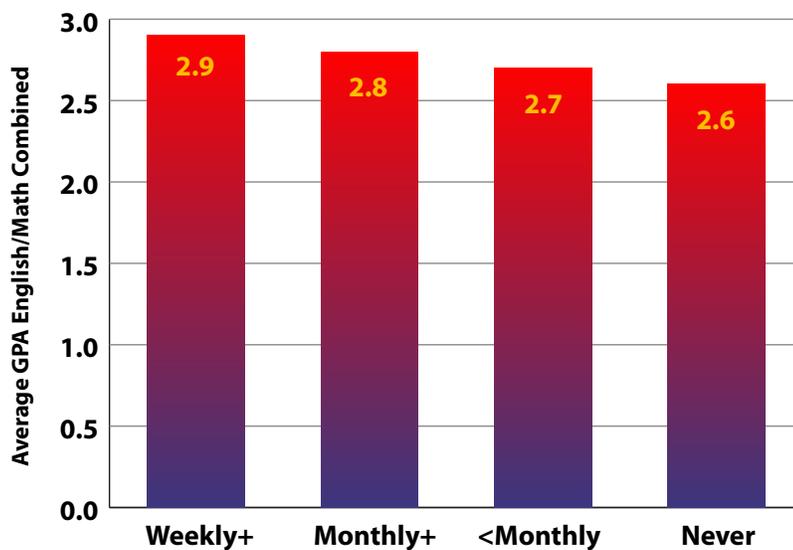




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Religious Attendance and School Performance of U.S. High School Students

Combined Average in English and Math by Frequency of Church Attendance



Source: Patrick Fagan, Kirk A. Johnson and Jonathan Butcher, *A Portrait of Family and Religion in America*. The Heritage Foundation, 2006, chart 20, based on data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health.

This snapshot of young Americans in high school shows the range of educational performance when viewed from the perspective of their attendance at religious services.

Teenagers who attend religious activities weekly or more had the highest average combined GPA, or grade point average, for English and math (2.9). Those who never attend religious activities have the lowest (2.6). In between are those who attend a couple of times per month (2.8) and those who attend a few times a year (2.7).

Drawing on a large national (16,000) sample from the National

Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health, the chart illustrates a linear correlation between student attendance at religious activities and their academic performance (combined grade point average for both math and English). This work was done by the author in cooperation with former colleagues at The Heritage Foundation.

The relationship between family and economics came to the fore when Gary Becker of the University of Chicago and the Hoover Institution received his Nobel Laureate (1992) for his work on the family's role as the great generator of "human capital." Human capital is that combination of attitudes, knowledge and intellectual skills needed to do well in the modern economy. The chart illustrates that the family's church attendance (and teenagers' cooperation in this) is likely a significant factor in forming the attitudes and skills needed to acquire this human capital.

Mark Regnerus of the University of Texas at Austin and his colleague Glen Elder have dug deeper still into this same data and concluded in 2003 that "...church attendance functions

as a protective mechanism in high-risk communities in a way that it does not in low-risk ones, stimulating educational resilience in the lives of at-risk youth. We argue that adolescents' participation in religious communities—which often constitute the key sources of neighborhood developmental resources—reinforces messages about working hard and staying out of trouble, orients them toward a positive future, and builds a transferable skill set of commitments and routines.”¹

In other words Regnerus and Elder see a natural alliance among family (particularly the poor family), church and school in yielding superior results for these poorer teenagers, benefiting them even more than it does teenagers from families with higher incomes.

Karl Marx famously wrote in 1843: “Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opiate of the people.”² Freud regarded religion as a compulsive neurosis, and God as a construct of man's wishful imaginings.³ As both were quite taken with a scientific, data-driven approach to grasping reality, they might have concluded differently, and they might not have urged so many to abandon religion, could they have foreseen these data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health. Rather than being opium for the masses, attendance at religious services seems to stimulate more young people, especially poor young people, to develop their intellectual potential.

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¹ Mark D. Regnerus and Glen H. Elder, Jr. *Staying on Track in School: Religious Influences in High- and Low-Risk Settings* Journal for The Scientific Study of Religion, 2003, pp 633–649.

² Karl Marx, *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* (1843); Cambridge University Press, 1970. Ed. Joseph O'Malley. Introduction, p. i.

³ Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion* 1927



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