

Article

Canadians attend weekly religious services less than 20 years ago

by Colin Lindsay

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Celebrating 20 years

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The *Matter of Fact* series highlights important insights into changes in Canadian society over the past two decades, following the theme, "Without the General Social Survey, we would still be wondering . . ."

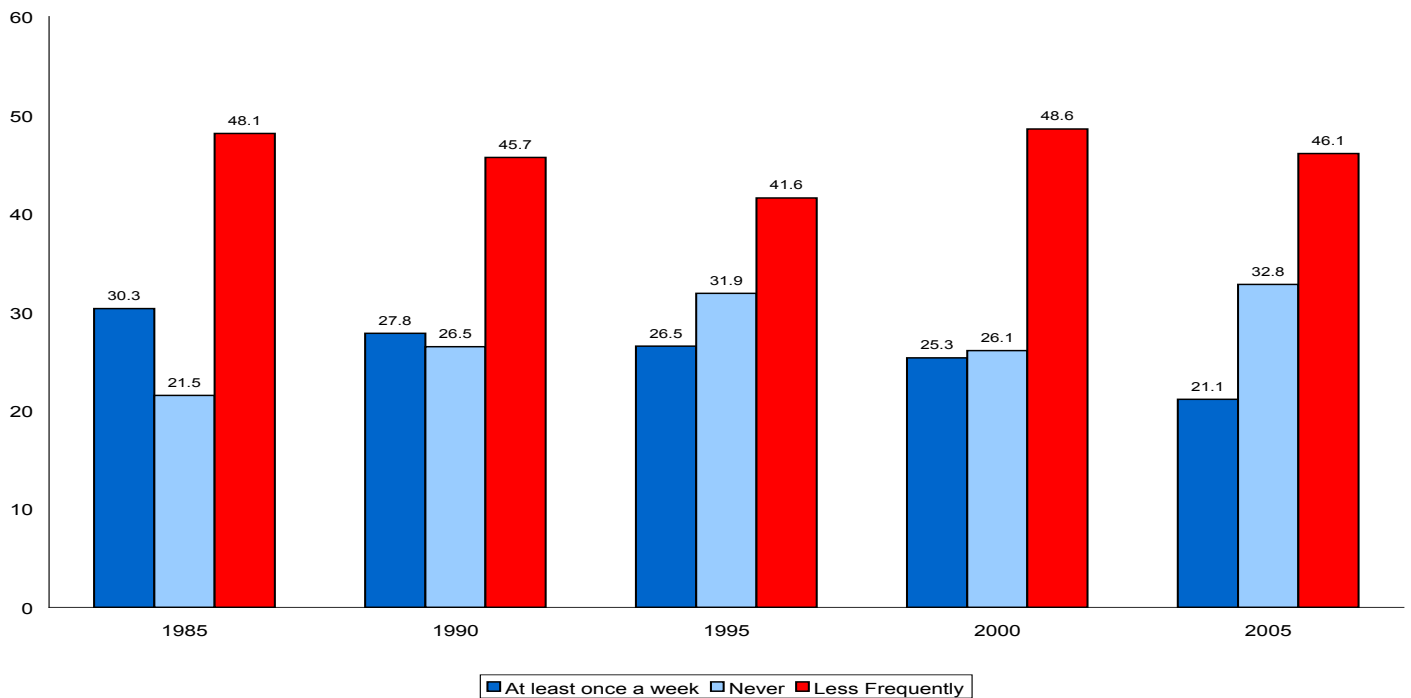
By Colin Lindsay

Canadians attend weekly religious services less than 20 years ago

The percentage of the Canadian population¹ attending religious services on a regular basis has declined over the past 20 years. According to the General Social Survey (GSS), 21% of Canadians aged 15 and over reported they attended a religious service at least once a week in 2005, down from 30% in 1985.

At the same time, the share of Canadians indicating that they never attended religious services in the previous year increased in the past couple of decades. In 2005, around one in three Canadians aged 15 and over reported that they never attend services, up from 22% in 1985.

Chart 1 Frequency of religious attendance, 1985 to 2005



Note: The category less frequently includes: at least once a month, a few times a year and at least once a year
Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey.

1. Canadians aged 15 and over living in the 10 provinces, not including the institutionalized population

That leaves the majority of Canadians who attended religious services less frequently than weekly, but at least once in the previous year. In fact, about half of Canadians fall into this group of less frequent religious service attendees when looking at the attendance by age groups. The percentage attending less frequently stayed around the same since 1985, declining only slightly for 15 to 24 year olds, from 55% to 51% between 1985 and 2005, and declining less than 2 percentage points to 48% for 24 to 44 year olds. The percentage of Canadians 45 and over who attended religious services, less frequently, did not change over the 20 years.

Older Canadians are considerably more likely than their younger counterparts to attend religious services on a regular basis. In 2005, for example, 37% of all Canadians aged 65 and over attended a religious service at least once a week, whereas this was the case for just 16% of both those between the ages of 15 to 24 and 25 to 44. In contrast, about a third of those aged 15 to 44 said they never attended religious services, while just 26% of seniors never attended religious services.

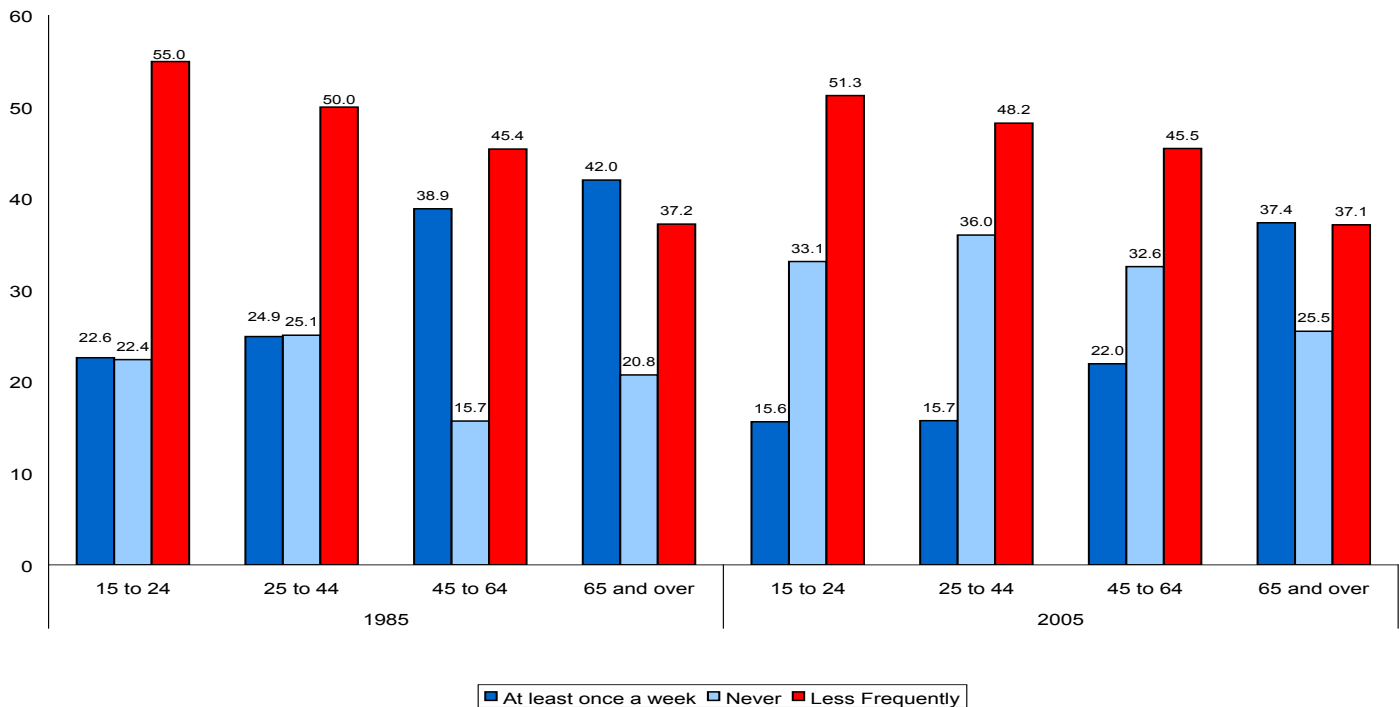
For all ages, over the past two decades there has been a decline in weekly (at least) church attendance, while the share indicating they never attended religious services has increased in all age ranges. This is particularly the case among those aged 45 to 64. The percentage of people in this age group attending a religious observance on at least a weekly basis, for example, fell from 39% in 1985 to just 22% in 2005, while the proportion reporting they never attended any religion functions more than doubled from 16% to 33% in the same period.

The decline in attendance at religious services reflects, at least in part, the fact that there has been a substantial increase in the share of the population reporting no religious affiliation over the past two decades.

In 2005, 22% of people aged 15 and over reported that they had no religion, that is, to the question on religious affiliation, they responded they were either agnostic, atheist, humanist or had no religion. This was double the figure in 1985 when 11% of the adult population indicated they had no religious affiliation.

Attendance at religious services, though, has declined even among those with a religious affiliation. In 2005, 27% of people aged 15 and over who had some kind of religious affiliation, reported they attended religious services on a weekly basis, compared with 34% in 1985. On the other hand, the percentage of those with a religious affiliation never attending a religious service increased from 24% to 41% in the same period.

Chart 2 Frequency of religious attendance, by age, 1985 to 2005



Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey.

How to obtain more information

Specific inquiries about this product and related statistics or services should be directed to: Social and Aboriginal Statistics Division, Statistics Canada, Ottawa, Ontario, K1A 0T6 by telephone: 613-951-5979 or by e-mail at sas-dssea@statcan.ca.

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