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The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the religiosity of Canadians

by Simon-Pierre Lacasse and Louis Cornelissen

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The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the religiosity of Canadians

by Simon-Pierre Lacasse and Louis Cornelissen

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected many aspects of Canadians' lives, including religion. For example, the risks associated with COVID-19, as well as physical distancing measures, limited access to places of worship, and many religious organizations reacted by offering online religious services. Surveys conducted by private firms suggested that the online broadcast of religious services may have partially, but not completely, replaced in-person attendance.¹ In addition, some people reported that, because of the pandemic, they prayed more² or their faith got stronger.³ Do the data from the most recent General Social Survey (GSS) reveal the effect of the pandemic on religiosity?

This study used GSS data (cycles 29 to 35, from 2015 to 2020) to better understand the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on the religiosity of Canadians. As a result, the situation in 2020, during the pandemic (based on data from the survey cycle collected between August 2020 and January 2021), was compared with the situation in previous years. The study analyzes the evolution of the rates of religious affiliation, frequency of participation in religious activities (in a group or individually) and involvement in religious organizations.

Participation in group religious activities fell during the pandemic

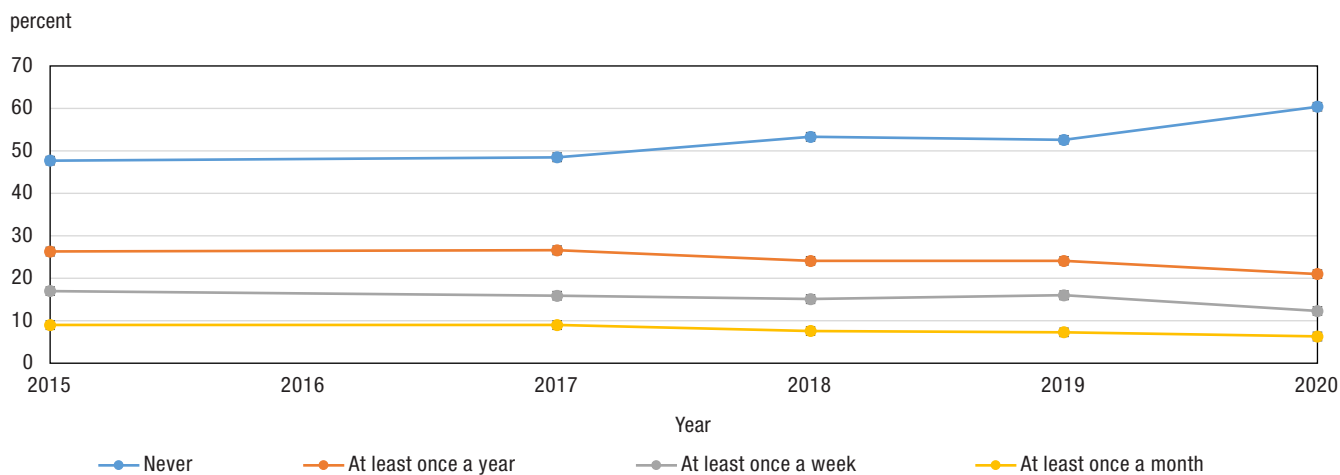
In recent decades, participation rates in group religious activities have declined in Canada.⁴ The proportion of people who participated in this kind of activity at least once a month fell from 43% in 1985 to 23% in 2019. Over the same period, the proportion of those who did not participate in group religious activities in the year preceding the survey rose from 38% to 53%.

In 2020, the decline in participation in group religious activities accelerated sharply. Among the population as a whole, the proportion of people who participated in a group religious activity at least once a month decreased from 23% to 19% (Chart 1). In addition, the percentage of people who participated in a group religious activity in the year preceding the survey fell from 47% in 2019 to 40% in 2020. As a result, the situation in 2020 was quite different from previous years, suggesting an impact because of the pandemic and physical distancing requirements.

1. Angus Reid Institute. (2021). *Religious Canadians praying for return to in-person worship, but won't forsake online services in future*. <https://angusreid.org/covid-religion-easter-2021/>
2. Angus Reid Institute, 2021.
3. Pew Research Center. (2021). *More Americans Than People in Other Advanced Economies Say COVID-19 Has Strengthened Religious Faith*. <https://www.pewforum.org/2021/01/27/more-americans-than-people-in-other-advanced-economies-say-covid-19-has-strengthened-religious-faith/>
4. Cornelissen, Louis. (2021). "Religiosity in Canada and its evolution from 1985 to 2019." *Insights on Canadian Society*. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 75-006-X. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/75-006-x/2021001/article/00010-eng.htm>



Chart 1
Frequency of participation in group religious activities, population aged 15 years and older, Canada, 2015 to 2020



Note: This line graph represents the frequency of participation in group religious activities for the population aged 15 years and older in Canada from 2015 to 2020. The y-axis shows the percentages of the frequency of participation in group religious activities. The x-axis shows the years of data collection.
Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, cycles 29 (2015) to 35 (2020).

Less impact on religious practice for people who report excellent general health

It could be assumed that the pandemic had a greater impact on group religious practices of people whose general health was poorer. As a precaution, they may have been more likely to avoid gatherings because they were at a higher risk of catching the virus. It was observed that from 2019 to 2020, the decrease in the proportion of people who did not participate in a group religious activity in the previous year varied based on the individuals' self-reported health (Table 1).

Among those who reported having fair or poor general health, the proportion of people who participated in a religious activity at least once in the previous year fell from 43% in 2019 to 34% in 2020. Similarly, it decreased from 47% to 37% among those who felt their health was good, and from 49% to 41% among those who felt it was very good. However, among those who felt their general health was excellent, there was no significant difference between 2019 and 2020 in the proportion of those who had participated in group religious activities.

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Table 1
Persons who participated in at least one group religious activity in the last year, population aged 15 years and older, Canada, 2019 and 2020

	2019	2020
	percent	
Total	47	40*
Gender		
Male	45	37*
Female	50	42*
Age group		
15 to 29 years	45	37*
30 to 44 years	46	37*
45 to 59 years	47	42*
60 to 74 years	48	39*
75 years and older	57	50*
Place of residence		
Atlantic provinces	49	41*
Quebec	40	31*
Ontario	53	45*
Prairies	50	43*
British Columbia	40	34*
Self-reported general health		
Excellent	48	45*
Very good	49	41*
Good	47	37*
Fair or poor	43	34*
Importance given to religious or spiritual beliefs		
Very important	80	70*
Somewhat important	59	46*
Not very important	34	25*
Not at all important	12	8*
Religious affiliation		
Buddhist	74 ^E	50*
Christian	60	53*
Hindu	78 ^E	70
Jewish	75 ^E	67
Muslim	71	57*
Other religious and spiritual traditions	72	66
No religion and secular perspectives	16	11*

^E use with caution

* statistically significant difference between the 2019 and 2020 estimates ($p < 0.05$)

Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, cycles 34 (2019) and 35 (2020).





People who consider their beliefs very important see their religious practice more affected

The COVID-19 pandemic seems to have particularly affected the religious practice of Canadians for whom their religious or spiritual beliefs were very important. The percentage of people who participated in at least one group religious activity in the previous year declined from 80% in 2019 to 70% in 2020 among those who considered their beliefs very important to the way they live their life, and from 59% to 46% among those who considered their beliefs somewhat important. The drop was smaller among people who did not consider their beliefs to be important at all, falling from 12% to 8%.

Participation in group religious activities is more affected for certain religious affiliation groups

Differences were noted between religious affiliation groups in terms of the pandemic's impact on rates of participation in religious activities. Among certain groups, the proportion of people who participated in at least one group religious activity fell more than the average. For example, this was the case for Buddhists (from 74%⁵ in 2019 to 50% in 2020) and Muslims (from 71% to 57%).

Less involvement in organizations in 2020, including religious organizations

Beyond participation in religious services, many people volunteer for religious organizations. In 2020, 12% of Canadians reported being involved with a religious organization in the previous 12 months. For about one-third of those people (or 4% of the total population), the religious organization was the main organization, group or association with which they were involved, that is, the one they dedicated the most time to. Of the people who were mainly involved with a religious organization, 35% said that they had reduced the number of hours they spent involved with the organization compared with the previous year, 22% said that they dedicated more hours, and 43% said that the number had remained the same. This trend was similar to what was observed among all people who were involved with any type of organization, group or association: 40% reported that their involvement had decreased compared with the previous year, 13% said that it had increased and 46% said that it had remained the same.

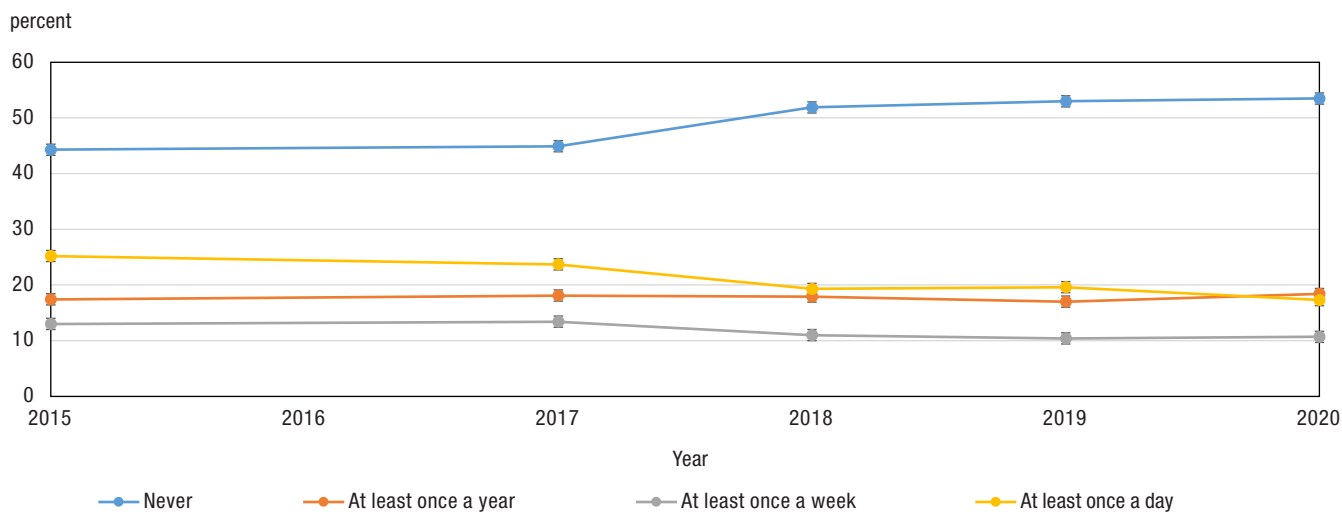
The pandemic has not affected how often respondents engage in individual religious or spiritual activities

Contrary to what was observed for group religious practices, the pandemic does not appear to have had a significant impact on how often respondents engaged in religious or spiritual activities on their own (e.g., prayer or meditation). The responses from 2020 on this topic were similar to previous years (Chart 2).

5. The quality of this estimate is considered marginal because of high sampling variability. Therefore, it should be used with caution.



Chart 2
Frequency of individual religious practice, population aged 15 years and older, Canada, 2015 to 2020



Note: This line graph represents the frequency of individual religious practice for the population aged 15 years and older in Canada from 2015 to 2020. The y-axis shows the percentages of the frequency of individual religious practice. The x-axis shows the years of data collection.
Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, cycles 29 (2015) to 35 (2020).

No visible effect of the pandemic on religious affiliation trends

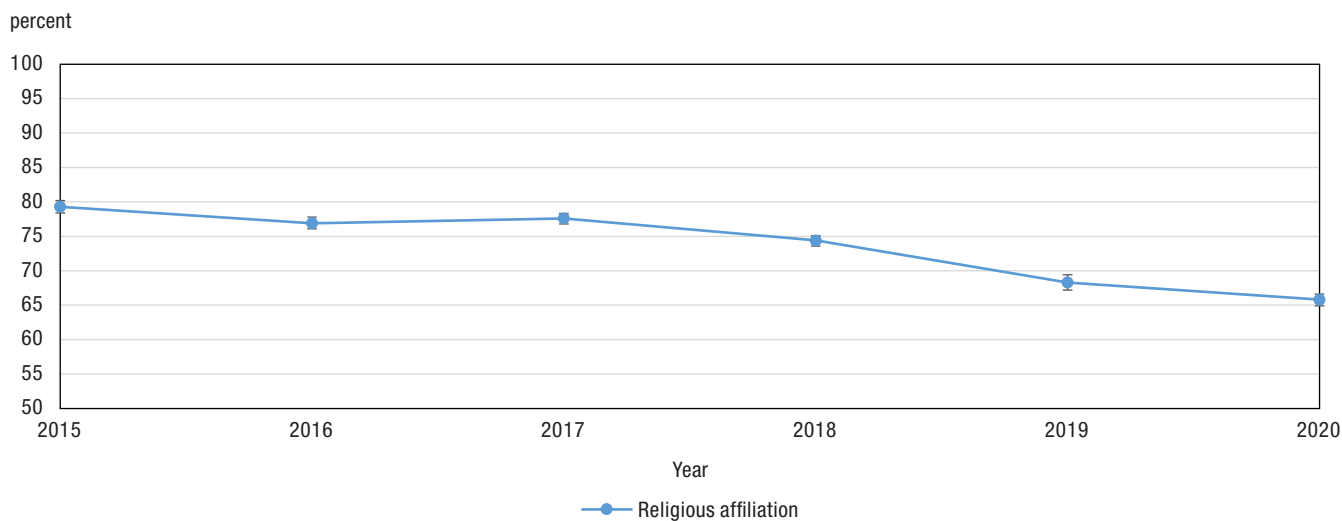
Generally speaking, religious affiliation also does not appear to have been affected by the pandemic.

Among the total Canadian population aged 15 and older, 66% of people reported a religious affiliation in 2020, compared with 68% in 2019 (Chart 3). This slight decline follows the general trend that has been observed since 2017, when 78% of GSS respondents reported a religious affiliation. This trend of declining religious affiliation in Canada has continued for almost 35 years.⁶

6. Cornelissen, 2021.



Chart 3
Religious affiliation, population aged 15 years and older, Canada, 2015 to 2020



Note: This line graph represents the religious affiliation of the population aged 15 years and older in Canada from 2015 to 2020. The y-axis shows the percentages of religious affiliation. The x-axis shows the years of data collection.

Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, cycles 29 (2015) to 35 (2020).

Conclusion

In light of the GSS results, the COVID-19 pandemic seems to have affected Canadians' religiosity to a certain extent, but it did not drastically disrupt religious practice and affiliation. The risks associated with the pandemic and the public health measures in effect may have led the population to reduce its participation in group religious activities, with certain groups being more affected than others. Involvement with religious organizations also declined. In contrast, the pandemic does not seem to have had an impact on engaging in religious or spiritual activities on one's own or on religious affiliation.

Methods

Data and population

The data are taken from cycles 29 (2015) to 35 (2020) of the General Social Survey (GSS). These GSS cycles have representative samples of the Canadian population aged 15 and older living in the provinces (excluding the territories).

Many factors can affect the comparability of data between different GSS cycles. As a result, caution must be used when comparing data. These factors include differences in the questionnaires of the cycles (topics covered, spot in the questionnaire for the questions on religion, etc.) and how the questionnaire is administered (electronic questionnaire or telephone interview). For example, cycle 35 (2020) used electronic questionnaires to a much greater extent than previous cycles. The questionnaire administration mode can considerably influence the responses to certain questions, particularly those for which a social desirability bias is likely to affect responses. That being said, analyses have confirmed that the trends analyzed in this study (decreased participation in group religious activities in 2020, etc.) are not attributable to a mode effect.



Definitions

Religious affiliation. Religious affiliation refers to a person's self-reported association or affiliation with a religious denomination, group, organization, sect or cult, or another religious community or system of beliefs. Religion is not limited to formal membership in a religious organization or group. Question from the General Social Survey (cycle 35): "What is your religion? Specify your denomination or religion, even if you are not currently a practising member of that group." Respondents could respond that they have no religion or specify their religion (open question, no response choices).

Participation in group religious activities. Question from the General Social Survey (cycle 35): "Not counting events such as weddings or funerals, during the past 12 months, how often did you participate in religious activities or attend religious services or meetings? Exclude rites of passage such as weddings, funerals, baptisms, bar mitzvahs." Choice of responses: At least once a week; at least once a month; at least three times a year; once or twice a year; not at all.

Engaging in religious or spiritual activities on one's own. Question from the General Social Survey (cycle 35): "In the past 12 months, how often did you engage in religious or spiritual activities on your own? Include prayer, meditation and other forms of worship taking place at home or in any other location." Choice of responses: At least once a day; at least once a week; at least once a month; at least three times a year; once or twice a year; not at all.

Importance of religious or spiritual beliefs. Question from the General Social Survey (cycle 35): "How important are your religious or spiritual beliefs to the way you live your life?" Choice of responses: Very important; somewhat important; not very important; not at all important.

Self-reported general health. Question from the General Social Survey (cycle 35): "In general, how is your health? By health, we mean not only the absence of disease or injury, but also physical, mental and social well-being." Choice of responses: Excellent; very good; good; fair; poor.

Involvement with an organization. In 2020, a section of the General Social Survey (cycle 35) questionnaire dealt with involvement in various types of community organizations, groups or associations. Regarding the organization to which respondents said they were dedicating the most time, they were asked, "Compared with last year, would you say that your involvement with this organization has increased, decreased, or stayed the same?"