

Nonreligion in a Complex Future (NCF) US Scoping Exercise Report

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Introduction

This report outlines the findings of a scoping exercise on nonreligion and atheism in the US with a particular emphasis on the five areas of the NCF project. The aim of this report is to detail what we currently know about the nonreligious in order to then identify the gaps in knowledge.

Demographics

Scholarly research on the nonreligious in the US dates back to the early 20th century (Leuba 1916, 1934). However, the research conducted between the early 20th century and the late 1960s was very rare. This early research focused on a finding that has held since then: atheists in the US tend to be better educated than theists (Larson and Witham 1998). A second period of increased scholarly attention given to the nonreligious in the US was in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Campbell 1971; Demerath 1969b, 1969a; Demerath and Thiessen 1966; Vernon 1968). This research noted that the nonreligious were disproportionately male, they were younger, better educated, and likely to be white. These early findings about the demographics of the nonreligious held throughout the 1980s (Hadaway 1989).

With the rapid growth of the nonreligious in the US starting in the 1990s (Kosmin et al. 2009), the demographics of the nonreligious became less distinctive – they began to look like the rest of the population (Strawn 2019). This makes sense from a statistical standpoint. During the blip of interest in studying the nonreligious in the late 1960s, the nonreligious were a very small percentage of the US population, somewhere between 4% and 6%. When the nonreligious were a small percentage of the population, they were distinctive. However, as their ranks grew in the 1990s – doubling from 7% in 1990 to 14% in 2001 and through the beginning of the 21st century (now between 24% and 26% of the population in the US) – they became a larger percentage of the population and it became far more common to be nonreligious. Whenever a segment of a population increases relative to the population, it must necessarily begin to reflect norms within the population because more of the population is made up of the subset. As a result, in the US today, the nonreligious are no longer better education than those with a religious affiliation. While there are still small differences in gender, age, and race, the nonreligious are much closer to the religious on all of these categories as of 2019. Atheists, however, remain somewhat distinctive, with a disproportionate percentage of men, higher levels of educational attainment, higher incomes, and disproportionate representation among whites. Recent research provides some insights into why the nonreligious may have been so distinctive when they were a smaller percentage of the population and why atheists continue to be so distinctive: many of these characteristics are those of early adopters of technology and norms (Rogers 2006). Early adopters are typically individuals who are highly privileged (e.g., young, male, highly educated, affluent, white) as they can afford to engage in somewhat riskier behavior with minimal social costs. Thus, the lower representation of women and racial minority groups among the nonreligious and atheists may not be a reflection of actual beliefs or identities but careful consideration among minorities of the social costs associated with adopting such identities (Edgell, Frost, and Stewart 2017).

While the nonreligious are increasingly less distinctive in terms of age, sex, race, educational attainment, and income, they are still differences based on regions (see Table 1 below). The regional differences illustrate some of the factors that contribute to people leaving religions (Bruce 2013), specifically a more modern worldview (e.g., better education, more egalitarian ways of viewing the world for minorities, pluralistic thinking, etc.), which is more common in the US on the East and West coasts and in larger metropolitan areas.

Table 1. Regional Differences in Percentage Nonreligious in the US, 2018.

Region	% Nonreligious
New England	23.4
Middle Atlantic	24.7
East North Central	25.6
West North Central	17.4
South Atlantic	18.3
East South Central	16.7
West South Central	17.0
Mountain	31.3
Pacific	33.3

Health

Research on health and the nonreligious in the US has primarily focused on the perception that religious people are healthier than are nonreligious people (D. Cragun et al. 2016). A large body of research developed on the claimed health benefits of religiosity started in the 1990s and continued through the early 2000s (Koenig, McCullough, and Larson 2001). However, more recent research is raising serious concerns with much of that research (Speed and Fowler 2017). As Table 2 illustrates, even when there are differences, they are very small.

Table 2. Self-Reported Health of Religious and Nonreligious Americans in 2018. (Source: GSS)

Health	Religious Individuals	Nonreligious Individuals
Excellent	22%	25%
Good	50%	47%
Fair	23%	22%
Poor	5%	5%

One problem with that early research is that it very carefully parsed out specific individuals to include among the religious and among the nonreligious. For instance, one of the most common approaches when examining the relationship between religion and health was to focus on religious attendance rather than religious affiliation or religious beliefs. By separating individuals based on attendance, this has the consequence of including people who may identify as religious and hold religious beliefs but are unable to attend religious services due to health issues (e.g., someone with

mobility issues or a chronic health concern) with those who are nonreligious. Thus, rather than truly capturing health differences between the religious and the nonreligious, much of the research on religion and health was capturing differences in health between those who attend religious services and those who don't, which is a problematic proxy for religiosity (Sloan 2006). This research also conflated the nominally religious with the affirmatively irreligious and the nominally nonreligious. Those are distinct groups (Hwang, Hammer, and Cragun 2011). When more accurate comparisons are made between nonreligious individuals who have a strong sense of community and religious individuals who also have a community, health differences disappear (Baker, Stroope, and Walker 2018; Galen and Kloet 2010, 2011).

As a growing number of studies illustrated the serious problems with claiming health benefits to religion proper rather than deriving from the social health that religious participation can foster, many researchers turned to possible health benefits that derive from spirituality (Krause and Hayward 2016). However, much of this research uses measures of spirituality that are conflated with health (de Jager Meezenbroek et al. 2012). If a measure of spirituality includes measures of mental and physical well-being, then uses spirituality to predict well-being, it's not surprising that spirituality so measured is a good predictor of well-being.¹ Measures of spirituality that focus on the supernatural show no meaningful relationship with health (D. Cragun et al. 2016).

A careful review of the research on religion and health reveals that there is no reason to believe that having a religious identity in and of itself would provide any health benefits (D. Cragun et al. 2016). Having a strong community as a result of religious participation is likely to contribute to better social health, which can provide benefits to mental and physical health. However, the benefit is based on a strong community which can be found outside of religious contexts (Galen and Kloet 2011). There are reasons to think provision of healthcare could lead to marginal differences in health outcomes between the religious and nonreligious if healthcare providers find it difficult to relate to or communicate with nonreligious individuals like they have with racial minorities or if they treat nonreligious individuals differently (Krieger et al. 2005).

Thinking about health in a slightly different way by examining attitudes toward controversial health practices like abortion and euthanasia, there are clear differences between the religious and nonreligious in the US (Schwadel n.d.). Nonreligious individuals are more accepting of abortion than are religious individuals. As Table 3 shows, they are also more accepting of euthanasia and medical marijuana (Cragun 2013). These findings are not particularly surprising considering that nonreligious individuals are not restricted by the proscriptions of religious bodies. This does not mean that nonreligious individuals are all up to date on the latest scientific findings on any given health procedure but rather should be understood to mean that the nonreligious are able to evaluate these procedures and questions without wrestling with religious doctrines and teachings, many of which continue to oppose abortion, euthanasia, and medical marijuana.

Table 3. Support for Legal Abortion for Any Reason and the Legalization of Marijuana Among Americans by Religious Affiliation. (Source: GSS, 2018.)

	Abortion For Any Reason		Marijuana	
	Religious Individuals	Nonreligious Individuals	Religious Individuals	Nonreligious Individuals
Legal	59%	81%	44%	70%
Not Legal	40%	19%	56%	30%

1 Predicting your dependent variable with your dependent variable, not surprisingly, suggests a strong relationship.

Migration

There is very little research that examines nonreligion and migration in the US. Much of the research on religion and migration focuses on the religiosity of migrants (Myers 2000), how religious organizations help settle migrants to the US (Kurien 2014), or form a community of migrants (Cadge and Ecklund 2007). The limited research that links nonreligion and migration is tied to attitudes toward migration among the nonreligious (Schwadel n.d.). Many nonreligious individuals have more progressive views on migration than do religious individuals (Baker and Smith 2015), but this area remains largely unexplored. Table 4 illustrates the slightly different attitudes on the rights of illegal immigrants between religious and nonreligious Americans:

Table 4. Attitudes Toward Whether Illegal Immigrants Should Have the Same Rights as Citizens in the US Between Religious and Nonreligious. (Source: GSS, 2004 and 2014 waves.)

	Religious Individuals	Nonreligious Individuals
Agree Strongly	9%	11%
Agree	28%	34%
Neither Agree Nor Disagree	14%	15%
Disagree	39%	34%
Disagree Strongly	11%	7%

Law

Court cases that have addressed the roles of religion and nonreligion in the US are numerous. While a separation between church and state is implied in the First Amendment to the US Constitution,² how that amendment is to be interpreted has been examined in a variety of court cases. Court cases starting in the 19th Century limited some of the rights of religions (e.g., polygamy), illustrating that the First Amendment was not absolute. Many of the court cases respecting the right of nonreligious individuals to not have religion imposed on them were decided in the 1950s and 1960s, including cases removing school official led prayers in public schools and mandatory bible reading. Other cases have explored whether governments can directly or indirectly a variety of religious activities, from state sponsored days of prayers to the reconstruction of religious buildings damaged by natural disasters. The courts have also examined whether nonreligious groups should be allowed to put up comparable holiday displays next to Christian displays when they are on public property, like those that regularly adorn state capitals in the US. There have also been some challenges to the addition of “under God” in the US Pledge of Allegiance and the use of “In God We Trust” as a motto on US currency, both of which were added during the 1950s.

A number of national secular organizations in the US (see list below) have full time attorneys who respond to church state violations with letters or threats of lawsuits. Actual lawsuits are less common, but such lawsuits play out in the US on a regular basis over issues like: allowing clergy to proselytize on public school property, public school teachers threatening atheist or nonreligious students with punishments because of their beliefs, or government bodies beginning meetings with

² The religion clause of the First Amendment, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof...”

clearly sectarian prayers and not allowing nonreligious individuals to offer comparable invocations on a regular basis. Much of the research on these legal issues has been published as commentaries on court decisions in legal journals. There is very little social science research on these decisions, though the scholarly publication *Journal of Church and State* is the notable exception. A detailed listing of court cases related to the nonreligious and corresponding commentaries is included below.

The Environment

Like migration, there is very little research examining the role of the nonreligious when it comes to environmental activism. What little research examines the nonreligious and the environment focuses on how the nonreligious hold more progressive views toward the environment (Baker and Smith 2015; Schwadel n.d.), as shown in Table 5. There is one recent study showing a link between atheism and animal rights activism (Wrenn 2019) that shows that animal rights activists are also particularly likely to be nonreligious and nonbelievers. However, the article also argues that such individuals tend to downplay their nonbelief in order to minimize the stigma associated with it since they are already stigmatized for their animal rights activism.

Table 5. American Attitudes Toward Whether We’re Spending Too Much, The Right Amount, or Too Little Toward the Environment by Religiosity. (Source: GSS, 2018.)

	Religious Individuals	Nonreligious Individuals
Too Little	65%	79%
About Right	27%	18%
Too Much	9%	3%

Education

Most of the research on religion and education has focused on differences in educational attainment between the religious and nonreligious (Hill 2011; Iannaccone, Stark, and Finke 1998). As noted above, there have historically been differences between the religious and nonreligious in educational attainment, though those differences have shifted over time. Certain religious groups have consistently had higher levels of educational attainment than most others (e.g., Jews, Unitarian Universalists, Mainline Protestants). When the nonreligious were a smaller percentage of the population, they typically were in the middle or higher end of the educational distribution. However, as they have grown, differences in educational attainment have largely disappeared (Strawn 2019). Atheists, however, continue to have higher levels of educational attainment than do theists (see Table 6).

Table 6. Average Years of Educational Attainment by Belief in God. (Source: GSS 2018).

Belief Toward God/Higher Power	Average Years of Education (12=high school)
Do Not Believe In God	14.52
Not Sure and No Way to Find Out	14.75
Higher Power	14.19
Believe Sometimes	14.02

Believe But Have Doubts	13.96
Know God Exists	13.36

There is some research looking at discrimination and favoritism in university contexts. Some research has suggested that religious individuals experience discrimination on college campuses, but more recent research suggests both that college campuses have lower levels of discrimination tied to religion/nonreligion than broader society (R. T. Cragun et al. 2016) and that nonreligious individuals are more likely to experience discrimination (Liddell and Stedman 2011; Rockenbach, Mayhew, and Bowman 2015).

As noted in the section on law above, there have also been a number of court cases governing what can and cannot be done by religious individuals in public schools. Since the 1950s, prayer led by school officials, mandatory bible readings, and advocacy of religion by school officials have all been removed due to court decisions.

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Additional Information

Surveys

- General Social Survey
 - Description: Includes religious affiliation (including no religion) since 1972 and religious affiliation at age 16 since 1973. The GSS also includes a variety of questions about religiosity: attendance, prayer, belief in an afterlife, view of the Bible. Some years have extended questions about religiosity. Some years also include spouses religious affiliation and parents' religious affiliations.
 - Link: <http://gss.norc.org/>
- Pew Religious Landscape Survey
 - Description: Very large survey of religiosity in the US. Includes some additional questions. Large size provides a large sample of nonreligious individuals.
 - Link: <https://www.pewforum.org/dataset/pew-research-center-2014-u-s-religious-landscape-study/>
 - Note: They also have surveys on religion in [Latin America](#), [Eastern Europe](#), [Global Restrictions on Religion 2007-2016](#), [Western Europe](#), and [Israel](#).
- American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS)
 - Description: Similar to the 2007 Pew Religious Landscape Survey. It's a very large sample with a subsample of nonreligious Americans. As a member of the team that fielded the survey, I have access to this dataset, along with the 2001 ARIS and the 1990 precursor.
 - Link: <https://commons.trincoll.edu/aris/>
- Faith Matters
 - Description: Somewhat problematic, nationally representative survey (with a 1 year panel component) fielded by Robert Putnam. This survey was the focus of his book with David Campbell, *American Grace* (a very problematic book).
 - Link: <http://www.thearda.com/Archive/Files/Descriptions/FTHMAT11.asp>
- National Survey of Youth and Religion
 - Description: Another rather problematic survey, this one fielded by Christian Smith. Focuses on young people. Does have longitudinal data.
 - Link: <http://www.thearda.com/Archive/Files/Descriptions/NSYRW1.asp>
- AddHealth
 - Description: Longitudinal survey that started with young people and has tracked them over time. Important survey with lots of useful data but limited information on religiosity (has affiliation and importance and that is about it).
 - Link: <https://www.cpc.unc.edu/projects/addhealth>
- Portraits of American Life Study

- Description: Fairly robust survey collected in 2006 and 2012 by Michael Emerson with lots of variables. The sample size isn't huge but is sufficient.
- Link: <http://www.thearda.com/Archive/Files/Descriptions/PALS2PAN.asp>
- Baylor Religion Surveys
 - Description: Originally, not well-received but increasingly respected series of surveys that have a number of questions on religiosity (lots of questions). There are multiple waves (2005, 2007, 2010, 2014).
 - Link: <http://www.thearda.com/Archive/NatBaylor.asp>
- American Mosaic Project
 - Description: Survey by Penny Edgell and colleagues with a number of questions about religion and attitudes toward religious groups. Two waves: 2003 and 2014.
 - Link: <https://cla.umn.edu/sociology/graduate/collaboration-opportunities/american-mosaic-project-amp>

Nonreligious Organizations in the US

- American Humanist Association: <https://americanhumanist.org/>
- American Atheists: <https://www.atheists.org/>
- Council for Secular Humanism: <https://secularhumanism.org/>
- Freedom From Religion Foundation: <https://ffrf.org/>
- Secular Coalition for America: <https://secular.org/about/>
- Black Nonbelievers: <https://blacknonbelievers.wordpress.com/>
- American Ethical Union: <https://aeu.org/>
- Congress of Secular Jewish Organizations: <http://www.csjo.org/>
- Center for Inquiry: <https://centerforinquiry.org/>
- Atheist Alliance of America: <https://www.atheistallianceamerica.org/>
- Camp Quest: <https://www.campquest.org/>
- Foundation Beyond Belief: <https://foundationbeyondbelief.org/>
- Ex-Muslims of North America: <https://exmuslims.org/>
- Recovering From Religion: <https://www.recoveringfromreligion.org/>
- Hispanic American Freethinkers: <https://hafree.org/>
- The Freethought Society: <https://www.ftociety.org/>
- Secular Student Alliance: <https://secularstudents.org/>
- UU Humanists: <http://huumanists.org/>
- Military Association of Atheists and Freethinkers: <http://militaryatheists.org/>
- Society for Humanistic Judaism: <http://www.shj.org/>
- Secular Woman: <http://www.secularwoman.org/>

Court Cases Involving Religion/Nonreligion

Torcaso v. Watkins

Pfeffer, Leo. "The 'Religion' of Secular Humanism." *Journal of Church and State* 29, no. 3 (October 1, 1987): 495–507. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jcs/29.3.495>.

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Murray v. Curlett (which became Abington School District v. Schempp)

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Engel V. Vitale

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Cantwell v. Connecticut

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