

**Participation in Religious Services and Parental and Child Well-Being of Low Income
Families: Evidence from the 1999 and 2002 National Survey of America's Families**

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Background:

The role of religious belief and religious work in improving various aspects of quality of life for socially disadvantaged groups has received growing attention in recent years. Scholars and researchers are particularly interested in whether religious activities can act as a buffer against hardships in life and achieve positive outcomes despite the lack of financial resources. The role of religious beliefs and activities may vary across different groups defined by socio-demographic background.

Study Purposes

I will examine how parents' participation in religious services affects several aspects of parents' and children's well-being for low income families. In particular, I will use recently collected nationally representative data to evaluate whether parents' participation in religious services benefit parental self-rated health, mental well-being, attitudes towards parenting, parent-rated child health, child behavior, and child school engagement. I will also test interaction effects of participation in religious services with key demographic factors including age, gender, race/ethnicity, and immigrant status (US-born vs Foreign-born).

When interaction effects are found, group-specific analysis will be performed providing evidence on how religious activities are associated with parental and child well-being for specific social groups.

I will then examine whether participation in extra-curricular activities is a key mediating pathway linking parental participation in religious services to child well-being.

I will also explore the role of parental education in accounting for the observed link between participation in religious services and parental well-being.

Data

This is a cross-sectional study of children age 6 to 17 and their parents. I will use the 1999 and 2002 National Survey of America's Families (NSAF) to examine my research questions. The NSAF is nationally representative of the non-institutionalized, civilian population of persons under age 65 in the United States. With a primary emphasis on low income families with children and an unusually large sample size (more than 50,000 cases), the survey affords an excellent opportunity to comprehensively study the associations between participation in religious services and the well-being of American children and their parents in different socio-demographic groups.

Measures

Six dependent variables will be tested in this study, tapping parental and child well-being.

For parental well-being, I will include measures of parental self-rated health, mental well-being, and attitudes towards parenting. Parents' health is measured by *parental self-rated health*. Parents were

asked, “In general, would you say your health is excellent, very good, good, fair, or poor?” *Parental mental health* is measured by a scale that gauges how often in the past month the parent felt very nervous, felt calm and peaceful (reverse coded), felt downhearted, was a happy person (reverse coded), and felt so down in the dumps that she could not be cheered up. *Aggravation in parenting* is a scale that taps the parent’s attitudes towards parenting. It includes measures of how often in the past month the parent felt that the child was much harder to care for than most children of the same age, the child did things that really bothered the parent, the parent was angry with the child, and the parent felt that she was giving up more of her life for the child’s needs.

For child well-being, I will include child health, child behavior, and child school engagement. General health status is measured by a *parent-rated health* item. Parents were asked, “In general, would you say (CHILD’s) health is excellent, very good, good, fair, or poor?” This variable taps the child’s general health status as perceived by the parent. The behavioral dimension of child well-being is captured by a *behavioral index* that includes six items concerning the parent’s perceptions about the child’s behavioral and emotional status in the past month. A *child’s engagement in school scale* is used to assess the degree to which children are engaged in school. Parents are asked how often the child cares about doing well in school, only works on schoolwork when forced to (reverse coded), does just enough schoolwork to get by (reverse coded), and always does homework.

The key independent variable in this study is *parental participation in religious services* that is measured by a single item asking “In the past 12 months, about how often have you attended a religious service?” Responses to the two items include never (1), a few times a year (2), a few times a month (3), once a week or more (4). Higher values indicate more participation in volunteer work or religious services.

Another three important independent variables are financial hardship, child participation in extra-curricular activities, and parental education. Financial hardship will be used to identify low income families. *Financial hardship* captures food and/or housing insecurity. The variable is coded 1 if the child’s family had to worry whether food would run out or food bought would not last, had to cut/skip meals for the lack of money, were unable to pay rent in the last year or had to move in with other people during the last 12 months.

Extra-curricular social development is measured by a *scale of extent of child’s extra-curricular activities*. This index enumerates the number of activities a child has been involved in the last year. This is the hypothesized mediator of the link between parental participation in religious services and child well-being.

Parental Education is measured by the average level of regular school completed by both parents. There are twelve categories in this variable ranging from 8th grade or less (1) to graduate/professional degree (12). Given the fact that education is possibly correlated with frequency of participating in religious work (empirically found), it is possible that the beneficial effect of participation in religious services is confounded by parental education.

Other control variables include age, gender, race/ethnicity, and immigrant status. Their interaction effects with religious participation will be tested and significant effects will be reported.

Analytical Strategy

Weighted OLS regression models will be fit to examine the research questions. Taking the complex design of the NSAF into account, all the analyses produce inferences applicable to American children nation-wide. Hierarchical modeling strategy producing nested models will be adopted to test the mediating effects of child participation in extra-curricular activities and parental education.

Multivariate regression analyses that simultaneously test multiple dependent variables will be performed for the three child well-being indicators and the three parental well-being indicators respectively. This approach allows simultaneous testing of the effect of religious work on all the conceptually related dependent variables as a whole (Breusch & Pagan, 1980).

I will first perform these analyses on the full sample, and then test the interaction effect of religious participation with financial hardship to examine whether the impact of religious participation varies according to family economic resources. Next, I will fit the models on low income families that have experienced food and rent hardship in the past year.

Preliminary Results

I used the 1999 NSAF to explore the research questions. Preliminary results show that parental participation in religious services is significantly and positively associated with every single measure of parental and children's well-being. Child participation in extra-curricular activities seems a plausible mediator linking parental participation in religious services to child well-being. These patterns largely hold for low income families as well.

I also tested some interaction effects with demographic variables. Using child behavior as an example, I found that parental participation in religious services is a protective factor for all ethnic groups, but it exerts significantly more protective effect for Hispanic youths. By contrast, for child school engagement, parental participation in religious services has a significantly less protective effect for Asian American youths.

More results will be presented in the complete paper. A Discussion section will be added to the manuscript.

Policy Implications

The policy implications of this study will depend on the final analysis and the conclusion based on full data. The preliminary findings based on analyses using the 1999 NSAF data seem to suggest that participation in religious services does provide protective effects against child poor health, negative behaviors, and school disengagement and has beneficial impact on parents' self-rated health, mental health, and positive attitudes towards parenting. These beneficial effects are consistently strong for low income families. This evidence suggests that opportunities of participation in local religious services offered by faith-based organizations may be a fruitful avenue through which the government and the society can help low income families to enhance parental well-being and achieve desirable child development outcomes despite the lack of economic capital in the family.

References

Breusch, T., & Pagan, A. (1980). The LM test and its applications to model specification in econometrics. *Review of Economic Studies*, 47, 239-254.