

Prevalence of religious congregations affects mortality rates

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LSU associate professor of sociology Troy C. Blanchard recently found that a community's religious environment – that is, the type of religious congregations within a locale – affects mortality rates, often in a positive manner. These results were published in the June issue of *Social Forces*, a leading journal in the field of sociology.

"Although there is a great deal of research on religion and health, previous studies have tended to focus on the individual aspects of religion, such as how often an individual prays or attends worship services," said Blanchard.

Along with co-author John Bartkowski from the University of Texas at San Antonio and other researchers from the University of West Georgia and the University of Alabama at Birmingham, Blanchard found that people live longer in areas with a large number of Catholic and Mainline Protestant churches. He offers two key reasons for these findings.

"First, these types of churches have what's known as a 'worldly perspective.' Instead of solely focusing on the afterlife, they place a significant emphasis on the current needs of their communities," he said. These religions commonly organize outreach efforts for the needy and homeless, invest in the health infrastructures of their town and participate in other forms of public charity.

"Secondly, these congregations tend to create bridging ties in communities that lead to greater social cohesion among citizens," said

Blanchard. This enhanced sense of connection between people provides collective encouragement for healthy behavior.

In contrast to Catholics and Mainline Protestant congregations, Conservative Protestant churches have a mixed effect on community health. The "otherworldly" character of Conservative Protestantism leads congregations in this tradition to focus on the afterlife. Conservative Protestantism is also a more individualistic faith, one in which the believer's personal relationship with God is paramount. These types of churches are thought to downplay the importance of using collective action, including human institutions, to improve the world. Communities dominated by Conservative Protestant churches tend to have higher mortality rates.

However, this finding has an important caveat, because there are different types of Conservative Protestant churches, namely, Fundamentalist, Pentecostal and Evangelical.

"We find that a greater presence of Fundamentalist and Pentecostal congregations is associated with higher rates of mortality, but communities with a large number of Evangelical congregations have better health outcomes," said Blanchard. "Evangelical congregations do a better job of engaging the broader community and promoting social connectedness that is so essential for longer life expectancies. Fundamentalist congregations tend to be more reclusive, and this insularity is linked with higher mortality rates."

The exploration of these nuances within religious tradition is an important and unexplored avenue of public health and social science research.

Because religious congregations play such an important role in shaping community well-being, Blanchard and his co-authors believe that the

orientation of Catholic, Mainline Protestant and Evangelical congregations have important lessons to teach us about what it takes to improve community health and longevity.

"Policymakers and citizens, whether religious or not, should realize that socially engaged faith communities can enhance the well-being of society," said Blanchard. "In this era of faith-based initiatives, our findings highlight the critical importance of religious organizations to the social service infrastructure."

As summed up by co-author Bartkowski, "The religious environment in communities throughout America really is a matter of life and death."

Source: Louisiana State University

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