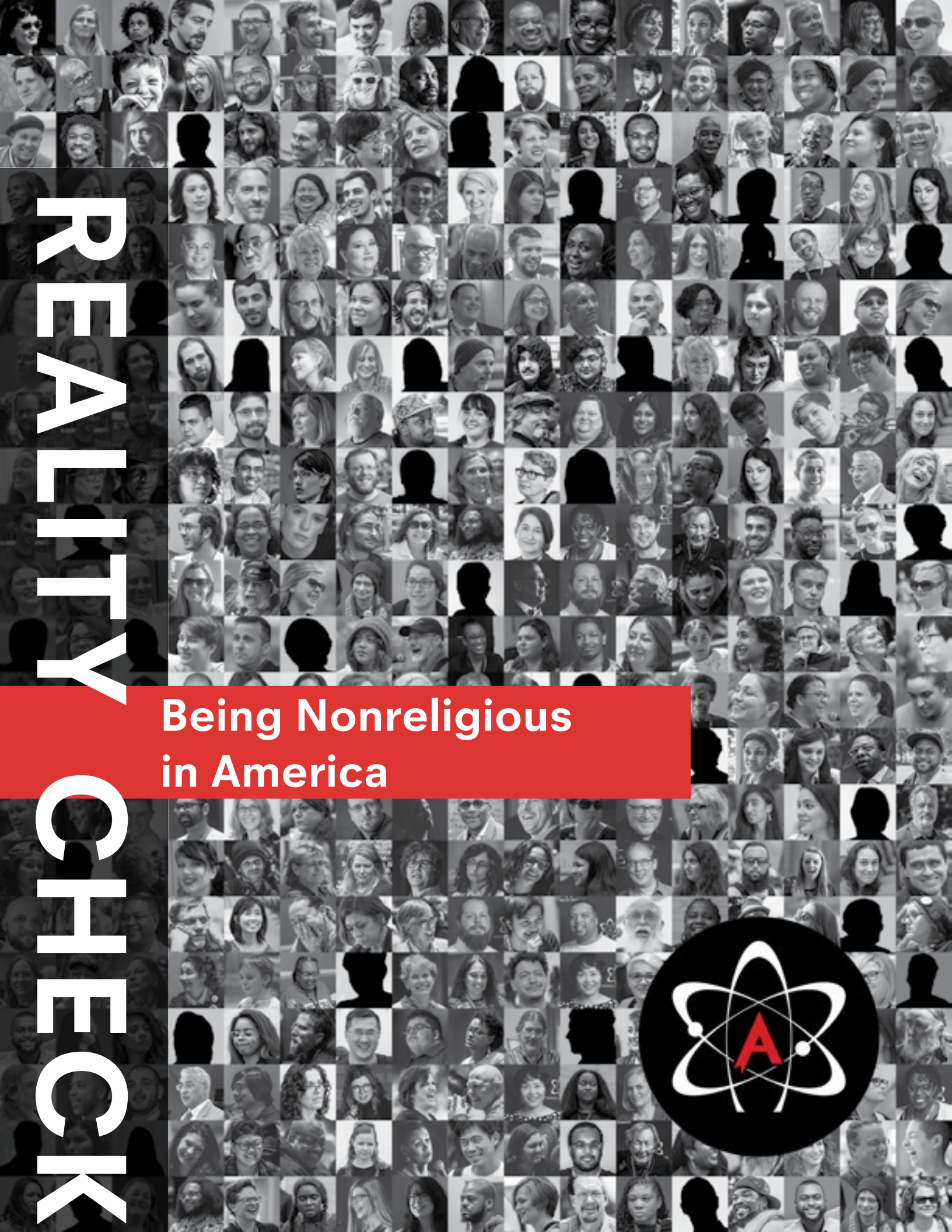


REALITY CHECK

Being Nonreligious in America

TABLE OF CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY 4

INTRODUCTION 10

ABOUT THE SAMPLE 14

BEING NONRELIGIOUS IN AMERICA 16
- Identity & Visibility 16
  - Nonreligious & Secular Identities 17
  - Concealment 18
  - How is concealment measured? 20
  - Religious Background & Upbringing 20
- Discrimination & Stigma 21
  - Discrimination Against Nonreligious People 22
  - Stigmatization of Nonreligious People 25
  - Family Rejection 27
  - Impact of Discrimination & Stigma 30
- Two Americas: Secular People in Religious Communities 34
- Disproportionately Affected Nonreligious Populations 38
  - Nonreligious Black Participants 39
  - Nonreligious Latinx Participants 39
  - LGBTQ Participants 40
  - Ex-Muslims 41
  - Servicemembers and Veterans 42
  - Young People 43

POLICY & ADVOCACY 44
- Advocacy Priorities 44
- Impact of State Law on Nonreligious People 47

COMMUNITY & ORGANIZING 50
- Political Engagement 50
- Involvement with Secular Organizations 52

METHODS 56

WORKS CITED 58

OUR ORGANIZATIONS 60

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS 61

FIGURES

Age 14

Sexual Orientation 14

Gender Distribution 14

Participants by State 15

Education Level 15

Community Type 15

Employment 15

Geographic Distribution 15

Identification with Nonreligious Identities 17

Primary Nonreligious Identity 17

Concealment of Nonreligious Identity 19

Religious Upbringing 20

Religious Expectations by Religious Upbringing 21

Negative Experiences and Discrimination 24

Experiences with Microaggressions and Stigmatization Scale 26

Stigmatization by State 27

Level of Family Support Before Age 25 28

Educational Attainment by Parental Support 29

Discrimination and Increased Depression 30

Stigmatization and Increased Loneliness 32

Criminal Incidents and Increased Depression 32

Evaluation of Loneliness 32

Concealment and Increased Loneliness 33

Stigmatization and Increased Concealment 33

Community Religiosity 34

Percentage of Very Religious Communities by State 35

Stigma and Community Religiosity by State 35

Concealment and Community Religiosity by State 36

Stigmatization by Community Religiosity 36

Community Religiosity and Increased Discrimination 37

Concealment by Community Religiosity 38

Family Support Among LGBTQ and Non-LGBTQ Participants 40

Discrimination Against Ex-Muslims 41

Satisfaction with Chaplain Service 42

Importance of Various Policy Issues 45

Policy Priorities for Secular Organizations 46

State Protections for Religious Equality and Stigma 49

Percent Voting in the 2016 Election by State 51

Political Engagement of Nonreligious People 51

Membership in Secular Organizations 52

Engagement with Local Secular Activities 53

Protective Effect of Involvement with Organized Secularism 54

Background

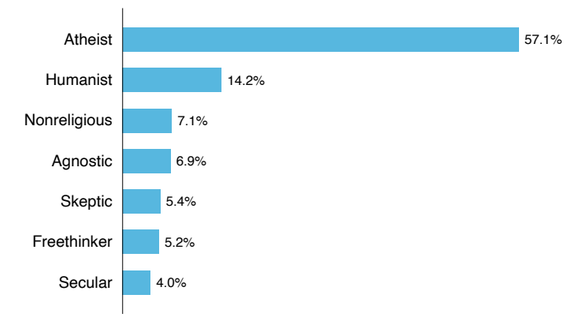
Since the founding of the United States, nonreligious people have been an important, but too often invisible, segment of American society. Despite the fact that they make up a significant and growing percentage of the population, we know remarkably little about nonreligious people and communities. The 2019 U.S. Secular Survey was an effort to address that gap – a groundbreaking survey of nearly 34,000 nonreligious people living in the United States. This survey brought together atheists, agnostics, humanists, freethinkers, skeptics, and others to provide essential data about our communities, our priorities, and our lives. *Reality Check* is the first report that American Atheists is publishing from this important data set, intended to provide an overview of what we learned about nonreligious people in America and to show significant differences across regions and communities.

Identity & Concealment

People with many different nonreligious identities participated in the U.S. Secular Survey, including atheists, agnostics, humanists, skeptics, freethinkers, and people who simply identified as secular or nonreligious. **More than half (57.1%) of participants most strongly identified as atheists, and the vast majority of participants (94.8%) identified as atheists to at least some extent.** The second most prevalent primary identity was humanists (14.2%), and significantly fewer participants primarily identified with other labels. Despite stereotypes about how religious upbringing affects nonreligious people, participants had fairly diverse religious backgrounds. One in seven (14.3%) participants were raised in a nonreligious household and about the same number (14.3%) had very strict religious expectations growing up.

As with other invisible minorities, we found that nonreligious people frequently conceal their nonreligious identities and beliefs in various contexts, particularly when they are likely to face stigmatization or discrimination. Nearly one third (31.4%) of participants mostly or always concealed their nonreligious identity from members of their immediate family. **Nearly half of participants mostly or always concealed their nonreligious identity among people at work (44.3%) and people at school (42.8%).**

Primary Nonreligious Identity



Discrimination & Stigma

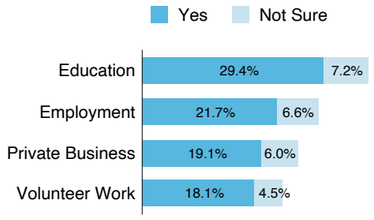
Tragically, we found that participants faced a high level of family rejection as a result of their nonreligious identity. Among participants under age 25, one in five (21.9%) reported that their parents are not aware of their nonreligious beliefs. For those whose parents are aware of their nonreligious identities, nearly one third (29.2%) have parents that are somewhat or very unsupportive of their beliefs. We found that family rejection had a significant negative impact on participants' educational and psychological outcomes. **For example, participants with unsupportive parents had a 71.2% higher rate of likely depression than those with very supportive parents.**

Nonreligious people in the United States live in a deeply religious culture where their beliefs are frequently stigmatized. We found that nonreligious people routinely face discrimination and stigma because of

"In the small city I am from, religion is a way of life, and anyone who comes along who doesn't toe the line is scary, and when people fear you unjustly, they can justify doing horrible things to you. It's scary to be an atheist in a small town. We need more groups to not just be activists on the big issues, but we need to teach people how to be community leaders and provide tangible services to people. We need to teach them how to build safe communities that people can turn to when they lose everything after leaving religion. We need more groups that serve the emotional needs of the nonreligious in their community, that are helping on a local and individual scale."

—Female, Texas

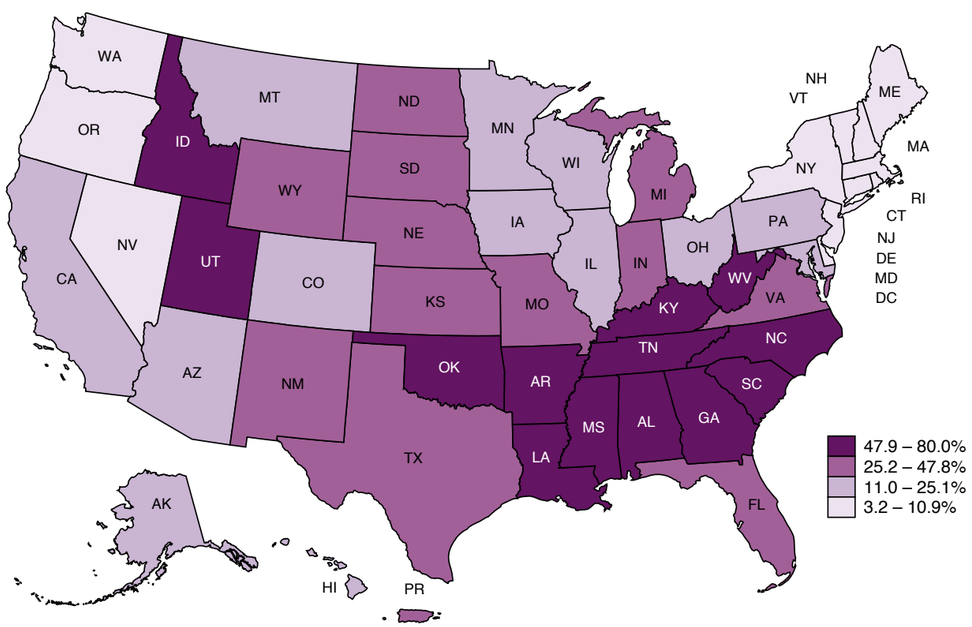
Negative Experiences & Discrimination



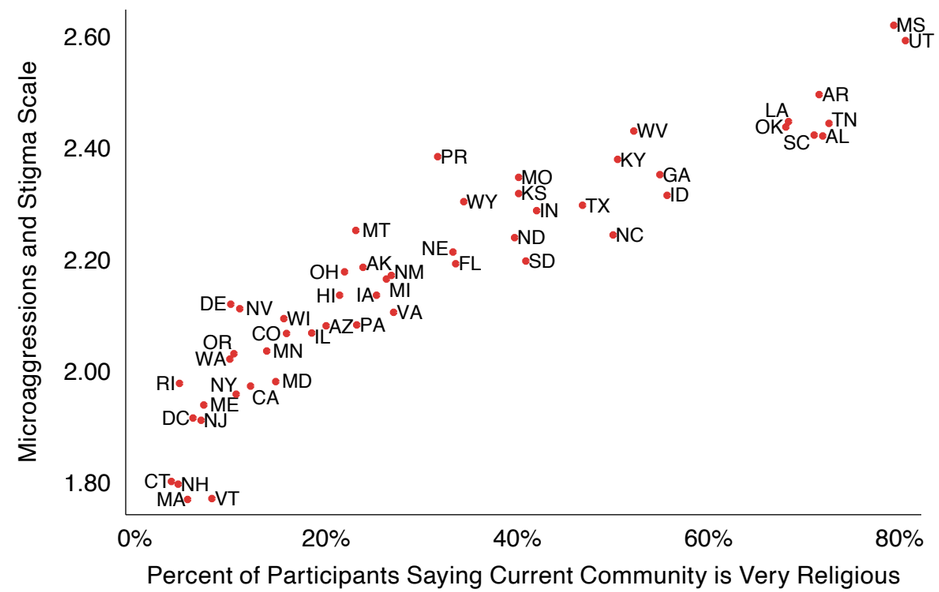
their nonreligious identity. **Nearly one third (29.4%) of participants had negative experiences in education due to their nonreligious identity, and one in five (21.7%) had negative experiences at work.**

The U.S. Secular Survey also measured exposure to stigma based on participants' nonreligious identity by asking how frequently they encounter various stigmatizing incidents. Perhaps contributing to the frequent concealment of their nonreligious identities, nearly half (47.5%) of survey participants were sometimes, frequently, or almost always asked or felt pressure to pretend that they are religious. Because of the discrimination and stigmatization nonreligious people face in our society, they experience heightened rates of loneliness and depression. **Our research shows that one in six (17.2%) of survey participants are likely to be depressed and about one quarter (25.6%) of participants often experience one or more indicators of loneliness and social isolation.**

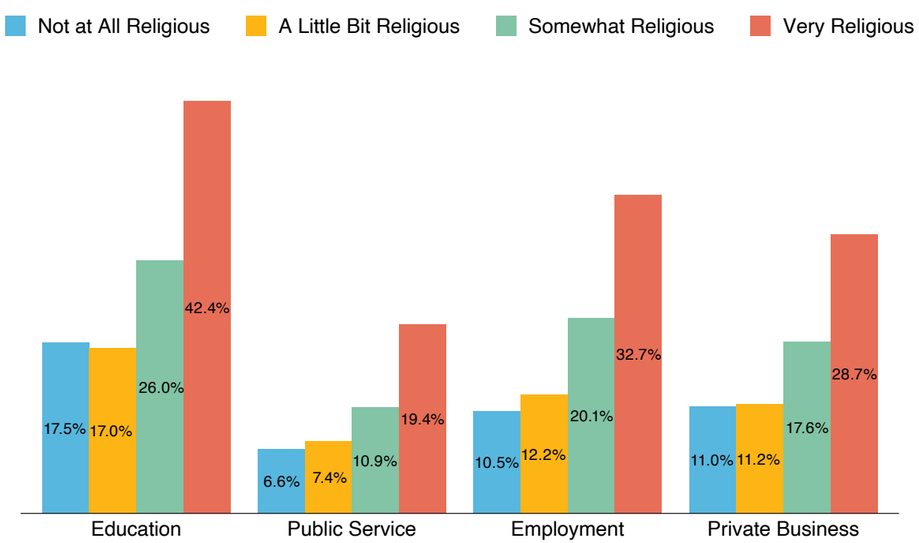
Percentage of Very Religious Communities by State



Stigma and Community Religiosity by State



Community Religiosity and Increased Discrimination



Because of their nonreligious beliefs:

Black participants were

1/2 as likely to have supportive parents

3x as likely to be physically assaulted

Ex-Muslim participants were

2x as likely to experience negative interactions with police and court systems

Among **nonreligious servicemembers and veterans**, nearly

1/2 had negative experiences during their service

Young people were

5x as likely to be physically assaulted

3x as likely to be depressed

Notably, the level of discrimination and stigmatization was dramatically higher for participants living in very religious areas. Survey participants were asked to assess how religious people in their communities are; nearly one third (29.8%) of participants live in very religious communities. Participants from rural locations (49.6%) and small towns (42.7%) were more likely to say their current setting was very religious than those from other settings (23.7%).

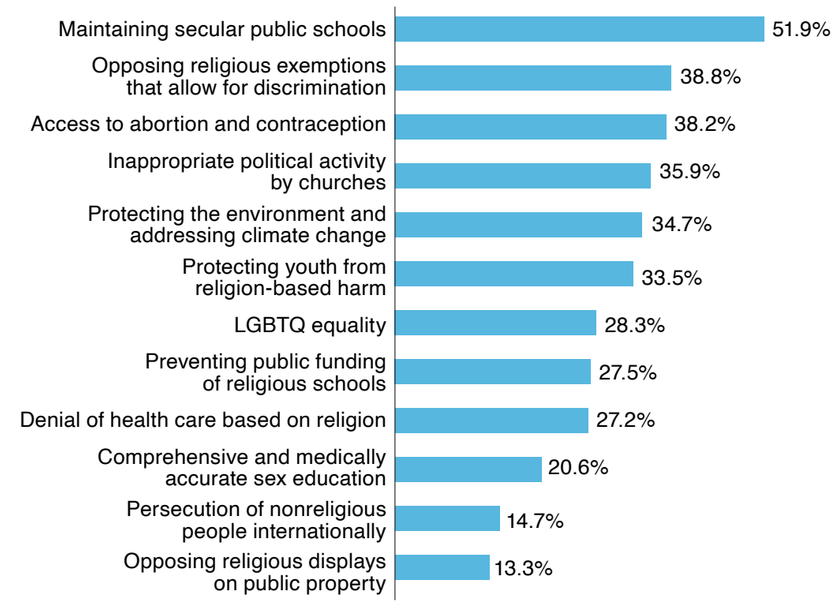
Nonreligious participants living in very religious communities were **nearly 2.5 times more likely to experience negative events in education** than in nonreligious communities, **nearly 2.5 times more likely to experience negative events in public services** (for example, voting, jury duty, poll work), **more than 3 times more likely in employment**, and **more than 2 times more likely when dealing with private businesses**. Moreover, participants living in very religious communities experienced nearly 40% more stigma than those in not at all religious communities.

Several subpopulations of nonreligious people face unique additional discrimination and stigma because of their race or religious upbringing, and others have unique experiences which required further analysis. While this report provides an initial look at the data for these subpopulations of nonreligious people, American Atheists intends to separately publish a more detailed analysis on these communities.

Policy Priorities

Survey participants were asked to identify the three more important issues that organizations representing nonreligious people should prioritize. **More than half (51.9%) of all participants expressed that maintaining secular public schools should be one of the key issues prioritized.** We also found that in states with strong protections for religious equality, nonreligious people on average faced a lower level of stigma.

Policy Priorities for Secular Organizations



Involvement with the Secular Movement

A significant percentage of participants were involved with Secular Movement activities, ranging from membership in national organizations to participation in local groups and activities. **More than one in five (22.1%) participants were involved with a local secular organization.** Moreover, there was a widespread interest among participants in participating in advocacy, community, educational and service activities organized by local organizations. **Most notably, 72.2% of participants with children were interested in additional nonreligious resources for people with children.** We also found that involvement with Secular Movement organizations was a protective factor that correlated with reduced loneliness and likely depression. **For example, members of national organizations were more than one third (34.8%) as likely than nonmembers to screen positive for depression (13.4% vs. 19.2%).**

INTRODUCTION

"Just being able to complete this survey makes me hopeful for the future."

—Male, New York

The U.S. Secular Survey was a groundbreaking survey of nonreligious people living in the United States of America, bringing together atheists, agnostics, humanists, freethinkers, skeptics, and others to provide essential data about our communities, our priorities, and our lives. And the need for this survey was very much recognized by nonreligious people. American Atheists had originally hoped that 5,000 – 10,000 people would participate in this national online survey, but we exceeded that number in just the first eight hours of the field period! Amazingly, nearly 34,000 nonreligious people choose to take this survey during the field period in November 2019. Clearly, in a country where far too often nonreligious people are invisibilized, we keenly feel the need to speak out about ourselves and our lives.

Reality Check is the first report that we are publishing from this amazing data set, intended to provide an overview of what we learned about nonreligious people in America and to show important differences across regions and communities. In an age when our nation feels more divided than ever, nonreligious people participate in and are affected by the vastly different communities in which we live. It is our hope that this report will paint a picture of what living in America is like for the approximately 9% of the population that identifies as atheist or agnostic (Pew, 2015).

For any population, data is essential for understanding the needs of the community and advancing advocacy to meet those needs. Unfortunately, until now, we have had only superficial data about nonreligious people and communities. While organizations have done broader population research on religion that collects demographic and other data about nonreligious people (Pew, 2019; Jones et al., 2016), the U.S. Secular Survey was instead a large survey solely of nonreligious people, created by us and focusing on our communities. Moreover, larger population surveys have frequently lumped nonreligious people into a broader category of religiously unaffiliated people, often referred to as the "Nones." While this is valuable to compare how religious adherence has changed over time in the United States, the category is less useful for truly understanding nonreligious people because it includes people of widely varying beliefs, from devoutly religious people who have a belief system that is not easily characterized, to people who lack well-defined religious beliefs but consider themselves "spiritual," to agnostics, humanists, and atheists. For example, we know that Nones are the fastest growing religious category, but prior to the U.S. Secular Survey, we couldn't say anything meaningful about how often and in what circumstances nonreligious people disclose their beliefs, or what types of services they are looking for from local secular organizations.

So why is data so important? Although we know that nonreligious people face stigmatization (Brewster et al., 2020) and that minority stress leads to significantly worse psychosocial outcomes (Meyer, 2003), until now, we did not know the extent to which this specifically affects our communities. Robust data about nonreligious communities will allow us to better identify the challenges we face, the realities of our daily lives, and the impact of living in a deeply religious culture that stigmatizes those who reject religion. One goal is to use this data both to show community need for intervention programs and investment, and to help local and national nonreligious organizations to better meet the needs of their members. Moreover, this data will allow the Secular Movement to better identify and advance our advocacy goals. From voting, to organizing around policy goals, to building a compelling case for change, policy change is driven by data. Lastly, it is our hope that the U.S. Secular Survey will spark additional research on nonreligious people and communities. As thorough as this report is, we are only scratching the surface of a much-needed body of scientific research. To that end, American Atheists intends to make the data from the U.S. Secular Survey available to both our Secular Movement partners and to researchers in this field.

"The world seems exceedingly harsh towards atheists and I don't want to rock the boat. I want the world to change but know I have to make that change. Perhaps this survey is the catalyst to pull myself out of the shadows and into the open."

—Male, Iowa

American Atheists took on this project because we recognized that, unlike most other populations facing stigmatization in the United States, government surveys almost never collect data about nonreligious communities. This is most likely the result of a federal law passed in 1976, which prescribes that "no person shall be compelled to disclose information relative to his religious beliefs or to membership in a religious body." While this language pertains only to the U.S. Census (which is notably the only nationwide, mandatory federal data collection), this concept has permeated data collection across the federal government, preventing our society from seeing how religion affects issues ranging from education to health, from crime to housing, from prison to the military.

The modern Secular Movement began in the mid-20th century, and since that time, we have had many significant victories that have improved the lives not only of nonreligious people, but of all Americans. Removing mandatory Bible reading from schools, fighting government-imposed symbols of religion in public places, preventing religious coercion of young people in schools and vulnerable people in courts and prisons, working to end special privileges for religious practices like faith healing that endanger children, fighting for nonreligious people to conscientiously object to military service, striking down blasphemy laws, and preventing giveaways of taxpayer dollars to churches and religious schools, the Secular Movement has made a very real difference in the lives of many. And currently, we work to oppose the flood of religious exemptions and special privileges for religion now threatening our constitutional system. As the U.S. Supreme Court noted in 1879, such exemptions would "make the professed doctrines of religious belief superior to the law of the land, and in effect to permit every citizen to become a law unto himself" (Reynolds v. U.S., 1879). No constitutional order can survive in those circumstances. But it is our goal to use the data acquired through the U.S. Secular Survey, the very voice and power of the nonreligious community, to ensure the future of the Secular Movement and to allow us to fight for religious equality, the separation of religion and government, and the civil rights of nonreligious people for decades to come.

"In a nutshell, I avoid telling others that I'm not religious until I've gotten to know them well and I can tell that they already consider me to be a decent person. It's a sad state of affairs that there is so much stigma toward those who don't identify as religious, despite the fact that we are a large group of the American population. Thanks for putting together this survey and allowing our voices to be heard."

- Female, Ohio

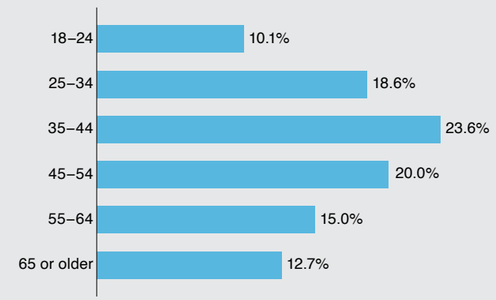
ABOUT THE SAMPLE

33,897 Nonreligious Participants

U.S. Secular Survey Dates: October 15, 2019 to November 2, 2019

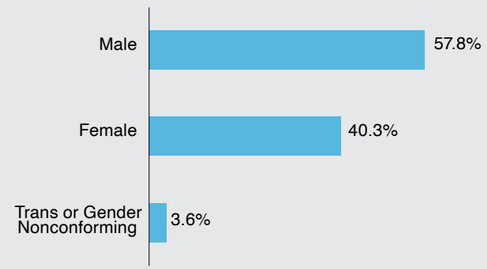
Age

FIGURE 1



Gender Distribution

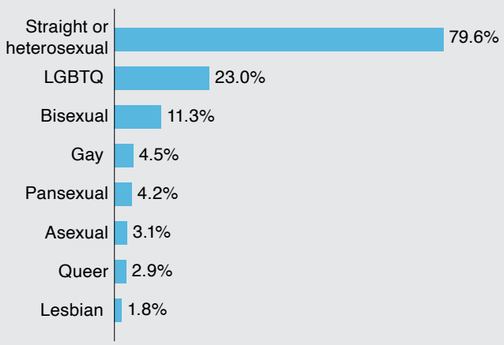
FIGURE 2



Participants under age 35 **3x** as likely to identify as TGNC

Sexual Orientation

FIGURE 3



Race/Ethnicity	Number of Participants	Percentage
African American, Black	891	2.7%
Hispanic, Latino, Latina, Spanish	1,892	5.7%
Caribbean	205	0.6%
Asian, Asian American, or Pacific Islander	790	2.4%
Native American, American Indian, Alaskan Native	633	1.9%
Middle Eastern, Arab American	236	0.7%
White	30,485	92.4%
Biracial or Multiracial	1,800	5.5%

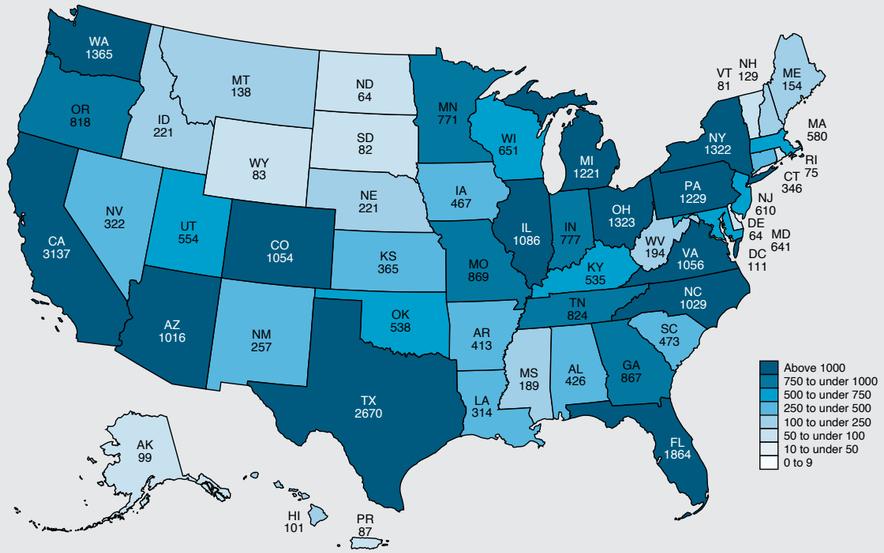
27.8% Live with children under 18

20.0% Attend school or college

30.3% Have children that attend school or college

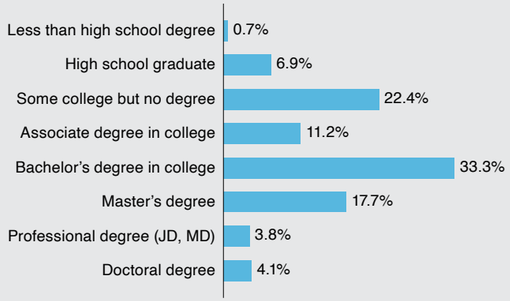
Participants by State

FIGURE 4



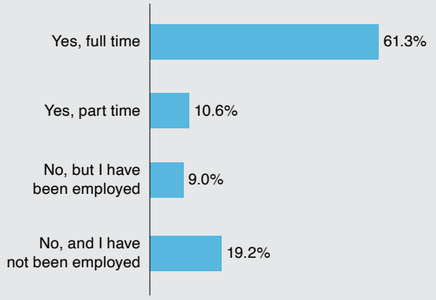
Education Level (Over 24 Years Old)

FIGURE 5



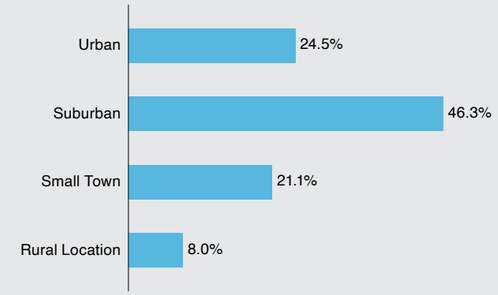
Employment (Over 24 Years Old)

FIGURE 6



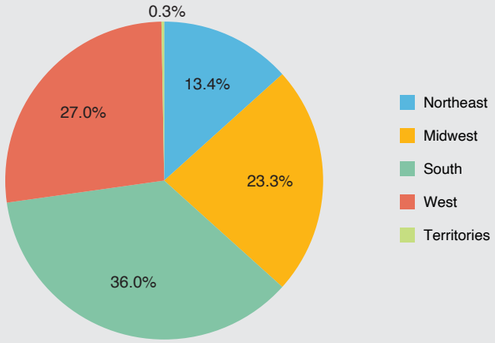
Community Type

FIGURE 7



Geographic Distribution

FIGURE 8



Identity & Visibility

"My children have the most difficult time. Any time they disclose their nonreligious identity at school they get picked on or criticized by at least one person. I have had to tell them to be honest if it comes up, but that announcing it can cause issues."

—Female, Arizona

Nonreligious people are an invisible minority in the United States, having sadly faced a long history of opprobrium and stigmatization. Though this number is decreasing over time, still nearly half (42%) of Americans say that "it is necessary to believe in God to be moral and have good values" (Smith, 2017). In early America, blasphemy laws were employed in many states against those who publicly renounced religion, and authors who sought to criticize Christianity, such as Thomas Paine, were too frequently ostracized and derided. And this continues even today, with two in five (40%) Americans saying that they would not support an atheist candidate for president (McCarthy, 2019).

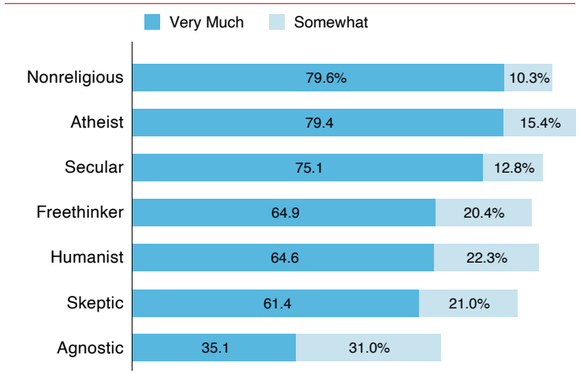
Like other invisible minorities throughout history, such as LGBTQ people, religious minorities, and people living with disabilities, being vocal and making ourselves visible to the broader society is an essential element to protecting nonreligious civil rights and advancing our policy goals. Over time, with greater awareness comes greater acceptance and inclusion. In this section, we examine how nonreligious people identify, how often and in what circumstances they conceal their nonreligious identity and beliefs, and what sorts of belief systems they grew up with.

Throughout this report, we speak of "nonreligious" people or communities to represent the broader array of atheists, agnostics, humanists, freethinkers, skeptics, and secular people that make up our communities. While nonreligious people have many varying beliefs, they universally face stigmatization because they reject religion. This term is meant to be inclusive so that we can speak to the experiences of the entire community rather than just a part of it.

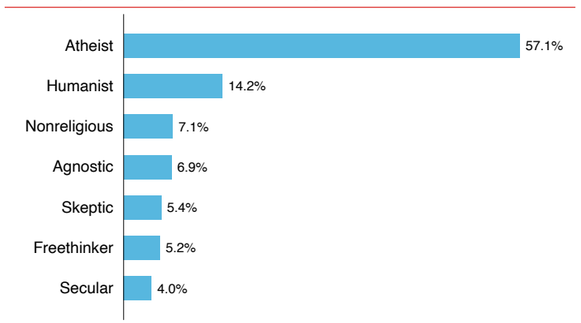
Nonreligious & Secular Identities

While for outreach purposes survey participants were referred to as secular or nonreligious, in order to better understand how our population of interest identified themselves, survey participants were asked to what extent they identified as atheist, agnostic, nonreligious, humanist, freethinker, secular, and/or skeptic. More than three quarters of survey participants reported to identify as nonreligious (79.6%), atheists (79.4%), and secular (75.1%) "very much." A little over three fifths of survey participants very much identified as freethinkers (64.9%), and a similar number as humanists (64.6%), while slightly fewer very much identified as skeptics (61.4%). The vast majority of participants (94.8%) identified as atheists to at least some extent. Survey participants did not identify as agnostics (35.1%) as strongly as they did with the other identities.

Identification with Nonreligious Identities FIGURE 9



Primary Nonreligious Identity FIGURE 10



"It's amazing to me just how sensitive people in general are to labels. When I would tell people that I am 'agnostic' I was usually greeted with much more acceptance than once I started referring to myself as 'atheist.'"

—Male, Illinois

"I wonder if I'd receive more flack if people really knew what Humanistic Judaism was. People know I'm involved but it's clear to me that they just think it's a type of Judaism. Some don't get it even after I've explained it."

—Female, Illinois

"I don't tell people I'm an atheist except for a select group of friends. I'm in that closet because I know how people have treated me in the past. It shouldn't have to be this way."

—Male, Virginia

"I was nervous about filling out this survey because I'm afraid the information can be used to out me. I know this is an irrational fear, but the religious pressures are so strong around me that I have to constantly watch what I say and do so that I can maintain my current quality of life and support my family."

—Male, Texas

Survey participants were asked about which of the identities they identified with most strongly. As shown in Figure 10, more than half (57.1%) of all survey participants most strongly identified as atheists, followed by those who identified as humanists (14.2%). Significantly fewer participants primarily identified with the other labels.

Participants were also asked how long they identified as one or more of these secular or nonreligious identities. Nearly one half (48.6%) of survey participants reported that they have so identified for more than ten years but less than their whole life, and approximately 15.9% of survey participants reported that they identified as one or more of these secular or nonreligious identities their whole life. Only 1.6% of participants so identified for less than one year.

The data demonstrated that, regardless of race and gender, survey participants primarily identify as atheists. However, male participants were more likely to primarily identify as atheists than were other survey participants (60.5% vs. 52.6%). Trans and gender non-conforming (TGNC) participants were less likely to identify as atheists (50.3% vs. 57.4%) than were non-TGNC participants. The youngest survey participants (age 18-24) were nearly twice as likely to identify as agnostic (11.4% vs. 6.4%) than were other participants.

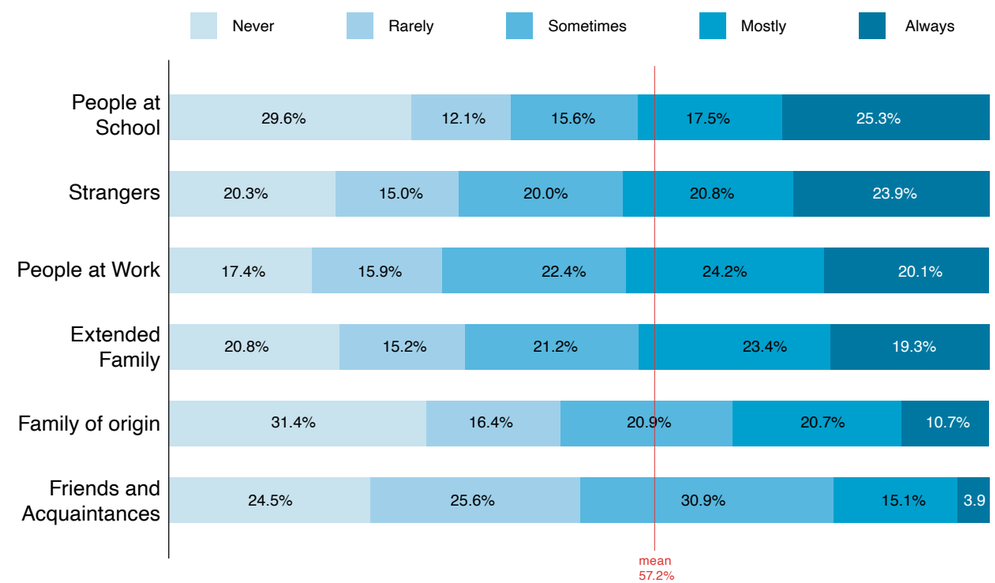
Concealment

Based on our focus group research on nonreligious people and previous studies on this population (Strength in Numbers Consulting Group, 2019), we were aware that people often conceal their nonreligious identities in different social circumstances. In order to better understand in what contexts nonreligious people engage in concealment, survey participants were asked how often they avoid talking about topics related to being nonreligious or that would reveal their nonreligious identity to people in particular groups. While almost one-third (31.4%) of survey participants mostly or always concealed their nonreligious identity from members of their immediate family, the rate of concealment was much higher for extended family members (42.7%). Nearly half of participants mostly or always concealed their nonreligious identity among people at work (44.3%) and people at school (42.8%).

"I live in a pretty liberal part of the country. But even so, I go by the 'don't ask, don't tell' policy."

—Female, Pennsylvania

Concealment of Nonreligious Identity FIGURE 11



"The very act of taking this survey has revealed to me how much I hide my nonreligious identity from the people around me for fear of harm—not to me, but to my livelihood."

—Male, Washington

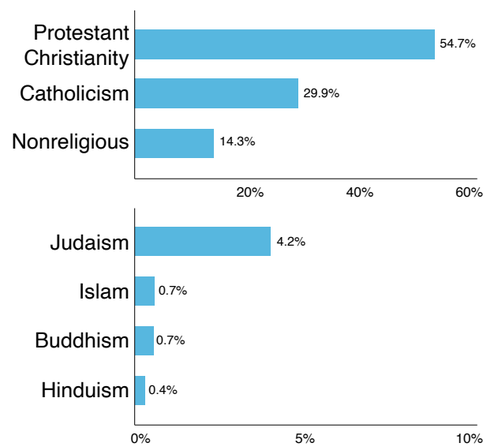
How is concealment measured?

Participants were asked questions to assist in identifying patterns of concealment of their nonreligious identity. Concealment was assessed by asking how often a participant avoids talking about topics related to or otherwise indicating their secular or nonreligious identity in their interactions with different groups. This question was asked for six different groups that participants interact with: immediate family, extended family, friends, people at work, people at school, and strangers. A 5-point scale was then created by calculating the mean of the constituent groups. This scale was used to examine the average concealment and disclosure across different groups within our sample, with higher scores (highest 5) indicating greater concealment and disclosure. The average concealment of participants of the U.S. Secular Survey was 2.86.

Religious Background & Upbringing

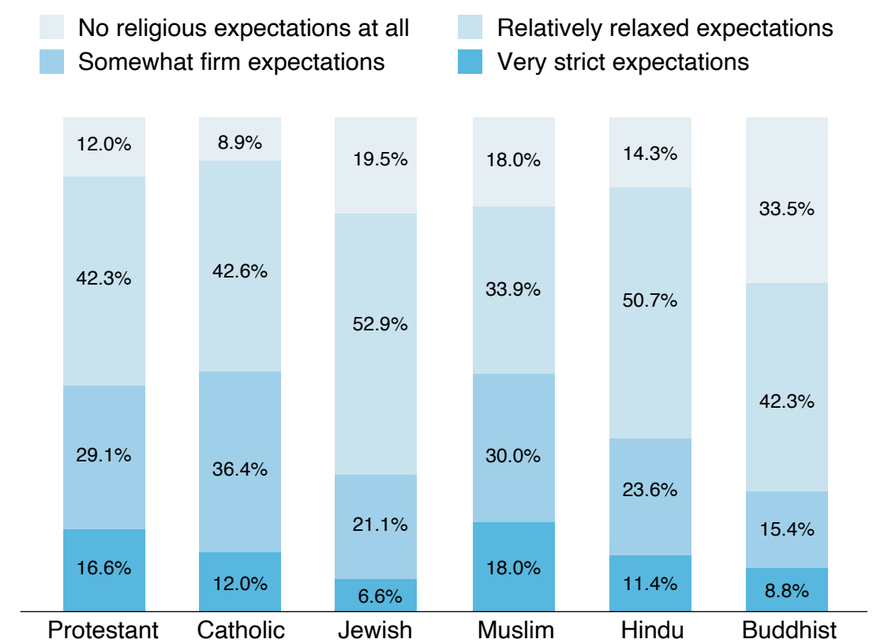
In order to better understand the background and beliefs of nonreligious people, participants were asked about their religious upbringing. Specifically, participants were asked to specify which, if any, religion(s) were practiced in their family when they were growing up, with the option to select all that apply. As expected, the vast majority of participants were raised in the Christian religion, either in Protestant Christian (54.7%) or Catholic (29.9%) households. One in seven participants (14.3%) were raised in nonreligious households. Although this is not directly comparable, in the 2016 PRRI publication, "Exodus: Why Americans are Leaving Religion—and Why They're Unlikely to Come Back," nine percent of Americans reported being raised in a nonreligious household.

Religious Upbringing FIGURE 12



Moreover, survey participants were asked to describe how strict their familial religious expectations were during their upbringing. While more than one third (38.1%) of survey participants described having relatively relaxed expectations, more than one quarter (27.3%) had somewhat firm expectations, and one in seven (14.3%) had very strict religious expectations growing up.

Religious Expectations by Religious Upbringing FIGURE 13



Discrimination & Stigma

Although the percentage of Americans who consider themselves religious has been declining for decades, and the diversity of religious beliefs has increased substantially in that time (Pew Research Center, 2015), nonreligious Americans continue to live in a culture dominated by Christianity. Like religious minorities, nonreligious people too often face discrimination in various areas of life, as well as stigmatization, because of their beliefs. This is also true of those who conceal their nonreligious beliefs, who, as the data demonstrates, face both a higher level of stigmatization and worse psychological outcomes.

Notably, the increasing politicization of conservative Christianity may also affect how nonreligious people encounter discrimination and stigmatization.

"I was told by my counselor at a state-run mental health office that my problems were due to leaving church, and I needed to go back to church."
—Female, Utah

"As a recovering addict, I have been mocked, ridiculed and told I have no chance of recovery unless I accept spiritual principles and believe in some deity."
—Male, South Carolina

"Going through infertility and IVF as an atheist was heart wrenching. People said the cruelest things about how it was God's plan, and I was being punished."
—Female, Kansas

Unfortunately, especially among evangelical Christians, there is a common misperception that Christians face a high level of discrimination in America compared to religious minorities like Muslims (Cox & Jones, 2017). Similarly, despite their political dominance, many conservative Christians believe themselves and their culture to be under attack by secularism, perhaps resulting in increasing hostility toward nonreligious people.

In this section, we examine which areas of life nonreligious people are most likely to encounter discrimination because of their identity, how nonreligious people encounter stigmatization in their daily lives, the infrequent but notable criminal acts against nonreligious people, and the impact of family rejection on nonreligious young people. We also examine how this discrimination and stigma affects the psychological well-being of nonreligious people.

Discrimination Against Nonreligious People

Survey participants were prompted to think about the past three years and report whether they have experienced a negative event related to being nonreligious in a variety of contexts. Specifically, the question asked: "Thinking about the past three years, have you experienced a negative event related to being secular or nonreligious in any of the following types of locations?" They were then asked to select "yes," "no," or "unsure." The answer "unsure" was included because it is common for members of stigmatized groups to be unsure whether discrimination is occurring, either because they have low expectations about their treatment by others or because of some other form of ambiguity in the situation.

Those participants to whom a particular context was not relevant were not given the question. For example, those who were not employed and had not been employed in the past three years were not asked to indicate whether they had a negative experience in employment.

Figure 14 describes the locations where participants experienced negative events because of their nonreligious identity, including health, education, and employment, when interacting with public systems such as public benefits, and in their own families.

The most common areas where participants reported having negative experiences due to their nonreligious identity were using social media or commenting online (58.3%) and with their families (54.5%).

Among those who used health services, a greater proportion of participants who had used mental health services said they had a negative experience (17.7%) because of their nonreligious identity, compared to those that used substance abuse recovery services (15.2%), reproductive care (14.6%), or other health services (10.7%).

Nearly one third (29.4%) of survey participants who attend school or who have children attending school reported having had negative experiences in an educational setting because of their nonreligious identity. More than one in five (21.7%) employed or recently employed survey participants reported negative experiences in employment because of their nonreligious identity.

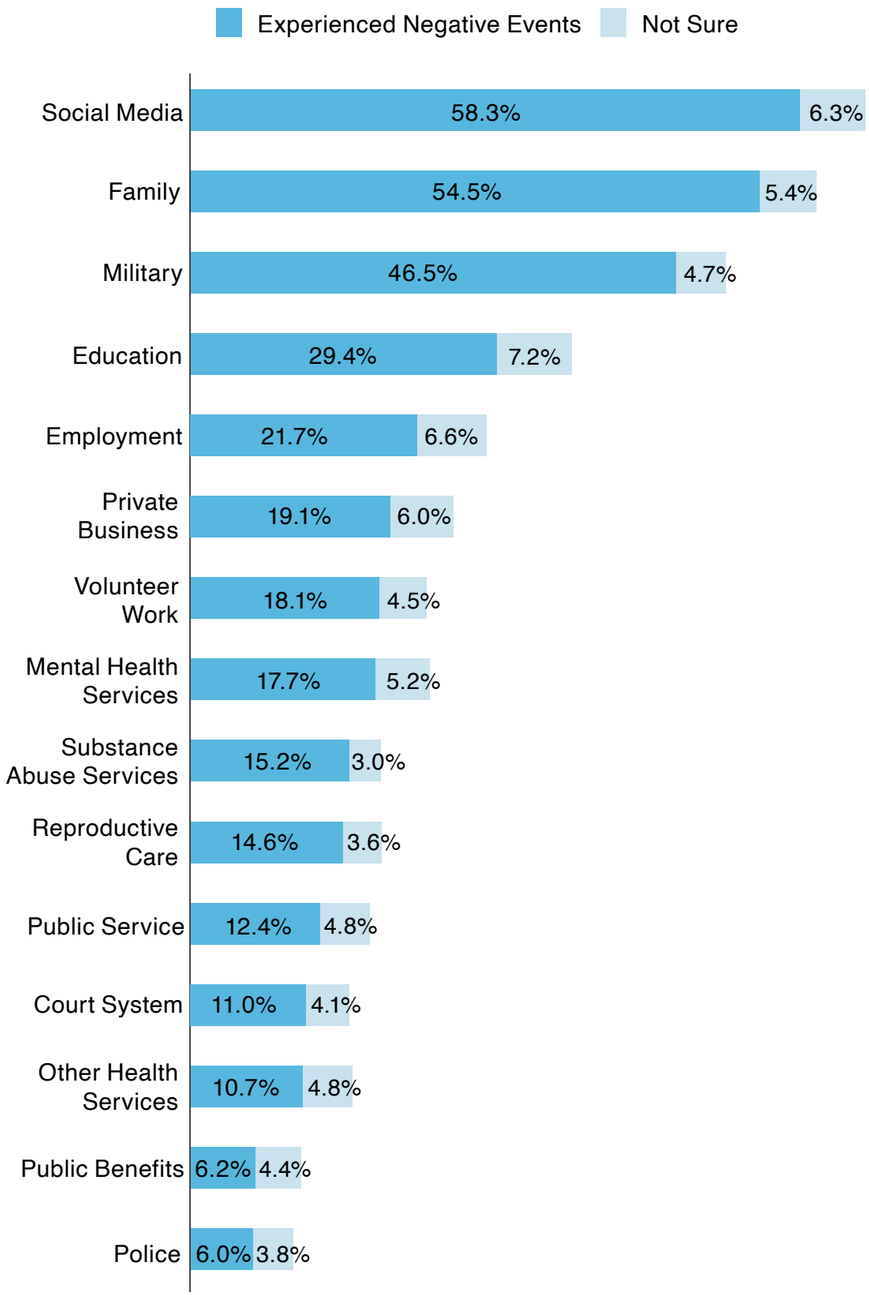
Negative experiences were reported when accessing private businesses by nearly one fifth (19.1%) of nonreligious participants. Notably, research shows that an increasing number of Americans believe that it is acceptable for businesses to discriminate against nonreligious people. A PRRI poll regarding religiously based service refusal found that Americans' belief that small businesses should be allowed to refuse to serve atheists increased from 15% in 2014 to 24% in 2019 (Greenburg et al., 2019).

More than one in ten (11.1%) of survey participants have had a negative experience when interacting with the court system because of their nonreligious identity. Negative experiences were reported while doing or attempting to do volunteer work (18.2%) and accessing public services (for example, voting, jury duty, poll work)

"I feel an unspoken pressure to either not disclose that I am nonreligious or to pretend I am religious."
—Female, California

"I was passed over for promotion. My supervisor told me privately, 'You seem like a good person, I just can't understand you if you don't believe in God.'"
—Male, Mississippi

Negative Experiences and Discrimination FIGURE 14



(12.4%) because of the participants' nonreligious identities. Negative experiences were not as prevalent when interacting with police (6.0%), when seeking to adopt or foster children (5.0%), and when seeking or living in housing (4.5%).

Participants were also asked if they had been threatened, experienced property damage, or been hit, punched, kicked, or assaulted in the past 3 years because of their secular identities. While the vast majority (86.7%) of survey participants did not experience any of these events, 12.2% of survey participants reported being personally threatened, 2.5% had their personal property damaged, and 0.9% have been hit, punched, kicked, or physically assaulted because of their nonreligious identity. As described in the Disproportionately Affected Nonreligious Populations section, these rates were substantially higher against certain subpopulations of nonreligious people, such as Black participants.

Stigmatization of Nonreligious People

Studies on minority populations have shown that minority stigma can result in increased negative outcomes, including for LGBTQ people (Meyer, 2003) and nonreligious people (Abbott & Mollen, 2018; Brewster et al., 2020). In order to gauge the level of stigma that nonreligious people receive, survey participants were asked to reflect how often they recall experiencing certain microaggressions in the past year. Figure 15 shows how frequently participants encountered these situations that stigmatize nonreligious people.

In the year prior to taking the survey, nearly two thirds of all survey participants were sometimes, frequently, or almost always asked to join in thanking God in a fortunate event (65.6%). Nearly half (47.5%) of survey participants recalled sometimes, frequently, or almost always being asked to or feelinging pressure to pretend that they are religious. Nearly half of participants

"We all work for the state, and as public sector employees, we have extra scrutiny which can be leveraged for harassment, and which has been in the past. This potential for harassment makes it wise to not speak up, not stand out, not join a protest, etc. Not because doing so would cost us our jobs, but because the opportunities to attack us are much more robust than if we were private sector employees. Those sorts of attacks can be endless and disheartening, and make life harder for us and everyone around us."

—Male, Wisconsin

"I am terrified for my children if their daycare teachers find out we are an atheist family. I am scared that they will no longer receive equal or adequate care."

—Female, Michigan

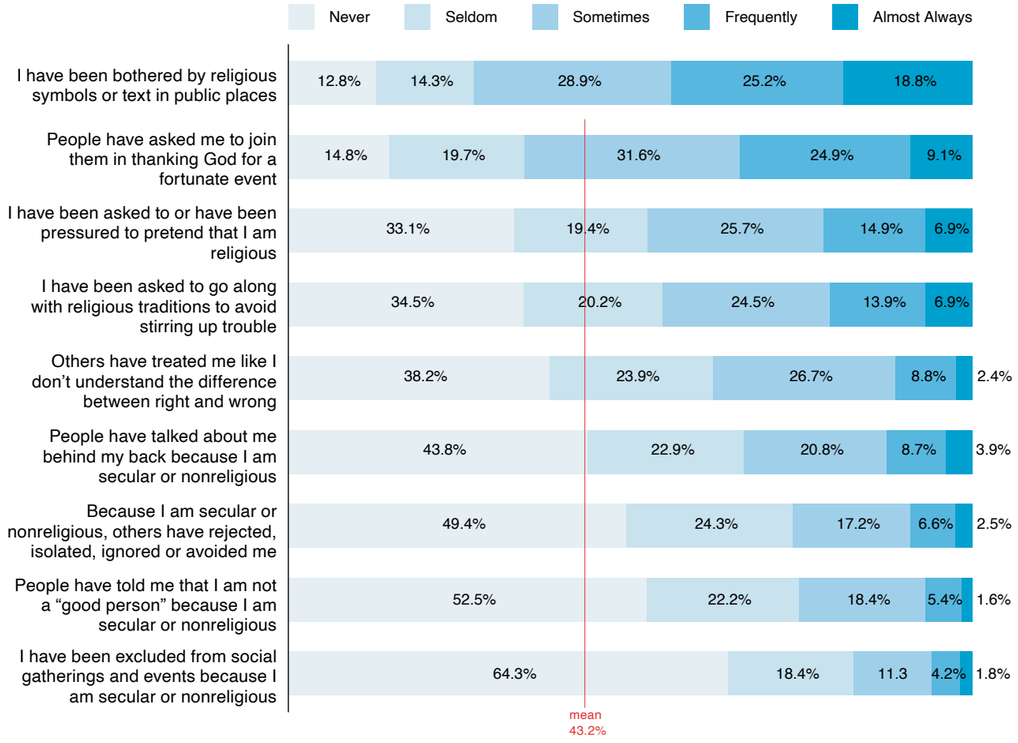
"I have shirts that clearly state my atheist status and I am unable to wear them anymore as people have denied me meals in restaurants and entrance into stores."

—Female, Tennessee

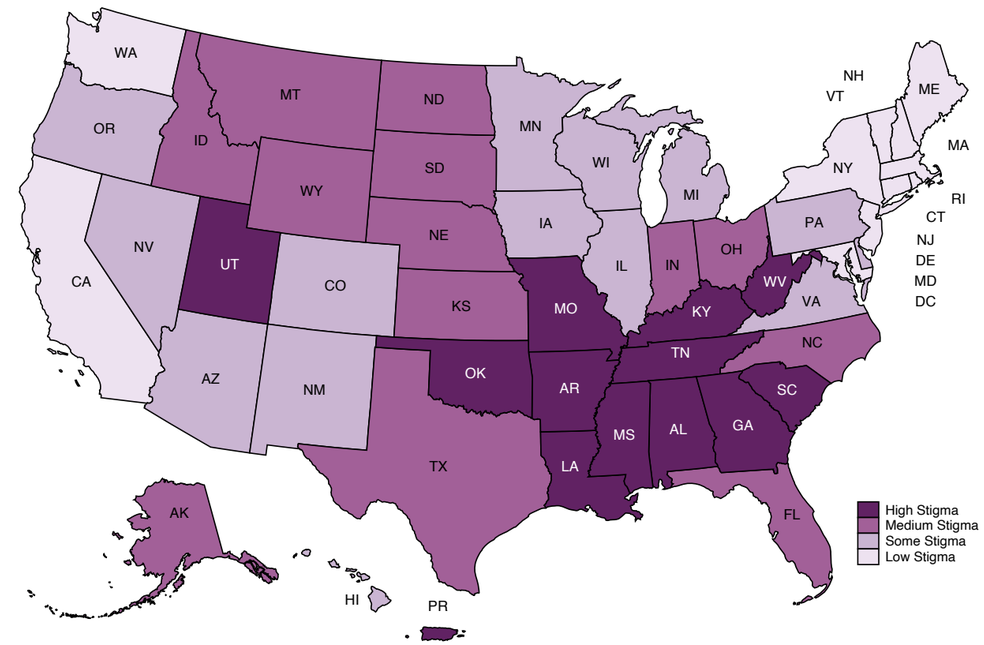
were sometimes, frequently, or almost always asked to go along with religious traditions to avoid stirring up trouble (45.3%), and nearly two in five (37.9%) were treated like they don't understand the difference between right and wrong. These indicators were also used to create a scale (see sidebar). Moreover, nearly three fourths (72.9%) of participants reported that they sometimes, frequently, or almost always were bothered by seeing religious symbols or text in public places.

States were separated into categories by the median level of stigmatization that participants reported (High, Medium, Some, or Low Stigmatization; see Figure 16). The state or territory with the highest median value is Mississippi (2.63). Most of the states in the High Stigmatization category are in the Southeast or Southern Midwest, as well as Utah.

Experiences with Microaggressions and Stigmatization Scale FIGURE 15



Stigmatization by State FIGURE 16



Family Rejection

Based upon the focus group interviews that were conducted, we anticipated a high level of family rejection experienced by the participants based on their nonreligious identities. When asked how supportive their parents or guardians were of their nonreligious beliefs before they turned 25, nearly half (44.0%) of older participants reported that their parents or guardians were not aware of their nonreligious beliefs or that they did not hold those beliefs at that time. However, more than one fifth (20.7%) of older participants reported that their parents or guardians were somewhat or very unsupportive of their nonreligious beliefs before they turned 25.

Among participants under age 25, more than one fifth (21.9%) reported that their parents or guardians are not aware of their nonreligious beliefs. Nearly one third

"For months, my parents tried to convince and coerce me into going to church even though they knew I didn't believe in god. They finally gave up trying only recently, but I suspect they'll never really stop trying. I know they love me, but they are completely and utterly unsupportive of me in my lack of faith. It's as though I have a disease that they can't do anything to cure."

—Male, Indiana

How is exposure to stigma measured among nonreligious people?

In order to understand stigma against nonreligious people, the U.S. Secular Survey prompted participants to reflect how often they have experienced nine different microaggressions in the past year (12 months). Microaggressions reflect a set of views frequently held about a group of people that foster and reinforce marginalization. Microaggressions can be best be defined as "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial [or other] slights and insults to the target person or group" (Sue, et al., 2007). While microaggressions are often discussed from a race lens, other marginalized groups may also experience microaggressions, including those that identify as atheists, nonreligious, or secular.

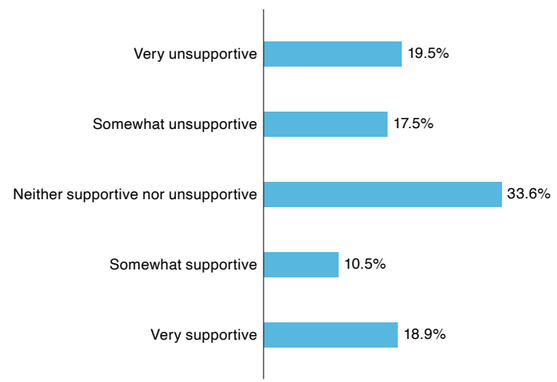
(29.2%) of participants under age 25 reported that their parents or guardians are somewhat or very unsupportive of their nonreligious beliefs.

Figure 17 provides an analysis of both participants below age 25 and older participants whose parents are/were aware of their nonreligious identity. More than one third (37.0%) of these parents reported that their parents were somewhat or very unsupportive of their nonreligious identity.

Family rejection had a significant negative impact on participants' educational and psychological outcomes. Among those age 25 and older whose parents were aware of their nonreligious identity, those with more supportive parents had higher levels of educational attainment. For example, 32.5% of those with "very supportive" parents achieved a Masters, professional degree, or doctorate, while just 23.2% of those with "very unsupportive" parents did so. Similarly, nearly half of participants with very unsupportive parents did not complete a four-year degree (46.1%), compared to about one third (32.4%) of participants with very supportive parents.

Moreover, survey participants with very unsupportive parents were 71.2% more likely than those with very supportive parents to screen positive for depression, and they scored 14.8% higher on loneliness.

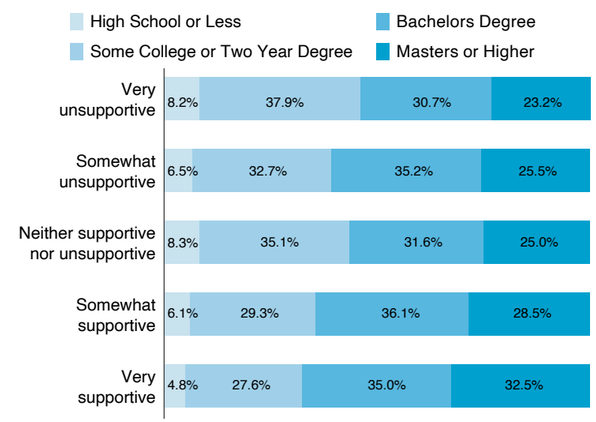
Level of Family Support Before Age 25 FIGURE 17



"As a teenager suffering from mental illnesses and from self-harm, my family performed an exorcism on me. I still go to therapy for it, and hearing people pray can trigger intense breakdowns."

—TGNC, Alaska

Educational Attainment by Parental Support FIGURE 18



Survey participants with very unsupportive parents were 71.2% more likely than those with very supportive parents to screen positive for depression.

The scale used in this study was adapted from the Measure of Atheist Discrimination Experiences (MADE) (Brewster et al., 2016), with the exception of the item "I have been bothered by religious symbols or text in public places," which was added as a result of focus group findings (see Methods section). Participants were provided with categories ranging from (1) Never to (5) Almost Always. In addition to examining individual items, a scale was created by taking the average of the items adapted from the MADE. The scale was also scored 1 to 5, with the sample recording an average of 2.16.

Participants were divided into categories based on their stigmatization scale score for the purpose of analysis. Each category includes approximately 25% of participants.

Participant Stigmatization Categories

Category	Stigma Scale Range
High Stigma	2.76 – 5.00
Moderate Stigma	2.01 – 2.75
Some Stigma	1.51 – 2.00
Low Stigma	1.00 – 1.50

"When I admit to anyone I am atheist my morals are immediately under attack. It's crazy. I have a full-time job I've been at for almost 30 years, wife, kids, active in the community with the town and school...but I'm a person without a moral compass apparently."

—Male, Oklahoma

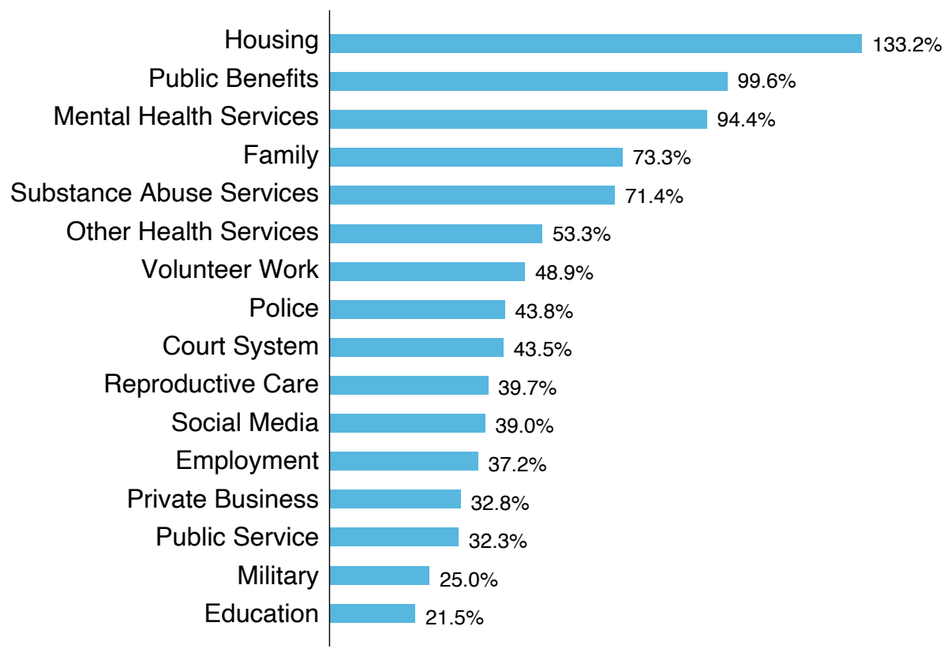
Impact of Discrimination & Stigma

To understand how minority stress affects nonreligious people, we analyzed how discrimination and stigmatization affected participants' loneliness and likelihood of depression. Our data shows that participants who experienced discrimination or high levels of stigmatization because of their nonreligious identity were more likely to screen positive for depression and to experience greater loneliness.

Figure 19 shows the elevated odds of depression associated with experiencing a negative event in a variety of domains. For example, those who experienced a negative event related to being nonreligious in housing were 133.2% more likely to experience depression than those that did not have such an experience.

Discrimination and Increased Depression FIGURE 19

Increased Odds of Depression Among Those Who Had Negative Experiences, by Location



Depression & Loneliness

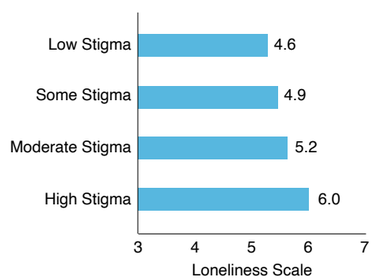
The U.S. Secular Survey asked a set of questions to assess the likelihood of depression (PHQ2) and the degree of loneliness of each participant (UCLA loneliness scale). The PHQ2 is used to screen whether a participant likely has depression and the UCLA loneliness scale produces a score for which higher numbers indicate greater loneliness. Please refer to the Methods section for additional details.

First, to screen the likelihood that survey participants were depressed, they were asked two questions based on the "PHQ-2" assessment (Spitzer et al., 1999). Over one half of all survey participants reported that they did not have little interest or pleasure in doing things (57.7%) or feel down, depressed, or hopeless (54.9%). Almost one third, however, had little interest or pleasure in doing things (28.3%) or felt down, depressed or hopeless (30.4%) several days over the past two weeks. When added together, the PHQ2 score ranges from 0 to 6, and cutoff score for someone to be referred for further screening for depression is 3. We refer to those who have PHQ2 scores of 3 or higher as "likely to be depressed". Based on this analysis, about one in six (17.2%) survey participants are likely to be depressed. Although not directly comparable, the 2017 National Survey on Drug Use and Health found that 7.1% of all U.S. adults aged 18 or older had at least one major depressive episode in a given year (NIH, 2019).

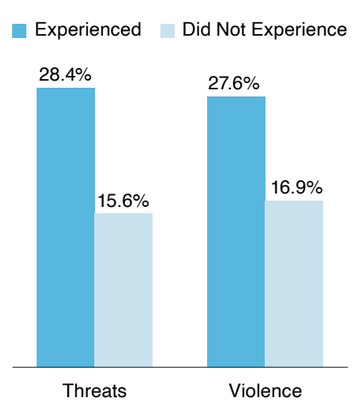
In order to assess the extent to which survey participants feel lonely or experience social isolation, they were asked how often they feel a lack of companionship, feel left out, and feel isolated from others. Participants were provided with three response choices which were coded 1 (hardly ever), 2 (some of the time), and 3 (often). Loneliness was determined by summing each of the three responses, with higher scores indicating greater feelings of loneliness. While more than half of all respondents hardly ever lack companionship (49.1%), feel left out (45.0%), or feel isolated (43.3%), over one third of survey participants do feel these aspects of loneliness some of the time (33.9%, 40.2%, 37.6%, respectively). On average, 25.6% of participants report that they "often" experience one or more of these indicators of loneliness and social isolation. Please refer to the Methods section for further information on how loneliness was measured.

25.6% of participants report that they "often" experience one or more of these indicators of loneliness and social isolation.

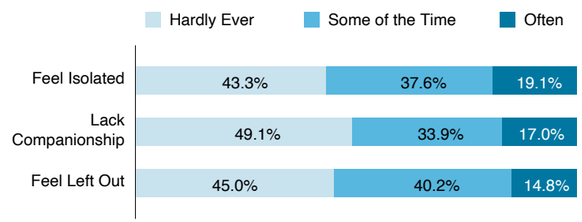
Stigmatization and Increased Loneliness FIGURE 21



Criminal Incidents and Increased Depression FIGURE 22



Evaluation of Loneliness FIGURE 20



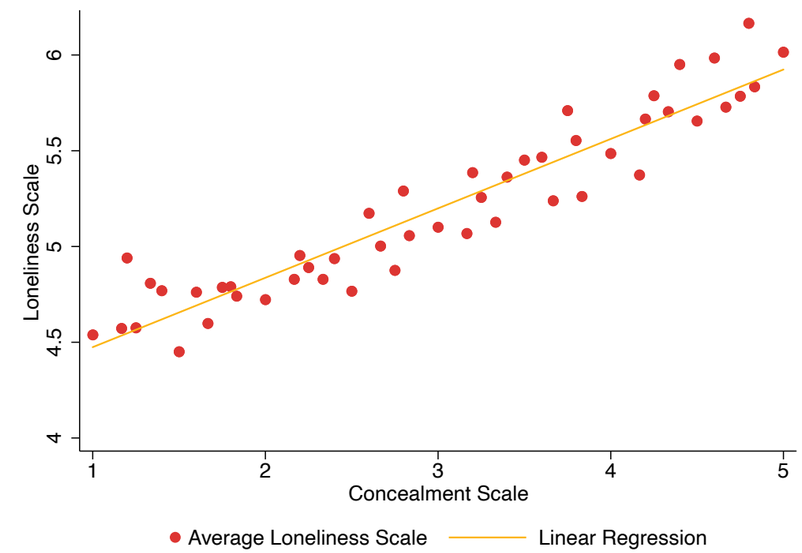
Similarly, Figure 21 shows the average loneliness scale rating for participants by their level of stigmatization (see sidebar, page 28). Participants who experienced higher levels of stigma scored higher on the loneliness scale. On average, participants with High stigmatization were 30.4% more lonely than those with Low stigmatization.

Finally, the prevalence of those with likely depression was nearly twice as high among those that experienced threats (28.4% vs. 15.6%) and more than 1.5 times higher among those that experienced violence (27.6% vs. 16.9%).

Research has revealed that concealment can lead people to feel a lack of authenticity, to be less able to establish close ties with others, to experience more social isolation, to have lower feelings of belonging, and to have lower psychological well-being (see for example, Quinn, 2009, 2013 & 2017). Our data shows that concealment is associated with several different negative outcomes among survey participants, including increased loneliness and risk for depression. Figure 23 shows how higher levels of concealment were associated with higher levels of loneliness. On average, a participant who "always" conceals their secular identity scores 32.5% higher on the loneliness scale than a participant who "rarely" does so (6.01 vs 4.54).

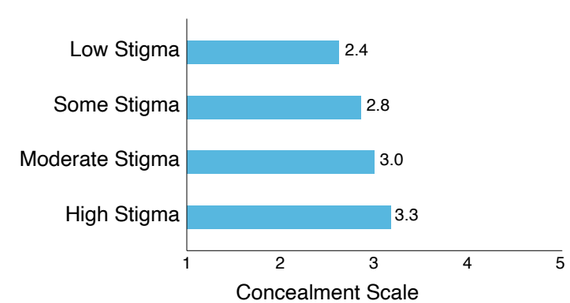
Moreover, survey participants were more likely to engage in concealment when they experienced a higher level of stigmatization. Figure 24 shows the average concealment scale rating for participants by their Stigmatization Category (see sidebar, page 28).

Concealment and Increased Loneliness FIGURE 23



For example, participants with High stigmatization had concealment scores that were 37.5% higher than those with Low stigmatization (3.3 vs. 2.4).

Stigmatization and Increased Concealment FIGURE 24



"Everyone in the South assumes everyone else is religious. Public schools assume this. My family does. So it's very difficult to be honest here w/o being 'evangelized.'"

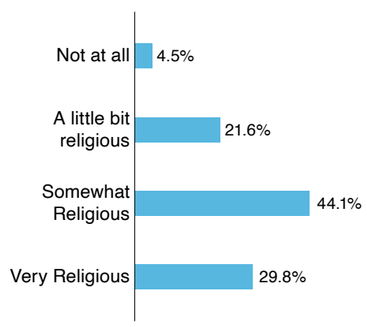
—Female, Tennessee

Two Americas: Secular People in Religious Communities

"Living in the Bible belt, where everyone takes for granted that you attend church, can make you feel defeated. It's difficult to feel that you are resented just for being. I miss the community and built in family that comes with attending a church."

—Female, Alabama

Community Religiosity FIGURE 25

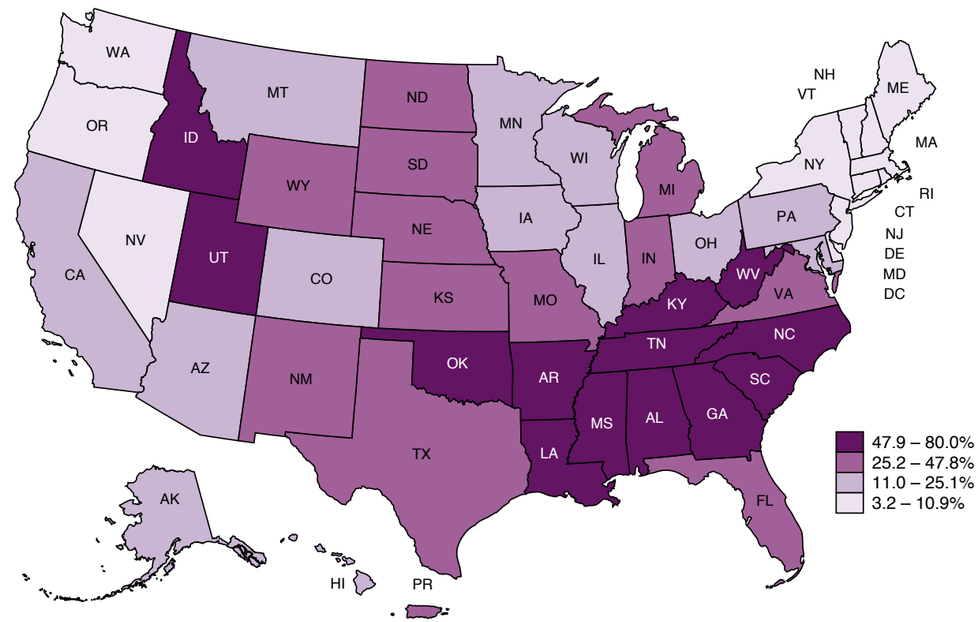


The experiences of nonreligious people vary dramatically in different parts of the United States. While nonreligious beliefs may be casually accepted in states like California and Vermont, nonreligious people living in states like Mississippi and Utah have markedly different experiences. In this section, we used the data available to examine the impact of vastly different religious cultures in the United States on nonreligious people. Although we can generalize about states, we sought to identify a better metric to show how the religious culture in which nonreligious people live impacts the discrimination and stigma they face, as well as their psychological outcomes.

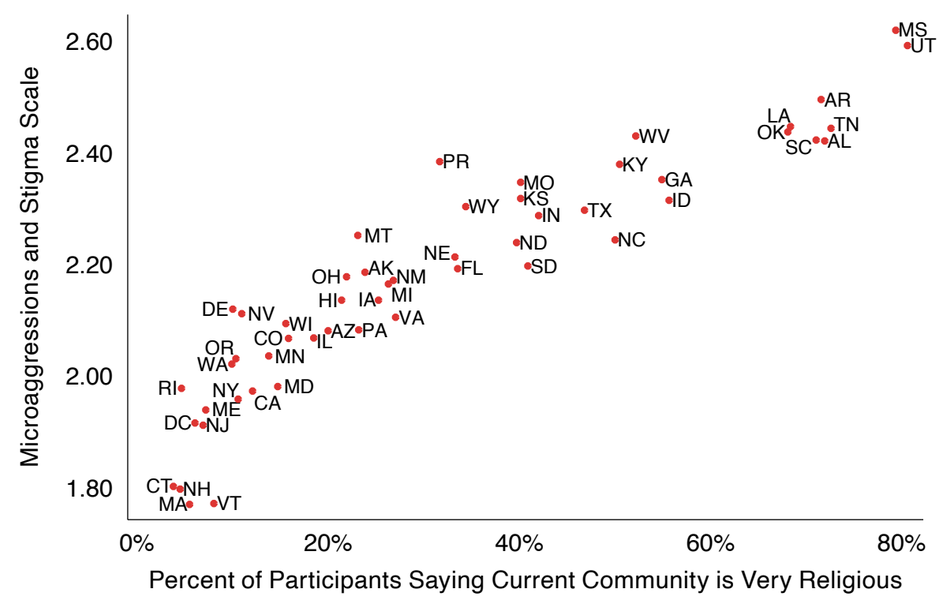
To that end, survey participants were asked to assess how religious people are in the community in which they live. Nearly half (44.1%) of participants reported that they live in "somewhat religious" communities, and nearly one third (29.8%) live in "very religious" communities. Participants' analysis of community religiosity aligned well with geographic expectations (see Figure 26, showing the percent of participants who rated their community as "very religious" by each state). As might be expected, participants from rural locations (49.6%) and small towns (42.7%) were more likely to say their current setting was "very religious" than those from other settings (23.7%). Stigmatization and concealment were higher on average in states that participants reported are "very religious." Figures 27 and 28 show average stigmatization and concealment, respectively, by community religiosity in each state.

Figure 29 shows how stigmatization of participants (see sidebar, page 28) varied based on the reported level of community religiosity. In very religious communities, 37.0% of participants reported High levels of stigmatizing experiences, while just 15.4% had Low levels of stigmatizing experiences. In communities that are

Percentage of Very Religious Communities by State FIGURE 26

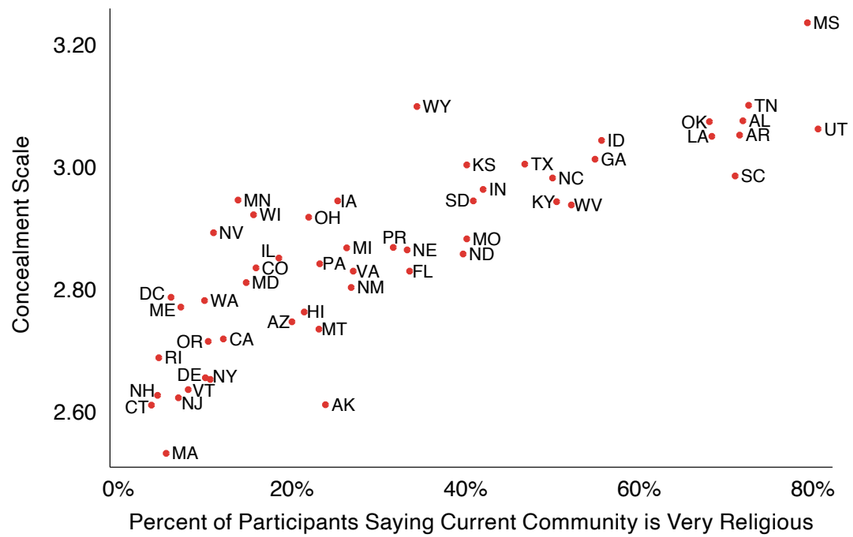


Stigma and Community Religiosity by State FIGURE 27



Concealment and Community Religiosity by State

FIGURE 28

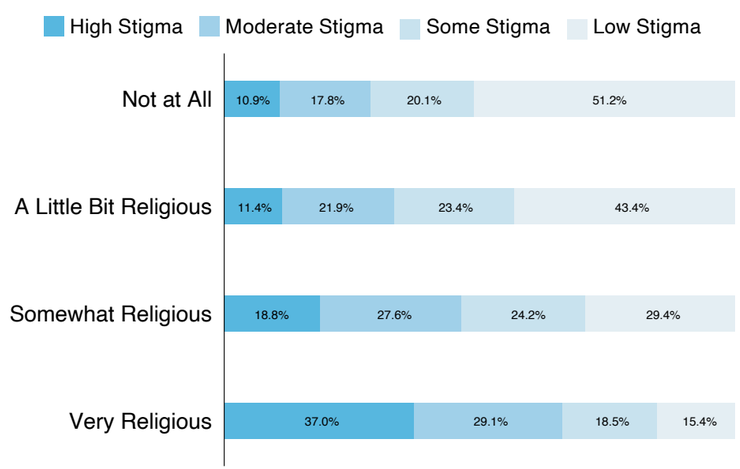


"Living in the South as an atheist is hell."

—TGNC, Arkansas

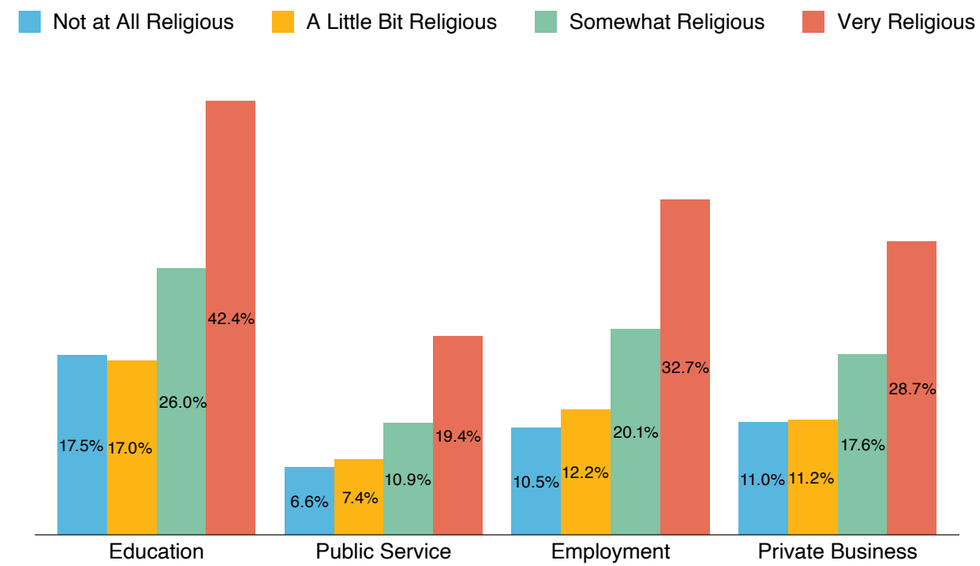
Stigmatization by Community Religiosity

FIGURE 29



Community Religiosity and Increased Discrimination

FIGURE 30



"not at all" religious, however, just 10.9% of participants experience High levels of stigmatizing experiences, while 51.2% experience Low levels. Participants in very religious communities scored nearly 40% higher on the stigma scale than those in not at all religious communities (2.5 vs. 1.8), in other words, they experienced 40% more stigma.

A similar trend is seen when looking at discrimination against nonreligious people. Figure 30 examines frequency of negative events related to being nonreligious in education, employment, public services, and by private businesses, by community religiosity rating. This analysis shows that participants reported low levels of negative experiences in less religious communities and a significantly higher rate in very religious communities.

Finally, survey participants in very religious communities were more likely to always conceal their nonreligious identities than were those in less religious communities. Average concealment was nearly one

Participants living in very religious communities were more likely to experience negative events than those living in not at all religious communities:

2.5x in **education**

2.5x in **public services**

3x in **employment**

2x from **private businesses**.

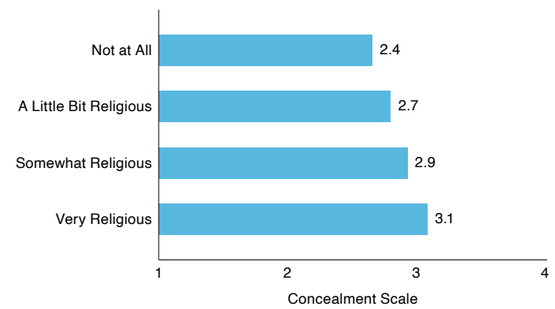
Those in very religious communities experience nearly 40% more stigma than those in not at all religious communities.

"I experience discrimination in the form of silencing. I'm a black, ex-Muslim, immigrant woman. So I face a layered complex form of discrimination."

—Female, DC

third (29.2%) higher in very religious (3.1) communities compared to not at all religious (2.4) communities.

Concealment by Community Religiosity FIGURE 31



Disproportionately Affected Nonreligious Populations

In addition to the discrimination and stigma they face because of their nonreligious identities, various subpopulations of nonreligious people encountered enhanced discrimination and stigma because of their race or their religious upbringing. In this section, we conducted an intersectional analysis, finding that both nonreligious Black people and ex-Muslims encounter significantly higher rates of discrimination and stigma, which concordantly results in worse psychological outcomes for these populations. We also analyzed the experiences of Latinx and LGBTQ people, who also experienced disparate outcomes in some areas. Moreover, we conducted a more detailed look at the experiences of young people and of servicemembers and veterans, two groups that encounter discrimination and stigma in unique ways compared to other nonreligious people.

While this section provides a brief initial look at the data for these subpopulations of nonreligious people, we intend to separately publish a significantly more detailed analysis for each of these communities.

Nonreligious Black Participants

The sample included 891 Black survey participants, almost half (49.9%) of whom resided in the Southern region of the United States (compared to just 35.7% of other participants). While they reported that their current community was very religious at only a slightly higher proportion than other participants, (32.2% vs. 29.8%), Black participants were less likely (6.9% vs. 11.1%) to report that their parents had been very supportive. They were also more likely to report that their family religious expectations were "very strict" (20.4% vs. 14.1%) and that they were raised as Protestant Christians (69.1% vs. 54.5% of other respondents).

Black participants were three times as likely to report being physically assaulted (2.5% vs. 0.8%) because of their nonreligious identity than were other participants. They also scored, on average, 7.6% higher on loneliness compared to other participants, and they reported significantly higher rates of depression (24.6% vs. 17.0%). This is especially troubling because, among the general population, Black people generally have lower rates of depression (Riolo et. al, 2005).

Nonreligious Latinx Participants

Like Black participants, Latino/Latina ("Latinx") participants experienced additional stigma and negative experiences related to being nonreligious compared to non-Latinx participants. For example, a larger number of Latinx participants reported negative experiences related to being nonreligious within their families (61.6% vs. 54.2% of non-Latinx participants). They also experienced more negative events at the hands of police (8.6% vs. 5.7%) and when seeking public benefits (8.9% vs. 5.9%). Finally, Latinx participants were more likely to report experiencing threats (14.2% vs. 12.0%) and vandalism (3.2% vs. 2.5%) and were 77.3% more likely than non-Latinx participants to experience assault because of their nonreligious identity.

"I don't talk with my family or friends about [being nonreligious]. There is an assumption that African Americans are all Christians/ religious."

—Female, Virginia

Black participants were three times as likely to report being physically assaulted (2.5% vs. 0.8%) because of their nonreligious identity than were other participants.

"As a Latinx person, religious indoctrination is woven into the fabric of our culture. I have some extended family members who have stopped speaking to me after finding out I was an atheist. And in general, most of my family is very uncomfortable when the topic comes up."

—Female, California

"Oftentimes my bisexuality is lumped in as being the reason I am atheist, so that I can 'continue to live in sin without facing consequences.' This makes no sense to me and I can fairly easily shrug it off, but it's so disheartening to know how comfortable some people are with degrading who a person loves."

—Female, Maine

"I was a Catholic who believed it was wrong to be gay when I was younger. Realizing I was gay obviously made me question other things."

—TGNC, Rhode Island

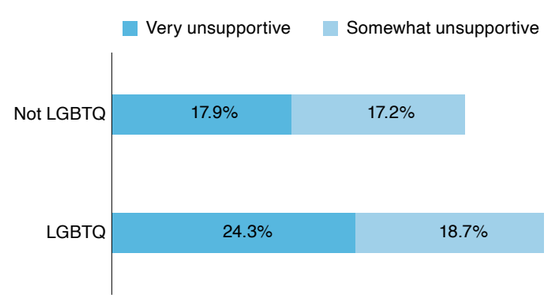
LGBTQ Participants

A significant portion of survey participants identified with a sexual orientation other than straight or heterosexual and/or identified as transgender or gender nonconforming (23.3%). Among the general population, an estimated 4.5% of adult Americans identify as LGBTQ, and nearly half (47%) are nonreligious (Newport, 2014 & 2018).

LGBTQ young people face significant family rejection that results in a greater rate of negative psychological outcomes (Ryan et al., 2009). Similarly, nonreligious LGBTQ survey participants were more likely to have unsupportive parents. Among families that are aware of the participant's nonreligious identity, LGBTQ participants were significantly more likely to have had "very" or "somewhat" unsupportive parents (43.0%) compared to non-LGBTQ participants (34.9%).

Moreover, LGBTQ participants reported significantly higher rates of concealment of their nonreligious identity in relation to their families. More than one third (36.1%) of participants who identified as LGBTQ reported that they mostly or always conceal their nonreligious identities from their families, with nearly half (49.7%) mostly or always concealing their secular or nonreligious identities from their extended family.

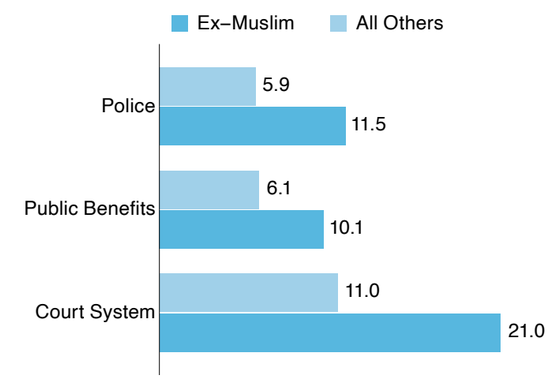
Family Support Among LGBTQ and Non-LGBTQ Participants FIGURE 32



Ex-Muslims

Very little research has been done about nonreligious people who were raised as Muslims. The sample included 233 ex-Muslim participants, who were more likely to be people of color and to be younger than other respondents. Ex-Muslim survey participants were more likely to report having very strict religious expectations growing up than participants with other religious backgrounds (18.0% vs. 14.3%). They were also much more likely to report discrimination in several different areas, especially when interacting with the police and court system. Ex-Muslims also experienced stigmatization that was 14.3% higher than their counterparts.

Discrimination Against Ex-Muslims FIGURE 33



"I had to hide my transformation for a very long time. Bangladesh is a very dangerous place for atheists still. I am living in the USA for last 28 years, still somewhat in the shadows. It is not safe for a nonwhite immigrant to be atheist in a rural community."

—Female, New York

"My parents are very religious and would be absolutely devastated if they learned I am not Muslim anymore, so I've been lying to them about being a practicing Muslim for the past 9 years. They have a very low opinion of atheists."

—Male, Oklahoma

"I was denied contraception in the military from a Catholic doctor and fell pregnant, to the detriment of my mental health. After my daughter was born, the only services available to me for temporary foster care were religious based."

—Female, Nevada

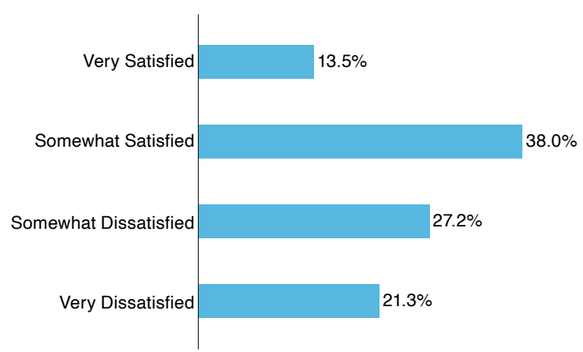
Servicemembers and Veterans

Approximately 12.4% of survey participants have served in the U.S. Armed Forces, Coast Guard, Reserves, or National Guard. Of the survey participants who reported serving, seven out of eight (86.2%) had been retired or separated from services three or more years ago, and 5.1% were currently serving.

Among those who serve or who have served in the U.S. Armed Forces, Coast Guard, Reserves, or National Guard, almost half (46.5%) reported to have had a negative experience related to their nonreligious identity during their service.

More than one quarter (27.2%) of those who serve or have served in the Armed Forces, Coast Guard, Reserves, or National Guard were somewhat dissatisfied with their interactions with military chaplains, and more than one in five (21.3%) were very dissatisfied. Overall, only 13.5% of those who served were very satisfied with the service provided to them by military chaplains.

Satisfaction with Chaplain Service FIGURE 34



"My time in the service was by far when I was most discriminated against for my open atheism."

—Male, Florida

Young People

Young people ages 18-24 represented 10% of the sample. Nearly three-quarters (70.4%) reported that they were attending school at the time of the survey and about one third each were employed full time (29.1%) or part-time (33.0%).

One third (33.6%) of youth reported that they had negative experiences in education because of their nonreligious identity, compared to 28.5% of older participants. Young people were also more likely to have had negative experiences in mental health services, reproductive care, and volunteer work. Youth under age 25 experienced stigmatization that was 12.6% higher than that of older participants.

Nearly one in five (20.8%) young people reported that they had been threatened because of their nonreligious identity, compared to 11.3% of older participants. Shockingly, young people were more than five times as likely (3.3%) than older (0.6%) participants to have been hit, punched, kicked, or physically assaulted because of their nonreligious identity.

Young people that have reported a negative event related to their family feel lonelier on average (6.4) than those that did not report a negative event within their family (5.9). Those who reported that their parents were very supportive had 23.5% lower average concealment of their nonreligious identity than those who reported that their parents were very unsupportive.

Participants under age 25 were more likely to lack companionship, feel left out, and isolated than older participants. For example, three quarters (75.2%) of youth reported they lack companionship some of the time or often compared to less than half (48.4%) of older participants. More than three quarters of youth also reported feeling left out (75.6%) and isolated (77.8%) some of the time or often. Nonreligious young people were more than twice as likely to screen positive for depression (37.5%) compared to older participants (15.1%).

Young people were more than five times as likely (3.3%) than older (0.6%) participants to have been hit, punched, kicked, or physically assaulted because of their nonreligious identity.

"I've been told that I can't know/don't understand religion because I'm young (18), and that I'm being silly/trying to be rebellious and don't know what I'm talking about. I casually mentioned that I don't believe in God in front of a Christian friend, and got a horrible look as he said 'oh... I respect you a lot less now' to my face.

—Female, Maryland

Young people were more than twice as likely to screen positive for depression (37.5%) compared to older participants (15.1%).

"The current administration is promoting religion rather than respecting separation of church and state, so I worry that my freedom from religion is being threatened and that I may be persecuted in the years to come if they are successful in pushing a non-secular agenda."

—Female, California

Advocacy Priorities

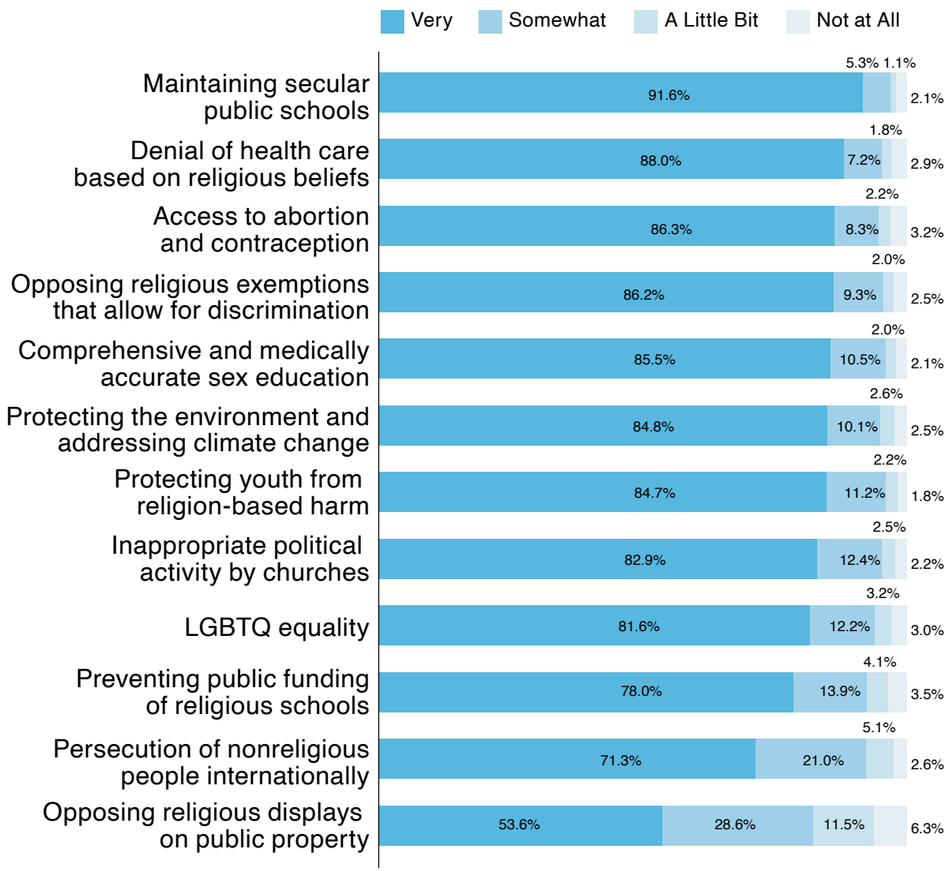
Secular Movement organizations that represent nonreligious people have traditionally advocated for the separation of religion and government and fought discrimination against nonreligious people. While various secular organizations have polled their members about their priorities, and organizations like Pew Research Center have surveyed religiously unaffiliated people about their views on various controversial topics (Pew Research Center, 2015), there has been less work to determine the key policy priorities for nonreligious people. This section examines how nonreligious people surveyed feel about various selected policy goals, and it assesses which goals the participants rank as most important for Secular Movement organizations to advocate for.

In order to understand the policy priorities of nonreligious people, we asked survey participants how important a number of policy issues were to them personally. Issues were selected from among those discussed as important to nonreligious people during focus groups. While survey participants expressed strong interest in all these policy issues, overwhelming concern was expressed for maintaining secular public schools (91.6%) and about the denial of health care based on religious beliefs (88.0%). More than four fifths of all survey participants expressed strong support for access to abortion and contraception (86.3%), for opposing religious exemptions that allow for discrimination (86.2%), for comprehensive and medically accurate sex education (85.5%), for protecting the environment and addressing climate change (84.8%), for protecting youth from religion-based harm (84.7%), for opposing inappropriate political activity by churches (82.9%), and for LGBTQ equality (81.6%). Opposing religious displays on public property (53.6%) was least likely to be rated as an important policy priority.

"I am very public in my advocacy for quality science education. In that role I have been the subject of personal attacks because of the perception of evolution being associated with atheism."

—Male, Florida

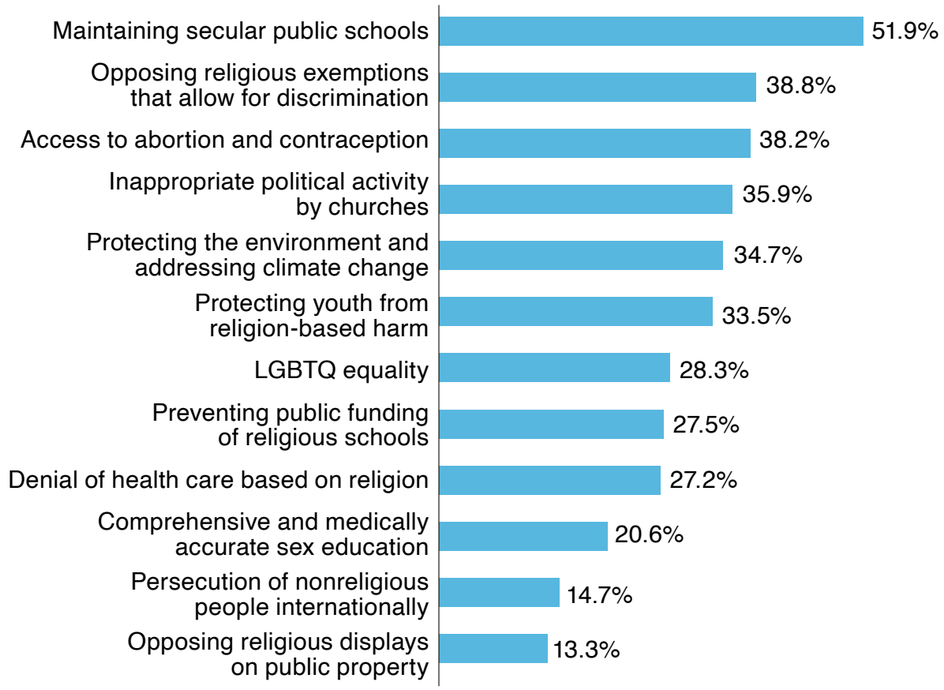
Importance of Various Policy Issues FIGURE 35



"I'm probably not the only one to note an apparent shift in our culture. Dogmatic forms of thinking that have been incubated so well in our country's churches are seeping more and more thoroughly into our general public discourse and political landscape. The effects are very toxic, but "general infestation of dogmatism into public discourse" was not one of the priorities listed in this survey; it would have been in my top three."

—Male, Washington

Policy Priorities for Secular Organizations FIGURE 36



More than half (51.9%) of all survey participants said that maintaining secular public schools should be a key priority.

Survey participants were then prompted to select three issues in particular that should be priorities for organizations representing nonreligious Americans. More than half (51.9%) of all survey participants said that maintaining secular public schools should be a key priority.t More than one third of participants believed that secular organizations should prioritize addressing inappropriate political activity by churches (35.9%), opposing religious exemptions that allow for discrimination (38.8%), access to abortion and contraception (38.2%), protecting the environment and addressing climate change (34.7%), and protecting youth from religion-based harm (33.5%). A lower proportion of participants identified policies related to funding of religious schools (27.5%) and LGBTQ equality (28.3%) as priority issues (among LGBTQ participants, the number was higher at 41.7%). Fewer participants rated comprehensive and medically accurate sex education (20.6%), opposing persecution of nonreligious people internationally (14.7%), and opposing religious displays on public property (13.3%) as key policy priorities for Secular Movement organizations.

Impact of State Law on Nonreligious People

American Atheists published the *2019 State of the Secular States* report (www.atheists.org/states) to assess state laws and provide an analysis of how well states protect the separation of religion and government and religious equality. This report categorizes each state, as well as the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico, into three groups based on these state law assessments.

1. **Strong Protections for Religious Equality**. In addition to strong constitutional protections which protect the separation of religion and government, states in this category have laws and policies that protect individuals from religion-based harm, such as child marriage or conversion therapy. Generally, these states allow few religious exemptions or special privileges for religion.

2. **Basic Separation of Religion and Government**. States in this category have constitutional provisions which protect religious equality by ensuring the separation of religion and government, but few additional laws to protect individuals from religion-based harm. These states also usually have some religious exemptions or special privileges for religion.

3. **Religious Exemptions that Undermine Equality**. States in this category have several laws which establish religious exemptions or special privileges for religion

"All of these are important issues, but we must concentrate on a few to begin to make progress in the overall goal of a truly secular society, with religious freedom for all, not only a preferred group. Prevent public funding of religious schools, military chaplains, congressional preachers, prayer breakfasts, national 'Day of Prayer' and similar are equally objectionable to nonreligious or non-favored group religious members. Get churches and religions out of politics for the good of both."

—Female, Maryland

Using Data to Support Advocacy

Successful advocacy for any policy or population requires the use of data to inform policymakers and stakeholders and to demonstrate the need for the policy change. Too often, however, well-meaning advocates use data in ways that are misleading or that unintentionally harm, rather than support, advocacy efforts. Therefore, we hope to provide some guidance to advocates seeking to use the statistics and data in this report to support their efforts.

First, because the data in this report was gathered as part of a convenience sample, it is not generalizable to the entire nonreligious population of the United States. Therefore, the statistics and information provided in this report apply to the sample of nearly 34,000 survey participants, not all nonreligious people. For example, although 23% of participants in our sample identified as LGBTQ, **it is not accurate** to say that 23% of nonreligious people in the U.S. identify as LGBTQ. Nor can the data be used to make direct comparisons to data about other communities gathered in different ways. For example, although 17.2% of participants in this survey are likely to be depressed, and federal surveys found that 7.1% of U.S. adults experienced depression at least once within the past year, **it is not accurate** to say that nonreligious people are twice as likely to be depressed as the general population.

At the same time, the size of the sample may be helpful to include because it shows that the data provided is not from a small, hand-picked sample, but instead from a very large survey of nonreligious communities. For example, it would be appropriate to say: "A national survey of nearly 34,000 nonreligious people found that the majority (51.9%) identified maintaining secular public schools as their key policy priority," and cite to the report. The data can also be used to support comparisons within the sample. For example, this report could be cited to say: "A national survey of nonreligious people found that Black participants were three times as likely as others to be physically assaulted because of their nonreligious identity."

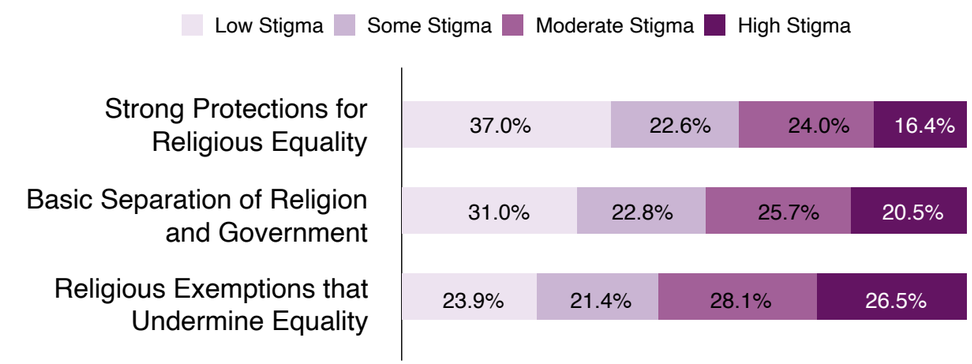
When using data to support advocacy, it is important to use it sparingly and when there is a clear relation between the data and your advocacy goals. Generally, it can be better to use individual examples to explain the need for policy change, and then use data to provide a broader context. Moreover, local data is often more persuasive than national data. While the majority of data in this report applies to nonreligious people across the U.S., the data about heightened risk for stigma and discrimination against nonreligious people in very religious communities provides additional context for highly religious states such as Mississippi and Utah.

and provide few protections for the separation of religion and government. Some of these states have passed laws to promote false Christian nationalist narratives, allow religious exemptions to civil rights protections, and enshrine particular religious views into the law.

Figure 37 provides an analysis of the stigma that participants reported (see sidebar, page 28) by state law classification, showing that participants in states with stronger protections were less likely to experience High levels of stigmatization.

Moreover, none of the states with Strong Protections for Religious Equality were rated as having High stigmatization, while nearly half (42.9%) of the states with Religious Exemptions that Undermine Equality were rated as having High stigmatization (see Figure 16).

State Protections for Religious Equality and Stigma FIGURE 37



"There are several volunteer organizations locally that work on issues I am very committed to (e.g. equality in housing). However, because they frequently use faith-based terminology, or start talking about faith-based initiatives, I feel isolated and unable to fully participate in the advocacy work. Also, many organizations meet in local churches which makes me somewhat uncomfortable, even though I know it is frequently done because of a lack of other places to meet."

—Female, Missouri

"I do wish there was more of an atheist presence in elected officials. I often feel not represented politically which makes the thought of voting uncomfortable for me. The more religious people we vote in, the more discrimination against nonbelievers will continue/not change."

—Female, Florida

At both the national and local level, Secular Movement organizations seek to engage nonreligious people to organize strong nonreligious communities and to build political power. While voting trends have been extensively studied among religiously unaffiliated people, it is unclear how this research pertains to nonreligious people. This section examines how nonreligious people engage politically through voting and also how they interact with Secular Movement organizations, both nationally and at the local level.

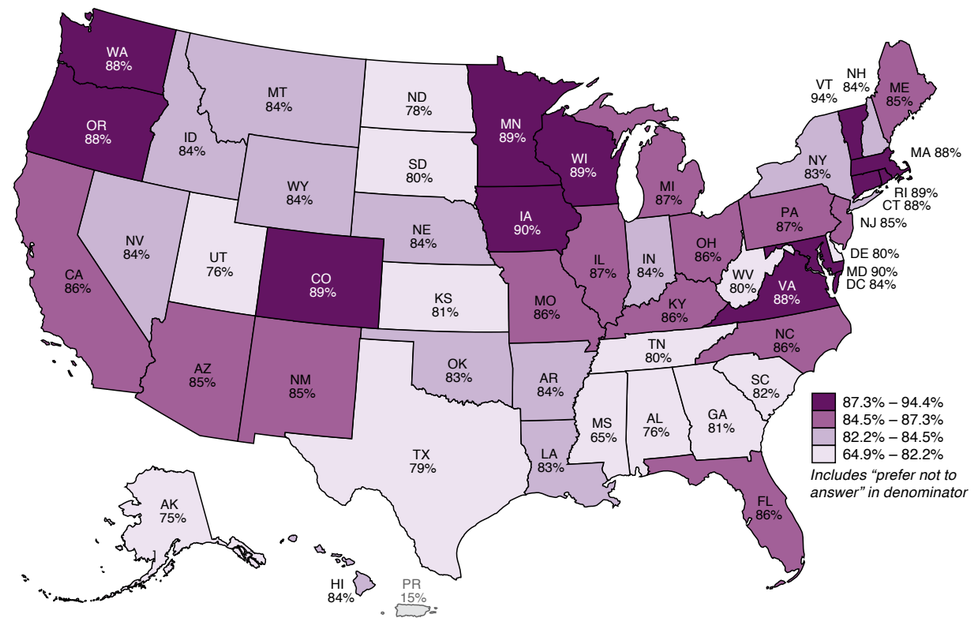
It is our hope that this data will enable both national and local organizations to better engage with nonreligious people to build thriving, inclusive communities that broadly meet their needs. As this report shows, because of the discrimination and stigma that nonreligious people too frequently face, they can have worse psychological outcomes than the general population. However, our data also shows that participation in Secular Movement organizations, both at the local and national level, can positively impact the psychological outcome and general well-being of nonreligious people.

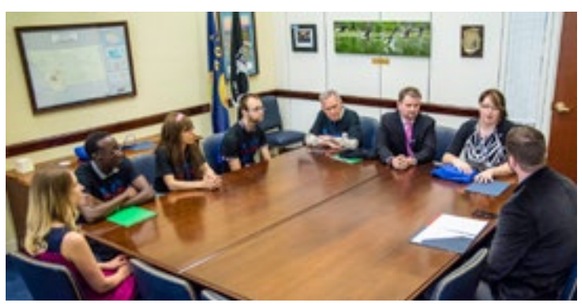
Political Engagement

To better gauge the level of civic participation among nonreligious persons in the United States, survey participants were asked about their participation in the 2016 presidential election, their voting frequency, and their voter registration status. Nearly all participants who answered the question reported that they were registered to vote (94.7%), 87.0% voted in 2016, and nearly as many (86.5%) reported that they always or nearly always vote.

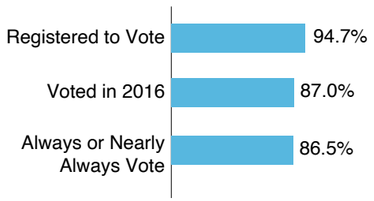
Although not directly comparable, these rates are much higher than the voting rate in 2016 (55.7%) for members of the general voting age population (FEC, 2017). While research by Pew Research Center indicates that religiously unaffiliated people or "Nones" are less likely to vote than religiously affiliated people, it is important to understand that this category is broad and that it includes both nonreligious and religious people (2015). This research indicates that in 2015, 22.8% of the population was religiously unaffiliated, but, according to another study, they constituted only 15% of the 2016 presidential vote (Martinez & Smith, 2016).

Percent Voting in the 2016 Election by State FIGURE 38





Political Engagement of Nonreligious People FIGURE 39



"I hate having to enter a church to exercise my voting rights."

—Female, Kansas

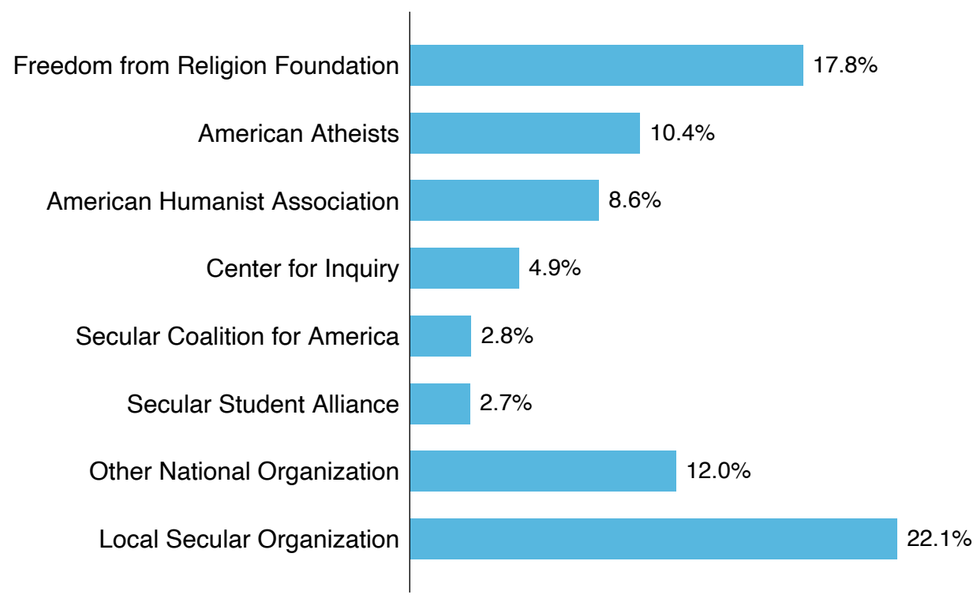
"The one thing I believe atheists need is more community; one thing that makes religion successful is the sense of community they foster, and this community feeling is lacking for us. We don't have a gathering place to join together and be part of a larger group. At least not in my area. Sometimes it feels very isolating."

—Female, Colorado

Involvement with Secular Organizations

Survey participants were asked about their membership in national and local organizations representing nonreligious people and their participation in organized secularism. While nearly two thirds (66.1%) of survey participants were not members of any organization, a significant number of survey participants reported membership in the Freedom From Religion Foundation (17.8%), American Atheists (10.4%), American Humanist Association (8.6%), Center for Inquiry (4.9%), Secular Coalition for America (2.8%), or Secular Student Alliance (2.7%). More than one in ten (12.0%) were members of another national secular or nonreligious organization. More than one in five (22.1%) survey participants were members of a local organization for atheists, humanists, freethinkers, skeptics, or nonreligious people in their area.

Membership in Secular Organizations FIGURE 40

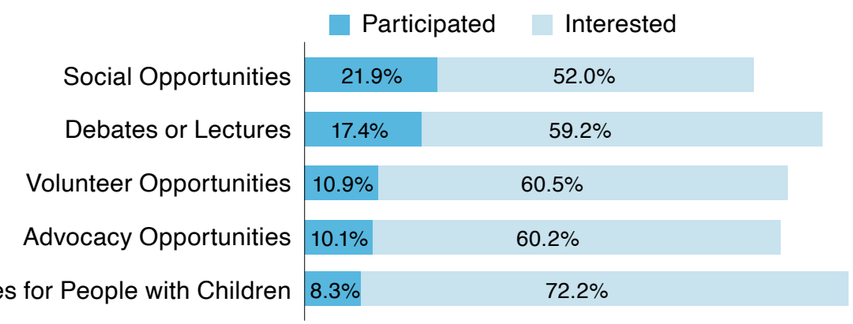


Survey participants were asked if they had participated in any events or services frequently offered by local secular organizations within the last year, and if not, whether they were interested in such events or services. More than one-fifth (21.9%) of survey participants have attended an in-person social event for nonreligious people in their area. Fewer survey participants attended debates or lectures by secular leaders or issue experts (17.4%), participated in local volunteer opportunities for nonreligious people (10.9%), or were involved in advocacy for secular issues (10.1%).

"I'm legally blind, going deaf, terminally ill, and in a powered wheelchair. I NEVER hear of any atheist programs for disabled/handicap, or even mention of how the handicap/disabled are more often, dangerously trapped in forced religious situations."

—Female, Arizona

Engagement with Local Secular Activities FIGURE 41



Of those who hadn't participated in a particular activity in the past three years, about three fifths of survey participants expressed interest in volunteer opportunities for local nonreligious people (64.0%), opportunities to be involved in advocacy for secular issues (63.2%), attending debates or lectures by secular leaders or issue experts (69.4%), and in attending in-person social opportunities for nonreligious people in their area (65.0%). Note that these percentages differ from those in Figure 41 because they take into account individuals who have already participated in these activities.

Among participants who have children under age 18, 8.3% reported that they benefited from resources for

"I just wish more Black Americans who are nonreligious would speak out and create a network for people like me to get together. I love being the catalyst of change but I am alone in my fight and I don't know how much more fight I have in me to live."

—Female, Nevada

"Joining an atheist/humanist meetup group helped me have the courage to 'come out' with my secular beliefs. Prior to having a social group, I felt alone without a way to overcome judgement from religious family members. I learned that being "out" is freeing for me, but also helps other people know it's okay."

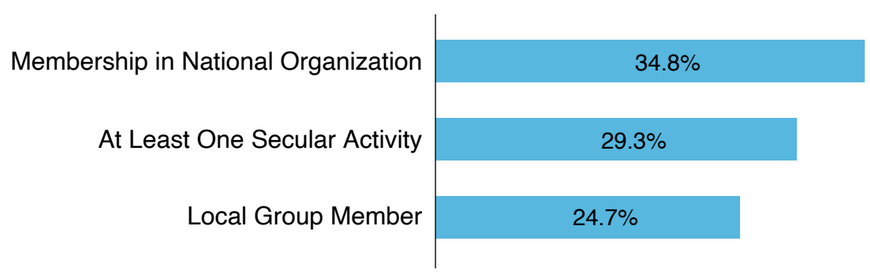
—Female, Kentucky

people with children who are nonreligious. Participants with children expressed a high level of interest (72.2%) in additional nonreligious resources for children.

Engagement with organized secularism was found to be an important protective factor that reduced loneliness and risk for depression among nonreligious people. This accords with other research on nonreligious people engaging with local secular organizations (Galen et al., 2015). Those who were members of at least one national secular organization, were local group members, or took part in at least one local activity for nonreligious people were less likely to have depression, with membership in a national secular organization having the largest protective effect. Members of these organizations were over one third (34.8%) *less likely than nonmembers* to be at risk for depression; that is to say, 13.4% those who were members of a national secular organization were likely depressed, compared to 19.2% of those who were not.

Protective Effect of Involvement with Organized Secularism FIGURE 42

Percent reduction in likely depression, compared to nonmembers/nonparticipants



"I live in Texas—it's generally assumed that a person is church-going. However, I have been part of the atheist community here for a decade and most of the people I socialize with are atheists, so I am a little bit insulated from the discrimination."

—TGNC, Texas

"I do feel like there is a lack of secular volunteer opportunities in my current community."

—Female, Maryland

"Growing up, I was never religious, but I struggled for years with depression and a feeling of needing a way to 'connect.' I had read that having spiritual beliefs was necessary for one's mental health, and it distressed me to know that I did not and could not believe in anything 'spiritual.' Finally, I got involved with the skeptic movement and with my local Humanist group, and I realized that the connection I needed was with people who felt like I did."

—Female, Michigan

METHODS

The 2019 U.S. Secular Survey was designed after a series of focus groups with 89 nonreligious people who attended the American Atheists National Conference in April of 2019. The survey was available in English and Spanish and was distributed online using the Qualtrics platform from October 15, 2019, to November 2, 2019. The survey was advertised to people who self-identify as secular or nonreligious, who are age 18 or older, and who live in any of the states or territories of the United States. Qualitative narratives were also collected at the conclusion of the survey, and while they were not analyzed for this report, select quotes were included to help provide context.

In order to be included in the final dataset used for this report, respondents had to (at minimum) consent, enter a valid age (18 or older), identity to at least some extent with at least one secular or nonreligious identity, and enter a valid state or territory. Responses to questions from incomplete surveys were included in analyses of questions with a complete response. Respondents were directed only to those questions that applied to them; for example, only those who were currently or had at some time been employed were asked about negative events that occurred during the last three years in employment settings.

The race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation questions were all structured so that respondents could select all the options that apply to them. Only 53 respondents, or less than 1 percent of the sample, took the survey in Spanish.

The survey was analyzed in Stata, a statistical program. All differences commented upon are statistically significant at the .05 level (or less). The phrases "more than" or "higher than" (as in "Participants from very religious communities scored on average 26.1% higher on the microaggressions scale than those from other areas") refer to the quotient of the absolute scores (in this case, 2.53, the score for those in very religious areas, divided by 2.00, the score of those in other areas minus one or 2.53/2.00-1 =1.26-1 = .261 or 26.1%). The phrase "more likely than" refers to the difference in the odds of a certain outcome, like depression, given certain circumstances. For example, the report might say that "participants from very religious areas were 29.0% more likely to report depression than those from other areas" when the odds of reporting depression from very religious areas are 0.53: 1 and from other areas are 0.41: 1, meaning the odds ratio is (.53/1)/(.41/1) = 1.29, properly phrased as "129% as likely" or "29% more likely."

It is the intention of American Atheists and the survey design and data analysis consultants that survey data will be made available at a later date to interested, qualified researchers and organizational partners requesting it for secondary analysis.

Analysis of Concealment and Disclosure

Survey items concerning concealment and disclosure of the participants' nonreligious identity were adapted from the Nebraska Outness Scale (NOS) (Meidlinger & Hope, 2014), a 10-item measure that includes a concealment (NOS-C) and disclosure (NOS-D) subscale. The NOS-C scale measured concealment by asking the proportion of time around a group an individual avoids indicating their sexual orientation. In the U.S. Secular Survey, however, concealment was assessed by asking how often a survey participant avoids talking about topics related to or otherwise indicating their secular or nonreligious identity in their interactions with different groups. Similarly, the NOS-D scale measured disclosure by asking the participants how many people within a group they think were aware of their sexual orientation, which was adapted to instead ask about awareness of secular or nonreligious identities. Each of the subscales ask these questions across six different groups that we interact with: immediate family, extended family, friends, people at work, people at school, and strangers. A 5-point scale was then created by calculating the mean of the constituent groups. This scale was used to examine the average concealment and disclosure across different groups within our sample, with higher scores (highest 5) indicating greater concealment and disclosure.

Analysis of Exposure to Stigmatization and Microaggressions

For a description of the survey items used to assess exposure to microaggressions and stigmatization, see page 28. In addition to examining individual items, a scale was created by taking the average of the items adapted from the Measure of Atheist Discrimination Experiences (MADE) (Brewster et al., 2016), with the exception of the item "I have been bothered by religious symbols or text in public places," which was added as a result of focus group findings. This was done after testing the reliability of the items adapted from the MADE; the scale performed well, with a Chronbach's alpha of 0.88 with all items included. The scale was also scored 1-5. Figure 15 reports the findings for individual items and the scale mean (2.16) and median (2). Next, two four-point scores were created to assist with analyzing state-level outcomes. States were assigned to quartiles (low, some, medium, high levels of stigma) corresponding to the median scale score for the state, with each quartile containing approximately 25% of the states (see Figure 16). Survey participants were assigned to quartiles based on whether the participant's scale score reflects low (1.00-1.50), some (1.51-2.00), moderate (2.01-2.75), or high experiences of stigma (2.76-5.00), with each quartile containing approximately 25% of participants.

Analysis of Likely Depression

The Patient Health Questionnaire, or PHQ, is comprised of two screening tools used to test for preventive depression (Spitzer et al., 1999). The PHQ-2 is often used as a "first-step" approach for screening for depression and is routinely administered before the PHQ-9. The PHQ-2 includes the first two items that appear on the PHQ-9, and it questions an individual about the frequency with which they experienced a depressed mood or anhedonia over the span of two weeks prior. More specifically, the PHQ-2 asks: "Over the past two weeks, how often have you been bothered by any of the following problems 1) Little interest or pleasure in doing things and 2) Feeling down, depressed, or hopeless?" For each of two items, the response options are: "Not at all," "Several days," "More than half the days," and "Nearly every day." They are respectively scored as 0, 1, 2, and 3, and therefore, an individual can score between 0 and 6. A score of 3 or greater indicates that a major depressive disorder is likely and further assessment with the PHQ-9 is recommended.

Analysis of Loneliness

In order to examine the strength of social relationships, participants were asked three questions to determine the likelihood that they were lonely. Heralded as one of the most widely used measures of loneliness, the UCLA Loneliness Scale (Russell et al., 1980) is a 20-item scale designed to measure an individual's subjective feelings of loneliness and social isolation. However, a three-item loneliness scale was developed from the revised UCLA loneliness scale to provide a quick way to collect information on the degree to which an individual feels socially isolated (Hughes et al., 2004). In the 2019 U.S. Secular Survey, participants were asked the frequency to which they feel 1) the lack of companionship, 2) left out, and 3) isolated from others. Participants were provided with three response choices which were coded 1 (hardly ever), 2 (some of the time), and 3 (often). Loneliness was determined by summing each of the three responses, with higher scores indicating greater feelings of loneliness.

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OUR ORGANIZATIONS

American Atheists is a national civil rights organization that works to achieve religious equality for all Americans by protecting what Thomas Jefferson called the "wall of separation" between government and religion created by the First Amendment. We strive to create an environment where atheism and atheists are accepted as members of our nation's communities and where casual bigotry against our community is seen as abhorrent and unacceptable. We promote understanding of atheists through education, outreach, and community-building and work to end the stigma associated with being an atheist in America. To find out more about American Atheists and our work, please visit www.atheists.org.

Strength in Numbers Consulting Group is a progressive research, evaluation, and strategy firm. Incorporated in 2010, SiNCG offers nonprofit, government, and philanthropic clients high quality data and analysis using substantive input from the most affected communities. SiNCG focuses on marginalized and stigmatized groups in the United States and in international contexts. Please visit strengthinnumbersconsulting.com.

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REALITY CHECK

Being Nonreligious in America