

Appendix A. Methodological details of the Little Rock Congregations Study

The Little Rock Congregations Study is a longitudinal research project that began in 2012 and has had 5 data collection efforts:

- In 2012, 66 congregation leaders were surveyed, 15 congregation leaders were interviewed, 452 congregation members at 5 different places of worship were surveyed, and 20 congregation members at those same 5 places of worship were interviewed. The clergy response rate for survey participation in 2012 was 16.1% (66/409). In retrospect, we suspect that this denominator is somewhat inflated because some places of worship listed in public records were not functioning. As our small research project was just starting, without many community connections or resources to follow up on all 409 congregations, some non-existent congregations were likely included in this initial denominator.
- In 2016, 84 congregation leaders were surveyed, 65 congregation leaders were interviewed, 1,475 congregation members at 17 different places of worship were surveyed, and 99 congregation members participated in focus groups at those same 17 places of worship. In 2016 the response rate for congregation leaders was 21.4% (84/393).
- In 2018, 114 congregation leaders were surveyed, 18 congregation leaders were interviewed, but no congregation members were contacted in this iteration of the research, which focused specifically on congregational interactions with nonprofits. As our research team expanded, learned more about the community, and eliminated congregations that were no longer in operation, we calculated a clergy response rate for survey participation in 2018 of 31% (114/367).
- In 2019, 112 nonprofit organizations were surveyed about their collaborative relationships with congregations. These data are not discussed here.
- In currently ongoing research in 2020, congregation leaders are once again being surveyed and interviewed, and congregation members will also be surveyed.

In addition to getting a more accurate count of the congregation denominator, another reason for the increasing response rate over time is the fact that our research project has been building trust in the community. When longitudinal community-based research is working well, this is what should be happening. Congregations that have participated in the research in prior iterations should have had a positive experience and be willing to participate again. Clergy who complete a survey and read our community reports should share them with their friends in the ministry who will then be more willing to complete a survey when they hear from us a year or two later. We don't know for certain that this is happening, but we suspect that the increasing response rate is at least partly attributable to increasing trust.

One corollary to increasing trust and reputation building in the community, which researchers should be aware of, is that the goals of the research project may become known. Although we did not share specific hypotheses with participants, our website and Facebook page clearly state that we are studying religion and community engagement in our city. Just knowing this information may attract particular congregations to self-select into participating in the research, to provide responses that they think we are looking for, or even to leave comments about the survey on our Facebook page. As our research team has analyzed responses to our surveys, we have noticed early returns from community-engaged congregations and we have made strategic outreach efforts to other congregations to balance our sample. Researchers should be aware of the unintended consequences of publicizing their research and research goals.

Of course, one feature of a longitudinal study is repeat respondents. For instance, of the 66 congregations that responded in 2012, 28 also responded in 2016. Of these 28, new clergy members had assumed leadership in 16, leaving 12 surveys that are verified repeat surveys of the same clergy member in both 2012 and 2016. In modeling clergy political and community engagement, we found that including or dropping these 12 respondents yielded substantively similar results, indicating that they are not outliers in the data trends that we are interested in [author citation redacted].

Although the Little Rock Congregations Study did not have a project Facebook page until September 10, 2018, the researchers did use Facebook to contact congregations during the 2016 data collection effort. In 2016, researchers used their personal Facebook accounts to send 102 messages inviting congregations to participate. These messages were sent to every congregation who had a Facebook page that could receive messages, including congregations who also got reminders to participate via email.

Of the 102 congregation Facebook pages that we messaged in 2016, 14 returned the survey. Of those 14, only 2 of them did not have email addresses and had not received the reminder to participate via email as well. Three of the 14 Facebook respondents were from congregations that had also participated in 2012. The effect of our Facebook message efforts in 2016 were underwhelming, which leads us to believe that the improved response rate from Facebook message contact in 2018 is at least partially attributable to the presence of a project Facebook page (which we linked to in our message), where potential respondents could easily check our legitimacy.

Another key difference between 2016 and 2018 was that, in 2016, all of the clergy surveys were paper; there were no direct links. So, congregation leaders who were reminded of the survey via Facebook still had to find the paper survey in the mail, complete it, and mail it back to us. In 2018, when we sent the Facebook messages, we were able to include a direct link to the electronic survey as well. This simplified process likely helped increase the number of responses.