

The Role of Nonprofit Organizations in Homeless Policy Networks: A Research Note

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Abstract

This research note investigates the extent of nonprofit organizations' involvement in federal homeless policy networks in the United States and examines the degree to which nonprofits take a leading role. Nonprofit organizations are in a good position to take on the leading role in human service networks because they tend to be focused on helping their specific locality and are likely to have established legitimacy and trust with other community organizations. We conduct a descriptive analysis of a nationwide sample of 382 local homeless networks and an in-depth analysis of 35 local networks from one service region in the United States. The results indicate that nonprofit organizations are significant players in implementing federal homeless policy and that they take on a leadership role by coordinating the efforts of the local homeless network.

Introduction

Collaboration between the nonprofit and public sectors has arrived as an alternative service delivery arrangement to the single organization attempting to serve a community. Although the reasons that organizations collaborate with one another are well studied, the role that nonprofit organizations play in collaboration and the degree to which nonprofits lead collaboration efforts remain largely unexplored. This research note pursues the following two questions: (1) What is the extent of nonprofits' involvement in local networks that are promoted by public policy? (2) To what extent do nonprofit organizations play a leading role in collaborative networks?

To address these research questions, this study examines a federal homeless policy that encourages local communities to create collaborative networks to address the incidence of homelessness—the Homeless Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing (HEARTH) Act of 2009. We conduct a descriptive analysis of these local homeless networks in the United States using data from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and the U.S. Census Bureau. First, we conduct an indepth analysis of a sample of 35 local homeless networks within a region¹ of the United States to explore the network membership composition, the sectors these organizations represent, and the extent of nonprofits' involvement in these homeless service networks. We then analyze a nationwide sample of 382 local homeless networks² to understand the extent to which nonprofits take a leading role. The results indicate that nonprofit organizations are not only significantly involved in the implementation of the federal homeless policy, but they also take on the leading role within the collaborative network.

This research note is organized into four additional sections. First, we briefly review the literature that addresses why nonprofits collaborate and why nonprofits may be positioned to lead collaborative networks. The research context, data, and methods are presented in the second section. The third section reports the findings of this study with discussion. The fourth and last section comprises the conclusion, a discussion of the study's limitations, and directions for future research.

Literature Review: Why Nonprofits Collaborate and May Lead Collaborative Networks

Nonprofit organizations engage in collaborative networks for a variety of reasons, including rules, regulations, and other mandates that require or encourage them to collaborate with other organizations (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Gray and Wood, 1991). Nonprofit organizations also collaborate because of a need to access resources (Gazley, 2010; Jang and Feiock, 2007; Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978; Singer and Yankey, 1991). The current scholarship has adequately addressed the multidimensional motivations of nonprofit organizations to participate in collaborative networks. Few attempts, however, have been made to understand nonprofits' leading role in collaborative service networks. We propose that nonprofit organizations are in a good position to take on the leading role in human service networks for several reasons.

First and foremost, because nonprofit organizations tend to be focused on helping their specific locality, they are likely to have established legitimacy and trust with other community organizations (Ott and Dicke, 2012; Wolf, 1999). As such, nonprofits may be positioned to lead the process of activating key members of a network and initiating the collaboration process (O'Regan and Oster, 2000; Wolch, 1990). Second, a service network led by a nonprofit can establish itself as a

¹ Continuum of Care (CoC) networks are established to serve all 50 states and the U.S. territories, such as Puerto Rico. A single CoC may cover a city, county, metropolitan area, or entire state. See, for example, HUD's 2014 *Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress*, which chronicles the homelessness rate by CoCs.

² Using CoC data from HUD's Exchange website (<https://www.hudexchange.info>), we identified 421 networks serving the 50 states. Of those networks, 39 were organized to serve an entire state and 382 served a city, county, or metropolitan area. Our analysis focuses on the 382 networks because they are community-based, self-organized networks engaged in collaboration.

public charity to help mobilize support and secure a variety of private financial resources (Dropkin and Hayden, 2001; McGuire, 2002). Third, nonprofit organizations may be positioned to lead a collaborative network because of their natural capacity to frame a vision and mission and build consensus among network stakeholders (Agranoff and McGuire, 2001; McGuire, 2002). Leading a network requires selling a mission and vision to collaborative partners and other stakeholders, which is important for providing a sense of direction and purpose for the collaborative process (Milward and Provan, 2006; Silvia, 2011). Nonprofits are also positioned to take on the leading role in collaborative networks because of their ability to mobilize volunteers for collaborative activities. Fourth and last, unlike government agencies, nonprofits can pursue partnerships with faith-based organizations and religious congregations without political concerns or the stigma of meshing church and state relations (Bielefeld and Cleveland, 2013).

Research Design

In this section, we briefly discuss the context to exploring the role of nonprofit organizations within collaborative networks. In addition, this section describes data sources retrieved from HUD and methodology.

Research Context

To understand the extent of nonprofit organizations' involvement in networks promoted by public policy, we study collaborative networks within the context of the HEARTH Act of 2009. The HEARTH Act encourages local communities to create Continuum of Care (CoC) networks operating under collaborative governance to address the incidence of homelessness.³ This context is optimal for studying nonprofits' participation and their potential leading role for at least two reasons. First, the policy specifically calls for the active participation of a variety of nonstate actors in homeless networks,⁴ thus enabling us to assess the extent of nonprofits' membership. Second, CoC networks are self-organized, and they identify their own unique strategies to address problems of homelessness within their communities (HUD, 2012). CoC networks, for example, have the freedom to identify a collaborative applicant, which functions as the leading agency.⁵ This context then enables us to investigate the degree to which nonprofits take a leading role in the process.

³ In 1994, HUD began encouraging the creation of collaborative networks at the local level and providing the resources needed to implement what is known as the Continuum of Care network or homeless networks (HUD 2012). (In this research note, we use the terms *CoC network* and *homeless network* interchangeably.) This approach was codified into law in 2009 with the adoption of the HEARTH Act.

⁴ "Homeless Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing: Continuum of Care Program; Interim Final Rule," edited by HUD, 45421-45467.

⁵ According to the CoC federal interim rule, the CoC designates one applicant or agency to function as the collaborative applicant, which is the only entity allowed to apply for a grant from HUD on behalf of the CoC (HEARTH Act). The collaborative applicant functions as the organization identified by the CoC to be the lead agency responsible for soliciting funding applications from CoC network members, submitting a single application, and overseeing the administration of the funded projects.

Data

We collected data from HUD, requests for information from CoC networks, and the websites of CoC networks. In 2014, we identified 421 CoC networks operating in the United States (excluding those in Puerto Rico and the other U.S. territories) from the HUD Exchange website (<https://www.hudexchange.info>).

To analyze the degree to which nonprofit organizations are involved in local CoC networks, we collected network membership data from a convenience sampling of CoC networks within the Mountain Plains region.⁶ In 2014, 39 local homeless networks were in operation within this region, and membership data were gathered from one of two sources: (1) the local CoC network website or (2) requests for information from the collaborative applicant of each network. Data were successfully collected for 35 of the 39 local CoC networks.⁷

Next, we analyzed the websites of all collaborative applicants and coded their sector as nonprofit, city, county, or other (private entities, regional governments, and so on). We also categorize the various types of nonprofit organizations, such as human service nonprofits, faith-based organizations, and churches, to capture their diversity. For instances in which two organizations were listed as the collaborative applicant, we coded this entity as one of three partnership types: nonprofit-nonprofit, nonprofit-public, or public-private. The analysis of network membership sheds light on what sector organization(s) take the leading role within the network.

Methodology

The method of analysis for this study is based on descriptive statistics, which is an appropriate choice considering the exploratory nature of this study (Singleton and Straits, 2010). In addition, descriptive statistics lay the foundation for later, more sophisticated inquiries about our subject matter (Meier, Brudney, and Bohte, 2012). Our intention is to develop a foundational understanding of local homeless networks across the United States, including their composition and leadership, and to conduct more indepth analysis.

Findings

First, we examine the extent to which nonprofit organizations participate in collaborative networks. In exhibit 1, we tabulate the total number of network member organizations by sector within the Mountain Plains region. As presented, nonprofit organizations constitute about 68 percent of the member agencies within the 35 CoC networks. Note that faith-based organizations (13.0 percent) and churches (2.2 percent) participate in homeless service networks. This observation indicates that the HEARTH Act may create an environment that attracts diverse nonprofit organizations to collaborate with other stakeholders to coordinate public service networks for homelessness.

⁶ Using International City/County Management Association regions, we collected data from the Mountain Plains region, which includes Arizona, Arkansas, Colorado, Idaho, Kansas, Montana, Nebraska, New Mexico, North Dakota, Oklahoma, South Dakota, Texas, Utah, and Wyoming.

⁷ Membership data were directly received from 20 local CoC networks through a request for information, and data for 15 CoC networks were collected from their individual websites. The remaining 4 local CoC networks were eliminated from our sample.

Exhibit 1

Local Homeless Network Member Composition for a U.S. Region^a

Sector	Type of Organization	Total Number (N)	Proportion by Category (%)	Proportion by Sector (%)
Public	City	169	11.0	20.9
	County	84	5.5	
	State	62	4.0	
	Court system	2	0.1	
	Federal	5	0.3	
Nonprofit ^b	Human service nonprofit	816	52.9	68.2
	Faith-based nonprofit	201	13.0	
	Church	34	2.2	
Education	School district	62	4.0	5.6
	University	24	1.6	
Private	Individual citizen	24	1.6	4.9
	Business organization	51	3.3	
Other	Unknown	8	0.5	0.5
	Total	1,542	100.0	100.1^c

N = 35 networks.

^a The Mountain Plains region includes Arizona, Arkansas, Colorado, Idaho, Kansas, Montana, Nebraska, New Mexico, North Dakota, Oklahoma, South Dakota, Texas, Utah, and Wyoming.

^b The categorization of nonprofit organizations was conducted to capture the distinctive service nature and mission focus of diverse 501(c)(3) nonprofit organizations.

^c The total equals 100.1 percent due to rounding.

Sources: HUD (2012); requests for information from homeless networks

Next, we explore the degree to which nonprofit organizations play a leading role in local homeless networks. Exhibit 2 tabulates the collaborative applicants of the 382 homeless networks by their sector. Of 441 collaborative applicants, nonprofits (53 percent) are the most frequent type of organization to take on the leading role as the collaborative applicant. This finding suggests that nonprofits may not only be motivated to collaborate for reasons such as resource dependency and institutional pressure, but also may be in the best position to lead the network for reasons centered on their distinctive nature.

We also take a closer look at collaborative applicants that are nonprofit organizations (234 nonprofits) by identifying their types (that is, whether secular, faith-based, or church organizations). Results indicate that, of all nonprofit collaborative applicants, a vast majority of nonprofits leading local CoC networks are human service nonprofit organizations (75.9 percent). Only about 2.5 percent of all nonprofit collaborative applicants are faith-based nonprofit organizations. In addition, we find that, although church entities are found to be members of networks, no instances occur in which they are the collaborative applicant or lead agency of the network. In general, our interpretation is that faith-based nonprofits and church organizations are less likely to put themselves in a leading position in which they will have to deal directly with the federal government, which the collaborative applicant would have to do.

Exhibit 2

Local Homeless Network Leadership Across the United States^a

Sector	Homeless Network Leaders ^b	Number of Homeless Network Leaders (N)	Proportion of Homeless Network Leaders (%)	Proportion by Sector (%)
Public	City	53	12.0	35.8
	County	96	21.8	
	State	5	1.1	
	Court system	0	0.0	
	Federal	0	0.0	
	Public-public partnership	4	0.9	
Nonprofit	Human service nonprofit	154	34.9	46.0
	Faith-based nonprofit	5	1.1	
	Church	0	0.0	
	Nonprofit-nonprofit partnership	44	10.0	
Education	School district	0	0.0	0.2
	University	1	0.2	
Hybrid	Public-private partnership	8	1.8	15.9
	Nonprofit-public partnership	62	14.1	
Other	—	9	2.0	2.0
Total		441	99.9^c	99.9^c

N = 382 networks.

^a Puerto Rico and the other U.S. territories were excluded.

^b HUD reports instances with more than one collaborative applicant, which we categorize as a form of partnership between lead organizations.

^c The total equals 99.9 percent due to rounding.

Source: HUD (2012)

Conclusion

This study provides an exploratory analysis of homeless networks and examines the extent to which nonprofit organizations are involved in the implementation of the federal homeless policy and the extent to which they lead collaborative efforts. Our findings highlight the significant role that nonprofit organizations play as both leading agencies and service providers within CoC networks. We do not necessarily know the exact reasons why nonprofits take the leading role, but we theorize that the reasons center on nonprofits' distinctive nature and the unique resources they bring to the collaborative process. Future research should explore, for example, the conditions under which nonprofits assume such an important role in collaborative networks and whether nonprofit-led networks are more effective than government-led networks.

At least two policy implications emerged from the findings of this research. First, the current federal homeless policy is resulting in policy implementation structures that involve a variety of nonstate actors, such as nonprofits, local governments, school districts, and business organizations, within at least one region of the United States (Hall and O'Toole, 2000; Hjern and Porter, 1981). This implication is favorable because the needs of homeless people are multidimensional (Cunningham, 2009). Second, considering the extensive involvement of nonprofits and particularly their leading role, more efforts are needed to assess the degree to which nonprofit-led networks

and networks in general are achieving collaboration outcomes, such as reducing the incidence of homelessness within their communities, as a result of the resources and expertise that nonprofit organizations bring to the collaborative efforts.

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