

Introducing the Fourth Wave of the National Congregations Study

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ABSTRACT

The fourth wave of the National Congregations Study (NCS-IV) was conducted in 2018-19 with a nationally representative sample of congregations from across the religious spectrum. The NCS-IV included a fresh cross-section of congregations generated in conjunction with the 2018 General Social Survey and a panel of congregations that participated in the third NCS wave. Data were collected via a 65-minute interview with one key informant from 1,262 congregations. The cooperation rate was 74 percent; the conservatively calculated response rate was 69 percent. Information was gathered about multiple aspects of congregations' social composition, structure, activities, leadership, and programming. Approximately two-thirds of the NCS-IV questionnaire replicates items from previous NCS waves. This introduction to the NCS-IV symposium describes NCS-IV methodology and special features of the new data. The three symposium articles present NCS-IV results about congregations' political activities, racial and ethnic composition, and worship practices.

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INTRODUCTION

Congregations remain the most significant collective expression of American religion, and the National Congregations Study (NCS) -- a survey of a nationally representative sample of congregations from across the religious spectrum -- is an important part of the data infrastructure for studying congregations. The NCS gathers information about multiple aspects of congregations' social composition, structure, activities, leadership, and programming. It has been conducted four times: 1998, 2006-07, 2012, and 2018-19. In this NCS-IV symposium introduction we describe key features of the NCS's fourth wave, conducted in 2018-19.

The NCS-IV essentially replicated the methodology used in Waves I-III, with some differences and enhancements. NCS methodology for earlier waves is described in Chaves et al. (1999) and Chaves and Anderson (2008; 2014). Additional methodological documentation is contained in the very detailed NCS codebook, which is available both on the NCS web site (<https://sites.duke.edu/ncsweb>) and at the Association for Religion Data Archives (www.thearda.com). Consequently, we describe here only the methodological basics and key features of the NCS-IV.

NCS-IV METHODS

Sample

The NCS-IV contains both a new cross-section of congregations generated in conjunction with the 2018 General Social Survey (GSS) and a panel of congregations that participated in the 2012 NCS.

The General Social Survey (GSS) is an in-person survey of a nationally representative sample of non-institutionalized, English- or Spanish-speaking adults (Smith et al. 2019). The 2018 GSS asked respondents who said they attended religious services at least once a year to say where they attend. The congregations named by these respondents constitute a new nationally representative sample of religious congregations in the United States.

This basic strategy for generating NCS samples has been tweaked over the years. For example, in 2018-19 we explicitly asked GSS respondents to use their smart phones to look up their congregation's contact information. Also, when a GSS respondent who should have nominated a congregation did not, or did not provide complete contact information for a nominated congregation, we asked GSS interviewers to tell us more about why that occurred. This enabled us to better distinguish situations in which the GSS respondent was uncomfortable giving us congregational information from situations in which the GSS respondent did not actually attend religious services often enough for us to seek a congregational nomination.

Cognitive pretesting before the 2018 GSS indicated that we are not missing many nontraditional congregations, or congregation-like religious gatherings, by relying on asking people who say they "attend religious services" to tell us where they attend. This pretesting showed that asking people who say that they do not attend religious services if they attend some other sort of religious gathering would not yield many additional congregations that would be appropriate to include in the NCS. When such people mentioned other gatherings, they mainly mentioned weddings and funerals, or stand-alone discussion and self-help groups.

Technological advances have not led to the creation of an adequate national sampling frame for congregations. As of 2018, the Google Places API did not generate a comprehensive, unbiased list of congregations. A list of Christian churches generated by combining Google

Places searches conducted in 2015 and 2018 missed 14 percent of the Christian churches newly nominated for the NCS by 2018 GSS respondents (Pew Research Center 2019:37). Analyses by NCS researchers comparing all NCS-III congregations with those located using the Google Places API in 2015 found that small, rural, evangelical, and black churches all were under-represented in a congregational list generated using that tool. Scott Thumma, at Hartford Seminary, led another recent attempt to generate a comprehensive list of U.S. congregations. He developed his list using hundreds of on-line sources, various printed lists, several commercial providers of congregation lists, and multiple web scraping strategies. This attempt similarly missed about 15 percent of U.S. congregations (Thumma 2020). The bottom line is that, at the launching of the 2018-19 NCS, there still was no list-based sampling strategy that would generate an unbiased national sample of congregations.

In 2018, 1,479 GSS respondents said that they attended religious services at least once a year. Of these, 191 backtracked on their attendance report when asked to name their congregation, 156 either did not name a congregation or named one that could not be located, and 21 mentioned a congregation that was closed, out of the country, or not really a congregation. The remaining 1,111 respondents provided valid congregational nominations, 1,016 of which were unique congregations. Data were gathered from 740 of these congregations.

The 2018 GSS had a smaller than expected sample, consequently generating fewer than expected congregations. To increase the NCS-IV sample size, we supplemented the new cross-section of congregations by including all 830 Wave III congregations that were nominated by GSS respondents who participated in the GSS for the first time in 2012. That is, we did not include Wave III congregations that had been nominated by GSS respondents who were in the

2012 GSS because they were part of the GSS's own panel of re-interviewees. We re-interviewed 597 of these congregations, 75 of which also were nominated anew in 2018. So the panel effort added 522 congregations to the sample. In addition to the 597 congregations that were part of the panel sample, five other congregations nominated in 2018 were also a part of the 2012 sample but not included in the panel. So the NCS-IV sample contains 602 cases on which we also have 2012 data. Although this panel component was added to the NCS-IV primarily to increase sample size, it will enable analysts to study within-congregation change in new ways.

All in all, the NCS-IV gathered data from 1,262 congregations. The cumulative NCS I-IV dataset contains data from 5,333 congregations. Some of these participated in more than one NCS wave because of the panel components in Waves II and IV. Taking these into account, the cumulative dataset contains information from 4,469 unique congregations.

Data Collection

Data were gathered by NORC at the University of Chicago between July 2018 and September 2019. One key informant from each congregation, usually a clergy person, was interviewed. Seventy-five percent of interviews were with clergy, 94 percent were with staff of some sort, and the remaining 6 percent were with non-staff congregational leaders. The median interview lasted 65 minutes. We attempted to conduct these interviews by telephone, but we visited congregations to make appointments or to conduct in-person interviews if necessary. Ninety-one percent of the interviews were conducted by phone; 9 percent were conducted in person.

Because so few NCS interviews in previous waves were conducted in Spanish even though we had a fully translated Spanish questionnaire, we did not translate the Wave IV

questionnaire into Spanish. We did, however, employ bilingual interviewers to conduct impromptu Spanish interviews when necessary. Seventeen Wave IV interviews were conducted either all in Spanish or in a combination of English and Spanish. No sampled congregation was excluded because no appropriate key informant spoke English or Spanish well enough to be interviewed. Data were gathered from 1,262 congregations.

Responses to open-ended questions have been coded into sets of variables. We usually double-coded open-ended items, refining the codes and coding rules until we achieved an inter-rater reliability of at least 80 percent. Researchers interested in working directly with the verbatim responses may request them via a restricted-data access agreement.

Congregations were geocoded and placed in census blocks. A small number of variables derived either from the United States decennial census or the American Community Survey are included in the public dataset. Researchers interested in appending additional census variables (or other contextual data) may request geographical information via a restricted-data access agreement.

Weighting the Data

The probability that a congregation appears in the NCS sample is proportional to its size: larger congregations are more likely to be in the sample than smaller congregations. Retaining or undoing this over-representation of larger congregations corresponds to viewing the data either from the perspective of attendees at the average congregation or from the perspective of the average congregation, without respect to its size. See Chaves and Anderson (2008:418) for further elaboration of this feature of the NCS sample.

Weights provided in the NCS public dataset allow analysts to adjust for this probability-

proportional-to-size feature of the sample, as well as for duplicate nominations, the two-stage sampling design that the GSS began using in 2004, the NCS-III oversample of congregations nominated by Hispanics, and the panel components in Waves II and IV. Users should become familiar with the several available weights, though for most purposes analysts will want to weight the data by WT_ALL4_CONG_DUP when examining the data from the average congregation's perspective and by WT_ALL4_ATTENDEE when examining the data from the average attendee's perspective. These weights allow analysts to treat each wave of NCS data as representative of the population of United States congregations in that year. The NCS weights are described in detail in the NCS codebook.

Response Rate and Nonresponse Bias

The NCS-IV cooperation rate – the percentage of contacted congregations who agreed to participate – was 74 percent. The response rate, calculated in line with the RR3 response rate developed by the American Association for Public Opinion Research (2016:62), but not taking account of the GSS's own response rate, was 69 percent. Incorporating the 2018 GSS's own 59 percent weighted response rate reduces the NCS-IV response rate to 49 percent.

We care about response rates only as proxies for nonresponse bias. Direct assessment of nonresponse bias in the NCS gives little reason for concern. We know the location and denomination of congregations that declined to participate, and we know the race of GSS respondents who nominated non-participating congregations. We also know the location, denomination, and race of GSS respondents who did not nominate a congregation even though they said that they attend religious services. Hence, we can directly assess nonresponse bias on these characteristics by comparing their distributions for congregations that participated in the

NCS-IV to the distributions we would have obtained with a 100 percent response rate. These comparisons show very little nonresponse bias on any of these variables. The details of these analyses are available upon request.

CONCLUSION

The NCS-IV provides rich data gathered from a nationally representative sample of American religious congregations in 2018-19. These data can be used to study many features of contemporary congregations, and the many ways in which they have changed, or not, since 1998. The articles in this symposium examine three of those features: worship practices, racial and ethnic diversity, and political activities. These articles contribute important new knowledge, but they only scratch the surface of what can be learned about these subjects using the NCS. And they of course do not encompass the many other subjects that can be examined with these data. In addition to topics from earlier NCS waves that the NCS-IV asked about again, the NCS-IV contains information on previously unexamined congregational characteristics and activities such as endorsing the prosperity gospel, providing disaster relief, conducting same-sex marriages, sponsoring refugees, and offering sanctuary for immigrants.

The NCS-IV also gathered detailed staffing information that was used to conduct a follow-up survey of clergy who serve NCS-IV congregations. This follow-up survey, the National Survey of Religious Leaders (NSRL), funded by the John Templeton Foundation, is a natural extension of the NCS. It will provide information from a nationally representative sample of congregational leaders about their characteristics, attitudes, knowledge, and behaviors in a wide range of arenas. Together, the NCS-IV and NSRL will provide an even richer portrait of congregations and those who lead them. NSRL data and results should be publicly available

sometime in 2021.

The 1998 NCS became a baseline from which to study 20 years of stability and change in congregations. We did not anticipate that the NCS-IV also would serve as a baseline, but it turned out that these data were gathered on the eve of the COVID-19 pandemic. This pandemic, and the economic crisis it caused, have had dramatic short-term effects on congregations' worship practices, technology use, finances, building use, and community activities. The NCS-IV gathered data on all of this, data that will provide a baseline for examining the medium and long-term consequences of COVID-19 on American religion.

In the meantime, we hope readers and researchers will find the new NCS data to be a valuable resource in the ongoing effort to advance knowledge about American religion.

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