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Data-informed recommendations for faith communities desiring to support vulnerable children and families during the COVID-19 pandemic

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has heightened risk factors in vulnerable families. Historically, faith communities have provided support crises but may lack clear direction on how to best aid during the pandemic. The current study provides data-informed recommendations for faith communities to support vulnerable families during the pandemic. Eighty-seven non-government organizations serving 454,637 vulnerable families completed a questionnaire. Results examined (1) the needs of families and NGOs during the pandemic and (2) opportunities for faith communities to engage this population. Data revealed areas of need were material support, spiritual nurture, funding, and disseminating information. Based on these findings, seven recommendations were made.

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Within months, the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) became the largest worldwide health, humanitarian, and economic threat in recent history (Thompson & Rasmussen, 2020). As a result, many countries have implemented restrictive measures to prevent disease transmission, leading to a pervasive impact on daily life (Grills et al., 2020; Nay, 2020). Frequently, those who are most impacted are those who are already most vulnerable, including families at risk for separation and children outside of parental care (Desai, 2020; Wang et al., 2020). Further, the service providers who typically offer support to this population have struggled to adapt to constraints to continue to meet the evolving needs of their beneficiaries. Historically, faith-based communities have been able to provide the necessary support to this population in times of crisis (Cascio, 2003). The pandemic provides a unique opportunity for faith-based communities to provide the vital support needed to support vulnerable children and families. The present paper sought to highlight needs and opportunities for faith-based communities desiring to benefit vulnerable children and families, with the goal of helping these communities target their support.

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Characteristics of vulnerable populations

Children outside of parental care and families at risk of separation are considered vulnerable populations. Beyond separation or risk of separation as a defining characteristic, this population tends to experience many other challenges and risk factors that precede separation or risk of separation, including poverty (Muros et al., 2019), mental and physical health concerns (Águila-Otero et al., 2018; Dziro et al., 2013), abuse (Ayaz et al., 2011), and instability (Kaur et al., 2018). Decades of research clearly demonstrate that children need healthy families to develop optimally (Dozier et al., 2014; Nelson et al., 2019; Van Ijzendoorn et al., 2011). However, millions of children continue to be separated from family care, often living in institutional settings or on the street (Desmond et al., 2020). For this present study, vulnerable populations will be defined as (1) children separated from biological parental care and (2) families with a high risk of separation (Atwoli et al., 2014; Johnson et al., 2014; Khoury-Kassabri & Attar-Schwartz, 2014). The sample for this study was also accessing services from non-government organizations (NGOs).

Vulnerable populations and COVID-19

Although research is still emerging, early evidence suggests children tend to experience less severe presentations of COVID-19 (Mellis, 2020; Thompson & Rasmussen, 2020). Despite this, vulnerable children may experience situations or risk factors that increase their risk of exposure to the virus. Poverty is often a precursor to separation from parental care (Hawk et al., 2018; Ruiz-Casares & Phommavong, 2016) and may increase the likelihood of poor nutrition, restricted or overcrowded living quarters, and limited hygiene. Nutrition is a key factor in building immunity, and inadequate nutrition may leave a child more at risk for COVID-19 and a host of other conditions (Butler & Barrientos, 2020). Living in slums or favelas means a very high population density, making recommended social distancing impossible (CDC COVID-19 Response Team, 2020). Proper hand washing and hygiene are a primary recommendation from medical professionals, but lack of soap or running water makes this practice unreasonable (Cavanaugh, 2020). These and other risk factors may increase vulnerability to COVID-19.

Further, the recommended restrictive measures associated with the prevention of COVID-19 transmission have placed tremendous strain on vulnerable populations. Strict lockdowns and quarantines have limited access to income (Wilke et al., 2020), which is especially detrimental to a population that already experiences economic barriers (Hussain et al., 2017). For economically disadvantaged individuals and families, lack of income can lead to reduced access to even the most basic resources, such as food, water, and shelter (World Bank,

2020). In addition to these stressors, research suggests child maltreatment increases in times of stress (Cluver et al., 2020; Galea et al., 2020), adding to the strains on vulnerable populations. Finally, not being able to access typical support services, such as school and childcare, due to social distancing mandates may place children and families further at risk. As a result of these and other factors, it is likely that some intact families will become separated, and that more children will enter the alternative care system.

Faith communities and vulnerable populations

Faith communities have a long history of supporting people in need (Hodge, 2019). Frequently, this is accomplished through partnerships with NGOs who specialize in serving vulnerable populations (Mitchell, 2017; Ridings, 2015). Currently, many NGOs are struggling to operate as usual due to lockdowns and decreased funding (Wilke et al., 2020), even though their services may be needed now more than ever. Honoring and augmenting partnerships with NGOs is one-way faith communities can efficiently and effectively serve vulnerable children and families, whether they are located across the world or across town. Learning from service providers about needs and opportunities can inform competent engagement.

The present study

Listening to and learning from NGO leaders about what they and the vulnerable populations they serve need most can ensure support is from faith communities targeted. The objectives of the current study are to (1) outline the needs of NGOs serving vulnerable children during the pandemic and (2) provide data-informed guidance and recommendations for faith communities desiring to support NGOs serving vulnerable children and families during the COVID-19 pandemic. To better understand the needs and opportunities facing this population, the current sample included representatives from NGOs serving vulnerable children and families across diverse contexts around the world. Participants reported on (1) types of support received from the faith-based community and (2) support they wish faith communities would provide. This knowledge will facilitate a better understanding of how faith-based communities can effectively support vulnerable children and families and the NGOs that serve them.

Materials & methods

Participants

Participants representing 87 NGOs supporting vulnerable children and families completed a short online questionnaire. Organizations served

Table 1. Frequencies and percentages for types of services provided by organizations ($n = 87$).

Type of Service	n	%
Adoption	21	24.1
Advocacy	50	57.7
Education	65	74.7
Family Reintegration	52	59.8
Family Strengthening	64	73.6
Foster Care	30	34.5
Kinship Care	38	43.7
Medical Care	44	59.6
Post Care Support	28	32.2
Residential Care	37	42.5
Sponsorships	42	48.3
Supported Independent Living	24	27.6

a collective total of 454,637 children with individual organizations providing direct services to 0–267,000 ($M = 6403.34$; $SD = 3537.90$) children. A summary of direct and indirect services provided by NGOs can be found in [Table 1](#). Services were provided in 43 countries with the most frequently reported countries being Haiti ($n = 14$), Uganda ($n = 13$), Kenya ($n = 13$), India ($n = 10$), and Mexico ($n = 7$). The majority of participants (59.3%) served in a leadership position (i.e. CEO, president, and executive director) within their organization.

Measures

Demographic survey

A brief questionnaire regarding demographic information for the respondent and the organization she or he represented was included. Participant-focused items included primary role and job title. NGO-focused items included services provided (i.e. medical services, residential care, family preservation, etc.), countries served, and the number of children served in 2019.

COVID-19 impact survey

Data presented here were collected as part of a larger study focused on the overall impact of COVID-19 on vulnerable children and families and the organizations that serve them. Findings from that study are reported elsewhere (see Wilke et al., 2020). The original study included a 25-item survey. Five of these items related to the role of faith communities in supporting vulnerable children and families by assisting the NGOs that serve them. Questions included (1) “Has the local faith-based community provided any support to your program?”, (2) “What is your program’s greatest need during this time?”, (3) “What type of support has the faith-based community provided?”, (4) “What type of support do you wish they (faith community) would provide?”, and (5) “Is there anything else you think we should know?”

Procedure

This study was approved by the University Institutional Review Board. All respondents provided informed consent before completing the survey by checking a box. Participants were recruited between April 8, 2020 and May 8, 2020 using both snowball and convenience sampling. Study notices were posted on relevant websites and sent via e-mail to the distribution lists of relevant professional and organizational networks. Surveys were completed online and participants were invited to answer qualitative and quantitative questions. The rate of completion was 84.0%.

Data analysis

This study used a mixed, concurrent, equal status design, in which qualitative and quantitative data were analyzed distinctly and combined at the stage of interpretation (Creswell & Clark, 2007).

Qualitative analysis

Qualitative analysis was completed using Qualitative Content Analysis. Data was coded by two researchers using an iterative process. Open-ended questions were analyzed independently, and themes were then clustered. Researchers created a directory of phrases and operational definitions which supported the primary themes. Prior to the final write-up, descriptions of the relationship between themes were drafted and considered in the context of the overarching document. Quotes, including full sentences and sentence fragments, were included to support themes.

Quantitative analysis

Some quantitative data, primarily frequencies and percentages, were also collected. It was used to support and supplement qualitative findings.

Results

The overall findings suggested the pandemic led to additional and unmet needs for vulnerable populations. Most of the organizations (70.1%; $n = 61$) reported that the faith-based community had already provided some additional support since the onset of the pandemic. However, all of the organizations (100%) believed that additional support would be necessary as the pandemic continued to unfold and the needs of vulnerable families evolved in response. When analyzing survey responses, four opportunities of support that faith communities could provide to vulnerable children and families were identified: (1) providing material support, (2) offering spiritual nurture, (3) providing funds, and (4) disseminating information. Discussion of each theme

is composed of: (1) a description of the theme, (2) data that supports the theme, (3) representative quotes that highlight the theme, and (4) and a brief summary of the data and contextual details needed for interpretation.

Two important caveats are worth noting when interpreting results for the current study. Foremost, NGOs in the current sample provided a range of services in multiple contexts across 43 countries. As a result, the presented themes represented major findings across organizations, but did not fully capture the experiences of every organization. Second, relationships with faith communities varied across the NGOs. Some NGOs had local church partners, some had international church partners, and some had both. This dynamic may have influenced the types of faith community support or engagement that were possible.

Theme 1: providing material support

One overarching theme that emerged encompassed efforts of faith communities to provide material support to vulnerable children and families and the need for further support. Types of material support needed depended on context, but included clothing, food, shelter, personal protective equipment, and educational materials. Many vulnerable children and families were experiencing inadequate access to material goods (31.0%) and loss of income (73.6%) due to the pandemic. Several organizations indicated that food programs that typically supported vulnerable children and families (i.e. school lunch program, government feeding program, etc.) had been halted. Further, half (55.2%) of the respondents reported an increase in the cost of food in the region, while others (17.1%) reported food was not available in their communities. Although some churches were already providing food and other sources of material support, most organizations (82.1%) expressed a need for increased food assistance. The following quotes highlight material support provided and needed:

- “They gave homes for shelter for a number of kids.”
- “At the moment, two of our local churches are making face masks, and putting together food parcels.”
- “Donations like assorted foods and clothes.”
- “We need to develop a plan for how our children will survive if this goes on longer than a month. How will they eat? How will they access medical supplies?”
- “Food for our families whose children would be receiving nutritious food while in our school. School is closed, prices on food have skyrocketed and families are struggling to eat.”
- “Local support like food for the families in their church”

- “The impact of ‘lockdown’ is very different in Africa where most people earn a daily wage. We already had an estimated 4 million people who would need food security in 2020, that number is going to go through the roof very soon. We are totally unprepared and certainly without the capacity to deal with a pandemic effectively.”
- “Food boxes for pick up weekly.”

Taken together, these findings suggested that additional material support, particularly food assistance, was an area of further need that faith communities may be able to fulfill.

Theme 2: offering spiritual nurture

Spiritual nurture provided by the church was a reoccurring theme. Mentions of prayer, pastoral care, counseling, and worship were present in many responses. While some spiritual nurture was focused toward vulnerable children and families directly, most was geared toward NGOs. This was especially prevalent where churches and NGOs had established partnerships. Respondents expressed appreciation for the encouragement churches had provided. Some also communicated a desire for more spiritual support from the surrounding faith communities. The following quotes highlight the importance of spiritual nurture from faith communities:

- “The local faith community in country is providing pastoral and community support.”
- “The best thing they can do is pray. As they are sheltering in place there really isn’t much they can do.”
- “We partner with a local church in our community and work with the pastor and families in the church.”
- “Spiritual guidance and local support.”
- “Online Devotion or staff devotional times.”
- “Let’s continue to pray for all vulnerable children at this point. Pray for a solution to the pandemic.”

Considered collectively, findings suggested many faith communities were providing spiritual nurture both to the NGOs and vulnerable children and families, but continued support in this area was desired.

Theme 3: providing funds

The most frequently reported concern among NGOs was that their ability to provide services to vulnerable children and families was impaired by lack of funding. Many communicated a decrease in funding at the time of the survey

(61.0%), and all organizations (100%) anticipated short- and long-term decreases in giving would impact their ability to operate and provide adequate services. Respondents indicated that the broader economic implications of the pandemic would impact (1) the economic capacity of vulnerable families and (2) NGOs and other community service providers who offer vital support to this population. The following quotes highlight the need for further funding:

- “We have high concerns about funding. The team there has needs that are new and different from what we’d anticipated, and our funding future is uncertain with the world and US economy in such a state. We’re a shoestring organization in the best circumstances – this could be catastrophic, but we’re trusting in God to provide, and not slowing down on our mission.”
- “In some of our partner organizations, employees are affected financially, some are on half pay. I think it’s right to consider all people during this time especially those taking care of children.”
- “Finance. But not just immediate finance, cause we are actually fine for the next month or 2, but rather financial security for the months to come . . . cause we know that the economy is taking a huge knock, which will leave us in a fairly vulnerable position later in this year.”
- “Additional funds to meet intensified needs among our alumni, families being supported through our program, and replacing lost funds from donors affected by job loss themselves.”

This suggested continued or increased financial support for NGOs was a major area of need.

Theme 4: disseminating information

One common opportunity mentioned by study participants was the role of faith communities in disseminating information. With many NGOs being deemed “non-essential”, they were unable to communicate effectively with program beneficiaries. Vulnerable children and families required access to information, but lacked the necessary technology (i.e. internet, electricity, etc.) which greatly limited communication. As trusted and respected members of the community, churches were uniquely positioned to step in and share messaging related to COVID-19 and associated restrictive measures. They have established relationships that make them a credible source of information. Additionally, they often have established infrastructure for the dissemination of information with their congregants. Example quotes regarding faith communities as a source of information include:

- “Help educate the community and stop fear-inducing rumors.”
- “Awareness and sensitization because they can be listened to.”
- “Resources on how to support our beneficiaries.”
- “Create awareness of the pandemic.”
- “Strong messaging that is factual and helpful. NOT falsehoods of faith being able to keep people safe from Coronavirus. This is dangerous.”

In conclusion, the data suggested that more dissemination of information to vulnerable children and families was needed and faith communities were well positioned to fulfill this role.

Discussion

The objectives of this study were to (1) outline the needs of NGOs serving vulnerable children during the pandemic and (2) provide data-informed guidance and recommendations for faith communities desiring to support NGOs serving vulnerable children and families during the COVID-19 pandemic. NGOs shared about their needs during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Some of the themes that emerged in the data were expected even able to even them. For example, the outpouring of material support by faith communities to help organizations provide for the physical needs (i.e. food, personal protective equipment, etc.) of vulnerable children and families was anticipated. Indeed, faith communities have a long and robust history of serving vulnerable populations by partnering with NGOs in this way (Hodge, 2019; Mitchell, 2017; Ridings, 2015). Further, it was not surprising that organizations reported needing further financial and material support from faith communities to continue to effectively provide services to vulnerable families as the pandemic continued to unfold. However, it was surprising just how pronounced and recurrent the theme of continuing support was among the NGOs. Nearly every organizations had experienced an increase in costs when transitioning their services in light of government mandates and pandemic restrictions. These “cost-spikes” meant that the NGOs not only required continuing support from faith communities, but also additional support that went above and beyond regular giving.

An unexpected theme that emerged was the importance of faith communities for disseminating information and as a hub of communication during the pandemic. For example, several NGOs stated that churches in their region were able to make announcements on the NGOs behalf on their social media and other platforms. Moreover, several NGOs reported that the faith communities were able to even them to families that were in need of support that the organization was not serving prior to the pandemic. Perhaps that most prevalent and hopeful theme was the emphasis on the value and need for spiritual nurture provided by the church for both the NGOs and the families they serve.

NGOs expressed the importance for all types of support provided by the faith communities. However, gratitude for the spiritual nurture that had already been provided and the continued need for prayer, spiritual counseling, pastoral care, and opportunities to worship were embedded in nearly every response.

Building on this evidence, and supported by current literature, the following recommendations for faith communities were developed by the research team. Each recommendation mirrors a theme identified in the data. Although the data in this research related specifically to the COVID-19 pandemic and faith communities, some recommendations were relevant to broader contexts and situations.

Recommendations for faith communities

The global pandemic and associated restrictive measures may have long-lasting effects on vulnerable populations, including mental health (Gautam et al., 2020), development (Yoshikawa et al., 2020), and resilience (Masten & Motti-Stefanidi, 2020). Faith communities have a long history of playing an important role in supporting vulnerable populations in times of hardship (Cascio, 2003; Hodge, 2019). Faith communities should be strategic in how they serve vulnerable populations, requiring communication, information, and a long-term perspective. Recommendations for faith communities include:

(1) Provide Material Support

Times of crises can multiply challenges for those in need. The global pandemic has left many children and families without the provision of basic material goods. Survey participants noted a need for clothing, food, shelter, personal protective equipment, and educational materials. Meeting these needs can be one way faith communities can serve vulnerable populations. As opposed to counseling or other direct care services, providing material goods offers an opportunity to serve, even for those who are untrained. Further, it can allow those with little money to share what they have, whether it be food from their garden or a room in their home.

(2) Offer Spiritual Nurture

Along with meeting physical and financial needs, churches are ideal to provide spiritual support and encouragement to partners serving vulnerable populations. Prayer, counseling, encouragement, and Scripture were all noted by study participants as valued supports during this time of stress. Times of crises can lead to a greater risk of secondary trauma and compassion fatigue

(Noullet et al., 2018), and faith communities can connect partners with necessary resources to support their wellbeing. Although support may not be in person, verbal or written encouragement, access to written resources, or connection to local individuals may provide encouragement (Just, 2020).

(3) *Provide Funds*

As a result of the pandemic, economies around the world are struggling, leading to decreased funding for NGOs (Wilke et al., 2020). As funding decreases, so do the services supporting vulnerable children and families. Even as faith communities see a decrease in giving, it may be necessary to consider creative fundraising solutions to not only maintain, but increase financial support to organizations. Faith communities are well suited to advocate for the needs of children and families on behalf of NGOs, and encouraging able congregants to become partners is one way they can serve vulnerable populations.

(4) *Disseminate Information*

During this unprecedented global crisis, recommendations, laws, and policies are regularly being implemented, revised, and changed. Faith communities are well prepared to disseminate updated information as it becomes available. NGOs and other service providers may struggle to communicate with vulnerable children and families, especially those that do not have internet access or electricity (Wilke et al., 2020). They may serve large geographic areas, making in-person or written communication difficult, particularly in light of social distancing mandates and limited postal service. Partnering with local churches to provide needed information for their neighbors can be a mutual benefit to churches and NGOs. International church partners of NGOs can advocate for the needs of their partner to their congregations. They can share their financial and prayer needs, connecting congregants to action steps that benefit the children and families served by their NGO partner. Not only does this benefit the NGO, but it informs their congregants of a practical opportunity to make a difference in a sea of need that can overwhelm to the point of decision paralysis.

Previous international responses to crises have created dependencies on foreign aid (Qayyum & Anjum, 2019; Wroe, 2012). Prior to giving money or material goods, consider the long-term implications. If giving a financial gift, ask what the program will do when the money has been spent and how any remaining funds will be used. If providing food or other material goods, ask what contingencies are in place when these materials have been depleted. Consider ways to provide sustainable support, such as connecting partners to training or learning networks and investing in communities. Faith

communities may have skills in assisting NGO partners to develop strategic plans for responding to the pandemic and future crises. One study participant stated, “Yes. If COVID-19 should finish today, the impact it will have on vulnerable families will be greater than we could imagine. Planning for the future could start now to avoid the mistakes of yesterday.”

Cultivating open, honest relationships across time is a key principle to any partnership (Clausen et al., 2017), and times of crisis may test the strength of the relationship. Although opportunities for in-person conversation are limited, research suggests much of communication, especially cross-cultural communication, is non-verbal (Purnell, 2018; Sauter et al., 2010). Asking about organizational needs will provide information about what actions will be most effective. Regular communication will demonstrate greater support and provide insight into areas of evolving need than a one-time interaction. Listening and learning to an NGO partner will allow faith communities to revise their partnership strategies to be most effective during this time.

Limitations and implications for future research

Limitations of the current study can serve to stimulate future research. Data for the current study was collected early on in the pandemic and only captures the short-term impact. As the COVID-19 and associated restrictive measures continue to grow and develop, further research is necessary to fully understand the needs of vulnerable populations and the role of faith communities in meeting those needs. Continuing data collection is needed to assess the long-term impact of response measures, policy changes, and economic recovery on vulnerable children and families, and NGOs. Moreover, as NGOs continue to adapt and learn more about the immediate needs of families, they will be better able to provide insight into the role faith communities can play. If possible, future research should directly survey impacted families, which could allow for more targeted recommendations.

The diversity of the respondents in the current study provided an adequate snapshot of needs and opportunities for faith community engagement in general, but did not delineate responses based on some important variables. For example, appropriate ways for local and international churches to engage may differ substantially, based on contexts, constraints, and resources. Further, more granular analysis by types of services provided by NGOs would also allow researchers to identify context-specific needs (i.e. residential care, family preservation, etc.) and highlight ways faith communities could support them. Qualitative study of examples of effective practice could offer potential solutions to NGOs and their partners, catalyzing innovative responses to unprecedented situations.

This sample consisted only of service providers to vulnerable populations, and did not address faith communities themselves. Understanding their

motivations, resources, and objectives could lead toward an understanding of mutually beneficial partnerships in this current context and could inform recommendations for further practice. Understanding how faith communities can support vulnerable populations and the NGOs that serve them will be valuable not only during the COVID-19 pandemic, but will benefit practice in future crises, as well.

Concluding thoughts

Around the world, vulnerable children and families, and the NGOs that serve them, are in great need of support. A global pandemic and associated restrictive measures have removed some of the minimal and much-needed supports that have helped them survive until now. Lack of ability to provide for basic needs has increased their vulnerability and risk of separation substantially.

Historically, faith communities have been a support to vulnerable populations and the NGOs that care for them. The present situation is an excellent opportunity to continue with and even augment that relationship. Listening to and learning from NGO leaders about what they and the vulnerable populations they serve need most can ensure support is targeted. Rather than making assumptions about needs and risking ineffectiveness, faith communities can steward resources to serving in the most needed ways. Further, they can serve from their substantial strengths, multiplying the impact of their efforts. In times of crisis, vulnerable populations need faith communities to be both faithful and strategic, leading to a symbiotic relationship for all involved.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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