



THE TIPPING POINT GENERATION

America's Nonreligious Youth



AMERICAN
ATHEISTS

secular
student
alliance

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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. The survey was limited to participants age 18 and older, and approximately 3,400 of the participants (10.1%) were between the ages of 18 and 24. 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 a group of nonreligious people who are too often overlooked—nonreligious youth.

Although nonreligious young people are the most rapidly growing segment of the nonreligious community, we know remarkably little about this population, in part because of differences in identity labels and survey methodology. For example, Pew Research Center, which uses population surveys to examine changing religious demographics, groups nonreligious people into a larger category of “nones” or people who do not identify with a particular religious affiliation (Smith et al., 2019). This research shows that in 2019, 26% of the U.S. population was religiously unaffiliated, and among Millennials (ages 23-38), this increased to 40%. Similarly, analyses of nationally representative samples of Americans participating in the 2018 and 2019 Cooperative Congressional Election Study found that 46.7% of youth ages 18-25 are religiously unaffiliated (Djupe & Burge, 2020). Moreover, while approximately 9% identified as agnostic or atheist (a subcategory of the broader religiously unaffiliated category), it is unclear how these numbers vary by age. Other studies show that approximately 13% of youth ages 13-18 identify as atheists and more than a third are nonreligious (Barna Group, 2018).

There has been a lack of research on issues facing nonreligious people across all ages, but as we detailed in the *Reality Check* report, discrimination and stigmatization can have a disproportionate impact on nonreligious youth. Family rejection because of a young person’s nonreligious beliefs is distressingly common, and it can have a lifelong impact on educational attainment and psychological well-being. Similarly, the fact that discrimination and stigmatization against nonreligious people is greatly increased in highly religious areas is especially concerning for nonreligious young people, who often lack the means to leave the communities of their origin in order to find more tolerant and pluralistic communities.

In addition to all the negative stereotypes about nonreligious people in general, nonreligious young people encounter unique stereotypes, often unwittingly perpetuated by nonreligious communities themselves. For example, older nonreligious people may believe that the stigma

they encountered in their youth is a thing of the past, when in fact harassment in school and ever present symbols of Christian authority punctuate the daily lives of far too many nonreligious youth.

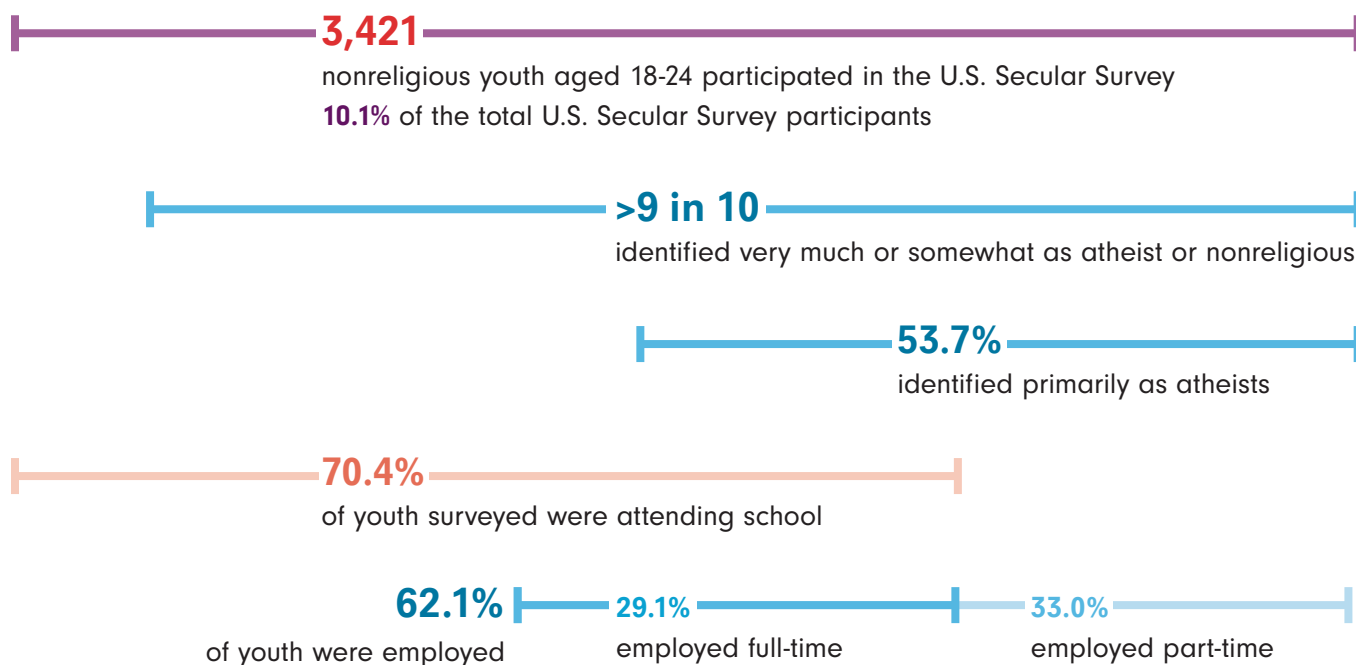
It is true that the U.S. is becoming more secular. But this is a process marked by pockets of intolerance and reactionism, a growing skepticism of basic civil rights protections, and a national discourse that favors the religious interests of a few powerful groups over the lives and well-being of everyone else. This is the America that nonreligious young people are growing up in, that they will one day inherit. We hope that this brief will shine a light on how America's religious culture has shaped these youth and how, in turn, they will shape its future.



This brief provides an analysis of data related to nonreligious young people who participated in the U.S. Secular Survey. These participants ranged in age from 18 to 24, and they identified with one or more nonreligious labels, such as atheist, secular, freethinker, humanist, skeptic, or agnostic. 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

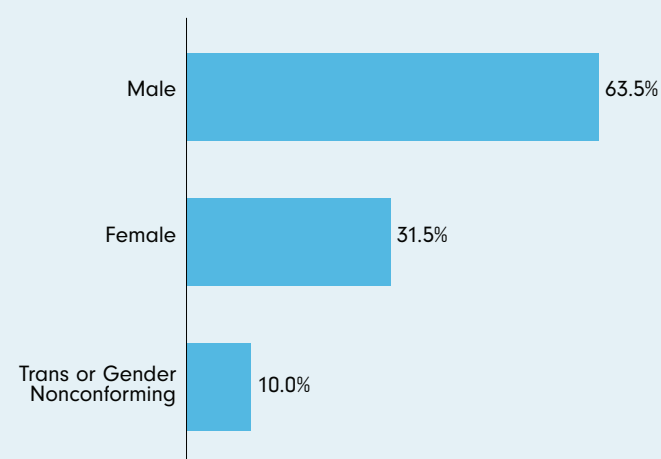
By the Numbers



Sex, Gender, and Sexuality

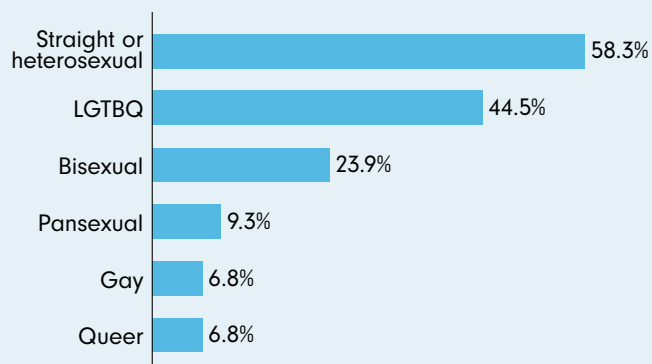
Gender Distribution

FIGURE 1



Sexual Orientation

FIGURE 2



Young people age 18 to 25 were **3.7 times as likely** to identify as trans or gender nonconforming.

Race & Ethnicity

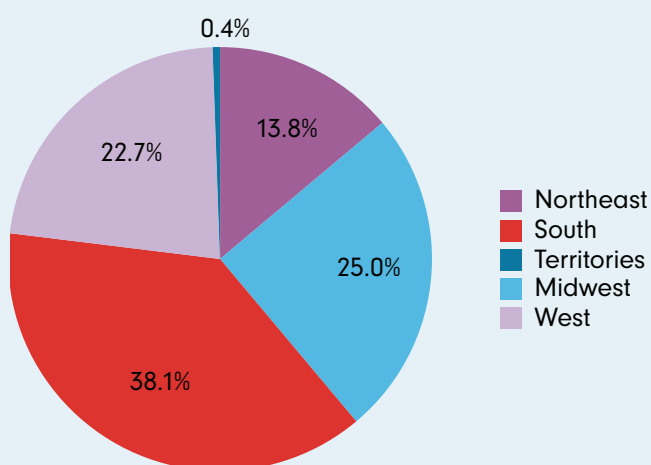
	Number of Participants	Percent
African American, Black	162	4.8%
Hispanic, Latino, Latina, Spanish	370	11.0%
Caribbean	34	1.0%
Asian, Asian American, or Pacific Islander	215	6.4%
Native American, American Indian, Alaskan Native	75	2.2%
Middle Eastern, Arab American	54	1.6%
White	2,888	85.6%
Biracial or Multiracial	363	10.8%

Younger nonreligious people were **more likely** than older participants to identify as Black, Hispanic/Latinx, Asian/Pacific Islander, Middle Eastern/Arab American, or Biracial/Multiracial.

Region & Community

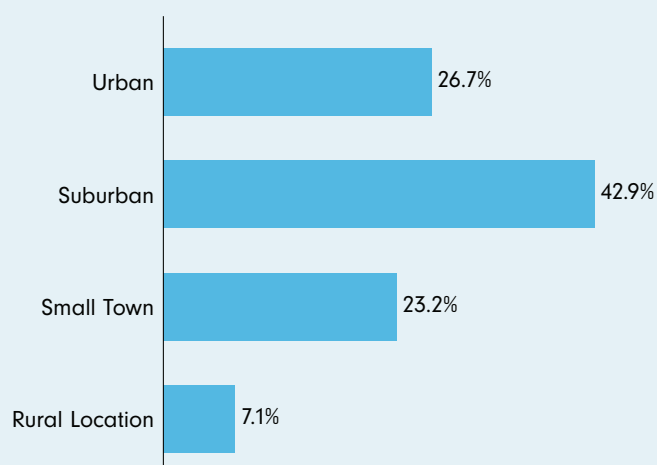
Census Region

FIGURE 3



Community Type

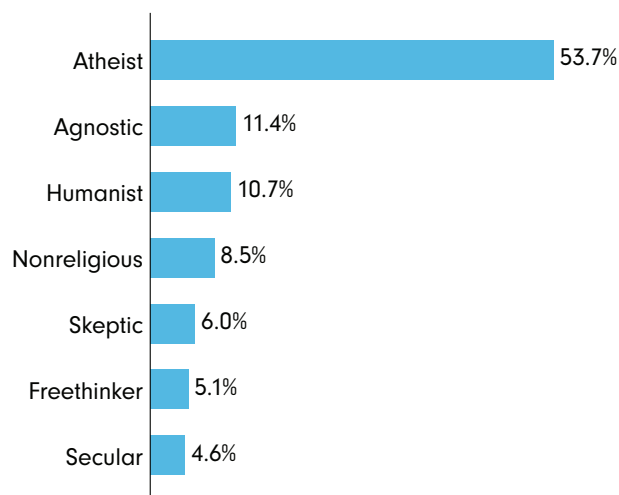
FIGURE 4



Nonreligious Identity & Upbringing

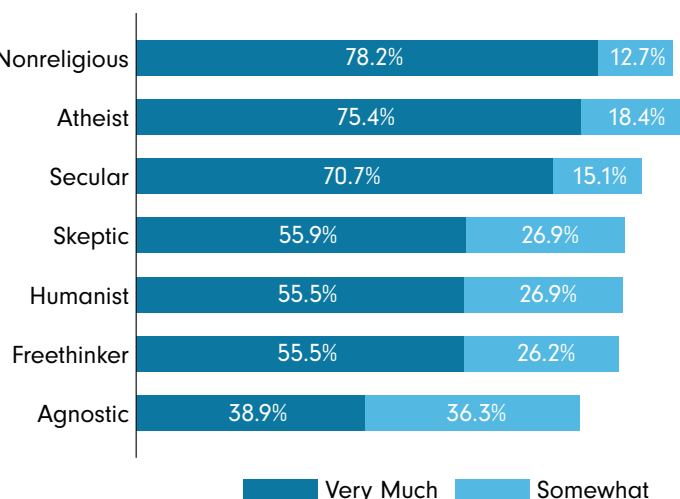
Primary Nonreligious Identification

FIGURE 4



Identification with Nonreligious Identities

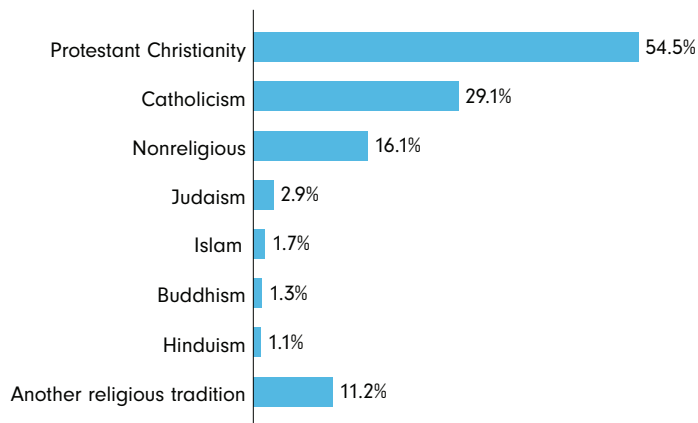
FIGURE 5



Compared to older participants, young people were **more likely** to identify as agnostic and **less likely** to identify “very much” with particular nonreligious labels.

Religious Upbringing

FIGURE 6

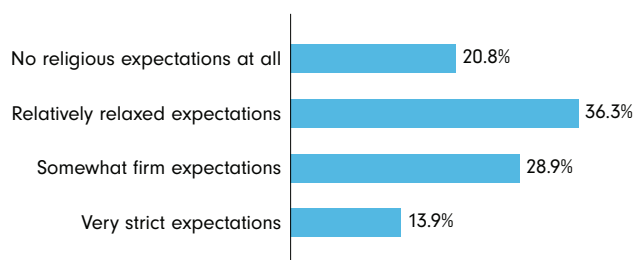


One in six (16.1%) youth participants were raised in nonreligious households, compared to one in seven (14.1%) among older participants.

Nearly **one in seven** (13.9%) had very strict religious expectations growing up, and more than **one in five** (20.8%) had no religious expectations at all.

Religious Expectations

FIGURE 7



BEING A NONRELIGIOUS YOUNG PERSON IN AMERICA

Family Rejection

Both anecdotally from communication with nonreligious youth and based on the focus group interviews that were conducted in planning for the U.S. Secular Survey, we anticipated a high level of family rejection of nonreligious young people due to their beliefs. Sadly, we discovered that family rejection was even more frequent than expected, that it has a significantly negative impact on nonreligious young people, and that it may result in concealment of nonreligious beliefs among youth.

Among participants under age 25, more than one fifth (21.9%) reported that their parents or guardians were not aware of their nonreligious beliefs. This coincides with youth participants' significantly higher rate of concealment of their nonreligious beliefs with their family of origin and extended family compared to older participants (see below, Concealment & Negative Outcomes).

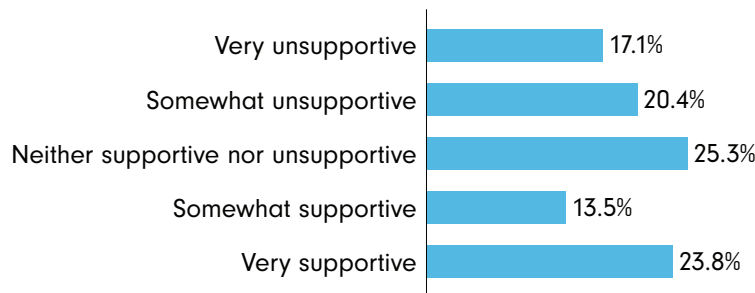
For those youth participants whose parents were aware of their nonreligious beliefs, more than one third (37.5%) reported that their parents were somewhat or very unsupportive of their nonreligious identity. LGBTQ youth participants encountered a higher level of family rejection than other youth. LGBTQ youth were more likely to say their families are somewhat or very unsupportive (40.4%) of their nonreligious identity compared to heterosexual, cisgender youth (34.9%).

Additionally, nearly two thirds (65.2%) of youth reported negative experiences due to their nonreligious identity with their families within the past 3 years. These numbers were even higher for youth living in "very religious" communities, where more than three quarters (77.9%) reported negative experiences with their family because of their nonreligious identity.

This type of family rejection had a significant negative impact on youth participants' psychological well-being. Youth participants with very unsupportive parents were 45.4% more likely to screen positive for depression than those with very supportive parents, and they scored 9.7% higher on loneliness. Those who reported negative experiences with their families due to their nonreligious beliefs were about two thirds more likely (65.5%) to screen positive for depression than those who did not or were not sure that they experienced a negative family event.

Level of Family Support

FIGURE 8



In *Reality Check*, we reported that among all participants, family rejection had a significant negative impact on participants' educational attainment. Specifically, among those 25 and older, **32.5%** of those with "very supportive" parents received a master's degree, professional degree, or doctorate, while just **23.2%** of those with "very unsupportive" parents did so. Furthermore, **nearly half** of participants with very unsupportive parents did not complete a four-year degree (46.1%), compared to about **one third** (32.4%) of participants with very supportive parents. Because the majority of our youth participants were currently in education or had not yet completed their education, this type of analysis could not be applied to them.

Discrimination & Stigma

The demographic trends are clear – the number of Americans who consider themselves religious has been declining for decades. Today's youth are less religious than any previous generation of Americans. However, this secularization is a gradual process that almost inevitably provokes backlash. Religion, specifically Christianity, continues to dominate American culture, and nonreligious people, particularly vulnerable groups like nonreligious young people, all-too-often face discrimination, harassment, and stigma because of their beliefs.

Half (50.3%) of youth participants had encountered negative experiences and discrimination while using social media or commenting online. This is especially concerning because participating in online secular communities and discussing their beliefs online may be the only available method for many young people to express or engage with their nonreligious beliefs. This is especially true for young people living in very religious areas or those whose parents are not supportive of their beliefs.

More than **one third** (38.6%) of nonreligious youth surveyed who were servicemembers or veterans reported negative experiences in the military because of their nonreligious beliefs. About **three percent** (3.3%) of youth participants were either servicemembers or veterans.

Discrimination in education can have a life-long negative impact on young people, and unfortunately, the data shows that nonreligious youth experience significant discrimination across the country because of their nonreligious beliefs. This type of discrimination can lead to young people being pushed out of school, to young people choosing not to seek out higher education, and to negative health and psychological outcomes, all of which can have significant implications for employment and future earning potential.

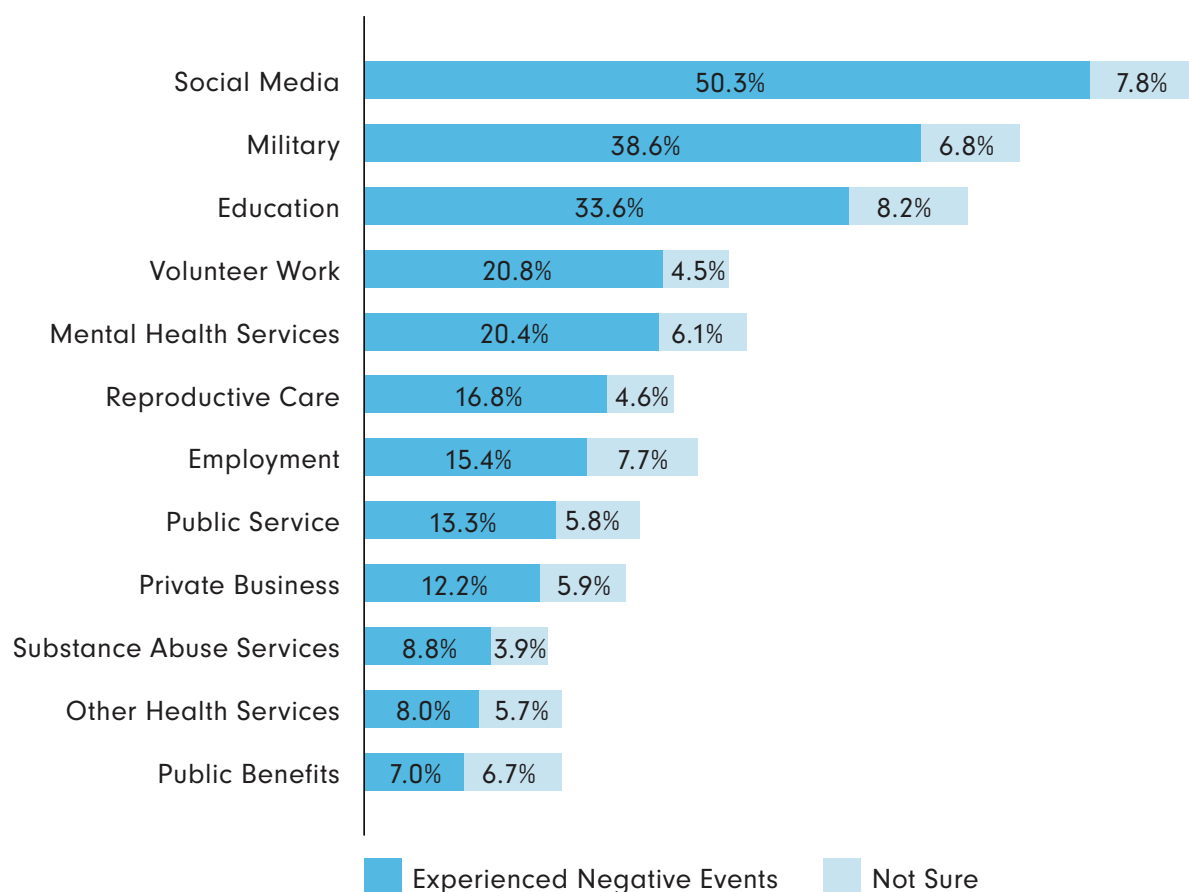
In the U.S. Secular Survey, nearly **one third** (33.6%) of youth participants who attend school or who have children attending school reported having had negative experiences in an educational setting within the past three years because of their nonreligious identity. Nonreligious youth participants were slightly **more likely** to encounter discrimination in education because of their beliefs than older participants (33.6% versus 28.5%). This rampant

discrimination against nonreligious people in education is further evidenced by a recent study showed that Muslim and atheist parents face disproportionate discrimination by public school principals (Pfaff et al., 2020). Notably, youth participants from states with protections against education discrimination on the basis of religion were **17.8% less likely** than those without to say they had a negative experience in education. (Data about state education nondiscrimination laws was compiled for American Atheists' forthcoming *2020 State of the Secular States* report, to be published in January 2021.)

Nonreligious youth participants were also slightly **more likely** to encounter discrimination in areas including volunteer work, mental health services, and reproductive care than their older counterparts.

Negative Experiences and Discrimination

FIGURE 9



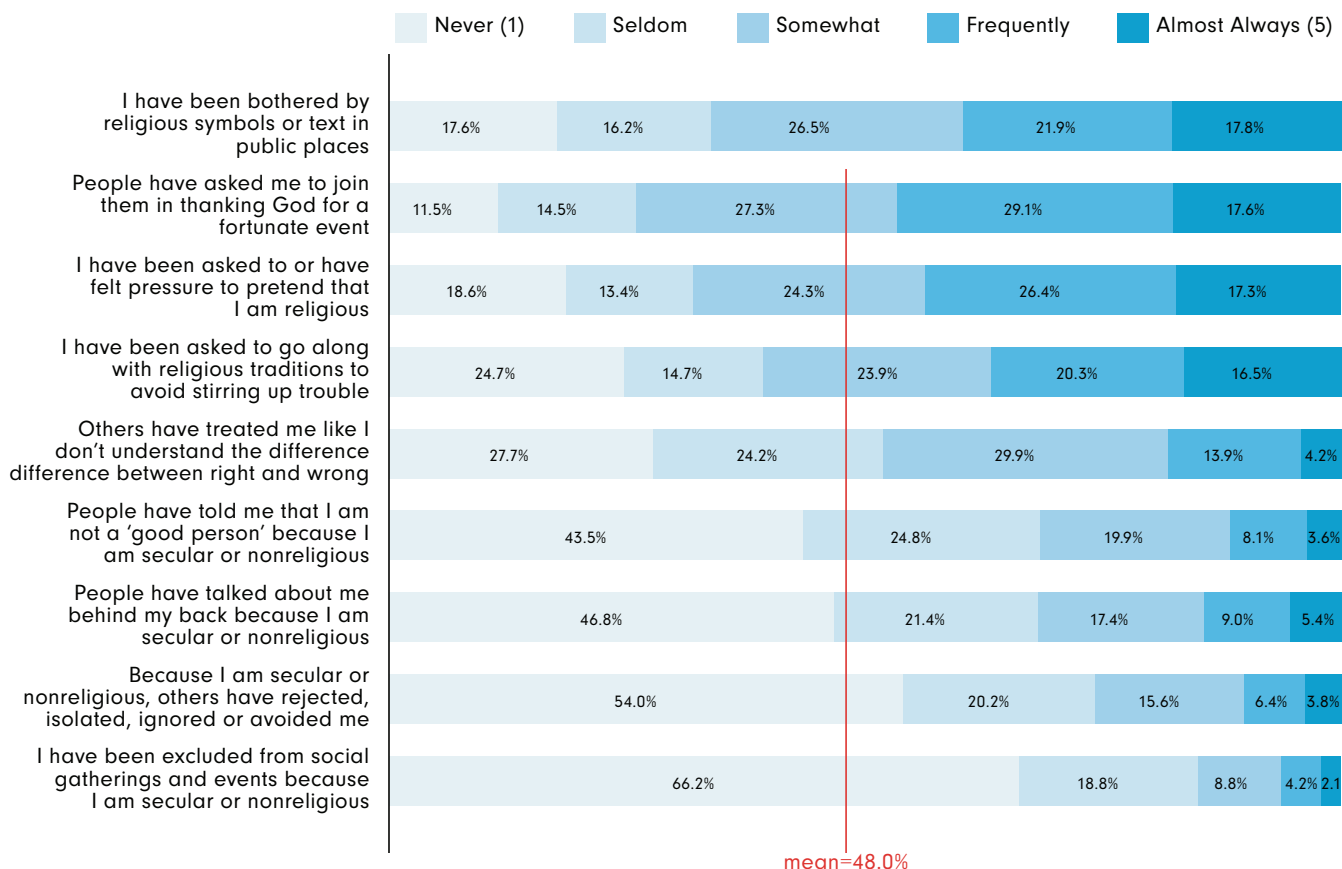
In addition to incidents of discrimination in various areas of life, nonreligious young people encounter widespread stigmatization as a result of their nonreligious identities and beliefs. Studies have shown that this type of minority stigma can result in increased negative outcomes for nonreligious people (Abbott & Mollen, 2018; Brewster et al., 2020). Stigma is characterized

by microaggressions, or brief and commonplace signals that communicate hostility or negativity to a culturally marginalized group.

To measure the level of stigma that they encounter, participants of the U.S. Secular Survey were asked to reflect how often they recalled experiencing certain microaggressions in the past year. On a scale of 1 – 5, with 5 representing high levels of stigma, young people averaged 2.40. This level of stigmatization was **12.6% higher** among young people compared to adults age 25 and up. The most common stigmatizing experiences youth reported included being asked to join in thanking God for a fortunate event and being asked to pretend to be religious. Nearly **two in five** youth reported frequently or almost always being bothered by religious symbols or text in public places, but this item was not included in the calculation of stigma. There was also some variation among subpopulations. For example, LGBTQ youth also experienced **9.3% more stigma** in comparison to cisgender and heterosexual youth.

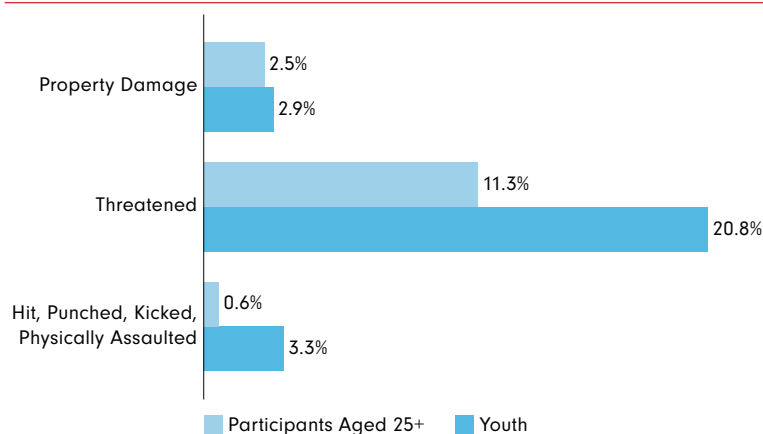
Stigmatizing Experiences

FIGURE 10



Finally, we found that nonreligious youth were significantly **more likely** to encounter physical harassment or assault because of their nonreligious beliefs than their older counterparts. About **one in five** (20.8%) youth reported having been threatened because of their nonreligious identity, **twice as frequently** as adults age 25+ (11.3%). Similarly, youth were **5.4 times as likely** to report an assault due to their secular identity compared to older participants.

Vandalism, Threats, and Assault Experienced **FIGURE 11**



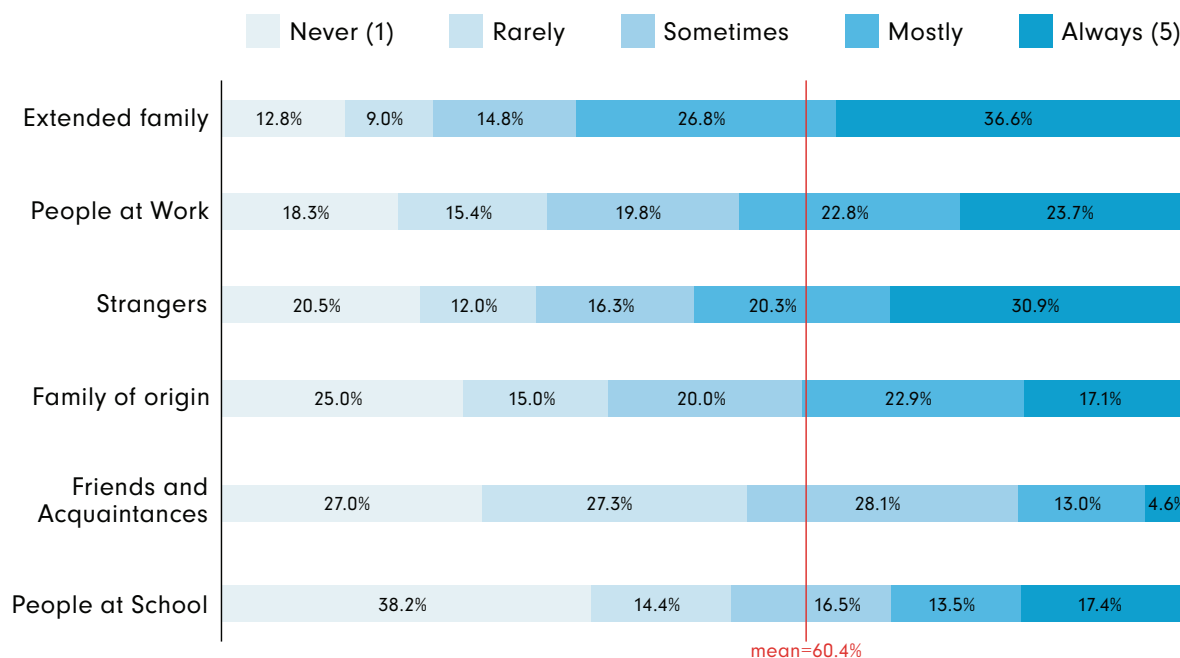
Concealment & Negative Outcomes

As a result of these high levels of discrimination and stigma, nonreligious youth had disparate negative outcomes, particularly with regard to concealment of their nonreligious beliefs and increased levels of loneliness and depression.

Youth participants were **2.5 times as likely** to say they mostly or always concealed their secular identities compared to adults age 25 and up. This affected nearly every area of life, but it was most pronounced with their family of origin and extended family. The only area where youth

Concealment of Nonreligious Identity

FIGURE 12



were less likely to conceal their identities was among people at school, which may indicate that school communities are an important source of support for nonreligious young people.

Concealment was notably higher among participants whose parents were either unaware of their nonreligious identity (27.6% higher) or were very unsupportive (23.5% higher) than among those whose parents were very supportive. Concealment was also significantly higher among those youth participants who experienced greater levels of stigma.

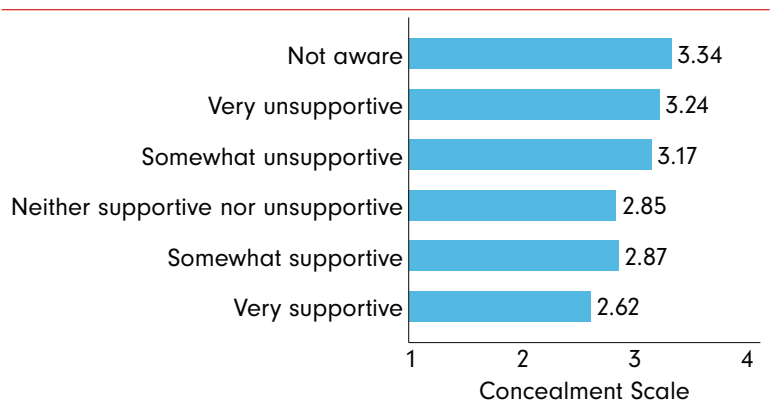
Significant research demonstrates that concealment can lead people to feel a lack of authenticity, to have difficulty establishing close ties with others, to experience more social isolation, and to have lower feelings of belonging and psychological well-being (see, for example, Quinn & Chaudoir, 2009; Quinn & Earnshaw, 2013; Quinn, 2017). Our data shows that concealment is associated with several types of negative outcomes among survey participants, including increased loneliness and risk for depression.

In order to assess the extent to which these various factors affect psychological outcomes, participants were asked various questions to measure their level of loneliness or social isolation and to screen for likely depression. With regard to loneliness or 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. Please refer to the *Reality Check* report for more details on how this construct was created.

Youth participants of the U.S. Secular Survey scored an average of 6.26 on the loneliness scale, which is nearly **one quarter** (24.7%) higher compared to older participants. There was some variation between subpopulations. For example, Native American youth experienced the highest average loneliness, being **11.1% more lonely** than other youth participants. Similarly, youth who identified as LGBTQ were **10% more lonely** than cisgender and heterosexual youth.

To assess the likelihood of depression, survey participants were asked two questions based on the “PHQ2” assessment (Spitzer et al., 1999). Over **one half** of all youth survey participants reported that they did not have little interest or pleasure in doing things (31.9%) or feel down,

Average Concealment by Level of Family Support FIGURE 13



depressed, or hopeless (31.2%). Slightly more than **one third**, however, had little interest or pleasure in doing things (37.8%) or felt down, depressed, or hopeless (36.1%) for several days over the past two weeks. When added together, the PHQ2 score ranges from 0 to 6; and the 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.”

Based on this analysis, more than **one third** (37.5%) of youth surveyed are likely to be depressed, compared to less than **one sixth** (15.1%) of older participants. In fact, youth participants were more than **three times as likely** to be depressed as adults age 25+. Those who reported education discrimination due to their nonreligious beliefs were **13.6% more likely** to screen positive for depression than those that did not.

We also saw that among nonreligious young people, the religiosity of their family and community can significantly impact their psychological well-being. For example, youth participants who were raised with strict religious expectations were **42.3% more likely** to screen positive for depression compared to all other youth. Similarly, youth that live in “very religious” communities were **one third** (33.5%) more likely to screen positive for depression than youth in “not at all” religious communities.

Youth participants that experienced threats or violence because of their nonreligious beliefs were significantly **more likely** to be depressed. Young people that experienced threats were **one half** (51.1%) more likely to screen positive for depression than other youth participants, and those who had been assaulted were **2.5 times as likely** as other youth.



IMPACT OF COMMUNITY RELIGIOSITY

One of the most striking findings of the *Reality Check* report is that the level of community religiosity dramatically affects the level of discrimination and stigmatization that nonreligious people face. For those participants living in very religious communities, marginalization based on their nonreligious beliefs was a ubiquitous experience, while for those living in less religious areas, incidents of discrimination based on their beliefs were infrequent, although they still encountered stigmatization.

As we consider the impact that this divergence has on young people, it is important to keep in mind that many nonreligious youth lack the means or opportunity to control the type of community they live in, especially if they are dependent on their parents for support. For this reason, educational environments may provide an important venue for identity development, expression of their nonreligious beliefs, and communities of support.

More than **one quarter** (28.1%) of nonreligious youth participants live in communities that are “very religious.” These nonreligious young people were more likely to experience high levels of stigma and discrimination as well as depression and loneliness. For example, youth living in “very religious” communities experienced stigma that was **41.3% greater** than those living in “not at all” or “a little bit religious” communities.

Community Religiosity

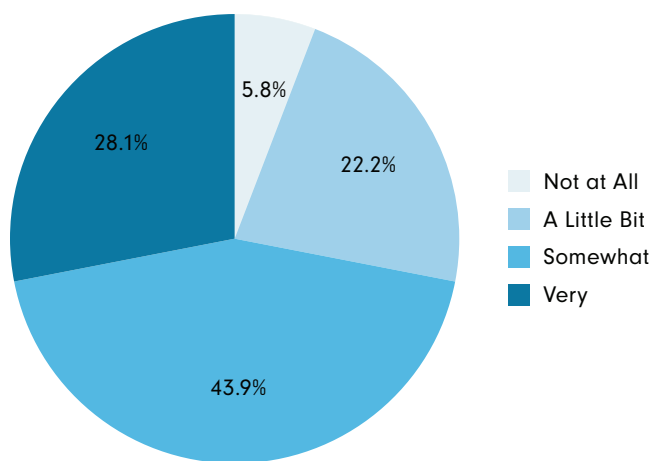
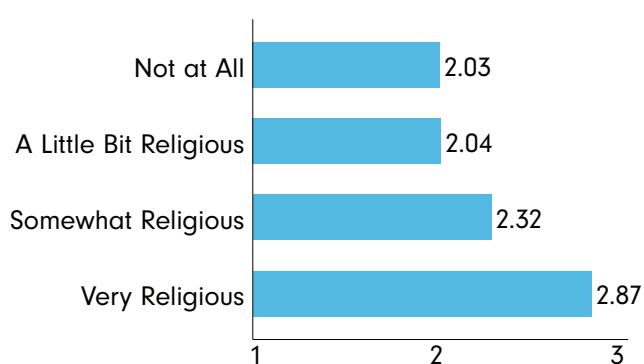
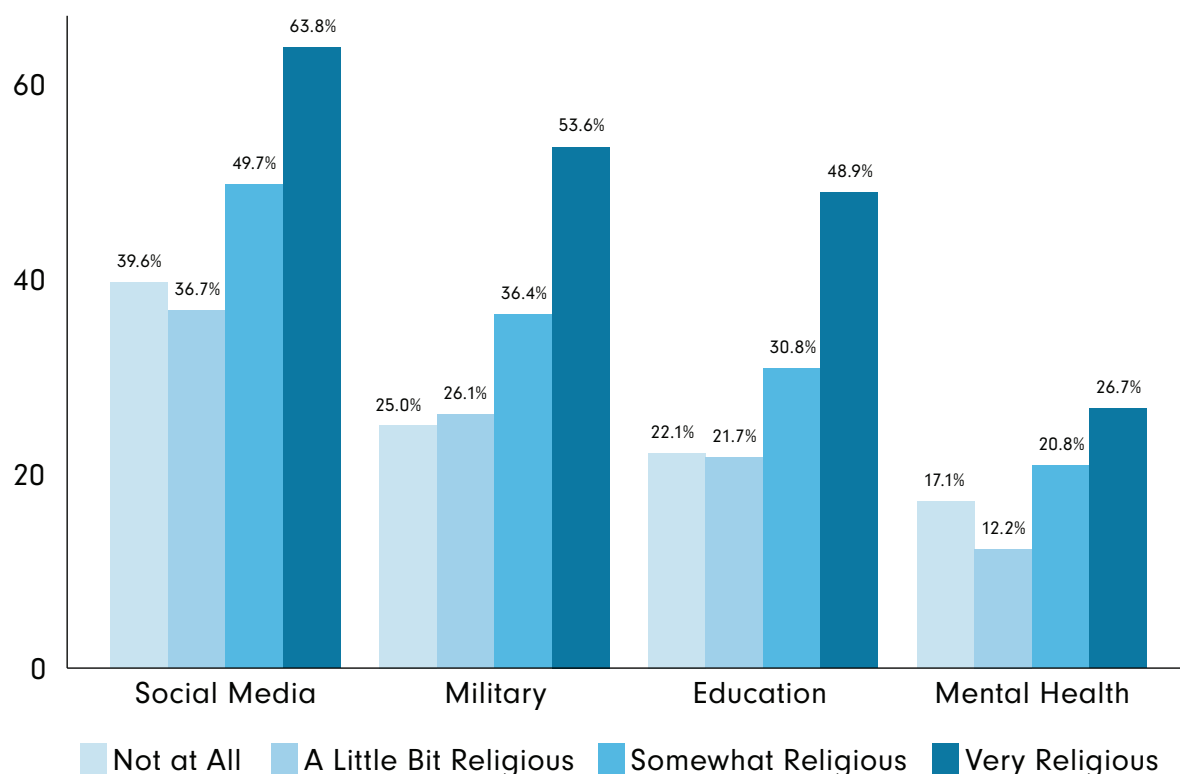


FIGURE 14

Average Stigma by Community Religiosity



Nonreligious young people living in “very religious” communities also encountered significantly higher rates of discrimination and negative events in various areas of life than their counterparts living in less religious communities. For example, youth who are servicemembers or veterans that lived in “very religious” areas were nearly **3.5 times as likely** to report that they experienced discrimination in the military than those living in “not at all” or “a little bit religious” communities. Education was similar, with those living in “very religious” areas more than **three times as likely** to experience discrimination than their counterparts.



Slightly more than **two fifths** (41.8%) of nonreligious youth living in “very religious” communities screened positive for depression, compared to **one third** (35.0%) of those living in “not at all” religious communities. This means that youth living in “very religious” communities were **one third more likely** (33.5%) than those residing in “not at all” religious communities to be depressed. Moreover, average loneliness among youth was **12.8% higher** in “very religious” communities compared to “not at all” religious communities.



ENGAGEMENT & ADVOCACY

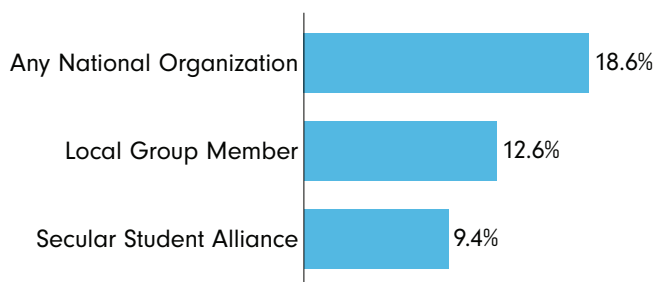
Engagement with secular organizations and advocacy can be formative experiences for nonreligious young people. Such advocacy can be particularly meaningful for nonreligious young people because it often directly impacts their lives. It is increasingly clear that Christian nationalists, and those who would like to upend America's traditional guarantees of religious equality, target young people with religiously coercive laws and policies. Laws requiring schools to have "In God We Trust" displays in every classroom, requiring schools to offer Bible classes (too often taught in an unconstitutional, devotional manner), providing special privileges to religious groups, or encouraging schools to "release" students to attend religious services during the school day, are intended to introduce religious symbolism into school, normalize Christian nationalism, and ostracize or indoctrinate religious minorities and nonreligious students.

Joining student organizations to engage in advocacy against these types of measures can be a form of active resistance for nonreligious young people. Similarly, many nonreligious young people join student organizations in order to connect with nonreligious peers, find a space where they can be open about their beliefs, receive support from others, and seek validation for their nonreligious views in a culture that disfavors them. This is even more important in very religious areas, where nonreligious young people are subject to heightened rates of discrimination and stigma. Too often, the communities they form at school or online can be the only refuge that nonreligious young people have against a religiously oppressive culture.

Involvement with Local & National Organizations

About **one in four** (23.2%) youth participants were involved in local or national secular organizations, which is a significantly lower rate of organizational involvement than older participants. For example, nonreligious young people were about **half as likely** as older participants to be involved with national secular organizations (18.6% vs. 36.0%). Similarly, young people were nearly **half as likely** to be involved with local organizations, with only **12.6%** of youth participants belonging to a local organization, compared to 23.1% of participants aged 25+. There are many potential factors for this difference in group involvement. For example, groups may not be available in areas where young people live, or they may not have the means to travel to them; youth may not be aware of secular organizations; they may feel that these organizations don't meet their needs or that they are intended for older people; or they have other mechanisms for building community outside of organized secularism.

Membership in Secular Organizations **FIGURE 17**

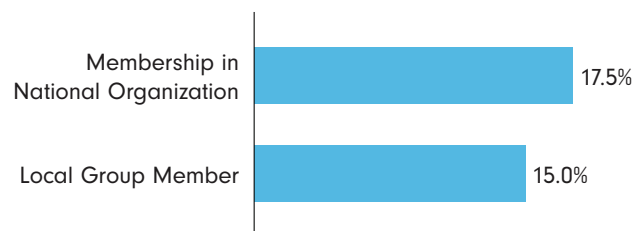


However, engagement with these organizations was an important protective factor for nonreligious youth. Youth that are members of a national secular organization were **17.5% less likely** than nonmembers to be at risk for depression. Similarly, young people that were involved with local secular groups were **15.0% less likely** to be at risk for depression.

Nearly **one in ten** (9.4%) youth participants reported that they were members of the Secular Student Alliance (SSA), although the actual number of such youth is likely to be significantly higher because students involved with local SSA groups may not have indicated involvement with the national organization. Overall, members of SSA saw improved outcomes compared to their peers. For example, members had slightly lower average concealment and average loneliness than youth who were not members of SSA. Moreover, while **one third** (33.1%) of those youth who were members of SSA were likely to be depressed, nearly **two in five** (38.0%) youth who were not members of SSA were likely to be depressed.

Protective Effect of Involvement with Organized Secularism

FIGURE 18



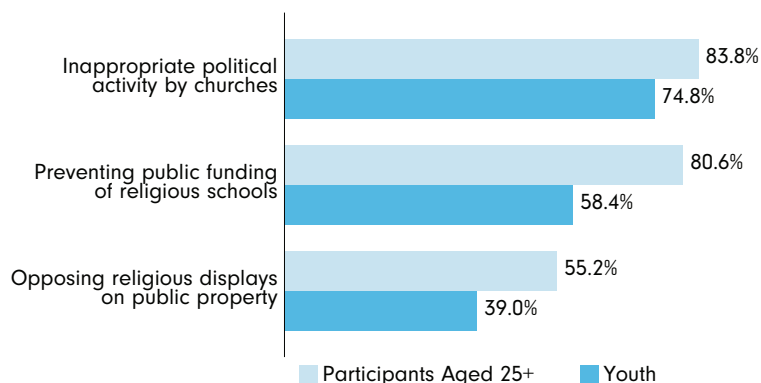
Voting & Policy Priorities

Nonreligious youth participants showed a high level of interest in voting and political engagement. More than **four in five** (82.7%) youth participants were registered to vote. Comparatively, among the general population, the U.S. Census Bureau Reports that 55.4% of adults ages 18-24 were registered to vote for the 2016 election. Because a significant part of our youth sample was not of sufficient age to vote in 2016, it is not possible to provide a comparable assessment of the voting rate of youth participants.

While youth and older participants of the U.S. Secular Survey held similar views of the importance of many secular policy issues, such as climate change, abortion, and LGBTQ rights, youth were significantly **less likely** to say that preventing inappropriate political activity by churches, preventing public funding of religious schools, and opposing religious displays on public property were very important than were adults age 25+. When asked about their top priorities for advocacy by secular organizations,

Variation in Policy Priorities By Age

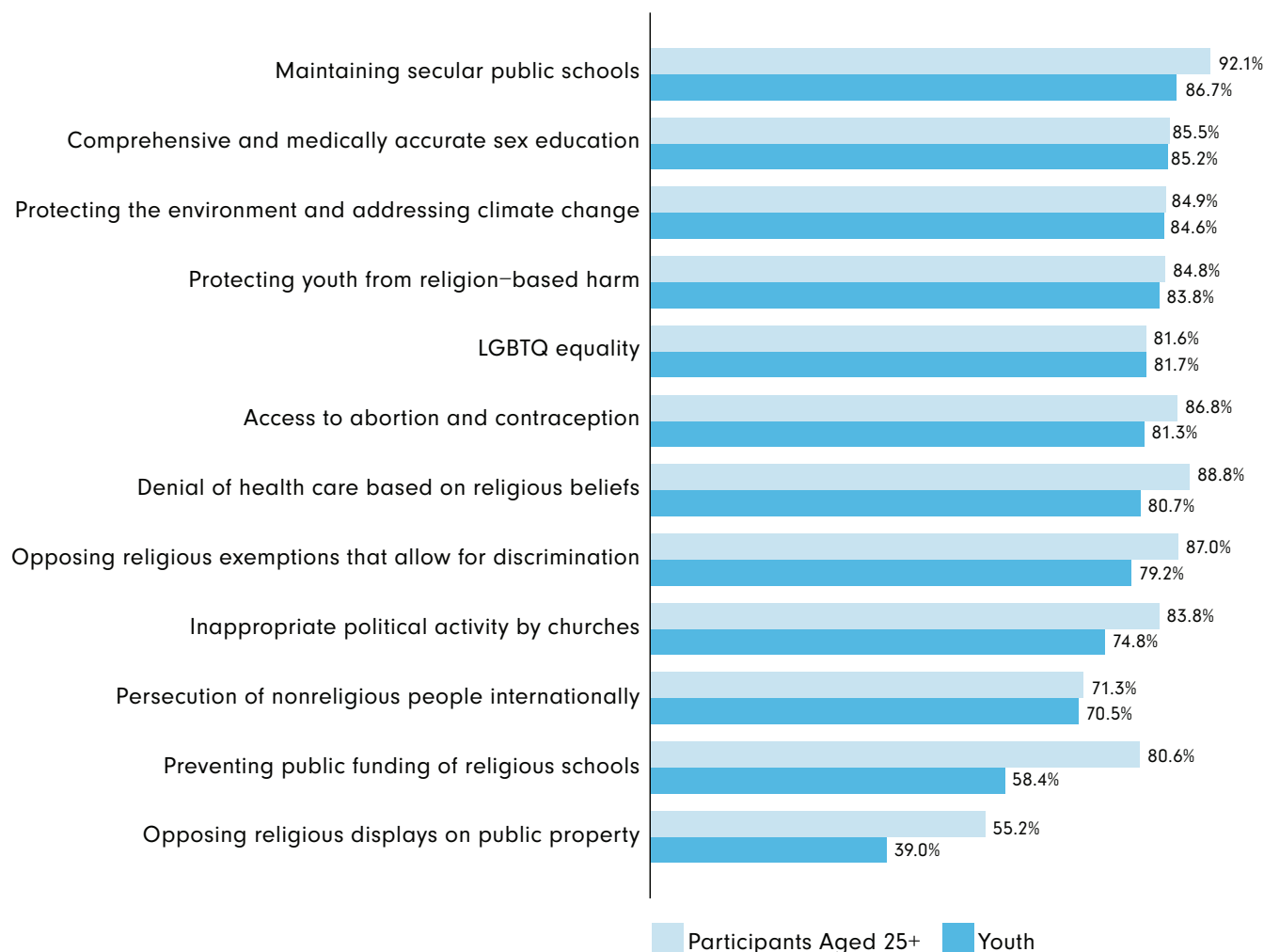
FIGURE 19



nonreligious youth ranked their priorities differently than older participants. While both groups more frequently selected maintaining secular public schools as a top priority (47.6% youth versus 52.4% older), youth participants also expressed a strong preference for protecting youth from religion-based harm (46.7% youth versus 32.1% older) and protecting the environment and addressing climate change (39.3% youth versus 34.2% older). Older participants more frequently prioritized opposing religious exemptions that allow for discrimination (36.7% youth versus 39.0% older) and access to abortion and contraception (35.2% youth versus 38.5% older). For both groups, opposing religious displays on public property was least frequently rated as a top priority (11.6% youth versus 13.4% older).

Policy Priorities Rated as Very Important

FIGURE 20



POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

There is an urgent need to address discrimination and stigma against nonreligious young people in our society. Even as America becomes more secular over time, nonreligious young people are subject to high rates of family rejection and to discrimination in education, both of which can have a dramatic, lifelong negative impact. This is particularly true in very religious communities because young nonreligious people in these areas are subject to heightened rates of discrimination, family rejection, and stigma, and yet they are more likely to lack supportive resources that can help address these deficits. Based on these findings, we recommend that states, school districts, educational institutions, and advocates:

- **1. Pass and implement supportive school policies, including inclusive state laws and policies that prohibit discrimination, bullying, and harassment on the basis of religion in education.** It is critical that such policies be accompanied with appropriate training for educators and school programs that are inclusive of nonreligious students.
- **2. Pass and implement school policies to ensure that educators understand their responsibility under the U.S. Constitution to prevent religious coercion in public schools.** Specific policy guidance and training will better enable educators to protect the religious freedom and equality of all students.
- **3. Repeal any school voucher programs that would redirect public funds to private schools that engage in discrimination.** These programs harm public schools and have a disproportionate negative impact on students that more often face religion-based discrimination, including nonreligious youth, religious minority youth, and LGBTQ youth.
- **4. Build and support organizations and communities of nonreligious young people.** Supportive student groups, such as Secular Student Alliances, online communities, and camps for nonreligious youth, are a critical protective factor for nonreligious young people.
- **5. Remove symbols of religious oppression from educational environments.** Inappropriate religious activity in public schools, including religious displays, Bible classes, and special privileges for religious students and groups, show clear favoritism towards dominant religious beliefs, hostility towards religious minorities and nonreligious people, and disdain towards the constitutional principles that underlie American democracy.

-
6. **Develop inclusive curricula and educational materials that emphasize the historical value of religious freedom and equality, as well as the contributions of nonreligious people.** Learning about these important concepts will help inform young people's engagement with our democracy and provide understanding regarding nonreligious people.

 7. **Raise awareness about the impact of family rejection on nonreligious young people.** Although our research indicates that such rejection is disturbingly common, particularly in very religious communities, and it has a clear detrimental impact on nonreligious youth, there is little discussion of this issue even within communities of nonreligious people.

For a more thorough assessment of state laws and policies that affect religious equality and the separation of religion and government, see American Atheists' **State of the Secular States** report, available at www.atheists.org/states.



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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 www.atheists.org.

The Secular Student Alliance is the largest network of atheist, humanist, and nonreligious students at high schools and colleges. The Secular Student Alliance is a national educational and advocacy non-profit organization dedicated to empowering secular students to proudly express their identity, build welcoming communities, promote secular values, and set a course for lifelong activism. With over 300 student chapters in high schools, colleges, and universities across the country, the Secular Student Alliance provides support for secular student leaders, scholarships, leadership training, an annual conference, and resources for educators and administrators. More information, a map of student chapters, and free student membership are available at www.secularstudents.org.

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