

1 **ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY OF NONPROFIT**  
2 **SOCIAL SERVICE AGENCIES**

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14 **ABSTRACT**

15  
16 The U.S. social safety net is formed by governmental and nonprofit  
17 organizations, which are trying to respond to record levels of need.  
18 This is especially true for local level organizations, such as food  
19 pantries. The organizational capacity literature has not covered front-  
20 line, local, mostly volunteer and low resource organizations in the same  
21 depth as larger ones. This analysis is a consideration of whether  
22 grassroots nonprofit organizations have the ability to be a strong  
23 component of the social safety net. Based on the literature on  
24 organizational capacity, a model is developed to examine how service  
25 delivery at the local level is affected by organizational capacity.  
26 Surprisingly, find few of the characteristics previously identified as  
27 important are statistically significant in this study. Even when so, the  
28 material effect is negligible. Current organizational capacity research  
29 may apply to larger nonprofits, but may not to the tens of thousands of  
30 small community nonprofits, a significant limitation to the research to  
31 date.

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35 In 2007 more than five out of ten Americans (54  
36 percent) believed that government should help the poor and  
37 needy even if the national debt increased, but by 2012  
38 support for social programs dropped to 43 percent (Pew,  
39 2012). Services designed to prevent most people from  
40 suffering lack of food, shelter, medical treatment, work,

1 and other essentials make up the social safety net. It is  
2 under an unprecedented strain. Government, with record  
3 debt and deficits at all levels, is considering how to reduce  
4 social programs rather than expand governmental capacity  
5 to meet demand (Applebaum & Gebeloff, 2012). As a  
6 result, nonprofit organizations provide expanded safety net  
7 services to fill gaps.

8 In an example of particular note for this study, 25  
9 percent of Americans participate get nutritional aid through  
10 the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP  
11 which accounts for two-thirds of the current U.S.  
12 Department of Agriculture budget (ERS, 2012). Even so, in  
13 2011 more than 50 million households experienced food  
14 insecurity, defined as not having access at all times to  
15 enough food for an active, healthy life (ERS, 2012). To  
16 ameliorate the impact of food insecurity an expansive  
17 network of private and public food assistance programs  
18 work together in communities. In turn grassroots nonprofits  
19 have experienced increased service demands even though  
20 these organizations may lack the necessary resources or  
21 capacity to deliver requested services.

22 Organizational capacity for social service delivery  
23 through both governmental and nonprofit agencies is an  
24 important subject in the public administration literature  
25 (e.g., Andrews and Boyne, 2010; Fredericksen & London,  
26 2000; Alexander, Brudney, & Yang, 2010; Lacy & Van  
27 Slyke, 2012). Practitioners and researchers alike have  
28 raised concerns and questions about nonprofit capacity (see  
29 Clerkin & Grønbyerg, 2007 or Hackler & Saxton, 2007).

30 Typically, organizational capacity is defined in  
31 terms of leadership, financial strength, or operational  
32 strategies, but most research tackles these issues separately  
33 and lacks a holistic presentation of capacity (see for  
34 example, the focus of Barman & MacIndoe (2012) focus on  
35 three bureaucratic measures in their study of the  
36 relationship between organizational capacity and outcome

1 measurement). Building on previous public administration  
2 and nonprofit research this study explores the idea of  
3 comprehensive capacity of local level nonprofit  
4 organizations. The primary goal of this study is to  
5 understand whether the concepts of organizational capacity,  
6 usually associated with larger, more professionalized and  
7 often public organizations, are present in smaller  
8 community nonprofits that are part of the social safety net.  
9 The paper proceeds with an overview on food pantries, the  
10 context of this study, before reviewing the literature on  
11 organizational capacity. The concepts of organizational  
12 capacity are then applied to community nonprofits  
13 providing food assistance services, specifically data from  
14 313 community food pantries.

#### 15 **STRATEGIES TO ADDRESS HUNGER**

16  
17  
18 The federal government spends billions of dollars to  
19 reduce hunger (Eisinger, 2002; Jensen, 2002; Berner &  
20 O'Brien, 2004; Borders & Lindt, 2009). Nutrition  
21 assistance is offered through a variety of programs  
22 including SNAP, the Women, Infants & Children (WIC)  
23 program, the National School Lunch Program, and variety  
24 of commodity distribution services. The largest program is  
25 SNAP. In November 2012, SNAP participation rose to  
26 almost 48 million individuals, a 75 percent increase from  
27 November 2007 (FRAC, 2013).

28 But governmental aid alone is not enough to stop  
29 hunger. Partnerships with nonprofits are a critical weapon  
30 in the war on hunger (Daponte & Bade, 2006; Mosley &  
31 Tiehen, 2004; Bhattarai, Duffy, & Raymond, 2005). Food  
32 pantries are a part of the group of multipurpose human  
33 services nonprofits that are 63.7 percent of all 501(c)(3)  
34 public charities in the United States (Blackwood et al.,  
35 2012). The proliferation of nonprofit emergency food  
36 providers as a part of the social safety net is now a well-

1 accepted reality (Davis & Senauer, 1986; Leitch-Kelly,  
2 Rauschenbach, & Campbell, 1989). Food pantries often  
3 work in tandem with local governments via the local  
4 department of social services. These organizations serve  
5 populations in need by customizing programs for  
6 community situations. If these nonprofits lack capacity to  
7 deal with increasing service demand the impact on food  
8 insecure households will be great.

### 9 10 **ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY**

11  
12 Safety net programs are offered by both public and  
13 private actors (Thompson & Gais, 2000) and are considered  
14 interdependent (for example see Naim, 2006; Smith &  
15 Lipsky, 1993). Interdependence theory suggests that when  
16 government recognizes the benefits of social services  
17 provided through nongovernmental actors it is sometimes  
18 willing to fund private enterprises (Salamon, 1987) or more  
19 often delegate the responsibilities for producing those  
20 goods and services to nonprofits to reduce costs, improve  
21 quality, and maximize efficiency (Lecy & Van Slyke, 2012;  
22 Alexander & Nank, 2009; Lambright, Mischen, &  
23 Laramie, 2010). A 2012 national survey of nonprofits  
24 reported 55 percent of respondents had added or expanded  
25 services, but 60 percent reported still not being able to meet  
26 demand. In prior surveys over 70 percent of respondents  
27 reported increased service demand from 2009 to 2011  
28 (Nonprofit Finance Fund, 2012). These data raise clear,  
29 new questions about nonprofit organizational capacity.

30 Research on various individual aspects of  
31 organizational capacity in larger organizations delivering  
32 quasi-public goods exists (Eisenger, 2002; Salamon, 1995;  
33 Smith & Lipsky, 1993). Generally, the literature focuses on  
34 characteristics like community networks,  
35 institutionalization, effective leadership, resources, and  
36 sufficient staff (Wolf & Bryan, 2009; White, Fisher,

1 Hadfield, Saunders, & Williams, 2005; Sowa, Selden, &  
2 Sandfort, 2004; Bishop, 2004; Leake, Green, Marquez,  
3 Vanderburg, Guillaume, & Gerdner, 2007; DeVita,  
4 Fleming, & Twombly, 2001; Letts, Ryan, & Grossman,  
5 1999; Ebrahim, 2003). Mission fulfillment is also a central  
6 tenet of capacity (Sharpe, 2006) with an eye toward  
7 resource deployment and sustainability (Glover, Parry, &  
8 Shiness, 2005).

9 There is a far more limited treatment of  
10 organizational capacity of grassroots nonprofits. Sobek  
11 (2008) linked evaluation, planning and grant writing to  
12 capacity building. For grassroots organizations she found  
13 modest financial investment has a positive impact.  
14 However important, these are activities aimed at satisfying  
15 short-term objectives rather than long-term goals.

16 Whether in large or small organizations, the ideas  
17 behind most notions of capacity center on performance.  
18 The presence of organizational capacity is most important  
19 if it is linked to program outcomes. Organizational capacity  
20 is defined broadly as mission fulfillment (McPhee & Bare,  
21 2001). Success for nonprofits may be measured in how  
22 well constituent groups are served (Kaplan, 2001; for a  
23 local government equivalent see Andrews & Boyne, 2010).  
24 In terms of food insecurity, the concern is ultimately how  
25 to put groceries on the tables of hungry households. For the  
26 present study mission fulfillment is operationalized through  
27 four categories: leadership; management; planning and  
28 financial strategies; and operations (Fredericksen &  
29 London, 2000).

### 30 LEADERSHIP

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33 Leadership is defined here as adherence to mission,  
34 governance structure, staffing model, resources, community  
35 networks, and management practices, all of which vary  
36 widely. Some of the variability in organizational

1 characteristics discussed below may help explain the  
2 service capacity of a community pantry.

3       Effective leadership is tightly tied to organizational  
4 mission (Knauff, Berger, & Gray, 1991). Mission  
5 statements help define organizations, embody values,  
6 attract stakeholders (including clients and donors), and are  
7 a way to ensure accountability through performance  
8 evaluation (Smith, Howard, & Harrington, 2005). Mission  
9 statements are one of the most elemental components of a  
10 formalized organization. This may mean staff or volunteers  
11 in organizations without mission statements are not driven  
12 by the same sense of purpose or commitment that would be  
13 found where clear, direct missions are used. Organizational  
14 capacity might be expressed as a mission statement, further  
15 refined through goals and objectives that lead to the  
16 creation of policies. Understanding the goals and objectives  
17 provides organizational leaders, funders, and stakeholders  
18 with metrics to determine “success.”

19       Clear mission matters but so does structure.  
20 Generally, the literature favors a stronger governmental  
21 approach, noting that structure and process are important.  
22 Institutionalization occurs once an organization begins to  
23 imitate others, develops internal operational processes used  
24 in similar organizations, and exhibit stability and efficiency  
25 (Zucker, 1987). Also, formal processes give stakeholders  
26 the means to measure program strengths, weaknesses, or  
27 needs.

28       Formalization gives an organization direction but  
29 nonprofit structure varies. Some grassroots organizations  
30 are tax-exempt nonprofits, some are voluntary associations  
31 but not corporations, and others are arms of larger groups  
32 (for example churches). Tax-exempt organizations in a  
33 number of American states must have a board with at least  
34 three members (Council on Foundations, 2010). The  
35 consensus is that larger boards have increased capacity for  
36 fundraising and program monitoring (Olson, 2000) because

1 there are simply more people to assist with gift acquisition,  
2 special events, and accountability through formal  
3 evaluations and reports made at meetings (Brown, 2005).  
4 The Panel on the Nonprofit Sector (2007) and the National  
5 Committee for Responsive Philanthropy (2009) suggest  
6 five board members is the minimum threshold nonprofits  
7 should reach. The diversity of professional and personal  
8 experiences board members bring to organizational  
9 management can be an important tool. Organizations that  
10 have major donors as board members tend to have greater  
11 organizational efficiency and lower administrative  
12 expenses (Callen, Klein, & Tinkleman, 2003).

13 The distinction between different organizational  
14 structures, particularly in the role of oversight, is likely to  
15 influence organizational capacity. A board and professional  
16 staff manage some organizations while volunteer  
17 committees lead others. On the other end of the spectrum,  
18 the most informal of social service organizations are not  
19 tax-exempt. These are founded and operated by individuals  
20 without oversight from either a board or committee. Some  
21 are affiliated with churches, run by committees, and others  
22 are loose associations of people who work to “help others”  
23 in some way. Having a formal structure gives  
24 organizational stakeholders direction, instills responsibility,  
25 and can standardize operational practice. At the same time,  
26 decisionmaking and consensus building are more difficult  
27 in larger groups, may occur with less difficulty in the  
28 absence of a hierarchy, board, or group of employees.

29 There is an important distinction in the  
30 organizational design of most food pantries versus larger  
31 nonprofits. The nature of community-based organizations  
32 fosters reliance on local volunteers for a governance  
33 structure. The differential in capacity between paid staff  
34 and volunteers may be important. Moreover, some pantries  
35 are independent 501(c)3 tax-exempt organizations while  
36 others operate under the umbrella of larger tax-exempt

1 entities, often with ties to a religious group. Both types  
2 have implications for organizational capacity.

3 Faith-based organizations undertake efforts aimed  
4 at helping homeless and hungry households, such as soup  
5 kitchens and food pantries. Though the religious  
6 organization is often a 501c(3) nonprofit, its board is not  
7 likely to provide strategic direction for all efforts under the  
8 organizational umbrella. In this scenario committees  
9 proliferate. Committees are often involved in the day-to-  
10 day operations of the program and may insulate the larger  
11 organization from involvement in service delivery.

12 Organizations lacking formalization and staffing  
13 structure or where service provision is favored over  
14 administrative responsibilities have been described as  
15 underdeveloped or lacking developmental maturity (Schuh  
16 & Leviton, 2006). In the pantry world, dedication to a  
17 cause means that the interest of a single person or small  
18 group may nurture an idea into service. These founders  
19 work in loosely formed coalitions that are likely not a legal  
20 corporation and lack an understanding of the rules  
21 associated with tax-exempt nonprofits but their passion  
22 means that needy households are served. In these cases,  
23 leaders may face the “founder’s dilemma” (Wasserman,  
24 2008). The founder’s dilemma may play a decided role in  
25 the development of professionalized management  
26 strategies. Founders channel desire and motivation to  
27 address some issue into tangible, working organizations  
28 through hard work, inspiration, resource acquisition, and  
29 management. At some point many realize other individuals  
30 may better capitalize on resource opportunities but ceding  
31 organizational control is difficult.

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**MANAGEMENT**

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3       Daily management and administration are critical  
4 components of service delivery. Whether or not there is a  
5 paid executive director (ED) has been clearly established as  
6 an important aspect of a successful organization. The  
7 research focuses not on the existence of the position, but on  
8 ED education, related job experience, training and tenure  
9 (Schuh & Leviton, 2006; Simonton, 1996). Organizations  
10 with an experienced ED are more likely to be equipped  
11 with the expertise to understand and manage internal and  
12 external situations more easily than novices, thereby  
13 thriving on flexibility and enhanced performance  
14 (Mumford et al., 2000). When a new leader enters an  
15 organization, prior educational experiences and social skills  
16 provide a baseline for managing in the new environment  
17 (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, & Bommer, 1996).

18       On-the-job experience is built on that base. Tenure  
19 is vital to job knowledge, especially when a person has ten  
20 or more years with an organization (Chi, Glaser, & Rees,  
21 1982). Prolonged exposure to organizational norms,  
22 practices, programs, and personnel lead to a high degree of  
23 knowledge about the particular environment, both internal  
24 and external, for that agency. Vinzant & Vinzant (1996)  
25 argue experienced people are the most important  
26 organizational resource and may be the key to effective  
27 strategic management. Experienced directors with three or  
28 more years tenure (Peters, Allison, Chan, Masaoka, &  
29 Llamas, 2001) recruit and retain volunteers more readily,  
30 build relationships with community partners, and are more  
31 likely to engage in effective strategic management leading  
32 to mission fulfillment (Leviton, Herrera, Pepper, Fishman,  
33 & Racine, 2006).

34       A sense of permanence around the formal values or  
35 practices defining operational procedures within an  
36 organization is a form of institutionalization. One very

1 basic indicator of institutionalization may be survival.  
2 Organizations that exist for a period of years demonstrate  
3 the ability to continue to deliver program activities. Other  
4 measures of institutionalization come from stability and  
5 predictability in service delivery. Policy and procedures  
6 manuals provide direct evidence of a structured, step by  
7 step approach to programming.

#### 8 **RESOURCE STRATEGIES**

9  
10 Organizations often strategize for the future.  
11 Organizational capacity is clearly boosted by the use of  
12 strategic planning (Bryson, Gibbons, & Shaye, 2001) as a  
13 way to guide vision and performance (Moxley, 2004).  
14 Strategic planning is easier when formal internal  
15 management processes are present. Processes like mission  
16 review, stakeholder analyses, and visioning (Bryson, 1995)  
17 may be coupled with resource allocation strategies (Vinzant  
18 & Vinzant, 1996), and strength and weakness reviews  
19 (Eisinger, 2002) to arrive a system of strategic  
20 management. Internal (behavioral, structural, experiential,  
21 and process design) and external (stimuli, autonomy)  
22 factors embedded in the process lead to the capacity to  
23 manage (Vinzant & Vinzant, 1996).

24 Managing resources is critical for mission  
25 fulfillment. Financial aspects of organizational capacity are  
26 used to understand effectiveness (see Hodge & Pittman,  
27 2003; Cnaan, Boddie, Handy, Yancey, & Schneider, 2002)  
28 and manage resources. Degrees of financial maturity, such  
29 as budgeting and funding diversity, allow agencies to act  
30 deliberately in pursuit of the mission rather than in an ad  
31 hoc, financially vulnerable position (Greenlee & Trussel,  
32 2006; Tuckman & Chang, 1991; Schuh & Leviton, 2006).  
33 More autonomous organizations may be less dependent on  
34 single funders, have increased resources, and engage  
35 readily in strategic planning processes (Vinzant & Vinzant,  
36 1996).

1           Budgeting is an area where organizations  
2 demonstrate that program activities are aligned with  
3 strategic plans and organizational mission. Implementing a  
4 budget allows the organization to measure performance  
5 relative to outcomes in an intentional way (Koteen, 1991).  
6 Budgeting leads to effective strategic planning (Eadie,  
7 1989) including use of “in-kind” resources including  
8 professional services (often accounting or legal), office  
9 products, volunteer hours, or service oriented goods (for  
10 pantries donations of food). Many pantries include  
11 donations from private businesses (e.g., local grocers or big  
12 box stores), farms, restaurants, churches, or other groups in  
13 organizational budgets.

14

#### 15 *Operations*

16           Organizational capacity may be easily linked to  
17 human resource management. For example, having enough  
18 staff to keep the pantry open is a major concern for food  
19 assistance organizations. Attracting and retaining sufficient  
20 staff, whether paid or volunteer, is critical to service  
21 delivery. That said, reaching the point where a nonprofit is  
22 stable enough pay staff is an important evolutionary step.  
23 Paid staff mean the organization can offer more reliable  
24 hours of operation.

25           Organizations can have a cadre of helpers  
26 numbering in single digits ranging to hundreds of people  
27 (Sharpe, 2006). Volunteers serve in leadership and  
28 management roles in addition to providing direct client  
29 services in grassroots organizations where only about a  
30 quarter of the programs have paid staff (Institute for  
31 Nonprofit Management, 1995). While volunteers are  
32 important, most devote only a few hours per week to  
33 nonprofit work.

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36

1 *Networks*

2       Having an organizational support network is also  
 3 important. Nonprofits manage operations to maximize  
 4 relationships with key stakeholder groups (Balser &  
 5 McCluskey, 2005). Food pantries are supported by church  
 6 groups, individuals, and whole communities through  
 7 funding, volunteer efforts, special events, and grants.  
 8 Experienced executive directors build coalitions (Simonton,  
 9 1996) and work with community stakeholders to develop  
 10 relationships with individuals and other organizations,  
 11 leading to diverse and sustainable funding, and effective  
 12 volunteer recruitment retention strategies.

13  
 14 **METHODOLOGY**

15  
 16       The data for this study come from a 2010 survey of  
 17 food pantries affiliated with the three largest food banks in  
 18 North Carolina. Organizations sampled were located across  
 19 all regions of the state, operating in 69 of 100 counties  
 20 where 83 percent of the population lives. The response rate  
 21 for the survey was 40 percent; typical for food pantries  
 22 according to food bank officials (see table 1).

23  
 24 Table 1  
 25 *Response Rates at North Carolina Food Banks*

	Counties Served	Surveys Distributed	Surveys Returned	Response Rate (%)
FBCENC	34	451	159	33
MANNA	16	154	80	52
Metrolina	19	177	74	42
Overall	69	782	313	40

26 Source: Authors.

27

1           If the food pantry had an ED, he or she was asked to  
2 respond; if not, the board president or committee chair  
3 responsible for overall leadership and management of the  
4 organization was asked. On average respondents reported  
5 affiliation with the pantry in excess of eight years. Most (71  
6 percent) completed the questionnaire electronically. There  
7 was no statistically significant difference between this  
8 group and those who responded via paper surveys. It is  
9 interesting to note more surveys were completed  
10 electronically than the percentage of pantries reporting an  
11 onsite computer (51 percent). One explanation is that  
12 pantry employees supplement organizational resources with  
13 personal ones (using a personal computer for example).

14           The findings from this study are not generalizable  
15 beyond pantries, but because there are so many of these  
16 organizations across the United States the results have great  
17 potential. The measures, particularly those around  
18 community networks, are most appropriate for measuring  
19 the capacity of community-based, locally focused  
20 nonprofits. The findings may be particularly well suited for  
21 grassroots organizations. A grassroots organization (as  
22 many food pantries are) is a volunteer-led nonprofit  
23 operating at the community level (Smith, 2000).

24           In the previous section commonly cited aspects of  
25 organizational capacity were identified. These are  
26 predictors in the model presented. The dependent variable  
27 is the number of clients served in 2009 (the most recent  
28 year for which data are available). The number of clients  
29 served is a count of service provided. A single incidence of  
30 client service is an "event."

31           The sample used in this study is thus event count  
32 data. Count data are biased, inefficient, and inconsistent  
33 representations of non-negative integer values associated  
34 with an event (Cameron and Trivedi, 1998). This type of  
35 data is left-censored since no value can be recorded below  
36 zero. This is the case for clients served. The fact that no

1 pantry could serve fewer than zero people means the data  
2 are likely to be biased and unreliable due to heterogeneous  
3 error terms associated with the model. But there is a  
4 solution.

5 In the case of Poisson models, which can account  
6 for outliers, the conditional variance of a predictor can be  
7 equal to its conditional mean. In the real world this  
8 situation rarely exists. A more likely scenario is over-  
9 dispersion of the mean without an excessive number of  
10 zeroes. For example, consider that the number of pantry  
11 clients served ranged from 21 to 42,486 but 80 percent of  
12 the cases were below 10,000 ( $\mu=5,792$ ). The appropriate  
13 correction for a situation like this is to use a negative  
14 binomial regression model (NBR). As such a NBR is used  
15 in this study.

16 Predictor variables used in the model are grouped in  
17 five categories according to the literature and interviews  
18 with key food bank staff (Earline Middleton, personal  
19 interview; Leigh Pettus, personal interview). The measures  
20 are: leadership ( $\alpha = .75$ ), management ( $\alpha = .67$ ), strategy ( $\alpha$   
21  $= .67$ ), operations ( $\alpha = .71$ ), and an additional category  
22 identified as "network" ( $\alpha = .80$ ). The dichotomous nature  
23 of the variables, which indicate presence or absence of  
24 practices or activities (for example, board leadership,  
25 development of annual budget or strategic plan, etc.),  
26 makes it impossible to conduct factor analysis to construct  
27 key measures. Instead, each measure is a scale where that  
28 the maximum possible score is the sum of the sub-measures  
29 related to that category.

30  
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**RESULTS**

1  
2  
3 Respondent experience leading the food pantry  
4 ranged from 2 months to 28 years. Educational attainment  
5 was dispersed across the group with around 40 percent  
6 having at least a high school diploma and about a third of  
7 the sample reporting master or professional degrees. About  
8 35 percent of the respondents had been with the pantry  
9 between 5 and 8 years and 58 percent reported an affiliation  
10 between 2 and 10 years long. Achieving Cronbach's alpha  
11 scores around 0.7 for the capacity characteristics suggests  
12 measurement reliability given the range of experiences and  
13 traits of the people responding to this survey.

14 The leadership variables are mission statement,  
15 goals and objectives, leadership by board or committee,  
16 and, if there is a board, whether there is community input in  
17 board selection. The maximum score was four and a mean  
18 of 2.39 was reported. Respondents were asked to provide  
19 mission statements as well as goals and objectives and  
20 descriptive information about board members (age, years of  
21 education, gender). Committees led only 21 percent (n=66)  
22 of the respondent organizations while 58 percent (n=184)  
23 were board led. Surprisingly, many respondents (n=63)  
24 reported not knowing the leadership arrangement for the  
25 organization.

26 While management and leadership are  
27 interconnected concepts, the former is more focused on  
28 structural variables while the latter centers on policy. The  
29 measures related to management are whether the  
30 organization has policy and human resources manuals, has  
31 an executive director, conducts performance evaluations for  
32 employees, trains employees and volunteers, uses eligibility  
33 rules to screen clients, and is accessible during non-  
34 business hours. The maximum score on this measure was  
35 eight. The mean score was 5.5. Executive directors were  
36 more likely to manage the day-to-day operations than

1 committees or boards and were usually responsible for  
2 creating, implementing, and enforcing policies or training.  
3 For this reason the executive director measure was included  
4 in this grouping rather than leadership or operations. Most  
5 organizations report having an executive director (n=250),  
6 of those, 44 percent are volunteers, 24 percent full-time  
7 employees and about half have at least bachelor's degrees.  
8 Another major food assistance issue arises with this  
9 category: many people seeking food assistance work  
10 (Berner, Ozer, & Paynter, 2008). If a food pantry is open  
11 only during weekday business hours and never during the  
12 evening or on weekends, people who work may not be able  
13 to access the aid they need. Accessibility is treated as a  
14 management variable in this study because it requires that a  
15 manager have the ability and experience to anticipate this  
16 sort of problem and develop a resource strategy to address  
17 it.

18 Resource strategy is measured through the existence  
19 of strategic planning and budgeting processes, receipt of  
20 grants through government (federal, state, or local) and/or  
21 private foundations, in-kind donations, and special  
22 fundraising projects. The maximum strategy score was  
23 seven. This is an area where the pantries have diminished  
24 capacity (mean = 2.1). More than 75 percent of the  
25 organizations possess less than three of the sub-measures  
26 associated with resource strategy. Of the organizations that  
27 responded to this survey, 224 reported having "no budget"  
28 and half (n=150) noted having no formal financial  
29 statements. There are two possibilities to explain this result.  
30 The first is based on statements provided in the comment  
31 section of the survey. Twenty-seven people wrote that their  
32 organization had no budget but "spent all the money"  
33 available, another 37 people wrote about spending  
34 "donations that come in," and a few noted that the  
35 organizational budget "varied with congregational giving  
36 and special offerings." It appears if these organizations



1 raise money it is spent immediately. There are no formal  
2 fundraising goals and no traditional budget plan. Even so,  
3 when money was spent it was often tracked through  
4 financial reports. The second explanation is that there was  
5 confusion about the definitions of a budget and financial  
6 statement. Again, the comments provided on a number of  
7 the surveys suggested that some people saw these as  
8 interchangeable terms.

9 Management, planning, and leadership are  
10 important, but daily activities are perhaps the most visible  
11 form of organizational capacity, and are included in the  
12 model as “operations.” The maximum score for operations  
13 was 11, and the mean reported was 6.5. Organizations  
14 garner support from stakeholders through financial or in-  
15 kind contributions, distribution of needs notices (lists of  
16 items to be distributed), opportunities for speaking  
17 engagements, or volunteer hours. Other measures of  
18 operational strength are found in the physical space  
19 (adequacy of storage, client intake, records management),  
20 and systems used (computer, internet, type of client  
21 records). The ultimate measure of capacity included in this  
22 study as an operational variable was whether clients were  
23 turned away for any reason – ranging from the organization  
24 running out of food to clients living outside the service  
25 area. There was an even split in responses with 50.2 percent  
26 of organizations reporting turning clients away for some  
27 reason.

28 Finally, as a final measure of strength, respondents  
29 reported the numbers and types of organizations with  
30 whom the food pantry is affiliated. They noted whether  
31 resources are garnered from community bakeries, farms,  
32 grocery stores, or restaurants. In addition, they reported  
33 whether the pantries have a relationship with the local  
34 department of social services. The overwhelming majority  
35 of organizations are not very well connected to the  
36 community. The maximum score was six. Most (65

1 percent) reported a single organizational connection,  
2 usually with the department of social services.

3 On average, food pantries served 5,792 clients in  
4 2009, with a range of 21 to 42,000. However, as described  
5 above, the distribution is skewed -- only 20 percent of the  
6 pantries served more than 10,000 people. These small,  
7 community based organizations rarely turned clients away  
8 but when they did it was because there were too few staff  
9 or volunteers available (n=9), the pantry had a limited  
10 amount of food (n=44), clients were unqualified (n=61),  
11 or lived outside the service area (n=62).

12 Leadership, strategy, and operations were  
13 associated with increased capacity though management and  
14 network were associated with decreased capacity (see table  
15 2). As it turns out, food pantry organizational capacity is  
16 most affected by leadership, though the effect is small.

17 The NBR model produces coefficients that are the  
18 log likelihood estimates of a one-unit change in the  
19 dependent variable as a function of an independent  
20 variable, while holding all other variables constant. For  
21 example, if the leadership coefficient is 0.11 that means  
22 that the number of clients served will increase by one  
23 person for each 0.11 increase in log likelihood of leadership  
24 capacity (as evidenced by the type of governance structure  
25 (board or committee), and presence or absence of a mission  
26 statement and goals and objectives). It is difficult to  
27 conceptualize this effect. NBR coefficients are interpreted  
28 as the difference between logs of expected counts. The  
29 difference in logs of expected change in leadership is 0.1,  
30 with all else being held constant. Surprisingly, both  
31 management ( $B=-.014$ , 95% CI -0.07 to 0.4) and network  
32 strength ( $B=-.12$ , 95% CI -.24 to -.02) have negative effects  
33 on organizational capacity.

34  
35  
36

1 Table 2  
 2 *Results of Negative Binomial Regression, Predicting*  
 3 *Factors Associated with Local Nonprofit Organizational*  
 4 *Capacity*  
 5

	Coefficient	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval
Leadership	.100	.075	-.047 .247
Management	-.014	.026	-.066 .037
Strategy	.088	.051	-.012 .189
Operations	.011	.029	-.047 .068
Network	-.121	.050	-.243 -.023
Constant	8.307	.218	7.880 8.734

6 Dispersion = mean  
 7 N=278  
 8 Prob X<sup>2</sup>=.004  
 9 Log likelihood = -2658.73  
 10 LR X<sup>2</sup>(5)=17.3  
 11 Pseudo R<sup>2</sup>= .003  
 12 Source: Authors.

13  
 14 Incidence rate ratios (IRR) are used to make the  
 15 results more intuitive (see table 3). An IRR presents the  
 16 change in the dependent variable as a ratio – a count –  
 17 based on changes in the independent variable, again  
 18 holding all else constant. In this case, if the leadership  
 19 coefficient is 1.11 that would mean that the number of  
 20 clients served would increase by 1.11 times for each  
 21 increase in leadership score, all other things being equal.  
 22 Practically speaking, the results indicate that the traditional  
 23 traits associated with organizational capacity have little  
 24 effect in the case of food pantries. That is, there are likely  
 25 other variables at play and those variables ultimately  
 26 explain whether a food pantry is able to garner necessary  
 27 resources to aid the hungry.  
 28

1 Table 3  
 2 *Incidence Rate Ratio, Predicting Factors Associated with*  
 3 *Local Nonprofit Organizational Capacity*

	IRR	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval	
Leadership	1.11	.075	0.047	.247
Management	.99	.026	0.066	.037
Strategy	1.09	.051	0.012	.189
Operations	1.02	.029	0.047	.068
Network	.89	.050	0.243	-.023

4 Dispersion = mean  
 5 N=278  
 6 Prob X<sup>2</sup>=0.004  
 7 Log likelihood = -2658.73  
 8 LR X<sup>2</sup>(5)=17.3  
 9 Pseudo R<sup>2</sup>= 0.003  
 10 Source: Authors.

11  
 12 Organizations with higher capacities for leadership  
 13 are 1.11 times more likely to increase the number of clients  
 14 served by *one* individual relative to those with lower  
 15 leadership capacity scores. Similar patterns hold true for  
 16 management, resource strategies, operational activities, and  
 17 network strength where the incidence rates all hover around  
 18 1. Boosting network strength means that not enough one  
 19 whole additional person is served by increasing the number  
 20 of organizations with which the food pantry works. In fact,  
 21 it could be that taking time to develop relationships takes  
 22 away from time a staff person or volunteer devotes to  
 23 handing out bags of food. That is, the organizational  
 24 capacity traits most associated with increased ability to  
 25 provide services do not materially affect whether a small,

1 community based organization like a food pantry is able to  
2 increase service provision.

3  
4 **DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS**  
5 **FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**  
6

7 There are a number of possible explanations for the  
8 capacity issues related to grassroots organizations. For  
9 example, the use of a policy or procedure manual may  
10 decrease client service numbers because the pantry staff is  
11 likely to act in a more uniform, less ad hoc fashion. Having  
12 increased food storage capacity may impact how much  
13 room is available for client interviews and intake  
14 procedures. Automation and professionalized record  
15 keeping systems are highly touted as important  
16 organizational management tools, but anecdotal evidence  
17 coupled with these findings suggests that whether a  
18 computer is used or not, pantry staff find ways to get food  
19 to hungry clients. In fact, taking the time to log information  
20 into a computerized database may slow some volunteers,  
21 especially those unfamiliar with the software systems.

22 The literature suggests that leadership strategies,  
23 financial management, and operational practices are  
24 indicators of organizational capacity, and in some ways  
25 associated with organizational health. The results of the  
26 comprehensive capacity model built in this analysis both  
27 support the extant literature and call into question the  
28 applicability of the concepts of organizational capacity as  
29 universal measures. The notions of leadership are positively  
30 associated with increased capacity, but even so, increasing  
31 leadership capacity through building a board or better  
32 understanding organizational mission or goals only  
33 increases the rate of clients served in the most minimal  
34 way. The strength of this paper lies in what we did not find.

35 While the model is statistically significant the weak  
36 associations are simply not expected. The most important

1 story from this analysis is that the generalizability of much  
2 of the literature on the importance of various aspects of  
3 organizational capacity is more limited than previously  
4 understood. Capacity in grassroots organizations may be so  
5 different than in their larger counterparts that these groups  
6 need to be studied in more detail and separately from  
7 nonprofits with extensive professional staff or resources.  
8 That is small organizations are just different from large  
9 ones.

10 The characteristics of larger, often public  
11 organizations may not apply to grassroots organizations.  
12 Formal titles, board selection processes, or mission  
13 statements may not increase whether or not a small  
14 organization can increase the number of people who are  
15 served. Certainly the practices associated with  
16 organizational capacity can lead to positive results at the  
17 local level and beyond. This is without question. Even so,  
18 there are other relationships, practices, and intangible  
19 factors relative to those suggested as important in the larger  
20 body of organizational capacity that impact smaller human  
21 service organizations. At the local level, community  
22 supported nonprofits are unlike other public sector  
23 organizations. Latent factors may be at play. In that light,  
24 there are great possibilities for future research.

25 One variable possible area for study is training.  
26 Having the formal process of in-take forms and client  
27 records reflects an important milestone in the capacity of a  
28 pantry. It reflects a level of professionalism, formality,  
29 organization, planning, accountability, expected  
30 sustainability, and stable administrative and financial  
31 situation. Those with a training system for staff and  
32 volunteers are there for the long haul with someone who  
33 cares about running a tight ship. Training leads toward  
34 consistent, equitable service provision.

35 Practically speaking, this study has importance for  
36 groups that are faith-based or volunteer driven. Volunteers

1 often lead food pantries as well as many other types of  
2 grassroots organizations. These organizations may have  
3 people or groups with unique sets of values or motivators  
4 that drive them to be involved in service delivery.  
5 Volunteers may be involved because a friend is or because  
6 there is a personal connection to a particular cause. The  
7 one-size-fits all mentality may not work. Instead grassroots  
8 organizations may look for ways to develop or strengthen  
9 community ties that maximize resources

10 Despite their commitment, transportation, work,  
11 family, health, and other issues challenge their ability to be  
12 at the pantry handing out food. As part of continuing  
13 research in this area, volunteer interviews documenting the  
14 experiences of those who have been working at the food  
15 pantries for decades may shed light on why and how  
16 pantries operate and how to increase their capacity to serve  
17 clients. Staffing via volunteers is a double-edged sword for  
18 nonprofits. A free labor pool is an incredible asset when the  
19 workers are present and a terrible gap when they are  
20 missing. A volunteer's availability and his or her individual  
21 capacity may drive the existence and use of many of the  
22 characteristics included above. At least one volunteer  
23 pantry director noted she does not have a computer, does  
24 not want a computer, and will not use a computer. She is 84  
25 years old, a widow. She has kept meticulous records for  
26 over a decade. Food is organized, shelved and tracked in  
27 the former tobacco barn on her land. She has a personal  
28 relationship with the produce manager at the local grocery  
29 store. She has a planned weekly route for deliveries,  
30 including a stop at the local senior center. She carries the  
31 food in herself. In the world of small community  
32 nonprofits, the commitment of the volunteers may be more  
33 important than items like storage space or training manuals.

34 Religiosity may also be a factor to consider. About  
35 half of the sample studied report having some sort of tie to  
36 a faith tradition. This is not unique to this sample, and is

1 actually lower than the norm for food pantries nationwide.  
2 Many human services nonprofits have a religious tie. In  
3 that case, the program or project may be seen as a  
4 “ministry” that does not need its own staffing, budget  
5 process, or leadership structure. Resources, both financial  
6 and other, may come through the church, synagogue, or  
7 other bodies, meaning again, that food pantries or other  
8 religiously supported nonprofits, would not have, or  
9 necessarily need, the organizational characteristics listed  
10 above in order to maximize client service.

11 Future research should continue to focus on what is  
12 important for the growth and sustainability of small  
13 community nonprofits. For example, in line with the results  
14 from this analysis, there is substantial opportunity to study  
15 the tipping points where smaller organizations find ways to  
16 excel in offering expanded services despite decreased  
17 capacity as it is traditionally viewed. Future work needs to  
18 include a much broader range of organizational size and  
19 structure.

20 Future work also needs to focus more on  
21 community level nonprofits. Resources to effectively  
22 manage the organizations must also be made available if  
23 the onus of service delivery continues to be on local level  
24 nonprofits. Nonprofit food assistance organizations may  
25 serve as “canaries in the coal mine” for social service  
26 programs. Demand in these programs has increased at  
27 double digit annual rates for over a decade. Can grassroots  
28 community organizations handle that type of growth? How  
29 can policy help create capacity at community-level  
30 nonprofits – the organizations which serve as the final  
31 recourse? It may be only through expanding the capacity  
32 of the current community- based system that society will be  
33 able to fill the gaps in the national social safety net.  
34 However, first, it may require an entire change in the  
35 concept of capacity.



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