

Mapping American Adolescent Religious Participation

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Sociologists know surprisingly little about the religious lives of adolescents in the United States. This article begins to redress that unfortunate lack of knowledge by examining descriptive findings on adolescent religious participation from three recent, reputable national surveys of American youth. We present descriptive statistics on three fundamental aspects of youth religious participation: religious affiliation, religious service attendance, and involvement in church youth groups. We also examine the influences of gender, race, age, and region on these religious outcomes. This descriptive inquiry should help to heighten broader understanding of and to lay down a baseline of essential information about American adolescent religious participation. Further research is needed to investigate the social influence of different kinds of religiosity on various outcomes in the lives of American youth.

We know relatively little about the religious lives of American adolescents. The vast majority of research in the sociology of religion in the United States focuses on American adults, ages 18 and older. And few scholars of American adolescents in other fields pay close attention to youth's religious lives. As a result, our social scientific knowledge of the religious affiliations, practices, beliefs, experiences, and attitudes of American youth is impoverished.¹

This is a problem for many reasons. American adolescents between the ages of 10–19 represent about 14 percent of all Americans (adolescents ages 10–24 represent 21 percent), an age-minority population deserving scholarly attention as much as any other group. Indeed, American adolescents may deserve extra scholarly attention by sociologists of religion. Adolescence represents a crucial developmental transition from childhood to adulthood and so can disclose a tremendous amount of knowledge about religious socialization and change in the life course. Adolescents are a population that many religious organizations, both congregations and para-church ministries, particularly target in order to exert influence in their lives. Adolescence and young adulthood is also the life stage when religious conversion is most likely to take place. Adolescence furthermore provides a unique opportunity to study religious influences on family relationships and dynamics, peer interactions, risk behaviors, and many other outcome variables. Finally, adolescence provides an ideal baseline stage for longitudinal research on religious influences in people's lives.

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Gaining a solid understanding of the religion of American adolescents can also enable sociologists of religion to make useful contributions to a variety of nonacademic audiences for whom our findings might have relevance. A series of high-profile events—including multiple school shootings and local epidemic outbreaks of sexually-transmitted diseases among youth—have heightened broad public concern about problems in youth culture. There appears to be a growing awareness of and interest in religious, spiritual, and moral influences in the lives of youth among not only religious leaders, but also educators, social service providers, public policy-makers, philanthropists, and journalists. Unfortunately, although impressionistic and journalistic works on youth religion abound (for example, Lewis, Dodd, and Tippens 1995; McAllister 1999; Mahedy and Bernardi 1994; Zoba 1999; Beaudoin 1998; Rabey 2001) and a few suggestive opinion-poll-based studies on American youth religion exist (Gallup 1999; Barna 1997, 1999, 2001), sociologists of religion currently have very little solidly dependable, nationally representative, empirical knowledge about adolescent religiosity to contribute to these public discussions. Some good qualitative studies of American youth religion do make helpful contributions to our knowledge (for example, Lytch 2000; Flory and Miller 2000; Davis 2001; Myers 1991), yet these are not designed to make nationally representative claims about the religious participation of American youth. Of the few good works on adolescent religiosity, most focus specifically on intergenerational religious transmission (Hoge, Petrillo, and Smith 1982; Ozorak 1989; Parker and Gaier 1980; Cornwall 1988; Erickson 1992; Keysar, Kosmin, and Scheckner 2000). In general, much of the existing social science literature on youth and religion is simply out of date.²

The problem is, to some degree, a simple lack of interest and attention among sociologists. But the problem also stems from failing to put useful religion questions on many good surveys of youth, which typically understand and measure religion in narrow and deficient terms. Of 18 of the best national surveys of youth that we investigated in our research, for example, fully 12 contain a mere three religion questions or less; only three high-quality, nationally representative surveys of adolescents include six or more questions about religion.³ Moreover, it appears that no studies have analyzed these few religion questions systematically—which is what we intend to do here. Sociologists of religion who get involved in this research need to advise other scholars in family and adolescence on the importance of measuring religion well. We also need to conduct our own surveys of adolescent religion.

Meanwhile, however, we can move in the right direction in redressing our lack of knowledge about youth religion by analyzing and compiling available survey data, as inadequate in some respects as they may be, to provide a big-picture view of adolescent religious participation. It is possible to scour reputable existing survey data on youth to learn about some religious aspects of their lives. Even simple descriptive work can serve to heighten broader understanding of and help lay down a baseline of essential information about American adolescent religion. That is the goal of this article. Here we analyze existing data from three recent, reputable national surveys of American youth to present descriptive statistics on three fundamental aspects of youth religious participation: religious affiliation, religious service attendance, and involvement in church youth groups. We also examine the influences of age, race, gender, and region on these religious outcomes, as the survey data allow.

We believe that since our collective substantive knowledge of American youth religion is so thin, and since available data sets do contain a great deal of interesting and important descriptive information on the religious participation of American adolescents, a purely descriptive article mapping the contours and correlates of youth religion using frequencies and cross-tabs is more than warranted. Having mapped the religious terrain descriptively here, we intend in subsequent work to conduct multivariate analyses to predict factors explaining variance in youth religious participation. But first, in this article, we concentrate on one of the crucial tasks of sociological work: describing the configurations of (religious) social life.

DATA AND METHODS

Our findings are based on analyses of the following data sets.

Monitoring the Future, 1996

The Monitoring the Future (MTF) survey is a nationally representative survey of American high school students, administered to 12th graders since 1975, and to 8th and 10th graders since 1991. Subsamples of students in each grade are administered different versions of the questionnaire, while each covers the core areas of demographic information and drug use, as well as questions on a range of other topics, including social life in school, academic achievement, parental involvement, political preferences, and religion. MTF uses a multistage area probability sample design, with three selection stages: (1) geographic areas, as the primary sampling unit (PSU); (2) schools within the PSU; and (3) students within each sampled school. MTF includes 80 PSUs, eight of which were selected with certainty; the remaining PSUs were selected with probability proportionate to the size of the senior class, as were schools within each PSU. Typically, one school was selected from each PSU, although multiple schools were drawn for some major metropolitan areas. For each school, 400 students were randomly selected; for schools with less than 400 students in a given grade, the entire class is surveyed. The response rate for schools has ranged from 66 to 88 percent for every survey year, and the student response rate in 1996 was 83 percent. Total Ns for MTF surveys vary by year and grade. However, the N for 1996 12th graders is 14,823; for 1996 10th graders is 7,895; and for 1996 8th graders is 9,167—class samples were weighted in proportion to their national representation. By design, MTF data does not include school drop-outs and home-schooled youth. The MTF survey includes two religion questions on its core questionnaire: (1) “How often do you attend religious services?” and (2) “What is your religious preference?” (we are using up through 1996 MTF data here rather than 1999 data, because MTF surveys after 1996 did not ask subjects in the western region any of these core religion questions). Demographic information includes age, gender, race (to maintain confidentiality, race is only coded for whites and African Americans; all other races are labeled simply “other”), and geographic region (following standard Census divisions).

Survey of Adolescent Health, 1995

The National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health (Add Health) is a nationally representative school-based study of adolescents focusing on the social context of healthy behavior. Eighty eligible high schools—both public and private—were drawn from a national sampling frame of high schools, drawn up by Quality Education Data. To be eligible for selection, a high school needed to have an 11th grade and total enrollment greater than 30. The sampling design ensured representativeness according to geographic region, urbanicity, school type, and school size. Once the high schools were selected, one “feeder” middle school or junior high school was selected with probability proportionate to the student body it sent to the selected high school in the past year. Because some high schools contain grades 7 through 12, the number of feeder schools is smaller than the number of high schools. There are a total of 132 schools in the survey. The recruitment rate of the originally sampled high schools was over 70 percent. The Add Health survey was administered in school, from the fall of 1994 to the spring of 1995, to all students grades 7 to 12 present on the survey date, and was completed by more than 90,000 students. An equal number of boys (49.5 percent) and girls (50.5 percent) completed the Add Health survey. It is important to note, however, that respondents who answered “no religion” to the survey’s religious affiliation question were not administered subsequent religion questions; to be conservative, we have coded these cases as the lowest category on other religion questions, meaning that we no doubt underestimate the religiosity of American youth on this survey (i.e., a “no religion”

respondent may very well attend a religious youth group, but was nonetheless coded in these data as never having done so). Finally, note that by design, Add Health data do not include school drop-outs and home-schooled youth.

The Survey of Parents and Youth, 1998

The Survey of Parents and Youth (SPY) was designed by Princeton University's Center for Research on Child Wellbeing in conjunction with the National Evaluation Team for the Urban Health Initiative at the Center for Health and Public Service at New York University Robert F. Wagner Graduate School, and was funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. SPY was designed to monitor trends in youths' access to parental and community resources. The survey includes interviews with parents and youth. The youth survey generated information on parent-child relationships, involvement in supervised activities, and outcomes such as health status, educational expectations, and school achievement. The study, completed in 1998–1999, was administered as a random-digit-dial telephone survey to a nationally representative sample of youth ages 10–18; and to oversamples of youth in five selected cities (Philadelphia, Baltimore, Detroit, Oakland, Richmond, and Chicago). Parents were screened and then interviewed, after which the interviewers asked permission to interview the youth. SPY did not provide incentives for participation; it achieved an adult response rate of 89 percent and a parent consent rate for child interviews of 74 percent. SPY was conducted in English, Spanish, or Chinese, and lasted an average of 30 minutes for youth, and 20 minutes for parents. Since we are interested here in nationally representative statistics, and not the urban oversamples, we eliminated the latter and only analyzed the national sample of youth, providing for analysis a weighted N of 743.

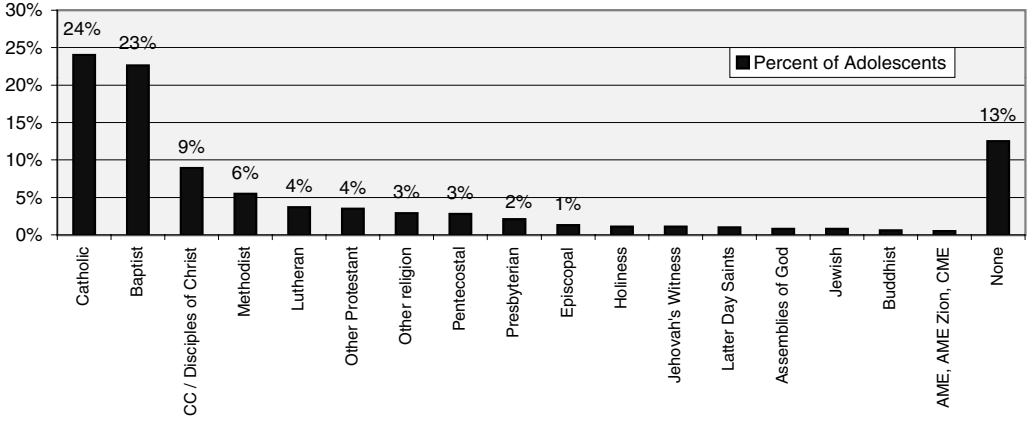
For purposes of this study, we have focused on American youth in the standard teenage years, those between the ages of 13 and 18. All data are weighted to be nationally representative. To provide the basic findings needed at this stage of a research program on American youth and religion, we have primarily employed descriptive frequencies and cross-tabs for analysis. We will first present the descriptive findings on our three main dependent religious participation variables. Then we will turn to examine the effects of gender, race, age, and region on these variables.

RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION

Perhaps the most basic task in mapping the religious landscape of American adolescents' lives is to identify their distribution among America's many religious traditions. Figure 1, using Add Health data, reveals the uneven distribution of youth's religious affiliations in 1995. The largest block of religious youth are Catholic, at 24 percent; followed closely by Baptists at 23 percent. Church of Christ, Methodist, and other Protestant groups follow with small minorities of the total population.⁴ In 1995, 13 percent of American youth claimed to have no religion, roughly proportional to the size of nonreligious adults.⁵ Adventist, Congregational, Eastern Orthodox, Muslim, Christian Science, United Church of Christ, Hindu, Unitarian, Quaker, National Baptist, and Baha'i each represented less than 1 percent of youth in this sample.

Figure 2 uses Monitoring the Future data to project major religious affiliations over a 20-year time frame, from 1976 to 1996. We can see that, in the context of overall stability, the proportion of Protestant youth has declined by 10 percent. Close inspection shows that much of the Protestant decline appears to have been located among Lutherans, Methodists, Baptists, and the United Church of Christ. The proportion of Catholic youth has declined very slightly, and the proportion of Jewish youth grew slightly. By contrast, the proportion of American youth of "other" religions and those who are not religious grew noticeably (5 percent each) over this 20-year period. Although the vast majority of American youth remain within the Christian tradition, proportionately more youth both consider themselves not religious and are affiliating with non-Christian traditions over time.

FIGURE 1
RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION OF ADOLESCENTS, 1995



Source: National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health, 1995.

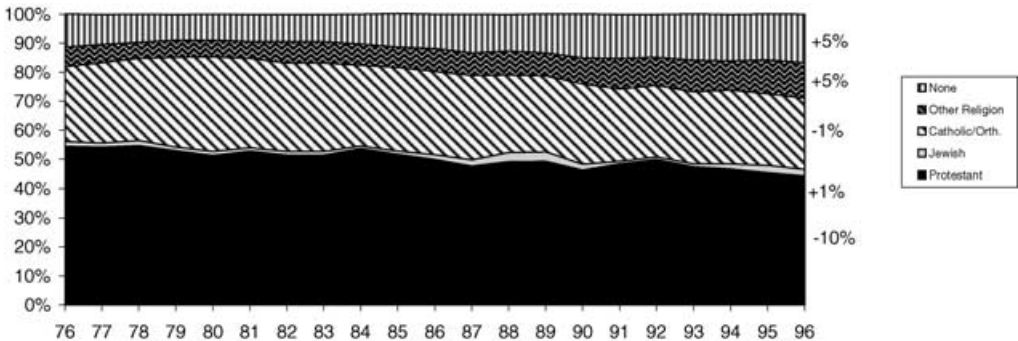
Note: The following affiliations were each cited by less than 1 percent of adolescents: Adventist, Congregational, Easter Orthodox, Muslim, Christian Scientists, United Church of Christ, Hindu, Unitarian, Quaker, National Baptist, and Baha'i.

RELIGIOUS SERVICE ATTENDANCE

American adolescents exhibit a great deal of variance in their frequency of religious service attendance. Analysis of the religious service attendance of 8th, 10th, and 12th graders (combined) shows that 38 percent attend weekly, 16 percent attend one to two times a month, 31 percent attend rarely, and 15 percent never attend religious services.⁶ The youth of America, in other words, widely vary in their levels of involvement in participation in religious worship attendance.

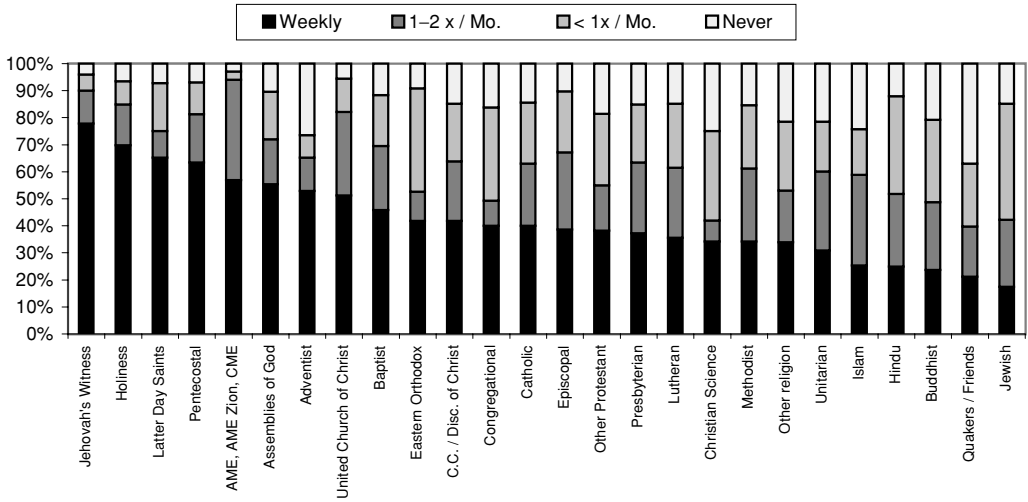
Attendance also clearly varies by religious affiliation, as shown in Figure 3. These Add Health data show that more conservative groups, and those with larger proportions of African Americans—such as Jehovah’s Witnesses, Holiness denominations, Mormons, Pentecostals, African Methodists, Assemblies of God, and Adventists—have higher rates of attendance. Youth in mainline religious groups for the most part exhibit moderate amounts of church attendance. And youth in minority religious groups—Jewish, Quakers, Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, Unitarian,

FIGURE 2
RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION OVER TIME, 12TH GRADERS



Source: Monitoring the Future, 1976–1996.

FIGURE 3
CHURCH ATTENDANCE BY AFFILIATION, ADOLESCENTS, 1995



Source: National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health, 1995.

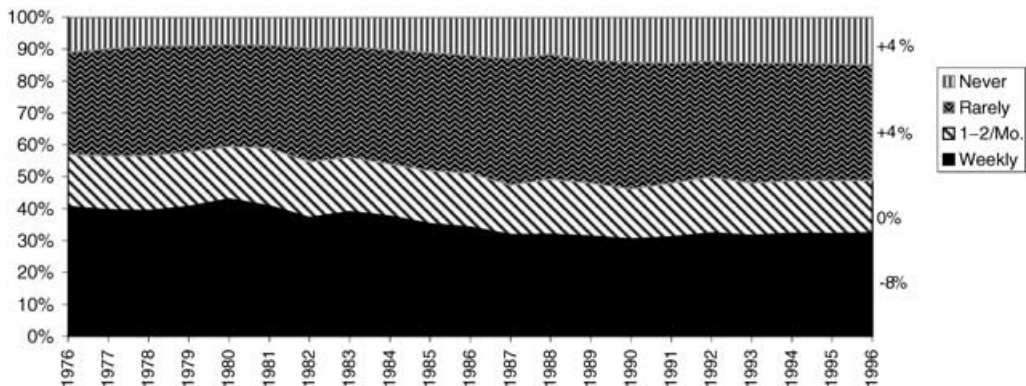
Christian Science, and “other” religions—appear to attend the least. These findings are clearly confirmed by an analysis of Monitoring the Future data (not shown).

Monitoring the Future has tracked the religious service attendance of 12th graders from 1976 to 1996. Figure 4, based on Monitoring the Future data, shows a largely stable pattern, with a slight but noticeable decline, however, in religious service attendance over the 20 years. Weekly religious service attendance in particular suffered, losing 8 percent over that time period. The categories attending never and rarely grew by 4 percent each during these 20 years.

YOUTH GROUP PARTICIPATION

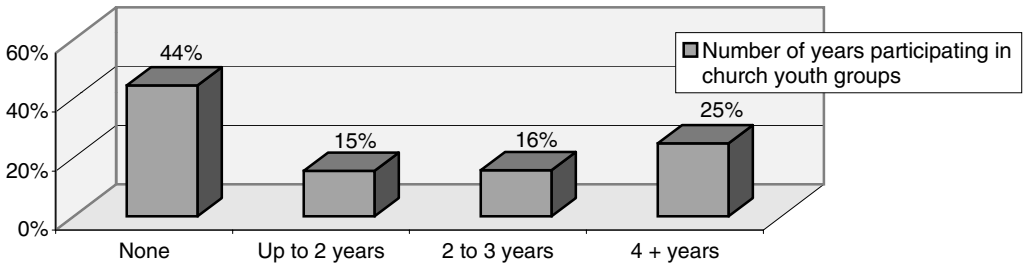
About half of American adolescents participate in religious youth groups. Among 12th graders (see Figure 5, which uses Monitoring the Future data), one-quarter have been involved in a religious

FIGURE 4
CHURCH ATTENDANCE OVER TIME, 12TH GRADERS



Source: Monitoring the Future, 1976–1996.

FIGURE 5
PARTICIPATION IN CHURCH YOUTH GROUPS, 12TH GRADERS, 1996



Source: Monitoring the Future, 1996.

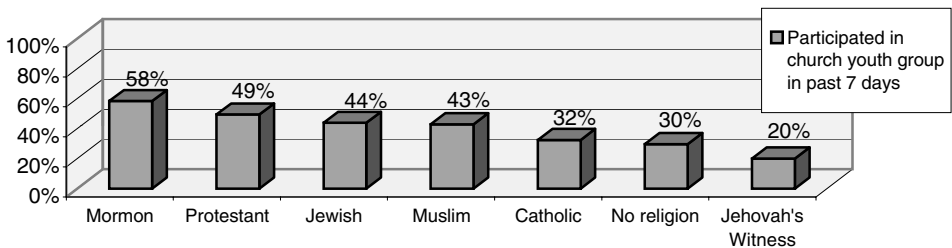
youth group for their entire four years of high school. Another 31 percent have been involved for one to three years. Forty-four percent of 12th graders have never been involved in a religious youth group during their adolescent years.

Youth group participation varies by religious tradition. According to the SPY data used in Figure 6, 58 percent of Mormon youth, about one-half of Protestant youth, somewhat less than half of Jewish and Muslim youth, and one-third of Catholic adolescents reported having participated in a religious youth group in the seven days prior to the survey. Interestingly, three out of 10 “nonreligious” adolescents are involved in religious youth groups, more than those in the Jehovah’s Witnesses.

Figure 7 uses Add Health data to break down the distributions more finely by denomination. The overall pattern matches that of Figure 6 and what we saw about church service attendance in Figure 3. In general, more conservative denominations and those with higher proportions of African Americans have the greatest youth group participation, followed by mainline Protestant religious denominations. Religious minority youth tend to be involved in youth groups the least, with Jewish and Christian Science youth the possible exceptions. An analysis of Monitoring the Future data (not shown) verifies these findings.

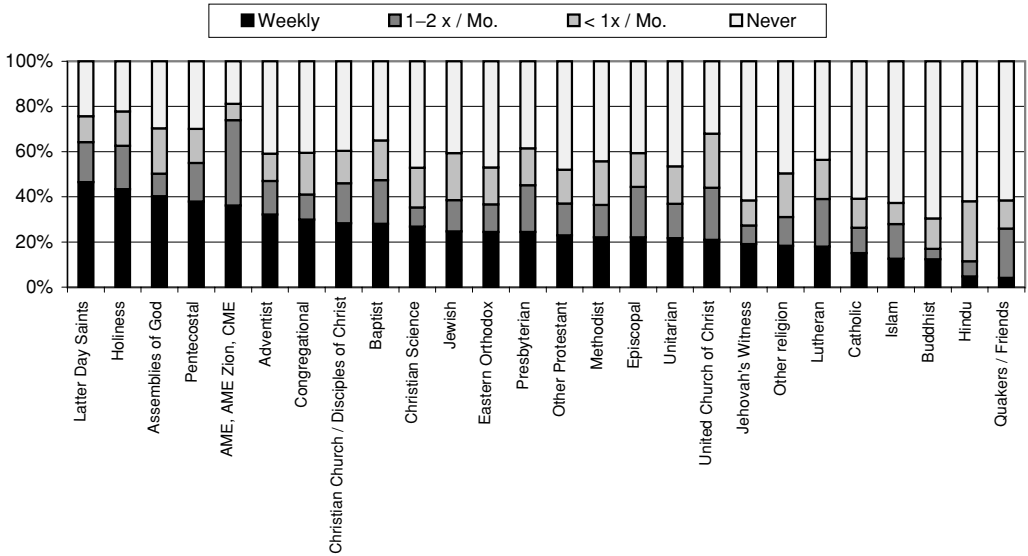
This variance of adolescent participation in religious youth groups is evident not only when comparing by religion and denomination, but also when considering the religious identity of the adolescents’ parents. The Survey of Parents and Youth asked Protestant and Catholic parents of surveyed youth in a separate but linked survey to name the religious tradition within their larger faith with which they identify. Figure 8 uses SPY data to reveal that, among all Protestants, youth with an evangelical (especially) or fundamentalist parent were most likely to be involved in a religious youth group (74 and 52 percent, respectively), followed by mainline Protestants

FIGURE 6
ADOLESCENTS AND CHURCH YOUTH GROUPS, BY AFFILIATION, 1998



Source: Survey of Parents and Youth, 1998.

FIGURE 7
PARTICIPATION IN CHURCH YOUTH PROGRAMS, BY AFFILIATION, 1995

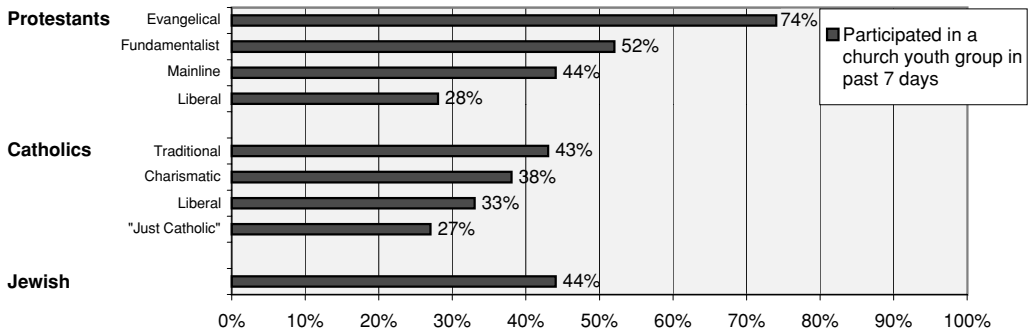


Source: National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health, 1995.

(44 percent) and liberal Protestants (28 percent). Among Catholics, youth with a “traditional” Catholic parent were most likely to be involved in a youth group (at 43 percent) followed by youth with a charismatic Catholic parent (38 percent), or liberal Catholic parent (33 percent). Youth with a parent who self-identified as “just Catholic” were the least likely Catholics to be involved in a religious youth group (27 percent). According to these data, American youth in Jewish households are involved in youth groups at the same rate as youth with mainline Protestant parents (44 percent).

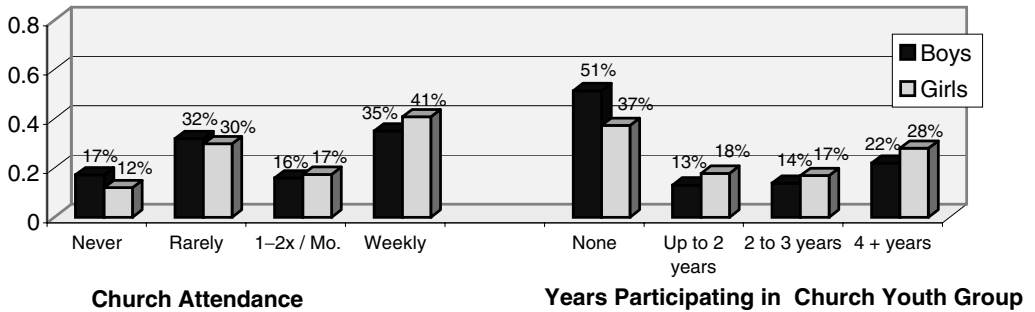
It is worth noting that church attendance and youth group participation are highly correlated. For example, Monitoring the Future data shows that fully 72 percent of 12th graders who have been involved in a religious youth group for six or more years also attend church once a week or more (90 percent attend once a month or more); by contrast, only 13 percent of 12th graders who

FIGURE 8
PARTICIPATION IN CHURCH YOUTH GROUPS, BY PARENT’S RELIGIOUS IDENTIFICATION, 1998



Source: Survey of Parents and Youth, 1998.

FIGURE 9
CHURCH ATTENDANCE AND YOUTH GROUP PARTICIPATION BY GENDER, 1996



Source: Monitoring the Future, 1996.

are not involved in a religious youth group attend church weekly. Likewise, 81 percent of 12th graders who never attend church are also not involved in any youth group; and only 19 percent of 12th graders who attend church weekly are not involved in a religious youth group. What does *not* appear to be happening among American youth, then, is a diversification and specialization process in which some youth participate religiously in church services while others are involved only in youth groups; rather, American youth tend to do either both or neither.

GENDER DIFFERENCES

It is well known that adult American women (and those from many other cultures) consistently score higher on most measures of religiosity than adult men. This difference holds for American adolescent girls compared to boys. Add Health data, for example, show that 45 percent of all youth reporting no religion are girls, while 55 percent are boys. Figure 9 (left side) uses Monitoring the Future data to show gender differences in religious service attendance for our surveyed 8th, 10th, and 12th graders combined. Six percent more American adolescent girls than boys attend church services weekly; on the other hand, 5 percent more boys than girls never attend church.

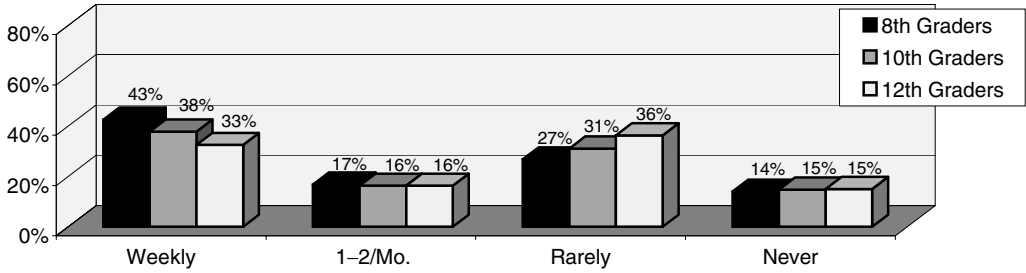
Figure 9 (right side) also reveals a gender difference in adolescent participation in religious youth groups. Fully 14 percent more 12th grade boys than girls have never participated in a religious youth group. By contrast, 28 percent of 12th grade girls, compared to only 22 percent of 12th grade boys, have been involved in a religious youth group for the full four years of high school. Clearly, using these measures of religious participation, American adolescent girls are more involved in religious activities than are boys.

AGE DIFFERENCES

Each additional year lived through adolescence in American culture brings with it significant physical, psychological, and social changes that we might expect to influence the religious participation of youth. Our data bears this out, showing steady decline in religious participation with age. Using Survey of Adolescent Health data, for example, we find that only 9.9 percent of 13 year olds report having no religion, a figure that increases steadily with every year of age to a high of 14.8 percent among 18 year olds.

Alternatively, Figure 10 uses Monitoring the Future data to split out adolescent religious service attendance by grade in school, comparing 8th, 10th, and 12th graders, using school class as a proxy for age. Here we see that religious service attendance declines as youth move through school (grow older). Weekly attendance, for instance, drops 10 percent over the four years of high school. The percentage of youth who attend once or twice a month and who never attend

FIGURE 10
CHURCH ATTENDANCE AMONG ADOLESCENTS, 1996



Source: Monitoring the Future, 1996.

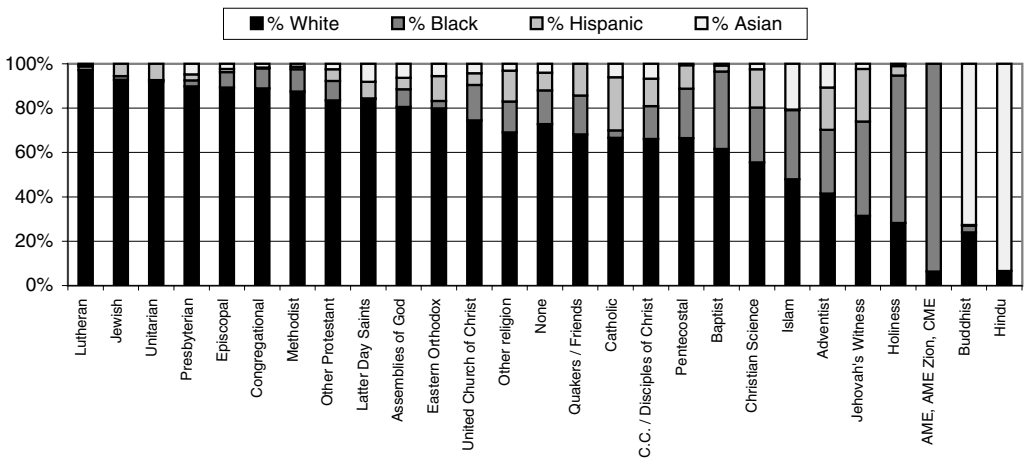
remains constant (about 16 and 15 percent, respectively). The frequency category that does gain significantly (9 percent) between the 8th and 12th grade of high school is “rarely.”

Finally, when it comes to youth group involvement, analysis of the Survey of Parents and Youth data show that fully 50 percent of 13 year olds report participating in a religious youth group in the previous seven days, a figure that steadily declines with each year to a low of 28.6 percent for 18 year olds—a loss of 21.4 percentage points, constituting a 42.8 percent decline overall, over these five teenage years.

RACE DIFFERENCES

The race of American adolescents influences their religious location and levels of religious participation. The various religious traditions and denominations in the United States are comprised of different racial mixes, as we see in Figure 11 (based on Add Health data). The African Methodist, Holiness, Jehovah’s Witness, Baptist, and Muslim communities have relatively higher concentrations of African-American youth. The Catholic, Jehovah’s Witness, and Adventist

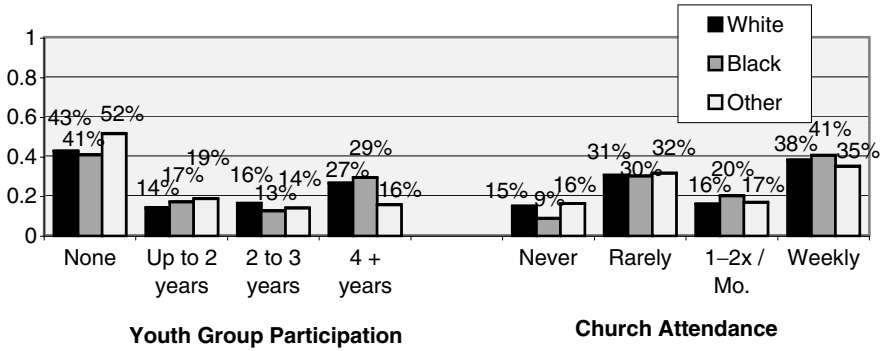
FIGURE 11
RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION BY RACE, ADOLESCENTS, 1995



Source: National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health, 1995.

Note: The following affiliations were cited by less than 1 percent of teens: Adventist, Congregational, Eastern Orthodox, Muslim, Christian Scientists, United Church of Christ, Hindu, Unitarian, and Quaker.

FIGURE 12
CHURCH ATTENDANCE AND YOUTH GROUP PARTICIPATION BY RACE, 1996



Source: Monitoring the Future, 1996.

traditions have relatively higher concentrations of Hispanic youth. The Hindu, Buddhist, and Islamic faiths in the United States comprise relatively more Asian youth. As a numerical majority, white adolescents dominate most denominations and traditions, except the Islamic, Adventist, Jehovah’s Witness, Holiness, Buddhist, Hindu, and African Methodist communities.

Measured alternatively as the percent of racial groups in different religious traditions, 47.7 percent of African-American youth are Baptist, 55.7 percent of Hispanic youth are Catholic, 35.5 percent of Asian youth are Catholic, while another 11 percent are Buddhist. White adolescents are 22.7 percent Catholic, 20.3 percent Baptist, 8.6 percent Church of Christ/Disciples of Christ, 7.1 percent Methodist, with the remainder distributed among many different traditions, each claiming less than 5 percent of the total.

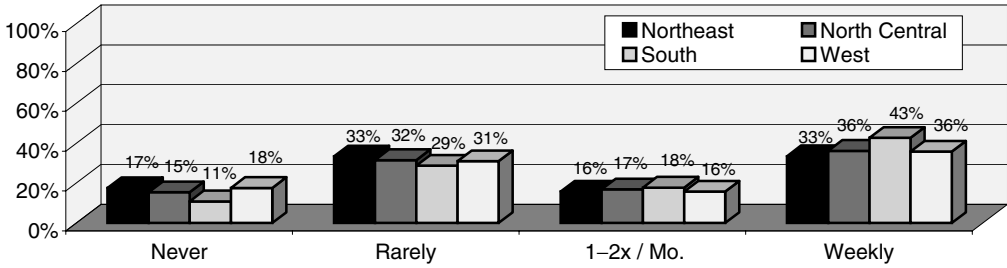
We also observe racial differences in religious service attendance among American youth in the 8th, 10th, and 12th grades (combined). Figure 12 (right side) uses Monitoring the Future data to show that African-American adolescents have the highest rates of church attendance, followed by whites. Youth of other racial and ethnic backgrounds in the United States attend church with comparatively lower frequencies. This race effect is evident across all categories of frequency of attendance, from never to weekly.

This race effect is also consistent with findings on participation in religious youth groups. Figure 12 (left side) shows that young African Americans are slightly more likely than whites to be involved in a religious youth group for all of their four years of high school, which is nearly twice the rate for youth from “other” racial and ethnic groups. American youth who are neither white nor African American are also the most likely to have never participated in a religious youth group during their high school years.

REGIONAL DIFFERENCES

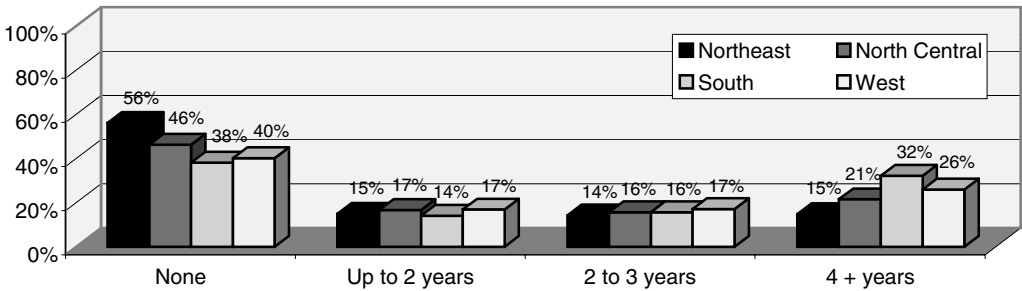
Research on American adults has shown regional effects on religiosity (Smith, Sikkink, and Bailey 1998). We find similar effects on the religious participation of American youth. Using Add Health data, for example, we find that only 8.4 percent of southern youth report having no religion, while 12.1 percent of northeastern youth, 15.2 percent of midwestern youth, and 17 percent of youth living in western states report having no religion. Figure 13, based on Monitoring the Future data, shows that youth living in the south are the most likely to attend religious services weekly and least likely to never attend. Youth in the north central and western states follow the south in church attendance. American adolescents who reside in the northeast are consistently the least likely to attend church weekly and the most likely to never attend church. Even so, we should

FIGURE 13
CHURCH ATTENDANCE BY REGION, 1996



Source: Monitoring the Future, 1996.

FIGURE 14
PARTICIPATION IN CHURCH YOUTH GROUPS BY REGION, 12TH GRADERS, 1996



Source: Monitoring the Future, 1996.

keep in mind that more than one-third of youth are attending church weekly, no matter what the region.

A similar pattern holds true for 12th graders' participation in religious youth groups, as we see in Figure 14. These Monitoring the Future data show that those living in the south are most likely to be involved in a youth group, and to be involved for more years. Next most likely are youth living in western states, followed by youth in north central states. Again, adolescents living in the northeast are the least likely to ever have been involved in a youth group during high school years, and least likely to have been involved for many years.

DISCUSSION

There are many important things that we can learn about the religious affiliations and participation of American youth from existing descriptive survey data. It is always important to bear in mind, however, some limitations built into much extant data, which should qualify our interpretation of the findings. The Survey of Parents and Youth contains no significant problems in this regard. However, Monitoring the Future data only represent American 8th, 10th, and 12th graders, and so are not technically nationally representative of all adolescents; nevertheless, we believe they provide a close approximation. Moreover, Add Health respondents who answered "not religious" on the religious affiliation question were unfortunately skipped out of remaining religion questions, and so not given the chance to answer either the attendance or the youth group question. We know from other studies (and from Figure 6 above) that some "nonreligious" youth do attend church and youth group meetings. This means that Add Health data clearly underestimate the

proportion of American youth attending church and participating in youth groups. Furthermore, both the Add Health and Monitoring the Future data are school based, and so exclude school drop-outs and home schoolers.⁷ Nevertheless, these are the best data available at the moment, so we must make our best use of them.

What, in review, have we found about American adolescent religion, particularly religious participation? We believe the following eight summary observations are most important.

1. *The majority of American youth are religious* insofar as they affiliate with some religious group or tradition. Only about 13 percent in 1995 say they have no religion. Nearly one-quarter of American youth are Catholic and Baptist each; the remaining half are spread thinly across a variety of different traditions and denominations (or are not religious). We would expect the religious affiliations of youth to fairly closely track that of their parents. On the other hand, older adolescents sometimes explore religious congregations, denominations, and traditions other than those in which they were raised. And the majority of church-attending youth claim that they go to religious services not only because their families make them, but because they themselves want to (Gallup 1999:11).
2. *The number of American adolescents within the Christian tradition has been gradually declining* over the last two and one-half decades. The number of youth in the “other religion” category has grown between 1976 and 1996 by 5 percent, which may be due in part to immigration from other countries.⁸ The number of youth reporting “none” for religion has increased by 5 percent. By contrast, the percent of American youth affiliating with a Protestant tradition declined by 10 percent, and with the Catholic tradition by 1 percent. This growing pluralism may help account for an apparent increase in religious tolerance and relativism among American youth (Rabey 2001). In any case, it is clear that American adolescents are gradually becoming more religiously pluralistic.
3. *About half of American adolescents regularly participate in religious organizations* in the form of religious service attendance and participation in religious youth groups. Furthermore, youth who participate in one tend to be the same youth who participate in the other, meaning that religious involvements tend to cluster among youth—those youth who are religiously involved tend to be so through multiple forms of religious participation.
4. *On the other hand, about half of American youth are not religiously active.* About half attend church services only rarely or never, and about half are not and have not been involved in a religious youth group during their high school years. These halves tend to be the same people, meaning that religious nonparticipation appears to cluster among the same youth. Moreover, church attendance trends among American high school seniors reveal a slight, gradual decline in regular attendance between the mid-1970s and the mid-1990s, suggesting that the proportion of American youth who are not religiously active may be growing over time.
5. *The religious participation of American adolescents declines with age.* For probably a variety of reasons, the older American youth grow, the less likely they are to report having a religious affiliation, attending church services regularly, and being involved in a religious youth group. This decline with age may reflect increased autonomy from the authority of religious parents; increased participation in paid jobs that may compete with religious activities for time; an expansion of available alternative social and recreational activities through increased ability to drive and access to friends who drive; and perhaps other factors. Whatever the reason, older youth are less religiously active than younger.
6. *Adolescent girls tend to be somewhat more religiously active than boys.* Girls are more likely than boys to report a religious affiliation, to attend church regularly, and to be involved in a religious youth group. This difference mirrors a similar pattern of religious variation among adult men and women in the United States and numerous other countries.
7. *The religious participation of American adolescents is somewhat differentiated by race.* While youth of all races can be found in almost every religious group, certain religious traditions

comprise much higher proportions of African-American, Hispanic, and Asian youth, who tend to cluster in specific religious groups. Race also somewhat influences church attendance and youth group involvement, with African-American youth being the most involved, followed by white youth, and youth of “other race” exhibiting relatively the least religious participation. These differences are not easily explained by socioeconomic differences, but probably derive in large measure from cultural expectations of religious participation within racial and ethnic communities and the religious traditions in which they tend to participate.

8. *The religious participation of American adolescents varies somewhat by region of residence.* Southern youth are the most religiously involved, followed by youth in the midwest and west. Adolescents residing in the northeast participate in religion the least (although they are not the least likely to report having no religion). As with the gender differences, this regional effect largely tracks what we know about regional religious effects among adult Americans. Southern culture is generally much more friendly to religion than other nonsouthern cultures in the United States. Moreover, the south is dominated denominationally by Baptists, whose youth are among those with the highest levels of church attendance and youth group participation. By contrast, not only does northeast culture tend to be relatively more secular than many other regions of the country, but the dominant religion of the northeast is Catholicism, which is associated among its youth with lower levels of church attendance and religious youth group involvement. Future multivariate analyses beyond the scope of this article will help to sort out the relative importance of alternative factors in predicting variance in religious participation among American youth.

CONCLUSION

Current social scientific knowledge about the religious lives of American adolescents is inadequate. Given the increasing interest in many sectors of society in the religious and spiritual lives of American youth, and an apparently growing interest in “spirituality” among American youth themselves, sociologists of religion need to invest more resources into research on adolescent religion and its social effects. This article is a modest step in that direction. We have employed existing data from three high-quality national surveys of American youth, however wanting on some points they may be. We have focused our analysis on adolescents’ religious affiliations, service attendance, and youth group participation, and have examined gender, race, age, and regional effects. We hope that our findings help to raise broader awareness about the religious lives of American youth, and perhaps help establish some core body of available knowledge about the extent of adolescent religious participation in the United States. Future survey research of American youth needs to develop much better and more extensive measures of adolescent religious practices, experiences, beliefs, and interests; to combine quantitative survey methods with qualitative interviews and ethnographies; to use multivariate analysis to identify the most important variables predicting religious participation; and, ideally, to conduct a longitudinal design that will track the same respondents over time in order to strengthen our ability to assess causal religious influences.

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NOTES

1. To be sure, there exist vast literatures that address religion in the lives of American youth. However, such literature is riddled with serious problems. First, much of the existing literature on American youth and religion is not systematically

empirical, but consists largely of theoretical works on moral formation and faith development, proposals for ministry models, unsystematic case studies, etc. Second, most existing empirical research on youth is out of date. While some subjects of study change relatively slowly, American youth pass through time in culturally shaped generations that change significantly from decade to decade. We do know from the literature a fair amount about baby boomers in their youth, but this is a generation now passing through middle age and toward retirement, with teenage and adult children of their own. Furthermore, members of the much discussed “Generation X” are typically defined as those born between the years 1965 and 1980, a generation that has passed into adulthood; GenXers are now about 22–37 years old, many with children of their own. We cannot claim to understand youth today by referencing existing research conducted on GenX teens (the age-median of whom were getting their driver licenses before the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989) or older. Third, many works in the literature involve analyses that do contain a religion variable, but do not make religion a focus of analysis or explanation. Many studies exist that control for religion by adding a religion variable in an analytical model, but are not particularly concerned to understand that religious effect; they are interested instead in some other independent variable and use religion only as a nonexplicated control variable to bolster the main argument. Fourth, the vast majority of published empirical studies on American youth and religion employ samples of subjects and respondents that are methodologically problematic. While some studies are based on strong research designs, many rely on samples that are quite small, are not randomly selected, and/or that represent a very narrow segment of a population. As a result, it is difficult to assess about whom findings can be generalized as representing; and it is difficult to piece together the findings collectively into a coherent picture of American youth. For example, our review of empirical studies published in 1999 and 2000 related to religious beliefs, practices, and commitment are based on the following samples: participants in a Protestant youth conference; 300 Iowa children; three Muslim teenagers; 1,500 teenagers from Seventh-Day Adventist churches; 86 youth attending alternative music concerts; 276 high school parochial school juniors; 125 11th graders from West Virginia; 77 college students; 273 Jewish teenagers from the Philadelphia area; an unspecified number of participants in Buddhist and Catholic retreats; and 2,358 African-American youth from poverty areas of three cities; only two other of the studies during these years were based on large, nationally representative samples of youth.

2. For instance, one important, older synthesis of the literature is Hyde’s (1990) 529-page *Religion in Childhood and Adolescence*, which digested roughly 1,760 pieces of literature. But only 16 of the 119 references in its chapter on “Religion and Morality in Adolescence,” for example, were published after 1985—meaning almost everything that we know from Hyde about adolescent religion and morality (when accounting for the data-publication lag time) is based on studies of people who were teenagers before Ronald Reagan had become President in 1980. See also Bensen, Donahue, and Erickson (1989).
3. See <http://www.youthandreligion.org/surveydata/index.htm>.
4. Note that the 9 percent of Christian Church/Disciples of Christ respondents *may* include youth who mistook that category to mean “simply Christian,” thus overestimating adherents to this denomination; if so, it is impossible now to separate them out.
5. As a comparison, a 1992 survey of American teens conducted by the Gallup International Institute found that 69 percent of youth considered themselves “a religious person,” while 31 percent did not. In a separate survey of 500 teenagers, Gallup found that 43 percent of teens aged 13–17 think “having a deep religious faith” is very important to them, 33 percent somewhat important, and 23 percent not important (Gallup 1999:41, 42).
6. The Gallup International Institute reports that 49 percent of American teenagers attend religious services weekly. In a separate 1996 Gallup survey of American youth, 68 percent of teens said that they attend religious services because they decided themselves that they wanted to go; 28 percent said they attend only or mostly because their parents want them to attend (Gallup 1999:8, 11).
7. According to U.S. Department of Education data, approximately 1.7 percent of high-school aged youth are home schooled; and approximately 6 percent of high-school aged youth drop out of school by the 12th grade.
8. We should recall, however, that many “Other Religion” respondents in surveys of American adults prove, upon closer inspection, actually to be Christians (Sherkat 1999). The eight countries and regions sending the most immigrants to the United States between 1981 and 1998 are, in order: Mexico (3,582,900 immigrants), the Caribbean (1,728,900), the Philippines (927,400), Central America (880,900), China (685,500), the former Soviet Union (503,200), Korea (481,400), and India (363,000) (Statistical Abstract 2000:10). The vast majority of those immigrants have come from predominantly Roman Catholic countries, but a substantial minority of them have come from atheist, Buddhist, Orthodox, and Hindu nations, which could account for some of the relative growth in other religions.

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