

# ***Political Science***

## **On The Relationship Between Nonprofit Organizations And The U.S. Government: Is It Symbiotic And Why Should It Be?**

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The United States is a nation filled with inequality for minority members. This inequality inhibits the ability of all U.S. citizens to reach their maximum potential. This research is based on the concept that the U.S. government is not capable of addressing and eradicating these inequalities on its own. Further, this research posits that nonprofit organizations are often unable to serve to the fullest extent possible because of their limited capacity. Through a symbiotic relationship, meaning a relationship advantageous to both sides, the U.S. government and nonprofit organizations can take the necessary steps to create a more egalitarian society. The purpose of this research is to analyze the relationship as it stands to determine whether or not it is currently symbiotic, and if not, what steps must be taken for it to reach this state.

### **Inequalities in the United States**

Minorities in the United States face different life experiences than their white male counterparts. These differences extend from wealth, to education, to incarceration and even to the violence they might face. When comparing the wealth of women to men, and ethnic minorities to white Americans, it becomes apparent that the imbalance favors whites and males. Data from 2009 discloses that the mean income for white households (\$86,800) doubled the mean income for African-American households (\$41,400), and nearly doubled the income of Hispanic households (\$49,100) (Wolff 2012, 60-61). A review of the 2014 U.S. census shows that the median earnings of full-time, year-round male workers 15 years or older (\$50,383) exceeded that of female workers (\$39,621) fitting the same description by more than ten thousand dollars (DeNavas-Walt and Proctor 2015, 10). The census also allows for a comparison based on the rates of poverty for each demographic. A higher portion of the female population was in poverty (16.1%) than the male population (13.4%) in 2014. Black Americans had the highest rate of poverty at 26.2%, followed closely by the

Hispanic population at 23.6%. These statistics affirm that the minority poverty rates are not only higher than that of the white population, but also that both more than doubled the rate of poverty for white Americans, which was 10.1% (DeNavas-Walt and Proctor 2015, 13).

The disparity in experience for minorities is not only financial. In regards to education, data from the National Center for Education Statistics shows that there are consistently more “proficient” and “advanced” white students than there are black or Hispanic students for the same performance level; further, a smaller percentage of white students than minority students fall into the “below basic” performance level (2015, 5). These trends go beyond grade level and subject matter. The report encompassed test scores from 4th and 8th grade mathematics and reading scores. Not only is there variation in the performance of students based on race through school, but their end results also vary. The dropout rates for 2013 are provided by the National Center for Education Statistics in their report on the condition of education. The report not only shows that the drop out rate for white students age 16 to 24 was lower than both the rate for black students and the rate for Hispanic students in 2013, but also indicated that, “In each year from 1990 to 2013, the status dropout rate was lower for Whites than for Blacks, and the rates for both Whites and Blacks were lower than the rate for Hispanics” (2015, 178).

White Americans are less likely to dropout of school than American minority members and are also less likely to face prison time. A report produced by the U.S. Department of Justice revealed that “In 2014, 6% of all black males ages 30 to 39 were in prison, compared to 2% of Hispanic and 1% of white males in the same age group” (Carson 2015, 1). The increased likelihood of African American males and Hispanic American males to be imprisoned is not age dependent: “Imprisonment rates for black males were 3.8 to 10.5 times greater at each age group than white males and 1.4 to 3.1 times greater than rates for Hispanic males” (Carson 2015, 15).

While minority members are more likely than white Americans to suffer at the hands of the U.S. justice system, American women are more likely than men to suffer at the hands of an intimate partner. There is little recent data regarding violence against women; however, a review of what is available indicates that in 2007, “Females made up 70% of victims killed by an intimate partner” and that this is “a proportion that has changed very little since 1993” (Catalano 2009, 3). A report from the Center for Disease Control reveals, “Nearly 1 in 10 women in the United States (9.4%) has been raped by an intimate partner in her lifetime” and estimates that 16.9% of women have experienced sexual violence other than rape. The report further indicates, “97.1% of female victims of rape,

physical violence, or stalking by an intimate partner had only male perpetrators" (Breiding 2014, 1-2, 51). None of this is meant to suggest that all males are violent, or to suggest that men cannot also be victims of intimate partner violence; rather the purpose behind these references is to illustrate that "women are disproportionately affected by intimate partner violence" (Breiding 2014, 65).

The disparities just described only hint at the total extent of inequality in the United States. American minority members suffer anywhere from limited life opportunity to physical violence. Steps must be taken toward a more egalitarian and safer society in the U.S. Nonprofit organizations across the nation are dedicated to leading the American people toward a more equal future.

### **The Role of Non-Profit Organizations**

The National Center for Charitable Statistics lists 1,406,786 nonprofit organizations in the United States for 2013. The Internal Revenue Service defines a 501(c)(3) nonprofit as an organization whose purposes are "charitable, religious, educational, scientific, literary, testing for public safety, fostering national or international amateur sports competition, and preventing cruelty to children or animals." They use the term "charitable" to denote "relief of the poor, the distressed, or the underprivileged... advancement of education or science... lessening the burdens of government... eliminating prejudice and discrimination; defending human and civil rights secured by law; and combating... juvenile delinquency" (IRS 2015). Out of the 1.4 million nonprofit organizations operating in the United States, an array of them are aimed at ending the inequalities previously mentioned. Four nonprofits that are focused in some capacity on addressing the inequalities listed were analyzed for this work.

### **Literature Review**

Extensive research and literature regarding the relationship between nonprofit organizations and the government could not be found; however, two studies conducted by the Urban Institute provided relevant information regarding the benefits and complications of the relationship in question. Because nonprofit and government organizations "often share the same mission and goals" they are able to "offer each other valuable resources" (Fyffe 2015, 1). The Urban Institute report on the government agency perspective explains, "Nonprofits and governments have a reciprocal relationship: both entities have valuable resources they can offer each other to enhance service delivery. For instance, state governments have financial resources they can allocate to meet the needs of communities across their state. Nonprofit organizations, on the other

hand, offer expertise with certain populations and greater flexibility and reach to help state governments address social pitfalls. Effective partnerships can be mutually beneficial but also can be complex and challenging, often requiring time and resources from all parties” (Fyffe 2015, 25). Nonprofit organizations, such as Harmony House and West Georgia Star, function in large part due to the financial resources provided by the government, and they are not alone: “In 2011, one-third of revenue for 501(c)(3) public charities came from the government” (Pettijohn 2013, 1). The aforementioned expertise nonprofits provide was acknowledged by many state agency representatives in the Urban Institute research, including one respondent who articulated, “Nonprofit organizations have their finger on the pulse of what’s happening in the communities in which they’re serving” (Fyffe 2015, 26). Further, the research found, “Agency representatives willingly admitted that without nonprofit organizations, they would not be able to provide important services and programs in their states.” One agency representative went as far as to say, “Clearly we are a public agency and we feel public dollars need to go for public good. The nonprofit agencies reach into communities that we can’t. We’re a small staff of under 20 individuals and we are managing over 1,000 grants annually and we can’t get into all of our communities... Without them we wouldn’t be able to reach those people living in all of our counties” (Fyffe 2015, 26). The mutual benefits to this relationship are evident; however, problems are also present in the current relationship.

State agency representatives listed several common pitfalls to their relationship with nonprofits, including capacity: “we can see some groups that overextend themselves and really struggle to not only survive the two-year contract with us, but possibly long-term improvements because they were so committed to trying to accomplish something at so little cost” (Fyffe 2015, 27). The attempts by nonprofit agencies to be as cost efficient as possible affects everything they do, including compensating employees. Mr. Cooper, the director of a nonprofit organization used in the case study later discussed, told of his experience with this during his interview: “It’s hard to keep great help in nonprofits because the salaries are not that high, but like I say, I actually took a pay cut to come here” (Cooper 2016). A respondent from the Urban Institute reiterated this occurrence: “Some of them [nonprofits] don’t pay their employees enough because they don’t have enough funding and so they have a lot of employee turnover” (Fyffe 2015, 29). This high employee turnover is one of the commonly cited difficulties from the report. The research reveals, “Respondents often discussed the amount of time and resources invested in developing relationships with nonprofits and informing them of their agency’s contract or grant processes. This becomes more of a challenge when the nonprofit’s leadership or contact people experience high turnover” (Fyffe 2015, 29). The importance of developing these relationships cannot be overstated considering, “Respondents dis-

cussed the importance of nonprofit organizations understanding not only the overarching goals of the contract or grant, but also the nonprofits' roles, responsibilities, and obligations. Particularly, some nonprofits do not fully grasp what is expected of them once they receive funds from state agencies" (Fyffe 2015, 28). The lack of understanding by nonprofits regarding what is expected of them leads to disappointment on both sides of this relationship.

Aside from the mentioned struggles, nonprofits have their own troubles with the relationship from their perspective. As it stands, few state agencies "have established formal feedback loops" and "invite nonprofits to be involved with program changes and decisions" (Fyffe 2015, 31). This leaves communication in this relationship appearing to be mostly one sided. Nonprofits are also left without much training from the government, "Several state agency respondents noted that unless the administrative costs associated with T/TA were built into the contracts or grants program, states often have limited resources and staff to provide formal or intensive T/TA activities" (Fyffe 2015, 32) which means that is not a common practice for nonprofit organizations to receive training and technical assistance (T/TA) regarding how to receive and better manage the contracts and grants provided by the government. Further troubles for nonprofits include the application process (a problem Mr. Cooper stressed), reporting, payments not being enough, the government changing the contracts or grants and the government being late on payments. The "Complexity of/time required by application process" was deemed a "Big problem" by 32% of the nonprofit organizations, and a "Small problem" by 39% of the organizations, while 28% did not view it as a problem. In regards to the "Complexity of/time required for reporting," 31% claimed it to be a big problem and 40% labeled it as a small problem. A total of 54% of the organizations deemed "Payments do not cover full costs of contracted services" as a problem. The final two had the lowest reported incidence of being labeled problematic: 43% report problems with "Government changes to contracts or grants" and 45% have had problems with "Late payments (beyond contract specification)" (Pettijohn 2013, 25).

Complications exist on both ends of this relationship, leaving room for possible improvements. One state agency respondent posits that encouraging mutual-ity between the parties would improve the relationship: "The first strategy that I would identify may not be considered a strategy, but it is making sure that there is a professional relationship that exists between the state agency and the local nonprofit. One that would entail mutual respect and mutual accountability for service provisions" (Fyffe 2015, 30). Another respondent echoed this strategy explaining, "from my experience having more of a partnering or technical assistance type of relationship with the [nonprofits] has been effective rather than more of a policing attitude. So, each of the [nonprofits] knows that

our department is looking for their best outcome and the staff know that we're here to support them and they view us as a partner in the services that they're providing" (Fyffe 2015, 30). Establishing the feedback loops the were previously acknowledged as nonexistent, as well as inviting nonprofits to be involved in any program changes and decisions, would foster a relationship more similar to a mutual partnership. Focusing on providing nonprofit organizations with training and technical assistance would remove some of the misunderstandings involved in contracts and grants. Further improvements could be made by "Streamlining the application and reporting processes" which would "be helpful to both nonprofits and government agencies" (Pettijohn 2013, 28).

## **Methods**

Case studies were done based on in depth interviews to analyze the relationship between nonprofit organizations and the government. Four nonprofits were chosen for examination based on their area of focus. Each of the organizations is focused on alleviating the negative impact of inequality minority members experience. The directors of Harmony House and West Georgia Star each sat down for personal interviews. The directors of Ahimsa House and Big Brothers Big Sisters of the Heart of Georgia were interviewed via email and phone.

The survey questions were approved by the LaGrange College Internal Review Board prior to being administered and can be found the appendix following the works cited.

## **Non-Profit Case Studies**

Harmony House is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that has been serving victims of domestic violence since 2005. This organization was selected for this work because Harmony House is dedicated to aiding victims of domestic violence as well as preventing it in the future, thereby attempting to eradicate a physically violent form of inequality in the United States. They provide "emergency shelter, crisis intervention, and advocacy for victims of domestic violence" (Harmony House). Harmony House also serves victims through a 24-hour crisis hotline, safety planning with trained professionals, legal advocacy, counseling and support groups as well as assistance with "medical, transportation, employment and housing needs." The organization launched because "The need for a shelter for those affected by domestic violence became increasing[ly] apparent" in Troup County, Georgia, where Harmony House is located. The lack of shelter in Troup County left victims "without a safe housing alternative" (Harmony House). Michele Bedingfield, the director, and her staff now serve a need that was previously not addressed. Part of their ability to serve comes from the government.

The relationship between Harmony House and the government is mostly a financial one, though Mrs. Bedingfield does not understate the value of having government certification. She explained that having the certification gives the community confidence in their ability to carry out their mission. Certification is not the only thing Harmony House has received from the government. Currently, 65.57% of Harmony House's \$415,000 budget is provided through government grants. When asked if her organization would be able to continue operating without the government's aid, her response was, "We wouldn't be able to do what we do. Or the majority of our time would be spent doing fundraisers" (Bedingfield 2016). Having the government's financial support allows Mrs. Bedingfield and her staff to focus their attention on meeting the needs of the community. Mrs. Bedingfield did not report any major complaints between her organization and the government, nor were there any suggestions made as to how this relationship could be improved. She explained that the guidelines for receiving grants and certification as they pertain to her organization were so clear that it left little room for confusion or misunderstanding. Harmony House has a very specific focus, and the government's guidelines do not detract from their ability to fill that need.

Similar to Harmony House, Ahimsa House is also a nonprofit focused on serving victims of domestic violence. Myra Rasnick, the director of Ahimsa House, participated in this survey via phone call. Miss Rasnick explained that they "get government funding, so that makes [them] a sub grantee" (Rasnick 2016). She affirmed that she believes the government needs her organization and also that her organization needs the government. When asked if Ahimsa could operate without the aid of the government she said, "Yes, but we would be debilitated" (Rasnick 2016). Ahimsa House currently receives \$80,000 in government funding, which accounts for 30.53% of their overall budget. In response to being asked how the relationship between nonprofit organizations and the government could be improved, Miss Rasnick suggested that the relationship needs "more input from stakeholders and sub grantees" (2016).

The third organization examined for this research was Big Brothers Big Sisters of the Heart of Georgia. Big Brothers Big Sisters is a mentoring program that targets at risk youth. The organization is directed by Dianna Glymph. In her interview, Miss Glymph posited the government's need for her organization: "The government cannot possibly run a local mentoring program that involves local grassroots volunteers and does so much good for the children" (Glymph 2016). She also discussed her organization's need for the government, "As we serve very poor counties, we need government funding to serve the most vulnerable of our youth" (Glymph 2016). While she acknowledged the aid the government provides her organization, which accounts for 34.67% of the organization's to-

tal budget, she also stated that they could function without government assistance: "We have operated most of our 60+ years without the government, so yes we can. We just can't serve as many children in our poor counties without the government funding" (Glymph 2016). Miss Glymph's suggestion to improve the current relationship between nonprofit organizations and the government was directed at the government:

"Weed out and do not fund the nonprofit organizations that do not use the funding appropriately or wisely and redistribute it to those who meet the criteria and are careful with the dollars and the mission. A broad stroke brush is used to measure all nonprofits - often most unwisely. Blind trust is not requested, but reward of grant dollars to those who do meet goals and use the dollars wisely would go a long way to fostering more effective services in the community."

The last of the case studies is West Georgia Star. Chad Cooper, the director of West Georgia Star, explained in an interview that his aim through the organization is to "decentralize poverty" in his hometown of LaGrange, GA (Cooper 2016). West Georgia Star's mission, as stated on their website, is "To provide opportunities that build strong families and individuals through education, cultural and social awareness. While increasing economic stability, in a cohesive and diverse community" (West Georgia Star 2015). West Georgia Star operates out of the LaGrange Housing Authority. While they may be located in LaGrange, they serve individuals "anywhere from Troup County, Harris County and Coweta County" (Cooper 2016). According to Mr. Cooper, "Our primary function is to serve the residents of the housing authority. Secondary is the surrounding community." Mr. Cooper elaborated regarding the population they serve: "Demographically speaking it's primarily African-Americans. I would probably say 95% African-American, very low Hispanic rate and maybe 4% white." West Georgia Star was chosen for this research because they target a population previously cited as suffering from inequality. The services they provide fall into two major categories, residential services and youth services. For the youth, West Georgia Star focuses on a leadership platform described as follows: "Influence and support are the key elements we focus on with our Youth Leadership Platform. Servicing youth age range of 13-until high school graduation, we make every attempt to influence positive decision making to further impact their lives toward greater opportunities. We are supportive by offering life skills, educational learning and onsite job training. In additions to influence and support all teens participate in a 10-week drug prevention program, that teaches them the dangers of underage drinking and drug usage. Our program runs year round servicing all teens throughout the local community" (West Georgia Star 2015). West Georgia Star further attempts to improve the lives of

at risk youth in their community through afterschool enrichment: “We engage students in fun activities that create a desire to learn, and they build on what students are learning during the school day to extend the knowledge they already have. Servicing children grades kindergarten to eighth grade WGS (West Georgia Star) strives with every effort to expose and inspire our youth, with cultural learning and helping them see further potential in themselves. WGS is a nonprofit organization that thrives through generous funding and grants, for the purchase of state of the art teaching tools, daily snack distribution and education-cultural field trips. Our program runs year round servicing all children throughout the local community” (West Georgia Star 2015).

West Georgia Star is a newer organization than the others, having only been established since 2012. The organizations target distinctive groups, through different means, which makes it unsurprising that their relationships with the government, would also differ. While Mrs. Bedingfield elaborated that Harmony House would be crippled without government funds and would be forced to dedicate a majority of their time that is needed elsewhere to fundraising but could still operate, Mr. Cooper posited, “If we weren’t funded by the government, we really couldn’t exist.” In regards to the government funding nonprofits across the United States in general, Mr. Cooper believes that, “You take government funding away and you’re going to have chaos, I mean complete chaos.” Mr. Cooper goes on saying, “Government funding, man without that we’d be in a horrible, horrible state.” Mr. Cooper clearly iterated the need nonprofits have for government support. He also made it clear that receiving this support is no easy task: “You apply for 20 [grants] you might get one...the ratio is never, never great. It’s so hit or miss.” When discussing the government grant application process, he used the term “archaic” to describe the sometimes 50 page application, concluding, “They require so much time and effort.” He further discussed one of the more frustrating questions commonly on grant applications: “How would you sustain if we didn’t give you this grant?” That’s the biggest question we always get and I’m like we need this money. To see that on a grant application is so disheartening.”

Mr. Cooper lists being such a young organization as a major hindrance to their ability to receive grants: “This is the biggest thing about being a young nonprofit, getting your data.” He continued to cite “y’all are just too young, you know, you need some more time first” as being a primary reason why the organization fails to receive funding. When the organization is “lucky enough to get a government grant,” they are hindered by the guidelines that accompany them. When asked if the organization would operate differently without government funding guidelines, Mr. Cooper responded: “Oooh god yes! If we didn’t have such strict rules that we had to go by, we would be so far, light-

years, ahead.” He explained that the guidelines “definitely restrict” their ability to function. He went as far as to claim, “If the guidelines wasn’t there, we probably wouldn’t even need so many nonprofits.” His reason being that more could be accomplished, lessening the need for each organization.

When asked if he believes the government needs his organization, he had this to say: “Uhm hmm, they definitely need our organizations and other one’s that similar as well.” He elaborated that he does not believe what is being accomplished in communities by his organization, and other nonprofit organizations, would be accomplished without their involvement.

### **Conclusion**

The inequalities in the United States are currently abundant; however, through a symbiotic relationship between nonprofit organizations and the U.S. government, these inequalities can be better addressed. The results of this research reveal that this ideal symbiotic relationship has yet to be fully achieved. The results show an array of issues, on both sides of this relationship that must be addressed. It must be noted that this research not only highlights the problems, but also points to solutions. The literature review and the case studies offer suggestions to improve this relationship so that it may reach its fullest potential. A symbiotic relationship between the government and nonprofit organizations is not only beneficial to both parties involved, but is also beneficial to American minority members.

This work could be considered a clearing exercise. This research set the foundation for more future exploration. While the results are informative, there is more on the relationship to be unearthed. Further case studies with more in-depth questions and interviews would shed more light on the relationship and how it could be improved. One option for future research would be a more specific case study, focused exclusively on one organization and how it interacts with the government including interviews with the state agency with which said organization is most involved. This possible research could also include input from those who receive aid from the specific organization. This would not be generalizable, but could provide substantial information on the government-nonprofit relationship.

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## **Appendix**

### **Interview Questions:**

1. Who does your organization serve?
2. Who do you serve demographically speaking?
3. How many people do you serve?
4. How many years has your organization been in operation?
5. What is the societal impact of your organization?
6. How do government funds impact your ability to function as an organization?
7. Are there difficulties involved in attaining government funds, if so what are they?
8. Do you receive funding before or after services are rendered?
9. How long does it take to receive the funding?
10. What factors contribute to this time frame?
11. How do government funding guidelines impact your ability to function as an organization?

12. What steps must you go through to receive government funding?
13. What are your thoughts regarding government funding guidelines?
14. Would your organization operate differently without government funding guidelines?
15. How would you describe your overall relationship with the state and federal government?
16. Do you believe your organization could operate successfully without the government's aid?
17. Do you believe your organization needs the government's support?