businesses in the Yellow Pages. Perhaps it is obvious to someone who has lived his or her entire life in the United States that one should look under “exterminators” if there are cockroaches in his or her house. To someone who is unfamiliar with such a concept, however, “cockroaches” might seem to be the integral word of reference. This director admits to making herself perhaps too available to answer such questions at all hours, but she feels that the minor inconvenience to her is well worth the hours of trouble it might save someone else.

Surprisingly, “benevolent services,” which was the ministries’ title for services such as the provision of food pantries, providing access to donated clothing and home furnishings, and providing assistance in covering the costs of medical bills or rent payments, were not depicted as

the most vital component of the ministries' work. Instead, these services were seen as very temporary solutions that were only needed occasionally by a relatively small portion of their community. The nature of benevolent services, as viewed by Laura, is that they are only very temporary solutions and can never accomplish much in the way of achieving upward mobility or "fighting poverty." In contrast, ESL instruction was viewed as a lasting solution through which the ministers could make a real impact in the lives of those they serve.

In examining the legal services available to immigrants, this study found one organization which can be deemed particularly indispensable to the Salvadoran community. A Northern Virginia subsidiary organization of a national Catholic charity maintains a specific department solely dedicated to assisting Hispanic immigrants in the Washington area, the vast majority of who are Salvadoran. The organization's director of legal services, Robert, explained why it was so important to create a separate department that served only the Hispanic community. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, when Salvadorans began seeking refuge from the Civil War that was ravaging their home, his charity was inundated by requests for help from this rapidly-expanding client base. The number of individuals who needed to understand the legal aspects of their asylum or Temporary Protected Status (TPS) was "overwhelming."

In response, Robert and his then-supervisor created an organization which would specialize in tending to the legal needs of the Hispanic community (and in which nearly all volunteers and employees would be fluent in Spanish). The idea was that this organization could claim a thorough understanding of the rights and entitlements of Hispanics, and Salvadorans in particular. Since then, this organization has been enormously successful in fulfilling its mission, and, at any point in time, maintains an estimated 700 clients.

Separation of Church and Aid

Students are always invited to services, but they rarely attend.

-Elizabeth, the director of a Presbyterian immigrant ministry in Northern Virginia

Prior to beginning research, this author expected church-affiliated respondents to describe a process by which immigrants were gradually brought into the fold of their congregations. In light of the Handlin and Herberg Thesis (see Herschmann, 2006), it could be expected that immigrants' levels of commitment to a single church, denomination or religious group would increase upon arrival in the United States if they regularly sought aid from those institutions. This idea was further supported by the findings of Cecilia Menjívar (2003), who studied the role of churches in Salvadoran communities in three large American cities. In Menjívar's interviews, immigrants regularly cited familiarity and comfort as reasons for seeking church aid. Simply put, church life provided a viable, if modest, link to their life in El Salvador.

Bearing the above findings in mind, each church leader in the present study was asked the question: how do you view the role of your church in the life of each immigrant who seeks assistance? Interestingly, no director pointed to the religious significance of their services. Respondents made few references to the function of allowing immigrants to continue religious practices that were begun in one's country of origin (see William Herberg, 1960). Instead, it appears that the immigrants who receive social services are largely separate from the churches' primary congregations and rarely attend weekly religious services.

Moreover, in six of the churches examined for this study, it was found that the branch of each church which provides aid is entirely separate from religious services. Immigrant ministries are primarily providers of aid, and they do not actively encourage recipients to become members of their churches, nor do they emphasize religious ideology in forming relationships with those

who receive aid. Often, classes offered within church buildings are taught by volunteers who have little to no affiliation with the church community.

Interestingly, this trend of keeping the spheres of religion and assistance separate does not seem to stem from a lack of interest in immigrant communities for religious practice. Most directors interviewed agreed that the vast majority of Spanish-speaking immigrants (almost all of whom are Salvadoran) had extensive personal religious histories. In the words Bonnie, the director of a Methodist ministry, Salvadoran immigrants are nearly always “churched” when they arrive in the United States.

This begs the question of why immigrant ministries in the Northern Virginia are so strictly divided from the congregations as a whole. One Anglican church in Fairfax, Virginia, which hosts a monthly meeting of five immigrant ministry directors from local churches, roughly exemplifies this region’s social characteristics. This church’s mission statement, as printed on its website and information pamphlets, includes language which hints at strong political conservatism.

We are a church that loves to worship the living God in ways that reflect our tradition... We delight in being known as Christ’s disciples... You will see this evidenced in our commitment to the poor, unborn and other marginalized persons. For a fuller statement, read our parish’s Sanctity of Life statement.

It is worth noting that this church is not particularly accessible without reliable personal transportation and English-language fluency. Their website is entirely in English with the exception of one page entitled “Comunidad Hispana.” Here, Spanish-language sermons are advertised as occurring once a week, on Sundays at 10 a.m. However, this church is only accessible via one bus line, which runs every 60-90 minutes on Sundays.

Demographics of Fairfax, Virginia as a whole offer some evidence of segregation on the basis of income. According to the U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey, the real median family income for Fairfax in 2008 was \$111,555, far above the national average of \$63,211. The median household income, a more commonly used measure, was \$98,133 for Fairfax and \$52,175 for the U.S. as a whole. (Unfortunately, there are no data available on the income statistics of this church's congregants). By contrast, the median annual income for a Hispanic household of Salvadoran origin in 2008 was \$43,791.⁸

With such a wealthy population from which to draw a congregation, it is not entirely surprising that this particular church does not present itself as being integrated with immigrant communities. Rather, it presents itself as an organization which views this community as “poor [and] marginalized,” and in need of outreach. As put by Laura, the volunteer coordinator at this church, she and her fellow church leaders felt “burdened” by the growing needs of the Northern Virginia community. What this implies is that the decision to create immigrant ministries came in response to changing demographics in the region, rather than changing demographics within their church's congregation. Notably, however, the aforementioned income statistics also offer hints as to why this church might be able to provide such generous services to immigrants.

One director of a small immigrant ministry in a Protestant church in Northern Virginia sees it as her personal “mission” to increase the visibility of the church's English as a Second Language (ESL) program within her church. The director describes the very pervasive sense of segregation which used to divide American-born, English-speaking parishioners from the

⁸ It should be noted that this data does not refer to the population of Salvadoran immigrants in Northern Virginia specifically, but rather to the Hispanic population of Salvadoran origin in the United States. Income data by racial and ethnic background in the Northern Virginia area is unfortunately not available. Data from the Census Bureau's 2008 American Community Survey. Reprinted in the Pew Hispanic Center Fact Sheet. “Hispanics of Salvadoran Origin in the United States, 2008” April 22, 2010. <http://pewhispanic.org/files/factsheets/61.pdf>.

immigrant community. She describes a situation in which the parishioners “didn’t want to integrate” and held the immigrants “at an arm’s length.” However, after several years as the director of the ESL program, she feels she’s been able to narrow some of the distance between the two rather disparate communities. She modified the program so that it would continually draw upon parishioners for support, and several every year now regularly volunteer for six-week commitments of one-on-one tutoring during the summer time. By the director’s account, this new component of the program has been a success, and has brought a “new level of interest” in the immigrant ministry among congregants.

Salvadorans in the context of the Northern Virginia Immigrant Community

Distinctions regarding income and education

It is common practice for students’ placement in church-run language classes to be determined by an oral entrance examination. There is often no written component because even the most proficient English-speakers have rarely had any formal training in reading or writing. Robert, a minister at a Northern Virginia church with one of the largest immigrant ministries in the region, commented that “our Hispanic students are often far behind” our other students. Compared to immigrants from South Asia, East Asia or the Middle East, Salvadorans “enter with a much lower level of education,” and require intensive elementary-level tutoring.

In Robert’s experience, many, if not most, of the Salvadorans start at the “pre-beginner” or “beginner” level of classes. The majority of students in the pre-beginner classes have not yet achieved literacy in Spanish, and they must therefore begin with the absolute fundamentals, such as the alphabet.

Several program directors mentioned referring students to the local Literacy Council to gain basic language competency. Robert commented that the idea of learning English in a

formal, classroom setting was a “luxury” for many Salvadorans. They simply work too many hours to have the time for such an investment. Moreover, many Salvadorans “tend to take on work with other Spanish speakers,” so they can function for extended periods without English language skills.

In response to the above commentary from respondents, this author raised the question of how ministries had begun accommodating the unique needs of the Salvadoran community. When this question was posed, Deborah, a volunteer director of an immigrant ministry, immediately emphasized the importance of evening classes. Evenings are frequently the only time of day on any day of the week during which working-age Salvadorans are available. Salvadoran students are, by far, the greatest component of these classes, which is why they are most often the beginner classes. According to Deborah, these evening classes are often designed to teach “survival” English. Some language classes, such as those offered at the community college, are targeted toward occupational English, but these are often “not necessary or appropriate” for the Salvadoran population. According to Deborah, “our Salvadorans are almost all day laborers and gardeners,” so, she implied, the need for them to communicate on anything more than a superficial level while at work is simply not there.

Social distinctions

This interviewer found one distinction made by Paul, the previously-mentioned ministry director, particularly striking. Tersely, Paul made a stark distinction between more educated immigrants and their less-advantaged counterparts. “High-end” students, he commented, tend to be involved in church activities primarily for social reasons. In that sense, the services churches provide for non-destitute immigrants are “not essential in a survival sort of way.”

One of Lisa's responses, while less class-oriented, echoed Paul's description. She described church affiliation as a chance to be among native-born American citizens in a manner offered by virtually no other venue. The relationships that immigrants can maintain with their teachers or with fellow church members (if they choose to become a part of the congregation) allow them to feel "valued" by Americans. Lisa described this as unprecedented for many immigrants, because, in nearly every other aspect of daily life, they are far more likely to encounter signals that they are unwanted.

Lisa continued by saying that, through church organizations, immigrants have the opportunity to experience true American traditions of which they otherwise might be completely unaware. They reportedly have the opportunity to go on "field trips, to teacher's homes" and are given baby showers, birthday parties and citizenship parties. Lisa viewed these gestures as part of the church's overall duty to extend a sense of social inclusion to their students and congregants. It is notable, however, that these events were only mentioned in the discussion of "high-end" immigrants—that is, middle and upper-level income immigrants with a higher degree of English proficiency. In the discussion of services offered to Salvadoran immigrants, no such social aspects were mentioned.

The economic status of the Salvadoran immigrant community

If there was one issue that was persistently mentioned by directors and ministers, it was the low economic status of Salvadorans as compared to most other immigrant groups. This insistence lent itself to the question of whether these perceptions were the result of stereotyping or they were largely based in truth.

According to data released by the Salvadoran Embassy, an estimated 1.7 million Salvadorans (which include immigrants and first-generation Americans) resided in the United

States in 2007, of which approximately 500,000 lived in the Washington, D.C. region. The U.S. Census data rank Salvadorans as the largest immigrant group in the Washington Metropolitan area. From these findings, it can be deduced that income and educational statistics with respect to Salvadoran immigrants in the United States as a whole can be somewhat reasonably applied to Salvadorans in the DC area specifically.

The Pew Hispanic Center reports that 58.4% of immigrants from El Salvador arrived after 1990, implying that, generally, Salvadorans are a relatively new group to this country. This may in part explain why 44.2% describe themselves as speaking English “proficiently,” and only 30% have achieved citizenship. The median age for all Salvadorans is 29 years old—far below the median age for the entire United States, which is 36.

Salvadorans demonstrate lower levels of education than the Hispanic population as a whole. More than half of all Salvadorans in the U.S. (53%) have not obtained at least a high school diploma or its equivalent. It is meaningful to compare this figure to that for U.S. Hispanics in general, which is 39.2%. All of the foregoing information helps to explain why the median annual personal income for Salvadorans in the labor force was \$20,368 in 2008 (compared to \$21,488 for all U.S. Hispanics). Not surprisingly, these incomes are lower than those for U.S. citizens with a high school diploma and far below those with at least some years of college education. They are, however, almost exactly equal to the median income for non-Hispanic, white Americans without a high school diploma, which is \$20,321.

Providing Assistance since the Onset of the Recession

Bonnie, a ministry director for a Methodist church, was quick to respond to the question of how the duties of her church had changed since the fall of 2008. She has found that the recession has left so many more people desperate and “facing insecurity.” It seems that she is

constantly seeing new faces at her church to request “benevolent services.” Bonnie estimates that “three times” as many people have begun seeking material aid from her church as compared to the number that sought help a year and a half ago.

This trend has undoubtedly provided the ministries with an increased volume of administrative tasks. According to every director and minister who was interviewed for this study, recipients of aid are “tracked” so that the services can be rationed, and no single family or individual receives more than his or her fair share of the charity. What the ministry leaders emphasized about tracking is that it was purely a matter of practicality—the churches simply cannot afford to sustain unlimited benevolence programs for all those who need assistance. In the words of Paul, this system allows his organization to accomplish “the most good for the most people,” while still encouraging those who seek help to become more self-sufficient.

Lisa also commented that more people have begun coming to her church for referrals to shelters for the homeless and battered women. “So many people are seeking direction right now,” because, she says, they have no remaining source of livelihood. The demand for career counseling, which was offered by two of the churches featured in this study, has also increased markedly. If nothing else, Lisa commented, “many of those we serve have become very good at finding and applying for jobs.”

Lisa mentioned one trend of the recession that she found particularly disturbing. Many laborers’ hours were being reduced solely, from what she could surmise, so that employers could escape the legal obligation to provide benefits. Lisa felt that this self-serving and avaricious behavior would ultimately have disastrous consequences, and she expressed grave concern that her church may not be able to shoulder the burden of so many in need. “Something is very wrong with our system,” she commented.

Carol highlighted one positive trend of the recession: the increase in the volunteer work force. At her ministry, there has been an “upswing” in the number of young adults who are eager to help out. Because they are unable to find jobs, they are quite content to do something to keep their resume from having “a huge gap” which might imply that they are either unmotivated or unwilling to work. “I’m worried I’m going to lose all of my volunteers when the recession ends,” Carol said in jest.

While in the focus group with Carol, Martha, also an immigrant ministry director, quickly countered that this development was really an ambiguous blessing. “Well, it’s been a little different for us,” she said. At her ministry, some of her “best” volunteers have had to leave to seek paid work because “their husbands⁹” had been laid off or had their hours reduced.

With respect to the legal services division of the previously-mentioned Catholic charity, clients’ needs have undoubtedly grown more pressing during the economic recession. The organization’s intake director, Melissa, explained how unemployment and under-employment are plaguing the Salvadoran community: it is far more difficult to petition for an extension of Temporary Protected Status or to obtain a Green Card if an individual is no longer working. Melissa described a pervasive mentality by which unemployed individuals—and immigrants in particular—are automatically labeled “freeloaders.” This, she explained, is obviously unjustified, particularly in an economic recession when so many hard-working and qualified people are unemployed through no fault of their own. As could be expected, Melissa has also found that the number of individuals who are requesting waivers for legal fees and for application fees for documents has increased markedly in the last year.

⁹ Martha’s statement either erroneously implied that all volunteers were married women who were not participants in the (paid) labor force, or it accurately represented the composition of the church’s volunteer force. In either case, it is interesting to note the social dynamic of this statement.

Conclusion

This study finds that immigrant ministries and other religiously-oriented charitable organizations provide an extremely important source of assistance to immigrants in the Washington, D.C. area. Of primary importance is the ministries' commitment to teaching English as a second language, as this is seen as an indispensable opportunity to improve the employment prospects of immigrants. This study also finds that the economic recession has impacted both immigrants and charitable institutions in several important ways.

According to the directors interviewed for this study, the pools of donations and grants upon which religious organizations depend have not been seriously compromised by the economic recession. The need for assistance, however, has reportedly grown among immigrant communities, and the recession's effects upon the churches' ability to keep pace with that demand have been ambiguous. On the one hand, the growing needs of the immigrant communities have been somewhat offset by an expanding supply of volunteers who have recently become unemployed or underemployed and are looking for meaningful experience until they are able to find paid work. Alternatively, a large number of the most seasoned volunteers have been forced to leave their work with the churches in search of compensated employment due to a job loss within their family.

While immigrant ministries and charitable organizations undoubtedly strive to improve the conditions faced by immigrant populations, the nature of the services provided may depend in large part on the characteristics of the population being served. The interview data in this study suggests that there are forces of segregation at work, driving a wedge between the most well-endowed immigrant ministries in the Washington metropolitan area and the Salvadoran immigrant population. This division acts to hinder Salvadorans' access to what immigrant ministries categorized as their single most important service: teaching English as a second

language. This finding implies that Salvadorans' access to services from some of the most generous charitable institutions may be restricted by latent social pressures. If this is indeed the case, then Salvadorans might be particularly disadvantaged as compared to other immigrant groups in the Washington area.

More research must be conducted, however, before any conclusive link can be drawn. It would be particularly instructive to interview the immigrants who actually receive assistance to determine how they perceive the role of immigrant ministries in their life. It would also be very useful to determine if they sense any of the segregating pressures which were noted in this study.

Moreover, the context in which this research was conducted certainly affected its results. This subject might be further elucidated by examining the dynamics among the populations studied during a time of greater economic opportunity. By studying social insurance in a time of heightened unemployment, the results of this study may have been unrepresentative. Finally, this investigation could be expected to yield very different results if it were conducted after Salvadoran-Americans have had time to gain permanence in the United States. Perhaps some of the statistical attributes of this group, such as vulnerability to poverty and low levels of English proficiency, are largely the result of being in transition. Immigration is undoubtedly disruptive to the life of the individual undertaking it, and it is a change which almost certainly impacts that individual's ability to achieve financial stability for an extended period of time.

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