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# Immigration Detention and Faith-based Organizations

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Immigration detention is a hot contemporary issue in the United States, with over 33,000 individuals held in detention facilities daily and reports of poor conditions and human rights abuses. Building on a growing body of theory exploring the role of faith-based organizations (FBOs) in social services provision, and seeking to address a gap in the literature concerning services provided to immigrants in detention, this qualitative study explored the responses of FBOs to immigration detainees. Twenty in-depth interviews with volunteers and staff members of FBOs as well as field notes from participant observation were analyzed using thematic coding techniques. Findings suggest that FBOs are active leaders in this area of social work practice and provide significant resources to isolated and vulnerable detained immigrants in a variety of ways. Simultaneously, they face challenges surrounding access and constricted activity. The study indicates that considerable scope exists for expanding and enhancing faith-based and other social work engagement in this crucial field.

KEY WORDS: *advocacy; challenges; faith-based organizations; immigration detention; visitation*

In the current national debate on comprehensive immigration reform President Obama stressed the need to “stay focused on enforcement” while considering a pathway to citizenship (Obama, 2013). Immigration detention is a key means by which the Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency (ICE) seeks to enforce the law and remove those deemed unlawfully present in the United States. Detention often leads to deportation. In 2012, ICE detained 33,000 individuals per day, and in 2010, \$1.7 billion of taxpayers’ money was spent on immigration detention (Golash-Boza, 2012). Human rights groups have documented a litany of human rights violations of detainees (Community Initiatives for Visiting Immigrants in Confinement, 2013; National Immigration Law Center [NILC] & American Civil Liberties Union [ACLU], 2009), and in 2014, detention of unaccompanied minors crossing the U.S.–Mexico border resulted in a new outcry (Libal and Brané, 2014). The purpose of this article is to acquaint readers with the work faith-based organizations (FBOs) are undertaking in response to immigration detention. To this end, this study explores two key questions: (1) How are FBOs responding to the needs of immigration detainees? and (2) What challenges do they face as they engage in this crisis context?

## THE U.S. DETENTION SYSTEM

There are currently around 250 detention centers—immigrant-only facilities managed by private companies as well as wings in county jails—being used to hold immigrants across the United States (Ackerman & Furman, 2013; Detention Watch Network, 2013). Most of those detained are unauthorized immigrants and legal residents who have committed a minor crime such as possession of marijuana for personal use. People applying for asylum at a national border also face mandatory detention (though they may be released pending a case outcome), and people can be detained indefinitely on the grounds of national security (Golash-Boza, 2012).

Conditions in detention can be appalling, and reveal “substantial and pervasive violations” of government standards (NILC & ACLU, 2009, p. 7). People face a “prolonged limbo” (Mountz, 2012, p. 91), and the vast majority lack legal counsel. Isolation is profound. Families of detainees are often unable to visit, as many live hundreds of miles away, or their own irregular immigration status prevents them from entering a facility. Arbitrary transfer of detainees across the country makes it hard for families to locate loved ones and disrupts client–attorney relationships. Phone calls are prohibitively expensive,

costing up to five dollars per minute, and both medical care and mental health care are routinely inadequate (Ackerman & Furman, 2013). There is a “broken system of care” (Ochoa, Pleasants, Penn, & Stone, 2010, p. 395).

Use of solitary confinement has been particularly disturbing. On any given day, about 300 immigrants are held in solitary confinement, and nearly half of these for fifteen days or more, at which point there is risk of severe mental harm (Urbina & Rentz, 2013). LGBTQI detainees are often sent to “the hole” for what authorities claim is their own protection. Food is usually poor and inadequate; few recreational activities are offered and lock-down can last for sixteen or more hours a day. Disciplinary procedures can be unclear and arbitrary, and detainees talk of experiencing verbal and sometimes physical and sexual abuse. Detainees represent an extremely marginalized and underserved population, and the need for advocacy and service provision is pressing.

### SERVICES AND ADVOCACY FOR IMMIGRANTS

The services provided to immigrants by social workers and other helping professionals, including through FBOs, have been the subject of much recent research. Engstrom and Okamura (2007) called for social work to develop a specialization in immigrant well-being, and Shier, Engstrom, and Graham (2011) have noted a steady increase in research on international migration and social work since 1985. A robust body of literature comprises articles detailing and assessing services provided to immigrants in different national contexts, as well as those recommending best practices (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2011; Gal, 2008; Mweru, 2008; Potocky-Tripodi, 2002; Sun & Cadge, 2013). Researchers have stressed the need for cultural competence in social work with immigrants and for advocacy on their behalf (Chang-Muy & Congress, 2008; Ortiz, Garcia, & Hernández, 2012; Padilla, Shapiro, Fernandez-Castro, & Faulkner, 2008), and many focus on one particular demographic group, such as young people (Yohani, 2008) or Latinos (Ayón, 2014). The criminalization of immigration is having detrimental effects on immigrants (Ackerman & Furman, 2013), and research explores challenges—including legal barriers—that social workers face in supporting undocumented migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers (Furman, Ackerman, Loya, Jones, & Negi, 2012; Guhan & Liebling-Kalifani, 2011).

Studies exploring the contributions made by FBOs to immigrant well-being have also burgeoned (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2011; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2008; Levitt, 2008; Rose, 2012), indicating ways in which they provide practical, psychological, spiritual, and social support to new arrivals. Hirschman (2007) noted that religion can “serve as ballast for immigrants as they struggle to adapt to their new homeland” (p. 396) and assist them in their “search for refuge, respectability, and resources” (p. 413). When it comes to immigration detention specifically, a few articles have reflected on the role of helping professionals (Briskman, Zion, & Loff, 2012; Furman, Sanchez, Ackerman, & Ung, 2014; Gurd, 2011), but until now no study has explored services provision to detained immigrants in the United States.

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: FBOS IN SOCIAL WORK

The conceptual framework for this study is rooted in empirical research and theory surrounding the role played by FBOs in social work. A commitment to social justice lies at the heart of many religious traditions (Palmer & Burgess, 2012), and FBOs are often first responders to social needs. In addition to studies assessing the role played by FBOs in development (Ter Haar, 2011; Tomalin, 2013), scholars have explored the contributions made by FBOs to social welfare provision in the West (Göçmen, 2013; Putnam, 2000; Wuthnow, 2004). This research suggests, as Adkins, Occhipinti, and Hefferan (2010) put it, that FBOs increasingly “fill the gaps born of state neglect and retraction” (p. 1).

Three theoretical strands are prominent. First, scholars have debated the strengths and weaknesses of religious social welfare provision. Advantages include the ability of FBOs to reach marginalized people, access unrestricted funding, connect to global religious networks, and draw on their moral authority and human resources (Ferris, 1990, 2011). However, FBOs sometimes employ workers and volunteers with insufficient training, and suspicion surrounds organizations that use social programs to proselytize (Belcher, Fandetti, & Cole, 2004; Canda & Furman, 2009; Furness & Gilligan, 2010; Stewart, 2009). As a result, careful assessment of the efficacy and efficiency of FBOs is regarded as essential (DeHart, 2010; Wineburg, 2007).

Second, scholars have discussed the shifting political context faced by FBOs in the United States. Although separation of church and state historically

limited FBO involvement in state-supported welfare provision, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (P.L. 104-193) and creation of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives in 2001 opened the way for FBOs to receive state and federal funding for community services and facilitated the transfer of some social programs from government control to religious institutions (Adkins et al., 2010; Cnaan & Boddie, 2002; Sager, 2010; Wuthnow, 2004). When FBOs do accept statutory funding, it comes with expectations surrounding client base, evaluation, and support of government policy and systems.

Third, theorists have sought to categorize and define FBOs. Recognizing that the term FBO “describes a heterogeneous collection of organizations, employing a wide range of theories, ideologies, practices, and strategies” (Adkins et al., 2010, pp. 1–2), scholars have constructed typologies of FBOs and their work. Drawing on the *Working Group on Human Needs and Faith-Based and Community Initiatives* (2003), Adkins et al. (2010) delineated the following six categories of FBOs: (1) faith-permeated, (2) faith-centered, (3) faith-affiliated, (4) faith-background, (5) faith-secular partnership, and (6) secular (see also Tangenberg, 2005). In addition, they articulated a continuum of faith-based work from charity (immediate focus on individual needs) to service (organized programs) to justice (longer-term focus on public policy) (Adkins et al., 2010, p. 17). Crisp (2014) categorized FBO work according to their service orientation (members or nonmembers) and service aim (care or conversion), leading to categories of community maintenance, community education, community service, and mission.

In sum, the term FBO can indicate anything from a place of worship engaging in one local activity to large-scale, multi-site and multi-program services agencies only very loosely connected with religious bodies. Politically, they can be conservative or progressive. In this study, FBO is understood as a broad term encompassing all of these categories. In many FBOs, social workers play a prominent role as frontline service providers, and many in secular agencies are motivated by their faith (Crisp, 2014). The categories of social work and FBOs are therefore often complexly interwoven.

## METHOD

Given that work with detained immigrants has been little explored, researchers employed qualitative

methods to understand the work that FBOs are undertaking. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and participant observation. Twenty staff members and volunteers were recruited through e-mail solicitation, by word of mouth, and snowball sampling among FBOs across the United States involved in detention work. Participants were interviewed once, and interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. All interviews were conducted by the principal investigator in English, and were audio-recorded; some took place in the principal investigator’s office or an alternative location chosen by participants (for example, cafés), and others by telephone. A semistructured approach covered the following broad key questions: Could you describe the work that you are involved in to support immigrant detainees? What is your motivation for this work? What are the goals of [your organization], and how well is it meeting them? Interviews were transcribed by a third party, and the confidentiality of participants has been preserved through the use of pseudonyms.

In terms of participant observation, the principal investigator visited one detention facility on a formal group tour. She was a volunteer visitor with a detainee visitation program that involved a once-a-month visit with a detainee. In addition, she networked with local organizations in two cities, and she kept field notes of her observations of their work in a reflexive journal that led to additional thoughts, questions, and ideas that informed the subsequent professional interviews. This study was reviewed and approved by the institutional review board at the University of Texas at Austin. All participants gave informed, written consent and were not remunerated for their time or participation. Demographic information is summarized in Table 1.

The principal investigator conducted the data analysis using conventional thematic analysis techniques (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), contextualizing findings through participants’ own words to identify and compare themes. Analysis began with coding (that is, systematic identification of themes) each individual interview transcript and documenting the ways in which participants described their work. Dedoose, qualitative data analysis software, was employed in this process. Key themes were developed to label and define the various types of work and the challenges, joys, and meaning that emerged for the participants through the work; further coding allowed for new and unanticipated themes to

**Table 1: Participant Demographics (N = 20)**

Characteristic	n	%
Gender		
Male	8	40
Female	12	60
Racial/ethnic identity		
White	16	80
Latino	4	20
Religion/spiritual affiliation		
Agnostic/atheist	4	20
Assemblies of God	1	5
Catholic	3	15
Presbyterian	2	10
Unitarian/Universalist	3	15
United Church of Christ	2	10
Episcopalian	1	5
Nondenominational Christian	1	5
Mennonite	1	5
Quaker	1	5
Jewish	1	5

**Table 2: Nature of Faith-based Work and Challenges Faced (N = 20)**

	n	%
Types of Work		
Visitation programs	16	80
Hospitality houses	2	10
Chaplaincy	2	10
Postdetention support	7	35
Vigils	5	25
Campaigns/awareness raising	18	90
Challenges faced		
Access	19	95
Constricted activity	12	60

emerge. Member checking with those interviewed and peer support and debriefing were used to enhance analytical rigor (Padgett, 2008).

## FINDINGS

This study sought to explore how FBOs are meeting the needs of detainees. The data yielded a range of findings that can be grouped under two broad areas: (1) extent and nature of faith-based involvement and (2) challenges faced by FBOs. These findings are summarized in Table 2.

### Extent and Nature of Faith-based Involvement

Findings suggest that FBOs play significant and varied roles in responding to immigration detention.

Participants discussed being involved with six categories of work: (1) visitation programs, (2) hospitality houses, (3) chaplaincy, (4) postdetention support, (5) vigils, and (6) campaigns and awareness raising. Visitation programs represented one of the most common forms of response, with 16 participants naming involvement in these. Understood by Arturo (Latino, Catholic) as an “emergency response,” these programs involved volunteers going into detention facilities to meet with detainees as an immediate pastoral intervention. Visits usually took place one-on-one and behind Plexiglas, although some facilities did allow group or contact visits. Whereas a few programs had a formal arrangement with the facility management, others operated on an informal basis. All programs offered training to volunteers. The central aim of these visitation programs was to break the isolation experienced by incarcerated immigrants. Volunteers offered a listening ear or, as James (white, Presbyterian) put it, “a ministry of presence.” Volunteers could not solve detainees’ problems or get them out of the facility—they were explicitly forbidden from offering any legal advice—but they could, according to Bethany (white, Unitarian Universalist), simply “help the women to know they have a friend in the U.S.” Participants reported that the act of visiting and allowing the detainee to lead, shape, and control the conversation affirmed the humanity of those being held—as Hannah (white, Jewish) articulated, “The way that we sit and talk with people affirms their existence, affirms their importance, affirms their worth.” In some places, visitation led to letter writing, e-mailing, and sending books for detainees to read. Some visitors facilitated referrals to attorneys or medical help, and placed dollars into detainees’ commissary accounts so that they could purchase snacks.

Participants reported that detainees enjoyed and valued visits, and also that facility staff had pointed out the beneficial effects on detainees: Hannah was told that those visited were “happier and calmer.” Alison (white, Mennonite) recalled a particularly significant relationship with one Muslim man she had met. She said, “We’ve had men tell us, ‘Your visits are what keep us alive.’ My Muslim friend told me that it was our visits that kept him from having to go on antidepressants. That’s some powerful stuff.” Visitors claimed that visiting also transformed their own outlook and stimulated their passion for advocacy work. Alison recognized the powerful

effects that even a single visit could have: “Almost without exception, the folks who come on those visits will say things like, ‘I had no idea. I’m definitely going to stay engaged in this issue and tell other people about it.’”

Only two of the participants were involved in hospitality houses, unsurprising given the more intense and expensive nature of this work. Hospitality houses offered overnight accommodation and food to family members visiting detainees. Those operating hospitality houses rented or purchased accommodation to provide beds for families of those incarcerated, and also offered meals, pastoral and practical support, and advice. Volunteers contributed food and other supplies, in addition to their time. Laura described her aim in establishing a hospitality house: “It’s a place that is no cost to them. There’s meals provided, spiritual, emotional support. Just a safe place to be in the middle of extremely traumatic experience.” Both participants engaged in hospitality houses had also been involved in visitation.

Two participants named their work as chaplaincy, a role that involved the provision of conventional religious activities including worship services (for example, Catholic Mass), Bible studies, and prayer groups. Felipe (Latino, Presbyterian) saw his role as providing teaching, conversation, and pastoral support: “I just touch their hands or touch their shoulders to say, ‘I’m here for you.’” Robert (white, Assemblies of God minister) organized a Sunday morning nondenominational service, a Catholic Mass, services in Chinese and Spanish, a class on managing emotion, yoga, and a daily inspirational thought for the staff—which he also saw as those whom he served. He coordinated religious dietary requirements, and although no worship services existed for Muslims or Hindus, stated that he provided for everybody whatever their religion. He put Bibles in dorms and offered pastoral listening with the help of an interpreter line. Some participants expressed ambivalence about the role of chaplains, and particularly those who were facility staff members. For example, Lisa (white, agnostic) recognized that “What they’re doing is something that I think offers even more than we could.” On the other hand, she felt that some chaplains “are a little bit depoliticized” in that they did not challenge the system or advocate against injustices.

Seven participants were involved in postdetention support. Support for released detainees could

be short-term (for those released pending case hearings) or long-term (for those granted leave to remain) and involved case management to facilitate former detainees’ access to health care, housing, food, transportation, clothing, English-language classes, social and faith community support, and volunteering or work opportunities. These projects also ensured that people knew about and were able to attend their case hearings. Josie (white, agnostic) offered case management for LGBTQI asylum seekers released from detention, and Ethel (white, Catholic) described an extensive array of services they provided to those released. These included taking people to the bus station and helping them to purchase a ticket to get home, giving out backpacks of clothing and money for food, and providing housing—in a religious community or guest homes—for 15 men and women, along with a stipend. They had raised funds to employ housing and case managers. Ethel described the aims of the project as helping former detainees to reach self-sufficiency and providing social support:

We have our first post-detainee from Rwanda, who has asylum, has his work permit, has a job. . . . Now, we’re working to help him save money so he can get an apartment and become independent, but in those cases, we’re always going to be their family because they don’t have family.

Five interviewees had participated in vigils. Their goal was twofold: first, to connect with detainees inside, and second, to witness to and protest the existence of the facility and the detention system as a whole. Some participants went every week to hold an interfaith prayer vigil outside a detention facility—there were 30 to 50 people at the one Ethel organized. Ernesto (Latino, Catholic) helped to organize a vigil for 19 days and nights outside a state house protesting the immigration policies that resulted in detention. Bob (white, Unitarian Universalist) described a vigil that a group he was involved with organized three times a year. People carried banners and gathered outside a facility; there was testimony from those directly affected, including family members of detainees, as well as a reflection by a minister; and chanting and waving at those inside straining to see out through the small windows. On one occasion, Bob met a woman who had a son in the facility, and noticed her crying: “The

reason was that she had seen her son for the first time at our vigil through the window.” Vigils helped detainees to connect with supporters and family outside.

Campaigns and awareness raising was the most common type of response—18 out of 20 participants got involved—and many were passionate about it. This work often grew out of more direct individual or pastoral support, such as visiting. Participants had been involved in campaigns to close facilities, to reduce phone call costs, and to protest Secure Communities programs that allow local law enforcement to check immigration status on behalf of ICE. Others had compiled reports detailing conditions and abuses at particular facilities, or written or talked to the media, congregations, or political representatives. Bethany wrote a letter to the editor of a city newspaper on the use of the word “illegal,” and Hannah had written articles for the Hebrew Immigration Aid Society. Ethel had been involved in a successful campaign to introduce a state law to allow religious workers access to immigration detention facilities, which was followed up by a media and public relations campaign. Ethel and her colleagues’ threats to be arrested forced ICE to permit them entry. Hannah spoke for many in her articulation of the interconnection between pastoral response and advocacy: “I’ve always seen that there’s at least two aspects to social justice work. One is providing immediate relief, and the other is working towards changing the rules or the system or whatever . . . where the oppression is coming from.”

Although these six types of work had different foci—some were directed at individual detainees and some at their families, U.S. society, or the detention system—what is striking is that all of them shared an essence. Seventeen of 20 participants spoke explicitly of their work being about fostering connection. The other three mentioned it implicitly. Participants put their energy into offering friendship, care, and building bridges rather than offering services. As Carmen put it, “It’s about seeing other people as our connectedness, I think, to one another.” Connecting directly challenged the isolation, disconnection, and invisibility that detention creates.

### Challenges Faced

Participants mentioned two particularly significant struggles in making these connections in relation to immigration detention: access and restricted activity.

Of the 20 participants, 10 explicitly and 19 implicitly mentioned that gaining access to detainees was a problem. Not only did access to a facility depend on the openness of ICE in that region and the particular facility management, making it arbitrary, but it could be a challenge to find “A” numbers for detainees as they were not made publicly available. Without “A” numbers, it was not possible to visit someone. As previously mentioned, Ethel and her colleagues had to take political action to obtain entry. Two projects mentioned by participants had more visitors willing to go than they could get “A” numbers of people to visit. Those who ended up being visited were the luckier ones, as Alison pointed out: “The guys that we visit are—just by the fact they ended up on our list—it makes them not typical. They had somebody advocating for them, even if it was the buddy in the next cell.” For those who do not speak English or Spanish, access was even harder—as most attorneys and helping professionals spoke one of these two languages, and they were likely to be those who passed on “A” numbers.

This points to the second main challenge faced by FBOs. Twelve participants suggested that their activity was constricted. Some talked about the conflict of interest that existed between gaining entry to facilities to offer pastoral support and protesting conditions and the detention system. Yet, simultaneously, they feared becoming “complicit” if they visited but did not advocate. Anna brought up this challenge:

We work with the system, and that’s really great. We have a lot of access. We can do really great things. We’ve got this prison visit program, but then you have a lot of hindrances, ’cause you can also accidentally be just complicit.

Visitation programs have been shut down, or were feared being shut down, if the FBOs spoke out against abuses visitors saw. Lisa felt that this was a significant source of tension: “Because we have no legal rights to do what we do, there’s a constant fear of being shut down if we go too far. There’s a feeling of frustration or being constrained in that way.” Laura was prevented from teaching English as a Second Language and visiting because of her campaigning work. Felipe was told, when he expressed concern about detainees having enough soap to wash their hands, “It’s not your business.

Your business is only to do Bible studies here.” For many, this led to a sense of powerlessness in the face of the system. Lisa had days when she felt overwhelmed by hopelessness: “Sometimes it just feels like no matter what we do, there’s just going to be this system. There’s always this underlying sense of defeat.”

## DISCUSSION

This study concurs with literature that affirms the role played by FBOs in social service provision, particularly their ability to reach marginalized people such as detainees who may not otherwise be offered support (Crisp, 2014). FBO staff members and volunteers interviewed for this study illustrated a variety of ways they interacted with people in detention, and the focus of their activity ranged from charity to service to justice (Adkins et al., 2010). Work was aimed at transforming attitudes in U.S. society as well as at the immediate needs of detainees themselves. In other words, to draw on Crisp’s typology, they engaged in both community service and community education (Crisp, 2014).

Scope exists for deepening and expanding current faith-based and other social work involvement offered to detainees. The *National Association of Social Workers’ Code of Ethics* (2008) section 6.04d, on social and political action, clearly states imperatives to promote social justice for the “vulnerable and oppressed,” affirm the dignity and worth of all people, and advocate for noncitizens regardless of immigration status. There is an urgent need for increased support inside facilities, including mental health assessment, group and individual counseling, facilitating access to English language and other classes, and case management for individuals being released into U.S. communities or deported to their country of origin (Furman et al., 2014). There is a particular need to serve those who do not speak English or Spanish, and for culturally competent training and service provision. More case management in the growing number of alternatives to detention programs would also be beneficial, as would support for the families and children of detainees (Zayas, 2010). As advocates, FBOs and others could develop their efforts to lobby local, state, and national representatives and the media to raise awareness and educate the general public. They could call for improvement in conditions inside facilities, for alternatives to detention, and for an end to the detention system. This is likely

to require thoughtful collaboration among FBOs, nonprofits, social workers, and attorneys.

Service providers should also consider the two significant challenges flagged by participants as they develop activity in this field. In addition to navigating the complex political and funding context, FBOs are also confronted by facility and ICE requirements. Developing formal and necessary service programs inside facilities may require investment in a long period of groundwork building with ICE and facility managements, and where this fails, a willingness to work with attorneys and human rights activists to push for entry through legal avenues. Service providers in detention facilities, simultaneously, need to recognize that there is a fine line between provision of care and collusion with an oppressive system (Briskman et al., 2012). Three ethical tensions highlighted by Furman and colleagues (2012) in relation to social work with undocumented immigrants are pertinent—tensions between obeying the law (or the facility management) and adhering to professional values; reporting issues to the authorities and client confidentiality, particularly as detainees anecdotally report retaliation for challenging their conditions; and the needs of the one client in detention and the needs of the many who may be detained in the future.

The limitations of this study should be noted. The sample size was small, and given that participants were recruited through a snowball sample, findings may not represent the diversity and depth of the work being undertaken by FBOs across the country. But even though more research is required both about the needs of detainees and the services provided for them, this exploratory study should give those engaged in social work ideas about how to move forward. **SW**

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