

Did Religion Protect Americans From Deaths of Despair?

The generation of millennials, which includes most Americans under 40, is the first one in which Christians are a minority. By the year 2070 as few as one-third of all Americans could be Christians according [Pew Research Center projections](#). “Nones” – people without an allegiance to a religious faith, could be as many as 52 percent.

The dechristianisation of society is hard to assess and harder to predict. But we can ask: is this good news or bad news?

According to a research paper released last week by the National Bureau of Economic Research, a prominent think tank in Cambridge, Massachusetts, it is bad news. It is, in fact, literally deadly.

[“Opiates of the Masses? Deaths of Despair and the Decline of American Religion”](#) is a sobering look at the deaths due to overdoses, suicides, and alcoholic liver disease, medical conditions that increase when people believe that their long-term social and economic prospects are bleak.

Amongst middle-aged white Americans, the increase in [deaths of despair](#) has been so dramatic that mortality rates for all causes began to rise in the US after the year 2000. This perplexes demographers and economists and has been described as “one of the most important economic and demographic issues of our time”.

The three authors of the article believe that empirical evidence suggests that the reason for this deadly trend is the decline of religious practice. They write:

First, starting in the late 1980s, many measures of religious adherence in the US began a sharp downturn. This decline has been noted by researchers studying religion, but its proximity to the initial rise of deaths of despair has largely gone unnoticed. Second, religiosity is well known to be strongly correlated with health outcomes. Third, this religious decline was extremely large and widespread, so that it may have had quantifiable effects on mortality rates. We know of no other phenomenon that has these three characteristics.

This is a bold and controversial assertion. What proof do they put on the table?

In an original and thought-provoking use of statistics, the researchers examined deaths of despair after American states repealed their "blue laws". These were laws which banned commerce on Sundays so that people could observe the Sabbath by attending church services and spending more time with their families. Regulations varied from state to state, but typically the sale of alcohol was restricted or banned and department stores were closed. Many of the repeals took place in the 1980s.

What happened as a result? They report:

We find that for middle-aged Americans, the repeal of blue laws had a 5- to 10-percentage-point impact on weekly attendance of religious services and increased the rate of deaths of despair by 2 deaths per 100,000 people. Applying these results to the decline in religion at the end of the century suggests that this decline could be responsible for a reasonably large share of the initial rise in deaths of despair.

The usefulness of discussions about religion based on population-level statistics is limited, but intriguing. It's

important to observe that church attendance is not the same as personal spirituality. Some people attending church regularly might not appear very spiritually-minded. Some very spiritual people might not attend church. "The impact that we witness seems to be driven by the decline in formal religious participation rather than in belief or personal activities like prayer," they write.

Furthermore, other confounding factors could be at work – the opioid epidemic, downturns in the economy, unemployment, and so on.

But it does appear that church attendance, or "religiosity" as the social scientists call it, protects people against drug addiction, alcohol abuse and suicide. "The initial rise in deaths of despair in the US was preceded by a large decline in organized religious participation and ... both trends were driven by white middle-aged Americans," they say.

Perhaps that's one reason why it might be better to live in Texas than in Arizona, or in South Carolina rather than in North Dakota. "States with high levels of religiosity have suffered less from mortality due to alcohol, suicides, or drug poisonings ... States that experienced larger decreases in religiosity have had the largest gains in the rate of deaths of despair.

There is much more to be said about the consequences of rapid secularisation in the United States and elsewhere. But this look at the dark side of social change is provocative. There are many lessons to be learned.

First, those who applaud the decline of religion in the public square in the US should be careful what they wish for. Church attendance protects some vulnerable people from social isolation, introversion, alienation and even death. Regular attendance draws people into faith communities, gives them supportive fellowship and enhances a sense of meaning in their

lives.

Second, it is often observed that a decline in church attendance does not necessarily mean that people are less “religious”. Many of them are said to be still attuned to spiritual themes. People who fret over empty pews are supposed to take comfort in this small consolation. However, the more atomised, individual ethic underlying the retreat from a religious community still makes people susceptible to “despair”.

Third, the law of unintended consequences is always at work. We have all experienced this with the Covid lockdowns. Back in the 1980s, repealing the blue laws was meant to make life more convenient. For most people, it did. But for an unlucky few, it turned their lives upside down. It even killed them.

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