

Sociologists Find that Religious Teens Are More Positive About Life

Sociologists with the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR), based at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, have found that religious 12th graders in the United States have significantly higher self-esteem and hold more positive attitudes about life in general than their less religious peers. The findings were released in the report *Religion and the Life Attitudes and Self-Images of American Adolescents*.

According to Christian Smith, principal investigator of the NSYR, “Regular religious service attendance, high subjective importance of faith and years spent in religious youth groups are associated with higher self-esteem and more positive self-attitudes even when statistical procedures control for the influences of numerous demographic and socio-economic factors.” Smith is professor and associate chair of sociology at UNC-CH. He co-authored the report with Robert Faris, a Ph.D. candidate in sociology at UNC-CH.

Using 1996 data from Monitoring the Future (MTF), these findings examine correlations between four religion variables and a variety of attitudes, including view of self, hopefulness about the future, satisfaction with life and meaningfulness of life. Twelve of the 13 attitudinal variables examined in the report were related significantly to some dimension of religion when controlling for the effects of nine other variables such as age, race, sex and family structure. The religion factors most commonly related to these outcomes are religious service attendance and importance of religion, although religious affiliation and youth group participation were also significant in many cases.

Despite these positive findings, there are still areas of concern, according to Smith. “Although highly religious 12th graders generally have better life attitudes and self-images than non-religious 12th graders, it is still noteworthy that a minority of highly religious 12th graders in fact do have negative life attitudes and self-images. Religion is no cure-all for everyone when it comes to these issues.”

For example, 13 percent of 12th graders who attend religious services weekly or more and 15 percent of those who say faith is important in their lives agree that the future often seems hopeless and that life often seems meaningless. Eighteen percent each of 12th graders who attend religious services weekly or more and who say faith is important in their lives also agree that they

sometimes think they are no good at all. “Religion does positively associate with better life attitudes and self-images for 12th graders, but some religiously active youth still struggle in these areas,” Smith added.

Smith is also quick to point out that it is difficult to determine the direction of cause and effect between religion and life attitudes and self-images due to the cross-sectional nature of these data. What is clear in this report’s findings, however, is that religiously involved U.S. teenagers have more positive attitudes about themselves and life in general than non-religious youth. This understanding is a valuable starting point of knowledge for considering ways to enhance the quality of life of U.S. adolescents.

The National Study of Youth and Religion is a four-year research project funded by Lilly Endowment Inc. It began in August 2001 and will continue until August 2005. The purpose of the project is to research the shape and influence of religion and spirituality in the lives of American adolescents; to identify effective practices in the religious, moral and social formation of the lives of youth; to describe the extent to which youth participate in and benefit from the programs and opportunities that religious communities are offering to their youth; and to foster an informed national discussion about the influence of religion in youth's lives to encourage sustained reflection about and rethinking of our cultural and institutional practices with regard to youth and religion.

The Monitoring the Future (MTF) survey is a nationally representative survey of U.S. high school students administered to eighth, 10th and 12th graders since 1975. This analysis focused on 12th graders. By design, MTF data does not include school dropouts and home-schooled youth. The four questions regarding religion analyzed in this report are 1) “How often do you attend religious services?,” 2) “How important is religion in your life?,” 3) “How many years, if any, have you participated in religious youth groups?,” and 4) “What is your religious preference?”