

Report: America's Church Decline Fueled a Surge in 'Deaths of Despair'

A growing body of research suggests that America's decline in religious participation has had consequences far beyond cultural change. A new study reported by StudyFinds links falling church attendance in the late 20th century to a measurable rise in what economists call "deaths of despair," including suicide, drug poisoning and liver disease. The analysis focuses on an overlooked policy shift that reshaped American life: the repeal of Sunday "blue laws" that once restricted commercial activity.

Researchers examined how the erosion of Sunday observance altered community behavior and public health outcomes, finding that religious participation provided protective social benefits that were not replaced when attendance declined.

Key findings from the study

- **Repealing Sunday blue laws coincided with a sharp drop in church attendance**

When states eliminated restrictions on Sunday commerce in the 1980s and early 1990s, "religious attendance dropped 5–10 percentage points" among middle-aged Americans. Researchers found that making Sunday shopping legal made it easier to skip church, accelerating disengagement from organized religion.

- **Deaths of despair increased in states that repealed blue laws**

The study found that "death rates from suicide, drug poisoning, and liver disease increased by about 2 per 100,000 people" in states that lifted the restrictions.

Suicide showed the strongest response, with deaths “jumping by 1.2 per 100,000.”

- **Religious decline may explain a large share of rising mortality**

According to the researchers, “religious decline could account for roughly 40% of the mortality increase observed by 1996,” a rise that occurred before the introduction of OxyContin. By that year, death rates among white Americans ages 45 to 64 were about 17% higher than expected based on earlier trends.

- **The effects appeared before the opioid crisis escalated**

The researchers note that blue law repeals occurred “in the 1980s and early 1990s, before the current opioid crisis exploded.” The study period ends in 2000, well before fentanyl became widespread, suggesting that social vulnerability was already present.

- **Middle-aged Americans without college degrees were hit hardest**

The decline in church attendance was “driven precisely by” middle-aged white Americans without college degrees. Weekly church attendance among this group “dropped by 32% from its peak by the end of the decade,” while deaths of despair rose sharply.

- **Other causes of death did not follow the same pattern**

The study found that “other common causes of death like heart disease, diabetes and most cancers showed no consistent pattern,” strengthening the case that the mortality increase was specific to despair-related deaths.

- **Church attendance was not replaced by other social activities**

Researchers tested whether people substituted church with civic engagement or socializing and found “little evidence” they did. “Whatever benefits religious communities provided couldn’t easily be replicated elsewhere,” the study concluded.

- **Behavioral and belief changes followed religious decline**

After blue law repeals, middle-aged adults became “much more likely to report sometimes drinking too much,” an increase of 8.5 percentage points. The study also found evidence of “decreased belief in the afterlife,” suggesting changes in both behavior and worldview.

▪ **State-level patterns reinforced the findings**

States with higher church attendance in the late 1980s generally had lower deaths of despair. States that experienced the largest declines in attendance between 1986 and 2000 “saw the largest increases in these deaths.”



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The research was conducted by scholars from Wellesley College, University of Notre Dame, and The Ohio State University and published in The Journal of the European Economic Association.

While the authors acknowledge limitations inherent in observational research, they argue the findings highlight how policies unrelated to health can reshape social behavior in ways that carry long-term consequences. The study suggests that the erosion of religious participation removed a stabilizing force from many American communities, leaving them more exposed when later crises emerged.

James Lasher, a seasoned writer and editor at Charisma Media, combines faith and storytelling with a background in journalism from Otterbein University and ministry experience in Guatemala and the LA Dream Center. A Marine Corps and Air Force veteran, he is the author of *The Revelation of Jesus: A Common Man's Commentary* and a contributor to *Charisma magazine*.