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Five Trends Among the Unchurched



Since 1990, the percentage of unchurched adults in America has risen from 30% to 43% of the population. Even as this segment has grown, has their profile changed?

With the aid of more than two decades of tracking research—a sort of cultural time-lapse photography—Barna Group has discovered real and significant shifts in unchurched attitudes, assumptions, allegiances and behaviors. We've identified five trends in our research that are contributing to this

increase in the churchless of America.

This new study of the unchurched population comes in conjunction with the release of *Churchless*, a new book from veteran researchers George Barna and David Kinnaman. *Churchless* draws on more than two decades of tracking research and more than 20 nationwide studies of the unchurched.

The research reveals the big picture: Today's unchurched are much less likely to come from a church background than ever before. Furthermore, unchurched people today have different expectations of church involvement from those of previous decades. These changes are the result of shifting personal attitudes as well as significant changes in the broader cultural landscape.

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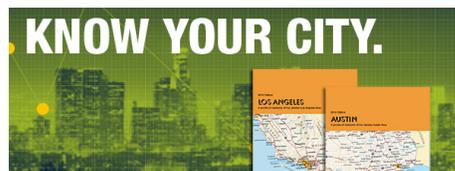


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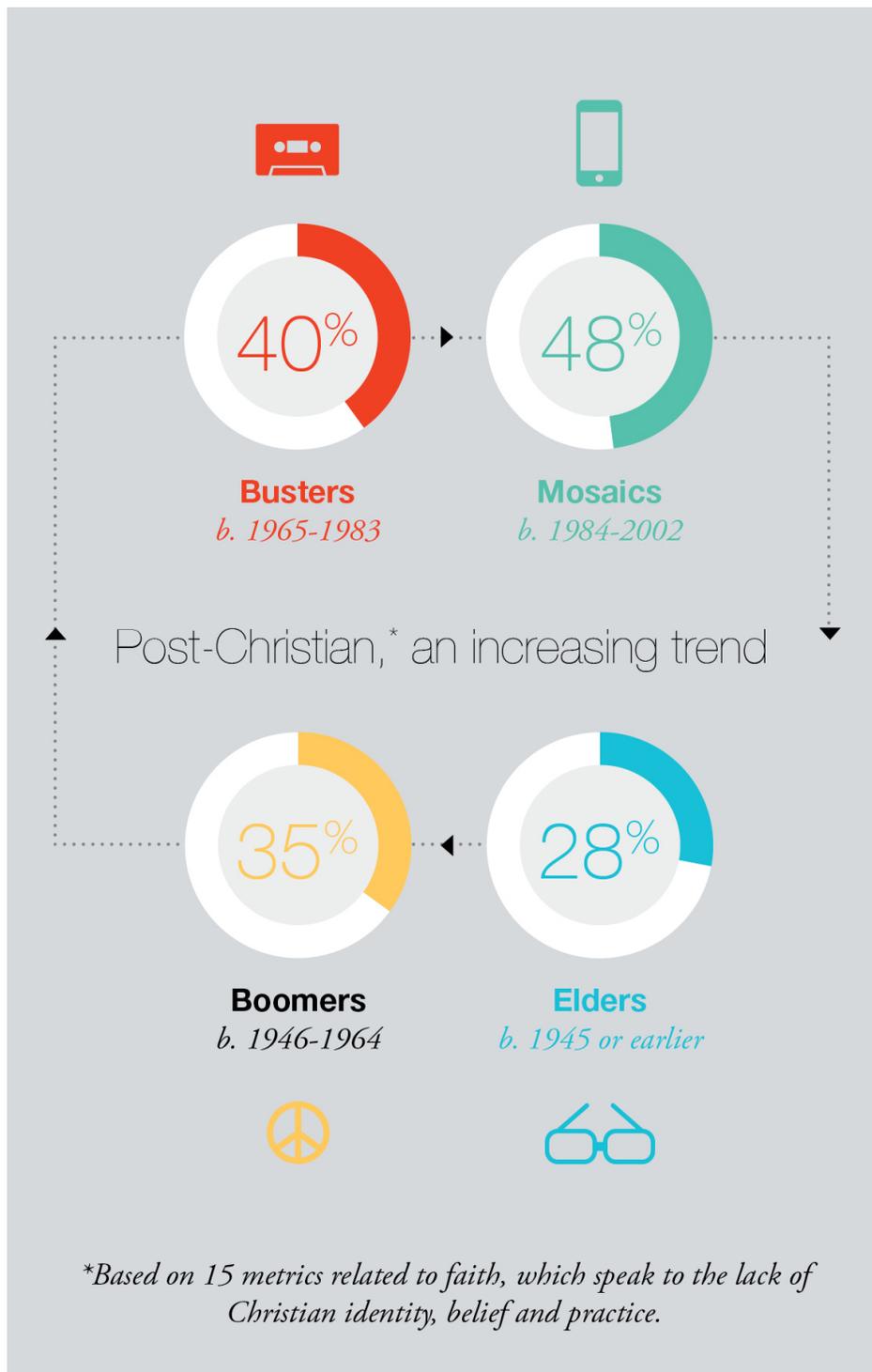
Did You Know: The vast majority of unchurched adults still have at least some level of personal experience in a church.
by *Barna Group* about 9 hours ago



Need help developing an effective plan to connect with Millennials? Check out Barna Labs.
<http://t.co/KgU6qGyCL6>
by *Barna Group* about 12 hours ago



#Churchless is an up-to-the-minute snapshot of a nationally representative body of churchless adults.
Learn more: <http://t.co/53YLnCFHE7>
by *Barna Group* about 15 hours ago



1. Secularization Is on the Rise

Nearly two-fifths of the nation's adult population (38%) now qualifies as post-Christian (measured by 15 different variables related to people's identity, beliefs and behaviors. [Read more about our post-Christian metric here.](#)). That includes 10% of Americans who qualify as highly post-Christian. Another one-quarter is moderately post-Christian (28%). Examined over time, our research shows that the proportion of highly secularized individuals is growing slowly but steadily.

In other words, in spite of our "Christian" self-descriptions, more than one-third of America's adults are essentially secular in belief and practice. If nothing else, this helps explain why America has experienced a surge in unchurched people—and presages a continuing rise in this population.

Among the churchless, the proportions skew even more heavily: Overall, more than three-quarters of unchurched adults fall in the heavy-to-moderate range on the secularization scale. That compares to about one out of eight among the churchled.

As you might expect, the data show some striking generational differences when it comes to secularization. The pattern is indisputable: The younger the generation, the more post-Christian it is. Nearly half of Millennials (48%) qualify as post-Christian compared to two-fifths of Gen X-ers (40%), one-third of Boomers (35%) and one-quarter of Elders (28%).

2. People Are Less Open to the Idea of Church

Barna research shows that the unchurched are becoming less responsive to churches' efforts to connect with them. For example, conventional wisdom says the best way to get people to visit a church is to have friends invite them—and the conventional wisdom is right. The churchless we interviewed were most open to “a friend of yours inviting you to attend a local church,” with one-fifth expressing strong interest and nearly half willing to consider a church based on this factor. An invitation from a friend is the top-rated way churches can establish connections with the unchurched.

However, while the conventional wisdom remains true today, the road ahead shows challenging signs. Barna Group's trend data raise questions about the long-term durability of this approach. Twenty years ago, two-thirds of churchless Americans (65%) were open to being invited to church by a friend. Today, that percentage has slipped to less than half (47%).

It's not only the efficacy of personal invitations that is changing. Barna's tracking data stretching back to the 1990s reveal a slow-growing calcification of unchurched people toward churches. For every outreach method surveyed, the unchurched are less open to it today than they were two decades ago. While churchless people continue to show moderate openness to high-touch, relational connections—pastoral home visits (27%, down from 34%), a phone call from a church (24%, down from 34%)—they are resistant to other forms of outreach. This is especially true for advertising, including TV, radio or newspaper (18%, down from 20%), direct mailings (16%, down from 24%) and billboard ads (14%, down from 21%).

[For more insights about the unchurched, order *Churchless*.](#)

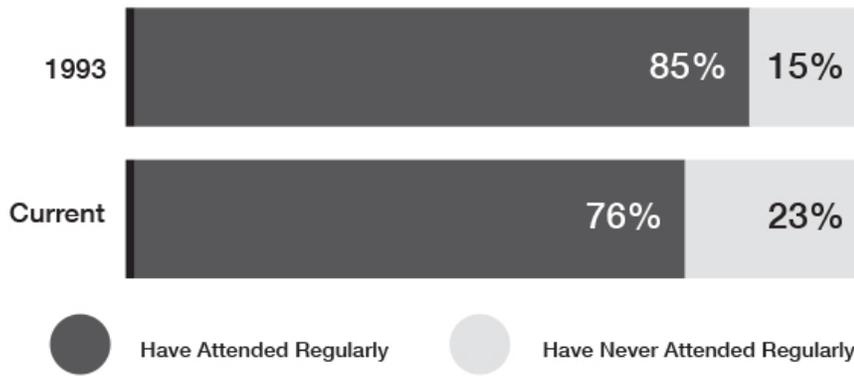
3. Churchgoing Is No Longer Mainstream

Churchgoing is slowly but incontrovertibly losing its role as a normative part of American life. In the 1990s, roughly one out of every seven unchurched adults had never experienced regular church attendance. Today, that percentage has increased to nearly one-quarter. Buried within these numbers are at least two important conclusions: 1) Church is becoming increasingly unfamiliar to millions of Americans, and yet 2) the churchless are still largely comprised of de-churched adults.

This latter conclusion may be hard for many churchgoing Christians to believe. But it's true: Even though the cultural trend is toward less church-friendliness overall, the vast majority of unchurched adults still have at least some level of personal experience in a church.

Churchgoing Is Losing Traction

Percentage of all US adults



Source: Barna Group annual OmniPoll

[Download full color infographics.](#)

4. There Are Different Expectations of Church Involvement

Another intriguing shift among the churchless has to do with their expectations of church involvement. In the early 1990s, our research showed that nearly seven out of 10 adults, if they were to visit a church, would be most interested in attending the Sunday service. Today, weekend worship services remain the most common entry experience, but only slightly; now, only 57% of churchless adults say they would be interested in Sunday worship as their starting point. Today's unchurched are more likely to say they are simply not sure, reflecting their disinterest in churches generally, or are more likely to say they would prefer attending some activity other than the Sunday service.

A similar shift is afoot in terms of the number of churches they would attend. The churchless were asked in both 1993 and in 2011 if they would prefer to be involved in one church or multiple churches in their area. Two decades ago, even the unchurched expressed some sense of church loyalty (albeit hypothetical): 85% said they would expect to attend just one congregation. The recent study reflects a slight loosening of this potential loyalty, but the more notable shifts are among those who don't have a preference and who aren't sure. Together, these percentages doubled from 8% to 16%, reflecting growing cultural indifference to church involvement.

5. There Is Skepticism about Churches' Contributions to Society

Although many of the churchless hold positive views of churches, a substantial number also have no idea what Christians have accomplished in the nation, either for the better or for the worse. When the unchurched were asked to describe what they believe are the positive and negative contributions of Christianity in America, almost half (49%) could not identify a single favorable impact of the Christian community, while nearly two-fifths (37%) were unable to identify a negative impact. Of those who could identify one way Christians contribute to the common good, the unchurched appreciate their influence when it comes to serving the poor and disadvantaged (22%), bolstering morals and values (10%) and helping people believe in God (8%). Among those who had a complaint about Christians in society, the unchurched were least favorably disposed toward violence in the name of Christ (18%), the church's stand against gay marriage (15%), sexual abuse scandals (13%) and involvement in politics (10%).

Today's Unchurched: More Resistant to Church

Question: There are many different ways a church in your community might let you know more about their church and their services. Let's talk about churches you have never visited before. Would each of the following make you more or less interested in visiting that church? (Open-ended query; responses add up to more than 100 percent because respondents could offer more than one answer.)

	1993	2011
A friend of yours invited you to attend a local church	65%	47%
A pastor or a member of a church came to your home to tell you about the church, and invited you to attend	34	27
Someone from a church in your community called you on the phone to tell you about the church, and invited you to attend	34	24
A representative of the church came to your home, conducted a survey about your church attendance and interests, then invited you to attend their church	25	21
You knew a church had a significant online social web presence	N/A	18
You saw or heard advertising for a church on TV, in a newspaper, or on the radio	20	18
You received information about a church through the mail	24	16
You saw advertising for the church on a billboard in your community	21	14

These percentages represent respondents who said the methods would make them either "much more interested" or "a little more interested" in visiting the church.

Reflecting on Change

"Our research suggests a growing indifference toward churches among the unchurched," says David Kinnaman, president of Barna Group and co-editor, with George Barna, of the new book *Churchless*, from which this data is taken. "The gap between the churched and the churchless is growing, and it appears that Christian communities of faith will struggle more than ever to engage church outsiders in their neighborhood, town or city."

Kinnaman notes that, while research cannot prove causation, given the nature of polling and the complex dynamics of cultural and spiritual change, it can however, point to possible underlying trends. "The cumulative effect of monumental cultural changes that have swept over us during recent decades is a widening gap, both real and perceived, between the churched and the churchless," he says. "To many faithful churchgoers, the unchurched seem increasingly alien and difficult to understand, while the churchless feel ever more comfortable outside a faith community. Yet while the culture will continue to change, our calling as the Body of Christ has not and will not."

"How can we recapture an urgency to fulfill the Great Commission while treating our churchless friends with respect?" Kinnaman asks. "Wrestling with answers to this question will help prepare a faith community to engage more meaningfully with unchurched people."

About the Research

The contents of this book are based on extensive, ongoing, nationwide research conducted by Barna Group. We used data from 20 surveys, encompassing interviews with more than 23,000 churched and unchurched adults. The number of unchurched adults involved was 8,220.

These surveys were done using random digit-dial telephone samples for landlines and listed cell phone samples for calls to mobile phones. Each of the studies entailed completing interviews with a minimum of 1,000 randomly chosen adults. The samples were developed to provide a reliable representation of the national population of people ages 18 or older living within the 48 continental states. The estimated maximum sampling error for each survey of 1,000 adults was plus or minus

3.1 percentage points at the 95% confidence level; the maximum sampling error estimate diminished as sample size increased. The number of interviews completed with cell-phone owners was based on federal government estimates of the number of cell-only households

The January 2011, 2012, 2013 and 2014 surveys also included samples of approximately 1,000 adults conducted online. Those studies relied on a research panel called KnowledgePanel®, created and maintained by Knowledge Networks. It is a probability-based online non-volunteer access panel. Panel members are recruited using a statistically valid sampling method with a published sample frame of residential addresses that covers approximately 97 percent of US households. Sampled non-Internet households, when recruited, are provided a netbook computer and free Internet service so they may also participate as online panel members. KnowledgePanel consists of about 50,000 adult members (ages 18 and older) and includes persons living in cell-only households.

In all of these surveys, regional and ethnic quotas were designed to ensure that the final group of adults interviewed reflected the distribution of adults nationwide and adequately represented the three primary ethnic groups within the United States (those groups that comprise at least 10 percent of the population: white, black and Hispanic). Those quotas were based on current US Census Bureau data regarding the population. Additional quotas were employed to balance the gender of respondents included in the samples. Upon completion of a survey, the data were run and the demographic outcomes were compared to the census statistics on key demographic attributes. In some cases the full survey database was then statistically weighted to bring the database into closer approximation of the true population proportions.

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Surveys Included in the Unchurched Database

study conducted in:	Total	Unchurched adult sample
January 2008	1,004	277
May 2008	1,003	331
July 2008	1,005	301
August 2008	1,005	305
October 2008	1,014	327
November 2008	1,198	299
July 2009	1,003	315
September 2009	1,004	284
January 2010	1,008	240
February 2010	1,005	305
August 2010	1,002	368
December 2010	1,022	311
January 2011	1,622	615
August 2011	1,007	324
January 2012	2,025	920
March 2012	1,020	386
April 2012	1,062	340
May 2012	1,009	371
November 2012	1,008	338
January 2013	2,083	952
January 2014	1,024	556

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