

Religion in West Virginia

West Virginia Social Survey Report

WVSS-20-10

Issued on February 25, 2021

Prepared by Christopher P. Scheitle, Katie E. Corcoran, and Taylor Remsburg

Background

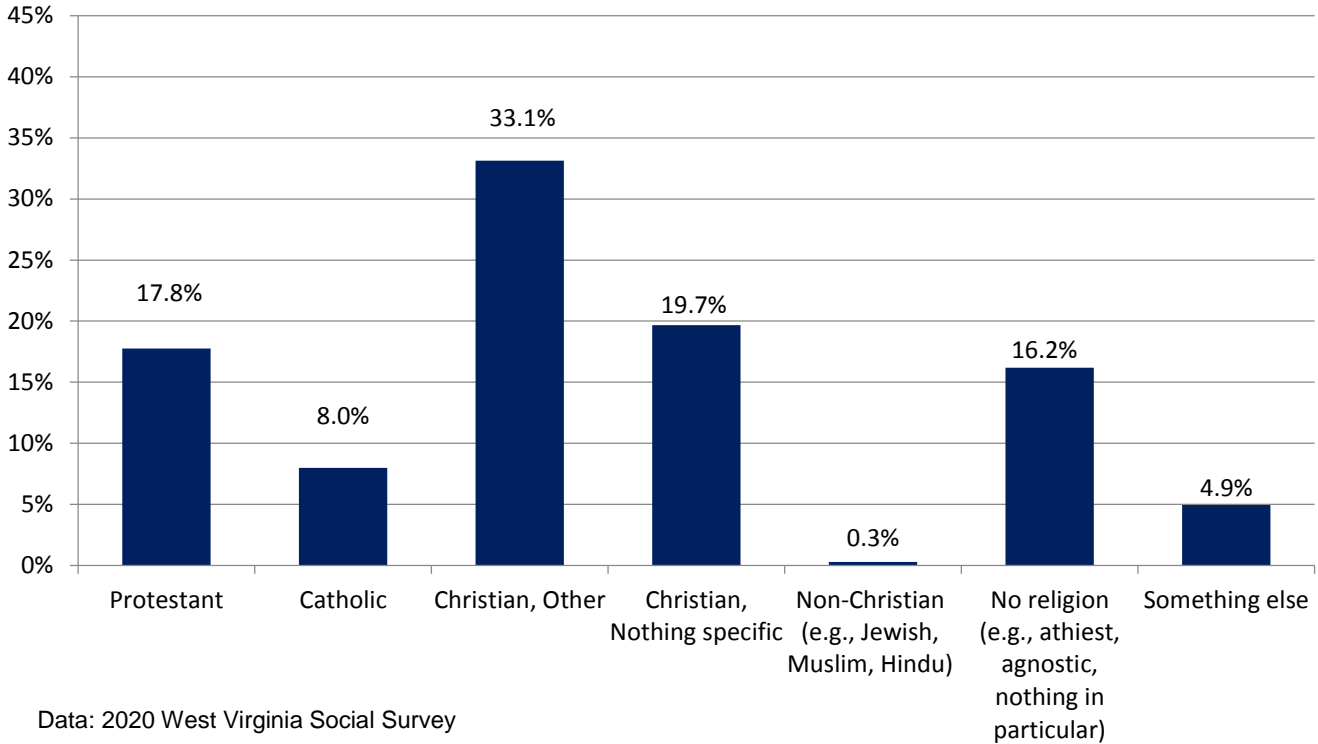
The religious composition of the United States has changed dramatically in recent decades. The most notable change has been the increasing proportion of the population who do not identify with a religion. This group represented about 5% of the U.S. adult population in the early 1970s, but it now represents about 25%.

This WVSS report explores the religious composition, religiosity, and religious service participation of the West Virginia adult population.

Highlights

- 78.6% of West Virginians identify as Christian. Of this group, the Catholic percentage is smaller (8%) than what is found in the U.S. overall (23%).
- Just over 16% of West Virginians do not identify with a religion, which is lower than the percentage found among all U.S. adults.
- 22% of West Virginians describe themselves as “very religious” and 27% of West Virginians attend religious services on a weekly basis.

Figure 1 - "What is your present religion, if any?"



Religion in WV

Religion is a multifaceted social phenomenon. An individual's religious life consists of a number of components, including identity, beliefs, behaviors, experiences, and a social community.

Religion in West Virginia [has at times been misrepresented](#) by focusing on one of these components while ignoring others.

The West Virginia Social Survey (WVSS) asked several different

questions meant to assess different aspects of religion among the West Virginian population.

Religious Identity

When we think about an individual's religion, we might first think of their religious identity or affiliation. That is, does the person say they are Christian, Jewish, Muslim, or some other religion?

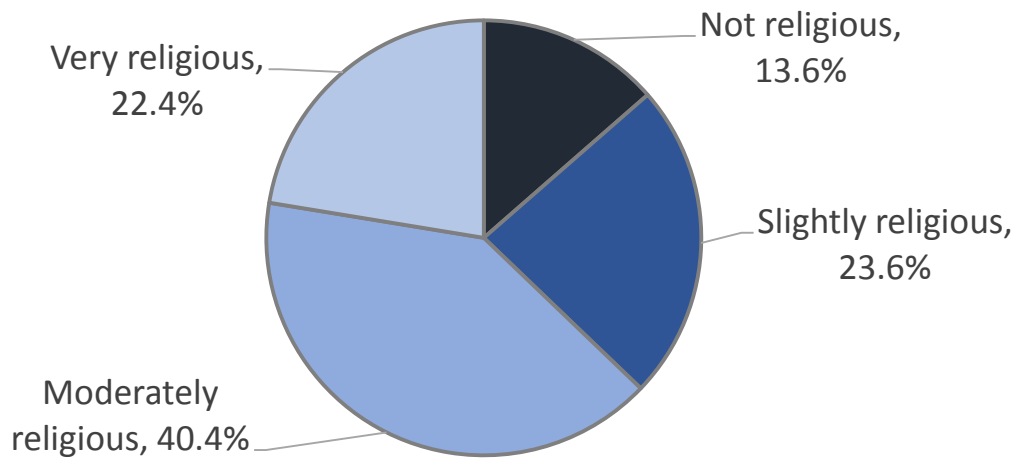
The WVSS asked individuals, "What is your present religion, if any?" Fourteen response

options were provided, some of which are combined in Figure 1.

Just under 18% of individuals identified as Protestant, while 8.0% identified as Catholic. Another 33.1% identified as "Christian, other," and 19.7% identified as "Christian, nothing specific."

Collectively, then, 78.6% of West Virginians identify as Christian. This is somewhat [higher than what is seen among the U.S. population as a whole](#).

Figure 2 - "How religious do you consider yourself to be?"



Data: 2020 West Virginia Social Survey

The Christian population in West Virginia is also significantly less Catholic than the nation as a whole (~21%). Christians in West Virginia also appear less likely to identify explicitly as Protestants and more likely to identify as “just” Christian or with a Christian label other than Protestant.

The proportion of the state’s population identifying as Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, or Buddhist (0.3%) is significantly lower than what is seen nationally (~6%).

Just over 16% of West Virginians do not identify with any religion, which includes those identifying as atheist, agnostic, or “nothing in

particular.” This is lower than what is seen in the U.S. population, as recent surveys find almost one in four adults in the U.S. do not identify with a religion.

In sum, the WVSS finds that the West Virginian population is more Christian than the U.S. population as a whole. Among Christians, West Virginians are less likely to be Catholic and more likely to prefer labels other than Protestant.

Self-Reported Religiosity

Of course, an individual’s stated religious identity does not necessarily tell us how religious they are. That is, a person identifying with a particular religion may or may not

consider themselves to be especially religious.

To capture more self-defined religiosity, the WVSS also asked individuals, “How religious do you consider yourself to be?”

As seen in Figure 2, 22.4% of West Virginians say that they are “very religious.” This is about seven percentage points higher than [what is seen among U.S. adults overall](#), suggesting that religiosity is higher among the state’s population.

Another 40.4% of West Virginians say they are “moderately religious.” Again, this is about six percentage points higher than what is seen among the national population.

Just under 24% of adults in the state say they are “slightly religious,” which is similar to the national percentage of 25%. Finally, 13.6% of West Virginians say they are “not religious,” which is about [nine points lower than what is found among U.S. adults](#).

In sum, the WVSS finds that West Virginians report higher levels of religiosity than the U.S. population as a whole.

Religious Service Attendance

Religious practice is another component of an individual’s religious life. While religious practices can include a number of things, both public and private, the most prominent practice is likely attendance at

religious services.

Like the percentage of U.S. adults who say they do not identify with a religion, the percentage of Americans who never attend services [has steadily risen in recent years](#).

The WVSS asked individuals, “How often do you attend religious services at a place of worship?” Figure 3 presents the distribution of responses to this question.

Looking at the low end first, we see that 25.2% of West Virginians say that they never attend religious services. This is somewhat lower than the 30% of U.S. adults overall who say they never attend religious

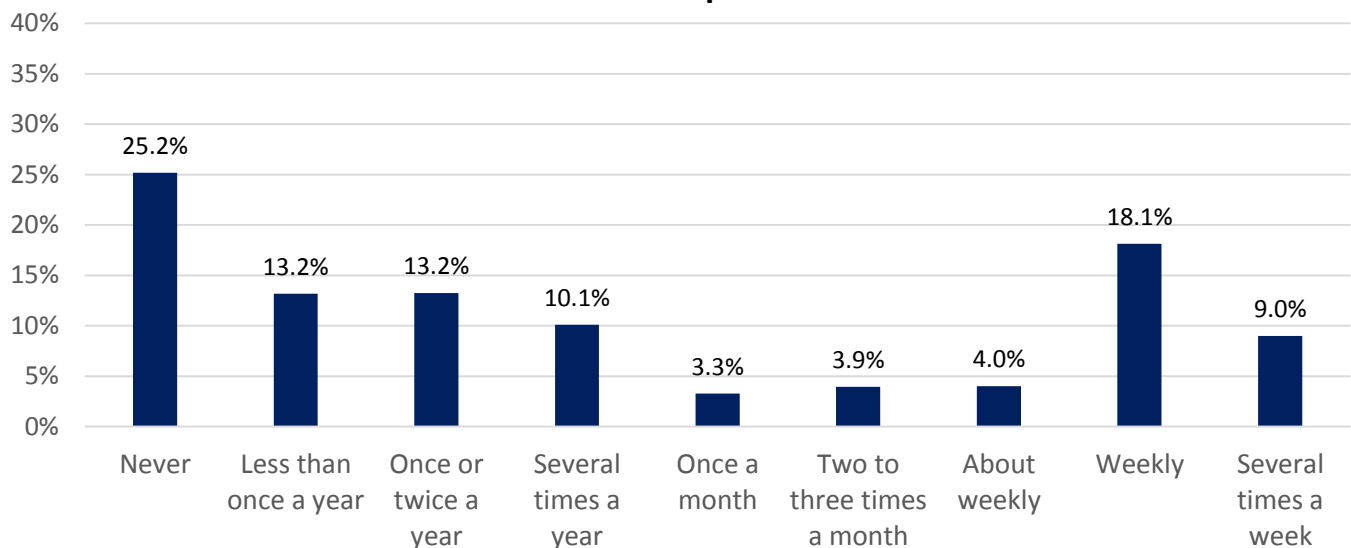
services.

Another 13.2% of West Virginians say they attend religious services less than once a year, while the same percentage say that they attend once or twice a year.

At the high end of attendance, we find that 9.0% of West Virginians say they attend religious services several times a week, while 18.1% say they attend weekly. These percentages are 6% and 17% among U.S. adults overall.

On the whole, West Virginians appear to attend religious services somewhat more regularly than U.S. adults overall. This corresponds to what was seen with the self-

Figure 3 - "How often do you attend religious services at a place of worship?"



Data: 2020 West Virginia Social Survey

reported religiosity measure.

Summary

The WVSS finds the adult population in West Virginia differs from the U.S. adult population in religious identity, self-reported religiosity, and religious service attendance. These differences point to a state population that is, on average, more religious.

In terms of identity, West Virginians are more likely to identify with a religion, especially Christianity. However, Christians in the state are less likely to be Catholic or to explicitly identify as Protestant.

In terms of religiosity and religious service attendance, West Virginians are more likely to say they are religious and more likely to say they at least somewhat attend religious services.

Data Source

The WVSS is produced by the Survey Research Center at West Virginia University. The purpose of the WVSS is to gather information on the attitudes, concerns, and challenges facing WV residents.

The WVSS is a mail survey utilizing an address-based

sample of nearly 5,000 households across the state.

The 2020 WVSS received nearly 1,900 responses for a response rate of 38.1% (American Association of Public Opinion Research Definition #3). Data are weighted to be representative of the West Virginia adult population.

Suggested Citation

Christopher P. Scheitle, Katie E. Corcoran, and Taylor Remsburg. 2021. "Religion in West Virginia." WVSS-20-10. *West Virginia Social Survey Reports*. Survey Research Center at West Virginia University. Morgantown, West Virginia.