

## OPINION

## Religion's health effects should make doubting parishioners reconsider leaving

John Siniff and Tyler J. VanderWeele, Opinion contributors

Published 9:55 a.m. ET March 21, 2019 | Updated 1:20 p.m. ET March 21, 2019

*A new Harvard study has found that religious upbringing contributes positively to a wide range of health and well-being outcomes later in life.*

The sexual abuse scandals that plague the Catholic Church and have likewise been unearthed across Southern Baptist churches (<https://www.houstonchronicle.com/news/investigations/article/Southern-Baptist-sexual-abuse-spreads-as-leaders-13588038.php>), have left a trail of victims decades-long and miles-deep. But new research out of Harvard reveals potential collateral damage of these sacrilegious and criminal breaches of trust: It finds that children who are pulled from church, or religion, in the wake of these scandals might have poorer long-term health outcomes.

The research (<https://academic.oup.com/aje/article/187/11/2355/5094534>), directed by Professor VanderWeele and published out of Harvard's Chan School of Public Health, suggests that a religious upbringing can profoundly help adolescents navigate the challenges of those years. In fact, this first-of-its-kind longitudinal study — examining so many outcomes at once and following 5,000 adolescents over a period of eight years — found that a religious upbringing contributes positively to a wide range of health and well-being outcomes later in life.

This is a significant moment in American religion, as the sex abuse scandals encompass two faith traditions that lay claim (<http://cara.georgetown.edu/frequently-requested-church-statistics/>) to about (<http://www.sbc.net/becomingsouthernbaptist/fastfacts.asp>) 85 million people, or 1 in 4 Americans. And if, as a recent Gallup survey found, more than a third (<https://news.gallup.com/poll/247571/catholics-question-membership-amid-scandal.aspx>) of American Catholics say the scandal has made them question whether they will remain in the church, we must consider this not just an issue of religion, but one with public health implications as well.



**Read more commentary:**

[After Catholic Church sex abuse cover-ups, we in the pews must no longer simply pray & pay \(/story/opinion/2018/11/23/catholic-church-sex-abuse-coverups-reforms-pennsylvania-grand-jury-column/2060850002/\)](https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2018/11/23/catholic-church-sex-abuse-coverups-reforms-pennsylvania-grand-jury-column/2060850002/)

[Can you be a former Catholic? With new betrayal on child sex abuse, I'm about to find out \(/story/opinion/2018/11/14/im-leaving-catholic-church-over-new-betrayal-sex-abuse-and-coverups-column/1993187002/\)](https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2018/11/14/im-leaving-catholic-church-over-new-betrayal-sex-abuse-and-coverups-column/1993187002/)

[Three ways Catholics can fight sexual abuse in the church \(/story/opinion/2018/08/21/catholic-priests-sexual-abuse-church-pennsylvania-report-pope-francis-column/1037825002/\)](https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2018/08/21/catholic-priests-sexual-abuse-church-pennsylvania-report-pope-francis-column/1037825002/)

People don't make decisions of faith based on physical health, of course, as belief generally isn't centered on measurable values such as blood pressure ranges or cholesterol levels. Religion and spirituality are about the pursuit of God, the promise of the afterlife, or achieving a sense of meaning. But as a scientist who has studied the epidemiology of these issues (VanderWeele), and a former journalist who spent a decade exploring the intersection of religion and public life (Siniff), we believe it's incumbent upon people to be fully informed while making decisions about religious community that can impact this life — and, if you're a believer, the next.

Among the findings:

- ▶ Children who were raised in a religious or spiritual environment were better protected from the “big three” dangers of adolescence: depression, drugs, and risky sexual behaviors.
- ▶ Those who attended religious services regularly were subsequently 12 percent less likely to have high depressive symptoms and 33 percent less likely to use illicit drugs.
- ▶ Those who prayed or meditated frequently were 30 percent less likely to start having sex at a young age and 40 percent less likely to have a sexually transmitted disease.
- ▶ Moreover, children with a religious upbringing were also more likely to subsequently have higher levels of happiness, of a sense of purpose, of volunteering, and of forgiveness of others.

Though these health data points are significant, we believe what occurs in church and religious environments — but not captured in the data — shapes the important psychological and health benefits that children will carry with them well into adulthood. Having a shared set of beliefs, practices and values instilled at an early age arms young people with some of the tools to navigate the pressure chamber of adolescence. Seeing adult members of their community, beyond their parents, striving to live virtuous lives can be formative. Whether by volunteering in the community — a mission of many faith traditions — or simply showing reverence for something greater than themselves, religion itself demands reflection and feeds self-understanding and self-awareness. It's easy to see how these virtues would be useful to adolescents testing their own boundaries and facing peer pressure.

## Religion has public health impacts

### Newsletters

**Get the **Today's Talker** newsletter in your inbox.**

Round up of commentary on the day's top issue.

Delivery: Mon - Thurs

Your Email



Simply from a public health perspective, the continuing diminution of religious upbringing in America would be bad for health. This is not proselytizing; this is science. At a time when the number of “Nones (<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/08/08/why-americas-nones-dont-identify-with-a-religion/>)” in the U.S. is rising, following the trends of [Western Europe \(https://www.pewforum.org/2018/05/29/being-christian-in-western-europe/pf\\_05-29-](https://www.pewforum.org/2018/05/29/being-christian-in-western-europe/pf_05-29-)

[18\\_religion-western-europe-00-15/](#)), the dual scandals stand to precipitate a rush to the exits for millions of people. Such an exodus — no matter the reason — stands to have a significant negative impact, on average, on America's youth.

Many might wonder whether these associations with religion and spiritual practices actually cause the health and well-being outcomes. In essence, asking, "Could it be that those who are already happier or who refrain from drug use are naturally drawn to religion?" The research dealt with this in several ways, from considering a child's upbringing 8-14 years before the health and psychological well-being outcomes were evaluated, to controlling for variables (health, psychological, social and demographic) that might explain the relationship. (VanderWeele and his colleagues even created a new measure, called the E-Value (<https://annals.org/aim/article-abstract/2643434/sensitivity-analysis-observational-research-introducing-e-value>), to evaluate the evidence for causality.)

We know this research does nothing to address those rightly outraged by what is outrageous and unconscionable, and it is not intended to do so. None of this is brought to the fore to excuse the crimes against children or to breeze past the institutional scandals that have driven people from belief and God and faith altogether. The wounds of those crimes will not heal for generations, and justice should be served.

## Reconsider religion before leaving

We also understand that our argument might be dismissed by natural skeptics of faith as more religion-favoring pabulum to be ignored alongside holy texts, prayer clothes and cavernous houses of faith. Fortunately, one doesn't have to believe in God to value and understand the science. In fact, we hope famed Oxford biologist and atheist Richard Dawkins — who once likened a religious upbringing to child abuse (<https://books.google.com/books?id=yq1xDpicghkC&pg=PA356&dq=Horrible+as+sexual+abuse+no+doubt+was,+the+damage+was+arguably+less+than+the+long-term+psychological+damage+inflicted+by+bringing+the+child+up+Catholic+in+the+first+place+god+delusion&hl=en#v=onepage&q=Horrible%20as%20sex+term%20psychological%20damage%20inflicted%20by%20bringing%20the%20child%20up%20Catholic%20in%20the%20first%20place%20god%20delusion>) might spend a little time with the Harvard research to inform his next book, which he says will tackle "atheism for children" (<https://twitter.com/RichardDawkins/status/1031911012813950977?s=20>)."

The research simply presents one more data point of many that can inform a family, or person, standing at the crossroads of faith. Parents of any faith who are reconsidering attendance — whether out of mere convenience, in response to these crimes or for some other reason — should pause to consider all the evidence. What's clear is that pulling children out of religious communities might be akin to throwing out the baby with the bathwater.

As fathers of young children ourselves, we understand the gravity of these decisions as well as the instinct to put ourselves between these young innocent souls and anything that would do them harm. But we know, too, that completely abandoning religion because of the sins of man may not just be bad for the soul, but also for the mind and the body.

*Tyler J. VanderWeele is the John L. Loeb and Frances Lehman Loeb Professor of Epidemiology at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health and the director of the Human Flourishing (<https://hfh.fas.harvard.edu/>) Program at Harvard University. John Siniff is a former editor at USA TODAY's Editorial Page and founder of the newspaper's On Religion weekly series that examined the intersection of faith and public life. He now works at Subject Matter (<http://teamsubjectmatter.com/>), a strategic communications firm in Washington, D.C. Follow John on Twitter: @jmsiniff (<https://twitter.com/jmsiniff>).*

*You can read diverse opinions from our Board of Contributors (<http://usatoday.com/reporters/boc.html>), and other writers on the Opinion front page (<http://usatoday.com/opinion/>), on Twitter @usatodayopinion (<https://twitter.com/usatodayopinion>) and in our daily Opinion newsletter (<https://profile.usatoday.com/newsletters/opinion/>). To respond to a column, submit a comment to [letters@usatoday.com](mailto:letters@usatoday.com).*

Read or Share this story: <https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2019/03/21/study-leaving-religion-sex-abuse-scandals-affects-public-health-column/3224575002/>