

# Less educated Americans turning their backs on religion

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While religious service attendance has decreased for all white Americans since the early 1970s, the rate of decline has been more than twice as high for those without college degrees compared to those who graduated from college, according to new research to be presented at the 106th Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association.

"Our study suggests that the less educated are dropping out of the American religious sector, similarly to the way in which they have dropped out of the American labor market," said lead researcher W. Bradford Wilcox, a professor of sociology at the University of Virginia.

The study focuses on whites because black and Latino [religiosity](#) is less divided by education and income. Most whites who report a [religious affiliation](#) are [Catholics](#), evangelical [Protestants](#), mainline Protestants, Mormons, or Jews.

Relying on nationally representative data from the [General Social Survey](#) and the [National Survey](#) of Family Growth, the study finds that moderately educated whites—those who have a high school degree but who did not graduate from a 4-year college—attended religious services in the 1970s at about the same rate as the most educated whites—those who at a minimum graduated from a 4-year college—but they attended at much lower frequencies in the 2000s.

The least educated white Americans—those who did not graduate from high school—attended religious services less frequently than both the

moderately educated and most educated in the 1970s and that remained the case in the 2000s. "The least educated have been consistently less religiously engaged than even the moderately educated, meaning the gap between the least educated and most educated is even larger than the one between the moderately educated and most educated," Wilcox said.

In the 1970s, among those aged 25-44, 51 percent of college-educated whites attended religious services monthly or more, compared to 50 percent of moderately educated whites, and 38 percent of the least educated whites. In the 2000s, among those aged 25-44, 46 percent of college-educated whites attended monthly or more, compared to 37 percent of moderately educated whites, and 23 percent of the least educated whites.

Wilcox views this disengagement among the less educated as troubling because religious institutions typically provide their members with benefits—such as improved physical and psychological health, social networks, and civic skills—that may be particularly important for the less educated, who often lack the degree of access to social networks and civic skills that the college-educated have.

"Today, the market and the state provide less financial security to the less educated than they once did, and this is particularly true for the moderately educated—those who have high school degrees, but didn't graduate from a 4-year college," Wilcox said. "Religious congregations may be one of the few institutional sectors less educated Americans can turn to for social, economic, and emotional support in the face of today's tough times, yet it appears that increasingly few of them are choosing to do so."

The study also shows that Americans with higher incomes attend religious services more often, and those who have experienced unemployment at some point over the past 10 years attend less often. In

addition, the study finds that those who are married (especially if they have children), those who hold more conservative views toward premarital sex, and those who lost their virginity later than their peers, attend [religious services](#) more frequently.

Indeed, the study points out that modern religious institutions tend to promote a family-centered morality that valorizes marriage and parenthood, and they embrace traditional middle-class virtues such as self-control, delayed gratification, and a focus on education.

Over the past 40 years, however, the moderately educated have become less likely to hold familistic beliefs and less likely to get and stay married, compared to college-educated adults. During the same period, wages have fallen and rates of unemployment have risen markedly for moderately educated men, while wages have remained stagnant for moderately educated women. For the least educated—those without high school degrees—the economic situation has been even worse, and they have also become less likely to hold familistic beliefs and less likely to get and stay married, compared to college-educated adults.

Because less educated whites are now less likely to be stably employed, to earn a decent income, to be married with children, and to hold familistic views, it makes sense that they also do not as often attend services at religious institutions that continue to uphold conventional norms, Wilcox said.

"While we recognize that not everyone wishes to worship, and that religious diversity can be valuable, we also think that the existence of a large group of less educated Americans that is increasingly disconnected from religious institutions is troubling for our society," said Andrew Cherlin, co-author of the study and a professor of sociology and public policy at the Johns Hopkins University. "This development reinforces the social marginalization of less educated Americans who are also

increasingly disconnected from the institutions of marriage and work."

Provided by American Sociological Association

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