

More Americans left religion during the pandemic

Religious affiliation in the U.S. has continued to fall during the pandemic, according to a new survey from the Pew Research Center.

The percentage of Americans who identify as Christians now stands at 63%, down from 65% in 2019 and from 78% in 2007. Meanwhile, 29% of Americans now identify as having no religion, up from 26% in 2019 and 16% in 2007, when Pew began tracking religious identity.

Many places of worship closed during the pandemic—some voluntarily, others as a result of state and local social-distancing rules—and in-person church attendance is roughly 30% to 50% lower than it was before the pandemic, estimates Barna Group, a research firm that studies faith in the U.S. Millions of Americans moved to worshipping online, and questions linger about how many will come back in person.

A previous Pew survey, in January, found that a third of Americans said their faith had grown stronger during the pandemic—the highest share of any developed country. But overall, religious engagement trended downward at roughly the same rate as before the pandemic, according to the new Pew survey.

“A significant minority of the population is saying their faith has been strengthened as a result of the coronavirus outbreak,” said Greg Smith, associate director of research at Pew and author of the religious affiliation study. “But that group, the people who say their faith has been strengthened, is concentrated among those who were already highly religious. There’s not a lot of evidence of people who were not that religious before March 2020 [and] have become so,” he said.

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Among the 29% who say they have no religion, 4% say they are theists and 5% agnostics. Both of those figures are unchanged since 2017. The percentage of Americans who identify as “nothing in particular” grew from 16% in 2017 to 20% this year. Though some who identify as “nothing in particular,” may believe in

God, Mr. Smith said they are far less likely to pray or attend services than Americans who identify with a religious group.

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