Church Dropouts: How Many Leave Church between ages 18-22 and Why?

Spring 2007
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Methodology

• Survey of Young Adults ages 18-30 in April-May 2007
• Sample size of 1,023 provides 95% confidence that sampling error does not exceed ±3.1%
• Eligible respondents attended a Protestant church regularly (twice a month or more) for at least a year in high school
• The web survey utilized a representative national panel of Americans
  – Panels have been utilized by research firms such as the Gallup Organization and National Family Opinion (NFO) for over 60 years
  – Online panels have been heavily utilized by Gallup, NFO, Harris Interactive and others for over 10 years
  – Panels facilitate accurate sampling and high response rates and ensure that emerging generations without telephone landlines are included
• Church “Dropouts” are defined as those who “stopped attending church regularly for at least a year between the ages of 18 and 22”
Key Findings

How many leave church between ages 18-22?

Among those who attended a Protestant church twice a month or more for at least a year in high school:

70 percent of 23-30 year olds stopped attending church regularly for at least a year between ages 18-22*

– 35% of these dropouts eventually returned and are attending church twice a month

*Throughout this report, those who “stopped attending church regularly for at least a year between the ages of 18 and 22” are referred to as church “dropouts”
Key Findings

Why do young people drop out of church?

• Life changes or situations are the top category of reasons – 97% of those who dropped out of church indicate at least one of 19 reasons
  Life changes/situation examples:
  – “Simply wanted a break from church” (27%)
  – “Moved to college and stopped attending church” (25%)
  – “Work responsibilities prevented me from attending” (23%)

• Church or Pastor related reasons are the second category – 58% of those who dropped out indicate at least one item among these 14 reasons
  Church/Pastor-related examples:
  – “Church members seemed judgmental or hypocritical” (26%)
  – “Didn’t feel connected to the people in my church” (20%)

• Religious, ethical or political beliefs are the third category – 52% of those who dropped out indicate at least one item among these 12 reasons
How Many are Church Dropouts?

Percentage who leave between ages 18-22
The Dropout Rate

Among those who attended a Protestant church twice a month or more for at least a year in high school:

70 percent of young adults ages 23-30 stopped attending church regularly for at least a year between ages 18-22

23 - 30 Year Olds

70% Dropped Out
30% Stayed in Church

S3. Did you stop attending church regularly for at least a year between the ages of 18 and 22?

Base: Attended a Protestant church for at least a year in high school.
18-30 year olds (n=1,557), 23-30 year olds (n=732)

Note: This study includes 18-30 year olds. The dropout rate for 18-30 year olds, including 18-22 year olds who may still drop out, is 65%
Why do Dropouts Leave?

Dropouts indicate the factors that contributed to their decision.
Why dropouts stop attending church

• 45 specific reasons were listed in three categories and an opportunity was provided to specify other reasons within each category
  • 19 reasons were listed in the category life changes/situations,
  • 14 reasons were listed in the category church/pastor-related, and
  • 12 reasons were listed in the category religious, ethical or political beliefs
• Almost every church dropout indicated a change in their life or their life situation contributed to their decision to stop attending church regularly
• Half indicated a specific reason in the other two categories
• Six of the top 10 specific reasons indicated are life changes/situations
Top 10 reasons church dropouts indicate they stopped attending church

Simply wanted a break from church: 27%
Church members seemed judgmental or hypocritical: 26%
Moved to college and stopped attending church: 25%
Work responsibilities prevented me from attending: 23%
Moved too far away from the church to continue attending: 22%
Became too busy, though still wanted to attend: 22%
Didn't feel connected to the people in my church: 20%
Disagreed with the church's stance on political/social issues: 18%
Chose to spend more time with friends outside the church: 17%
Was only going to church to please others: 17%

Q2a. Which of the following factors contributed to your decision to stop attending church regularly between the ages of 18 and 22?

Base: S3 = “Yes” (n=615)
Church dropouts are most likely to indicate they stopped attending church because of life changes or situations.

**Categories of specific reasons for stopping church attendance**

- **Life changes or situations**: 97%
- **Church or Pastor-related reasons**: 58%
- **Religious, ethical or political beliefs**: 52%

Q2a. Which of the following factors contributed to your decision to stop attending church regularly between the ages of 18 and 22? 
*Base: S3 = “Yes” (n=615)*
Life changes/situations dropouts indicate contributed to the stop in church attendance

Q2a. Which of the following factors contributed to your decision to stop attending church regularly between the ages of 18 and 22?

Base: S3 = “Yes” (n=615)

- Simply wanted a break from church: 27%
- Moved to college and stopped attending church: 25%
- Work responsibilities prevented me from attending: 23%
- Moved too far away from the church to continue attending: 22%
- Became too busy, though still wanted to attend: 22%
- Chose to spend more time with friends outside the church: 17%
- School responsibilities prevented me from attending: 16%
- Wanted to make life decisions that were not accepted by the church: 14%
- Family/home responsibilities prevented me from attending: 12%
Life changes/situations dropouts indicate contributed to the stop in church attendance -- continued

Q2a. Which of the following factors contributed to your decision to stop attending church regularly between the ages of 18 and 22?

Base: S3 = “Yes” (n=615)
Church/pastor-related reasons dropouts indicate contributed to the stop in church attendance

- Church members seemed judgmental or hypocritical: 26%
- Didn’t feel connected to the people in my church: 20%
- Church members were unfriendly/unwelcoming/cliquish: 15%
- Sermons did not capture my attention: 14%
- Church was not helping me to develop spiritually: 13%
- Pastor I liked left the church: 13%

Q2a. Which of the following factors contributed to your decision to stop attending church regularly between the ages of 18 and 22?  
*Base: S3 = “Yes” (n=615)*
Q2a. Which of the following factors contributed to your decision to stop attending church regularly between the ages of 18 and 22?

Base: S3 = “Yes” (n=615)
Religious, ethical or political reasons dropouts indicate contributed to the stop in church attendance

- Disagreed with the church's stance on political/social issues: 18%
- Was only going to church to please others: 17%
- No longer wanted to identify with church/organized religion: 16%
- Disagreed with the church's moral/ethical guidelines for everyday living: 16%
- Went through a challenge in life that caused me to question my faith: 15%
- Disagreed with the church's teachings about God: 14%

Q2a. Which of the following factors contributed to your decision to stop attending church regularly between the ages of 18 and 22? Base: S3 = “Yes” (n=615)
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Base: S3 = “Yes” (n=615)
While attending regularly only 20% of church dropouts planned to leave church after high school.

Q5. Thinking back to your days of regular church attendance in high school, had you planned on taking a break from church once you finished high school?

Base: S3 = “Yes” (n=615)
Few dropouts who plan to leave church, tell anyone of their plans

Among 101 church dropouts surveyed who planned to leave church after high school:

26 Told someone about their desire
   “Mother,” “friends,” and “parents” were the most common person they told

75 Did not tell anyone
   “I kept my feelings secret for fear of losing my friends”
   “Not really, I just told my parents I didn’t like it”
   “No, there was no one I knew that would support my decision to reject God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit.”

Q5a. Did you talk to anyone about your desire to leave church? If so, who did you talk to?
Base: Q5 = “Yes” (n=101)
When do Dropouts Leave?

Church attendance is a revolving door
Who attends church is constantly changing, but the number drops sharply between ages 17-19

- Churn occurs at every age: some attendees are new or returning to church at the same time others are leaving
- About two-thirds attend twice a month or more at a given age under 14, 14, 15, and 16
- This is followed by fewer teens attending church twice a month at age 17, even fewer at age 18, and fewer still at age 19 – less than half the number compared to age 16
- The lowest twice-a-month attendance levels occur at age 22
Ages young people attended church at least twice a month

Q1a. At which of the following ages did you regularly attend church (by “regularly attend,” we mean attend at least twice a month for three or more months)? Base: All (n=1,023 through age 18)
Ages young people attended church at least twice a month -- continued

Q1a. At which of the following ages did you regularly attend church (by “regularly attend,” we mean attend at least twice a month for three or more months)? Base: Current Age >= Age asked about (n ranges from =964 at age 19 to 465 at age 26)
There is constant turnover in those who attended at one age compared to those who attended the following year.

Q1a. At which of the following ages did you regularly attend church (by “regularly attend,” we mean attend at least twice a month for three or more months)?  *Base: All (n=1,023 through age 18)*

- **Age 14** Net 4% loss
  - +9% new or returning
  - -14% stop or attend less

- **Age 15** Net 2% gain
  - +9% new or returning
  - -7% stop or attend less

- **Age 16** Net 1% gain
  - +11% new or returning
  - -10% stop or attend less

- **Age 17** Net 15% loss
  - +5% new or returning
  - -21% stop or attend less

- **Age 18** Net 24% loss
  - +8% new or returning
  - -32% stop or attend less

Note: “Net” percent may not equal “new/returning” minus “stop/attend less” due to rounding.
Churn among those who attended church at least twice a month is heavy through ages 18 to 22

Q1a. At which of the following ages did you regularly attend church (by “regularly attend,” we mean attend at least twice a month for three or more months)? Base: All (n ranges from =964 at age 19 to 785 at age 22)

Note: “Net” percent may not equal “new/returning” minus “stop/attend less” due to rounding
Churn continues after age 22, but the number returning to twice-a-month attendance exceeds those leaving.

Q1a. At which of the following ages did you regularly attend church (by “regularly attend,” we mean attend at least twice a month for three or more months)? 

- **Base:** All (n ranges from =785 at age 22 to 465 at age 26)

**Age 22**
- +16% returning
- -3% stop or attend less

**Age 23**
- Net 13% gain
- +9% returning
- -7% stop or attend less

**Age 24**
- Net 1% gain
- +9% returning
- -6% stop or attend less

**Age 25**
- Net 3% gain
- +9% returning
- -6% stop or attend less

**Age 26**
- Net 4% gain
- +11% returning
- -6% stop or attend less

Note: “Net” percent may not equal “new/returning” minus “stop/attend less” due to rounding.
This study only included those who attended a Protestant church regularly for at least a year in high school, but the religious background they indicated did vary.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Childhood Religious Background</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protestant or Christian</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mormon/ Jehovah’s Witness/ Christian Science</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secular/ Nonreligious/ Agnostic/ Atheist</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None of the above</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Q10. Please indicate which of the following religious preferences most closely match your own childhood religious background. *Base: All (n=1,023)*

S6. What is your current religious preference? *Base: All (n=1,023)*
This study only included those who attended a Protestant church regularly for at least a year in high school, but the current religious preference they indicated did vary.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Current Religious Preference</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protestant</td>
<td>59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mormon/ Jehovah’s Witness/ Christian Science</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secular/ Nonreligious/ Agnostic/ Atheist</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No preference</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Q10. Please indicate which of the following religious preferences most closely match your own childhood religious background.  
Base: All (n=1,023)

S6. What is your current religious preference?  
Base: All (n=1,023)
Why do Some Dropouts Return to Church?

Dropouts who returned indicate the influences that contributed to their decision to return
Church dropouts do not all leave for good – one third have resumed attending at least twice a month

Current church attendance among those who dropped out

23-30 Year Olds

- Do NOT currently attend: 35%
- Attend once a month or less: 30%
- Attend twice a month or more: 34%

S5. Which of the following best describes your CURRENT church attendance?
Base: S3 = “Yes” (23-30 year olds n=477)
Why young adults return to church after dropping out for a year or more

Dropouts who returned to church indicate they did so because of encouragement from family and friends, a desire to return or a life event

**Encouragement from others**
- 39 percent returned due to encouragement from parents or family members
- 21 percent returned through encouragement from friends or acquaintances
- 50 percent returned through encouragement from either family OR friends

**Desire or calling**
- 34 percent started attending again because of a simple desire to return – this was a significantly higher reason for women than men (41% vs. 22%)
- 28 percent felt that God was calling them to return to church – this was a significantly higher reason for women than men (34% vs. 18%)

**Life events**
- 24 percent had children and felt it was time for them to start attending – this was a significantly higher reason for women than men (31% vs. 13%)
- 20 percent got married and wanted to attend with their spouse
Why some dropouts return to church*

* Reasons indicated by young adults who returned to church after dropping out for at least a year

Q4. Which of the following situations or influences contributed to your decision to start attending church again?

Base: S5 = Attend and S3 = “Yes” (n=394)
Why some dropouts return to church*
-- continued

* Reasons indicated by young adults who returned to church after dropping out for at least a year

Q4. Which of the following situations or influences contributed to your decision to start attending church again?

Base: S5 = Attend and S3 = “Yes” (n=394)
Why do Some Young Adults Stay in Church?

Young adults who stay in church indicate the factors that contributed to their continued attendance.
Almost all young adults who stayed in church between ages 18-22 attend church today at least occasionally.

Current church attendance among those who stayed in church between ages 18-22

23-30 Year Olds

- 82% do NOT currently attend
- 12% attend once a month or less
- 6% attend twice a month or more

S5. Which of the following best describes your CURRENT church attendance?

Base: S3 = “No” (23-30 year olds n=255)
Why some young church goers continue attending church

Church goers who stayed in church between ages 18 and 22, indicate they did so because they saw personal relevance (now and in the future) and were committed to the church’s purpose

**Personal relevance and commitment**
- Two-thirds stayed in church because it was a vital part of their relationship with God (65%)
- 58 percent stayed to receive guidance from the church for everyday decisions
- 42 percent remained out of commitment to the purpose and work of the church

**Perceived benefits**
- Similarly, half of church goers saw church helping them become a better person (50%)
- Almost a third were drawing help from the church to get through a difficult time in their life (30%)
- 43 percent desired to follow the example of a parent or family member
Q3. Which of the following factors contributed to your continued regular attendance between the ages of 18 and 22?

Base: S3 = “No” (n=406)
More reasons young adults who stayed in church indicate for continuing to attend regularly

Q3. Which of the following factors contributed to your continued regular attendance between the ages of 18 and 22?

Base: S3 = “No” (n=406)

Location of the church was convenient for me - 23%
Time of the worship service(s) was convenient for me - 20%
Friends were attending church at the time - 20%
Wanted to follow the example of someone I knew at church - 18%
Mainly went to church out of habit - 17%
Attended a lot of missions trips/community service events run by the church - 15%
Attended church mainly to please others - 10%
Other - 5%