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# Methodological Issues and Challenges in the Study of American Youth and Religion

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# General Introduction

Research on the religious and spiritual lives of American youth can involve methodological issues and challenges different from those encountered when studying adults, or when not exploring religious factors in the lives of youth. This report provides an introductory overview of some of those issues and challenges. It is written for interested researchers who are less experienced in studying youth and religion, as well as for consumers of research who are interested in improving their ability to assess the value of research findings. This is not a comprehensive, technical manual or textbook in research methods, but rather a general survey of some of the more important problems, questions, and choices that arise in the study of American youth and religion.

The following pages contain three major sections. This first section is a general introduction to key issues in the study of youth and religion. The following sections focus on issues particular to quantitative and qualitative research approaches to studying youth and religion.

## Research Design

There are several things to be aware of when studying the unique population of American youth. First, youth are often a difficult population to study. They tend to be very busy and mobile. The demands of school, sports, and other extracurricular activities create often-unpredictable schedules. This can make it challenging for researchers to find youth at home and difficult for them to find time to complete the requirements of the research project. The lives of American youth also make last minute schedule changes common, and parents may not always be aware of their children's schedules or even where their children are at any one time.

Given the unpredictability in obtaining cooperation from youth, many researchers have found that the best times in the year to conduct research are between September and November (the end of summer vacation until Thanksgiving) and between January and March. Holidays tend to be times when youth are very busy and often away on vacations. For high school seniors particularly, availability becomes a problem after the fall, when many are preparing mentally for college and it is often difficult to track them down and to get their attention. When youth do offer an opportunity to the researcher, it is wise to take advantage of the opening, since it may not come again.

Youth, as minors, are also normally considered a vulnerable population. As a result, research involving youth requires an awareness of certain concerns related to study design, sampling

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## *Youth are often a difficult population to study.*

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procedures, human subjects approval, parental consent, and many other issues that arise when studying this unique population. Furthermore, interest in studying the religious and spiritual lives of youth in particular creates added challenges, requiring sensitivity not only to issues in religious measurement generally, but also to the particularities of the categories and texture of religion and spirituality in the lives of youth today.

There are multiple potential approaches to studying youth and religion. Two immediate issues are the general research design and sampling method. While closely linked, these are two distinct questions that will be determined primarily by the researcher's interest and the particular issues one desires to study. In what follows, we outline the major alternative choices in research design and sampling methods.

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The quantitative approach to research with youth typically involves administering a survey questionnaire to a sample of respondents. If researchers decide a survey is the best way to gather their data, there are several options for administering the survey:

**Telephone Survey.** The survey research firm generates or buys a sample of telephone numbers and trained telephone interviewers call these numbers, screen for households with youth, and administer the survey questions over the telephone. This design usually takes advantage of technology in which the survey and survey response recording are computerized, providing an efficient way to obtain answers to a relatively large number of questions in a limited amount of time.

**Face-to-Face In-Home Survey.** A sample of households with youth in residence is generated and trained interviewers go to their homes to conduct the survey in person. Often, the interviewer asks the questions and records the answers either via pencil-and-paper or by entering them on a laptop computer. For particularly sensitive questions, the interviewee can record his or her own answers directly into the laptop or onto the paper so the respondent does not have to answer directly to the interviewer.

**In-School Survey.** In this design, researchers obtain the permission of school officials to administer a survey to students during school hours. This design provides a means to sample a large group of youth with relative efficiency; it also implies school-roster sampling and requires the full cooperation of schools.

**Mail Survey.** A sample of youth is generated using a mailing list. Selected individuals or households are then mailed surveys, asked to complete the pencil-and-paper survey, and return it to the

researcher by mail. Response rates for this type of survey tend to be much lower than other methods, since more initiative is required of the respondent.

There are many aspects of the religious and spiritual lives of American youth that cannot be adequately investigated using quantitative survey research. Qualitative research methods provide a variety of alternative options for exploring these issues:

**In-Depth Interviews.** A common method in qualitative research is the in-depth interview with individual youth. Interviews differ from surveys in that they involve open-ended questions that give respondents more opportunity to explain their answers, and interviewers the chance to follow-up on various questions in order to probe for more information from respondents. Interviews with youth often last about two hours and follow a general outline of questions, although there is much more freedom for variation in interviews than with surveys. Interviews can be arranged to take place in the youth's home, at a designated research location, or at a convenient public meeting place, such as a library, restaurant, etc.

**Focus Groups.** Rather than interviewing individual youth one at a time, this design brings together groups of youth interactively to discuss issues of interest. In a group format, participants are presented with questions that they discuss. Skilled researchers who ask questions and generate discussion among the participants best facilitate focus groups. An alternative approach is to have no researcher present, but instead to provide the participants with a discussion or question guide, and videotape the resulting conversation.

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**Participant Observation.** This type of investigation involves researchers immersing themselves in the life contexts of the youth being studied, in an attempt to understand better their natural environments, situations, interactions, and experiences. This means becoming a part of the normal worlds of youth, attending church and youth group meetings with them, spending time in their schools and homes, and being present in a variety of other circumstances in which youth interact. Participant observation may be very focused on specific individuals (for example, choosing a small number of youth and immersing oneself in their daily routines). Or it may involve a broader study of a larger group (for instance, participating in the events of the senior class at a high school).

One issue to consider in research on youth and religion is the role of parents in the lives of youth. Some research questions will lead the researcher to be interested in gathering information from parents as well as from youth. This adds another important data-collection element to the research design. There are several ways to incorporate parents into the study designs mentioned above. The type of research conducted with parents will be dependent on the questions being asked. Including parents in research also presents new issues to be considered in the research process. Throughout this report, we will mention additional issues to take into consideration when parents are included in a research design.

## Sampling Methods

A crucial aspect to any successful research project is the sampling of respondents to be used in the research. Sampling methods are often somewhat dictated by the type of research being conducted. However, choice of sampling methods is in-and-of-itself a major decision to consider carefully. The first step is to determine the target population, which is the group that the researcher is interested in studying and making claims about. One must then select a method that generates a

sample that adequately represents this target population.

There are two broad types of samples: probability and non-probability samples. Probability sampling is typically preferable and more scientifically reliable, although it may not always be logistically or economically feasible. The logic of probability sampling is that all people in a given target population have a known probability of being included in the sample. In the case of a truly

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random sample, this probability is equal for all people in the target population. A probability sample is designed to closely resemble the larger population, and therefore the characteristics of the sample can be generalized to the population. Probability samples tend to be more difficult and costly to obtain, since they require a more systematic and comprehensive strategy for selecting the sample. But if representativeness of a given population is an important goal of the research, efforts must be made to obtain a probability sample.

In a non-probability sample, cases are not selected systematically or randomly, and therefore cannot be said to be representative of the target population. There are times when the goal of research is not to describe accurately a bounded population, but instead to generate some initial understanding of an issue or problem through an in-depth study of a specific case or group. Non-probability samples can suffice in these situations. In all cases, however, it should be the overarching research goals (along with the resources

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available to the researcher) that drive the type of sampling method and research design of the study.

Recognize too that there are sometimes several levels or stages in generating a sample. In these cases, each level of the sample must be generated using probability methods in order for the sample to be truly represen-

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tative. For example, it is possible to develop a probability sample of schools, but then fail to randomly select the students within the schools. On the other hand, one may select a group of schools through non-probability methods, but then use random selection when generating the sample from within each school. There may be justifiable reasons for combining probability and non-probability methods. But whatever the process, the chosen research methods should be clearly described and the level of representation accurately presented to the consumers of the research findings. The social research methodologists, Singleton, Straits, and Straits (*Approaches to Social Research, 2nd edition*. 1993. New York:Oxford University Press), present four questions to consider when deciding on a sampling method:

- What is the stage of research?
- How will the data be used?
- What are the available resources for drawing the sample?
- How will the data be collected?

In general, the precision and generalizability of the sample depend upon the purpose of the research. Often, beginning stages of research are used to get a sense for some of the issues and patterns at hand to guide future research. In this case, a non-probability sample may provide helpful information without the expense and time of a more precise random sample. But data that will be used to make generalizations about a larger population or to formulate public policy need to be much more precise.

Another significant factor is the resources available for data collection and analysis. Probability samples are often more costly and time-consuming to obtain. Therefore, a researcher must consider the balance between the goals of the research and the resources available. Finally, the method of data collection will be linked to sampling methods. Survey research tends to lend itself to probability sampling. With qualitative research, such as participant observation or in-depth interviews, it is often not as feasible to ensure a representative sample. In these cases, non-probability samples are often an acceptable means of gathering data.

The main available methods of probability sampling include the following:

**Random Digit Dialing (RDD).** This method is used when conducting telephone surveys. A sampling firm uses a computer program to generate phone numbers in proportion to existing phones in area codes and exchanges in order to achieve a sample that is nationally representative. This is one of the most effective ways to achieve a random telephone sample. However, this sampling method excludes households without a telephone and people without permanent residences (typically the poor and younger adults). There are also potential problems with households that have multiple phone lines or lines dedicated to Internet use. These households may have a

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higher probability of being targeted, although most RDD technology has methods for identifying additional lines that are not used as a regular phone line.

**Stratified Random Sample.** Here the target population is divided on a characteristic correlated to the dependent variable (race, social class, religion), and then a random sample is drawn from each segment or strata of the population. This type of sampling is useful for ensuring that the variability in the population is represented and may reduce sampling errors that might arise if one segment of the population is not sufficiently represented. The drawback to this approach is that it is necessary to have information about the stratifying variable prior to drawing the sample. This information is not always readily available or can become quite costly to obtain.

**Cluster Sampling.** This approach randomly selects samples across national geographical sampling units, then samples among census tracts, then among neighborhood blocks, and then down to households with youth. This method is especially useful for research involving researchers going to the homes of the potential respondents, because it is more efficient for interviewers to be able to do a group of interviews in geographic clusters. Although it is efficient in terms of human and financial resources, it is a less precise sample strategy in terms of representativeness, since households in a given cluster will tend to be more homogeneous. One way to increase the precision of cluster sampling is to select a higher number of clusters and fewer cases within each cluster, but this will increase costs again. Available resources will be significant in determining the balance between cost efficiency and sampling precision.

**School Roster Sampling.** This method randomly samples schools from lists of the universe of public and private middle and high schools across the nation, stratifying by desired category (region, size, racial makeup, etc.). Researchers must secure the cooperation of the school principal (and school board members, if necessary). They then sample students from school rosters, contact parents for their informed consent, and conduct the data collection with the students, typically in schools.

**Direct Link to Survey.** If a research design includes both a survey and in-depth interviews, one way to sample interviewees is to select a random sample from the survey respondents for follow-up interviews. If the survey was administered to a probability sample, the interviews should also be fairly representative of the target population. This representativeness is an advantage of this strategy, along with the fact that interviews can be linked with the responses on the survey to strengthen the analysis of each component of the data.

Options for non-probability sampling methods include the following:

**Purposive Area Sampling.** Carefully choose a limited number of sites that roughly represent different faces of America (for example, Northeast inner city, Midwest small town, rural South, etc.) and conduct research in these sites. Note that the method for sampling within each site must then be determined. Selecting sites that represent different facets of the larger population can provide good data for making comparisons based on regional differences. This sampling method is often also used when there is a particular type of population that the researcher is interested in studying. For example, if the interest is in urban or inner-city

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youth, a nationally representative sample will not make as much sense as a sample that is limited to 10 of the nation's largest cities. Another use of this sampling method is when the goal of the research is to study the dynamics of entire communities or specific people groups that are concentrated in certain locations. Although this sampling method can be very useful for specific research goals, it is important to note that the researcher will not necessarily be able to generalize the results to a larger population.

**Sample Lists.** A sample can be obtained through mail or telephone lists that are purchased from sampling firms, or by generating lists from organizations. For example, if researchers are interested specifically in Catholic youth, they may want to obtain a list of all of the members of the Catholic churches in a given area. Using that list of members, they could then select a random sample. Similar to purposive area sampling, this method is helpful when there is a very specific population of interest. It is important, however, to check the reliability and completeness of the list being used, particularly if it is being purchased from a sampling firm, since published lists tend to become dated quickly and may not contain the entire target population.

**Quota Sampling.** A variation on purposive and stratified sampling, this method determines a specific number of each type of respondent desired for the study. Interviewers or researchers then select people who fit the criteria until they have reached the quota number. For example, if a study wants to include 15 Mormon and 15 non-religious youth, the interviewer may select any respondent they can access as long as they are either Mormon or non-religious. Once the interviewer has interviewed 15 Mormons, they stop interviewing Mormons

and only interview non-religious youth until they have reached their quota of 15. This can be a good way of ensuring that a sample includes respondents from each relevant segment of the population. Unlike stratified sampling, the respondents within each category are not selected randomly. This makes it easier to gather the sample and reduces the time and costs involved in completing the process. However, allowing the interviewer to choose any respondents who meet the one selection criteria very likely introduces bias into the sample; it will not be safe to assume that those selected accurately represent the category of people from which they were chosen.

**Convenience Sampling.** In this approach, individuals are selected into the study based on their convenient availability to the researcher, rather than through a systematic selection method. This is clearly the simplest method of sampling, since it makes no specific requirements of the researcher in selecting the sample. This method is usually used in initial stages of research to help researchers begin to become familiar with the topic and to discover the types of questions that they should ask in future research. Since the costs of a convenience sample are relatively minimal, this is a good way to test a research instrument or get started in the research process. Results from a convenience sample, however, should be interpreted cautiously and not used to formulate generalizations.

**Referral Sampling.** This approach is often used when studying a group that is a small subset of the population. In this method, respondents who fit the research criteria are asked to refer others they know who may also fit the research criteria. Thus, a sample is built through the networks of the population of interest. A referral sample is also a relatively low-cost way

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of sampling. This type of sample is most advantageous when studying a very specific group of people that might be hard to locate in the general population. For instance, if the researcher were specifically interested in youth involved in a particular new religious movement, the most effective way to identify this group of youth would be through referrals of others who are also involved in the group.

Sampling becomes more challenging when dealing specifically with youth, as opposed to the general U.S. adult population. Households that contain youth are a minority among U.S. households. This makes the task of locating eligible respondents more difficult. Any sampling method that begins with all households in the U.S. and narrows down from there will face the need to screen for eligible households, thus adding to the cost and labor involved. One possible answer to this concern is to start by identifying samples that will be likely to contain youth.

Schools, for example, seem a natural place to begin when one wants to research youth. Indeed, sampling through schools has many advantages. Using a

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school-based sample avoids many screening difficulties and locates concentrations of youth quickly. Once a sample is obtained through a school-roster, there is often the added benefit of access to additional information about the students in the sample. Schools can also sometimes provide researchers with a variety of useful school records for each student (transcripts, attendance, behavioral records, etc.). In some cases, doing research through a school generates a better response rate by lending researchers credibility with the parents and increasing the personal contact be-

tween researchers and parents. Finally, follow-up with respondents may be more easily facilitated through schools.

In spite of these benefits, however, researchers may be moving away from school-based sampling due to some of the obstacles present in this type of method. One of the biggest initial hurdles is obtaining cooperation from the school. This is becoming increasingly difficult as principals and administrators become more weary of requests to administer surveys and wary of the risks associated with allowing outside researchers into their schools. Wanting to ask questions about religion and spirituality often only make this problem worse. Once generally committed to a school-based sampling design, non-cooperation by a selected school can also create difficulties if maintaining a representative sample is a priority. Potential non-cooperation by parents then compounds any school refusals, thus lowering the response rate even further. Also, school-based samples, while targeting the majority of youth, still miss youth who are home-schooled and who have dropped out of school. This may not be a problem for some studies, but these are significant populations that may be important to many questions about youth and religion.

School-based sampling appears efficient on the front end, by locating large gatherings of youth. However, there is much communication and legwork required to make a school-based sampling design work successfully. Before choosing this design, a researcher needs to carefully weigh the costs and benefits, and determine if the additional organization and coordination with a third party is worth the benefits of a school-roster sample. If this sampling method is used, it is also important to keep in mind that a school-based approach can take a great deal of time and patience. Also, schools can vary greatly, providing very different environments for the children who attend them. For most types of research, it is important actually to visit in person each school being sampled to get a “feel”



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for the context of the school and any problems that may arise. It may also be advisable to conduct interviews with teachers, volunteers, principals, school counselors, and other potentially insightful informants about school context.

Whatever the sampling method eventually chosen, there are several considerations to be made specifically about studying religion among youth. First, the researcher needs to take into account those who may *not* be well represented in the sample, such as religious minorities. If the researcher is interested in fur-

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ther understanding a variety of religious traditions, including particular religious minorities, it may be necessary to over-sample these groups. In addition, religious “drop-outs” may need to be identified, since youth who have become disengaged or alienated from their religious tradition may have significant insights to offer. The chosen sampling methods need to be able to identify these youth and be sure that their voices are included. Finally, some scholars suggest that research about youth and religion need not be limited to current youth. Instead, they suggest, we can learn about youth’s experience of religion by asking older people to talk retrospectively about their experiences with religion when they were younger. One important question about religion is often about its long-term effects on youth. This method of asking people who are beyond their teen years may provide insight into the long-term salience of religious experiences that occurred during adolescence. However, researchers should also be aware of significant validity problems often involved in the gathering of retrospective data.

## Sample Size

There is no single or simple answer to the question of how large a sample size one must obtain. More specific information about sample size will be discussed below in the sections on qualitative and quantitative research. However, there are some general principles to keep in mind when deciding upon an adequate sample size. As is the case in other areas of research design, sample size must be driven primarily by the research goals and methods. Researchers must determine what claims they want to be able to make based on the data they collect, and then decide on the type of sample that will best support those claims. If the goal is to claim generalizability to a larger population, then the sample must be large enough to represent the variation within that target population. For example, a researcher who is interested in making comparisons between religious groups would need to obtain a sample large enough to include adequate representation of the religious variation in the general population. But if the goal is to provide a “thick description” of a narrowly defined population, then there may be more credibility to a study that selects fewer cases and devotes more resources to the thorough examination of each case. In addition, researchers need to consider the audiences to whom they want to present their findings, and estimate the sample size required to support the claims they wish to make to these audiences.

## Time Dimensions

Researchers studying youth and religion also need to consider the time dimension of their design. Cross-sectional designs study youth at one point in time, providing a “snapshot” view of the lives of youth. Longitudinal designs follow the same youth over a period of time, to see how they change as they age and undergo new experiences. As with other research issues, the decision about the time dimensions of research should be driven by the goals and questions of primary interest to the researchers.

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Cross-sectional designs provide for simple, time-bounded data collection. They are good at description, at showing associations, and for merely suggesting causal relationships among variables. Longitudinal designs are generally more impressive and desirable. A longitudinal design is usually needed to make strong claims about causality (for example, about the effects of religiosity on youth outcomes). This approach requires a good first wave response rate, personal connections with respondents, and maintaining the study's contact with respondents between waves (through newsletters, birthday cards, address tracking, etc.). In longitudinal studies, the second and subsequent waves of data collection are relatively inexpensive, since subjects' contact information is already known from the first wave of data collection. When done well, second and subsequent waves of data collection can get very high response rates, since subjects tend to know

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and trust the study. Note that in order to track first wave survey respondents of a telephone survey, it is necessary to obtain their name, address, and perhaps other contact information—which reduces the anonymity of the respondents and can complicate the task of confidentiality.

Most scholars agree that a longitudinal research design is very desirable and worth the effort whenever it is logistically possible to accomplish. But doing longitudinal research with youth presents some specific challenges that need to be addressed. First, youth can

be difficult to track over time. Youth tend to be a fairly mobile population, particularly with current divorce rates and the rise in the numbers of youth who move as a result of shifts of their family structure or changes in parental custody. This can make it difficult to keep track of respondents for follow-up research. One suggestion for dealing with this mobility is to try to identify a key, settled contact person who will always be able to provide the location of the respondent.

Two other important questions also need to be considered in longitudinal research. First, what ages of youth should be studied in the first wave? And second, how soon after the first wave should subsequent waves of data collection be administered? The answer to the first question should depend in part upon the goal of the research. Some researchers suggest that if you want to follow youth over time, the best approach is to start with a younger sample so that they can be followed throughout their teen years. However, others may feel the need to make comparisons across age groups as well as over time. One option is to generate a sample in which the majority of the participants are concentrated in the younger age range, with a smaller group filling out the older age range for comparison purposes.

There are different reasonable answers to the second question. Some argue that the way religion affects youth is a long-range process, so that there should be a substantial time lapse in order to see any longitudinal change or to observe the full range of these religious effects. On the other hand, some scholars argue that children's lives are in such rapid transition that follow-up waves should happen in much shorter increments. In longitudinal research with adults, one year may seem too short of a follow-up period. However, much can happen in a child's life within one year, and this may be compelling reason to do longitudinal follow-up on a yearly basis instead of waiting two or three years. In addition to capturing the accelerated pace of adolescence, shorter follow-up periods make it easier to track re-

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spondents. While shorter follow-up increments may be desirable for many reasons, if this approach is taken, the researcher should keep in mind that there will be things that will not change over the course of one year, and more complex understanding of these issues may require multiple follow-ups in order to achieve the long-range benefits of longitudinal research. Finally, if parents are included in the first wave of the research, a decision about if and when to follow-up with parents must be made. This will depend on the type of information gathered from parents and their roles in the overall study. If parents are used primarily as a source of information about family history, religious background, and demographic information about the children and their families, then these are things that will not change dramatically over time and may not require longitudinal follow-up with the parents. If, however, parents are asked more specific questions about their children and their relationships with their children, things that might change and evolve as the children change, this might raise the need for a longitudinal follow-up with parents as well as with children. The resource constraints and goals of the study will also help to determine at what points the parents are re-interviewed.

### **The Research Instrument**

Once a general research design and sampling method have been selected, the next step is generally to create the research instrument that will be used in the study. In the case of quantitative research this is usually a survey questionnaire. For qualitative research this can be the interview schedule, focus group questions, and so on. There are multiple issues to consider which are unique to each type of research design and research instrument. There are also some general considerations to be aware of when beginning to design a study of youth and religion.

Religion in particular is an aspect of personal and social life that has not always been measured well in the past. Experienced scholars emphasize the importance of including in the research good ways to ask about

and seek to understand the role of religion in the lives of youth. Religion is often an understated influence in people's lives, and people—perhaps especially youth—are not always fully conscious about the ways in which it affects them. This creates a burden on the researcher to probe for this information, to measure it well, and to encourage youth to think reflectively about religious issues. For one useful handbook of measures of religion and spirituality, see *Measures of Religiosity*, edited by Peter C. Hill and Ralph W. Hood, Jr. (Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press, 1999).

In addition, religion is often very “contextual” in the way it influences youth. For instance, the effects of religion may be different for students who share similar religious beliefs with the majority of their peers at

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school, as opposed to those who are of a religious minority. The effects of religion can also be conflated with family influences. Particularly in the lives of youth, religion is often closely tied to their family context and heritage and the relationships they have with parents, grandparents, siblings, and others. The influences of religious congregations can be important as well. In seeking to understand the influence of religion in the lives of youth, it is necessary to be alert to this possible conflation and to take steps to try to separate religious influences from other contextual variables. It is also important to keep in mind that youth and their parents may have very different views of their families' religion and one perspective should not be assumed to represent the other.

Once the research instrument has been drafted, it is important to pretest it. This usually involves conducting pilot interviews or surveys to identify any potential glitches or questions that don't work the way they were

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intended. When studying youth, it can also be helpful to involve youth themselves in the process of evaluating the instrument. Their perspective can be helpful in identifying questions that would be interpreted differently by youth than by an adult researcher, and suggesting wording that may be more relevant or understandable for teens. Another issue to consider is the fact that the effectiveness of the research instrument may vary across different segments of the population. For example, youth culture may be different in different sub-cultures or among various minority groups. It is important as much as is feasible to test effectiveness across the range of groups that will be included in the final sample.

### **Informed Consent**

An important consideration in all research with human subjects is informed consent. In most research settings, the procedures for obtaining informed consent from participants will require approval by a Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (IRB). The specific nature of the project and the requirements of the IRB will guide much about the consent procedures. However, there are some general guidelines worth understanding.

First, it is important to appreciate what is meant by informed consent. Informed consent requires that prior to obtaining consent, the researcher must give participants any information that may influence their willingness to participate and must present this information in language that is easily understood by people without any background in the research topic. Some of the information that should be provided to potential participants includes the title of the research project; name and contact information of the Principal Investigator and local IRB; the means by which confidentiality will be maintained in the research; any potential costs, risks, or benefits to the participant; a statement about any monetary compensation provided; expected duration of their participation in the project; and assurance that participants may at any point during the research refuse

to answer any question or discontinue their participation without penalty. Additional details about the process of obtaining informed consent should be obtained through each researcher's local IRB.

Once this information has been provided, potential participants must give active consent to be involved in the study. Failure to refuse to participate does not constitute consent. Rather subjects must actively agree to participate in the research. In research with youth under the age of 18, a parent or legal guardian must provide active consent. And, in addition to the consent of parents, the researcher must obtain the assent of the minors. Assent means that the youth provide affirmative agreements to be participants in the study. Again, failure of youth to refuse does not qualify as assent. Most IRB regulations stipulate that the parental consent must be in written form. However, it is possible to receive exceptions for research conducted over the telephone. In this case, verbal consent of the parents and the children may be acceptable. Note, too, that if the research design includes sampling through schools, this usually creates additional layers of consent, as it becomes necessary to secure the consent of principals, school boards, and often other school officials.

In the experience of many, the biggest challenge in all of this is to persuade parents to allow their children to participate in research. In some studies, for example, twenty percent of parents have been willing to complete surveys themselves but were unwilling to allow their teenage children to be surveyed. There is a wide range of variability in how protective parents are of their children. Various strategies can be used to increase the likelihood that parents will agree to let their children participate. Name recognition is helpful—it often lends credibility to the study if the research is associated with a reputable university or research firm. It is also important to establish early on that the inquiry concerns academic research and is not a marketing ploy. Moreover, presenting parents with a clear explanation of how the data will be used and the benefits

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of having their children involved can be helpful. Although they will not directly hear the answers their children give, you can offer to send parents aggregate reports or newsletters to increase their sense of personal “ownership” in the project. If the goals of the

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project appeal to parents, this can also increase cooperation rates. It may be helpful to stress that participation is important because the research will be used to help generate better policies or resources for teens and parents. Usually, however, once parents give consent, it is likely that their youth will consent as well. Experience suggests that many youth are glad for an opportunity to talk with someone who is genuinely interested in what they have to say. Some scholars, however, advise presenting to youth the request to participate in the research using the language of “a study” or “a project” instead of “research,” since some youth may feel intimidated by scientific sounding language.

### **Confidentiality**

Youth are legal minors and are considered a vulnerable population. Therefore, issues of confidentiality must be handled with extra care. In studying youth, confidentiality must extend beyond the traditional goal of making sure that those who read the results of the research cannot identify respondents. Researchers must also ensure that the information they gather from youth is not accessible to people close to the youth who might have an interest in the information. Keeping information confidential from parents, for instance, can become a significant challenge in research with

youth. Parents themselves play a key role in a researcher’s ability to assure confidentiality to the youth. Sometimes parents’ desires to violate this confidentiality may be the result of wanting to protect their children from possible negative effects of the research. A researcher can counter this by building trust with parents so that they allow their children to be studied outside of their presence. Parents must know ahead of time and in very clear terms that they will not have access to any of the information given by their children. It may help to explain some of the reasoning behind this need for confidentiality—for example, that teens may be more truthful if they are sure their answers are confidential.

Once parents have agreed to the confidential terms of the research, then the youth also must be assured of the confidentiality of their responses. It is important for the researcher to create an atmosphere where the youth trust the confidential nature of the research and are therefore comfortable disclosing information. The researcher should also take precautions to double check that others are not hearing the surveys or conversations taking place. After assuring the parents and youth of the confidential nature of the research, the burden then rests on the researchers to do everything in their power to maintain that confidentiality. Human Subjects IRBs at most colleges and universities will have formal procedures to help researchers maintain confidentiality in their research. Complicating the matter, however, is the fact that signs of serious and unaddressed neglect or abuse of or by the youth—especially threats of violence and suicide—that may surface in the course of the research need to be reported to relevant authorities. IRBs normally have guidelines and protocols for dealing with such situations.

### **Incentives**

For many Americans today, time is at a premium. This fact, along with the recent surge of aggressive telemarketing, has increased the difficulty of getting people to agree to participate in academic research,

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particularly when it is conducted over the telephone. For much research, the response rate is an important factor in supporting the validity of the findings. In order to increase response rates, some researchers have begun to offer incentives to potential subjects to participate in the research.

Many studies that have used incentives report that this has increased their response rates. However, some scholars claim that incentives, particularly financial incentives, are not effective. They argue that people are either willing to participate or they are not, and offering money does not induce a significant amount of resistant people to be willing to participate. Others support the use of incentives, but point out that the effectiveness of offering an incentive depends on a variety of factors, such as the type or amount of incentive, the

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*It is important for the researcher to create an atmosphere where the youth trust the confidential nature of the research and are therefore comfortable disclosing information.*

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population to which you are offering the incentive, the research design, and so on. Another factor to consider is that the use of incentives requires that additional data be collected from respondents in order to send them the incentives. It is the research team's burden to ensure that the collection of identifying information does not jeopardize the confidentiality promised to the respondents. However, even if extra cautions are taken to protect this information, some respondents may hesitate to provide identifying information, as this may reduce their feelings of anonymity. The decision to offer an incentive must weigh the costs

and benefits, including the likelihood and value of achieving a higher response rate and the availability of financial resources.

If incentives are to be offered, there are several questions that must then be addressed. Most incentives are in the form of money. However, it is also possible to offer gifts or gift certificates. Some researchers argue that gift certificates may actually be more effective with youth populations. However, this approach introduces complexity in that gifts are not as flexible as cash: for national studies, it puts a burden on researchers to offer gift certificates for items that will be available and have appeal to teens in all regions of the country.

For those who decide to use cash incentives, the next question is how much to offer. Ethical considerations and IRB reviews suggest that incentives must not be so large as to be coercive. This is of particular concern when dealing with low-income respondents for whom money might have a stronger influence in their decisions about whether or not to participate. Most studies of youth that rely on incentives offer between \$10 and \$20 for a completed survey or interview. Another question that arises is whether or not to offer the same incentive to everyone. There are those who will be willing to participate regardless of an incentive; then there are those for whom offers of money will directly influence their decisions to participate or not. Some studies offer baseline incentives to everyone, but offer higher amounts to people who are reluctant and require additional persuasion to participate. The idea is to use larger incentives only for those that would not participate without them. This approach has the advantage of being more economical, in only offering a large incentive when absolutely necessary; and it gives flexibility in efforts to increase the response rate. However, it may also raise ethical concerns about the differential treatment of participants, and methodological concerns about possible sampling biases.

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## Age Range

When designing a study of young people, one must ask the question, “who are ‘youth’?” There are several answers to this question, most of them dependent on the goals of the research being conducted. Historically, youth has been most often marked as the time between the onset of puberty and the onset of transition to adulthood, usually defined in this case as between the ages of 12 to 13 and 18 to 19. However, there are several complicating issues to consider when deciding what ages to include in a study of youth.

At the lower age boundary, one question is how old do respondents need to be to be included in the study. Many researchers say that children younger than 12 are not cognitively developed enough to participate in research in a meaningful way. It is unclear whether 10 year olds, for instance, can clearly articulate their experiences, in the case of an interview; or can fully understand and respond to survey questions, in the case

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*When designing a study of young people, one must ask the question, “who are ‘youth’?”*

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of a survey design. When research questions relate to religious beliefs and practices, it is important to consider at what age children begin to develop salient religious identities. If the goal of the research is to hear how youth think about and live out their religious identities, one must ask at what age do they become competent to articulate these issues. In addition, some religious experiences, such as church confirmation, are tied to age and would only be captured with certain ages of respondents.

There are other issues, however, for which beginning research at age twelve may omit some significant developmental patterns. Some researchers argue that

certain risk behaviors often begin at early ages, so if researchers are interested in what factors lead to delinquency or premarital sex, the research may need to include children as young as 10. Involving children this young creates complications, however. First, it places an additional burden on the researcher to make sure that the research instrument is accessible to all ages of children in the study. There may be questions that are too complex or confusing for younger children. Length of the research instrument may also need to be varied depending on age, with younger children having a shorter attention span and less likely to be able to complete a long survey or interview. Also, obtaining IRB approval for research becomes more difficult with a younger sample. The younger the children are, the more vulnerable they are considered to be, and therefore will normally be subject to stricter, more protective standards of research by IRBs. Sensitive questions, such as those about delinquency and sexual activity, may not be approved for children so young. Some of the reasoning behind this is that exposing children to these questions may in-and-of itself have causal and perhaps harmful effects on them.

At the upper age boundary, there are just as many issues to consider. Certain social and cultural markers in our society indicate that age 18 is a significant transition into early adulthood. However, culture is always evolving, and this transition is rarely uniform across all areas of life. Some scholars argue that “youth” lasts until the establishment of financial autonomy, career commitments, and possibly marriage. This perspective would argue that the period of life we refer to as youth can extend to age 22, 25, or even older. Regardless of how “youth” is defined, it is certain that there are still significant changes going on in most people’s lives between the ages of 18 and 25. What implications might this have for research design? Again, the question of the age range of study should depend in large part on the larger questions that drive the research.

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When researchers decide to study youth past age 17, other concerns arise. One logistical issue is that many youth at this age leave their parents' homes, at least seasonally, to attend college, to travel, or to work elsewhere. This may mean that studies, which include respondents up through age 18 and beyond, may suffer lower response rates, as older youth may be harder to locate. At the same time, once respondents turn age 18 they are no longer legal minors, IRB human subjects concerns slacken, and parental consent is no longer necessary for their participation.

Aside from logistical considerations, there may be profound qualitative differences between youth who are age 18 and older and those still of school age. If these differences are of interest to the researcher, then it will

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*When deciding upon the best age range for a study, it is necessary to keep in mind the goal of the research.*

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be helpful to include a wider age range in the study. However, if it is a goal of the research to be able to make generalizations about youth who are of school age in a family context, then it is possible that including youth over age 18 will introduce variation into the study that will make generalizations difficult. Similarly, if one is interested in the transitions during youth and into young adulthood, then it will be necessary to extend the age boundary even further. But for those who want to restrict focus to the traditional concept of adolescence, this may not be a wise decision.

The standard 12-18 age range for youth is large and encompasses a huge amount of variance. When deciding upon the best age range for a study, again, it is necessary to keep in mind the goal of the research. If the goal of the research is to give a broad description

of youth, ages 12-18 may be an appropriate range. However, if the goal is to examine how in-depth mechanisms work among youth, the researcher may be better served by selecting a narrower group and studying them more closely. This may be particularly true for longitudinal research. For example, if the goal of the research is to understand as fully as possible the mechanisms of friendship networks, one potential strategy might be to select a single age cohort (perhaps students at age 14) and then follow this one group over time. This design may provide better data than attempting to track a large range of ages and account for all of the variance that occurs as a function of age differences.

One age-range issue particularly pertinent for school-based sampling designs is the increasing rate of school drop-outs. Using school rosters to sample respondents introduces the risk of missing youth who have dropped out of school. This risk increases dramatically around age 16. A school-based sample that includes students beyond age 16 should acknowledge that likely bias in the sample, which, depending on the substantive focus on the research, may significantly alter the results of the study.

With this, we conclude our review of issues and questions arising in consideration of general research design for studies on youth and religion. The following two sections examine concerns related to quantitative and qualitative research designs more specifically.



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# Quantitative Research

## Research Design

The following pages provide a more detailed description of alternative methods of conducting surveys, and some of the strengths and weaknesses associated with each method. As always, determinations of research design should be driven by the project's larger research questions, which help to identify a method most consistent with research goals and feasible to accomplish with available resources.

**Telephone Surveys.** The major advantage of a telephone survey is that it provides a relatively cost effective way to question a large number of respondents in a relatively short time. In particular, nationally representative samples are more accessible and therefore much less costly by telephone than with a face-to-face survey design. The use of telephone calling centers to conduct the surveys also allows for closer oversight by the research team, which is able to monitor the interviewers. Another advantage of the telephone interview over the in-home survey is that it can often be completed with one phone contact. This reduces the risk of incomplete surveys that can occur when respondents change their minds or when scheduling difficulties arise in arranging an alternative time to complete the survey. Some researchers who have used telephone survey techniques have found that the telephone is an effective way to survey youth, since teens already tend to spend a lot of time on the phone and are often very comfortable with long telephone conversations.

There are some potential drawbacks to the telephone survey design, however. First they automatically exclude the approximately five percent of the U.S. population that are transient, without permanent homes, or do not have a telephone in their houses. This limitation introduces a slight bias into the telephone survey sample, predominantly

against lower income and young adult segments of the population. Another drawback of telephone surveys is that recent years have seen a decline in the response rates they produce. Increases in aggressive telemarketing have made people more suspicious of telephone researchers, and many people will not stay on the phone long enough to distinguish between telemarketing and academic research. This makes it difficult sometimes to get a final response rate much higher than 55 or 60 percent without additional costs for call-backs and refusal conversions. In addition, telephone surveys are limited in potential length. Previous research has found that most effective surveys last only 15-25 minutes over the phone. This limited time frame, in which respondents are willing to participate and able to provide reliable answers, limits the total number of questions that can be asked. It also places an additional burden on the survey to be composed of only the highest quality questions that will provide the most important information possible. A final drawback of phone surveys becomes a factor if the research design includes plans for longitudinal follow-up: telephone surveys provide less personal contact with respondents than face-to-face, in-home surveys. The relative lack of personal contact may reduce respondents' willingness to participate in future waves of the survey project.

**Face-to-Face In-Home Surveys.** The face-to-face in-home survey has many strengths and is the research design used in several top-quality national studies. With this design, it is possible to include households in a study that are transient or that do not have telephones. This design has also generally been found to produce higher response rates than either telephone or mail surveys. In addition, this survey design generally allows for longer surveys with more questions. The attention span and cooperation level of respondents is higher in face-to-face interviews, allowing the survey to be up to two or three times as long as telephone surveys.

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Conducting surveys in person also provides flexibility in the types of questions asked. Questions that may be complex or difficult to comprehend over the telephone can be presented by the interviewer orally as well as visually, thus increasing the ability of a respondent to comprehend the question and answer it more accurately. Questions that respondents may not want to answer in person can also be administered in ways that are confidential even from the interviewer—for example, respondents can complete parts of the survey directly on a laptop with the screen facing away from the interviewer. Another advantage to conducting the survey face-to-face is that it creates a greater personal contact with respondents. This can serve to build trust, increase the respondents' investment in and commitment to the study; and increase the likelihood of participation in follow-up interviews or a second wave of the survey if longitudinal research is planned.

The primary weakness of the in-home survey is the extraordinarily high costs associated with this research design—it can be as much as four to ten times as costly as a random-digit-dial telephone survey. Much of this cost is expended to pay trained interviewers to walk through sampled neighborhoods in search not only of households willing to participate, but the minority of those with teenagers in residence. In addition, executing a face-to-face survey at the national level definitely requires employing a large, experienced survey firm. This dependence on so much outside labor increases the risk for cost overruns, reduces researchers' direct oversight of data collection, and adds a significant amount of cost and complexity to the project. Also, while this design more likely includes households without telephones, it also typically omits households that are part of gated communities and guarded apartment complexes, and households in which (particularly elderly) residents are reluctant to answer the door to strangers. This introduces possible sampling biases that

may be associated with higher income levels, social class, and/or age.

**Phone/Face-to-Face Combination.** One logical option is to combine these two methods in order to take advantage of the strengths of each design. In a combination design, respondents could initially be contacted over the telephone to screen for households that contain youth and to obtain permission to send an interviewer to the house to conduct an interview with the youth. This design would enjoy many of the benefits of a face-to-face survey, but screening costs would be reduced by identifying over the phone precisely where to send interviewers. The disadvantage of this method is that it has not yet been well tested, and it is therefore hard to predict what problems might arise with this design.

**In-School Survey.** An in-school written survey is one option that may be available to those who choose to use school-roster sampling methods. Although not all schools will allow it, it is possible to obtain permission to administer a written survey to students while they are in school. This research design has built into it many of the advantages and disadvantages discussed above in the section on Sampling Methods. In addition, there are a few other things to consider with in-school surveys. This is a very cost-effective approach to survey administration, since it does not require a one-on-one administration strategy. By having a few people administer the survey to entire classrooms of students, the cost per completed interview is much lower than a telephone or face-to-face survey. Also, with this approach it is more feasible for members of the research team to personally administer the surveys, thus giving them greater control over the process. Since the survey is administered to a somewhat captive audience, it is possible to achieve somewhat higher response rates than with a telephone survey.

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However, as noted above, any design that samples through schools is subject to a greater potential refusal rate since both schools and parents must give consent. Another disadvantage of this type of survey design is that without the one-on-one administration of the survey, there is a higher risk of misunderstanding of questions by students, which may increase inaccurate responses. Also, any students who happen to be absent on the day that the survey is given will be left out of the sample, unless measures are taken somehow to include them later. The research team should also think about any systematic reason why students may be absent from school or class that might introduce a bias into the sample (for instance, a sporting event or religious holiday may exclude an entire group of students from the survey).

**Mail Survey.** The primary advantage of a mail survey is its cost-effectiveness. When resources are limited, mailings allow the research team to reach a large number of households for a relatively low fixed cost. Surveys conducted through the mail may also provide respondents the opportunity to take their time to answer the questions carefully and thoughtfully, if they are invested in it. This may result in better responses than would be generated when respondents have to reply right away over the telephone. It is also possible that, under circumstances where written consent from parents is required by an IRB, obtaining written consent may be easier with a written survey where the mailing of forms is already built into the survey design.

However, there are significant disadvantages to a mail survey design. While it may be cost-effective, it also normally produces the lowest response rates among all survey techniques. The time and initiative required to fill out a survey and mail it back and the lack of direct contact with the researcher are sufficient to keep many or most people from participating. As a consequence, it is likely

that the sample ends up containing a strong bias based on what types of people are willing to take the time to return surveys. Finally, the success of a mail survey depends in part on the quality of the mailing list used for sampling that is available to the researcher. A mailing list that is not up-to-date or complete can introduce significant problems to the survey and reduce the response rate and data validity even further.

### **Sampling Methods and Sample Size**

Quantitative studies of youth require some special considerations when deciding on a sampling strategy and research design. First, it is important to be aware that the incidence rate of a particular group within the larger population influences the level of difficulty for obtaining a sample for study. In this case, households that contain youth between the ages of 13-18 make up about 14 percent of the total population—although this varies considerably by race and social class. This means that a sampling method that starts at the national level will have to screen a large number of households to obtain those with youth in residence, since about 86 percent of the households contacted will not qualify for the study. The relatively low incidence rate of households with youth will increase considerably the screening costs of the research. Changing the targeted age range or choosing to include households even if they don't have children will alter the percentage of qualifying households and therefore change the number of contacts required per qualifying respondent. It is possible to purchase from a sampling firm lists of households that contain youth. This would reduce the screening costs associated with Random Digit Dialing or door-to-door sampling, however these lists are often out-of-date and incomplete and most researchers advise avoiding them.

In quantitative research, the sample size is determined in large part by what types of claims you want to be able to make with the data available. With quantitative studies, results are measured in terms of their statistical significance. As a general rule, the larger the sample,

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the more likely it is that the results will be statistically significant. In other words, if there is an underlying pattern in the data, the pattern will be more pronounced in a larger sample, and therefore more likely to show up as “significant” in statistical tests. Several scholars have noted that religious effects are often understated, and potentially conflated with other contextual variables. Given the often understated nature of religious effects, a larger sample size can be helpful in finding more significant relationships with religious variables.

The size of the sample should also be related to the groups that the researcher wants to compare. If the study is interested in making comparisons between particular religious traditions, this should be taken into account when determining sample size. Specifically, since each particular religious tradition might make up

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*Given the often understated nature of religious effects, a larger sample size can be helpful in finding more significant relationships with religious variables.*

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a relatively small proportion of the total population, a large sample size would be necessary in a random sample design to provide enough cases of each tradition to make substantial comparisons. If the research goals include being able to make additional comparisons of religious traditions across other variables (such as age, race, socio-economic status, etc.), then it becomes more critical to have a sample large enough to show variation across a wide range of variables.

The decisions involved in choosing a sample size involve the careful consideration of the available resources and the benefits gained by increasing sample size. At some point, the law of diminishing returns comes into play, and increasing the sample size costs more than can be justified by the additional gains to the data collected. There are no simple formulas for calculating the necessary sample size. However, in the case of survey research that is nationally representative, it is usually considered necessary to have a sample of at least 1,000. Larger is often better. If, as mentioned above, the researcher wants to compare particular groups that may be a small proportion of the population, there are two ways to accomplish this. The first is to increase the overall sample size. The second option is to oversample for the specific populations that may not otherwise be large enough in a random sample (racial minorities, specific ethnic communities, religious groups, etc.). Both approaches will increase the cost of the research. Therefore, it is necessary to compare the added costs of each approach with the expected gains of having either a larger total sample or an oversample that allows more specific cross-group comparisons.

### **Confidentiality**

Issues of confidentiality can be more problematic when conducting surveys over the telephone than in the home. One concern is how to make sure the answers that youth give are not being overheard by eavesdroppers in the household. In a telephone interview, there is no way for the interviewer to know conclusively about the respondent’s context or situation. There are, however, steps to take to guard against the possibility that there are other people who have access to the information the youth is providing. Some have suggested that if the survey includes both parents and their youth, that these two calls should take place at different times to prevent the likelihood of parents hanging around after their interview to listen to their child’s interview. While this strategy may be effective, it does complicate the survey process and may reduce the response rate. When beginning an interview, an inter-

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viewer may want to ask the youth, “Are you and I the only ones who can hear this conversation?” If the youth is aware of others who may be able to hear, the interview could be rescheduled for another time or location. This serves to alert the youth to the researcher’s desire for confidentiality. However, this does not necessarily guard against situations where youth are not aware of the potential for their answers to be heard. In addition, rescheduling interviews becomes problematic when trying to complete research with youth.

Another option for ensuring confidentiality of interviews, particularly with sensitive questions, is to ask youth to respond to sensitive questions with numbered responses rather than asking them to repeat the answer to the question. This can prevent others from overhearing the content of the answers they are giving, although it is likely to be more cumbersome and time-consuming than a standard survey answer, and may increase answer errors. A third level of confidentiality in phone interviews may be gained through touch-tone technology. The availability of this technology is currently limited, but may become more common in the future. With this approach, respondents can use the assigned numbers on the telephone keypad, rather than full verbal responses, to enter their responses to sensitive survey questions.

## **Consent**

As noted above, obtaining written consent of parents is the standard requirement for studies with youth. However, it is sometimes possible to obtain IRB approval for verbal consent when that is the only feasible possibility in the research design, such as when interviewing over the telephone. This simplifies the consent process, and allows the interviewer to proceed with the interview immediately after consent is given, without the lag time, callbacks, and potential lack of follow-through that may result if written consent must be obtained through the mail.

In telephone studies that involve youth, however, there are other complications that can arise in the consent process. Consent must be obtained from both the parent and the teen. This may become complicated if only one or the other is at home at one time. The parent may give consent, but the teen is unavailable and must be called back numerous times to obtain consent and complete the interview. The opposite may also be true. A teen may be available and willing to do the interview, however the interview cannot proceed until a parent can be reached for consent. When planning for the survey, the researcher should take into account that multiple calls may be necessary to obtain the consent required by all parties involved. In addition, when both parties are at home and available, there needs to be a carefully planned script for handling the consent process and juggling the telephone between parents and teens.

A related question when parents are involved is whether a project should interview parents who refuse to give consent for their child to be interviewed. It is possible that the goals of the research would find it helpful to have data about parents who are not willing to let their child participate in the study. However, if a primary goal of the research is to have completed pairs of parent-child interviews, it may be a poor use of resources to complete interviews with parents without access to data about their children. When this is the case, it is important to gain consent at the beginning of the process and drop interviews with parents who refuse for their child to be interviewed. Keep in mind, however, that even if a parent gives initial consent, following his or her own interview, there is always the possibility to withdraw consent to survey the child. Therefore, if the research design includes a parent interview, it is important that this interview be carefully constructed so as not to produce negative responses from parents that may cause them to decide to withhold their children from participation in the study.

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# Qualitative Research

## Research Design

There is much to be gained from employing a qualitative research design when studying youth. However, this type of research also presents some unique challenges. Qualitative research often involves much more interpersonal interaction between the researcher and those being studied. This element of the research creates the need to think carefully about how to approach these interactions and what methods will be most effective in reaching youth and gaining an understanding of their perspectives on life.

Of utmost importance is that the researchers establish credibility and positive rapport with the youth. Without this, they are unlikely to gain the cooperation and honest participation of the youth, which would jeopardize the goals of any project. Some have suggested that it is advantageous for researchers who interact with youth to be close to them in age so as to easily establish common ground. However, most scholars believe it is not necessary for youth to perceive a similarity of age. In fact, many say that if the youth think someone is trying to act young in order to relate to them, this might actually turn them off to the researcher instead of drawing them in. Many have found that youth are often very willing to interact with adults who are much older than they are, provided that they trust them and have established good rapport.

Those doing qualitative research with youth should also be aware of the potential difficulties they may encounter when working with youth. Research designs that include focus groups or interviews that require youth to come to a specific location may be problematic since not all youth have reliable transportation. In addition, researchers who have worked with youth say to expect a lot of “no shows” or cancellations. As mentioned above, youth tend to live lives that are very busy, unpredictable, and often dependent on the schedules of other people. This can complicate the process

of trying to schedule times for interactions with the youth.

When these scheduling challenges are met and the data have been collected, another problematic element of research with youth comes into play: interpretation and coding the data. The lives and language of youth can be quite dissimilar to that of the adult world. When reviewing data, it is important to be careful about the coding and interpretation of the responses given by youth. Several researchers have suggested that it is helpful to involve youth themselves in this part of the project. There are a few different approaches to using youth in the data analysis phase. One involves hiring youth to listen to the tapes or review the transcripts that have been collected. They can then be asked to help interpret what they hear. Youth reviewers may be able to shed light on some of the messages that may be hidden to researchers who are unfamiliar with youth language or culture. Another approach is to have “informed informants.” These are youth who are used as references throughout the project. They are given information about the goals of the project and asked to serve as consultants of sorts. The research team then consults these youth when they have questions about things they have heard or seen, and ask for their perspectives on or interpretation of the observations or reports.

The following are three of the most common qualitative research methods:

**In-Depth Interview.** The in-depth interview provides the researcher a forum for hearing youth express in their own words their experiences and thoughts and feelings about various concerns. Interviews also give the interviewer opportunities to use follow-up questions to probe for more information about issues that arise in the discussion. Interview transcripts then can be useful tools for identifying themes or patterns among the responses of youth. Many researchers have also found that youth themselves enjoy one-on-one interviews, as

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interviews give them an opportunity to talk about things that are important to them and to have their voices heard by others.

There are criticisms of data gathered from interviews, however, that should be considered. First, some scholars who study youth have noted that at times youth can be inarticulate and unreflective. This becomes problematic in interviews when youth are not able to provide clear or thoughtful answers to the questions asked of them. Not all have found this to be a problem, however, and some youth are quite capable of expressing themselves well. However, a potential risk of doing interviews with youth is that there may be those who are too young or not yet mature enough to prove helpful to the research goals. Another critical question concerns how much one can learn about a person's life in a single meeting and discussion. Some argue that it takes significant time and energy to build trust and rapport with youth, and that they are not likely to be open and honest with someone at their first meeting. On the other hand, there are those who find that youth are generally interested in being taken seriously, and that it is possible to build positive rapport with and receive honest answers from youth in an initial interview.

**Focus Groups.** Like the in-depth interview, focus groups allow youth to discuss significant issues in their own words and to reflect on the questions being asked. The use of focus groups is thought by some to be a more useful format than a one-on-one interview, since it offers an opportunity to see youth interacting with their peers. While this may give more insight into the interactions of youth, there is also the question of social pressure to be considered. It is possible that in the context of a group of their peers, teens may be less likely to be honest and more likely to give what they perceive to be socially acceptable responses.

As mentioned above, focus groups can be arranged to take place with or without an adult facilitator. It might be advantageous to be able to observe a group of youth without the potentially swaying influence of an adult. However, without being present in the discussion, it is not possible for the researcher to direct the conversation or probe for more information on particular issues. Similar to interviews, focus groups can suffer from the inability of youth to articulate answers well. The research team should include in their decision about research design the realization that not all youth will be able to participate in a meaningful way in a focus group conversation, and this may be dependent on a number of factors, such as age and maturity level.

**Participant Observation.** Participant observation is an approach often used when a researcher is interested in the dynamics of a group in its natural setting, not simply in collections of individual responses to questions. In addition to providing a more holistic and natural view of the subjects being studied, this research method provides researchers a way to observe underlying patterns of behavior and interaction about which the youth themselves may not be cognizant or articulate. There are things that youth may not be able to explain if asked about in an interview, but might be noticed by a trained observer: group dynamics, hidden patterns of interaction, relational structures, and so on. Another advantage to participant observation is that it often demands less from the participants, and thus consent may be easier to obtain. Observation takes place in settings where the youth are already involved. Youth may be more willing to participate since it does not require them to make time in their busy schedules for additional activities.

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Researchers doing participant observation should be aware of the possibility of a “Hawthorne Effect.” That is, youth who know they are being studied may alter their behavior because of the observant presence of the researcher (of course, this can happen with quantitative methods as well). Some researchers have found that this effect is related to the length of the research observation and is usually short-lived. As the youth get used to the presence of a researcher, eventually their behavior returns to their more normal routine. This argues in favor of multiple observations over a longer period of time. In addition to potential Hawthorne Effects, researchers should be aware of the biases and interpretations they bring to a project. In analyzing the field notes for a project, it is helpful to keep in mind that each person will view and interpret the same circumstances differently. This becomes important and should be taken into account during the stage of the research where conclusions are being drawn from the data collected.

Finally, many scholars recommend that participant observation—as ideally with any research method—not stand alone as a research method. Many researchers have found it extremely helpful to include in-depth interviews or focus groups as a supplement to participant observation. These more focused interactions provide an opportunity for the researcher to check their understanding of things against the interpretation of those whom they have been observing and to gather additional background information relevant to the study. When studying youth, other scholars suggest the need to interview some of the adults in their lives, such as teachers, youth group leaders, and parents, to provide background and context to the data being collected from the youth themselves. Experience suggests that mothers tend to know more about their children’s lives than fathers.

## Sample size

The sample size necessary for qualitative research varies greatly depending on the type of research being conducted. Similar to quantitative research, the sample must be large enough to provide sufficient data to support the claims that the researcher hopes to make. For example, people interested in participant observation of church youth groups must decide what claims

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*Researchers should be aware of the biases and interpretations they bring to a project.*

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they want to be able to make with their research. If the goal is to be able to make some general observations about the dynamics of the church youth group environment, then it will be necessary for them to observe several different groups across different religious traditions. However, if the purpose of the study is to provide an in-depth case study, then it may only be necessary to conduct observations in one youth group setting. Often in research there is a trade-off between breadth and depth. Research goals must be weighed, along with accessibility and available resources, to determine the sample that will be studied.

In the case of in-depth interviews, it is important to interview a large enough group so as to include in the sample the variations of interest to the researcher. However, there often comes a saturation point in interview research where additional interviews no longer add additional useful information to the project. In some cases, the best strategy is to start with a target number, but to allow the final count to be determined by how the interviews develop. For example, a study may set a goal to complete 150 interviews, but researchers may find that after about 100 interviews they are beginning to hear the same information repeated over and over. Given that the first 100 interviews included



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people from all parts of the targeted population, completing the next 50 interviews may not be the best use of resources, since there will be little value added from interviews repeating what has already been heard. At this point, the researcher may choose to adjust the final sample size to 100 instead of the original 150, or to add some new group or dimension to the research. The opposite may also be true. A group of researchers may find that, while they were only planning on conducting 50 interviews, at 50 they are still discovering interesting variation and differences among the respondents. They might then decide to continue interviewing more people.

### **Interview Issues**

If the research design includes one-on-one, in-depth interviews, there are some additional issues to consider.

**Interview Location.** Interviews can take place at any number of places, from the local library to a restaurant to someone's home. Some scholars advocate doing interviews in the home because homes provide additional information to the interviewer. By conducting the interview in the home, the interviewer can see the context in which the young person lives, and may be able to make observations about the youth that are not communicated directly. In general there does seem to be an advantage to conducting interviews in homes. However, there are some problems with in-home interviews that should be taken into consideration. Part of the interview process requires ensuring that the respondent's answers remain confidential. When conducting an interview in the youth's home, it may be difficult to ensure that there is no one listening to the conversation. Some have also found that youth may be more reluctant to talk about certain topics while in their parents' home, either for fear of being overheard or simply because it is an uncomfortable environment in which to talk about sensitive issues.

Conducting an interview alone with a youth when no one else is at home is not considered a good solution to this problem. This can lead to any number of potentially dangerous or compromising situations, potential for misunderstandings and damaging false accusations against the researcher, and various kinds of liabilities. One researcher who has done extensive interviews with youth reported that she always arranged to meet in a public place and would make sure that at least one person knew where she was going and when she expected to return. In addition, it is the policy of some researchers not to transport teens in their vehicle, but rather to arrange to meet them at a designated location. This may create an extra obstacle for the teen to be able to complete the interview, but it reduces interviewer liability.

**Interviewer Characteristics.** The most important characteristic of interviewers is that they are well trained and are able to establish good rapport with the young people they interview. Well-trained interviewers should be able to size up the interviewee and adjust their approaches appropriately. This means being alert to when someone did not understand or needs additional clarification on a question. It is important that the interviewer and interviewee understand one another in the interview. A well-trained interviewer should also be aware of when youth are being inconsistent in their answers, something that may happen often, and follow-up with questions of clarification that attempt to unpack the meaning behind the answers. As mentioned above, it is not necessary for interviewers to be young in order to gain credibility with youth. Several scholars note, however, that it is critical, whenever possible, to match interviewers and interviewees by race.

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**Interview Bias.** When conducting interviews, it is important to be aware that there are a number of things that can influence the way someone responds to an interviewer. The research team should do its best to maintain consistency across all interviews in order to reduce the potential bias that may be introduced by discrepancies across interviews. First, it is important that there is consistency in how the study is introduced. Youth's perceptions of what researchers are looking for can significantly influence their responses, so it is critical that all interviewees be given the same initial information about the study. The personal introduction of the interviewer is also important, since it is possible for interviewer status to affect the outcome. It is often unavoidable that interviews may be done by a range of people from the research team. A decision needs to be made about how interviewers will introduce themselves and how much information should be given about their roles in the study. Young people may respond differently if they know they are talking to the project head as opposed to an undergraduate or graduate student research assistant. It has also been suggested by some that interviewers should be consistent in the way they dress. The formality of the interviewer will set the tone of the interview. If a graduate student in shorts and a tee-shirt interviews one youth, while another is interviewed by a professor in a suit and tie, the two similar youth may present themselves to the interviewers in very different ways.

Consistency is particularly critical when the researcher is interested in religion. It is important that the interviewers appear neutral on the subject of religion, so as not to make the youth think that there are "right" answers to give, and then try to please or impress the inter-

viewer with what they think the interviewer wants to hear. It is also often helpful to tell interviewees ahead of time what kind of questions they might expect to be asked and the general content of the interview. This can serve to reduce their anxieties about the interviews and make them more confident in their abilities to participate.

Research with youth can require patience for dealing with lateness, no-shows, and last minute cancellations. However, several youth researchers say that interviewing youth is not so much different from interviewing

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*Research with youth can  
require patience.*

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adults. Youth and adults are similar in more ways than adults often admit, although youth tend to act out their thoughts and feelings in more dramatic ways than do adults. These scholars advocate inviting teens to tell their stories, since it is often the case that more can be learned by listening to stories than by asking direct questions. They caution, however, to be aware that youth, like adults, may omit information from their stories or fail to tell the whole story if they do not think additional information is relevant or might be potentially risky to share. One approach to getting a more balanced perspective is to make attempts to verify some of the information they provide with other sources. For example, if teens report that they attend church every week, it may be helpful in an interview with the parents to ask again how often their teens attend church, and see if the answers are consistent. This type of cross-checking must be done in a way that does not damage confidentiality or reveal any of the responses given by the teens.

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# Research Questions

In talking with a range of scholars about the study of youth and religion, many offered suggestions for questions that they thought were particularly important to investigate. The possibilities are, of course, nearly endless, but what follows is a sample of the kinds of questions of interest to those who want to better understand the relationship between youth and religion and spirituality:

1. *Family Influences*: How does family religious background shape the religious lives of youth? How does religion influence the quality of family relationships?
2. *Social Networks*: What role do friendship networks play in the lives of youth? Where are peer networks located? School? Church? Other? What influences do peer relationships have on youth decisions, beliefs, behaviors?
3. *Personal Narratives*: What are the stories youth tell about their lives? What are the significant events or rites of passage that shape their senses of self? How do they connect their individual stories with the social contexts in which they find themselves?
4. *Congregations*: What role does institutional religion (the church) play in the lives of youth? What role do youth play in the life of the church? Are there mutual benefits to relationships between youth and their congregations?
5. *Personal Faith and Tradition*: How do youth “make faith their own” and what factors help to shape their individual religious identities? How are youth shaped by the particularities of their religious traditions, beyond the influence of general religiosity? Are these particularities salient to their religious identity?
6. *Health*: Does religiosity affect the ways youth deal with issues of mental and emotional health such as depression, anxiety, self-esteem? Does religion facilitate better social adjustment?
7. *Protective Effects*: Does religion have a protective effect against problematic or delinquent behaviors? Does religion play a role in helping youth deal with life’s problems?
8. *Spirituality*: Do youth make a distinction between religion and spirituality? If so, how are they different? What for youth is “spirituality?”
9. *Adult Relationships*: Do adults other than parents serve as role models and mentors for youth? If so, how do these relationships influence their lives?
10. *Religious Practices*: What types of religious practices are youth involved in? Church attendance? Worship? Youth group? What types of activities do they participate in outside of church that hold religious meaning? Camps? Service clubs?
11. *Media Technology*: How has the shift into an information society affected youth? How does media shape their lives?
12. *Morality*: How do youth perceive ethics and morality? How do they make decisions about right and wrong, good and bad, just and unjust?
13. *Activities and Aspirations*: What activities are youth involved in outside of religion? What things do they currently do to fill their days? What are their aspirations for the future?
14. *Group Comparisons*: Do the answers to all of these questions differ by social class and economic status? Is there a relationship between socio-economic status and the role that religion plays in the lives of

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youth? Or does socio-economic status in any way mediate the influence that religion has in the lives of youth?

15. *Faith and Moral Formation*: How can we better measure the development of youth's faith and moral formation? What factors significantly influence faith and moral development?

## Conclusion

Investigating the religious and spiritual lives of American youth and how these affect various outcomes in their lives is an area ripe for continued fruitful social scientific research. Previous studies provide helpful guidance in sorting through some of the dilemmas and decisions about research design and process. This report is intended to provide an introductory methodological orientation for researchers interested in exploring this area of study. It is also meant to offer guidance for non-academic consumers of social science research on youth and religion, in order to help improve their ability critically to assess the value and limits of available research findings. We look forward to future advances in the quality and insight of research on American youth and religion.

Additional resources for study and research on American youth and religion can be found at *The Religious Practices of American Youth* Internet website, located at [www.youthandreligion.org](http://www.youthandreligion.org).

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## Appendix A: Research Consultants

This report is one of the products of research funded by a Lilly Endowment, Inc. planning grant made to the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill for work by Dr. Christian Smith of the Department of Sociology, UNC–CH. Between June 2000 and May 2001, Smith and his research team interviewed or otherwise communicated with about 45 scholars, researchers, and leaders in youth publishing and philanthropy (listed below) with experience and insights studying American youth and/or religion. In some cases, our conversations went into great depth, others were brief and focused communications. This report is a compilation and synthesis of the results of those discussions. We are extremely grateful for the contribution of these consultants to our work. However, no statement in this report can be attributed to any one individual below, nor should any of them be considered responsible for any error or misstatement found in this report. The content of this report is the sole responsibility of its authors.

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