

# Religion Associated with Strong Positive Youth Development In North Carolina County

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## ABSTRACT

Studies like “Religious involvement and adolescent psychosocial development” by Carol Markstrom have researched the relation of religion to human development. Previous studies like hers were able to employ methodologies that provided for a unique perspective. The study undertaken for this paper researched the association of religion with strong positive youth development (PYD) using the five C’s of PYD in psychology: connection, character, compassion, competence, and confidence. This study used a quantitative methodology through surveys that were analyzed to help reach the conclusion of the research. The pattern that emerged through analysis of the survey results indicated that approximately 39% of the participants were religious, which is influenced by the location of this study, a region of the United States commonly known referred to as the Bible Belt. Based on their answers, religion is associated with strong positive youth development. However, it can also be concluded that even those who are neither religious nor spiritual also have a strong positive youth development, just not as strong.

## **Introduction**

The effect of religion on mental health has been controversial as various philosophical, political and theological groups debate its pros and cons. A strong religious foundation can be connected to the life-long influences a person may feel during their developing years, especially during the stage of youth (15 through 24 years of age) development. A positive youth development (PYD) is based on the environment, communities, organizations a person surrounds themselves with that would enhance their manners and promote positive outcomes (Office of Adolescent Health, 2019). A positive youth development individual strengths and capacities includes family, faith-based, neighborhood, programs, social sources, school, work and peers (Flanagan, 2017). Based on a youth’s environment, varying factors may affect their mental health and influence a longer-lasting effect for their adolescence. The factors that comprise their daily routine may include a person’s religious state, friends, and family. According to Azagba, Asbridge, and Langille (2014), religion has proven to be a salient practice that enhances a better state of mind that would prove to be persistent through a longer time period. Because of this, religion can serve as a catalyst for better youth development and constructive mental health. If proven that religion has a close connection with PYD, it may lead to a constructive future of a youthful-minded person. During the time of adolescence, most teenagers would feel a sense of being out-of-place, lonely, and alone, as well as signs of depression for some (Schroeder, 2019). Hence, it is important to guide adolescents their purpose and their place in the world during their developing years. In Schroeder’s (2019) study, she elaborated on how teenagers would find themselves lost in their own mindset, going as far as thinking about suicide. Positive youth development provides salience to this topic of how religious inclusion can be associated with positive youth development and the betterment of mental health.

A religious connection is usually connected to the background of the family of an adolescent, although it is highly personal for the adolescent to decide for themselves if they desire to practice religion or to stay out of it, especially in a secular country (a country that separates the state and church) like the United States. However, according to Erikson’s Stages of Development, it was determined that religion is a prominent factor and leads to better human

development, providing the foundation for positive youth development (“Understanding,” 2007). The purpose of this research is to determine if religion is associated with a positive youth development in the sandhills region of North Carolina.

## Literature Review

Literature regarding the influence of religion has been researched frequently, however, not to the degree in which the research has reached consensus. Analyzing through an academic lens, Azagba et al. (2014) studied the relationship between religion and school connectedness. Their study was based in the location of Atlantic Canada during 2012 and published the study two years later. Azagba et al. (2014) collected their data through quantitative methods by doing cross-sectional surveys in grades 7th, 9th, 10th, and 12th. As a result of the study, they concluded that religiosity is significant to have a higher school connectedness. This fact shows that being religious would lead to being more connected to school which will lead to a lower risk of depression and cigarette use for students.

In comparison of the academic point of view shown through Azagba et al. (2014), a correlational study was made by Crystal Amiel M. Estrada, Marian Fe Theresa C. Lomboy, Ernesto R. Gregorio Jr., Emmy Amalia, Cynthia R. Leynes, Romeo R. Quizon, and Jun Kobayashi (2019). Their research, analyzing previous studies, encouraged schools to provide religious education as it would result in contributing to adolescents’ better mental health. Estrada et al. (2019) focused primarily on Asian countries, which justified their suggestion that a religious education is to be practiced, even in public schools. However, in contrast to the religious Asian countries, like the Philippines, it would not be feasible for a country like the United States to approve of religious study in public schools, primarily because of the governmental limitation where religious involvement is concerned. Estrada et al. (2019) correlational study determined that schools are an effective setting for a better mental health for adolescents, concluding that religious education plays a crucial role on mental health, especially for the young-adult age groups.

Owing to the nature of religion, it is salient to look through the cultural and social lenses. Diverging from the academic lens, which showed the positive effects for mental health, a 2001 research conducted by Park J., Hong, Park, & Cho (2012) analyzed “The Relationship between Religion and Mental Disorders in a Korean Population.” The participants consisted of the Korean population aged from 18-64 years old in the Korean Epidemiologic Catchment Area. The authors used a qualitative method utilizing the Korean version of the composite international interview 2.1, a type of interview conducted primarily for mental health information exclusively (Robins et al., 1988). The end result of this study indicated that **strong spiritual values were positively associated with increased rates of current depressive disorder and decreased rates of current alcohol use disorder.** However, the prospective they did not consider may have affected their study if performed differently. The authors had not included the worship frequency Christians practiced, thus addressing that they have a bias in the study. The missing part was included in a similar study to find out if the results would vary if worship frequency would be included. Cho et al. (2017) study is essential to future studies to be researched, especially if they are to research the positive effects of religion. By including the study of Cho and others (2017), it would indicate that the current researcher would evaluate both positive and/or negative perspectives, clearing away the bias of the person. In the continuation of the cultural and social lenses, “Youth Ministry as an Agency of Youth Development for the Vulnerable Youth of the Cape Flats” study by Garth Aziz (2017) based in Cape Flats, South Africa, performed a correlational study to enhance and support their own research, leading them to starting a youth ministry in Cape Flats whereby it became an agency of positive youth development in South Africa. Aziz’s (2017) study concluded that a youth ministry in a community would decrease tensions between youths and construct an effective and meaningful relationship, contributing to their positive youth development.

After analyzing studies through academic, social and cultural lenses, the last lens to analyze youth development and the role religion plays is through the psychological lens. The analysis of Carol A. Markstrom (1999), James L. Furrow & Pamela Ebstyn King (2008) separate studies, illustrates their contribution through the psychological lenses. One of the older research studies was by Carol A. Markstrom in 1999 about religious involvement and adolescent psychological development. Her participants consisted of 62 African Americans and 63 European-Americans

based in West Virginia composed of junior high school students from a lower income bracket. The procedure consisted of participants recruited when they were still freshmen in high school (1997). Most of the participants were nearly all females. She used a quantitative method where she made questionnaires to be completed and analyzed through Cronbach's Alpha, a measurement used for analysis and internal consistency on test items ("Using and Interpreting," 2015) and consistently looked through the Eriksonian perspective to categorize her dependent and independent variables. The result showed that greater religious involvement leads to a positive psychology of an adolescent. Based on Markstrom's (1999) research, there is an underlying connection to King & Furrow's (2008) study about religion as a resource for positive youth development: religion, social capital, and moral outcomes. The study was conducted in 2004 and was released the same year, in which the researchers used a quantitative method of questionnaires with high school students. The procedure was made as an in-class assignment for the students to participate. In California, the average age was about 15 years old, and the majority of the participants were either Black or Latino. The purpose of these two studies connects to youth development and its correlation to religion as well. It enhances and contributes the research done on previous studies, helping other researchers to consider different perspectives such as the Eriksonian. For example, this paper read through the youth part of Erikson's Stages of Development and analyzed the effects of religion on a youth's development.

## Gap

Research on religion and positive youth development has been investigated and studied before; but in each study, location, date, and other factors vary. This study will utilize different factors such as the division of groups of people: the religious, spiritual, both religious and spiritual (R/S), and neither R/S. Even more than this, the study had incorporated the five C's of positive youth development: Competence, Confidence, Connection, Character, and Compassion ("Understanding," 2007) to serve as a decision factor of whether a youth is positively or negatively developing. Five C's includes the characteristics of a person with PYD, therefore using it to measure the PYD of a participant by analyzing if they would strongly agree to strongly disagree with a statement that pertains to each five C's. For example, if a respondent were to strongly agree that they feel a strong sense of sympathy or empathy towards others, it would measure their PYD to a higher level.

## Methodology

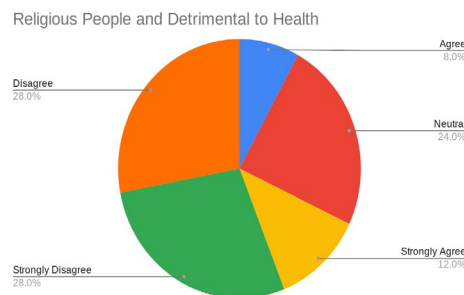
The method chosen for this study provided a rationale for the way it proceeded; the study includes a method of quantitative research. A form of questions was produced by the help of google form and was sent out to every student in the high school institution. 66 students were randomly selected from the respondents. The factors for positive youth development included in the study was inspired by Carol A. Markstrom's study of adolescent's development and religion. In this study, the author Markstrom used Eriksonian's perspective to categorize her analyses using different models such as Psychosocial Inventory of Ego Strengths (PIES) and Extended Objective Measure of Ego Identity Status (EOMEIS). The result consisted of that greater religious involvement correlates to a positive psychological criterion. However, for this research, instead of focusing on an adolescent group that includes ages from 10 to 19 years old, like the one from Markstrom's study, 66 participants were chosen between the ages 15-24. There were 24 males and 42 females from a high school in Fayetteville, North Carolina. Categories was chosen based on how it influences positive youth development, the five C's, as previously mentioned above ("Understanding," 2007).

The quantitative part of this study is the numerical results through surveys and questionnaires that was later categorized and analyzed. The initial questions participants answered focused on their gender, ethnicity, whether they are living with parents or guardians, and whether they are religious, spiritual, both or neither. Participants were put in four groups and their questions were analyzed differently for each group. Sample questions, for example are: "Do you say, 'Merry Christmas' or 'Happy Holidays?'" and "What role does religion play in your life?". It shaped the study

thoroughly when responses included both religious and non-religious students to participate, to look through both biases. Additionally, statements that incorporated the five C's were included, such as "I have positive bonds with people and institutions", and they would answer with, Agree, Strongly Agree, Neutral, Disagree, and Strongly Disagree. All the answer choices are included for all the five C's statements, except the one for confidence. In that portion, respondents were asked to rate their level of confidence from one through five; one being the lowest and five being the highest. Afterwards, each datum of five C's was split into the four groups and identified the differences in their answers corresponding to their religious state. To be as specific as possible, instead of four groups, it came down to two groups - (1) religious people and (2) neither religious nor spiritual. This way, the emphasis of demonstrating a strong PYD is to be shown in the two groups. Overall, 69 responded, but had to discard 3 responses due to undecipherable answers. 25 students identified themselves as religious, 13 saying they were neither R/S, 22 who were both R/S, and 6 who were spiritual.

## Data/Analysis

According to Cho and others (2012), the researchers concluded that being religious/spiritual was causing people to have a mental health issue. When the study was conducted, question of whether people feel that they get so down or upset sometimes, it becomes detrimental to their health, was included. Looking at figure 1, it clearly refutes Cho et al. (2012) study by the amount of the religious group strongly disagreeing at the statement. The data has also shown that neither R/S group people feel that getting terribly upset has been detrimental to their health according to the graph. However, the religious group still had people agreeing with the statement but not as much as those from neither R/S



group.

Figure 1: Figure 1 illustrates the connection between those who are religion and whether they are at more risk to fall mentally unstable.

Figure 2: Figure 2 shows whether religious people are more likely to act efficiently or successfully.

As illustrated in Figure 2, the religious group had a higher percentage of strongly agreeing (24%) when asked about the statement of whether they (participants) tend to look at the positive view of one’s action in specific areas, including social, academic, cognitive, and vocational. The graph supports my hypothesis that religious youth were more likely to have a positive youth development. However, when looking at neither R/S group, none responded ‘disagree’ nor ‘strongly disagree’ which surprises me. This might be because of the uneven number of respondents in both groups. Because what the graph failed to show is that the number of respondents in each group were not equal. While the religious group had a total of 25 respondents, there were only 13 for the neither R/S and the higher number of religious respondents might be the reason for the diversity of answers.

The concept of Character was evaluated, and the religious group consort had the short answer when asked about the character which pertains to whether they respect societal and cultural rule, possession of standard for correct behavior, morals, spirituality, and integrity. While neither R/S group had diverse answers. The majority of the religious cohort strongly agree which supports the study by King & Furrow (2008) in the literature review. In King and Furrow’s (2008) conclusion, their results suggested that the religious youth group were strongly tied to a three-dimensional model of their social capital demonstration, which included social interaction, trust, and shared vision that influences a youth’s moral behavior. And as shown in the data, the religious group had the preponderance of agreeing strongly with their moral values.

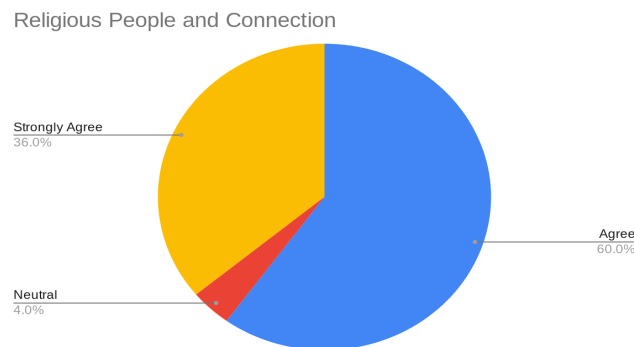
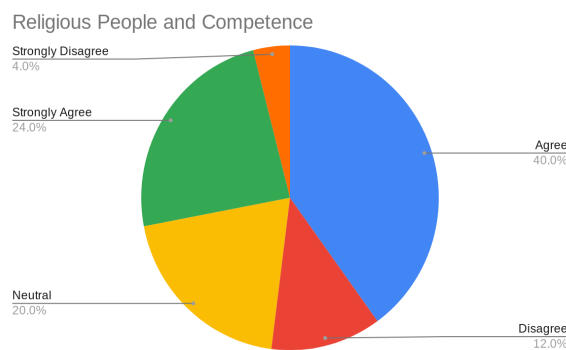


Figure 3: Figure 3 shows the connection between religion and connection with other people.



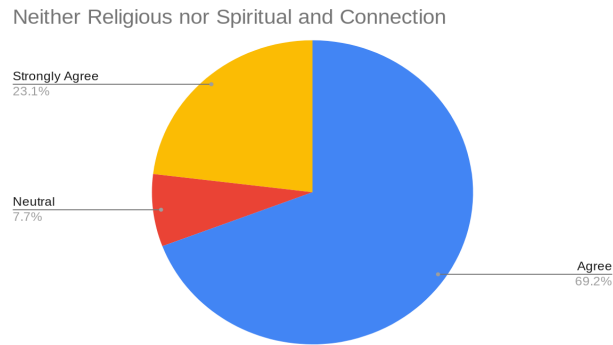


Figure 4: This figure shares the data for those that are neither religious nor spiritual if they have deep connection with other individuals.

In figures 3 and 4, both groups showed the 3 answer choices only with the statement asking if the respondents have positive bonds with people and institutions, for example, their peers, family, school, and community. Although it is still clear that the religious group had the highest percentage of people saying strongly agree, which shows that they had a stronger PYD. Neither R/S were also not too far behind with 23.1% of people still saying Strongly Agree which only had a 12.9% difference. This section actually generated a new understanding for me because while religious youth hold the stronger PYD, the neither R/S youth were not too far off which gives me the understanding that even those youth who are not religious or spiritual in any sort, they are still showing a PYD, just not as strong as the religious group which none of the scholarly articles touched base on. In this case, the figures are supporting my hypothesis but showing me another view of the other group who have a semi-strong PYD.

In the section concerning compassion, participants were asked if they have a sense of sympathy and/or empathy for others, the responses indicated that all of participants were possessing a strong PYD, when it comes to compassion, which is still actually supporting my new understanding. Although, the data, provided in the appendices would still resolutely report that the religious group had a very steadfast PYD in contrast to the nether R/S. The latter group (App. 2, figure 8) had several people answering neutral, while the first group (App. 2, figure 7) had participants responding either agree or strongly agree only. This shows that religious people have a strong PYD, but the neither R/S group is not too far off because the majority still strongly agree in the latter group.

Confidence section clearly showed the uneven number of participants in both groups (Appendix 2, figures 5 and 6). As stated previously, the religious group had 25 people while the neither R/S group had 13 people. Nevertheless, the figures above still support my hypothesis because of the fact that the religious youth had respondents saying their level of confidence is really high, a five, while the neither R/S have no one saying a five, the highest was only a four for the latter group. Aside from that, there was an equal amount of people from both groups saying their level of confidence is neutral, a three, which once again supports my hypothesis. Knowing that both groups had an uneven number of people, it was suggestive that at one point they had the equal number of respondents saying the same thing which enhances the point of my hypothesis.

## Limitations

At the end of the study, my data all came together and gave me a firm conclusion despite the pandemic that was happening. However, there were three limitations included in the paper that if addressed, it could have led to a different conclusion: the number of respondents on both sides, location of this paper (South = bible belt), and personal bias.

The first limitation addressed is the number of respondents on both sides. As previously mentioned, the study only had 25 respondents for the religious group while having 13 only for the neither R/S. If there had been an equal number of participants in both groups, the study would have reached a different conclusion, perhaps even refuting the original hypothesis. The limitation could have been addressed by cutting off the religious group members to an equal

amount of 13 for both sides, but that would have defeated the whole purpose of the survey. Doing two answer choices only when asking if the respondents are religious or not, instead of giving four answer choices: religious, spiritual, both, and neither, could have been performed as well. But again, that would give people a very limited choice of what they feel like is their standpoint in religion or spirituality. Performing a research means to overcome as much response bias as possible, which is why giving a variety of choices is better for both the participants and the researcher because it shows a diversity of the people and it is not too narrowed that it would chase away the participants, if they may not have known what their religious or not religious standpoint really is. An advice for the future researcher who wishes to do this topic is to keep up with the surveys and make sure that they have an equal quantity of participants on both sides and finish the survey with an even amount of people to both religious and neither R/S groups.

The second limitation is the location of the research conducted. This research paper was administered in the southeastern part of the United States, which is also known as the Bible Belt. And that may have caused the results of the religious group to be higher than neither R/S group. Conducting it to a different region in the United States and to address that limitation by looking if answers may have changed the results and conclusion is also suggested.

In this case, the researcher herself is a religious individual conducting this study, so it was hard to not be biased throughout. Even so, I tried not to interpret the responses in my own mindset of religiousness and instead tried to be more open about what the participants' answers really mean and not what I want it to mean. I addressed this limitation by asking for feedback from others and asking guidance from another person who is not religious and see if they would conclude a somewhat close understanding of the participants' answers close to what I interpret the data to be. I suggest for the person who would conduct research like this to not be biased and have a professional to talk to about interpreting the data, for example, like a psychology teacher if they are still focusing on the psychological part of this study.

## Discussion/Conclusion

I had my hypothesis that religious youth groups would have a positive youth development. However, before my scholarly research, I did not really know how to define a positive youth development, other than it is strongly related to the psychological state of a person, as if they would tend to be happier, brighter, and more positive. However, when I started doing research, I learned that there are different ways to look through a person's positive youth development and I looked through a psychology perspective specifically and used the Five C's of youth development. From there, I conducted my study and survey focusing on the participant's rating of the five C's. I have learned from my results that religious people tend to have a stronger bond with positive youth development. However, my new understanding is that even those who are neither religious or spiritual still have a PYD, but it is just not as strong as those who are religious. Non-religious people might have a stronger PYD today than before, because they are taught to respect people with religion and with the diversity the United States has, kids have grown up to be more understanding of other religions or the lack thereof because the country is not a strict stick-to-one religion rule.

Researching the connection between religion and students evolved over time as my initial focus centered on the role and mental effects of religious beliefs in high school students' lives. After sending my initial survey, I only received 3 responses. Upon talking to my fellow friends and classmates about my topic research, they informed me that my topic sounds uninteresting and overused, the 'mental' part especially. Then, I browsed through other articles and looked for a justifiable gap that incorporated religion and students. Upon reading the journal of Carol A. Markstrom about her study on adolescent's human development and connection to religion, I decided that would make a perfect fit on religion and youth's development, as I identified that the gap dealt with youth specifically. With further research, the gap fit perfectly, especially with the current situation as COVID-19 swept the nation.

## Future Implications and New Understanding

This study plays a vital role in the understanding of religion and mental development of students in high school. Counselors, religious leaders, even teachers will be able to take data from this study and gain a deeper understanding about religion and PYD. I think it is important to know the religious state of the country and how it may have changed through time. Although people do not know it, we are in for another great awakening because of the building of big mosques and churches, as well as looking for more religiosity in people, especially during this time that we are going through natural occurrences. For the future researcher, they should address this study with a new location, such as in the north or perhaps the whole country, because as mentioned in the limitations, it would perhaps change the conclusion as they would be far from the bible belt. Another big thing about this research is that we are facing a pandemic and people are learning to be more religious because of these occurrences. During this year of 2020, religion plays a big role in people's lives, whether it is to give them guidance or just strength to get through all of this. I am expecting more research about dissociation with religion and then the possible resurgence to being religious or close to it, as this pandemic goes around. People are more likely to research the ways people have overcome this pandemic, both mentally and physically worldwide, and in no doubt would religion be a part of it. My new understanding is that people that are religious and are neither religious nor spiritual youth are almost showing the same amount of positive youth development. Something that I learned about positive youth development is that at first, I thought that a faith-based background was the main vehicle that was the driving force of a positive youth development, but after concluding my study, I learned that even those who are neither religious or spiritual are showing a PYD. Religion is a support system and the other characteristics of PYD are what really makes a youth fully develop. One youth must have a positive community, family, peers, and environment all together to be able to fully obtain PYD. Being a religious person is not adequate to have a PYD, but a youth must commit to those positive support systems. The reason why a person who is neither religious or spiritual is showing a PYD is because their support system is mainly positive and that is the characteristics that make up a person's PYD.

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