

Effects of Religious Practice on Poor Communities

Even against the odds, in neighborhoods of disorder and poverty, religious practice serves as a significant buffer against drug abuse and juvenile delinquency. A study of 2,358 young black males from impoverished inner-city Chicago and Philadelphia found that a high level of religious attendance was associated with a 46 percent reduction in the likelihood of [using drugs](#), a 57 percent reduction in the probability of dealing drugs, and a 39 percent decrease in the likelihood of committing a crime that was not drug-related. Thus, religious attendance was associated with direct decreases in both minor and major forms of crime and deviance to an extent unrivaled by government welfare programs.¹⁾

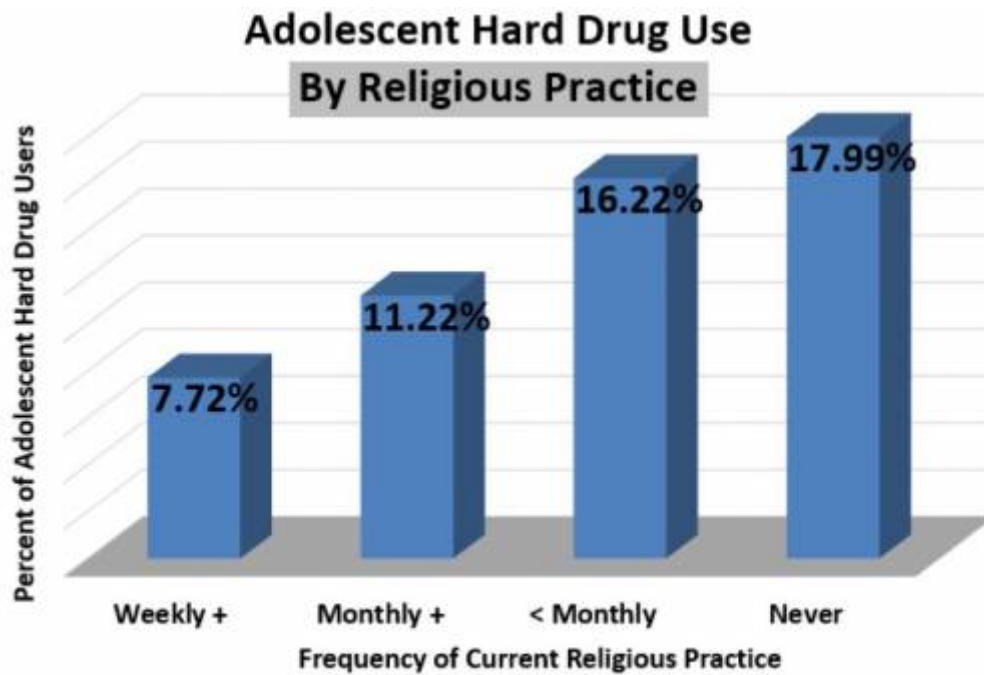
The effect of religion is not solely a matter of external controls that curb adolescents' risky behavior. Rather, religious attendance also promotes self-control, a positive allocation of time, [attendance at school](#), and [engagement in work](#).²⁾ In addition, youth religious practice is linked to a decreased likelihood of associating with delinquent peers—a significant factor in youth crime.³⁾

1. Drug Use in Inner-City Neighborhoods

While religious practice appears to have a general restraining effect on the [likelihood of using drugs](#), this effect appears to be especially strong for adolescents living in higher-risk neighborhoods, where increased religious practice coincides with substantially decreased drug use.⁴⁾ African-American youth living in impoverished urban neighborhoods who attended religious services at least weekly were half as likely to use illicit drugs as those who never attended.⁵⁾ Furthermore, an analysis of national longitudinal data indicates that religious youth from low-income neighborhoods are not only less likely than non-religious neighborhood peers to use illegal drugs, but also less likely than peers in “good” neighborhoods who have low levels of religious commitment.⁶⁾ In preventing drug abuse, religious practice trumps socioeconomic disadvantage.

1.1 Related American Demographics

According to the Adolescent Health Survey (Wave I), adolescents who worship at least weekly are less likely to use hard drugs than those who worship less frequently. Whereas only eight percent of students in Grades 7-12 who worship at least weekly have ever used hard drugs, 18 percent of those who never worship admit using hard drugs.⁷⁾ (See [Chart](#))



Source: National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, Wave I. Adolescents Grades 7-12.

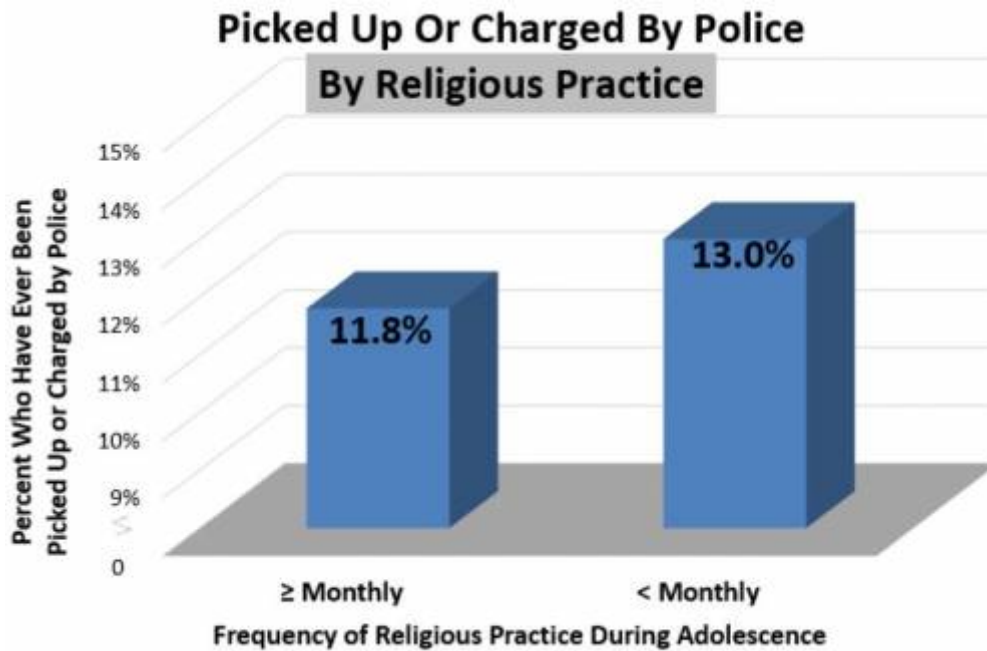
2. Juvenile Delinquency

In at-risk, destabilized communities, religious practice was found to be a buffer against [youth crime](#) in the same way that it reduced the likelihood of [substance abuse](#) among adolescents. Even in communities where there are no strong social controls against delinquent behavior, religious commitment and involvement protects youth from antisocial behavior—both minor and serious. In the Add Health Survey, a major national survey of adolescents, a 6 percent reduction in delinquency was associated with a one point increase on an index that combined adolescents’ frequency of religious service with their rating of the importance of religion.⁸⁾

[Mothers’ religious practice](#) is also an influence in reducing the likelihood that children will become delinquent. Each unit increase in a mother’s religious practice is associated with a 9 percent decline in her child’s delinquency. The adolescents at lowest risk for delinquency typically have highly religious mothers and are themselves highly religious.⁹⁾ Even in cases in which young people have become involved in deviant behavior, specific types of religious activity can help to steer them back on the right course and away from further criminal activity. In addition, evidence indicates that religious involvement during adolescence has a cumulative effect and thus may significantly reduce the likelihood that a young person will [commit crimes](#) in adulthood.¹⁰⁾

2.1 Related American Demographics

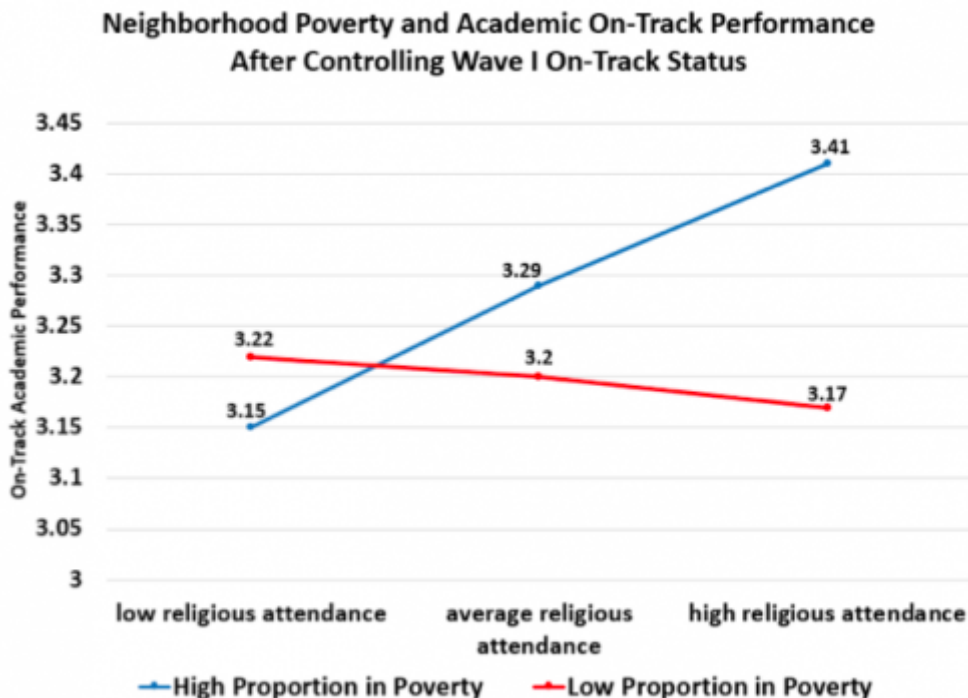
Adults who frequently attended religious services as adolescents are less likely to have ever been picked up or charged by police than those who did not. According to the General Social Surveys (GSS), 11.8 percent of adults who attended religious services at least monthly as adolescents have ever been picked up or charged by police, compared to 13 percent of adults who attended worship less than monthly as adolescents.¹¹⁾ (See [Chart](#) Below)



Source: General Social Surveys, 1972-1987

3. Education

According to Dr. Mark Regnerus of the University of Texas at Austin, weekly religious worship delivers educational benefits that are equivalent to moving the poorer children into middle class neighborhoods.¹²⁾ Nothing in public policy yields returns like these in education.



Source: Mark Regnerus, 2003

¹⁾ Byron R. Johnson, David B. Larson, Spencer De Li, and Sung Joon Jang, "Escaping from the Crime of Inner Cities: Church Attendance and Religious Salience Among Disadvantaged Youth," *Justice Quarterly* 17, no. 2 (June 2000): 377-39.

²⁾ Richard B. Freeman, "Who Escapes? The Relation of Church-Going and Other Background Factors to the Socio-Economic Performance of Black Male Youths from Inner-City Poverty Tracts," NBER Working

Paper, no. 1656 (1985): 11.

³⁾, ⁵⁾ Johnson and Larson, "Religion," and Byron R. Johnson, "Does Adolescent Religious Commitment Matter? A Reexamination of the Effects of Religiosity on Delinquency," *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency* 38, no. 1 (February 2001): 22-43.

⁴⁾ Increased religious practice coincides with decreases of 27 percent for marijuana use and 33 percent for hard drugs. Sung Joon Jang and Byron R. Johnson, "Neighborhood Disorder, Individual Religiosity, and Adolescent Use of Illicit Drugs: A Test of Multilevel Hypotheses," *Criminology* 39, no. 1 (February 2001): 109-144

⁶⁾ Byron R. Johnson, "A Better Kind of High: How Religious Commitment Reduces Drug Use Among Poor Urban Teens," Manhattan Institute for Policy Research, Center for Research on Religion and Urban Civil Society Report No. 2000-2. Available at

http://www.manhattan-institute.org/html/cr_12.htm Accessed December 6, 2006.

⁷⁾ This chart draws on a large national sample (16,000) from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health. This work was done by the author in cooperation with former colleagues at The Heritage Foundation, Washington, D.C.

Patrick F. Fagan, "Religious Attendance and Adolescent Use of Hard Drugs," Mapping America Project. Available at <http://marri.us/wp-content/uploads/MA-7-9-151.pdf>

⁸⁾, ⁹⁾ Lisa D. Pearce and Dana L. Haynie, "Intergenerational Religious Dynamics and Adolescent Delinquency," *Social Forces* 82, no. 4 (June 2004): 1553-1572.

¹⁰⁾ Byron R. Johnson, Ralph Brett Tompkins, and Derek Webb, "Objective Hope—Assessing the Effectiveness of Faith-Based Organizations: A Systematic Review of the Literature," Manhattan Institute for Policy Research, Center for Research on Religion and Urban Civil Society, (2002). Available at http://www.manhattan-institute.org/pdf/crrucs_objective_hope.pdf Accessed June 30, 2005.

¹¹⁾ This chart draws on data collected by the General Social Surveys, 1972-1987. The sample size averaged 1,500 each year. No GSS was conducted in 1979 or 1981.

Patrick F. Fagan and Althea Nagai, "Intergenerational Links to Being Picked Up or Charged by Police: Religious Attendance," Mapping America Project. Available at <http://marri.us/wp-content/uploads/MA-55-57-167.pdf>.

¹²⁾ Mark D. Regnerus, *Making the Grade: The Influence of Religion Upon the Academic Performance of Youth in Disadvantaged Communities*, Center for Research on Religion and Urban Civil Society, 2001, Report no. 3.

This entry heavily draws from [Why Religion Matters Even More: The Impact of Religious Practice on Social Stability](#).

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