



# Religion and Spirituality Among LGBTQ Youth

December 2022

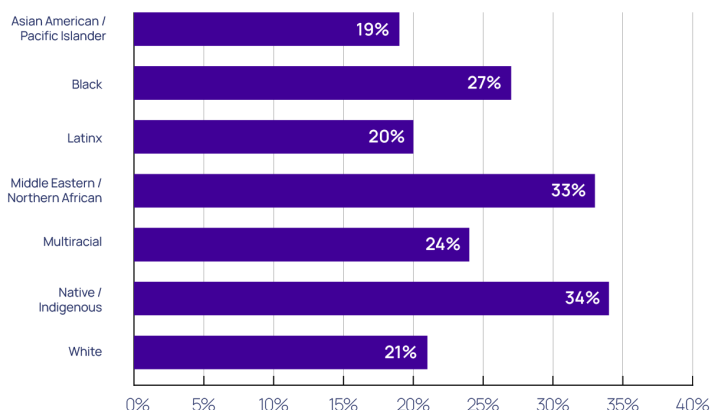
## Background

Religion and spirituality play important roles in the lives of many Americans. Overall, 68% of young adults ages 18-29 in the United States report that they believe in God, and 30% report that they believe God hears people's prayers and can intervene (Jones, 2022). Numerous studies have documented the ways that religion and spirituality are associated with positive mental health and healthy development among adolescents, including prosocial behavior and better physical health (Hardy et al., 2019; Canda et al., 2019; Koenig, 2018; Smith & Denton, 2005; Yonker et al., 2012; Nadal et al., 2018). Despite this, religion and spirituality can be fraught topics among LGBTQ communities due to historical anti-LGBTQ sentiments among many religious groups. Religious dogma has been used to dehumanize LGBTQ people, and LGBTQ people have often been excluded from religious spaces, ceremonies, and communities (Sherkat, 2019; Taylor & Cuthbert, 2019). While some American religious communities are shifting toward affirming and celebrating their LGBTQ members (Barton & Currier, 2019; Rodriguez & Etengoff, 2016), significant strides remain to ensure LGBTQ inclusion in many religious communities and spaces. Perhaps due to this historical exclusion and dehumanization, religion and spirituality have mixed associations with mental health among LGBTQ youth and adults. While, LGBTQ young adults who report that religion is important to them also report higher odds of recent suicidal ideation (Lytle et al., 2018), LGBTQ adults who report that they left their religion due to conflict with their sexual identity report higher odds of attempting suicide, compared to their peers who had no conflict between their faith and sexuality (Gibbs et al., 2015), suggesting the mental health impact is related to how they are treated in these spaces. Historical conflicts between religious communities and LGBTQ people have created a common misperception that LGBTQ people cannot be religious or spiritual. Using data from The Trevor Project's [2022 National Survey on LGBTQ Youth Mental Health](#), this brief sheds light on the importance of religion and spirituality in the lives of LGBTQ youth.

## Results

**One in five (21%) LGBTQ youth reported that their religion or spirituality is important or very important to them.** LGBTQ youth ages 18-24 (26%) reported higher rates of their religion or spirituality being important or very important to them, compared to LGBTQ youth ages 13-17 (19%). LGBTQ youth who reported just meeting or struggling to meet their basic economic needs (25%) reported higher rates of their religion or spirituality being important or very important to them, compared to their

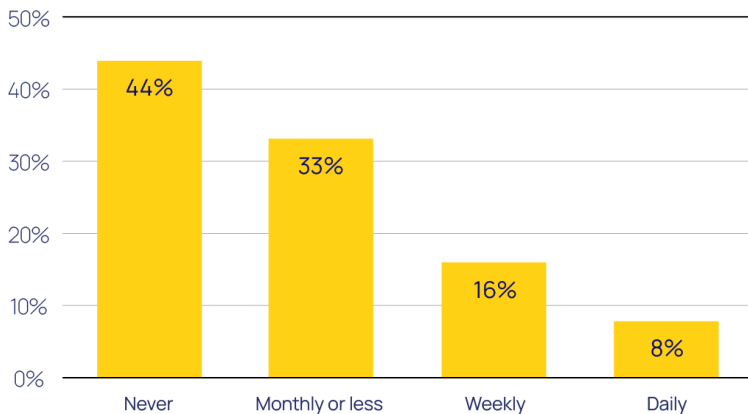
Religion / Spirituality Importance Among LGBTQ Youth, by Race



peers whose basic needs were more than met (21%). LGBTQ youth in the South (23%) reported the highest rates of their religion or spirituality being important or very important to them, compared to their peers in the Midwest (22%), Northeast (21%), and West (21%). Native and Indigenous LGBTQ youth (34%) reported the highest rates of their religion or spirituality being important or very important to them, followed by Middle Eastern / Northern African youth (33%), Black youth (27%), Multiracial youth (24%), White youth (21%), Latinx youth (20%), and Asian American / Pacific Islander youth (19%). These findings are similar to

The Trevor Project's previously published research [brief](#) on religiosity.

### Frequency of Prayer / Meditation Among LGBTQ Youth

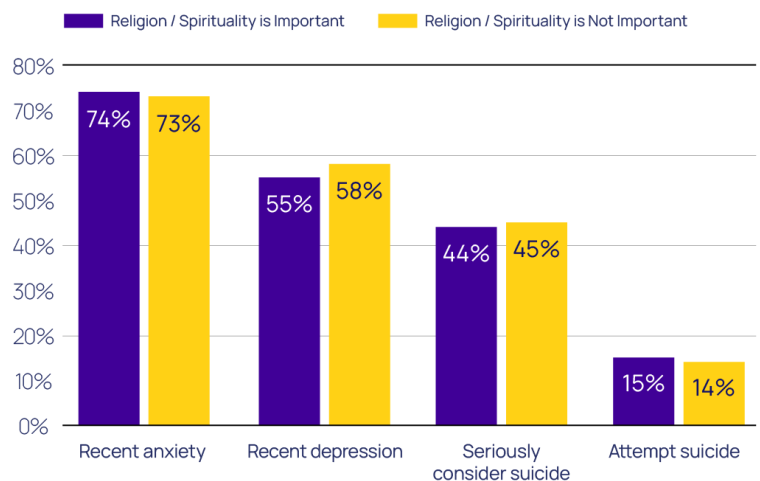


Nearly one in four (23%) LGBTQ youth reported engaging in prayer, meditation, or private reflection on their religion on at least a weekly or daily basis. When asked about prayer, meditation, and private reflection frequency, 44% of LGBTQ youth reported that they never do it, 33% reported that they do it monthly or less, 16% reported that they do it weekly, and 8% reported that they do it daily. Rates of prayer, meditation, and reflection were higher among LGBTQ youth who reported that their religion or spirituality is important or very important to them. Among

LGBTQ youth who reported that religion/spirituality is important or very important to them, only 4% reported that they never pray, meditate, or reflect, and 70% reported that they do so on a weekly basis or more.

LGBTQ youth who reported that their religion or spirituality is important or very important to them reported significantly lower rates of symptoms of depression (55%), compared to their peers for whom religion and spirituality were not at all or only a little important (58%). LGBTQ youth reported similar rates of recent anxiety and suicidality, whether they considered their religion or spirituality to be important or not.

### Mental Health Outcomes Among LGBTQ Youth, by Importance of Religion / Spirituality



## Methods

Data were collected from an online survey conducted between September and December 2021 of 33,993 LGBTQ youth recruited via targeted ads on social media. Youth were asked, “How important is your religion/spirituality to you?” Response options included: 1) Not at all important; 2) A little important, 3) Important, and 4) Very important. This variable was re-coded into two groups: 1) respondents who selected not at all important and a little important, and 2) respondents who selected important or very important. Youth were also asked, “How often, if ever, do you pray, meditate, or reflect on your religion, by yourself alone?” Response options included: 1) Never, 2) Less than once a month, 3) One to two times a month, 4) About once a week, 5) A few times a week, 6) About once a day, and 7) Many times a day. This variable was re-coded into four groups: 1) respondents who selected never, 2) respondents who selected less than once a month or one to two times a month, 3) respondents who selected about once a week or a few times a week, and 4) respondents who selected about once a day or many times a day. Recent anxiety was assessed using the GAD-2 (Plummer et al., 2016), and recent depression was assessed using the PHQ (Richardson et al., 2010). Items measuring seriously considering and attempting suicide in the past 12 months were taken from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s Youth Risk Behavior Survey (Johns et al., 2020). Chi-square tests were used to examine differences between groups.

## Looking Ahead

These findings suggest that religion and spirituality are important to many LGBTQ youth in the U.S. One in five LGBTQ youth reported that their religion or spirituality is important or very important to them, and nearly one in four reported that they pray, meditate, or reflect on their faith at least weekly. Demographic differences were observed: LGBTQ youth over age 18, those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, and those living in the South all reported higher rates of their religion or spirituality being important to them compared to their peers. Native/ Indigenous youth and Middle Eastern/Northern African youth reported the highest rates of religion or spirituality being important to them compared to other racial/ethnic groups. Among LGBTQ youth who reported that their religion or spirituality is important to them, 70% reported praying, meditating, or reflecting on their faith weekly or daily. Unlike previous studies with LGBTQ young adults (Lytle et al., 2018; Gibbs et al., 2015), no significant relationship between the importance of religion and spirituality and suicidal ideation or attempts was observed. That said, LGBTQ youth who reported that their religion or spirituality is important to them reported slightly lower rates of recent depression compared to their peers for whom religion and spirituality were not important. These findings suggest that the relationship between religious and spiritual importance and mental health is mixed and requires more research, but may also not be as harmful as it is often perceived.

It is important to note that this survey did not ask young people *which* religion or spirituality they practiced. Differences in rates of importance and mental health impact across different faith communities or practices were unable to be examined. Given the wide diversity of religious practices in the United States, future research should examine religious affiliations among LGBTQ youth. It is also possible that youth in this sample reported rates of meditation, which is not necessarily religious in intention, but rather a secular

practice often used to address mental health symptoms. It is also important to note that these data reflect LGBTQ youth's own reported religious importance and spirituality and not that of their parents/caregivers, which may have different associations with mental health (The Trevor Project, 2020).

Nonetheless, these findings paint an important picture of religion and spirituality among LGBTQ youth. They demonstrate that LGBTQ youth may be interested in participating in affirming religious communities. To that end, religious leaders must work to make sure that their congregations and communities are safe and affirming spaces for LGBTQ members. Denominations seeking to become more LGBTQ- inclusive should consider how their language and messaging may alienate LGBTQ people – which includes ending the harmful practice of conversion therapy, ensure that LGBTQ people are able to fully participate in the community, and work directly with LGBTQ young people and organizations to better understand how best to support them.

At The Trevor Project, we are dedicated to improving support for all LGBTQ young people. Our public training team is committed to training professionals and organizations – including faith-based organizations – that are in direct contact with LGBTQ youth to be more accepting of their identities. The Trevor Project also operates TrevorSpace, a safe space social networking site, as a way for LGBTQ youth to connect with supportive peers, and our advocacy team works to advance LGBTQ-inclusive policies. For youth who may find themselves in crisis, Trevor offers 24/7 crisis services that are available via phone, chat, and text. Finally, The Trevor Project's research team will continue to examine all LGBTQ youth, and how the different aspects of their identities intersect to paint a holistic picture of who they are and the challenges they face.

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