

Atheists more likely to hide beliefs if they're women, Republicans, southerners or were previously religious

February 28 2022, by Amy McCaig



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Atheists in the United States are more likely to conceal their beliefs if they're women, Republicans, southerners or if they've previously been

religious, according to new research from Rice University and West Virginia University.

"Patterns of Perceived Hostility and Identity Concealment among Self-Identified Atheists" appears in a recent edition of *Social Forces* and was authored by Jacqui Frost and Elaine Howard Ecklund of Rice University and Christopher Scheitle of West Virginia University. The study used [survey data](#) from a nationally representative sample of U.S. adults and examined which [atheists](#) are more likely to hide their [religious identity](#) and why.

While certain atheists were more likely to conceal their identity depending on where they lived or with whom they were affiliated, they were still less likely to conceal their identity when compared to other non-religious groups, such as agnostics or those who simply say they do not have a religion, the researchers wrote.

Frost, a postdoctoral research fellow in sociology and the Religion and Public Life Program at Rice and the study's lead author, said that findings about atheists hiding their religious beliefs aren't surprising. Previous research shows atheists are among the least liked and most distrusted [minority groups](#) in the U.S.

"If someone is already in a marginalized group—like women—or are members of a group that is heavily religious—such as Republicans or southern Americans—it stands to reason they are less likely to take on the additional stigma of being an 'out' atheist," she said.

Earlier research has also shown that atheists are more likely to report discrimination on the basis of their atheism in [social settings](#), at school and at work, Frost said.

A 2015 survey from the Pew Research Center found the number of

people who claim no religious affiliation had increased to 25%. That raises a question among researchers studying this subject: What can be done to support and protect this growing group of people in the U.S.?

"Our research suggests that openness about one's atheist identity may help combat some of the effects of the stigma they face," said Ecklund, director of the Religion and Public Life Program and a Herbert S. Autrey Professor of Social Sciences at Rice.

"In addition, the ability to gather with fellow atheists may help encourage this openness and provide individuals with a safe place to seek support in the face of discrimination," Scheitle said.

The researchers wrote that their findings are valuable for understanding the many different types of religious discrimination. The work also helps better understand how to address and cope with negative side effects of this mistreatment.

More information: Jacqui Frost et al, Patterns of Perceived Hostility and Identity Concealment among Self-Identified Atheists, *Social Forces* (2021). [DOI: 10.1093/sf/soab165](https://doi.org/10.1093/sf/soab165)

Provided by Rice University

Citation: Atheists more likely to hide beliefs if they're women, Republicans, southerners or were previously religious (2022, February 28) retrieved 19 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2022-02-atheists-beliefs-theyre-women-republicans.html>

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