



AMERICAN
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SURVEY

The decline of religion in American family life

Findings from the November 2019 American Perspectives Survey

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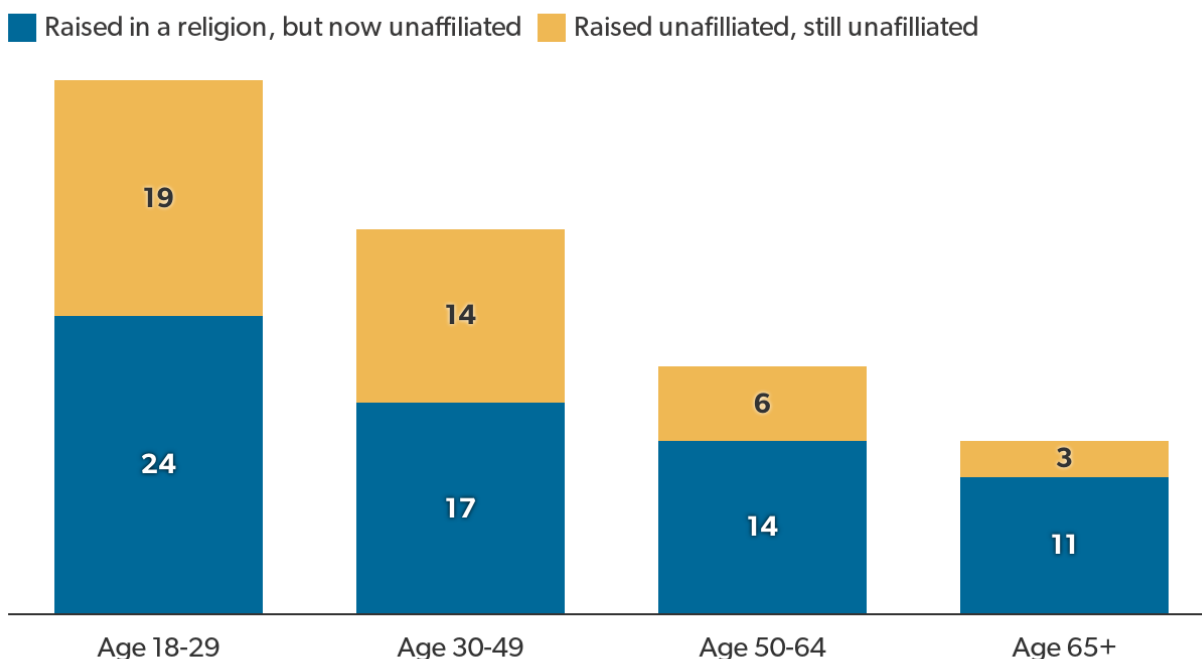
Generational Differences in Religious Upbringing

Most Americans today continue to be raised in a religious denomination or tradition. Only 12 percent of Americans report being raised outside a formal religious tradition. Half (50 percent) report being raised Protestant, close to three in 10 (29 percent) say they were raised Catholic, and significantly fewer Americans were brought up Mormon (2 percent), Jewish (2 percent), Muslim (1 percent), Orthodox (1 percent), or something else (1 percent).

However, there are significant differences in the religious upbringing of Americans across generations. Young adults (age 18 to 29) are far more likely to have been raised without religion than are seniors (age 65 or older). Roughly one in five (22 percent) young adults report that they were not raised in any particular religion, compared to only 3 percent of seniors. Notably, the proportion of young adults who have always been religiously unaffiliated is nearly as large as those who have left religion to become unaffiliated.

Close to Half of Young Unaffiliated Americans Were Raised in Nonreligious Households

Percentage of Americans in each group who were . . .



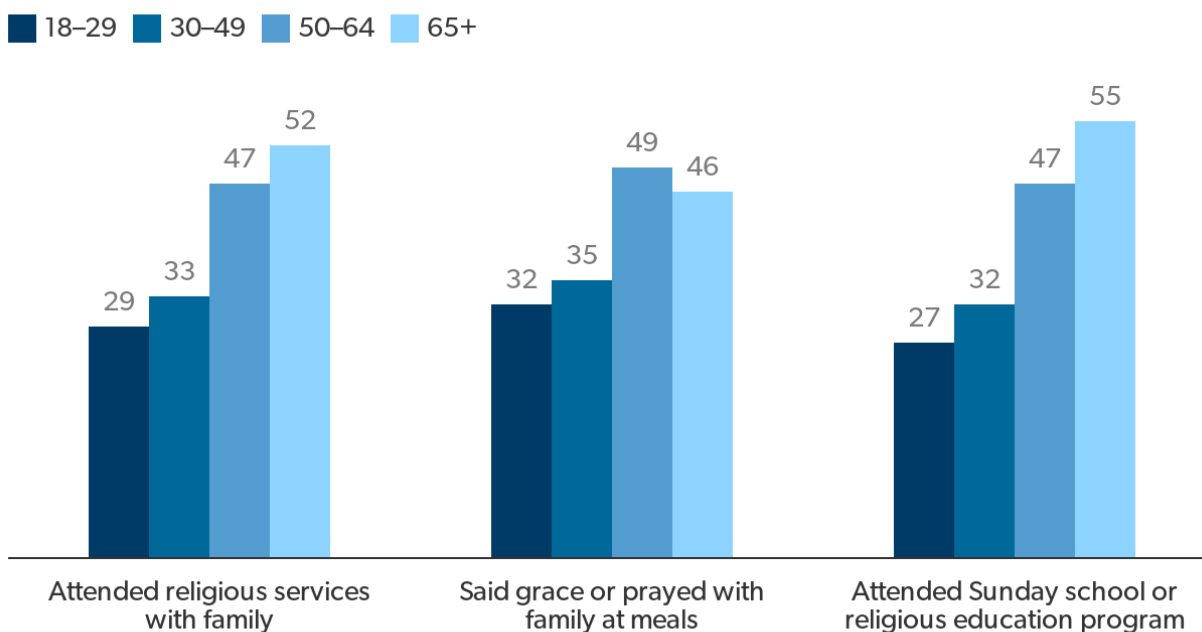
Survey of US adults [N=2,561] conducted November 13-14, 2019.
Source: American Perspectives Survey, November 2019.

Younger Americans have had less robust religious experiences during their childhood than previous generations have. Fewer than one in three (29 percent) young adults say they attended religious services with their family at least weekly when they were growing up. More than half (52 percent) of seniors say the same. About one-third (32 percent) of young adults say they never attended religious services during their formative years. Young adults also report lower rates of

attending Sunday school or other religious education programs as children. Only 27 percent of young adults say they attended Sunday school at least weekly. Among seniors, more than half (55 percent) say they attended Sunday school or a similar type of religious program during their childhood.

Young Adults Participated Less Often in Religious Activities Growing Up

Percentage who participated in the following activities at least once a week growing up . . .



Survey of US adults [N=2,561] conducted November 13-14, 2019.
Source: American Perspectives Survey, November 2019.

A similar pattern is evident in religious activities in the home. About one in three (32 percent) young adults report that they said grace or prayed with their family at meals at least once a week during their childhood. Nearly half (46 percent) of seniors say the same. Young adults are about twice as likely as seniors to say they never said grace or prayed at mealtime (38 percent vs. 21 percent). Young adults are about as likely as seniors to say they read scripture or prayed with their family at least once a week growing up (26 percent vs. 30 percent), but young adults are significantly more likely to say they never did (44 percent vs. 32 percent). Young adults are also more likely than seniors to say that they never participated in religious holidays in their home growing up. Nearly one in four (24 percent) young adults report never celebrating religious holidays, compared to 11 percent of seniors.

Divorced Parents, Interfaith Families, and Childhood Religious Activities. Generational differences in religious upbringing come down to parenting decisions and priorities. However, structural changes in family life may play a role as well. Americans raised by divorced or

separated parents report less robust religious experiences during their childhood. Close to half (47 percent) of Americans raised by parents who were married during their formative years say they attended worship services at least once a week with their family growing up. In contrast, only 28 percent of Americans raised in households with divorced or separated parents report this frequency of religious attendance. There is a similar-sized gap in Sunday school attendance. About half (47 percent) of Americans growing up in households with married parents report attending Sunday school or a religious education program weekly or more often, compared to 27 percent of those raised by divorced or separated parents. Finally, Americans whose parents were married are more likely to have regularly said grace or prayed with their family during mealtimes than those whose parents were divorced or separated (44 percent vs. 32 percent).

This effect is evident across generations. The difference between younger adults (age 18 to 34) raised by divorced or separated parents and those raised by married parents mirrors the national gap. For example, younger adults with married parents are about twice as likely to say they attended services at least weekly during their childhood as are those whose parents were divorced or separated (41 percent vs. 20 percent).

Another way changes in family life may affect formative religious experiences is the rise of interfaith families. Recent research suggests that one in five Americans are raised with mixed religious backgrounds and that this trend is accelerating.¹ Americans raised by parents with different religious beliefs or identities are less religiously active during childhood. A majority (56 percent) of Americans whose parents have similar religious backgrounds say they attended services with their family at least weekly. In contrast, fewer than half (43 percent) of those with parents who have different religious backgrounds report attending religious services weekly during their childhood. Americans raised by parents with similar religious backgrounds are also more likely to say they prayed or said grace with their families at meals at least once a week (57 percent vs. 41 percent).

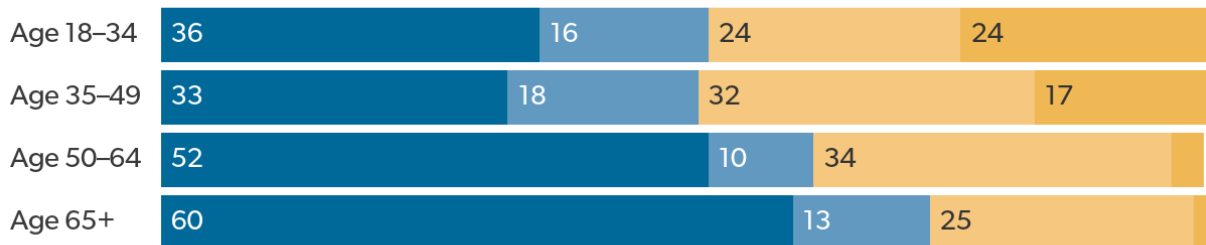
The Decline of Religious Marriages

The shifting religious landscape is also affecting the role religion plays in important life moments. For older married Americans, a religious wedding—officiated by a religious leader and held in a religious venue such as a church—was the most common type of ceremony. Six in 10 (60 percent) married Americans age 65 or older report that they were married by a religious leader in a church or religious setting. Another 13 percent say they were married by a religious official in a nonreligious setting. Roughly one-quarter (27 percent) say their wedding celebration was officiated by a justice of the peace, friend, or family member in a nonreligious location. Younger married Americans (age 18 to 34) are increasingly opting for secular venues and ceremonies. Only 36 percent of younger married Americans say their ceremony was officiated by a religious figure and held in a religious location such as a church or worship center. Sixteen percent say they were married by a religious leader in a nonreligious setting, while nearly half (48 percent) report being married by a different type of officiant in a secular venue.

Religious Weddings Are Much Less Common Among Younger Couples

Percentage who say they were married by a . . .

■ Religious leader, in a church or religious setting
 ■ Religious leader, in a nonreligious setting
 ■ Justice of the peace or other official, in a nonreligious setting
 ■ Friend or family member in a nonreligious setting



Results are based on married adults. Survey of US adults [N=2,561] conducted November 13–14, 2019.

Source: American Perspectives Survey, November 2019.

There is evidence that this trend will continue. Among Americans who have never been married, only 30 percent say they would prefer to be married in a church or other house of worship by a religious leader. Fourteen percent say they would like to be married by a religious leader in a nonreligious setting, while the majority (56 percent) say they would prefer to have their wedding officiated by a justice of the peace, friend, or family member in a nonreligious location.

Married Americans who had no religious affiliation growing up are far more likely to have had a secular wedding service. More than seven in 10 (71 percent) married Americans who were raised in a nonreligious household, compared to only 36 percent of those who were raised in a religion, report that they were married by a justice of the peace, family member, or friend in a secular setting.

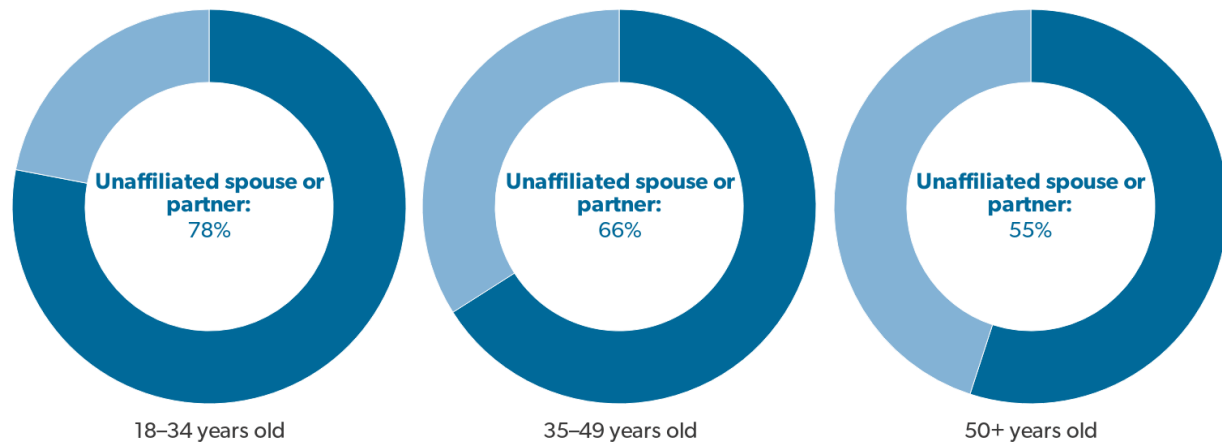
The most important reason couples decide to have a secular wedding service is also the most obvious: They are not religious. Sixty-nine percent of unaffiliated Americans with an unaffiliated spouse report that they had a secular service. Fewer unaffiliated people with a religious spouse (51 percent) say their ceremony was conducted by a justice of peace, friend, or family member in a nonreligious location.

The Rise of Secular Couples. Today, two-thirds (66 percent) of unaffiliated Americans who are married or living with a partner report that their spouse or partner is also unaffiliated, but this was not always the case. According to the General Social Survey, in the 1970s only about one-third (34 percent) of married Americans who were religiously unaffiliated reported that their spouse was also unaffiliated.² The majority of unaffiliated Americans of that era had a spouse who was religious.³

Younger Unaffiliated Americans Are More Likely to Have Spouses or Partners Who Are Also Unaffiliated

Unaffiliated with . . .

■ Unaffiliated spouse or partner ■ Religious spouse or partner



Survey of US adults [N=2,561] conducted November 13–14, 2019.
Source: American Perspectives Survey, November 2019.

Notably, younger unaffiliated Americans are more likely to have spouses or partners with similar beliefs than are those who are older. Nearly eight in 10 (78 percent) younger unaffiliated Americans (age 18 to 34) say their spouse or partner is also unaffiliated. Among unaffiliated Americans age 50 or older, slightly more than half (55 percent) report that their spouse shares the same religious identity.

Religious Disaffiliation: Who Leaves and When

Approximately one in five (19 percent) Americans raised in a religious tradition no longer identify with any religion as an adult. But patterns of religious disaffiliation are not constant across demographic and political identities.

Younger Americans report much greater rates of disaffiliation than do older Americans. Three in 10 (30 percent) young adults raised in a religious tradition growing up say they no longer affiliate with one as an adult. Among seniors, only 11 percent of those raised in a religion are currently unaffiliated.

There are sharp political differences in patterns of religious disaffiliation as well. Democrats brought up in religious households are roughly three times more likely than Republicans to have left religion. Nearly one in four (23 percent) Democrats brought up in a religion no longer identify with a religious tradition, while only 8 percent of Republicans say the same.

Childhood religious activity also is strongly related to current patterns of religious affiliation. Americans raised in homes with more robust religious experiences are less likely to disaffiliate

from religion entirely. More than one-third (35 percent) of Americans who were raised in a religious tradition but report very low levels of childhood engagement growing up now identify as religiously unaffiliated.⁴ In contrast, only 7 percent of Americans raised in a religious tradition who report very high levels of religious activity during their formative years have disaffiliated.

Age of Disaffiliation. Although higher education has frequently been offered as an explanation for the lower rates of religious adherence among young adults, most Americans who have become religiously unaffiliated report that they disaffiliated before they turned 18. Fifty-seven percent of Americans who disaffiliated say they did so before reaching adulthood, about one-third (35 percent) report that they disaffiliated between the age of 18 and 29, and only 9 percent say they left after the age of 30.

Young people are particularly likely to leave during their formative years. Seventy percent of young adults who have left their childhood religion to become unaffiliated report that they stopped identifying with their childhood religion when they were younger than 18 years old. Among seniors who have disaffiliated, 49 percent left religion during adolescence, while 51 percent left after they turned 18.

Looking for Religion? Few Americans who are currently religiously unaffiliated report that they are looking for a religion. Only 5 percent of unaffiliated Americans say they are now looking for a religion that would be right for them. Ninety-five percent say they are not doing this.

Are Parents Still Raising Children in Religion?

Most Americans say that raising children in a religion is important for providing moral guidance and instilling proper values. Roughly two-thirds (65 percent) of the public agree that raising children in a religion is important so they can learn good values. Only about one-third (35 percent) disagree. However, there are considerable differences of opinion by age. Fewer than half (48 percent) of young adults agree that raising children in a religious community is important to provide a moral foundation. A majority (53 percent) of young adults say this is not the case. In contrast, more than three-quarters (76 percent) of seniors say bringing children up in religion is crucial to instill good values.

Generational differences in views about the importance of religious education are largely driven by varying rates of religious affiliation across age cohorts. A majority (69 percent) of young adults who belong to a religious tradition agree that bringing up children in religion is important to teach them good values. This view is held by only 19 percent of young adults who are unaffiliated. However, even among religiously affiliated adults, views about the importance of religious upbringing differ by age. Religious young adults are less likely to agree that raising children in a religion is important than are religious seniors, 85 percent of whom agree.

Religious Activities in the Household. Close to half (44 percent) of parents with children under the age of 18 say they pray or read scripture with their children. More than four in 10 (42 percent) say they take them to religious services regularly, while a similar number (38 percent) report that they send their children to Sunday school or some other religious education program.

The level of religious engagement is noticeably higher among religious parents. Parents who are religiously affiliated are much more likely than those who are unaffiliated to report that they pray or read scripture with their children (55 percent vs. 14 percent), take them to religious services (53 percent vs. 11 percent), or send them to Sunday school (47 percent vs. 12 percent).

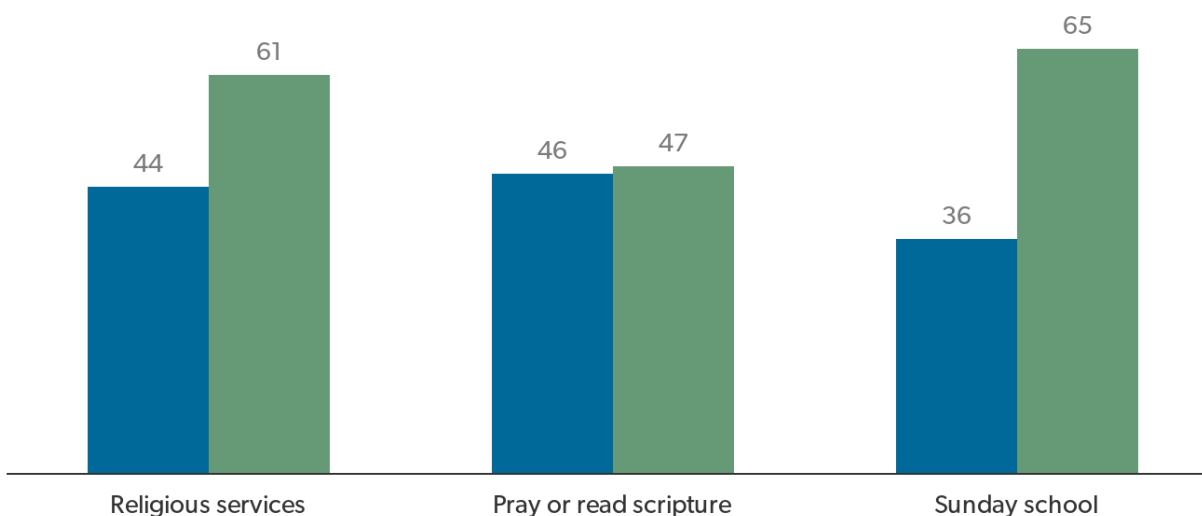
The pattern of religious involvement among young parents (age 18 to 34) with children under the age of 18 does not differ appreciably from parents overall with children in this age range. Nearly half (46 percent) of young parents say they pray or read scripture with their children. More than four in 10 (44 percent) say they attend religious services with them regularly, but only 36 percent say they send them to Sunday school or another religious education program.

However, older parents with grown children report being much more religiously engaged with their children during their formative years.⁵ Among parents age 65 or older who have grown children, nearly two-thirds (65 percent) say they sent them to Sunday school or some other religious education program, and more than six in 10 (61 percent) say they regularly took them to religious services. Notably, older parents are not more likely to have prayed or read scripture with their children when they were young. Fewer than half (47 percent) of older parents say they read scripture or prayed with their children growing up.

Younger Parents Are Less Likely to Participate in Religious Activities with Their Children

Percentage of parents . . .

- Aged 18-34 who participate in these activities with their children under age 18
- Aged 65+ who participated in these activities with their now-adult children when they were growing up



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Source: American Perspectives Survey, November 2019.

Given that younger parents are much more likely to have young children, it is worth considering whether lower levels of religious activity in these households are affected by the age of the child or children. Compared to parents with young children (age 0 to 6), parents with school-age

children (age 7 to 12) are more likely to report higher levels of religious engagement in their household. Parents with school-age children are more likely to participate in regular religious attendance with their children (49 percent vs. 37 percent), pray or read scripture with their children (57 percent vs. 42 percent), and send their children to Sunday school (45 percent vs. 27 percent).⁶ However, parents with teenage children report lower levels of religious involvement. Among parents with children living at home who are between the age of 13 and 17, only 36 percent report praying or reading scripture with them, 40 percent report sending them to Sunday school, and 46 percent report taking them to religious services regularly.

Interfaith Families, Formative Religious Experiences, and Children's Religious

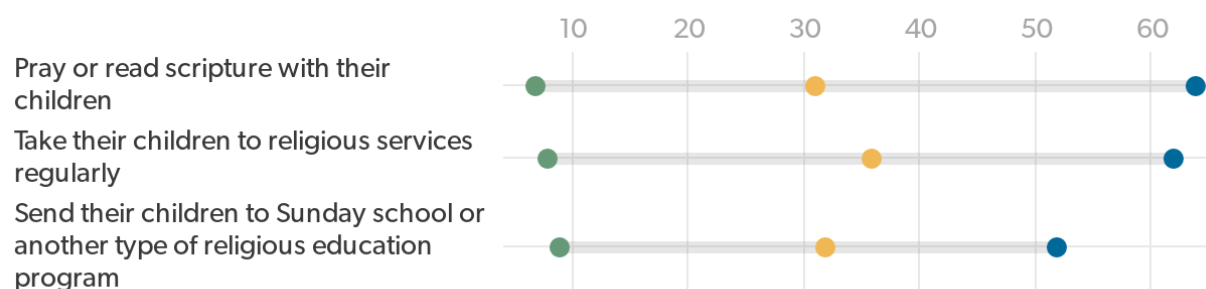
Engagement. A recent study found that about only six in 10 new marriages included people who belonged to the same religious tradition.⁷ The rise of interfaith families matters because parental religious homophily is closely tied to children's religious participation. When parents share the same religious identity, they are much more likely to involve their children in religious activities both inside and outside the home.⁸ A majority of parents who share the same religious identity as their spouses or partners say they pray or read scripture with their children (64 percent), take their children to religious services regularly (62 percent), or send them to Sunday school or another religious education program (52 percent).

In contrast, parents who have spouses or partners with different religious backgrounds report lower levels of religious engagement with their children.⁹ About three in 10 among couples with differing religious beliefs pray or read scripture with their children (31 percent), attend religious services with them (36 percent), or send them to a religious education program (32 percent). Finally, unaffiliated couples with children under age 18 report even lower levels of religious activity in their household.¹⁰ Less than one in 10 unaffiliated parents with unaffiliated spouses or

Parents Who Share the Same Religious Backgrounds Are More Likely to Participate in Religious Activities with Their Children

Percentage who participate in activity with their children . . .

● Religious parents with the same religious identity ● Religious parents with different religious backgrounds OR one religious parent, one unaffiliated parent ● Religiously unaffiliated parents



Results are based on two parent households with children who are younger than 18 years of age.
Survey of US adults [N=2,561] conducted November 13–14, 2019.
Source: American Perspectives Survey, November 2019.

partners pray or read scripture with their children (7 percent), attend religious services with them (8 percent), or send their children to a religious education program (9 percent).¹¹

The importance of formative religious experiences is also evident. Among Americans who report very low levels of religious activity during their childhood, only 11 percent pray or read with their children now, only 7 percent take them to religious services regularly, and only 7 percent send them to Sunday school. Those with robust religious exposure when they were growing up report being very religiously active with their children. Americans with very high levels of religious involvement during their childhood are about 10 times more likely to pray or read with their children (87 percent), attend worship services with them (84 percent), or send them to Sunday school (80 percent).

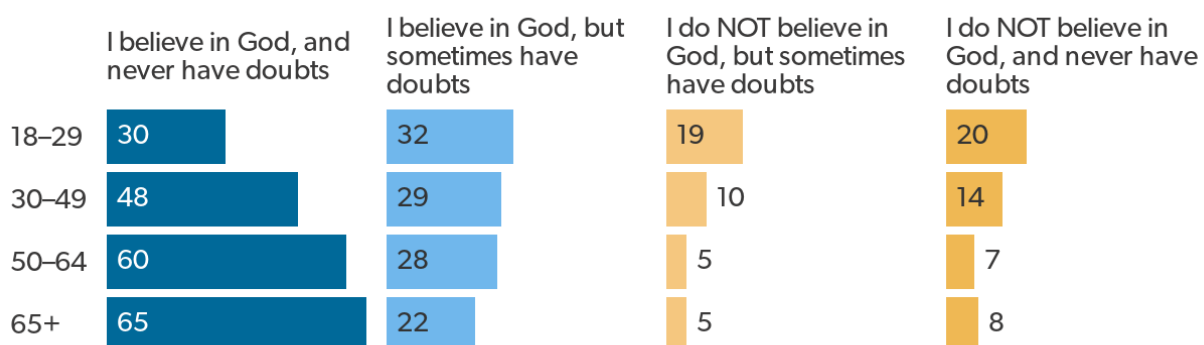
Young People Express Greater Uncertainty About God

Although the overwhelming majority of Americans believe in God, previous research has found that religious uncertainty is common among both believers and nonbelievers.¹² Consistent with this work, we find that religious doubting is fairly common among the public. More than half (51 percent) of Americans say they believe in God without any doubt. Twenty-eight percent say they believe in God but sometimes have doubts. About one in five Americans do not believe in God, including 9 percent who express some uncertainty about their lack of belief and 12 percent who say they never have doubts.

There are yawning generational divisions in views about God. Only 30 percent of young adults (age 18 to 29) say they believe in God without ever questioning their belief. About one-third (32 percent) say they believe in God but have doubts. One in five (20 percent) say they do not believe in God and never question their view, while 19 percent say they do not believe but have doubts occasionally. In contrast, nearly two-thirds (65 percent) of seniors say they believe in God without ever having doubts. Twenty-two percent say they believe in God but express some

Young Adults Report Much Less Certainty in Their Belief About God

Percentage who say they . . .



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Source: American Perspectives Survey, November 2019.

uncertainty about it. Only 13 percent say they do not believe in God, and only 8 percent say they have no doubts about this belief.

The higher rate of uncertainty in belief about God among young adults is not solely due to the disproportionate share of young people who are unaffiliated. Religiously affiliated young adults report higher rates of religious doubting than do older affiliated adults. About half (45 percent) of young adults who are religiously affiliated report that they never doubt their belief in the existence of God, compared to 74 percent of religiously affiliated seniors who say the same.

Americans are divided over whether being moral is contingent on a belief in God. Close to half (48 percent) of Americans say it is necessary to believe in God to be moral and have good values while about as many (52 percent) disagree.

Views about the relationship between belief in God and morality differs significantly across generational lines. Only about one-third (35 percent) of young adults say that a belief in God is requisite to be moral, while more than half (52 percent) of seniors say it is.

Young People Express More Ambivalence About Religion

The public is divided over the degree to which religious people are tolerant of others. Close to half (47 percent) of Americans say religious people are generally less tolerant of others, while a majority (53 percent) disagree with this statement.

Young adults express much more skepticism about religious people than do older adults. Nearly six in 10 (59 percent) young people say religious people are generally less tolerant, while only 34 percent of seniors agree. Two-thirds (66 percent) of seniors disagree with this statement.

There are yawning partisan differences in views about religious people. More than six in 10 (61 percent) Democrats, compared to only 30 percent of Republicans, believe that religious people are generally less tolerant of others.

Most Americans reject the idea that religion causes more problems in society than it solves. A majority (56 percent) of the public say they disagree with the notion that religion brings more problems than solutions, although 45 percent agree.

Views about the societal benefits of religion differ markedly across generations. A majority (55 percent) of young adults agree that religion causes more problems for society than it solves, a view held by only 32 percent of seniors. More than two-thirds (68 percent) of seniors disagree, including 47 percent who completely disagree.

Notes

¹ Pew Research Center, *One-in-Five U.S. Adults Were Raised in Interfaith Homes: A Closer Look at Religious Mixing in American Families*, October 26, 2016, <https://www.pewforum.org/2016/10/26/one-in-five-u-s-adults-were-raised-in-interfaith-homes/>

² Tom Smith et al., “General Social Surveys, 1972–2018 Cross-Sectional Cumulative Data,” NORC at the University of Chicago, 2019, https://gssdataexplorer.norc.umd.edu/pages/show?page=gss%2Fgss_data.

³ The level of religious agreement among unaffiliated couples is still lower than it is for most religious groups. For instance, 90 percent of white evangelical Protestants in relationships report having a Protestant spouse or partner.

⁴ This analysis is based on an additive scale that combined all five measures of childhood religious engagement that identified five separate categories of childhood religious engagement: very high, high, moderate, low, and very low.

⁵ The survey included an identical set of questions posed to two distinct groups of parents: Those with children under the age of 18 currently living at home and parents who have grown children (age 18 or older). This analysis compares young parents (age 18–34) with children currently living at home with older parents (age 65 or older) with grown children. Parents of grown children were asked about the religious activities they participated in with their children when “they were growing up.”

⁶ For ease of comparison, this analysis of parents with children in different age categories does not include parents who have children in multiple age categories.

⁷ Caryle Murphy, “Interfaith Marriage Is Common in U.S., Particularly Among the Recently Wed,” Pew Research Center, June 2, 2015, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/06/02/interfaith-marriage/>

⁸ This analysis is based on married parents with children under the age of 18.

⁹ Couples with “different religious backgrounds” includes couples affiliated with two different religions and couples in which one person is religious and the other is unaffiliated.

¹⁰ Results for unaffiliated parents of children under age 18 whose spouses are also unaffiliated are based on fewer than 100 respondents and should be interpreted with caution.

¹¹ This analysis is based on a group that includes only 89 respondents and should be interpreted with caution.

¹² Daniel A. Cox, “Doubting Disbelievers: A New Approach to Measuring Religious Uncertainty,” American Enterprise Institute, April 1, 2019, <https://www.aei.org/research-products/report/doubting-disbelievers-a-new-approach-to-measuring-religious-uncertainty/>.