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Religion *and* Spirituality *on the* Path Through Adolescence

**A Research Report
of the National Study
of Youth & Religion
Number 8**

by

Melinda Lundquist Denton
Clemson University

Lisa D. Pearce
*University of North Carolina
at Chapel Hill*

Christian Smith
University of Notre Dame



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The National Study of Youth and Religion is a research project directed by Dr. Christian Smith, William R. Kenan Professor of Sociology & Director, Center for the Sociology of Religion at the University of Notre Dame and Dr. Lisa Pearce, Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. This project, generously supported by Lilly Endowment Inc., began in August 2001 and is currently funded through December 2010.

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This publication was written by researchers and staff of The National Study of Youth and Religion at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, the University of Notre Dame, and Clemson University. Findings and conclusions found in this report are those of the authors.

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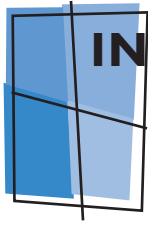


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NATIONAL
STUDY OF
YOUTH &
RELIGION



INTRODUCTION

This is a report about how certain aspects of religiosity and spirituality increase and decrease as adolescents in the United States mature and move towards becoming young adults. The National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR), initiated in 2001, is a longitudinal study of the religious and spiritual lives of American adolescents from the teenage years (ages 13–17) onward, using telephone surveys and in-person, semi-structured interviews. The first two waves (Waves 1 and Wave 2) of the NSYR telephone survey—the source of the findings in this report—were conducted by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and supported by a series of generous research grants from Lilly Endowment Inc.

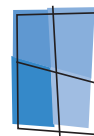
The purpose of the NSYR is to research the shape and influence of religion and spirituality in the lives of American adolescents; to identify effective practices in the religious, moral, and social formation of the lives of adolescents; to describe the extent and perceived effectiveness of the programs and opportunities that religious communities are offering to their adolescents; and to foster an informed national discussion about the influence of religion in adolescent’s lives in order to encourage sustained reflection about, and rethinking of, our cultural and institutional practices with regard to adolescents and religion.

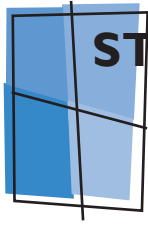
The first NSYR telephone survey was conducted in 2002/2003 (Wave 1) with adolescents 13–17 years old. These youth were re-surveyed in 2005 (Wave 2) when they were 16–21 years old. This report uses the findings from these first two NSYR telephone surveys to describe the level and directions of religious change for American adolescents from this cohort.

The purpose of the NSYR is to research the shape and influence of religion and spirituality in the lives of American youth.

A description of NSYR research design and methods follows this introduction. We then provide a summary of our findings, followed by more detailed results—divided into sections for each particular dimension of religiosity covered: religious affiliation, religious beliefs, public religious practice, evaluation of religious congregations, private religious practice, and personal religiosity and spirituality. Following this, we examine how adolescents report and explain any self-perceived religious change in their own lives. The final section contains our conclusions based on the study results.

Further information on the study, including the latest press releases, a listing of all publications and publications in electronic format may be found on the Web at www.youthandreligion.org.





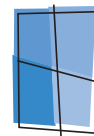
STUDY DESIGN AND METHODS

The National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR)'s longitudinal survey began as a nationally representative telephone survey of 3,290 English- and Spanish-speaking teenagers between the ages of 13 and 17. Researchers at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill conducted the baseline survey (Wave 1) with the teen respondents and one of their parents between July 2002 and April 2003. A random-digit dial (RDD) telephone method was employed to generate numbers representative of all household telephones in the 50 United States. The second wave (Wave 2) of the NSYR was a re-survey of the Wave 1 teen respondents. Similar to Wave 1, Wave 2 was conducted by telephone using a Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI) system from June 2005 through November 2005, when the respondents were between the ages of 16 and 21. Every effort was made to contact and survey all original NSYR respondents, including those out of the country and serving in the military. The overall retention rate at Wave 2 was 78.6%. The predominant source of attrition in Wave 2 was non-located respondents and the cooperation rate was 89.9%. The refusal rate for Wave 2 was 4%, calculated as the percent of all eligible respondents that refused to take part in the survey. The overall combined response rate for Waves 1 and 2 of the NSYR telephone survey was 44.8%—a rate consistent with the most high-quality telephone surveys conducted in the United States. The analyses we present in this report are based on the final Wave 2 sample of 2,530 adolescent respondents.

Diagnostic analyses, comparing NSYR data with U.S. Census data on households where adolescents reside and with comparable national adolescent surveys (e.g., Monitoring the Future, the National Household Education Survey, and the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health) confirmed that the NSYR provided a nationally representative sample without identifiable sampling and non-response biases of U.S. teenagers (ages 13–17) and their parents.

In summary, the NSYR's longitudinal survey may be assumed to provide a nationally representative picture of the religiosity and spirituality of adolescents (ages 13–17 in 2002/2003) and how that religiosity may or may not have changed during the following three years of their lives.

For more information on the research design, sampling, and data collection process, or to view the telephone survey questionnaires, please visit: www.youthandreligion.org.



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SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

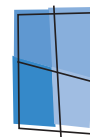
In this report, we examined religious and spiritual changes in the lives of adolescents in the United States across a three-year span. The comparison of NSYR survey responses from the same adolescents in 2002 and 2005 reveals relatively small but consistent decreases in conventional religious beliefs and practices. Although the majority of adolescents in this study remained stable in their religious beliefs, practices, and spirituality, a significant minority did experience slight shifts away from standard religious beliefs and decreases in religious practice. Overall, the dynamics in religiosity and spirituality among this nationally representative sample of adolescents reflect subtle changes—rather than large or dramatic shifts.

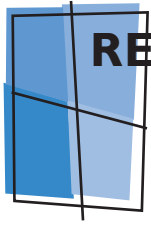
Several aspects of religiosity and spirituality were examined in this report. In terms of religious affiliation, there was a slight but significant decline in the number of adolescents reporting a Protestant affiliation and an increase in the number of adolescents who did not claim any religious affiliation. Regarding specific religious beliefs, adolescents seem to be shifting away from conventional religious beliefs. Over the three-year period, more adolescents reported they were unsure about their belief in God, fewer reported belief in a personal, involved God, fewer reported belief in a judgment day, and fewer reported belief in angels or some form of afterlife. The shift away from standard religiosity can also be seen in both their public and private religious practices. The surveyed adolescents reported attending religious services and religious education classes less often. Reading scripture alone and praying by themselves also occurred less often. On the other hand, there were slight overall increases in the proportion of these adolescents who believed in demons and evil spirits, reincarnation, and astrology. Considering adolescents' evaluations of the religious congregations in which they participated, the majority reported that their religious congregations were inspiring, welcoming, not boring, and were good places to receive advice and talk about problems.

Results reflect subtle changes rather than dramatic shifts.

The main conclusion from comparing measures of religiosity from Wave 1 to Wave 2 is that there was a slight aggregate decrease in most standard measures of religiosity. However, a separate question in Wave 2 that asked adolescents to evaluate whether they had become more religious, less religious, or stayed the same produced seemingly contrary results. The majority of adolescents reported remaining at the same level of religiosity, and when adolescents did report a change in their overall religiosity, a higher proportion of them reported becoming *more* religious than becoming *less* religious. Thus, the least common response of adolescents was that they had become less religious over the previous three years. We discuss explanations for this paradox in our Conclusion section.

The report sections that follow provide additional details about all of the above changes in the multiple aspects of religiosity and spirituality.





RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION

In this section, we discuss the religious affiliation of American adolescents and the degree to which their affiliations changed between 2002 and 2005. In our survey, we asked respondents at both points in time to tell us if they generally considered themselves to be Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, Muslim, another religion, or no religious affiliation. For those who responded that they belong to “another religion,” we asked for their specific religious affiliations and recorded their responses.

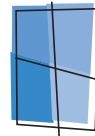
In the table below, we show the percentage of adolescents identified with each religious affiliation, including those who reported having no religious affiliation in Waves 1 and 2. Overall, there is very little change seen in the religious affiliations of these adolescents over the three years of our study.

The most significant changes in religious affiliation were found in the decline of adolescents reporting a Protestant affiliation and the increase in adolescents who did not claim any religious affiliation, resulting in an overall change of approximately 8% in each category. We found that about 25% of adolescents who identified themselves as Protestant in Wave 1 reported a different affiliation in Wave 2. Of those who reported being a Protestant in Wave 1, about 15% said they had no religious affiliation in Wave 2, and about 10% affiliated with a non-Protestant religious group Wave 2. Most of the adolescents who changed their affiliation from “Protestant” to “no affiliation” were not active in their Protestant faith in Wave 1, so the move from being Protestant to having no religious affiliation does not represent a radical change in belief or religious participation—dimensions of religion we will focus on more closely in later sections of this report.

Adolescents Religious Affiliation (N=2530)

| | 2002 NSYR Survey AGES 13-17 (%) | 2005 NSYR Survey AGES 16-21 (%) | Percent Change (%) |
|-------------------------------|--|--|--------------------------|
| Protestant | 56.43 | 48.27 | -8.16 |
| Catholic | 19.27 | 20.27 | 1.00 |
| LDS/Mormon | 2.36 | 2.19 | -0.17 |
| Jewish | 1.46 | 1.29 | 0.17 |
| Jehovah's Witness | 0.45 | 0.52 | 0.07 |
| Muslim | 0.36 | 0.39 | 0.03 |
| Buddhist | 0.34 | 0.19 | -0.15 |
| Hindu | 0.13 | 0.18 | 0.05 |
| Pagan or Wiccan | 0.14 | 0.13 | -0.01 |
| Native American | 0.09 | 0.04 | -0.05 |
| Eastern Orthodox | 0.02 | 0.04 | 0.02 |
| Christian Science | 0.00 | 0.04 | 0.04 |
| Unitarian Universalist | 0.07 | 0.00 | -0.07 |
| Misc. other affiliations | 1.80 | 1.90 | 0.10 |
| No affiliation reported | 15.18 | 23.51 | 8.33 |
| Don't know or refused to give | 1.39 | 0.87 | -0.52 |
| Two affiliations reported | 0.23 | 0.19 | -0.04 |

In regards to other, non-Protestant religious affiliations, identification with these groups remained remarkably stable between Wave 1 and Wave 2. Despite recent reports in popular news outlets to the contrary, our data did not reveal any radical movement of U.S. adolescents away from Evangelical Protestant groups or into Eastern religions (e.g., Buddhism, or Neo-Pagan religions—such as Wicca). Previous findings from the NSYR showed that adolescents living in the United States in 2002 were very likely to affiliate with the same religion or religious group as one or both of their parents. Our Wave 2 data showed that this condition remained much the same as in Wave 1.

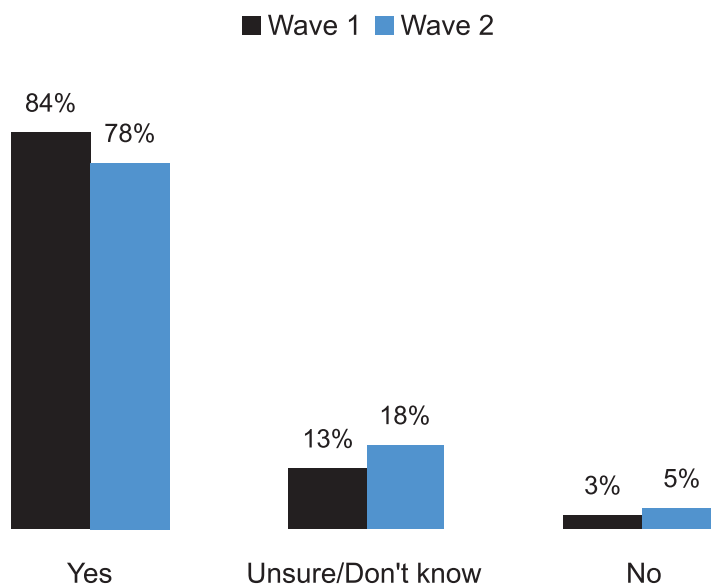




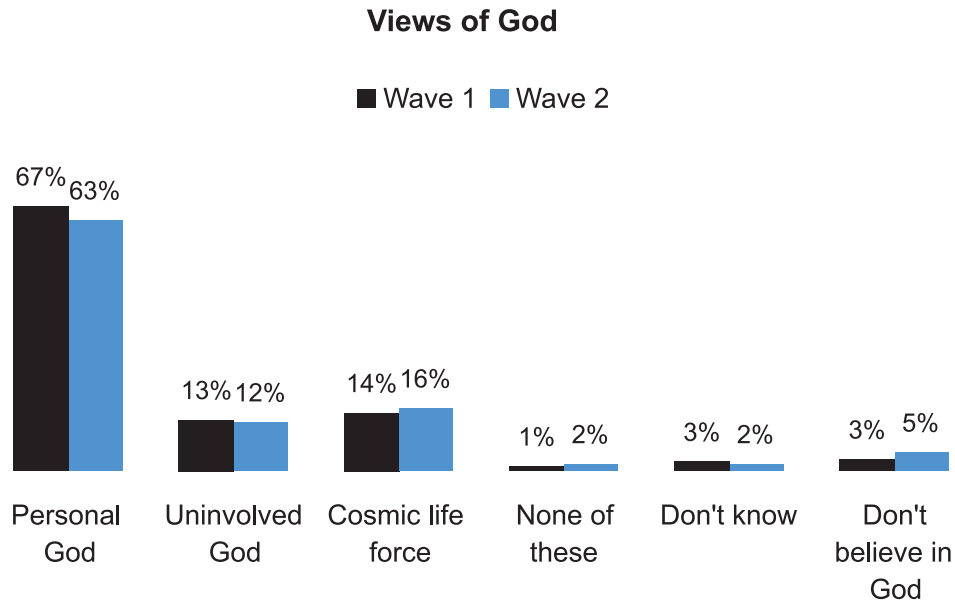
RELIGIOUS BELIEFS

Forming an important component of the religiosity of adolescents are the specific beliefs that they hold. An examination of changes in religious beliefs provided insight into the cognitive dimension of religious change in the lives of adolescents in the United States. In comparing the religious beliefs of the adolescent respondents in Wave 1 to the distribution of beliefs for this same group in Wave 2, we saw minor but consistent decreases in religious beliefs.

Belief in God



The first specific religious belief we examined was: *Belief in God*. In both waves, we asked adolescents: *Do you believe in God, or not, or are you unsure?* In Wave 1, 84% of teens reported believing in God. In Wave 2, the percentage of adolescents that reported believing in God decreased to 78%. While the percentage of adolescents who answered *no* to this question increased slightly, a larger increase was seen in the percentage of respondents who expressed uncertainty about their beliefs in God. In Wave 1, 13% said they did not know, or were unsure, if they believed in God or not; in Wave 2, this number increased to 18%. Although there was some aggregate decrease in belief in God for this cohort of adolescents, the large majority did not change in their belief about the existence of God; 81% of adolescents had the same belief in both Waves 1 and 2, 12% decreased their level of belief in God, and 9% increased their level of belief in God.



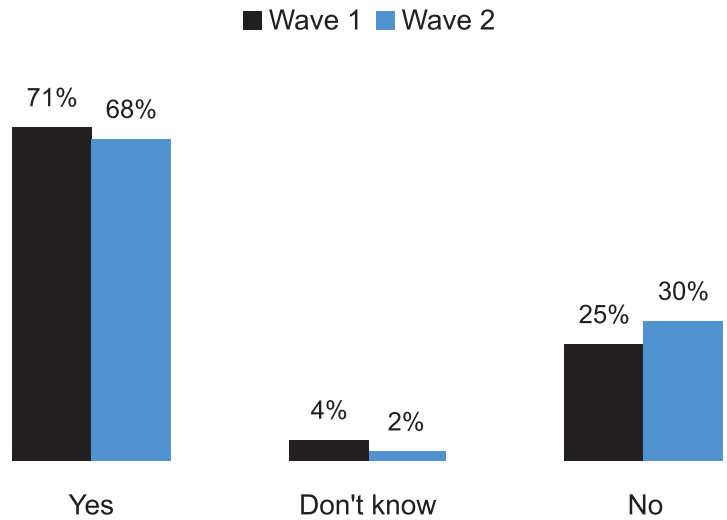
Following the question about belief in God, respondents were asked to report their views on the character or nature of God. Adolescents who said they believed in God, or were unsure, were asked:

Which of the following views comes closest to your own view of God:

- *God is a personal being involved in the lives of people today, or*
- *God created the world, but is not involved in the world now, or*
- *God is not personal, but is something like a cosmic life force?*

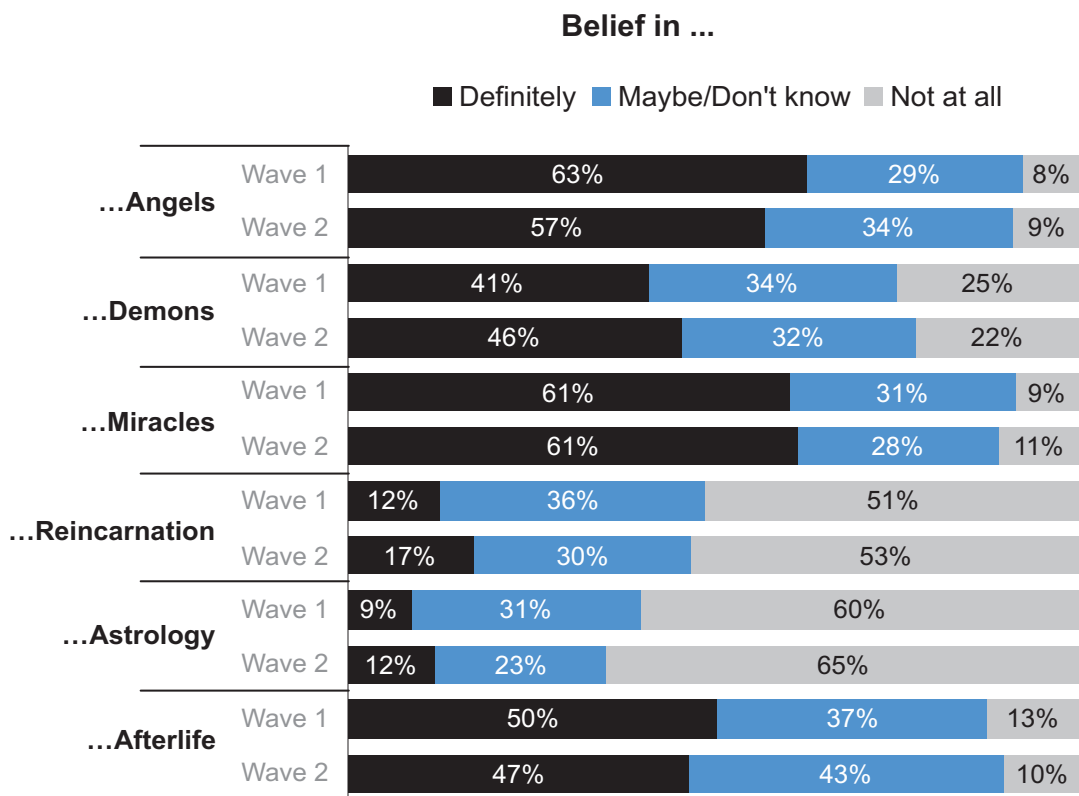
In Wave 2, the percentage of this group who viewed God as personal decreased from 67% in Wave 1 to 63% in Wave 2. The number of respondents who viewed God as an uninvolved creator decreased slightly, by 1%, while the percentage of adolescents who agreed with the statement *God is not personal, but something like a cosmic life force* increased slightly. There were also small increases in the numbers of adolescents who reported holding none of these views and who reported that they do not believe in God. These changes fit the overall pattern in our results of a small shift away from conventional religious beliefs; however, the changes are small. Overall, the large majority of adolescents continued to report a belief in a personal, involved God.

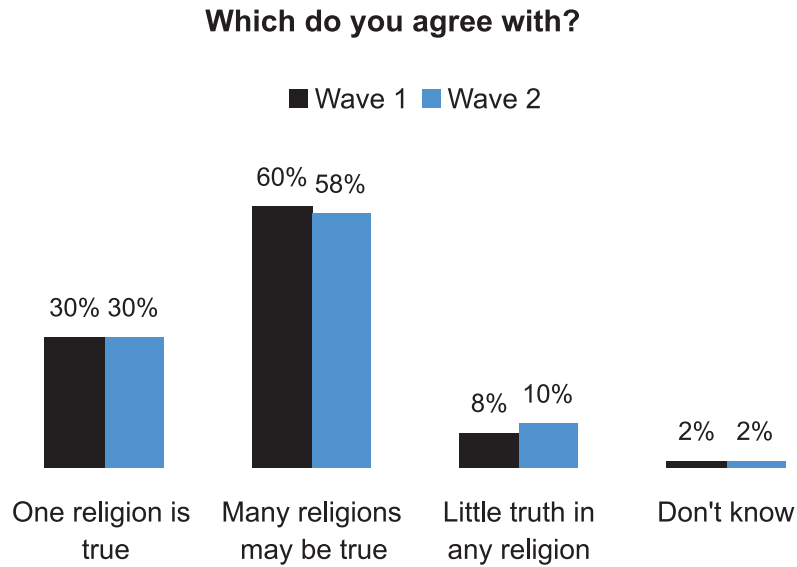
Belief in Judgment Day



Another question in our surveys asked adolescents if they believed there would come a day when God would reward some people and punish others. Compared to the answers adolescents gave in Wave 1, the percentage of respondents who answered *yes* or *I don't know* to this question in Wave 2 decreased by 3% and 2%, respectively. The percentage of respondents who reported that they did not believe in a day of judgment rose by 5%. Similar to the questions about God reported previously, these responses reflect only small aggregate changes in belief. However, the trend is still a slight, but consistent, shift away from religious belief.

In addition to the religious beliefs already discussed, the surveys also included a series of questions about beliefs regarding angels, demons, miracles, reincarnation, astrology, and the afterlife. While definite belief in miracles stayed the same in Wave 1 and Wave 2, belief in angels and the afterlife each experienced a significant decrease across this three-year period (6% and 3%, respectively). In contrast, definite belief in demons or evil spirits, reincarnation and astrology increased between Waves 1 and 2. It is interesting to note that although reincarnation and astrology are beliefs that are held by a relatively small percentage of the youth population, adolescents seem to have gained more certainty about these issues from Wave 1 to Wave 2. The proportion of youth who provided an uncertain response (*maybe* or *don't know*) decreased significantly for both reincarnation and astrology. At the same time, there were increases to both of the more certain answers (*definitely* and *not at all*).





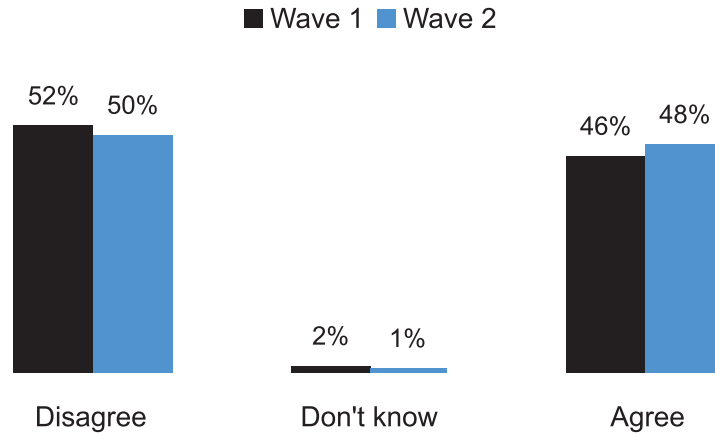
In addition to particular religious beliefs, we also examined how adolescents felt over time about the “truth” in religion. In both Waves 1 and 2, respondents were asked:

Which of the following statements comes closest to your own views about religion:

- *only one religion is true, or*
- *many religions may be true, or*
- *there is very little truth in any religion?*

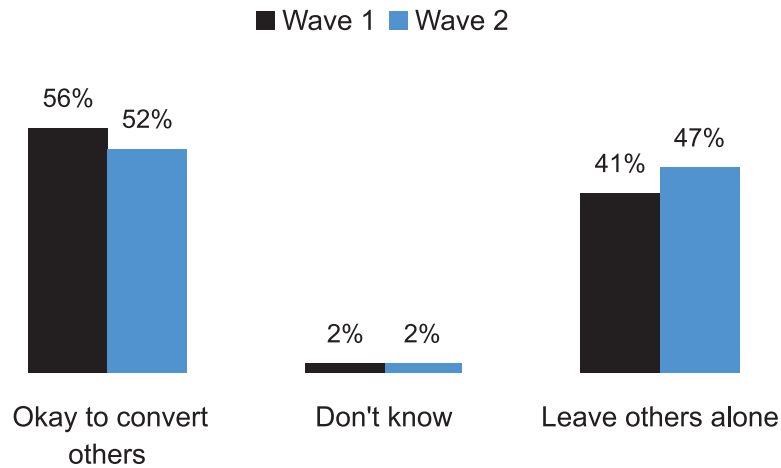
Our results revealed that the percentage of adolescents who believed that *only one religion is true* remained constant between Waves 1 and 2. As a whole, adolescents in the United States who were 13–17 years old in Wave 1 became slightly less likely to report that *many religions may be true* by Wave 2 (by 2%), while the proportion of adolescents who reported that *there is very little truth in any religion* increased by 2%. About one third of respondents changed their responses between Waves 1 and 2, but of those who did, the majority changed to an adjacent answer category, suggesting that dramatic change was uncommon.

It is okay to pick and choose beliefs



Next, we posed a question to adolescents about whether it is okay for people to pick and choose certain beliefs within their religious faiths or whether people should accept the teachings of their religious faiths as a whole. Over the three years, acceptance of picking and choosing religious beliefs from within a religious faith increased by approximately 2%—from 46% to 48%. This shift may indicate that among these adolescents there was a slight loosening of orthodoxy over time, and perhaps an increased tendency to think more critically about the separate components of religious belief systems.

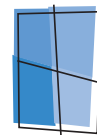
Is it okay to convert others?

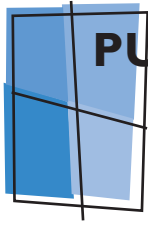


Another question we asked in both Waves 1 and 2 is whether it is okay for religious people to try to convert other people to their faiths, or whether everyone should leave everyone else alone. At both points in time, the majority of U.S. adolescents answered that it was okay for religious people to try to convert others. However, the difference lessened; by Wave 2, only 52 % agreed it was okay to convert others, compared to the 56% that agreed in Wave 1. The small percentage of survey respondents that answered that they did not know what they thought about conversion remained the same across the two waves.

The majority of youth kept their beliefs the same.

The religious beliefs of the sample of American adolescents (ages 13–17) that we began to follow in Wave 1 had not, in the aggregate, radically changed three years later. However, the changes that did appear followed a consistent pattern. In general, there was a slight shift away from belief in a personal, engaged God, a judgment day, angels and the afterlife. In addition, adolescents in Wave 2 were more likely to report belief in demons, reincarnation and astrology. They were also more likely to express an acceptance of picking and choosing religious beliefs and less likely to find truth in any religion or to accept efforts to convert others. Again, the shifts in the variables were often small, but the overall pattern was consistent. Compared to their Wave 1 responses three years earlier, the 16–21 year olds we surveyed in Wave 2 were slightly less conventional in their reported religious beliefs. However, with that in mind, the majority of adolescents we interviewed gave the same answers to all belief questions in both waves, so it is not that all adolescents were shifting their beliefs slightly. The majority kept their beliefs the same, but when adolescents did shift their beliefs slightly, they were more likely to shift them towards less conventional beliefs and away from more conventional beliefs.

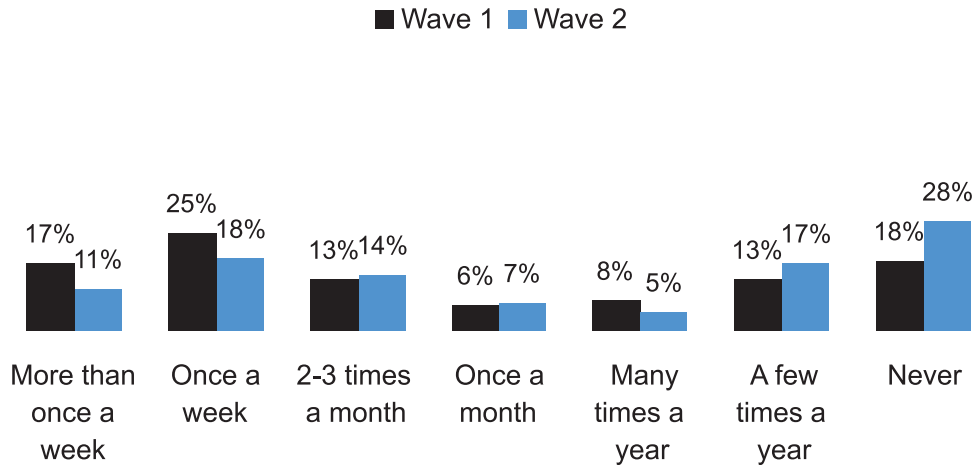




PUBLIC RELIGIOUS PRACTICE

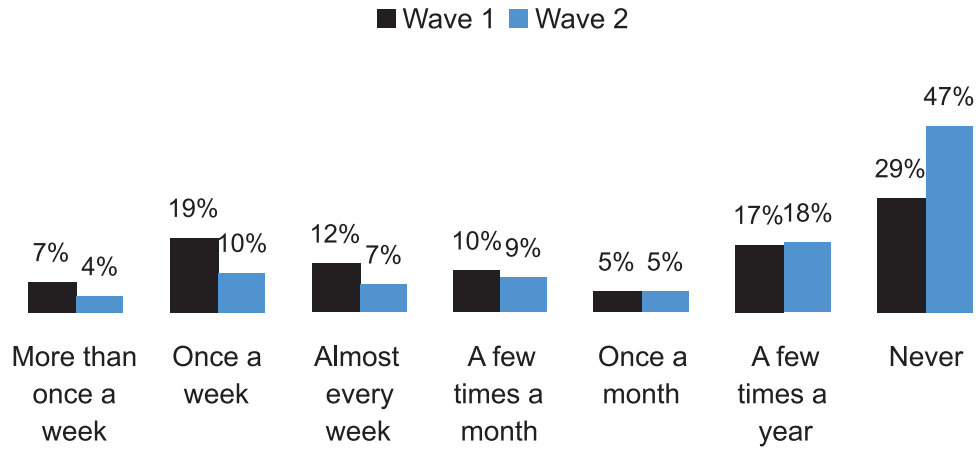
Another key aspect of the religious lives of adolescents is the degree to which they are involved in religious congregations such as churches, synagogues, temples, or mosques. In both waves we asked adolescents how often they participated in religious services, religious education, and religious youth groups. Although our previous results on religious affiliation and beliefs revealed only slight changes in the religiosity of American adolescents between Waves 1 and 2, more change was evident in their reports of public religious involvement at these two points in time. From Wave 1 to Wave 2, there were noticeable declines in aggregate levels of public religious practice.

Religious Service Attendance

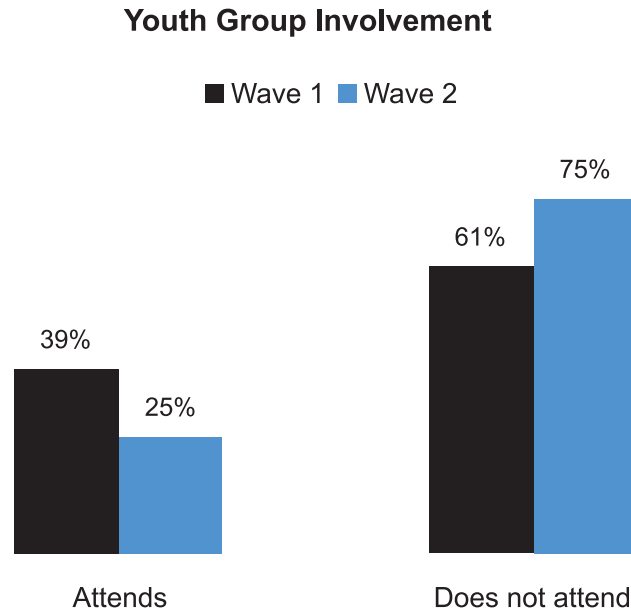


The comparison of Wave 1 to Wave 2 religious service attendance reflects an overall trend of declining participation in public religious practices. The percentage of adolescents reporting that they attended religious services once a week or more declined by 13% in this three year time period. In contrast, the percentage of adolescents who reported that they never attended increased by 10%. While the trend is toward reduced religious service attendance, there were relatively few adolescents who made dramatic changes in their individual attendance patterns. The majority of adolescents reported similar or only slightly lower attendance patterns in Wave 2 compared to Wave 1. More than 66% of Wave 2 respondents stayed within one answer category of their Wave 1 response. A decrease in attendance of two or more answer categories was reported by 24% of respondents and only 7% of our respondents changed from attending weekly or more often to never attending three years later. In contrast, a sizable minority (i.e., 15%) reported increasing their levels of religious service attendance by one or more categories.

Religious Education Classes

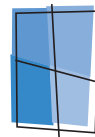


We asked adolescents about their participation in religious education (e.g., Sunday School). We saw a drop in this type of religious involvement at Wave 2. The percentage of adolescents who reported that they had not attended a religious education class in the last year increased by 18%. The percentage of adolescents participating almost every week or more decreased from a total of 38% in Wave 1 to a total of 21% in Wave 2.



The third type of religious involvement we discuss in this report is participation in a religious youth group. In Wave 1, 39% of adolescents reported that they attended a religious youth group at least a few times a year. Similar to other measures of public religious practice, however, reports of youth group attendance declined between Wave 1 (ages 13–17) and Wave 2 (ages 16–21) by 14%, with only 25% of Wave 2 adolescents reporting any type of youth group involvement.

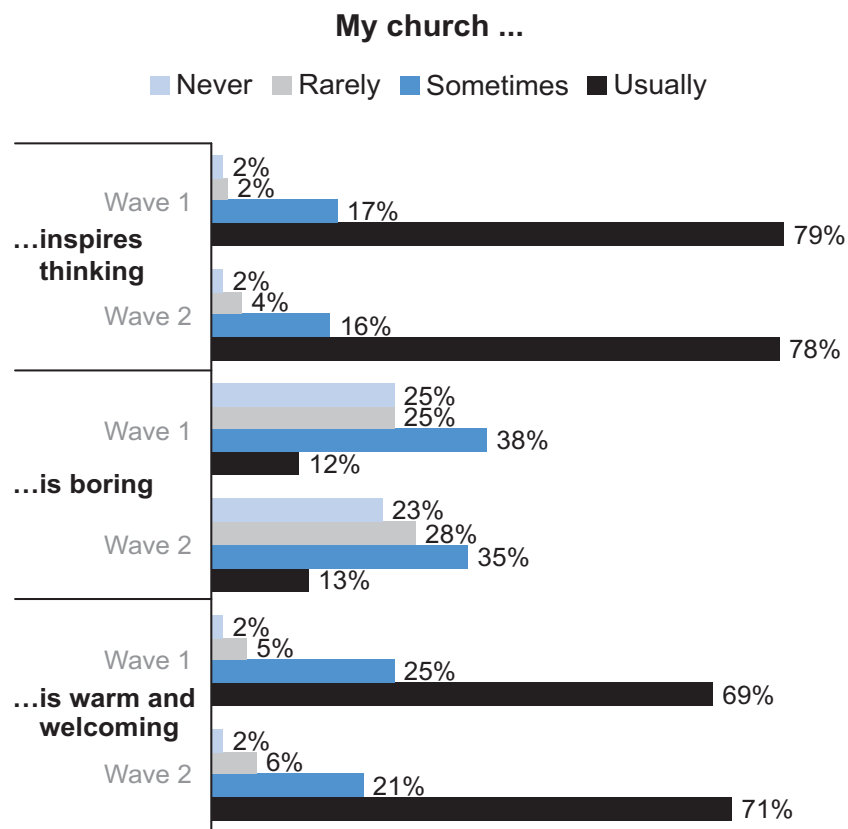
The analyses of adolescent attendance at religious services, religious education classes, and youth groups revealed what appears to be a general decline in public religious participation as youth move through adolescence. In addition to this general pattern, the decrease in religious education and youth group participation might also be understood in terms of the age-related offerings of religious congregations. Religious education classes (e.g., Sunday School) and youth groups are often targeted at school-age adolescents within a religious congregation. In many congregations, formal opportunities for involvement outside of regular service attendance are limited after adolescents graduate from high school. In fact, a closer examination of the data suggests that this was likely a factor shaping the overall declines presented above. When examined by age, we find that all age groups reported less participation in Wave 2 than in Wave 1. However, the largest declines were among adolescents between ages 15 and 16 in Wave 1 and were over the age of 18 by Wave 2. This is consistent with the expectation that at least some of the decline in public religious practice may be explained by the fact that adolescents “age out” of the opportunities for religious involvement typically offered to middle- and high-school adolescents.





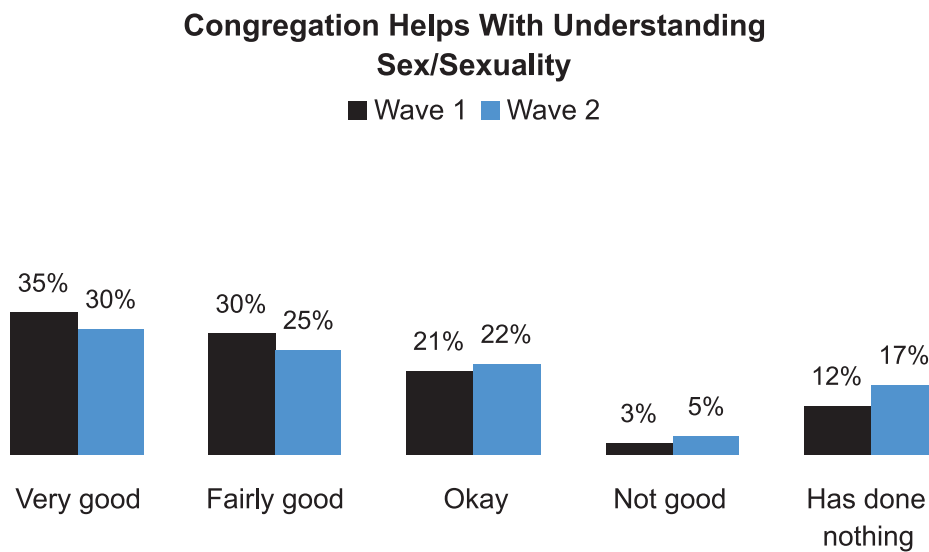
EVALUATION OF RELIGIOUS CONGREGATIONS

In addition to asking adolescents about the frequency of their involvement in the activities of religious institutions, we also asked them to evaluate their religious congregations. Adolescents who attended religious services at the time of Wave 1 and continued to attend at the time of Wave 2 were asked a series of questions about the religious congregations they attended most often. These questions allowed us to examine any changes in the ways that religiously active adolescents perceive and evaluate their religious congregations.



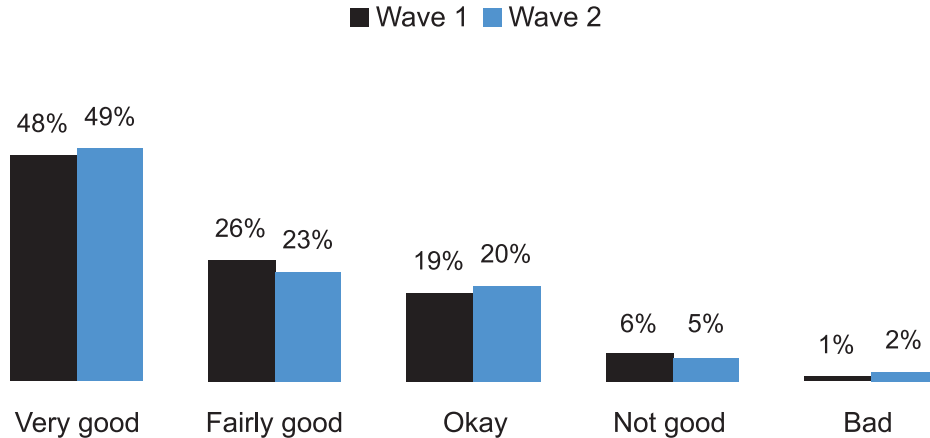
Among religiously involved, evaluations of religious congregations do not reflect any dramatic changes between Waves 1 and 2. In general, the majority of adolescents still involved in a religious congregation in Wave 2 reported positively about their congregations. In both waves, a strong majority of adolescents reported that their congregations inspired them to think about important issues and were warm and welcoming. The majority also reported that their congregations were rarely or never

boring. While there were slight shifts among the categories between waves (increases and decreases), the overall pattern remained—adolescents who were involved in religious congregations continued to report generally positive views about their congregations. It should be noted, however, that these questions were not asked of adolescents who no longer attended a religious congregation. Of the adolescents involved with a religious congregation in Wave 1, 18% were not involved in Wave 2. It is possible that adolescents who might offer negative evaluations of their religious congregations had already dropped out and therefore were not reflected in these survey responses.

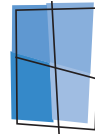


Another set of questions in our surveys asked adolescents to evaluate more practical concerns, such as how good of a job their religious congregations do in helping them understand issues of sexuality or in providing a good place to seek help for serious issues or questions about life. While the positive responses heavily outweighed the negative responses overall, there was more movement away from the positive responses over time. The most dramatic change was in response to the question about how well the congregation helped the teen to understand sexuality issues. In Wave 1, 65% of attending teens reported that their congregations did a *fairly good* or *very good* job of helping them understand their sexuality. In Wave 2, the *fairly good* and *very good* responses had decreased to 55% of those respondents that attended. This is likely to be more related to biological and social changes that adolescents experience as they age than to any large-scale change in the assistance that congregations offered adolescents during these three years. However, it does shed light on how adolescents evaluated their congregations over time, and the opportunity congregations may have to improve upon their outreach to adolescents during these ages—when it comes to understanding issues surrounding sex and sexuality.

Congregation as a Place to Talk About Problems



On the issue of religious congregations being places to seek help for serious issues or problems, the responses were mixed. The percentage of adolescents who reported their congregation as a *very good* place to go for help with serious problems increased very slightly, by 1%. However, there was a decrease (3%) in the number of adolescents who reported it as a *fairly good* place and an increase in the number of adolescents who reported their congregation as an *okay place* or a *bad place* to go for help with serious issues. Again, there were no dramatic changes. However, given that part of attracting and maintaining young members likely involves being a relevant and supportive social institution in the lives of adolescents, congregations should note that only about half of their adolescent members (on average) feel *very good* raising their problems in religious congregations. Further, as a reminder, these results only applied to the subset of adolescents in our surveys who reported attending a religious institution at both waves. We are, therefore, unable to account for how those who quit attending religious services between the two waves viewed their congregations at that time. This may mean we are overestimating adolescents' satisfaction with their religious congregations.

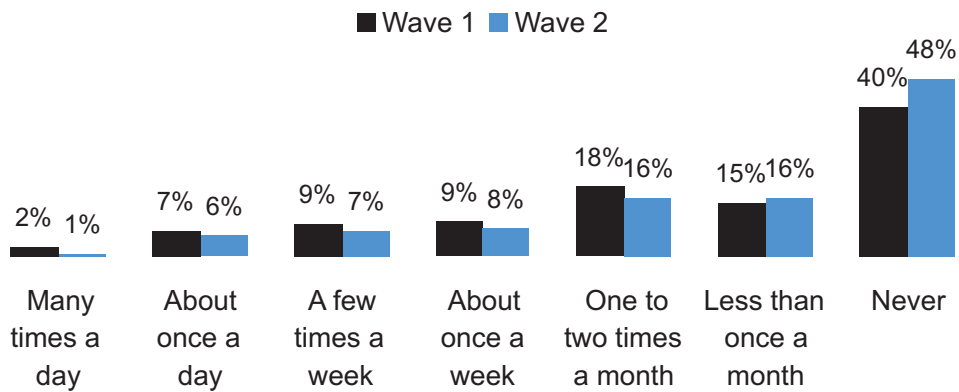




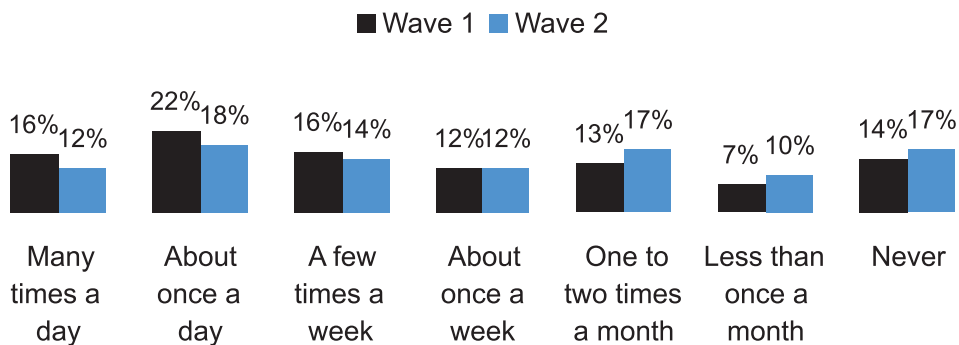
PRIVATE RELIGIOUS PRACTICE

We now turn to an examination of private religious practices—religious activities in which adolescents reported engaging on their own, outside of an organized religious context. They provided another window into the religious and spiritual lives of adolescents.

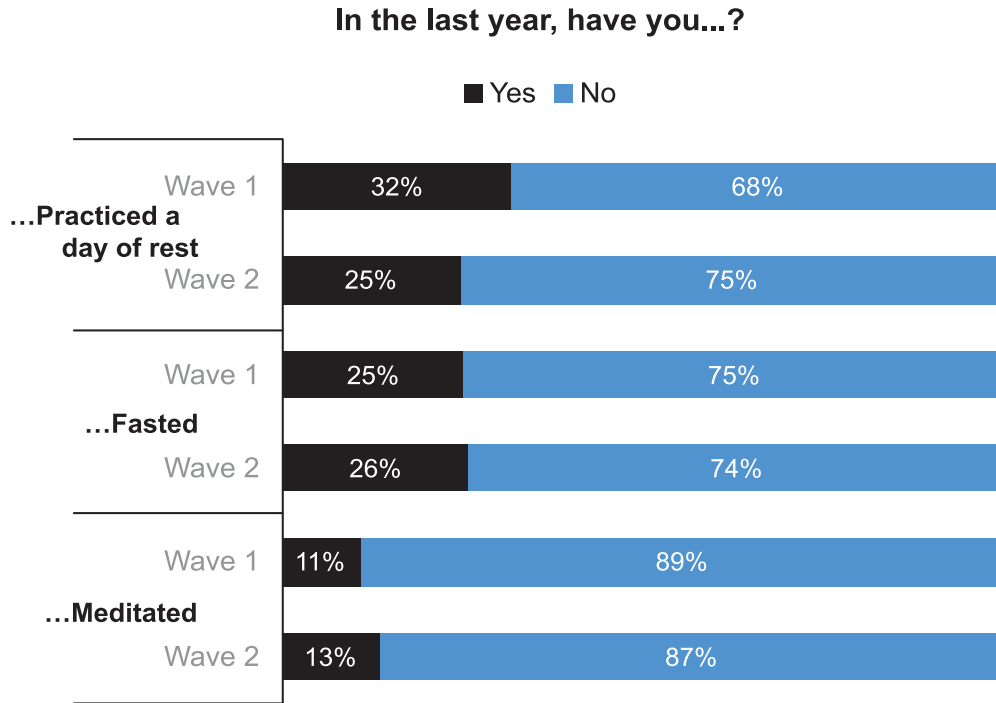
How often do you read scriptures alone?



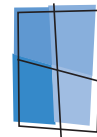
How often do you pray alone?

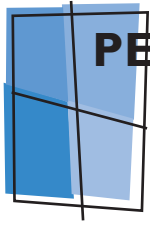


Adolescents were asked how often they read scriptures by themselves and how often they prayed by themselves. At the time of Wave 2, respondents reported lower levels of reading scriptures and private prayer than in Wave 1. The percentage of adolescents who reported that they never read scripture alone increased from 40% to 48%. The percentage of adolescents who reported personally praying alone a *few times a week*, *once a day*, or *many times a day* decreased by 2–4% for each category. In contrast, the *never*, *less than once a month* and *one to two times a month* responses each increased between 3–4% from Wave 1 to Wave 2 for each category.



In addition to personal prayer and scripture reading, adolescent respondents were asked to report about participation in other private religious practices within the last year. The surveys included questions about practicing a day of rest, fasting, and meditation. The number of adolescents who participated in these other private religious practices remained relatively stable between Waves 1 and 2. Participation in these private religious practices was initially small, but what change did occur might again indicate a slight move away from conventional religious practices. There was a decline in the percentage of adolescents who reported observing a day of rest. In Wave 1, almost 32% reported observing a day of rest, but in Wave 2, this number decreased to 25%. Reports of fasting and meditation increased by 1% and 2%, respectively, between Waves 1 and 2. The changes in private religious practice were consistent with the previous findings regarding public religious practice and religious beliefs, reflecting primarily small aggregate decreases in religiosity among this recent population of adolescents in the United States.

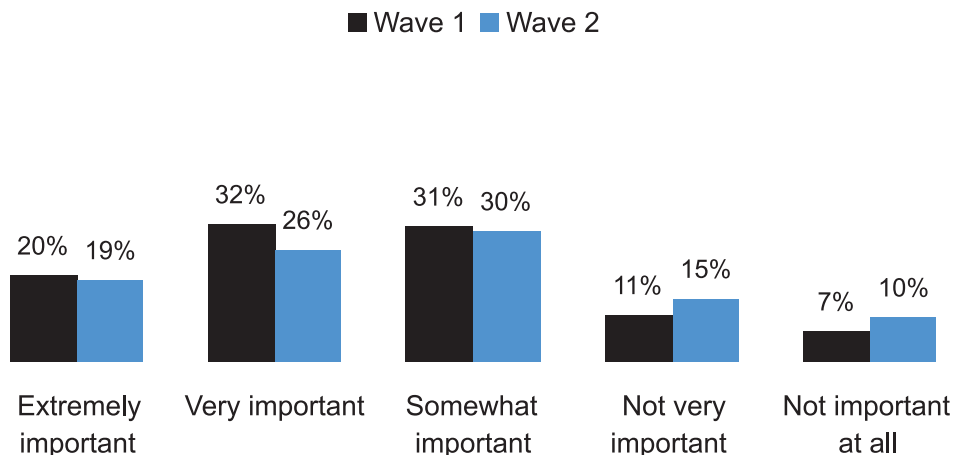




PERSONAL RELIGIOSITY AND SPIRITUALITY

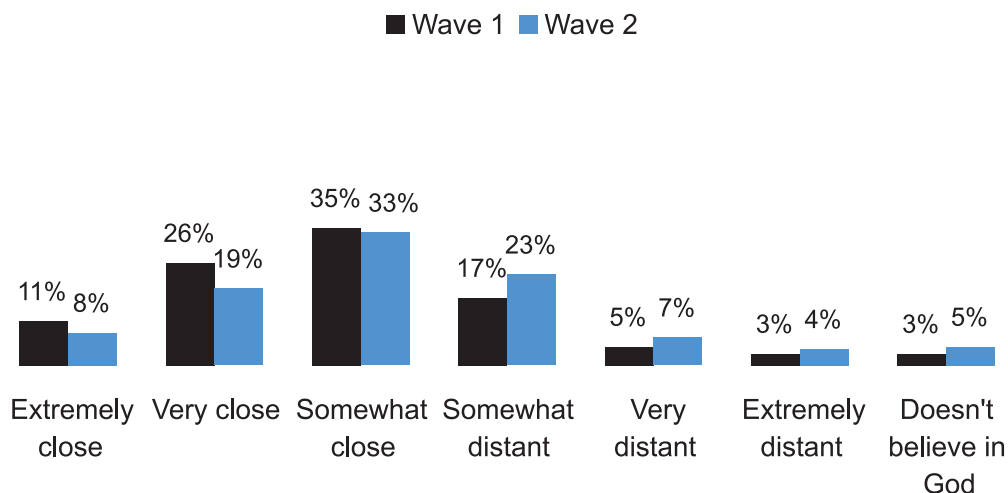
We now move our focus to measures of personal religiosity and spirituality. We examined patterns over time in how important, or salient, religion was in adolescents' lives, how close they feel to God, and how they viewed their own spirituality.

Importance of Religious Faith



To determine the first measure of religious salience, we asked adolescents: *How important or unimportant is religious faith in shaping how you live your daily life?* Responses to this question indicated that the overall importance of religion in the daily lives of adolescents declined from Wave 1 to Wave 2. Comparing responses from the two waves, we see that all three of the *important* categories (*extremely*, *very important*, and *somewhat important*) reflect fewer responses in Wave 2 than in Wave 1. In contrast, a higher percentage of respondents reported *not very important* or *not important at all* in Wave 2 compared to Wave 1. Movement at the individual level was typically small, with nearly 88% providing answers in Wave 2 that were the same as, or within one category, of their answers in Wave 1. In the overall distribution, however, there was a shift of about 7% from the *important* to *not important* answer categories between Wave 1 and Wave 2. This indicates that, on average, adolescents perceived religion as somewhat less important in shaping their daily lives as they aged through adolescence.

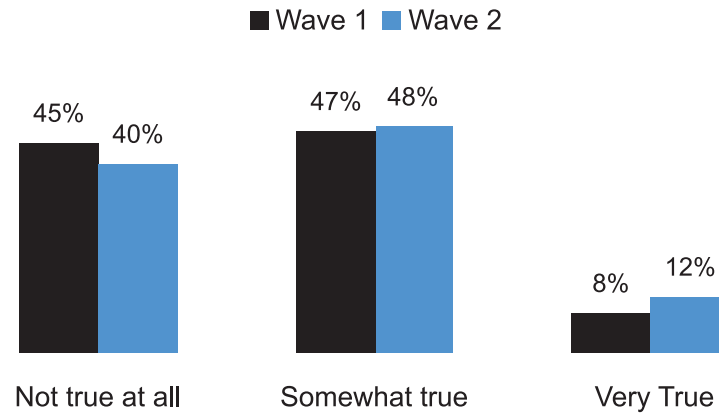
Closeness to God



We also asked adolescents: *How distant or close do you feel to God most of the time?* Responses to this question reflected a similar pattern as from the *importance of faith* question. The largest increase was in the percentage of adolescents who answered *somewhat distant*, an increase of 6%. There was a clear pattern of adolescents in Wave 2 reporting lower levels of closeness to God, with a small increase (2%) in the number of adolescents who professed that they did not believe in God. The frequency of the *close* responses decreased while the frequency of the *distant* responses increased, even if only by small amounts. Also similar to the *importance of faith* question, however, is that the changes at the individual level were slight—rather than dramatic. About 79% of teens reported answers in Wave 2 that were the same as, or within one category of, their answers in Wave 1. A change from *extremely close* to any of the distant categories was rare. To keep these changes in perspective, it is important to note that even though there were overall declines in adolescents' reported closeness to God, the majority of adolescents still continued to say they were at least somewhat close to God.

There have been overall declines in reported closeness to God.

Spiritual, but not Religious



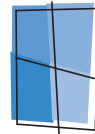
Finally, we assessed the extent to which adolescents described themselves as spiritual, but not *religious* using the following question:

Some teenagers say that they “are spiritual but not religious.”

How true or not would you say that is of you:

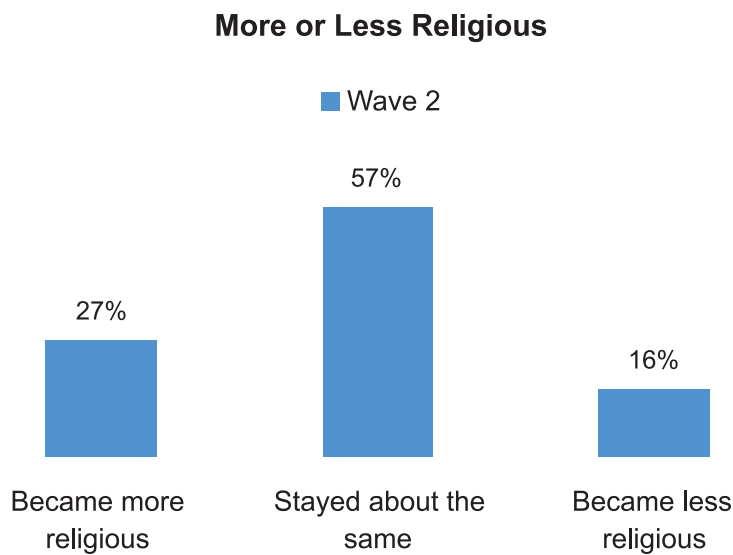
- *very true,*
- *somewhat true, or*
- *not true at all?*

Comparing the results from Wave 1 to Wave 2 responses, we saw that identification as spiritual, but not religious, increased over the three-year period. The percentage of adolescents who answered *somewhat true* and *very true* increased by 1% and 4%, respectively, while those who answered *not true at all* decreased by 5%. Similar to many of the other religion measures we examined, the changes reflected here were relatively small. However, these results were consistent with the gradual shift away from conventional or organized religious belief and practice among adolescents. While still viewing themselves as spiritual, some adolescents seemed to be moving somewhat away from the religious part of their identity.





SELF REPORTS OF PERSONAL RELIGIOUS CHANGE



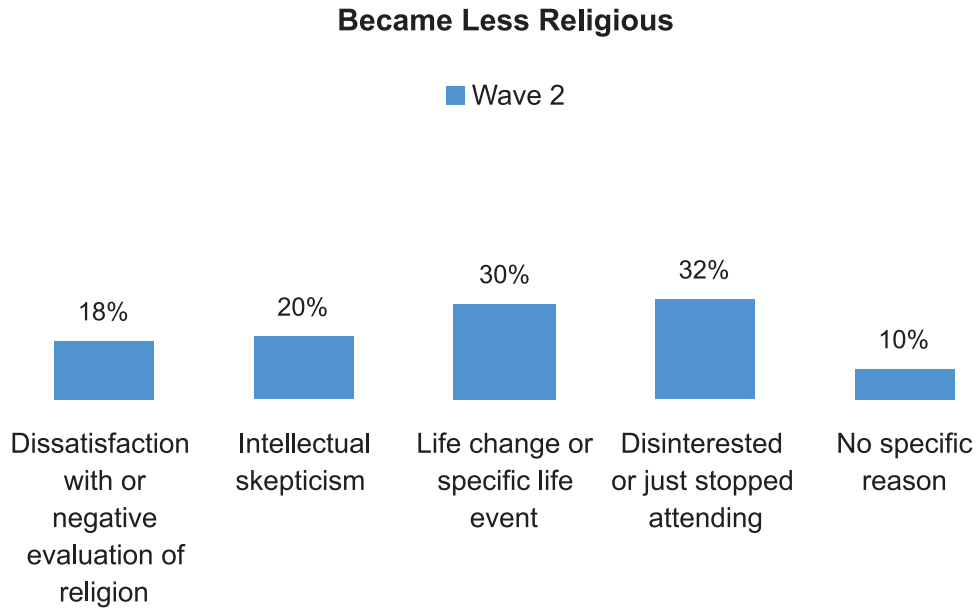
All of the measures of religious or spiritual change examined to this point reflect comparisons of respondents' answers to questions about specific beliefs or behaviors that were asked in Waves 1 and 2.

Another way to explore the question of religious change was to ask respondents to provide self-evaluations of the religious change in their own lives. Therefore, in Wave 2, respondents were asked to report about changes in their own religiosity since Wave 1 with the question:

Over the past three years, have you become more religious, less religious, or stayed about the same?

Somewhat surprisingly, given our findings outlined in previous sections, 27% of Wave 2 respondents claimed to have become *more religious* since Wave 1, 57% reported that they have *stayed about the same*, and 16% became *less religious*. This suggests that when it comes to ways adolescents define religiosity as a whole, they may place more emphasis on the aspects of religiosity that have changed the least—belief in God, the importance of faith in daily life, and closeness to God. At this point in their life course, they may include religious practices the least. Also, it could be that as adolescents develop and mature, they take more ownership of their own beliefs and practices, so that their religiosity feels stronger and more authentic—regardless of the levels of belief or behaviors they report.

The 43% of respondents who reported a change in their religiosity over the previous three years were then asked: *In one or two sentences, can you tell me why you became more/less religious?* This was an open-ended question, to which adolescents’ responses were recorded verbatim by the interviewer. Respondents were allowed to give more than one response, so percentages sum to more than 100%.



Among those who reported that they had become less religious since Wave 1, 10 % of these adolescents did not provide a specific reason for their religious change. However, the other 90% did provide some explanation about becoming less religious. These responses fell into four general categories. The first two categories reflect what appears to be an intentional distancing from religion. Of the 16% of adolescents who reported becoming less religious in the past three years, 18% of them (or 3% of the entire sample) reported *dissatisfaction with or a negative evaluation of religion*. Comments in this category ranged from a lack of interest or being bored with religion, to specific critiques of religion such as hypocrisy in specific congregations or religion in general and the negative effects of religion in society.

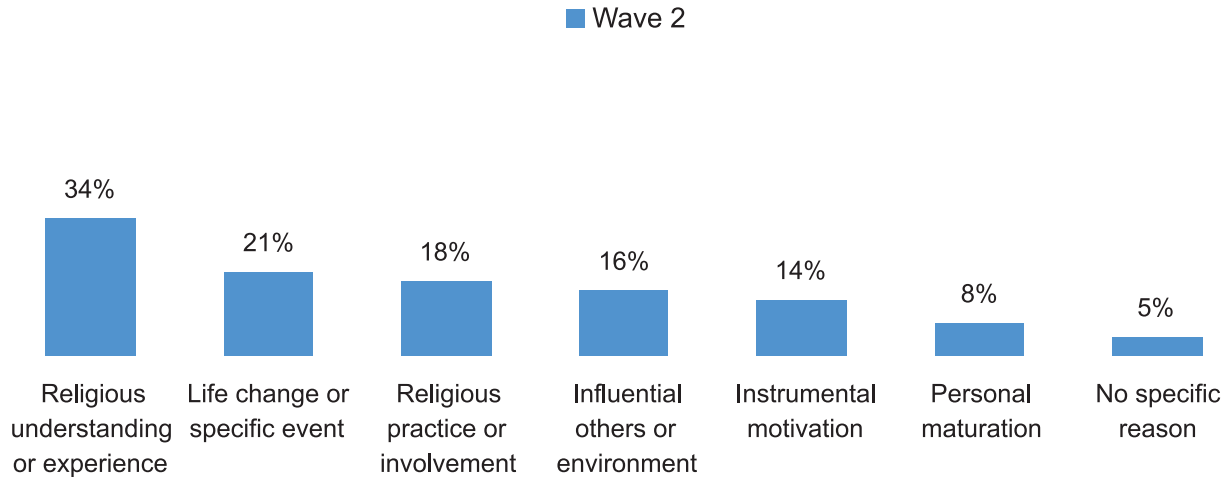
A second category reflecting distance from religion involved some type of *intellectual skepticism* about religion. In response to the question about why they have become less religious, these adolescents indicated that they did not believe the claims of religion. Some reported increasing doubts about the existence of God, while others pointed to a scientific worldview that they believed to be incompatible with faith or a lack of proof to support religion. Of the 16 % of all adolescents who reported becoming less religious, 20% provided this type of explanation for their decline in religiosity.

Another category reflected less of an intentional rejection of religion, and more of a pattern of religion slipping down the priority list in relation to other areas of life. Of adolescents who became less religious, 30% identified *a life change or specific life event* as the catalyst for their religious decline. This category included traumatic events—such as parents’ divorce, the death of a loved one, or other challenging life situations—that caused the adolescents to question their religious faith or lose touch with a religious community. Another type of life change mentioned was a change of environment and peer groups, such as moving to a new place or out of their parents house, switching schools or going off to college, or hanging out with a new group of friends. These adolescents identified these changes in their lives as contributing to a decline in religious commitment. Still another group of respondents reported that they have become less religious since they had gained more religious autonomy. Whether completing religious training (e.g., confirmation or bar/bat mitzvah) or just having more freedom from parents or guardians who no longer required religious service attendance, this autonomy led to a decline in religiosity.

The most common type of response (i.e., 32%) coming from adolescents when asked why they became less religious was that they were *disinterested* or *just stopped attending*. Respondents in this category often cited changes in religious practices which led them to consider themselves or less religious. For example, some of these adolescents cited the fact that they have stopped attending church or stopped reading scripture as evidence of becoming less religious. Many of these responses did not include a particular explanation for the change in behavior, but just noted the change itself. Among those who did offer an explanation for the decline in religious practices, a few mentioned being lazy or “just drifting away.” However, the most common explanation within this category—and the single most common “less religious” answer overall—was that adolescents have become less religious as a result of being too busy. Adolescents cited school, work, extracurricular activities, and friends as examples of things that fill their time and leave less and less time for religious participation and devotion. The religious decline among these young people was not typically the result of a negative experience with religion or a particular lack of religious belief. Instead, religion appeared to be getting squeezed out by all of the competing demands for their time and attention.

Religion appears to be getting squeezed out by competing demands.

Became More Religious



As noted previously, 27% of the Wave 1 respondents reported that they had become more religious since Wave 1. A closer look at the open-ended responses of this group revealed a variety of ways in which they considered this increase in their religiosity. Adolescent responses fell into six general categories of responses, along with a final group of 5% who did not provide a specific reason for their religious change.

The most common response was from adolescents who explained this increased religiousness in terms of new religious understanding, meaning, or experience. These adolescents reported things such as coming to a better understanding of religion, learning more about God or their religion, or going through a meaningful religious experience that moved them toward a higher level of religiosity. Of the 27% of adolescents who reported becoming more religious, 34% of them (or 9% of the total sample) explained this change in terms of new religious understanding, meaning, or experience.

The second most common category of responses came from the 21% of more-religious adolescents who identified transitions or events in their lives that contributed to an increase in religiosity. Many of these adolescents spoke of changes in their environments (e.g., a move, a new school, or a change in their family situation). Others spoke of a specific event such as the birth of a child, an illness, or the death of a loved one. Young people identified these life changes and life events as catalysts moving them toward increased religiosity.

In response to the question of why they have become more religious, 18% of these adolescents responded by identifying the religious practices or behaviors in which they became more engaged. This included things such as attending church more often, beginning to read or pray more regularly, or getting involved in a youth group or other religious activity. In some cases, the religious activity was identified as a catalyst for increased religiosity (e.g., when a mission trip motivated further religious commitment). In other cases, the religious involvement was offered as evidence of increased religiosity without a clear explanation of what motivated the religious activity.

Of the adolescents who became more religious, 16% identified the influence of important people in their lives as explanations for the change. Friends, family and religious leaders were identified as people who had influenced adolescents toward higher levels of religiosity. Also included in this category were those who mentioned the role of their religious schools in prompting them to be more religious.

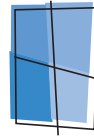
The instrumental role of religion was cited by a group of adolescents (14%) in order to explain why they had become more religious. Responses in this category were those that indicated an increase in religiosity was motivated by the benefits or gains that adolescents receive from religion. For example, many of these respondents explained their reasons for becoming more religious in terms of the help that religion provided them in dealing with life's problems, the guidance that religion provided, or the way that religion helped them to become better, happier people.

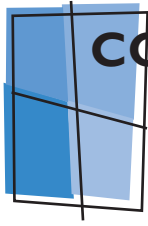
Friends, family and religious leaders were identified as people who have influenced youth toward higher levels of religiosity.

Although many adolescents spoke of specific changes in their lives such as those listed above, slightly more than 8% of our more-religious respondents attributed their increased religiosity to the general process of growing up and maturing. Rather than identifying specific life events as triggers, these adolescents seemed to indicate that the experience of getting older and more mature led naturally to an increase in religious devotion.

Although 57% of adolescents in Wave 2 reported that their religiosity stayed about the same, 43% of respondents reported some measure of religious change between Waves 1 and 2. Examining the ways in which they explained these changes adds additional insight into the changing role of religion in the lives of adolescents. Among adolescents who reported becoming more religious and adolescents who reported becoming less religious, we saw a connection between major life changes and corresponding changes in their religious lives. In addition, developing

cognitive skills and increasing autonomy may also be important factors in understanding adolescents' relationships with religion as they grow older. It is interesting to note, however, that there was not a consistent direction in which any of these factors operated. Some adolescents pointed to life crises as the reasons for their movements *toward* religion, while others claimed that these same types of crises drove them *from* religion. Similarly, some adolescents claimed that getting older, and presumably wiser, allowed them to understand and embrace religion more. Others cited increased maturity and wisdom as a reason for their religious decline. It is beyond the scope of this report to examine the factors that predict why the same event, such as a parental divorce or death in the family, might drive some adolescents to be more religious and others to drift away from religion. Likewise, this report cannot fully explore the developmental process of adolescence and its contribution to religious development. However, these findings do highlight the complexity of the issues surrounding religious change in the lives of adolescents and point to the importance of exploring multiple measures of religious change.





CONCLUSION

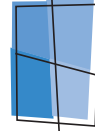
The purpose of this report has been to describe patterns of religious and spiritual change among a nationally representative sample of adolescents in the United States from 2002 to 2005. When evaluating change across the extensive range of religious measures used in the two surveys (Waves 1 and 2), we did not find the dramatic drops in religiosity that some might expect as teens mature. At this point, our sample of adolescents was still primarily living at home with their parents and finishing high school, so perhaps larger changes in religiosity and spirituality will surface as these adolescents move more fully beyond secondary school, move out from home, further their education and/or establish careers, and build families. Future waves of data will shed light on these issues. Most of the religious variables we were able to evaluate at these two points in time demonstrated stability or small levels of change. However, where there was change, it was usually moving in the direction of lower levels of religiosity among adolescents. While specific religious beliefs remained stable, we found slight declines in the levels of both private and public religious practice and religious salience.

As a reminder, what we were primarily examining in this report was the aggregate levels of change between 2002 and 2005 for this sample of the U.S. adolescent population. When reporting on some aspects of religiosity, we demonstrated that there was more individual-level change—increases and decreases—than these aggregate numbers represent. Sizeable minorities of the population were becoming more, *or* less, religious on the various indicators. Some of that movement cancelled out when we looked at the aggregate totals of changes in the population. The remainder shows that the majority of change in the religiosity of adolescents was decreasing in the United States. This does not mean all adolescents experienced decreased levels of religiosity. In fact, most stayed very similar from mid- to late-adolescence, and some became more religious. In other reports and publications that are in progress, our research team is studying the factors that encourage and deter various aspects of religious and spiritual development in these adolescents.

What is most thought provoking about our results is that our adolescent respondents reported that their own religiosity stayed the same or increased between Waves 1 and 2. It is a small proportion of the sample who reported being less religious at Wave 2 than at Wave 1. This self-reported increase in religiosity appears to contradict the overall declines we saw in comparing identical religious measures taken at Wave 1 and 2. As we suggested earlier, it may be that adolescents place more emphasis on the aspects of religiosity that changed the least—belief in God, the importance of religion in daily life, and closeness to God—when evaluating changes in their religiosity as a whole. They may consider religious practices to be the least important at this point in their life course,

when much of society seems to suggest that religious practice can diminish some before they marry and/or begin to raise children. In addition, it could be that as adolescents develop and mature, they take more ownership over their own beliefs and practices so that their religiosity feels stronger and more authentic—regardless of the levels of belief or behaviors they report.

Exploring the contours of religious change among adolescence and the interplay between the various dimensions of religiosity is an ongoing project of the National Study of Youth and Religion. Future publications will continue to examine the variety of ways we conceptualize and measure religious change, with the goal of further illuminating some of the findings reported here. This report, however, highlights the complexity of the religious lives of young people and provides a window into some of the ways their religiosity is changing along the path through adolescence.



APPENDIX

| Page # | Table Label | Question Wording |
|--------|---|---|
| 5 | Religious Affiliation | What religion or denomination is the place where you go to religious services? |
| 7 | Belief in God | Do you believe in God, or not, or are you unsure? |
| 8 | Views of God | Which of the following views comes closest to your own view of God? |
| 9 | Belief in Judgment Day | Do you believe that there will come a judgment day when God will reward some and punish others, or not? |
| 10 | Belief in... | Do you believe in [INSERT BELIEF ITEM HERE], definitely, maybe, or not at all? |
| 11 | Which do you agree with? | Which of the following statements comes closest to your own views about religion: |
| 12 | It is okay to pick and choose beliefs | Some people think that it is okay to pick and choose their religious beliefs without having to accept the teachings of their religious faith as a whole. Do you agree or disagree? |
| 13 | Is it okay to convert others? | Is it okay for religious people to try to convert other people to their faith, or should everyone leave everyone else alone? |
| 14 | Religious Service Attendance | About how often do you usually attend religious services [at your primary congregation]? |
| 15 | Religious Education Classes | In the last year, how often, if at all, have you attended a religious Sunday school [IF CATHOLIC, THEN INSERT “, CCD,”] or other religious education class (If teen attends a private religious school, INSERT “, not including classes at your school”)? |
| 16 | Youth Group Involvement | About how often do you attend this youth group’s meetings and events? |
| 17 | My church... | Does your [primary congregation] make you think about important things, usually, sometimes, rarely, or never? |
| 18 | Congregation Helps With Understanding Sex/Sexuality | How good or not good a job would you say your [primary congregation] has done in helping you better understand your own sexuality and sexual morality? Has it done: |
| 19 | Congregation as a Place to Talk About Problems | How good or not good a place is your [primary congregation] to go if you wanted to talk about serious issues like family problems, alcohol, or troubles at school? |
| 20 | How often do you...? | How often, if ever, do you pray by yourself alone?, How often, if ever, do you read from [relevant scripture] to yourself alone? |
| 21 | In the last year, have you....? | In the last year, have you... ? |
| 22 | Importance of Religious Faith | How important or unimportant is religious faith in shaping how you live your daily life? |
| 23 | Closeness to God | How distant or close do you feel to God most of the time? Would you say extremely distant, very distant, somewhat distant, somewhat close, very close, or extremely close? |
| 24 | Spiritual but not Religious? | Some teenagers say that they “are spiritual but not religious.” How true or not would you say that is of you? |
| 25 | More or Less Religious | Over the past three years, have you become more religious, less religious, or stayed about the same? |
| 26 | Became Less Religious | In one or two sentences, can you tell me why you became less religious? |
| 28 | Became More Religious | In one or two sentences, can you tell me why you became more religious? |