

Study: Christian Presence Drives Up Secular Divorce Rates

Conservative Protestants in red states aren't the only ones seeing high divorce rates—so are their neighbors, according to a new study.

Researchers found that simply living in an area with a large concentration of conservative Protestants increases the chances of divorce, even for those who are not themselves conservative **Protestants**.

According to researchers who took into account race, income and other factors, marriage and fertility trends that are common among conservative Protestants—younger marriage, more kids, less higher education—affect all people in areas most populated by conservative **Protestants**, no matter their personal religious affiliation.

“Conservative **Protestant** community norms and the institutions they create seem to increase divorce risk,” researchers say in the study. For example, those who are struggling in their **marriage** may feel discouraged to find help in communities where marriage is idealized or marital failure is viewed as shameful, the researchers suggest.

“Generally, **religion**, religious belief and religious activities are thought to strengthen marriages,” said co-author Jennifer Glass, a sociology professor at the University of Texas at Austin. “It appears that the cessation of education, early **marriage** and early parenthood, you're set up for relationship conflict, financial stress and dissolution.”

The study, titled “Red States, Blue States, and Divorce: Understanding the Impact of Conservative Protestantism on

Regional Variation in Divorce Rates" in the *American Journal of Sociology*, analyzed county divorce statistics and information from a study of religious congregations, divorce statistics, information on the religious breakdown of local areas and a national survey.

Researchers considered why states with larger proportions of **religious** conservatives have higher divorce rates than states with lower proportions of religious conservatives. The study compared "conservative Protestants"—those who believe the **Bible** is without error—with other "mainline Christian" denominations (including Catholics), other faiths and those who aren't affiliated with a **religion**.

The research suggests that "the average county would double its **divorce** rate as its proportion (of) conservative **Protestant(s)** moved from 0 to 100%," but "this effect is much smaller than the unaffiliated effect, which is almost three times larger."

The findings are not as straightforward as saying "conservative **Protestants** are causing trouble for other people's marriages," said Charles Stokes, a sociology professor at Samford University, who conducted a separate study on Americans who, on average, got married at a younger age.

In his own research, Stokes found that conservative **Protestants** who attend church regularly are significantly less likely to have gotten divorced than nonreligious peers.

"The pattern that pops out in this data is that when you look at those who attend **church** weekly, their divorce rates are the same as other high-attending Christians," Stokes said. "Nominal **Christians** are probably getting the community norms but aren't in a social structure to live the norms out."

Mark Regnerus, one of Glass' colleagues at UT, has stirred controversy over his research of gay parents and has been a

proponent of earlier marriage, though he doesn't condone teen **marriage**. Regnerus, who has some similar research in the past on marriage and sex, says he sees issues in what people expect in marriage and the little social support they receive.

"The analyses revealed here point out the wisdom in waiting until you're out of the most significant danger zone—the teens—and well into your 20s," Regnerus said in an email. "What I can see in this study is the obvious shortcomings of a culture of 'romantic individualism,' one that's toxic to marriage, rather than a warning to wait until you're 'older' to marry."