Effects of Religious Practice on Sexual Behavior

1. Teen Sexual Activity

Greater levels of community religious practice are correlated with lower levels of teen sexual activity.\(^1\) Traditional values and religious beliefs are among the most common factors cited by teens as their reason for remaining sexually abstinent, second only to fear (e.g., fear of an unwanted pregnancy, a sexually transmitted disease, or parental discipline).\(^2\) Youth who attend religious services more frequently have less permissive attitudes toward sexual activity and less sexual experience than peers who attend religious services less frequently.\(^3\) An analysis of National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health found that each increase in religiosity on their scale\(^4\) reduced the odds of becoming sexually active by 16 percent for girls and by 12 percent for boys.\(^5\)

In a 2002 review of the academic literature on the effects of religion, 97 percent of the studies reported significant correlations between increased religious involvement and a lower likelihood of promiscuous sexual behaviors. Individuals with higher levels of religious commitment and those who regularly attended religious services were generally much less likely to engage in premarital sex or extramarital affairs or to have multiple sexual partners.\(^6\)

1.1 Related American Demographics

According to the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, 14 percent of adolescents who currently attend weekly religious services had sexual intercourse at 14 years of age or younger, compared to those who attend church one to three times a month (20 percent), less than monthly (24 percent), and those who never attend church (26 percent).\(^7\) (See Chart)
The likelihood that an adolescent has had a non-romantic sexual relationship decreases as the adolescent’s religious involvement increases. According to the National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health, teens who attended religious services weekly or more within the past year were less likely to have had nonromantic sexual intercourse (21.5 percent) than those who attended monthly but not weekly (22.5 percent), less than monthly (27.5 percent), or never (28.0 percent).  

(See Chart Below)
2. Non-Marital and Extra-Marital Sex

Men and women who are religious are more likely to have less permissive sexual attitudes, and they are influenced by religion more than any other variable when it comes to their sexual choices. Individuals who attend religious services more often are less likely to have a positive view of extramarital sexual relationships.10

Those with higher levels of religious commitment and who regularly attend religious services are much less likely to engage in premarital sex or extramarital affairs or to have multiple sexual partners. Among both conservative and mainline Protestants, religious affiliation and religious attendance consistently predict negative attitudes toward divorce and premarital sexual intercourse.12

2.1 Related American Demographics

According to the General Social Surveys (GSS), among adults currently or previously married, 12.4 percent who worship once a week or more had had sexual relations with someone other than their spouse, followed by 17.1 percent of those who worship between one and three times a month, 20.6 percent of those who worship less than once a month, and 24.8 percent of those who never attend religious services.13 (See Chart)

Similarly, the National Health and Social Life Survey shows that, of adults aged 18 to 59, those who worship weekly are far less likely to have had intercourse with a “pick-up” in the previous year (.8 percent) than those who worship less than weekly but at least monthly (4 percent), those who never worship (6 percent), and those who worship less than monthly (6.4 percent).14 (See Chart)
The National Health Survey also shows that those who worship weekly are most likely to have been monogamous/abstinent during their life. Approximately 42 percent of those who worship weekly had only one lifetime sexual partner, and 5.4 percent had no lifetime sexual partners (a combined 46.9 percent of monogamous/abstinent persons). Among those who worship less than weekly but at least monthly, 24.7 percent had only one lifetime sexual partner, and 2.9 percent had no lifetime sexual partners (a combined 27.6 percent of monogamous/abstinent persons); among those who never worship, 22.2 percent had only one lifetime sexual partner and 3 percent had no lifetime sexual partners (a combined 25.3 percent of monogamous/abstinent persons); and among those who worship less than monthly, 22.2 percent had only one lifetime sexual partner and 2.5 percent had no lifetime sexual partners (a combined 24.8 percent of monogamous/abstinent persons).** (See Chart Below)
According to the National Health and Social Life Survey, those who worship weekly are least likely to have a current sexual partner who has other sexual partners (.9 percent), followed by those who never worship (3.1 percent), those who worship less than monthly (3.2 percent), and those who worship less than weekly but at least monthly (3.3 percent). (See Chart Below)

### 3. Out-of-Wedlock Childbearing

Thirty-seven percent of births now occur out of wedlock, with an increasing number born to cohabiting parents. However, given the findings on the relationship between religious practice, non-
marital sex, attitudes, and behavior, it is not surprising that regular religious practice is one of the most powerful factors in preventing out-of-wedlock births. Rates of such births are markedly higher among young women who do not have a religious affiliation than among peers who do.

The level of young women’s religious commitment also makes a significant difference. Compared with those who viewed themselves as being “very religious,” those who were “not at all religious” were far more likely to bear a child out of wedlock (among whites, three times as likely; among Hispanics, 2.5 times as likely; and among blacks, twice as likely). At the state aggregate level, the same phenomenon occurs. States with higher rates of religious attendance have lower rates of teenage pregnancy.

3.1 Related American Demographics

Examining current religious attendance, the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth showed that 16 percent of females who worshiped at least weekly have had an unwed pregnancy, followed by those who attended religious services between one and three times a month (25 percent), those who attended religious services less than once monthly (25 percent), and those who never attend religious services (27 percent). (See Chart Below)

4. Cohabitation

Women who attend weekly are one-third less likely to cohabit than those who attend less than once a month. Similarly, churchgoing adults tend to cease regular religious practice when they begin to cohabit. Those who attended religious services infrequently as adolescents and considered religion to be of low importance are more likely to cohabit as young adults. Children whose mothers frequently attended religious services are 50 percent less likely to cohabit than their peers whose
mothers were not actively religious.  

Studies consistently suggest that cohabitation is associated with an increased likelihood of divorce. For example, Paul Amato, confirming earlier indications, reported that couples who had lived together before marriage were 59 percent more likely to divorce than those who did not.

Repeated studies confirm the finding that those who attended religious services infrequently and those who, as adolescents, considered religion to be of low importance are more likely to cohabit as young adults. Compared with peers who attended religious services several times a week, young women who never attended were seven times more likely to cohabit.

### 4.1 Related American Demographics

According to the National Survey of Family Growth, 4.1 percent of women who worship at least weekly have had two or more cohabitations in their lifetime, followed by those who attend religious services between one and three times a month (6.8 percent), those who worship less than once a month (10.6 percent), and those who never attend religious services (12.3 percent). (See Chart)

![Bar chart showing the percentage of women with two or more cohabitations in their lifetime by religious practice](chart)

The same survey showed that 33.3 percent of women who worshipped at least weekly cohabited with their eventual first husband, followed by those who attended religious services at least monthly (50.8 percent), those who attended religious services less than once a month (59.2 percent), and those who never attended religious services (62.4 percent). (See Chart Below)
5. Sexual Satisfaction

Those who attend religious services more frequently are more likely to be happy in their sexual relationship. Very religious women report greater satisfaction in sexual intercourse with their husbands than do moderately religious or non-religious women.\(^{31}\)

5.1 Related American Demographics

The 1992 National Health and Social Life Survey shows that, of adults aged 18 to 59, those in intact marriages who worship weekly were most likely to say they felt thrilled and excited during intercourse with their current sexual partner. Almost 92 percent of adults who worship weekly reported feeling thrilled and excited, compared to only about 85 percent who never worship.\(^{32}\) (See Chart)
Similarly, those who worshiped weekly were most likely to report that they extremely enjoyed intercourse with their current sexual partner (86.3 percent), followed by those who worshiped less than weekly but at least monthly (82.9 percent), those who never worshiped (79 percent), and those who worshiped less than monthly (77.4 percent). 33) (See Chart)

Religious attendance also effects negative emotions within intercourse. Those who worship weekly were least likely to feel guilty during intercourse with their current sexual partner (5.4 percent), followed by those who worship less than monthly (8.7 percent), those who worship less than weekly but at least monthly (9.1 percent), and those who never worship (10 percent). 34) (See Chart Below)


4) In this study, religiosity was a composite score between 3 and 12 representing an individual’s religious attendance, participation in religious youth activities, and self-rated importance of religion.


8) The National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health (Add Health) is a congressionally-mandated longitudinal survey of American adolescents. Add Health drew a random sample of adolescents aged 13-19 in 1995 from junior high and high schools (Wave I) and has followed them in successive waves in 2001 (Wave III) and 2009 (Wave IV). Respondents were asked: “Not counting romantic relationships, have you ever had a sexual relationship with anyone?”


Sharon Scales Rostosky, Mark D. Regnerus, and Margaret Laurie Comer Wright, “Coital Debut: The


13) This chart draws on data collected by the General Social Surveys, 1972-2006. From 1972 to 1993, the sample size averaged 1,500 each year. No GSS was conducted in 1979, 1981, or 1992. Since 1994, the GSS has been conducted only in even-numbered years and uses two samples per GSS that total approximately 3,000. In 2006, a third sample was added for a total sample size of 4,510.


29) These charts draw on data collected by the National Survey of Family Growth, Cycle 6 (2002). The sample consists of 7,643 women between the ages of 14 and 44 who are statistically representative of all U.S. women.


30) These charts draw on data collected by the National Survey of Family Growth, Cycle 6 (2002). The sample consists of women between the ages of 14 and 44 and numbers 7,643.


This entry draws heavily from 95 Social Science Reasons for Religious Worship and Practice and Why Religion Matters Even More: The Impact of Religious Practice on Social Stability.