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Canadian Centre for Justice  
Statistics Profile Series

# Religious Groups in Canada



This paper is one in a series of ten profiles funded through the federal Policy Research Initiative. The objective of these profiles is to provide data analysis on the experience of various groups as victims and offenders\* in the criminal justice system.

The profiles are based on Statistics Canada sources and include a mix of demographic, economic and justice data as well as information specific to each group.

**Other profiles in this series include:**

- Aboriginal People in Canada
- Canadians with Disabilities
- Canadians with Literacy Problems\*\*
- Canadians with Low Incomes
- Children and Youth in Canada
- Immigrants in Canada
- Seniors in Canada
- Visible Minorities in Canada
- Women in Canada

\* Data on offenders is only available for the following: Aboriginal People, Children and Youth, Seniors, and Women.

\*\* The literacy profile does not include a criminal justice component.

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# Religious Groups in Canada

## Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Religious Groups<sup>1</sup>

### **Most Canadians report some religious affiliation**

There have been some dramatic changes in recent years in the religious affiliation and attendance of Canadians, as well as an increase in the proportion of the population who report no religious affiliation.

The large majority of the Canadian population continues to report affiliation with some religious grouping. In 1999, 77% of the population said they had some kind of religious affiliation, while 16% reported no religious affiliation.<sup>2</sup> It should be noted, however, that the latter category does not necessarily signify an absence of spiritual beliefs; instead, it may be

that those who chose this category do not identify with a particular religious group.

The share of the population with no religion, however, has increased substantially since the 1970s. In 1999, 16% of Canadians said they had no religious affiliation, up from 13% in 1991, and 7% in both 1981 and 1971.<sup>3</sup>

### **Most Catholic or Protestant**

Most Canadians are affiliated with either Catholic or Protestant religions. In fact, historically, the vast majority of the population has belonged to one of these two groups. In 1871, for example, 98% of the population belonged to one of these two major denominational groups, and this was true for 96% of the total population as recently as 1951. However, the share of the population reporting affiliation with

either the Catholic or Protestant denominations has fallen in recent decades, and by 1999, only 71% of all Canadians still belonged to these religious groups.

<sup>1</sup> This profile provides descriptive socio-demographic and criminal justice characteristics associated with religious groups. It does not necessarily account for the possibility that some additional factors, such as age, sex, visible minority status and immigration status may also be correlated with religion. For more information on these additional factors, please refer to the other profiles in this series.

<sup>2</sup> Approximately 7% of the population did not state their religious affiliation.

<sup>3</sup> In censuses prior to 1971, it was assumed that all persons had a religious affiliation and that the 1971 census was the first in which "no religion" was listed as an option.

### Box 1: Religious Groups

The data in this profile are drawn from two sources: the Census of Canada and the General Social Survey (GSS). Since the question on religious affiliation is a decennial census question, the most recent census data are from 1991. More recent and intercensal data, along with information on religious attendance, have been obtained from the 1999 General Social Survey.

The General Social Survey has a number of categories for religious groups. Due to the small sample sizes among some of the categories, they have been collapsed into the following 8 categories:

Religious Group	Includes:	1999 GSS Population % Distribution:
Catholic	Roman Catholic, Ukrainian Catholic, Polish Catholic, Other Catholic	40.9
Protestant	United Church, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Anglican, Baptist, Jehovah's Witnesses, Pentecostal, Mormons, Other Protestant	30.2
Eastern Orthodox	Greek Orthodox, Ukrainian Orthodox, Russian Orthodox, Other Orthodox	1.3
Other Eastern Religions	Islam, Buddhist, Hindu, Sikh, Bahai, Etc.	3.5
Jewish		.8
Other	Atheist, Free Thinker, Humanist, New Age, Scientology, New Thought, Native Indian or Inuit, Etc.	.4
No Religion		16.1
Don't Know/Not Stated		6.8

At the same time, there have been changes in the distribution of Canadians reporting affiliation with the Catholic and Protestant denominations. In particular, there has been a marked decline in the share of the population affiliated with the various Protestant denominations. In 1999, for example, 30% of Canadians said they belonged to one of the Protestant denominations, but this was down from 41% in 1981 and around 50% in both 1951 and 1961. Indeed, Protestant denominations had consistently accounted for around 55% of the population from Confederation through the 1930s.

In contrast, the share of the population reporting affiliation with the Catholic Church has remained relatively constant during this period. In fact, the percentage of Catholics in the population is now higher than it was during the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In 1999, 41% of Canadians said they were Catholic, down somewhat from a decade earlier, but up from 39% in 1911 and 1921.

There has been an increase in the proportion of Canadians reporting they are affiliated with a religion other than Catholic or Protestant. In 1999, 6% of the population said they belonged to a group other than Catholic or Protestant, up from 4% in 1981.

The increase in the share of the population belonging to a religious group other than Catholic or Protestant, was accounted for by those in the Other Eastern religions and other religions. In 1999, people affiliated with Eastern religions such as Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism, and Buddhism, as well as para-religious groups such as New Thought, Native Indian or Inuit religions, made up 4% of the Canadian population, more than double the figure in 1981. In contrast, there have been slight declines in the share of the population reporting affiliation with either Judaism or the Eastern Orthodox religions in this period.

### ***Provincial religious distributions***

There is considerable variation in the religious distributions within the various provinces. For example, the vast majority of people in Quebec – 86% in 1991 – were affiliated with the Catholic religion. Catholics also made up the majority of those in New Brunswick, where 54% of residents said they were affiliated with the Roman Catholic Church. In contrast, Protestants accounted for the largest religious groupings in the other provinces. That year, the share of people reporting affiliation with a Protestant denomination in these provinces ranged from 61% in Newfoundland to 44% in Ontario.

At the same time, British Columbia had the largest proportion of people with no religion. In 1991, 31% of residents of British Columbia said they had no religious affiliation, while the figure in the remaining provinces ranged from 20% in Alberta to just 2% in Newfoundland.

British Columbia was also home to a relatively large proportion of people reporting affiliation with religious groups other than Catholics and Protestants. In 1991, 6% of all B.C. residents said they were affiliated with either Eastern Orthodox, Judaism, or Eastern religions. This was the second highest figure in Canada behind only Ontario, where 8% of all residents belonged to one of these religious groups. At the same time, the figures were 5% in both Alberta and Manitoba, 4% in Quebec, 3% in Saskatchewan, and 1% or less in each of the Atlantic Provinces.

### ***Women more likely to report a religious affiliation***

Women are somewhat more likely than men to report affiliation with some religious grouping; as a result, women represent the slight majority of those in most religious affiliations. In 1991, just over half of the people affiliated with both the Catholic Church and Protestant denominations, as well as Judaism and para-religious groups, were women. In contrast, men made up the majority of those reporting affiliation with either the Eastern

Orthodox or the Other Eastern religious groups.

### ***Age***

Older Canadians are generally more likely to report some kind of religious affiliation than their younger counterparts. In 1991, for example, 94% of persons aged 65 and over, versus 86% of those between the ages of 15 and 44, reported some religious affiliation. While younger persons, were more highly represented in Eastern Orthodox, Other Eastern and para-religious groups, those in older age ranges were more likely to be represented among those reporting that they were Catholic, Protestant or Jewish.

### ***Higher education, lower religious affiliation***

The higher the educational attainment of Canadians, the less likely they are to report some kind of religious affiliation. In 1991, among people aged 25-44, 17% of those with a university degree said they were not affiliated with any religious grouping, whereas this was the case for only 5% of those who had not gone to high school. Still, the majority of the population aged 25-44, whatever their level of formal educational training, expressed affiliation with some religious grouping. That year, 83% of those with a university degree and 95% with less than Grade 9 reported they were affiliated with some religious group.

## **Acknowledgements**

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### Religious affiliation among Immigrants and Aboriginal people

There is a particularly wide diversity in religious affiliation among immigrants. For example, a relatively large share of immigrants report they belong to a religious group other than Catholic or Protestant. In fact, 18% of immigrants living in Canada in 1991 belonged to one of the Eastern Orthodox, Other Eastern religions, Jewish, or para-religious groups, compared with only 3% of the population born in Canada.

Immigrants were especially likely to belong to an Other Eastern religious group. In 1991, 16% of all immigrants, versus just 2% of the non-immigrant population, belonged to one of these religions. Indeed, that year, 60% of all those affiliated with an Other Eastern religion were immigrants.

Immigrants are also somewhat more likely than other Canadians not to report any religious affiliation. In 1991, 15% of immigrants, versus 12% of the non-immigrant population, did not have any religious affiliation. Again, however, the large majority of immigrants (85%) said they had some kind of religious affiliation.

At the same time, Aboriginal people in Canada are about as likely as the rest of the population to report some kind of religious affiliation. In 1991, 87% of all those identifying as Aboriginal people said they had some religious affiliation, while 13% said they had no such affiliation. As with the overall population, most Aboriginal people report affiliation with either the Catholic Church or Protestant denominations. In 1991, 51% of Aboriginal people said they were Catholic and 34% reported affiliation with a Protestant denomination, while 2% reported affiliation with another group, such as traditional Native Indian or Inuit religions.

### Church attendance

Although the majority of Canada's population is affiliated with a religious denomination, a large

share does not attend a religious service regularly. In fact, in 1999, only 20% of all Canadians aged 15 and over attended some kind of religious activity on a weekly basis.

Older Canadians are more likely than their younger counterparts to attend religious activities on a regular basis. In 1999, 34% of seniors and 28% of those aged 55-64 attended a religious activity at least weekly, whereas this was the case for only 20% of those aged 45-54, 17% of those aged 35-44 and around 14% of those under age 35.

As well, women are considerably more likely than men to attend regular religious activities. In 1999, 23% of women aged 15 and over, versus 17% of men, attended a religious activity at least once a week.

There is also wide variation in participation in religious observances among the various religious groups. In 1999, for example, 32% of those affiliated with Other Eastern religions and 25% of Catholics reported attending a religious service at least once a week. In contrast, the figure was 29% among Protestant denominations, 14%

among Eastern Orthodox religions, and 12% for members of the Jewish community.

## Religious Attendance and the Criminal Justice System

### Those who never attend religious services more likely to be victimized

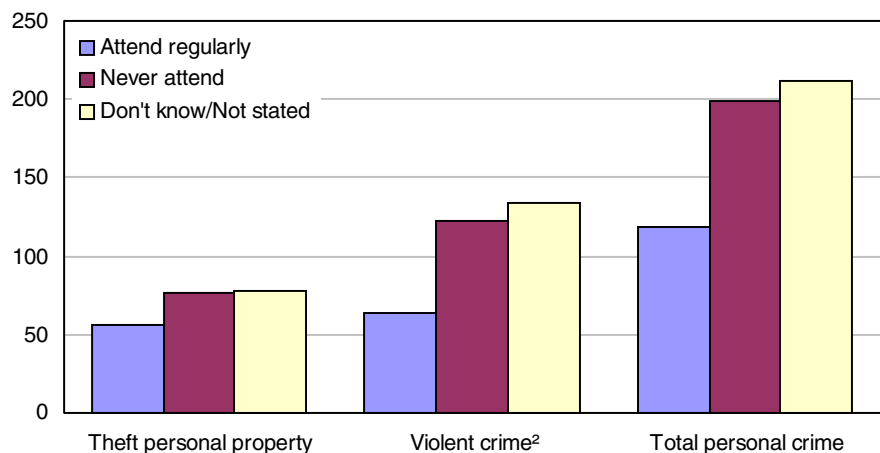
According to the 1999 General Social Survey (GSS), there were some variations in victimization between those who attended religious services weekly and those who never attended. Approximately 20% of regular attenders reported being victimized at least once in the 12 months preceding the survey, as compared to 28% of those who never attended.

Accordingly, overall rates of personal victimization were higher for those who never attended religious services (199 incidents per 1,000 population) than those who attended weekly (119 incidents per 1,000 population) (see Figure 1). Since older Canadians are more likely than their younger counterparts to attend religious activities, and women are considerably more likely than men to attend regular

Figure 1

### Those who never attend religious services more likely to be victims of personal crime<sup>1</sup>

Rate per 1,000 population



<sup>1</sup> Includes incidents of spousal physical and sexual assault

<sup>2</sup> Includes sexual assault, assault and robbery

Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 1999.



religious activities, many of the differences between religious groups may be attributed to the age and sex of those who frequently attend religious services and those who never attend. However, even controlling for the effects of age and sex, those who never attended religious services were still more likely to be victimized than those who attended weekly.

Among the specific crime types,<sup>4</sup> rates of assault were lower among weekly attenders (45 incidents per 1,000 population) than those who never attended (99 per 1,000). Similarly, rates of theft of personal property were also lowest among weekly attenders (56 per 1,000 population) as compared to groups who never attended (77 per 1,000 population). There were no statistically significant differences, however, in sexual assault rates between those who attended regularly and those who did not attend at all.

#### ***Church attendance does not affect perceptions of neighbourhood crime***

Respondents to the General Social Survey were asked about whether they felt crime in their neighbourhood had increased, decreased or stayed the same in the last 5 years, as well as whether they believed that their neighbourhood had a higher, about the same, or lower amount of crime compared to other areas in Canada. The level of religious attendance had no effect on perceptions of neighbourhood crime. All groups were most likely to report that crime in their neighbourhood had remained the same over the last 5 years (between 54% and 56%). Furthermore, approximately 60% of respondents in each group felt that crime was lower in their neighbourhood compared to other areas in Canada.

#### ***Feelings of safety from crime similar among religious groups***

While the 1999 General Social Survey measured incidents of victimization, it also examined fear

#### **Box 2: The General Social Survey**

Statistics Canada, as part of the General Social Survey Program, conducts a survey on criminal victimization every 5 years. The most recent survey was conducted in 1999, and involved telephone interviews with approximately 26,000 people, aged 15 and older, living in the 10 Canadian provinces. Similar to previous surveys, all respondents were asked about their experiences with criminal victimization, and their opinions on a variety of justice related topics including their fear of crime, and their perceptions about the performance of the police, criminal courts, prison and parole systems.

In the 1999 General Social Survey, two questions on religion were asked: one concerning religious affiliation, and the other, on frequency of attendance at religious services or meetings. Due to the fact that there were many religious groups with small sample sizes and high sampling variability, it was not feasible to address issues of victimization through the examination of individual religious groups. However, research has shown that attendance at religious services can influence attitudes, which in turn can have an impact on behaviour.<sup>5</sup> In light of this finding, the criminal justice component of the religion profile has been analyzed by examining differences in victimization, fear and perceptions of the justice system between those who attend religious services regularly and those who never attend religious services.

Since, as indicated in the previous section, older Canadians are more likely than younger Canadians, and women are more likely than men to attend regular religious activities, many of the differences between religious attendance groups may be attributed to the age and sex of those who frequently attend religious services and those who never attend. In the bivariate analysis, while fear levels and perceptions of the justice system were quite similar among religious attendance groups, there was a substantial difference in victimization between the two groups. For this reason, logistic regression analysis was undertaken in order to assess the independent impact of religious attendance on victimization, controlling for age and sex. When the effects of these socio-demographic variables were controlled for, the frequency of religious attendance still had an effect on victimization. In other words, controlling for the age and sex of the respondents, those who never attended religious services were more likely to be victimized than those attended weekly.

It is important to note that the GSS data are estimates. They are based on information collected from a sample of the population and are therefore subject to sampling error. The GSS analysis uses the coefficient of variation (CV) as a measure of the sampling error. Any estimate with a CV of more than 33.3% is considered unreliable and is not published. When the CV of the estimate is between 16.6% and 33.3%, the symbol '†' is used. These estimates should be used with caution.

and safety levels. Despite the fact that the risk of personal victimization was lower among those who attended church weekly than those who never attended, religious attendance did not have a large impact on feelings of personal safety. Over 90% of respondents, regardless of their level of church attendance, reported that they felt somewhat or very satisfied with their personal safety from crime (see Table 1).

#### ***Church attendance and perceptions of the justice system***

When asked about whether their local police force, the criminal courts, the prison system and the parole system were doing a good job, an average job or a poor job

<sup>4</sup> The rates of robbery for those who attend religious services regularly and those who never attend were too small to be expressed.

<sup>5</sup> See Clark (1998).

on specific measures of performance, regular church attenders and those who never attended assessed these agencies quite consistently, with some slight variations on certain aspects of performance. For example, with respect to certain measures of police performance, the perceptions of those who attended regularly were slightly more positive than those who never attended religious services (see Table 2).

All respondents, regardless of the level of church attendance, were less likely to give positive assessments of the courts, the prison and the parole systems than they were in assessing police performance.<sup>6</sup> The assessments of regular church attenders and those who never attended were quite consistent with respect to court, prison and parole performance. When there were variations in assessments of individual measures of performance, the differences between the religious groups ranged from 2% and 5%.

## References

Clark, Warren. "Religious Observance, Marriage and Family," *Canadian Social Trends Catalogue*, no. 11-008-XPE, Ottawa, Statistics Canada, Housing, Family and Social Statistics Division, Autumn 1998.

<sup>6</sup> *There was a high proportion of 'don't know' and 'not stated' responses for questions on perceptions of the performance of the Canadian criminal courts, the prison system and the parole system.*



Table 1

**Feelings of safety from crime by religious attendance<sup>1</sup>, 1999**

	% of population		
	Attend regularly	Never Attend	Don't know
<b>While waiting for/using public transportation alone after dark, how do you feel about your safety from crime?<sup>1</sup></b>			
Not at all worried	53	56	56
Somewhat or very worried	46	44	43
Don't know/Not stated	--	--	2†
<b>How safe do you feel from crime when walking alone in your area after dark?</b>			
Very or reasonably safe	88	90	88
Somewhat or very unsafe	12	10	11
Don't know/Not stated	--	--	1†
<b>While alone in your home in the evening or at night, how do you feel about your safety from crime?<sup>2</sup></b>			
Not at all worried	78	81	80
Somewhat or very worried	22	19	19
Don't know/Not stated	--	--	1†
<b>In general, how do you feel about your safety from crime?</b>			
Very satisfied	43	47	43
Somewhat satisfied	48	46	42
Somewhat dissatisfied	4	4	4
Very dissatisfied	1	2	2
Don't know/Not stated	3	1	10

<sup>1</sup> Includes only respondents who engaged in these activities.

-- amount too small to be expressed.

**Note:** † Coefficient of variation between 16.6% and 33.3%.

Figures may not add to 100% due to rounding.

**Source:** Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 1999.

Table 2

**Perceptions of the justice system by weekly attendance at religious services, 1999**

	Religious people aged 15+									
	Total	Good job	Average job	Poor job	Don't know/ Not stated	Total	Good job	Average job	Poor job	Don't know/ Not stated
	(000s)					%				
<b>What kind of job are your local police doing at ...</b>										
Being approachable?	4,915	3,449	711	153	601	100	70	14	3	12
Ensuring the safety of citizens?	4,915	3,240	1,145	195	335	100	66	23	4	7
Enforcing the laws?	4,915	3,148	1,271	207	289	100	64	26	4	6
Supplying information on reducing crime?	4,915	2,843	1,120	362	590	100	58	23	7	12
Responding promptly to calls?	4,915	2,601	886	281	1,147	100	53	18	6	23
<b>What kind of job are criminal courts doing at ...</b>										
Ensuring a fair trial for the accused?	4,915	715	1,628	1,883	690	100	15	33	38	14
Determining the guilt of the accused	4,915	1,027	1,973	926	989	100	21	40	19	20
Helping the victim?	4,915	836	1,513	1,631	935	100	17	31	33	19
Providing justice quickly?	4,915	1,940	1,625	503	848	100	39	33	10	17
<b>What kind of job is the prison system doing at ...</b>										
Supervising/controlling prisoners?	4,915	1,208	1,549	928	1,230	100	25	32	19	25
Helping prisoners become law-abiding	4,915	703	1,538	1,195	1,479	100	14	31	24	30
<b>What kind of job is the parole system doing at ...</b>										
Releasing offenders who are not like	4,915	678	1,555	1,601	1,082	100	14	32	33	22
Supervising offenders on parole?	4,915	664	1,362	1,526	1,363	100	14	28	31	28

**Note:** Figures may not add to total due to rounding.

**Source:** Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 1999.