

2022



HOW LATINO CONGREGATIONS ARE TRANSFORMING COMMUNITIES

A Survey Report by The Brown Church Institute,
Fuller Centro Latino and Urban Strategies



INTRODUCTION & OVERVIEW

For more than two decades, scholars have documented the critical role which churches and Faith-based Organizations (FBOs) play in upholding the social safety net. The social safety net may be defined as: “the network of government programs and civil society institutions, like FBOs and nonprofit organizations, churches, and private organizations, dedicated to supporting the poor”. Though the vital contributions of congregations to social service programs are well documented in the academic literature, for the most part, government, media, and the general public are unaware of the indispensable role which congregations play. One scholar has called this “the invisible caring hand”.



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Within Latino neighborhoods and other communities of color, churches play an especially important function because most community members turn to faith communities to cope with socio-economic hardship and poverty, and pastors serve as “first responders” in moments of crisis. Moreover, religious congregations are often more accessible than traditional nonprofit organizations because they are socially and geographically embedded within the neighborhoods of ethnic minorities. The critical contributions of Hispanic congregations and other churches of color to the social safety net are even less known to the government and the general public than that of white congregations. In addition, few academic studies have sought to quantify the specific contributions of Latino churches to the social safety net. The last significant survey of the community serving activities of Hispanic churches was conducted in 2003.

The vital role played by churches and congregations in the U.S. social safety net has especially heightened since the passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act in 1996, which outsourced to the private sector the government’s historic role of being the primary provider of direct social services. Under this new arrangement, the federal government no longer plays a central function in the direct provision of social services, but rather distributes grants to the private sector, including nonprofit organizations, to conduct the direct provision of social services. The Charitable Choice provision of the 1996 legislation, moreover, explicitly allows the government to contract with religious congregations to provide housing assistance, youth development programs, drug prevention programs, counseling, and other social services. Federal funding for social services is estimated at \$21.2 billion annually. Despite their substantial role as part of the social safety net, Latino churches and other congregations of color have accessed only a tiny fraction of such government funding, and less than 5% of all congregational programs are supported by public authorities.

As this report will demonstrate, churches and congregations played an especially critical role in supporting the U.S. social safety in communities of color during the peak years of the COVID-19 pandemic. As numerous studies have shown, COVID-19 had a disproportionate impact upon communities of color, including tragically higher death rates. Our survey results evidence that Latino churches and other congregations of color served as important “first responders” during the COVID-19 crisis, providing social services related to housing, food distribution, pastoral counseling, COVID-19 public health activities, financial literacy, immigration, and others.



METHODS & DATA

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The Survey

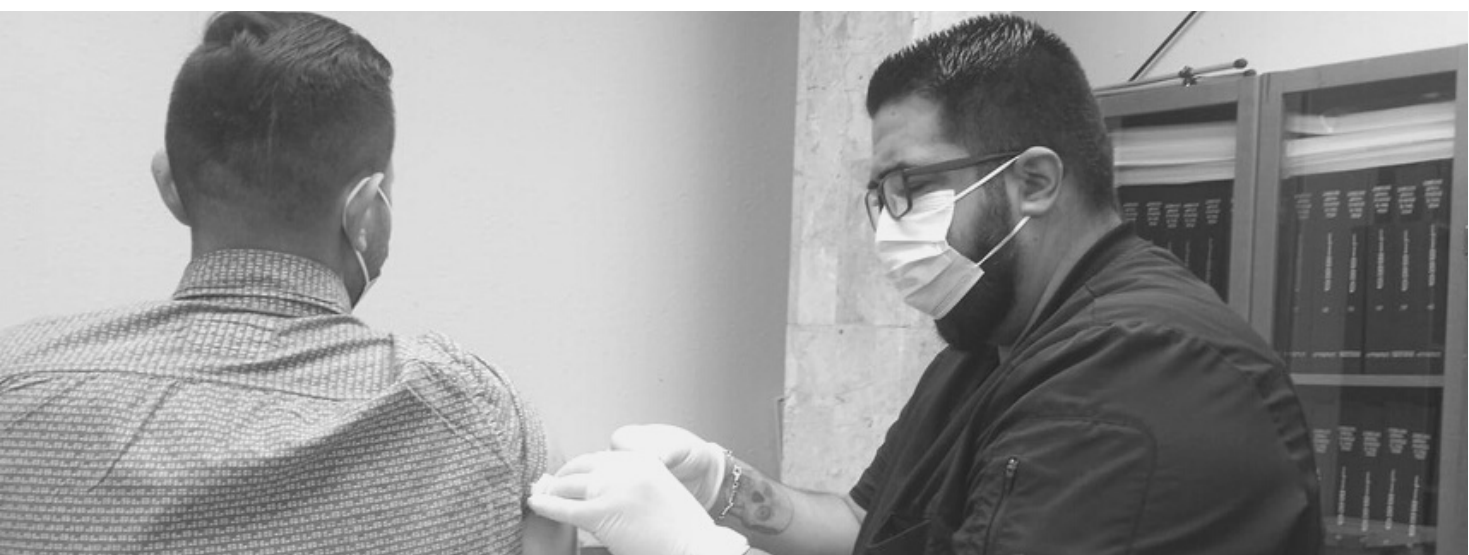
To examine the impact of churches and FBOs on the social safety net we rely on one dataset: The 2021 Faith Leaders Community Survey (FLCS). This survey contains a sample of leaders and staff (n=121) from Latino churches and FBOs of diverse Christian denominations. Respondents were selected from the Urban Strategies network. The survey was conducted online, and respondents had the option of answering the survey in English or Spanish. U.S.-based Hispanic churches and FBOs were targeted; therefore, non-Hispanic respondents were screened out. Urban Strategies fielded the survey in the U.S. and Puerto Rico.



Community Serving Efforts

The survey includes items on Community Serving Efforts (CSEs), which are defined as all the activities conducted by churches or FBOs that are aimed at the benefit of non-church members in the geographical area surrounding the church. This data allows us to assess the collective social impact of congregations during the COVID-19 pandemic as an example of the church as an invisible safety net.

In the following section, we present the most relevant findings that shed light on the role of churches and FBOs in improving the conditions of poor communities and communities of color:



KEY FINDINGS

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Congregations of color and FBOs serve as an important social safety net for their communities. Indeed, our survey results indicate that approximately 94% of Hispanic churches and FBOs provide a wide array of social services for community residents. CSEs range from short-term relief programs involving Healthcare and Food Security, to longer-term programs (Child and Youth Development, Adult Programming), and community development initiatives (Immigration-Related, Homelessness, Individuals affected by the justice system - i.e., incarcerated or formerly incarcerated).

02

Approximately 30% of churches and FBOs allocate between 10% and 20% of their annual budgets to CSEs (see Graphs 3 and 4). Additionally, more Latino churches and FBOs allocated a significant proportion of their annual budgets to CSEs in 2020 compared to 2019. As an example, churches that allocated more than 50% of their annual budgets to CSEs increased from 8% in 2019 to 16% in 2020 (see Graph 3). FBO expenses also increased in 2020 compared to 2019. For instance, FBOs that devoted up to 75% of their annual budgets to CSEs almost tripled in 2020 compared to 2019, going from 8% to 23% (see Graph 4).

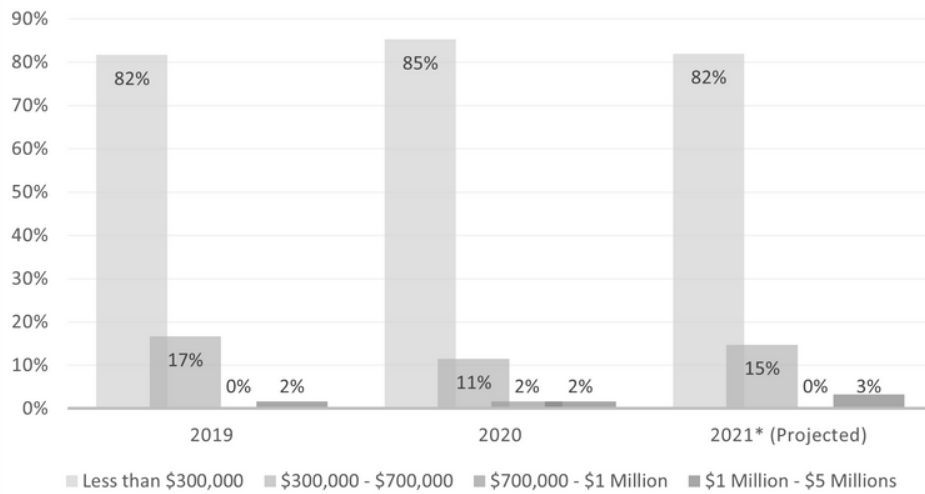
03

In 2020, approximately 85% of churches and 75% of FBOs operated under restricted budgets not exceeding \$300,000 dollars per year. Churches and FBOs that received between \$300,000 and \$700,000 dollars annually represented 11% and 13%, respectively. Finally, FBOs with the most economic resources, that is, those with annual budgets ranging from 1 million to 5 million dollars, experienced a drastic decline between 2019 and 2020 (see Graphs 1 and 2).

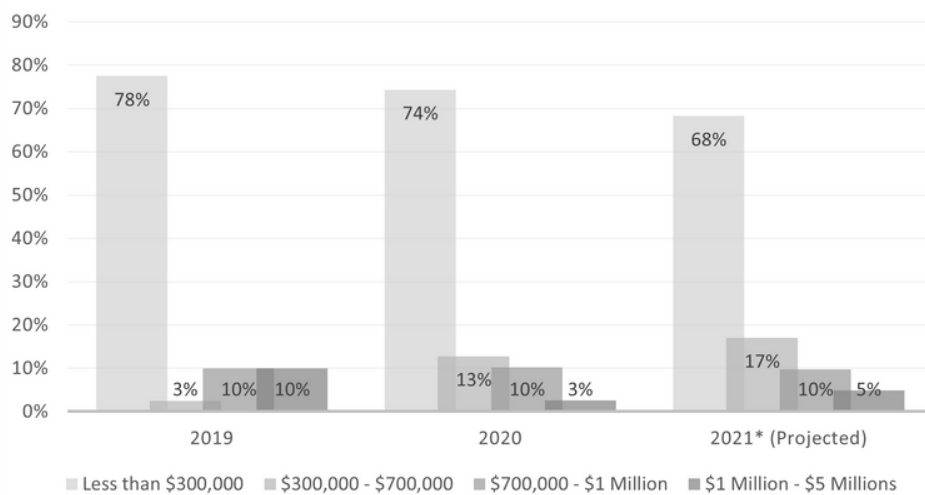
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During the COVID-19 Pandemic, significant CSEs were created or expanded by churches and FBOs. Among churches, the top three CSEs were related to Health services (28%), Food Security Services (23%), and Child and Youth Development Services (22%) (see Graph 6). Examples include Pastoral Counseling Services, Food Distribution & Essentials, and COVID-19-related public health activities. FBOs top three CSEs were focused on Food Security (22%), Adult Programming (22%), and Child and Youth Development (20%) (see Graph 7).

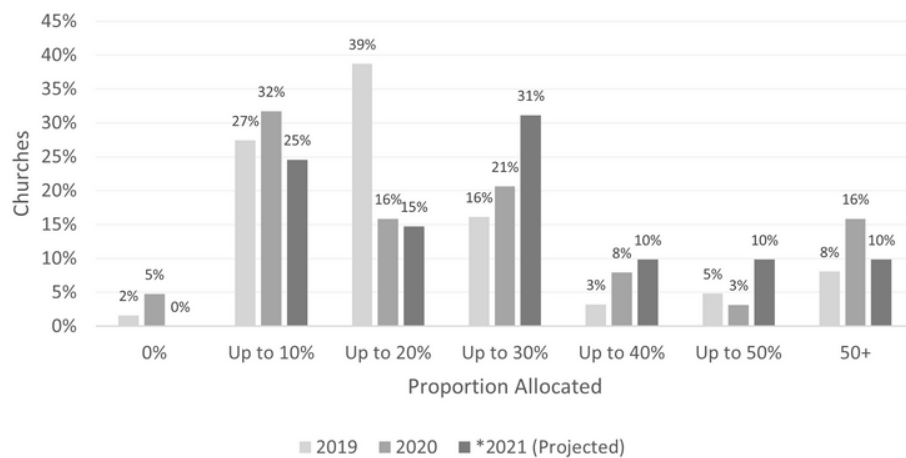
Graph 1. Annual Church Budgets, 2019-2021* (n= 61)



Graph 2. Annual FBOs Budget, 2019-2021* (n= 41)



Graph 3. Churches: Proportion of Annual Budget Allocated to CSEs, 2019-2021* (n= 63)



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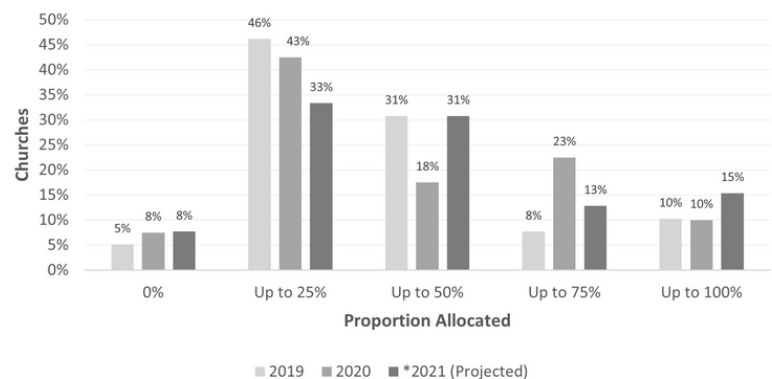
The most common health-related services provided by churches and FBOs during the COVID-19 Global Pandemic were pastoral counseling services (51%) and licensed and professional services (47%), followed by a variety of COVID-related interventions (see Graph 8).

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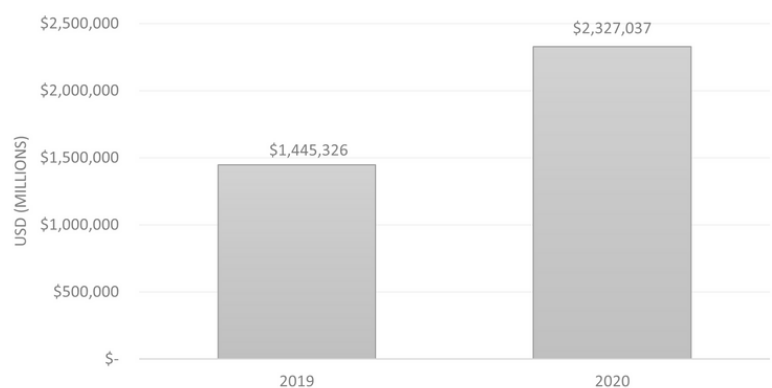
The economic value of volunteer hours provided by the Latino churches and FBOs surveyed amounted to \$2.3 million dollars in 2020. This represents an increase of 61% compared to 2019 (see Graph 5). Additionally, our study reveals that volunteering in Latino churches and FBOs did not decrease due to the Pandemic; on the contrary, volunteer hours increased by more than half (53%). This is in sharp contrast to data from other studies highlighting volunteer shortages nationally, particularly in religious organizations. At the same time, studies in Europe, and China, among other countries in the Global South, have registered a clear rise in “COVID-19” volunteer rates, which coincides with our results.



Graph 4. FBOs: Proportion of Annual Budget Allocated to CSEs, 2019-2021* (n=40)



Graph 5. Churches: Total Value of Volunteer Hours, 2019-2020





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RECOMMENDATIONS

Increase Investments and Funding

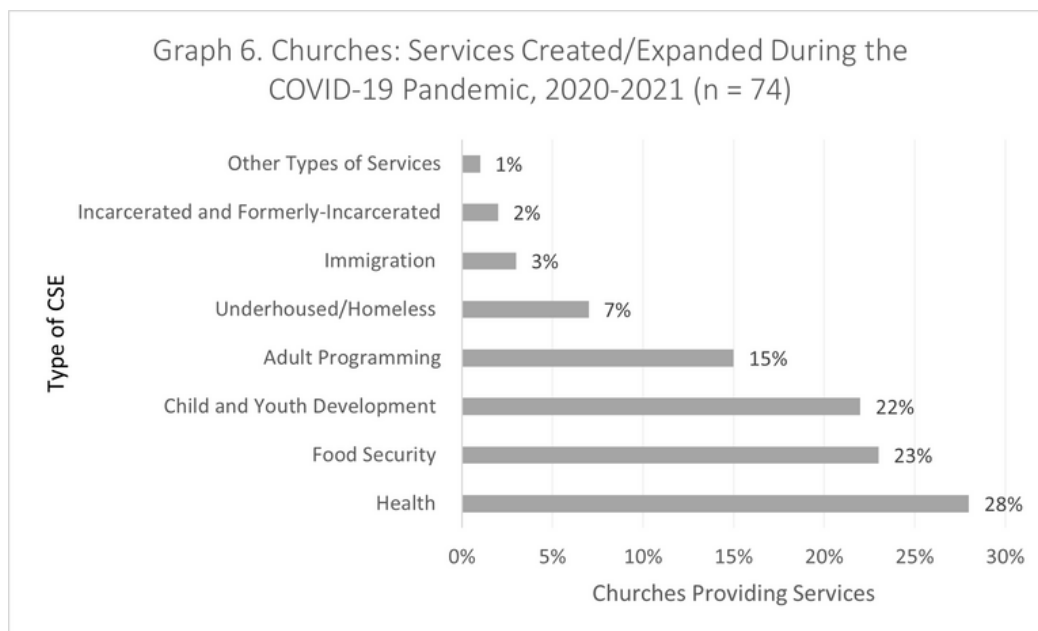
As a first step, it is recommended that a systematic effort be made to match the main areas of existing Latino faith-based social service provision with available funding opportunities from both government and private philanthropic sources and to raise awareness of such opportunities within Latino church networks. Consistent with the academic literature of the past two decades, this survey demonstrates that many Hispanic churches are active in the provision of social services and already represent a vital component of the social safety net. At the same time, many Hispanic pastors cite lack of adequate funding and resources as one of the most significant barriers to deeper social engagement in their communities. Sherman's findings are also consistent with our survey results since more than 80% of churches and FBOs in our study are operating under tight budgets (see Graphs 1 and 2). This seems like a problem with a practical solution, as very few Latino congregations have hitherto accessed government funding to support their CSEs, and billions of dollars in government grants remain available.

New Areas of Service and Strategic Partnerships

The most common types of social services provision identified in the survey include pastoral counseling, professional and licensed counseling, COVID-19 related public health services, and adult programming related to healthy relationship training, financial literacy, and the support of senior citizens. A second recommendation is to identify other types of social services for which congregations may be strongly suited to serve as either direct or indirect service providers. One example includes increased congregational participation in church-based health interventions and partnerships with public health entities. At once, Latinos are both highly religious and face multitudinous barriers to health care. In addition, many have high levels of mistrust of the healthcare system. Perhaps as a result of this, many church leaders express strong support for the idea of offering health programs and activities for their parishioners, and existing research points to the fact that FBOs possess favorable characteristics for health programming. As such, and as discussed by Derose and Rodriguez (2020), Hispanic congregations offer great promise as partners for meeting the diverse healthcare needs of the underserved Hispanic community. Survey results indicate that approximately 28% of churches assisted in the provision of COVID-19 public health services (See Graph 6). This represents a good jumping-off point for future partnerships between Hispanic congregations and public health entities.

Pastoral Training in Mental Health Care Provision

Survey results indicate that a large percentage of pastors are already engaged in counseling activities (See Graph 8). These findings jibe with current academic research which shows that Latino pastors are often the “first responders” in moments of mental health crisis and that mental health problems are ubiquitous in Latino and other minority congregations. At the same time, this same research highlights the fact that mental health concerns are highly stigmatized within the immigrant community and most pastors feel unequipped to deal with the mental health needs of their parishioners. Despite these limitations, our survey reveals that approximately 51% of Hispanic churches provided pastoral counseling services to their surrounding community (see Graph 8). Therefore, since many Hispanic pastors are already serving in the capacity of counselors and express a desire for further training, a great opportunity exists to create formal mental health trainings in the forms of webinars, workshops, and certificate and degree programs to better equip them. Alternatively, for those many pastors who might already feel too taxed by the weight of their regular pastoral responsibilities to extend their provision of counseling services, a healthy option would be for them to “pass the ball” to professional counselors.



National Database of Latino Social Service Providers

As this survey has demonstrated, many Latino congregations are already engaged in social services provision. It is uncertain however as to whether they are aware of each other or have meaningful interaction. A national database of Hispanic social services providers should be created to raise national awareness among Hispanic/Latino congregations and FBOs engaged in social engagement. The last time such a directory was created was nearly two decades ago.

Creation of Educational Infrastructure

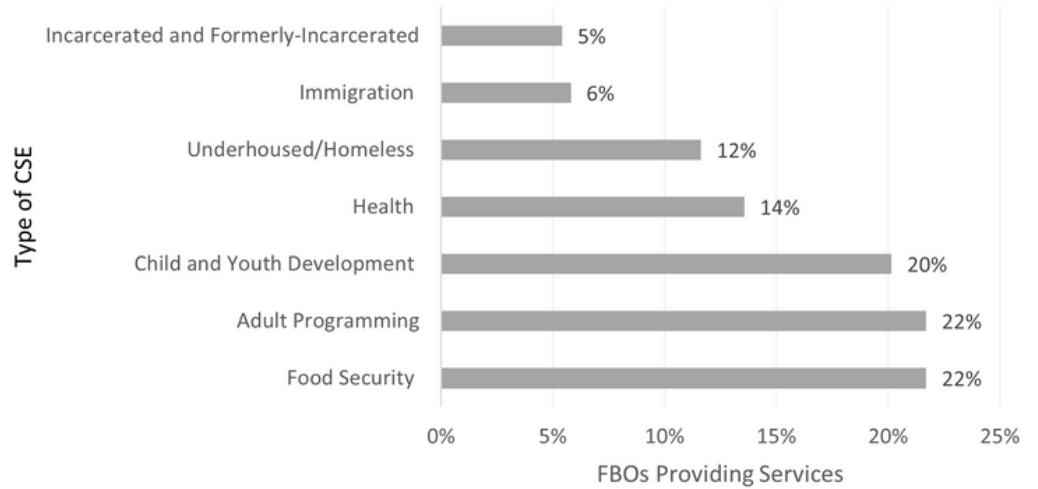
In addition to lack of funding, many Latino pastors cite a lack of “know-how” or training as a barrier to engaging in public facing projects of community transformation (Sherman, 2006). This is not surprising because, unlike the African American community, the Latino religious community lacks a strong educational infrastructure related to social engagement, community development, and political advocacy (Sherman, 2006). To meet this glaring need, a large future goal should be to create a collaborative network of bilingual educational opportunities for Hispanic pastors and lay leaders to learn about social engagement and community development. This could take the form of certificate and degree programs, webinars, workshops, and conferences. Training content should be interdisciplinary, involving community development, advocacy, public policy, social sciences, theology, and other relevant content. Because of the long negative historical track record of attempted partnerships with white denominations and organizations, it is also vital that such training be led and developed by Latinas/os and other trainers of color with direct professional and personal ties to the communities they serve (Aponte and De La Torre, 2020; Romero, 2020). This educational network could include churches, faith-based non-profit organizations, seminaries, and Bible institutes, and should build upon the important work which is already being done in this area on a smaller but meaningful scale. Pathbreaking existing educational efforts of this type are currently being conducted by organizations such as Mission Talk, Esperanza, Fuller Centro Latino, Matthew 25, the Latino Pastoral Action Center, Asociación para la Educación Teológica Hispana, the Christian Community Development Association, New Generation3, and Urban Strategies.

National Follow-up Study

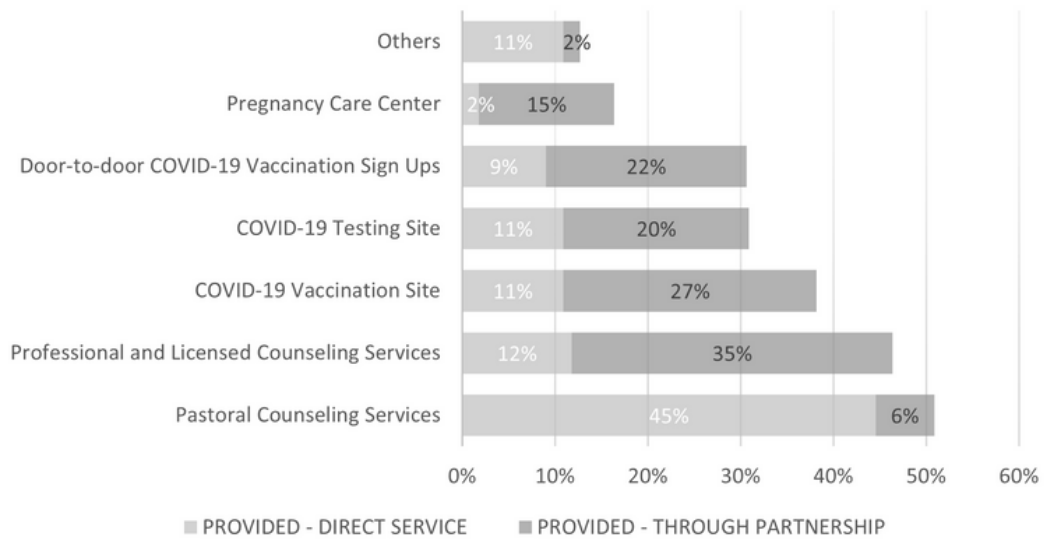
There is a need for an expanded national study of social services provision among Latino congregations to refine the recommendations and analysis of this report. A follow-up study should include a larger survey that draws upon a rigorously designed national random sample, in-depth interviews with pastors and lay leaders, and an analysis of key case studies. In addition, such an investigation may also assess the precise amount of funding Latino congregations that have hitherto accessed to support their CSEs from local, state, and federal government funding sources, as well as from private philanthropic organizations. Because of the dire need for such research, such a project could easily be funded by a major grant from the Lily Endowment or some similar funding agency in the amount of \$1 million-\$2 million. A large-scale national study of the social services provision of Hispanic/Latino congregations would be a landmark contribution to the US church, government, and nonprofit sector, for it would make visible the many CSEs of Hispanic congregations and open up the door to major new funding to expand such efforts.



Graph 7. FBOs: Services Created/Expanded During the COVID-19 Pandemic, 2020-2021 (n = 46)



Graph 8. Health CSEs Provided by Churches and FBOs





CONCLUSION

The Faith Leaders Community Survey, coupled with academic literature of the past two decades confirms that Latino congregations and other churches of color serve as an important, but largely invisible and unrecognized part of the social safety net. Hispanic congregations, together with other U.S. religious congregations and FBOs serve as an “invisible caring hand” which provides 35% of all volunteer hours in the U.S. This volunteer time translates into more than \$530 million in value. This survey and report represent a significant update to the Sherman Report from 2003 which demonstrated similar findings as to the active participation of Hispanic congregations and FBOs in the provision of social services.

The importance of Latino churches and FBOs as well as other churches of color to the social safety net of the United States will become heightened over time because of the rapid numerical decline of white churches and denominations. Stated simply, in the decades to come, white churches will experience less and less capacity to contribute to the social safety net because of their shrinking numbers. At the same time, Latino, African American, African, and Asian communities in the US represent the future growth and numerical vitality of the country, and its congregations are well-positioned to fill the growing needs which will arise. In other words, the social safety net has begun to tear and needs to be mended with the help of churches from communities of color. According to Fuller Seminary Dean, Amos Yong, the North American church is “browning” as white representation is declining and all other ethnic groups are together increasing. For instance, white evangelical Protestants in the U.S. have experienced the most precipitous decline in affiliation since 2010, dropping from 23% to 14%. Immigration from places such as Latin America, Africa, and Asia is fueling this rapid ecclesial change, and in fact, 1 in 3 American evangelicals is now a person of color. Accordingly, approximately one-quarter of all Christians in the U.S. come from first-generation immigrant families. In light of these changing demographics, it is vital to plan for the future preservation of the social safety net. This can be accomplished by systematically increasing the share of social services provision conducted by congregations of color over the next three decades. Such augmentation should include a symbiotic partnership with government and secular non-profit organizations to maximize efforts and capacity. Towards these ends, much future research is required to understand the most effective means of increasing the capacity of churches of color to participate in CSEs. The 2021 Faith Leaders Community Survey represents an important first step towards this goal.



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