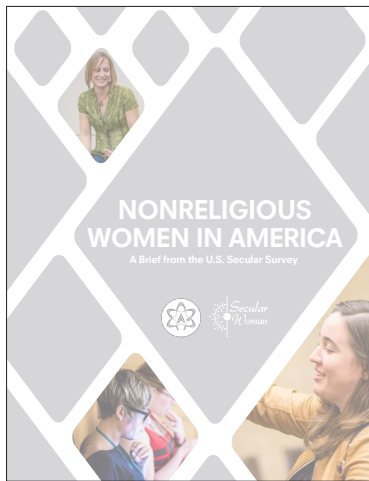




NONRELIGIOUS WOMEN IN AMERICA

A Brief from the U.S. Secular Survey





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INTRODUCTION

The U.S. Secular Survey was a groundbreaking 2019 survey of nearly 34,000 nonreligious people living in the United States. Of these participants, 13,522 identified as women, comprising 40.3% of the sample. Our previous *Reality Check: Being Nonreligious in America* report provided an overview of the data gathered through the U.S. Secular Survey, focusing on the lives and experiences of nonreligious people including atheists, agnostics, humanists, freethinkers, skeptics, and others. This brief will more closely focus on nonreligious women, a group that is often dismissed and faces stereotypes and marginalization, both within nonreligious communities and more broadly in our society. In addition to presenting data about this population, we will provide recommendations for secular organizations that seek to more fully engage with and support nonreligious women.

Data about nonreligious people is very limited, and there is even less information available about subpopulations such as nonreligious women. However, other large surveys of nonreligious populations have highlighted challenges facing nonreligious women within the secular movement (American Secular Census, 2013). National population surveys have found that 32% of atheists and 38% of agnostics identify as women, and among the broader religiously unaffiliated population, 43% identify as women (Pew Research Center, 2015a). Although the U.S. Secular Survey was not a representative survey, the higher percentage of nonreligious women participants in comparison to the available population data may in part result from the fact that the survey allowed participants to identify with nonreligious labels beyond just “atheist” and “agnostic.” For example, in our sample, 17.1% of nonreligious women identified primarily as “humanists.”

There is research suggesting that women who do not believe in a god are less likely than others to identify as an “atheist.” One study found that more than half (55.7%) of individuals who do not believe in a god identified as an atheist, but significantly more men used this label than women (59.4% vs. 49.0%) (Scheitle, et al., 2019). This is likely because women face a higher social cost for adopting a stigmatized label like “atheist.” While anyone who identifies




as nonreligious may encounter discrimination and stigma as a result, it may be more socially risky for women to do so because they are more harshly judged and, because they face gender-based oppression, have fewer resources to counter stigma (Edgell, et al., 2017). Stereotypes about atheists reflect perceptions about masculinity, meaning that there is a greater cost for nonreligious women, who are perceived as violating gender norms (Schnable, et al., 2016). As one researcher explained, “men do not face the risk of seeming less masculine by embracing what is portrayed as an emotionless, scientific, masculine belief” (Miller, 2013).

Our data reflects this increased social risk. Women were more likely to encounter discrimination in nearly every area of their lives because of their nonreligious identity than other participants. The difference in the rate of identification with nonreligious labels may result both from this greater social stigmatization and gendered coping strategies. For example, one study found that nonreligious women who experienced discrimination were more likely to identify as spiritual and men who experienced discrimination were more likely to identify as atheist (Edgell, et al., 2017).

The gender gap in identification with nonreligious labels also results from the fact that nonreligious communities are disproportionately male. More than two thirds (68%) of atheists in the U.S. are men (Pew Research Center, 2015b). Consequently, nonreligious women are less likely to have women friends who identify as atheists, which is an important factor when it comes to adopting this stigmatized label (Scheitle, et al., 2019). While nonreligious women in our sample were more likely than other participants to belong to local secular organizations, these organizations tend to be dominated by men (Miller, 2013). As reflected in our research, this gender gap likely has a significant impact on the dynamics of such organizations.

Prior to creating the U.S. Secular Survey, our researchers conducted focus groups with nonreligious people in order to better understand their lives, needs, priorities, and challenges (Strength in Numbers Consulting Group, 2019). Gender dynamics were highly visible in the focus groups in several ways. Men interrupted women far more than the opposite. Even without a formal count of





interruptions, all team members who conducted or took notes in focus groups estimated that women were far more likely to make space for others to talk and to “back down” rather than continue speaking when they were interrupted. Notably, in women-only focus groups, this gendered dynamic was absent. Women focus group participants also tended to discuss different issues than men. For example, they were more likely to show concern for the effects of anti-atheist stigma on their families.

With a deeper understanding of both the barriers that prevent women from being active in nonreligious communities and the unique challenges they face as nonreligious people, secular organizations will be better positioned to create a welcoming environment for nonreligious women. However, this is just the first step. Such understanding will need to be paired with a commitment to confronting sexism and to engagement with intersectional issues that most impact nonreligious women. And we must recognize that in order to increase diversity and outreach to nonreligious women, our groups, and the secular movement as a whole, must be willing to accept change.

Gender and the U.S. Secular Survey

This brief provides an analysis of data related to nonreligious women who participated in the U.S. Secular Survey. To be inclusive, U.S. Secular Survey participants were asked “How do you describe your current gender identity? Please check all those terms that apply to you.” Survey participants were provided a list of four terms that included Male, Female, Transgender, and Gender nonconforming, nonbinary or genderfluid, with the option to not answer. While the participants that are the focus of this brief identified as female (100%), a small percentage identified as one or more other gender identities including male (0.1%), transgender (1.0%), and gender nonconforming, nonbinary or genderfluid (1.3%). Throughout this report, we will refer to these participants as *nonreligious women*.

For a comprehensive description of the survey methodology and analysis, please see *Reality Check: Being Nonreligious in America*, available at www.secularsurvey.org.

ABOUT THE SAMPLE

By the Numbers



Nonreligious women participated in the U.S. Secular Survey, **39.9%** of the total 33,897 participants



One half of women surveyed identified primarily as atheists

Identified primarily as humanists



One third of women surveyed live with children, compared to one quarter (25.3%) of other participants



One fifth were attending school or had children attending school



Two thirds of women surveyed were employed

One half employed full-time

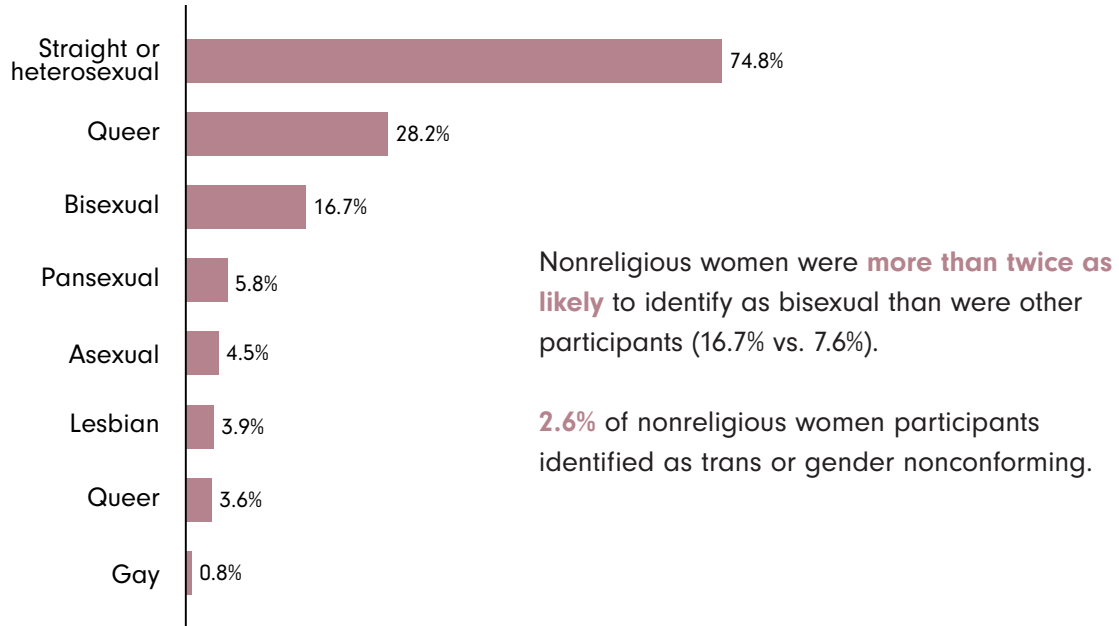
Employed part-time

| Race/Ethnicity | Number of Participants | Percent |
|--|------------------------|---------|
| African American, Black | 372 | 2.8% |
| Hispanic, Latino, Latina, Spanish | 756 | 5.7% |
| Caribbean | 76 | 0.6% |
| Asian, Asian American or Pacific Islander | 270 | 2.0% |
| Native American, American Indian, Alaskan Native | 261 | 2.0% |
| Middle Eastern, Arab American | 72 | 0.5% |
| White | 12,366 | 93.3% |
| Biracial or Multiracial | 772 | 5.8% |

Sex, Gender, and Sexuality

Sexual Orientation

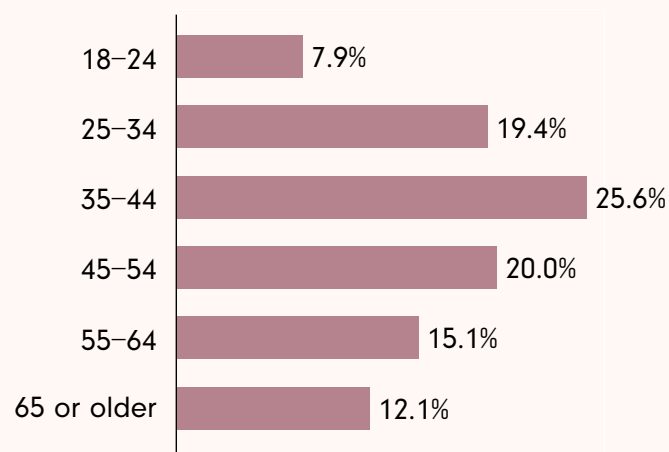
FIGURE 1



Age

Age Distribution

FIGURE 2

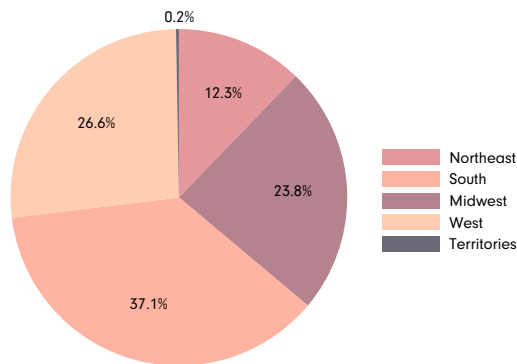


Two thirds (65.0%) of nonreligious women surveyed were ages 25-54.

Community and Religiosity

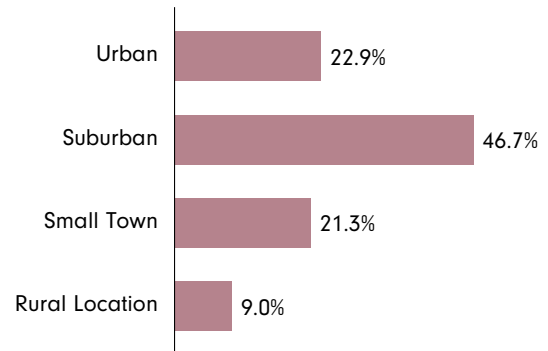
Census Region

FIGURE 3



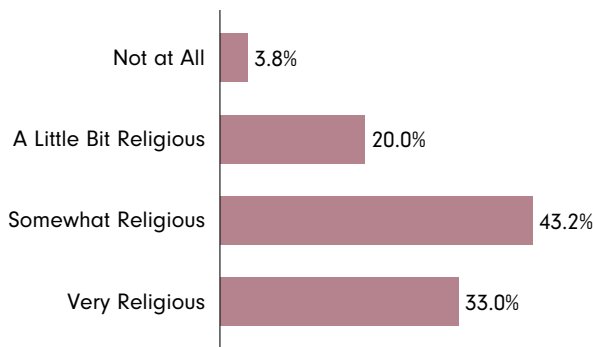
Community Type

FIGURE 4



Community Religiosity

FIGURE 5



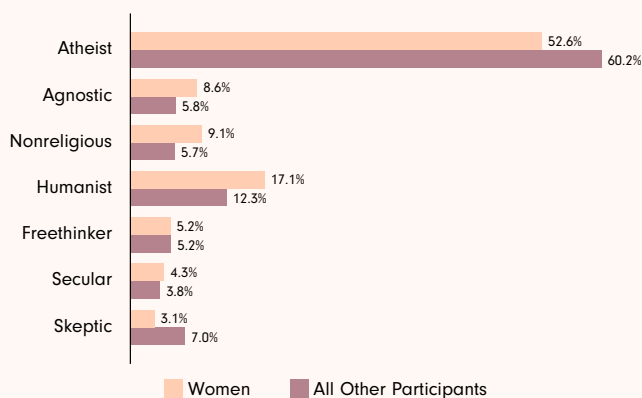
More than one third (37.1%) of nonreligious women resided in the South. Nearly half (46.7%) of nonreligious women surveyed resided in suburban communities.

One third (33.0%) of nonreligious women surveyed resided in very religious communities, compared to 27.8% of other participants.

Nonreligious Identity

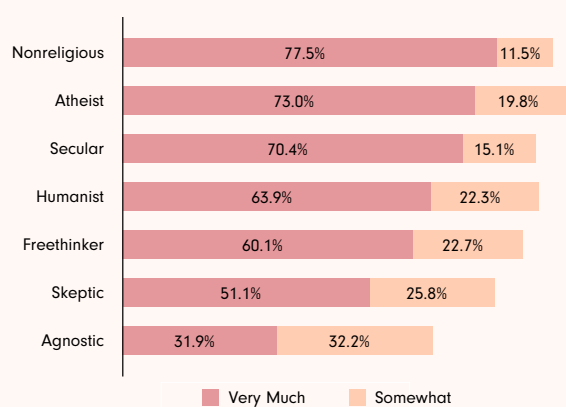
Primary Nonreligious Identification

FIGURE 6



Identification with Nonreligious Identities

FIGURE 7



Nonreligious women were more likely to primarily identify as humanist (17.1% vs. 12.3%) and less likely to primarily identify as atheist (52.6% vs. 60.2%) than other participants.

BEING A NONRELIGIOUS WOMAN IN AMERICA

Religious Upbringing & Family Rejection

As with other participants, the **vast majority** of nonreligious women surveyed were raised in the Christian religion, either in Protestant (53.2%) or Catholic (29.1%) households (Figure 8). **One in six (16.5%)** women surveyed were raised in nonreligious households. More than **two fifths (41.3%)** of women participants reported having somewhat firm or very strict expectations while growing up (Figure 9).

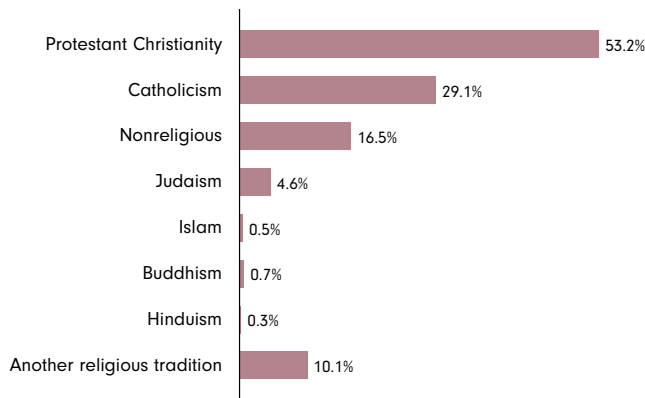
Nonreligious women who had very strict religious expectations growing up were **11.8% more** lonely than those who had no religious expectations at all (5.62 vs. 5.03, scale 3-9). Focus groups conducted with female participants provided insight into their experience developing and coming to terms with their

nonreligious beliefs. Many described having negative experiences with religion or negative experiences around the health or death of a loved one. They explained that these events made them question the existence of a god. However, this experience was not universal; others described their nonreligious journey as questioning what they had previously been taught about religion.

Like other participants, the nonreligious women surveyed had striking rates of family rejection, which can result in significant negative psychological outcomes. Among women 25 or older, **more than two fifths (43.4%)** reported that their parents or guardians were not aware of their nonreligious beliefs before age 25. Many actively concealed their nonreligious beliefs from their families (see Concealment below), while others had not yet realized their nonreligious beliefs. Among women participants whose parents were aware of their nonreligious beliefs, **one in five (20.1%)** had very unsupportive parents or guardians (Figure 10). Women with very unsupportive parents were **79.9% more likely** than those with very supportive parents to screen positive for depression, and they scored

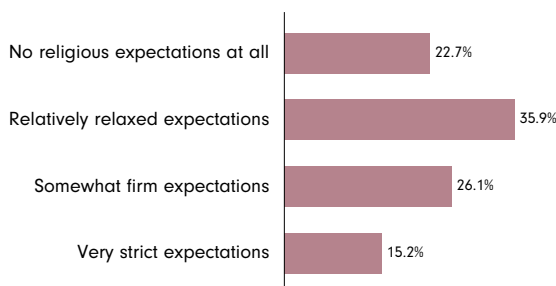
Religious Upbringing

FIGURE 8



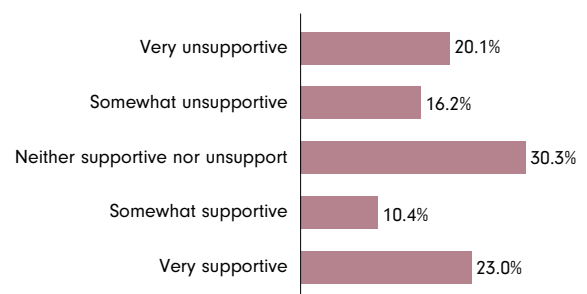
Religious Expectations Growing Up

FIGURE 9



Level of Family Support Before Age 25

FIGURE 10



17.0% higher in loneliness. Conversely, women whose parents were somewhat or very supportive were **7.0% less** lonely than those whose parents were somewhat or very unsupportive of or neutral toward their secular beliefs.

Furthermore, nearly **three fifths (57.9%)** of women reported negative experiences due to their nonreligious identity with their families, compared to 52.2% of other participants. Women who experienced a negative event in their family because of their beliefs were **83.5% more likely** to screen positive for depression than those who didn't.

Black women and women living in very religious communities were significantly more likely to have negative experiences with their families due to their beliefs. As explored in greater detail in our Black Nonreligious Americans brief, Black women are often stereotyped as religious, and nonreligious Black women may face additional stigma from their community. **Two thirds (67.6%)** of Black nonreligious women reported negative experiences with their families in comparison to other women (57.7%). Among women living in very religious communities, **two thirds (67.1%)** reported negative experiences with their family. Black women living in very religious communities had among the highest rate, with **more than four fifths (81.1%)** participants having negative experiences with their families because of their nonreligious beliefs. Further, Black women who had these experiences had worse psychological outcomes, being **41.5% more likely** to screen positive for depression than other women with negative family experiences.

Assessing Loneliness and Depression in the U.S. Secular Survey

In the U.S. Secular Survey, 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, producing a scale that ranged from 3-9, with higher scores indicating greater feelings of loneliness. Nonreligious women scored **slightly higher** on this measure of loneliness compared to other nonreligious participants surveyed (5.22 vs. 5.07). On average, nonreligious women residing in very religious communities were **16.0% more** lonely than women who reside in not at all religious communities (5.53 vs. 4.77).

The U.S. Secular Survey also included a set of questions to assess the likelihood of depression. To screen the likelihood that survey participants were depressed, they were asked two questions based on the "PHQ-2" assessment (Spitzer et al., 1999), which assesses the frequency of experiencing certain symptoms over the two weeks prior to the survey. 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.' Overall, **one in six (16.7%)** nonreligious women participants were likely to be depressed, which is approximately the same as other survey participants.

For more information about how loneliness and likely depression were assessed, please see the *Reality Check: Being Nonreligious in America* report.

Discrimination & Stigma

In addition to negative experiences with their families, many women participants reported negative experiences and discrimination because of their nonreligious beliefs in various parts of their lives (Figure 11). For example, **one third (33.9%)** of nonreligious women who attend school or who have children attending school reported negative experiences in education because of their nonreligious identity. Similarly, **nearly one quarter (24.5%)** of employed or recently employed women reported negative experiences in employment because of their nonreligious identity.

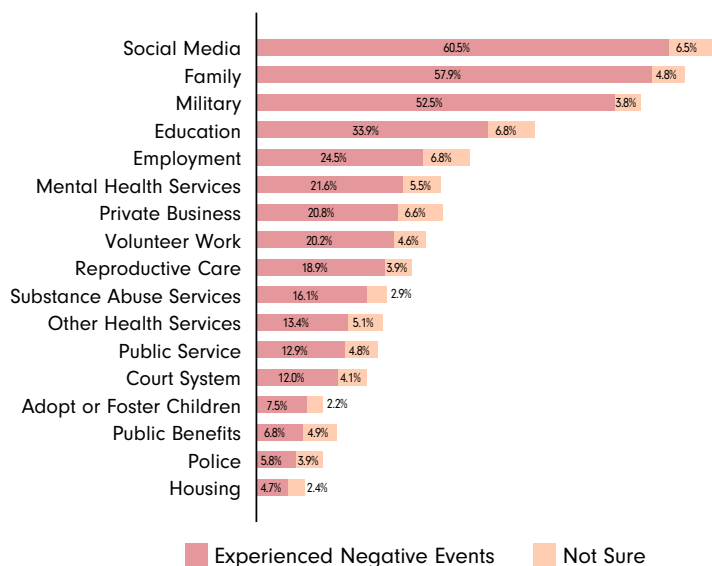
Compared to other participants, women reported more discrimination in nearly every area of their lives (Figure 12). This finding aligns with research showing that nonreligious women experience higher rates of discrimination than nonreligious

“At my last job, I had to pretend to have a religion (ANY religion) or they could fire me. I also had to hide the fact that I’m trans for the same reason, I worked for a Texas state agency. It was a job that almost no one gets fired from, but I had to pretend to be religious and tolerate the constant proselytizing.”

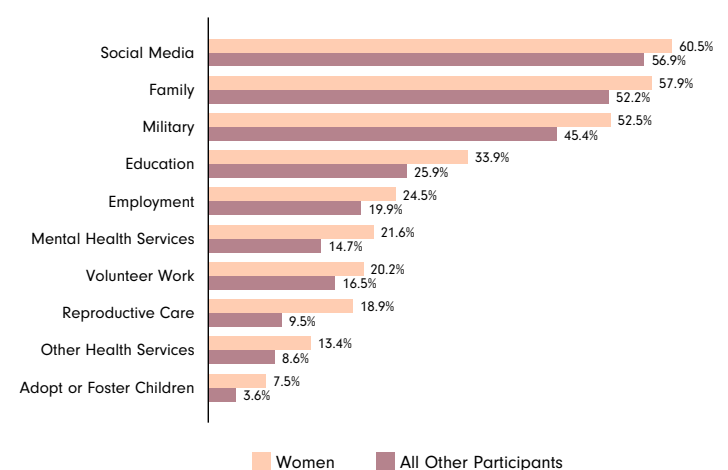
—Female, TGNC, Texas

men (Schutz & Roth, 2015). For example, **more than half (52.5%)** of women surveyed who were servicemembers or veterans reported experiencing negative events in the military, compared to 45.4% of other participants. A **significantly higher** proportion of nonreligious women reported negative experiences in reproductive care (18.9% vs. 9.5%), mental health services (21.6% vs. 14.7%), and other health services (13.4% vs. 8.6%) than other participants.

Negative Experiences and Discrimination FIGURE 11



Differences in Negative Experiences Among Nonreligious Women and Other Participants FIGURE 12

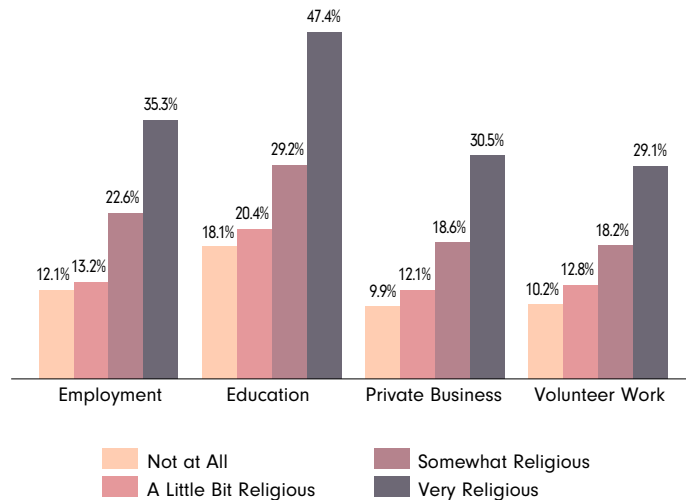


There were also striking regional differences and differences between communities with varying levels of religiosity. For example, **two fifths (39.9%)** of nonreligious women living in the South reported negative experiences in education, compared to those living in the Midwest (34.1%), West (28.1%), and Northeast (24.4%). Similarly, women living in the Northeast reported a **significantly lower** rate of negative events in reproductive care (11.4%) compared to those living in the South (21.5%), Midwest (19.5%), and West (17.9%).

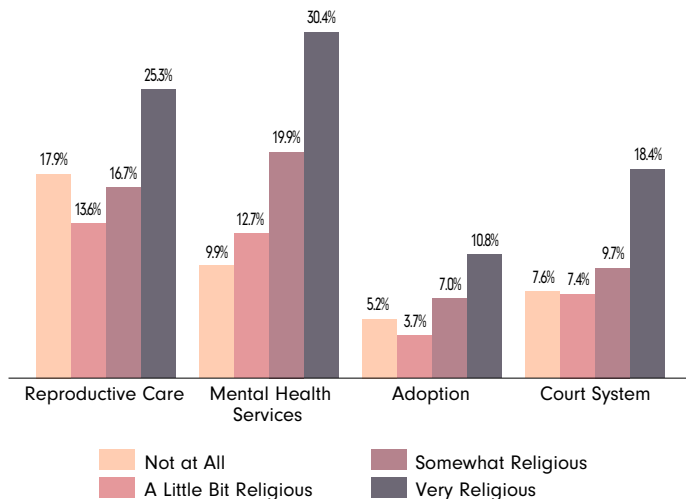
Moreover, women participants living in very religious communities had more negative experiences in nearly every area than those living in less religious communities (Figures 13 and 14). For example, **one quarter (25.3%)** of nonreligious women living in very religious communities had negative experiences in reproductive care compared to less than one sixth (15.8%) in less religious communities. Nonreligious women living in very religious communities were **2.5 times as likely** to have negative experiences in education because of their beliefs than those in less religious communities, and they were **about twice as likely** to have negative experiences in employment, volunteer work, reproductive care, mental health services, adoption or foster care, court systems, or from private businesses as those living in less religious communities.

Our data shows that participants who experienced discrimination because of their nonreligious identity were more likely to screen positive for depression (Figure 15). For example,

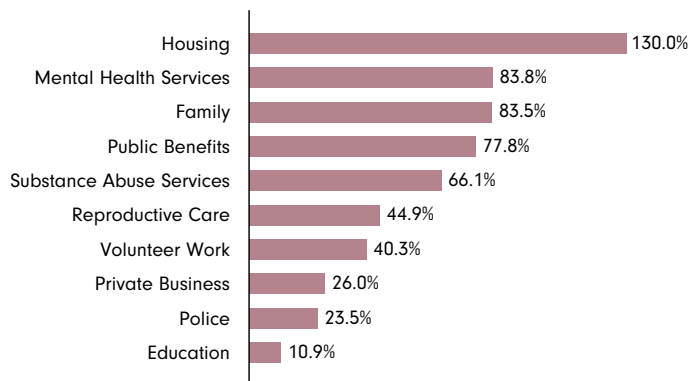
Negative Experiences by Community Religiosity FIGURE 13



Negative Experiences by Community Religiosity FIGURE 14



Increased Odds of Depression Among Those Who Had Stigmatizing Experiences, by Area FIGURE 15



women who had a negative event related to being nonreligious in their family were **83.5% more likely** to experience depression than those who did not have such an experience. Similarly, nonreligious women who had a negative event in reproductive care were **44.9% more likely** to experience depression than those who did not have such an experience.

In addition to incidents of discrimination in various areas of life, nonreligious women encounter widespread stigmatization as a result of their nonreligious identities and beliefs. To measure the level of stigma that they encounter, participants of the U.S. Secular Survey were asked to reflect how often they experienced certain microaggressions in the past year (Figure 16). These questions were

“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.”

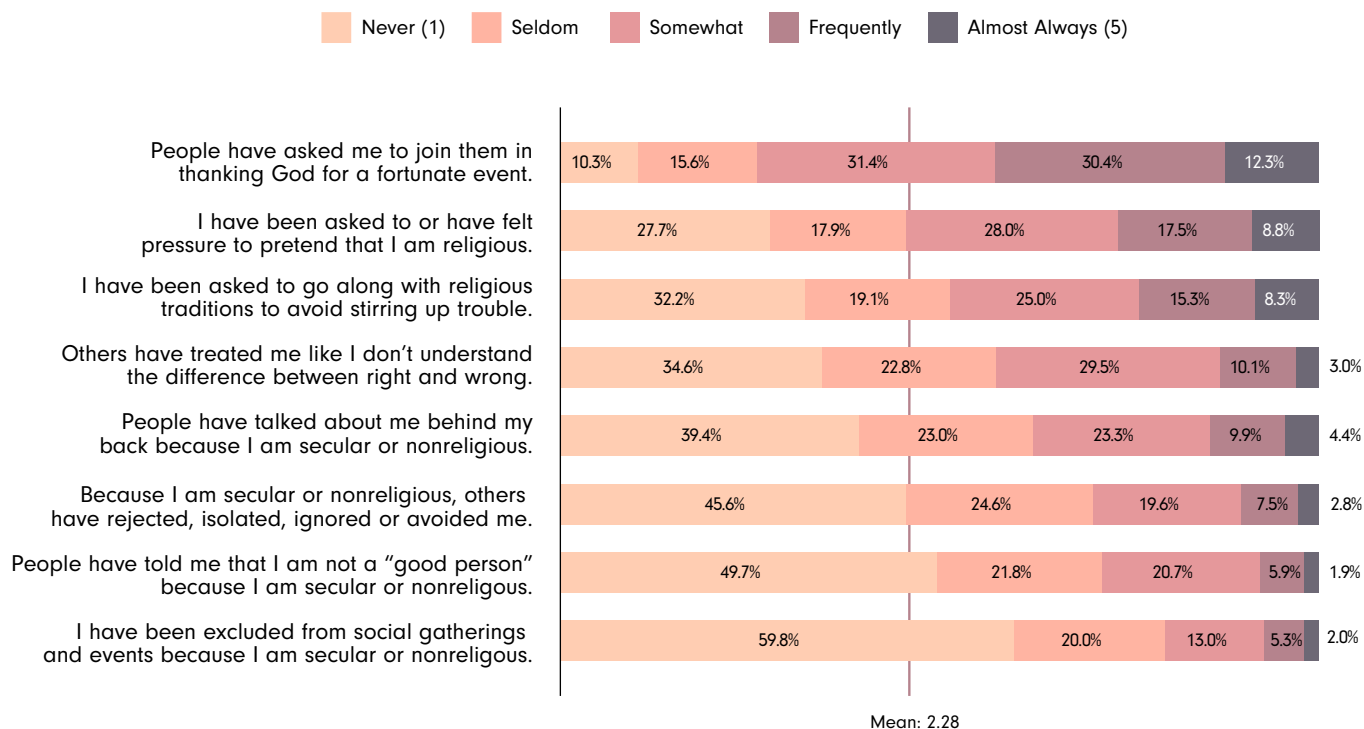
—Female, Arizona

“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

Stigmatizing Experiences

FIGURE 16



used to construct a stigmatization scale with a range of 1 – 5, with 5 representing high levels of stigma, and nonreligious women averaged 2.28. See *Reality Check: Being Nonreligious in America* report for additional detail on the construction of this scale.

Overall, nonreligious women experienced **10.2% higher** levels of stigma compared to other participants. In the year prior to taking the survey, **more than two fifths (42.7%)** of nonreligious women reported that they frequently or almost always were asked to join in thanking God in a fortunate event. **More than one quarter (26.4%)** of women surveyed recalled frequently or almost always being asked to or feeling pressure to pretend that they are religious.

Nonreligious women in the South reported on average **10.3% more** stigma than those from other census regions. Similarly, women living in very religious communities experienced **41.9% more** stigma than those in not at all religious communities. Women with intersectional identities also experienced more stigma. For example, nonreligious women with children experienced **12.8% more** stigma than women without children. Nonreligious lesbian women experienced on average **9.5% more**

“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

“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

“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

stigma than women who did not identify as lesbians.

Higher levels of stigma are associated with “poor mental health, physical illness, academic underachievement, infant mortality, low social status, poverty, and reduced access to housing, education, and jobs” (Major & O’Brien, 2005). We found that stigma was **positively associated** with loneliness so that, on average, nonreligious women who experienced more stigmatization were also more lonely ($\rho = 0.29$).



Concealment

Focus groups were conducted at American Atheists' 2019 annual convention in preparation for the creation of the U.S. Secular Survey (Strength in Numbers Consulting Group, 2019). These groups confirmed that people often conceal their nonreligious identities in different social circumstances. Moreover, during these focus groups, women participants expressed that they concealed their identities due to fear of disclosure to others, fear of stigma and rejection, or actual experiences with stigma and rejection. Some focus group participants shared that they lost contact with individuals to whom they disclosed their nonreligious beliefs.

It is no surprise, then, that women survey participants frequently concealed their nonreligious beliefs in various aspects of their lives (Figure 17). On average, women concealed their nonreligious

"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

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

— Female, California

beliefs **8.3% more** than other participants surveyed (3.00 vs. 2.77, scale 1-5). While **about one third** of both women and other participants mostly or always concealed their nonreligious beliefs from members of their immediate family (33.2% vs. 30.1%), women were **more likely** to mostly or always conceal their beliefs from extended family members (46.9% vs. 40.0%).

Concealment of Nonreligious Identity

FIGURE 17

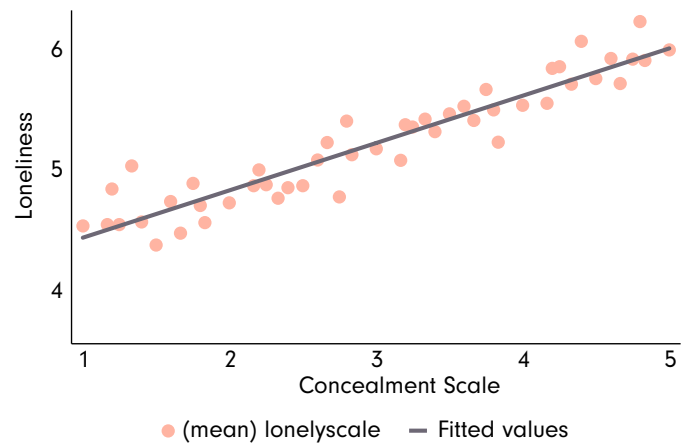


More than one fifth (22.1%) of women reported that they mostly or always conceal their nonreligious beliefs from their friends and acquaintances, compared to 16.9% of other participants. **Nearly half (49.3%)** of women participants mostly or always concealed their beliefs at work, compared to two fifths (41.3%) of other participants.

The prevalence of religiosity in their lives and community significantly impacted how openly women participants expressed their beliefs. Women with very unsupportive parents concealed their nonreligious beliefs **more than one quarter (27.1%) more** on average than those with very supportive parents (3.24 vs. 2.55). Moreover, women residing in very religious communities were **more likely** to conceal their nonreligious beliefs than were those in less religious communities. Average concealment was **more than one quarter (26.1%) higher** in very religious communities compared to not at all religious communities (3.23 vs. 2.57). Concealment was **slightly higher (6.6%)** among women who lived in rural locations in comparison to those in urban locations (3.04 vs. 2.85).

Concealment and Increased Loneliness

FIGURE 18



Research has revealed that concealment can cause 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). Overall, increasing concealment of nonreligious identity was found to positively correlate with increasing loneliness (Figure 18). The data showed that on average, women who “always” conceal their nonreligious identity were **32.0% more** lonely than women who “rarely” do (6.0 vs. 4.5).

“It is really hard for me to find open minded people that are comfortable with me being nonreligious. I have to pretend around many people that I’m religious when I’m not. I get really irritated thinking about it because it feels like I cannot truly be myself around people. I often wonder if I’m ever going to find someone that’s going to like me for me.”

—Female, Georgia

“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.”

—Female, Ohio

MEMBERSHIP IN SECULAR COMMUNITIES

In order to better understand how women interact with nonreligious communities, we asked women participants about their membership in national and local secular organizations as well as their participation in secular activities with those organizations. **One third (33.3%)** of women participants were members of a national secular organization. In comparison to other participants, women were more likely to be members of a local organization, with **one quarter (25.0%)** of nonreligious women being members of a local secular organization compared to one fifth (20.1%) of other participants. Women with children were **slightly more likely** to be members of a local secular organization than women without children (27.0% vs. 24.0%).

The religiosity of their community played a role in how likely women participants were to engage with secular organizations. Nonreligious women residing in very religious communities were only **slightly more likely** to be members of national

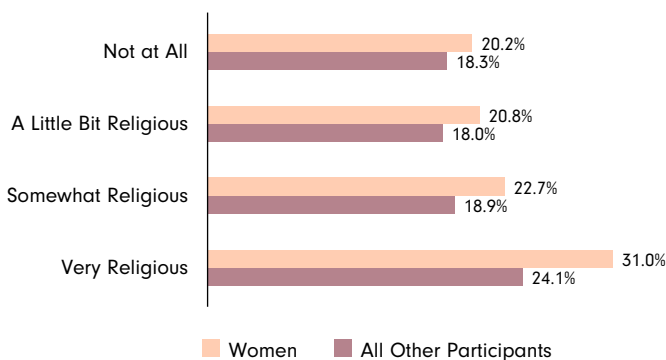
“Growing up, I was never religious, but I struggled for years with depression and a feeling of needing a way to ‘connect.’ I had read that having spiritual beliefs was necessary for one’s mental health, and it distressed me to know that I did not and could not believe in anything ‘spiritual.’ Finally, 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

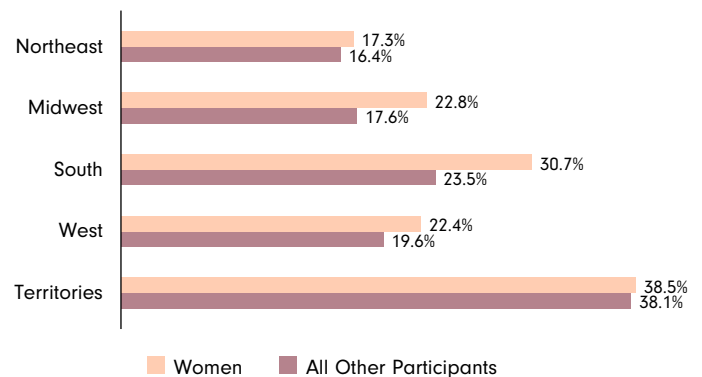
organizations (35.0%), compared to those living in less religious communities (32.4%). Strikingly, however, women living in very religious communities were **more than 1.5 times as likely** to be members of local organizations (31.0%), compared to those living in less religious communities (22.0%). Moreover, **nearly one third (30.7%)** of women from the South were members of local organizations in comparison to 22.8%, 22.4%, and 17.3% of women participants residing in the Midwest, West, and

Local Group Membership by Community Religiosity

FIGURE 19



Local Group Membership by Census Region FIGURE 20



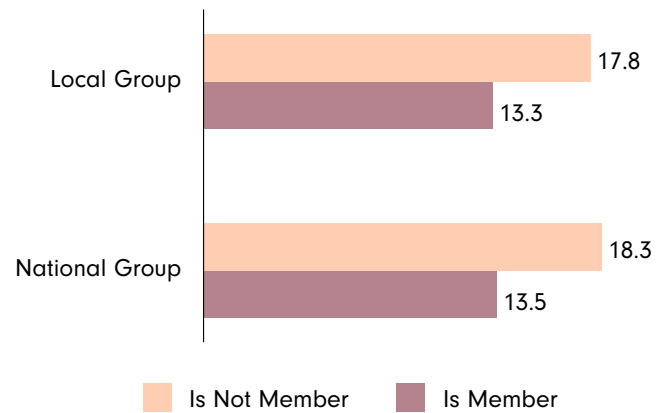
Northeast, respectively (Figure 20).

Membership in national or local secular organizations was found to be an important protective factor. Women who were members of either a national or local secular organization were **significantly less likely** to be depressed (Figure 21). Members of national organizations were **30.5% less likely** than nonmembers to be at risk for depression, and women who were members of local organizations were **29.0% less likely** to be at risk for depression. Also, women participants who were members of a national secular organization were on average **5.6% less** lonely than women who were not members (5.02 vs. 5.32).

Survey participants were also asked if they had participated in any events or services frequently offered by local secular organizations within the last three years, and if not, whether they were interested in such events or services (Figure 22). Overall, the activities and interests of women differed slightly from others surveyed, as they **were slightly more**

Reduced Likely Depression by Organizational Membership

FIGURE 21

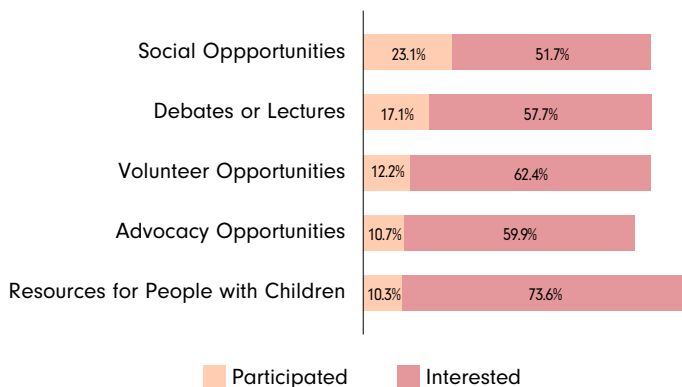


likely to attend secular social, volunteer, or advocacy activities (Figure 23). Conversely, women were **slightly less likely** to attend debates and lectures than other participants.

Those women who hadn't participated in a particular secular activity in the past three years expressed interest in participating in each of the events or services, with more than **three fifths (62.4%)** expressing interest in volunteer opportunities.

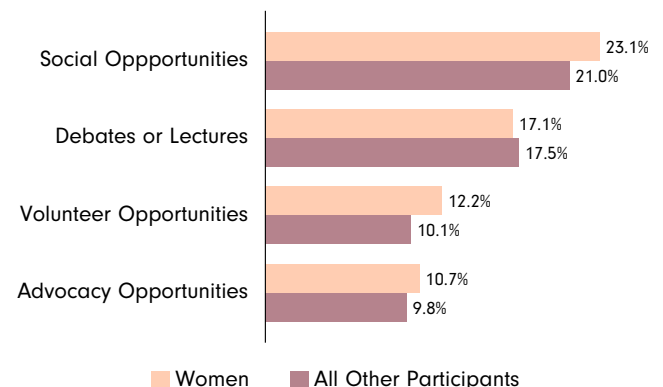
Engagement with Local Secular Activities

FIGURE 22



Participation in Secular Activities

FIGURE 23



Notably, women participants were **more than 1.5 times as likely** to have taken advantage of activities for people with children as other participants. While only 10.3% had participated in such activities, **nearly three quarters (73.6%)** of women were interested in secular activities intended for people with children. Despite their slightly greater likelihood to be a member of a local group, women with children **were less likely** than other women to have participated in any of the listed secular activities (Figure 24). At the same time, women with children were **more likely** than other women to have an interest in participating in these activities (Figure 25). These statistics demonstrate the clear need for local organizations to better engage nonreligious women with children.

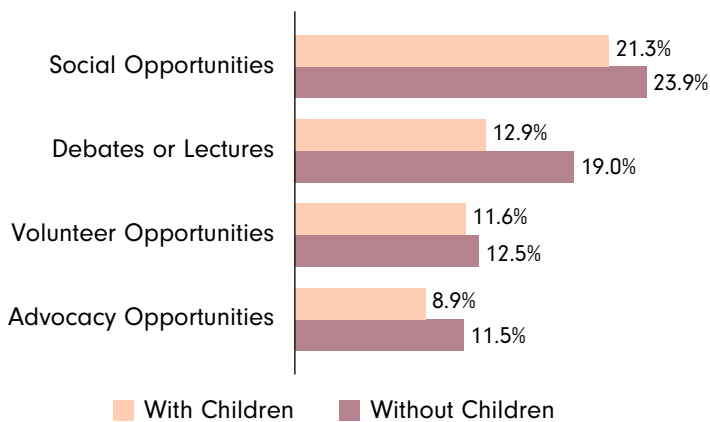
“The one thing I believe atheists need is more community; one thing that makes religion successful is the sense of community they foster, and this community feeling is lacking for us. We don’t have a gathering place to join together and be part of a larger group. At least not in my area. Sometimes it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

—Female, Colorado

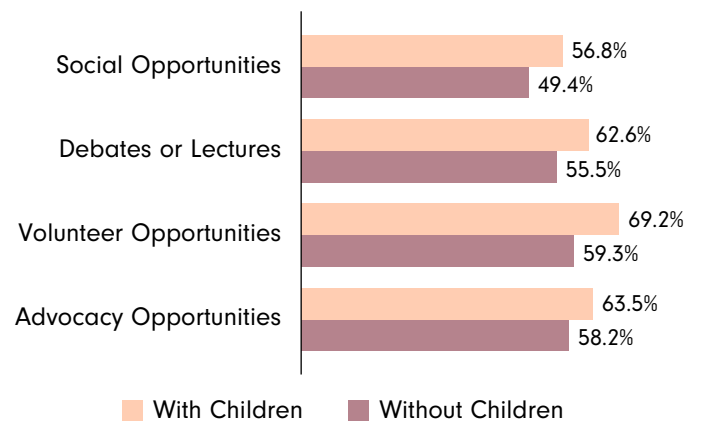
“Joining an atheist/humanist meetup group helped me have the courage to ‘come out’ with my secular beliefs. Prior to having a social group, I felt alone without a way to overcome judgment from religious family members. I learned that being ‘out’ is freeing for me, but also helps other people know it’s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

—Female, Kentucky

Engagement with Local Secular Activities **FIGURE 24**



Interest in Local Secular Activities **FIGURE 25**



“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

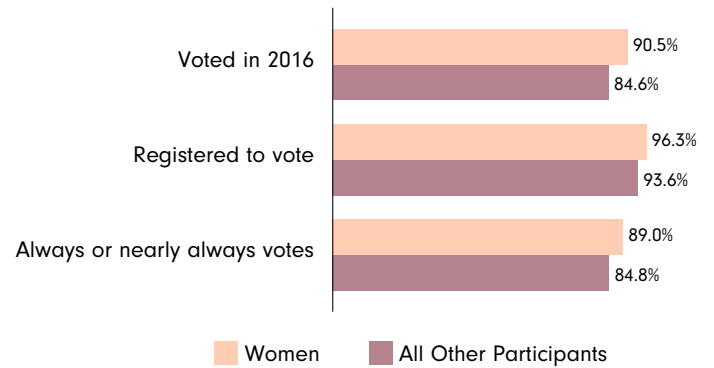
CIVIC ENGAGEMENT & POLICY PRIORITIES

The vast **majority (96.3%)** of women surveyed were registered to vote. In comparison to other participants, women were **more likely** to report that they voted in 2016 and that they always or nearly always vote (Figure 26).

We also asked survey participants about their views on various policy matters that were identified as important to nonreligious communities through focus groups (Strength in Numbers Consulting Group, 2019). Overall, women participants were **more likely** to view almost all policy priorities as very important than other participants (Figure 27). Moreover, there were significant differences between how women and other participants rated various policy priorities. Specifically, women were **more likely** to highly rate priorities relating to abortion and contraception, comprehensive and medically accurate sex education, LGBTQ equality, and protecting the

Voting Patterns

FIGURE 26

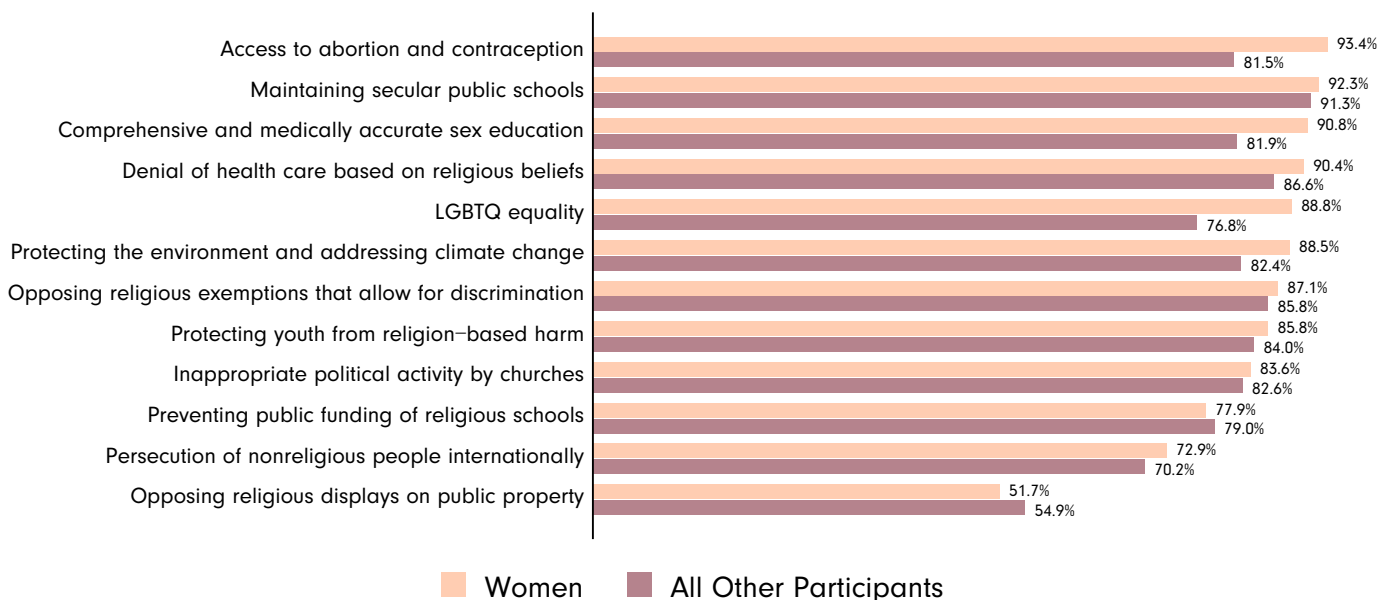


environment against climate change. With regard to reproductive access, our research aligns with other surveys finding that atheists overwhelmingly believe that abortion should be legal in all or most cases (88%) (Pew Research Center, 2015).

When asked about their top three priorities for advocacy by secular organizations, **nearly half** of women selected maintaining secular public schools (48.5%) and access to abortion and contraception

Policy Priorities Rated as Very Important

FIGURE 27



(48.0%). Women participants also indicated that secular organizations should focus on opposing religious exemptions that allow for discrimination (35.5%) and protecting the environment and addressing climate change (33.8%). In comparison to other participants, women were **significantly more likely** to prioritize access to abortion and contraception (48.0% vs. 31.4%) and **more likely** to prioritize comprehensive and medically accurate sex education (22.8% vs. 19.1%), LGBTQ equality (30.3% vs. 27.0%), and opposing denial of health care based on religious beliefs (29.1% vs. 25.8%).

At the same time, nonreligious women were less likely to say that secular organizations should prioritize opposing inappropriate political activity by churches, protecting youth from religion-based harm, preventing public funding of religious schools, or opposing religious displays on public property than

"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

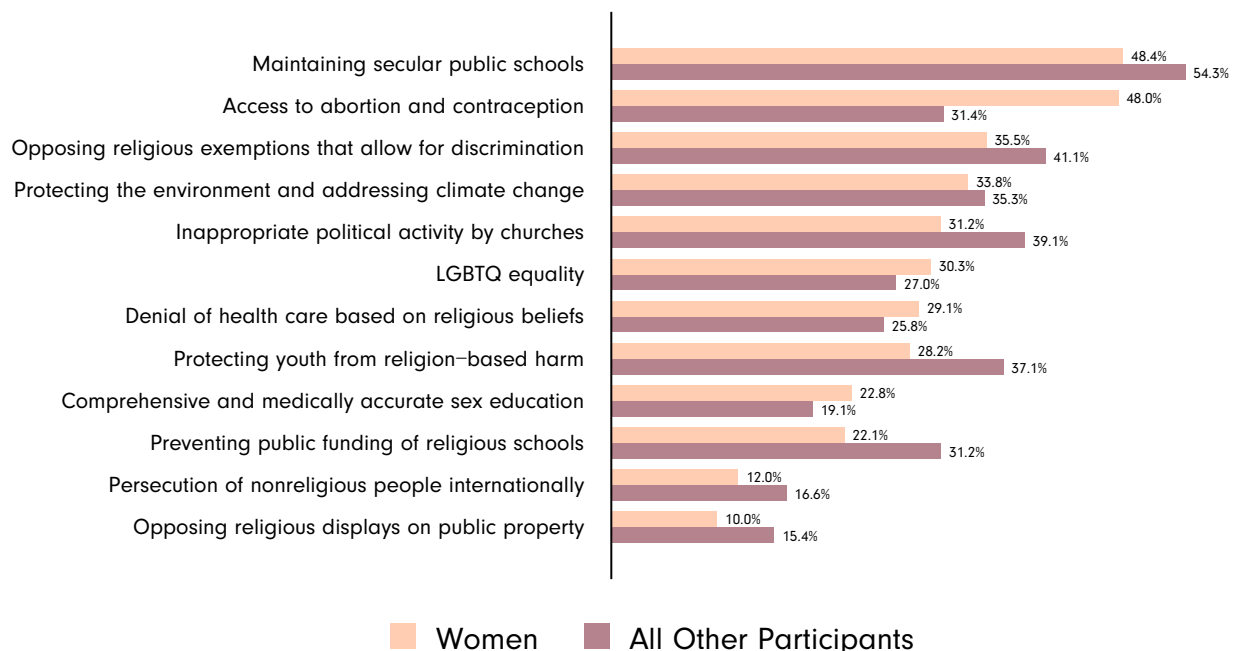
"I hate having to enter a church to exercise my voting rights."

—Female, Kansas

other participants. Notably, even though only 10.0% of women identified opposing religious displays on public property as a policy priority for secular organizations, **nearly half (46.8%)** of nonreligious women reported that they frequently or almost always were bothered by seeing religious symbols or text in public places.

Policy Priorities for Secular Organizations

FIGURE 28



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COMMUNITY BUILDING & ORGANIZING

The U.S. Secular Survey provides valuable insights that can help both national and local secular organizations better meet the needs of nonreligious women and better engage women in nonreligious communities. But data alone has little value. If secular organizations want to better meet these needs, they must be willing to take meaningful steps to reach out to nonreligious women, to reexamine their activities and their missions, and to accept that changing membership and increasing diversity require organizational change.

Our data shows that nonreligious women were more likely to experience discrimination and stigma than other participants. At the same time, their psychological outcomes, such as loneliness and likely depression, were approximately equivalent to other participants. This may be partly explained by the increased participation in secular organizations among nonreligious women. These organizations provide community and social engagement, and they can be important protective factors against depression and loneliness. This relationship was especially clear in areas where there is the greatest stigma – very religious communities and the South – where nonreligious women were significantly more engaged with local secular organizations than other participants. Especially in these areas of the country, local secular organizations play a significant role in the lives of many nonreligious women, which makes it even more critical that they are accessible and welcoming.

Based on our findings and the perspectives of national leaders with significant experience with nonreligious women communities, we offer several recommendations for secular organizations to better engage nonreligious women.

1. Be responsive to the needs and interests of nonreligious women in terms of your activities and opportunities for engagement.

The focus groups of nonreligious women conducted prior to the U.S. Secular Survey clearly indicated that there is a lack of suitable resources and programming by local secular organizations for nonreligious people with children. Our data now demonstrates the impact of that lack of resources. **Nonreligious women with children were both more likely than other participants to be members of local groups and less likely to have participated in any activities offered by those groups, although they expressed interest in doing so.** Where activities suitable for children existed, nonreligious women were significantly more likely to have taken part in those activities

“I found Atheists on Youtube, and in my local Meetup groups. My husband and I have similar beliefs...secular, humanist, atheist, agnostic, freethinker, skeptic. There are several groups in our area, and we participate in activities and social events, several times a year.”

—Female, Texas

than others surveyed. This is not surprising: childcare continues to be a gendered expectation of women in our society. The implications of this data could not be more clear: **it is essential for secular organizations that seek to better engage nonreligious women to offer activities and programming suitable for people with children.** These activities may include those intended for children or for families, as well as providing childcare alongside activities intended for adults.

Moreover, local organizations should consider the interests and needs of nonreligious women when planning activities and creating programming. **Nonreligious women surveyed were more likely than other participants to engage in social, volunteer, or advocacy activities and less likely to attend debates or lectures.** This data may reflect the observations of researchers during the focus groups conducted prior to the U.S. Secular Survey, where gendered expectations during mixed-gender focus groups resulted in women being more frequently interrupted and talked over. Of course, this analysis identifies only slight trends – it certainly does not define or limit the interests

of particular nonreligious women. Therefore, it is especially important for groups to be open to suggestions and feedback on activities from their nonreligious women members.

Finally, groups should understand that not every activity needs to have broad appeal in order to be successful. Offering diverse opportunities for participation and engagement can help make organizations more inclusive, particularly if some activities are especially relevant to nonreligious women or other subsets of the membership. For example, hosting periodic women-centered events can be a terrific way for secular organizations to both engage women members and to draw in nonreligious women who are not yet associated with the group.

2. Disrupt sexism and create a welcoming environment.

Gendered group dynamics invariably affect local secular organizations, and organizations that fail to recognize these dynamics and account for them will be unable to fully engage nonreligious women. All too often, nonreligious women are driven out of local secular organizations by aggressive sexual attention or harassment, sexist or lewd humor, dismissive or hostile members, or inappropriate physical contact. Organizational leadership can and must interrupt these patterns. For example, if it's well known that certain members tend to harass women who attend events, steps must be taken to address

the issue proactively. It's not enough to put the burden on prospective new members by subtly warning them to avoid certain people. Instead, community expectations must be established, which requires commitment from leadership, a clear standard of what behavior is not acceptable, and real consequences when these standards are violated. American Atheists and Secular Woman both have resources available to secular organizations to help establish standards of behavior. Ultimately, unless prospective women members feel that the group is a safe and welcoming environment, they will not return.

3. Understand that access to reproductive services, discrimination, and other issues that have a disparate impact on nonreligious women are secular issues.

By examining what different subpopulations of nonreligious people view as policy priorities for secular organizations, it becomes evident that what is considered a “secular issue” depends on who is asked. Because most secular organizations, and indeed the movement as a whole, have been dominated by white men, the priorities of white men have had an outsized focus. Organizations can change this dynamic by focusing on intersectional issues that have a disproportionate impact on nonreligious women. Just like everyone else, nonreligious women tend to prioritize policy issues that directly impact them, their families, and their communities.

“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

Secular organizations must be aware of and responsive to these preferences when setting their advocacy agendas.

The best example of a policy priority that affects nonreligious women in particular is protecting access to abortion and contraception. While this policy priority was among the top three identified by all participants for secular organizations, it had substantially more support among nonreligious women than other participants (48.0% vs. 31.4%). It is no surprise that nonreligious women prioritize access to such care when they are already disproportionately seeing the impact of lack of access. **Nonreligious women were about twice as likely to experience discrimination in reproductive care because of their beliefs than other participants, and those nonreligious women living in very religious areas were nearly twice as likely to experience such discrimination as nonreligious women in less religious areas.** Focusing on access to reproductive health care is especially important in the current moment because of the relentless assault on access to care waged by religious extremists and their lawmaker allies.

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 atheists.org.

Secular Woman is a nonprofit organization that seeks to amplify the voice, presence, and influence of non-religious women. Secular Woman envisions a future in which women without supernatural beliefs have the opportunities and resources they need to participate openly and confidently as respected voices of leadership in the secular community and every aspect of society. To learn more about Secular Woman, please visit secularwoman.org.

Strength in Numbers Consulting Group (SiNCG) 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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 *Secular
Woman*