

Religious people coped better with the COVID-19 pandemic, research suggests

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People of religious faith may have experienced lower levels of unhappiness and stress than secular people during the UK's COVID-19 lockdowns in 2020 and 2021, according to new University of Cambridge research.

The findings follow a Cambridge-led [study](#) suggesting that worsening

mental health after experiencing COVID infection—either personally or in those close to you—was also somewhat ameliorated by [religious belief](#). This study, published in the journal *European Economic Review* looked at the US population during early 2021.

University of Cambridge economists argue that—taken together—these studies show that religion may act as a bulwark against increased distress and reduced well-being during times of crisis, such as a global public health emergency.

"Selection biases make the well-being effects of religion difficult to study," said Prof Shaun Larcom from Cambridge's Department of Land Economy, and co-author of the latest study. "People may become religious due to family backgrounds, innate traits, or to cope with new or existing struggles."

"However, the COVID-19 pandemic was an extraordinary event affecting everyone at around the same time, so we could gauge the impact of a negative shock to well-being right across society. This provided a unique opportunity to measure whether religion was important for how some people deal with a crisis."

Larcom and his Cambridge colleagues Prof Sriya Iyer and Dr. Po-Wen She analyzed [survey data](#) collected from 3,884 people in the UK during the first two national lockdowns, and compared it to three waves of data prior to the pandemic.

They found that while lockdowns were associated with a universal uptick in unhappiness, the average increase in feeling miserable was 29% lower for people who described themselves as belonging to a religion.*

The researchers also analyzed the data by "religiosity": the extent of an individual's commitment to religious beliefs, and how central it is to

their life. Those for whom religion makes "some or a great difference" in their lives experienced around half the increase in unhappiness seen in those for whom religion makes little or no difference.

"The study suggests that it is not just being religious, but the intensity of religiosity that is important when coping with a crisis," said Larcom.

Those self-identifying as religious in the UK are more likely to have certain characteristics, such as being older and female. The research team "controlled" for these statistically to try and isolate the effects caused by faith alone, and still found that the probability of religious people having an increase in depression was around 20% lower than non-religious people.

There was little overall difference between Christians, Muslims and Hindus—followers of the three biggest religions in the UK. However, the team did find that well-being among some religious groups appeared to suffer more than others when places of worship were closed during the first lockdown.

"The denial of weekly communal attendance appears to have been particularly affecting for Catholics and Muslims," said Larcom. The research is published as a working paper by Cambridge's Faculty of Economics.

For the earlier study, authored by Prof Sriya Iyer, along with colleagues Kishen Shastry, Girish Bahal and Anand Shrivastava from Australia and India, researchers used online surveys to investigate COVID-19 infections among respondents or their immediate family and friends, as well as religious beliefs, and mental health.

The study was conducted during February and March 2021, and involved 5,178 people right across the United States, with findings published in

the journal [European Economic Review](#) in November 2023.

Researchers found that almost half of those who reported a COVID-19 infection either in themselves or their immediate social network experienced an associated reduction in well-being.

Where mental health declined, it was around 60% worse on average for the non-religious compared to people of faith with typical levels of "religiosity".

Interestingly, the positive effects of religion were not found in areas with strictest lockdowns, suggesting access to places of worship might be even more important in a US context. The study also found significant uptake of online religious services, and a 40% lower association between COVID-19 and [mental health](#) for those who used them.

"Religious beliefs may be used by some as psychological resources that can shore up [self-esteem](#) and add coping skills, combined with practices that provide social support," said Prof Iyer, from Cambridge's Faculty of Economics.

"The pandemic presented an opportunity to glean further evidence of this in both the United Kingdom and the United States, two nations characterized by enormous religious diversity."

Larcom added, "These studies show a relationship between religion and lower levels of distress during a global crisis. It may be that religious faith builds resilience, and helps people cope with adversity by providing hope, consolation and meaning in tumultuous times."

More information: Girish Bahal et al, Religion, Covid-19 and mental health, *European Economic Review* (2023). [DOI: 10.1016/j.eurocorev.2023.104621](#)

Provided by University of Cambridge

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