

The cost of repealing blue laws

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Repealing America's blue laws not only decreased church attendance, donations and spending, but it also led to a rise in alcohol and drug use among people who had been religious, according to a new study by economists Jonathan Gruber of MIT and Daniel Hungerman of the University of Notre Dame.

Blue laws, or Sunday closing laws, refer to statutes that restrict certain activities on the Christian Sabbath. By the end of the 19th century, nearly every state had at least some law prohibiting certain activities on Sunday. The 1960s saw the beginning of push to repeal these laws in favor of commerce, although a few still remain on the books.

In their study, which appears in the May 2008 edition of *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, Gruber and Hungerman show what happens when religious services must compete with shopping, hobbies and other activities.

To measure that competition, they studied the large number of states that repealed their blue laws over the past 50 years. (Massachusetts, for example, repealed its blue laws in 1994.)

"That policy-driven change in state laws allowed us to identify secular competition, as opposed to interreligious competition, which had been studied before," Gruber says. "We wanted to find out how people spent their time and money."

The economists used data from the General Social Survey on religious

attendance and from the Consumer Expenditure Survey to show a very strong reduction in religious attendance and a decline in religious contributions once the blue laws were repealed. They found no change in other charitable activity, Gruber notes.

To confirm their findings and to complete the economic portrait, the authors also analyzed budget data for four major Christian denominations over the past 40 years. Church expenditures declined significantly since the repeal of the blue laws, they found.

Gruber and Hungerman did more than track how individuals chose to allocate their resources on Sunday once the malls were opened, a change widely celebrated from the early 1960s onward as freedom from old-fashioned ways.

They considered the negative consequences for individuals or society from loosening secular constraints and they found those consequences in behaviors associated more with Saturday night than Sunday morning.

Using data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY) on consumption of alcohol and illegal drugs, the economists found that repealing the blue laws did lead to an increase in drinking and drug use.

What's more, they found that individuals who had attended church and stopped after the blue laws were repealed showed the greatest increase in substance abuse, Gruber notes.

Those effects have significant economic and social implications, the authors say.

The study, "The Church vs. the Mall: What Happens When Religion Faces Increased Secular Competition?" can be accessed online at [www.mitpressjournals.org/doi/a ... /qjec.2008.123.2.831](http://www.mitpressjournals.org/doi/a.../qjec.2008.123.2.831)

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