

BLACK NONRELIGIOUS AMERICANS

A Brief from the U.S. Secular Survey



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INTRODUCTION

The U.S. Secular Survey was a groundbreaking 2019 survey of nearly 34,000 nonreligious people living in the United States. Of these participants, 891 identified as African American or Black, comprising 2.7% of the sample. Our previous *Reality*

Check: Being Nonreligious in America

report provided an overview of the data gathered through the U.S.

Secular Survey, focusing on the lives and experiences of nonreligious people including atheists, agnostics, humanists, freethinkers, skeptics, and others.

This brief will more closely focus on Black nonreligious people, a group that

is far too often overlooked both within nonreligious communities and within our society more broadly. In addition to presenting data about this population, we will provide recommendations for secular groups that seek to more fully engage with and support Black nonreligious people.



“Being a Black woman, people almost always assume that I am a Christian.”

—Female, New York

While data about nonreligious people is very limited, this is all the more true for Black nonreligious people. National population surveys have found that 3% of atheists and agnostics identify as Black, and if we look at the broader religiously

I am a Black atheist, which presents its own unique set of problems in a culture that rejects those that reject religious programming that the Black community clings to. Not being able to be ‘out’ in my Black family, community and in our cultural organizations is difficult at best.”

—Female, Illinois

unaffiliated population, this percentage increases to 9% (Pew Research Center, 2015). According to Census estimates (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019), 13.4% of the U.S. population is Black, so then religiously unaffiliated Black people make up approximately 2.1% of the total U.S. population and 16.8% of the Black population. Recent research shows that, among Black Americans, 3% identify as atheist or agnostic (Mohamed et al., 2021). Although the U.S. Secular Survey was not a representative survey, the percentage of Black nonreligious participants generally aligned with these numbers. However, because of the prevalent stereotype in our society that Black people are more religious than other groups, we feel that it is necessary to further probe this issue.

Available data shows that Black people who do not believe in a god are less likely to identify as atheists. For example, one study found that only 26.1% of Black respondents who said that there was no god identified as atheists, compared to 59.1% of white respondents (Scheitle et al., 2019). This difference may be related to the fact that Black nonreligious people are less likely to say they have

close friends who identify as atheists. Combined, these factors may make the U.S. Secular Survey particularly ill-suited to capture robust data about Black nonreligious people. First, the survey screened for nonreligious status by asking respondents whether they identified with various nonreligious identity labels. Second, the survey was spread primarily through social media, often through personal contacts who took the survey or by local secular organizations. Because Black nonreligious people are less likely to identify as atheists and less likely to have friends who identify as atheists, even if they are nonreligious, our data likely reflects an unusual minority subset. These factors do not make the data on Black nonreligious people acquired through the U.S. Secular Survey invalid, of course, but they should help inform our understanding of who is being included—Black nonreligious people who are well-connected to secular groups and identify with nonreligious labels—and who is less likely to be included—the majority of the Black nonreligious population.

The reticence to identify as an atheist is not surprising. Research focusing on Black nonreligious Americans shows that they face a higher social cost for identification with this label than other groups.

“I wish I could be out as an atheist, but I don’t feel my friends and family would understand it. I feel that I would be ostracized and mistreated if they knew I didn’t believe in any gods.”

—Male, Virginia

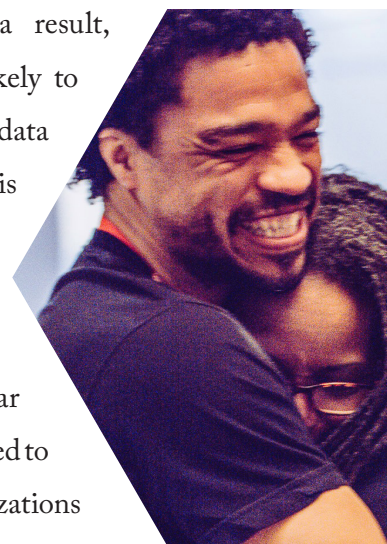
“Being African American, I usually find myself shut out of activities with other African Americans because of my lack of belief.”

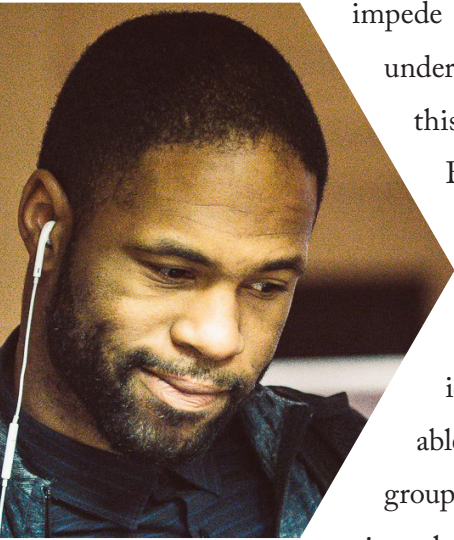
—Male, Minnesota

Stereotypes about the religiosity of Black people reflect a deeper truth—religion plays a profound role in Black communities and history. Nonreligious Black people who choose to adopt the stigmatized “atheist” label may be distanced from the social support of their communities and even be seen as rejecting their race and cultural identity (Abbott et al., 2020).

Our data reflects this sense of isolation felt by many Black nonreligious people. Black survey participants were more likely to feel lonely and more likely to conceal their nonreligious identity, and they faced a higher level of stigma than other participants. As a result, they were significantly more likely to be depressed. However, our data also shows the resilience of this community. Black participants were significantly more likely than other participants to be involved with local secular organizations, and those connected to national and local secular organizations reported better psychological outcomes.

However, the fact that Black nonreligious people are less likely than others to use nonreligious labels to describe their beliefs may





impede community-building and undermine the well-being of this population. For example, Black nonreligious people who do not recognize nonreligious labels as salient parts of their identities are likely to be less able to find supportive local groups of nonreligious people, since local groups are organized around these labels. By working to overcome this identification gap, the broader secular community can both improve the lives of Black nonreligious constituents and better engage with this population. This can be achieved by increasing exposure to Black atheists, promoting disclosure of nonreligious labels in Black communities to normalize atheism, reducing the social costs for

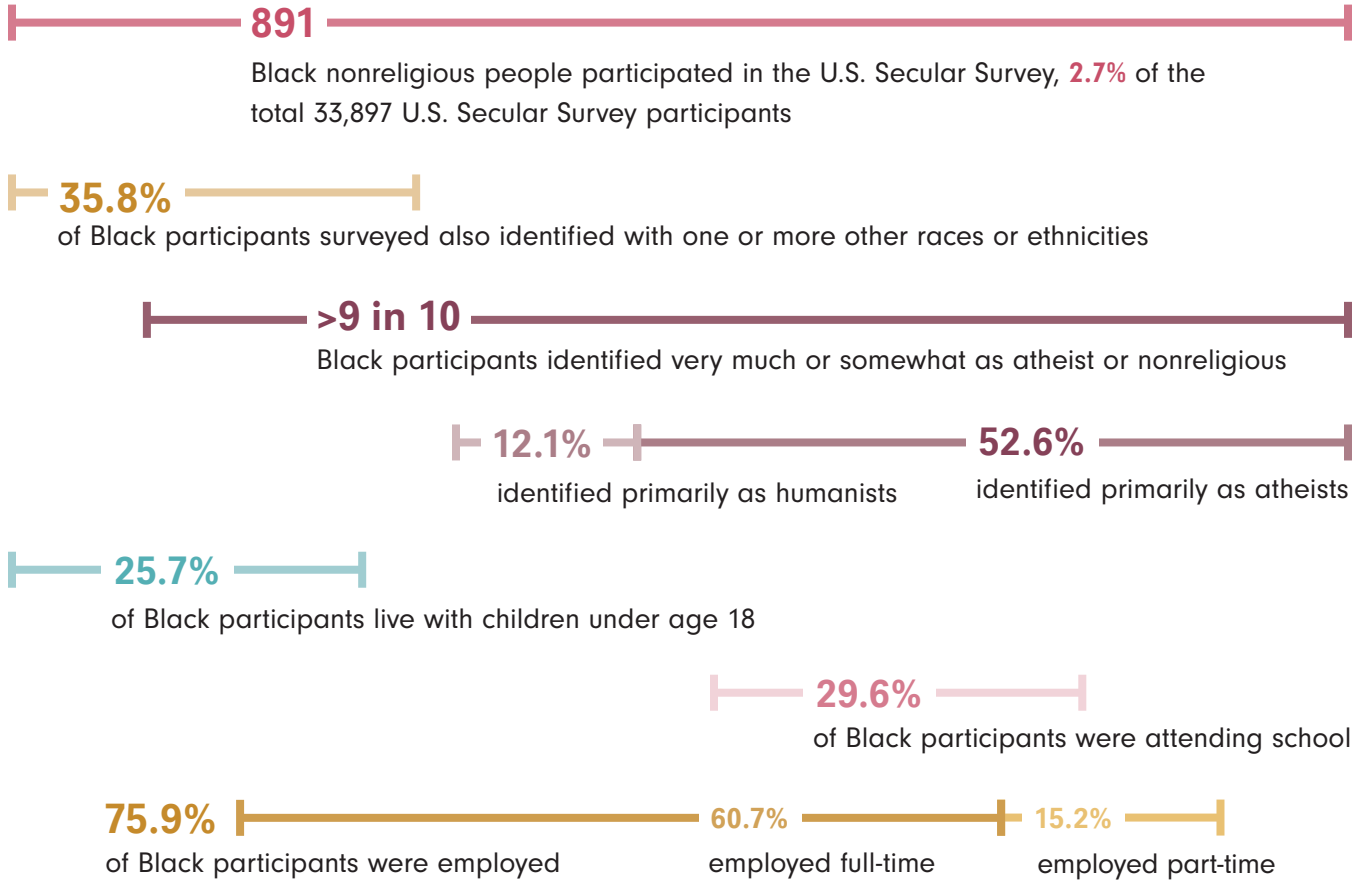
Black nonreligious people to identify as atheists, and increasing the benefits for doing so.

In many Black communities, atheism is seen as a “white” cultural phenomenon (Abbott et al., 2020). This is unsurprising given that 78% of atheists in the U.S. are white (Pew Research Center, 2015), and white people, often white men, tend to be overrepresented in many local secular groups, particularly in leadership. However, there are steps that secular organizations can and should take to become more welcoming to Black nonreligious people. Our organizations must be willing to confront racism and white supremacy, both within the secular community and beyond. Groups should engage with intersectional issues that most impact Black nonreligious people. And we should recognize that a commitment to increasing diversity means that our groups, and the secular movement as a whole, must be willing to accept change.

This brief provides an analysis of data related to African American and Black nonreligious people who participated in the U.S. Secular Survey. These participants identified as African American or Black, possibly along with other racial or ethnic categories, and they identified with one or more nonreligious labels such as atheist, secular, freethinker, humanist, skeptic, or agnostic. Throughout this report, we will refer to these participants as Black nonreligious people. For a comprehensive description of the survey methodology and analysis, please see **Reality Check: Being Nonreligious in America**, available at www.secularsurvey.org.

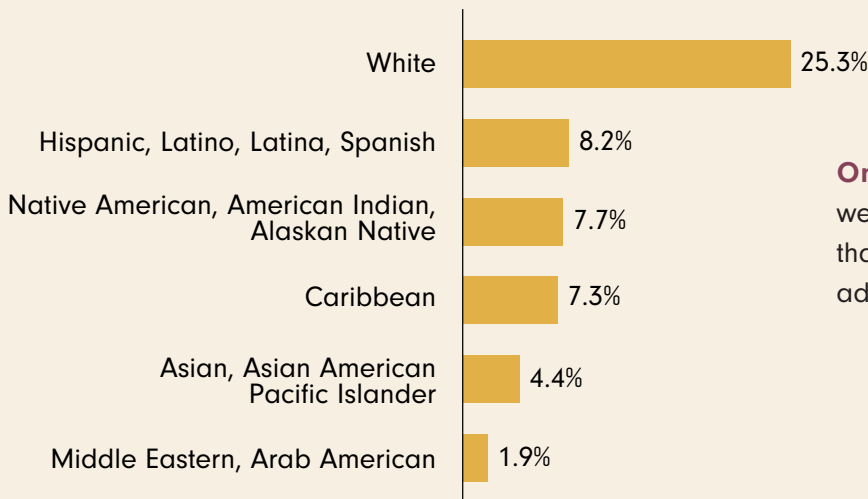
ABOUT THE SAMPLE

By the Numbers



Additional Racial or Ethnic Identities

FIGURE 1

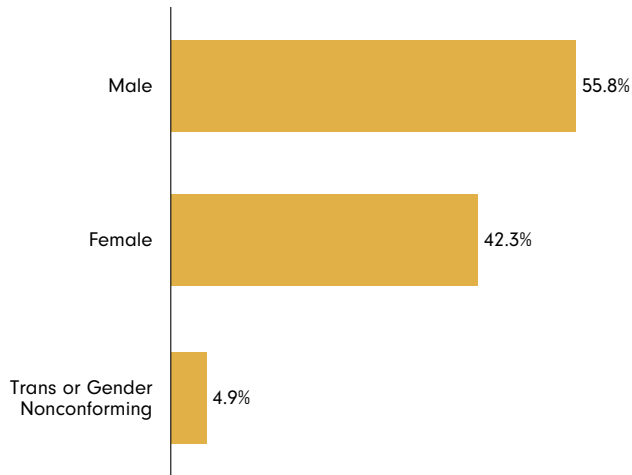


One in three (35.8%) Black participants were biracial or multiracial, meaning that they identified as one or more additional races or ethnicities.

Sex, Gender, and Sexuality

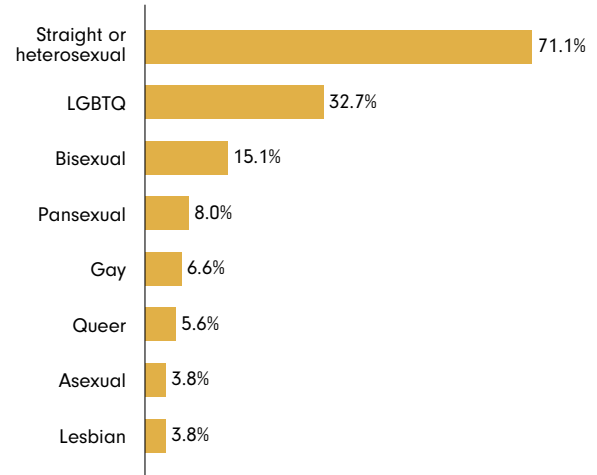
Gender Distribution

FIGURE 2



Sexual Orientation

FIGURE 3

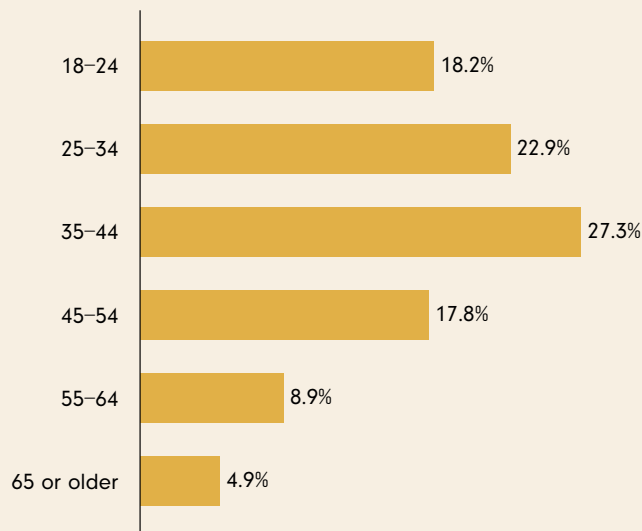


Compared to other survey participants, Black participants were **more likely** to be **younger**, to identify as **LGBTQ**.

Age

Age Distribution

FIGURE 4



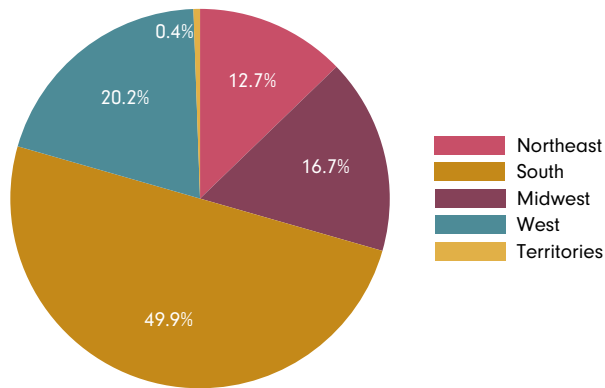
More than **one in four** Black participants were age 35-44 (27.3%), with about **two in five (41.1%)** being younger than 35 and a much smaller number (4.9%) being 65 or older.

Nearly **one in five** (18.2%) Black participants were between the ages of 18-24 in comparison to 10.0% of all other participants.

Religiosity & Community

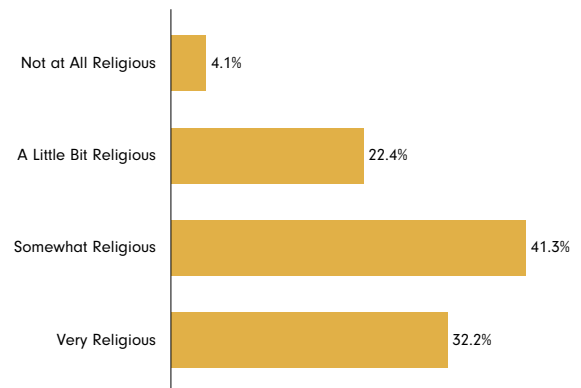
Census Region

FIGURE 5



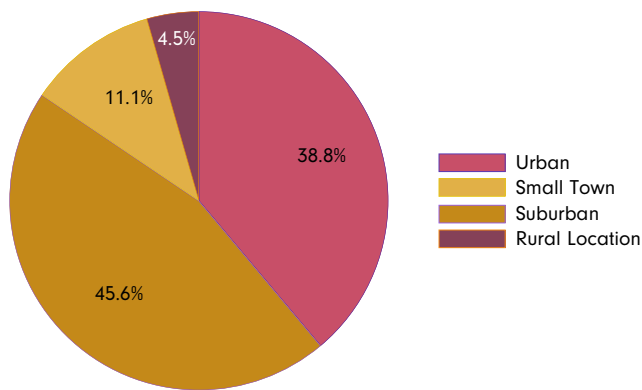
Community Religiosity

FIGURE 7



Community Type

FIGURE 6

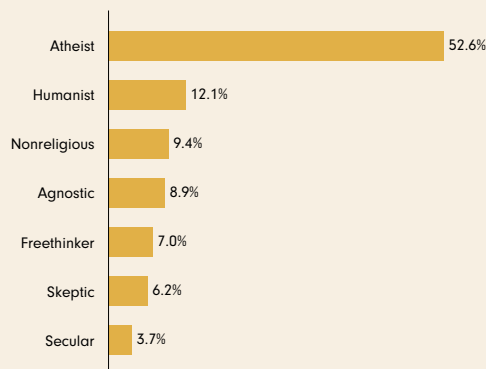


Black participants were **1.8 times as likely** to live in the South and **twice as likely** to live in urban communities as other participants.

Nonreligious Identity

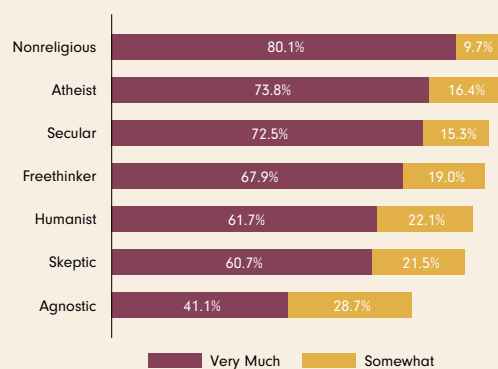
Primary Nonreligious Identification

FIGURE 8



Identification with Nonreligious Identities

FIGURE 9



Black participants were **nearly one fifth (18%) less likely** to primarily identify as atheist and about **one third more likely** to primarily identify as nonreligious (38%) or agnostic (32%), compared to other participants. On average, Black participants identified as nonreligious for less time than other participants.

CHALLENGES FACING BLACK NONRELIGIOUS PEOPLE

Concealment, Isolation, and Stigma

Based on significant feedback from Black participants in focus group interviews conducted before the U.S. Secular Survey, we anticipated a higher level of concealment and isolation among Black survey participants. In order to assess the contexts in which nonreligious people conceal their

beliefs, survey participants were asked how often they avoid talking about topics related to being nonreligious or that would reveal their nonreligious beliefs in various circumstances.

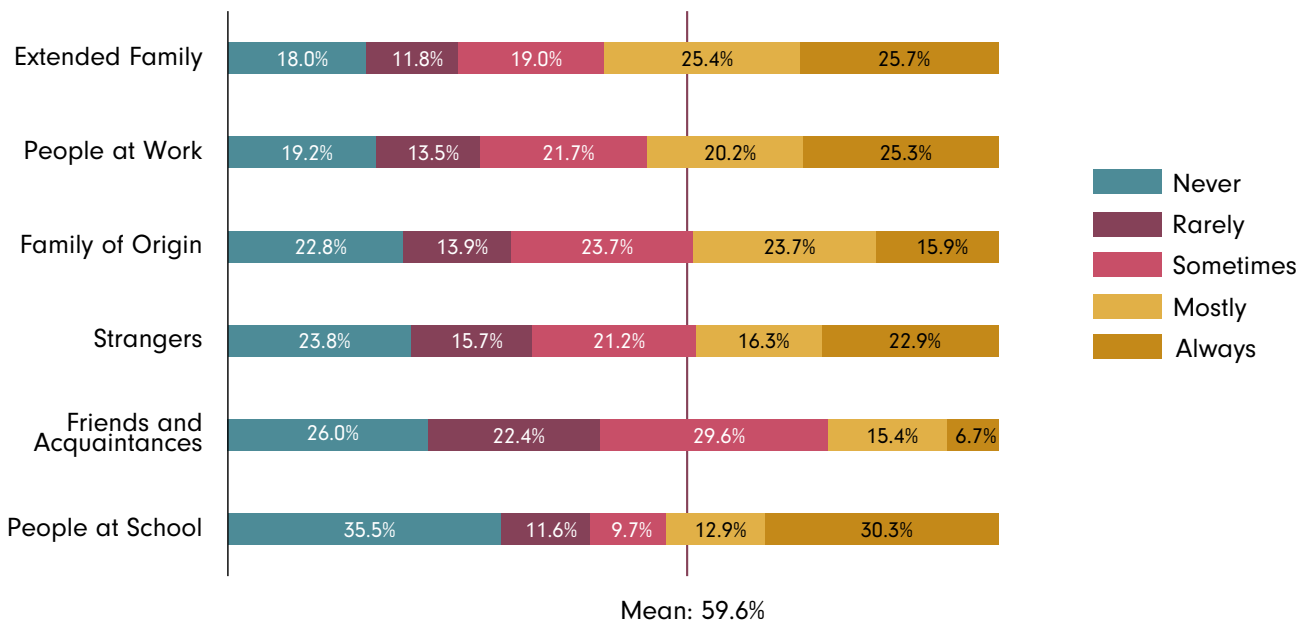
Our data revealed that, on average, Black participants concealed their nonreligious identity **slightly more often (4.0%)** than participants of other races (2.98 vs. 2.87, scale range 1-5). What is more significant are the areas of Black participants' lives where this concealment occurs (see Figure 10).

Nearly **four in ten (39.6%)** Black participants mostly or always concealed their nonreligious beliefs from members of their immediate family, compared with 31.2% of other participants. The rate of concealment was even greater among

“Too many Black community spaces assume that Black people are Christian, and even ostensibly secular spaces will include prayers to Jesus or praise dancing, which feels exclusionary. I haven’t been targeted personally in such spaces, but I do find that I am much more likely to hide my nonreligiousness when talking to people in such spaces.”
 —Female, New Jersey

Concealment of Nonreligious Identity

FIGURE 10



extended family where **more than half (51.1%)** of Black participants mostly or always concealed their beliefs, compared to 42.7% for other participants. A similar pattern emerges at work (45.6% mostly or always conceal) and at school (43.2% mostly or always conceal)—too often Black participants did not have any part of their lives where they feel comfortable discussing their nonreligious beliefs. Compared to other participants, Black participants were **42% more likely** to report that they always conceal their nonreligious beliefs in three or more areas of their lives (14% vs. 10%).

Moreover, this concealment was significantly more frequent in very religious communities, where Black participants were more likely to always conceal their nonreligious identities compared to less religious communities. Average concealment was **one sixth (16.2%) higher** in very religious communities compared to “not at all” religious communities (3.04 vs. 2.62). Similarly, concealment was **9.2% higher** among Black participants who lived in rural locations in comparison to those in urban locations (3.17 vs. 2.91).

Research has revealed that concealment can lead people to feel a lack of authenticity, be less able to establish close ties with others, experience more social isolation, have lower feelings of belonging, and have lower psychological well-being (see, for example, Quinn & Chaudoir, 2009; Quinn & Earnshaw, 2013; Quinn, 2017). Among atheist communities of color, concealment has been shown to be associated with both increased discrimination

“I had a Black supervisor I really liked who casually say she believed atheists lacked morals and good sense in front of me and my coworker/friend (who is Christian)... It was the first time I faced something like that at work, but it’s even harder to deal with Black folks in the community who can’t fathom that there are other Black people who don’t subscribe to Christianity. If she knew I was a non-believer, I know she would have treated me poorly and try to change me.”

—Female, Maryland

Assessing Concealment, Loneliness, Stigmatization, and Depression

In order to measure complex sociological phenomena such as concealment and stigmatization, we created scales using multi-question assessments that examined how frequently the participants encountered stigmatizing behavior or engaged in concealment. Similarly, to measure psychological outcomes, we used standardized constructs to measure loneliness and social isolation, and separately, to measure likely depression. Please refer to the *Reality Check* report for more detail about how these assessments were created and used.



and higher levels of psychological distress (Abbott et al., 2020b). Our data shows that higher concealment is associated with several types of negative outcomes among survey participants, including increased loneliness and risk for depression.

On average, a Black participant who “always” conceals their secular identity scored **36.6% higher** on the loneliness scale than a Black participant who “rarely” did so (7.1 vs. 5.2, scale range 3-9). Overall, Black participants scored **7.7% higher** on the loneliness scale than nonreligious people of other races. On average, Black participants residing in very religious communities scored **18.3% higher** on the loneliness scale than Black participants who reside in “not at all” religious communities (5.78 vs. 4.88).

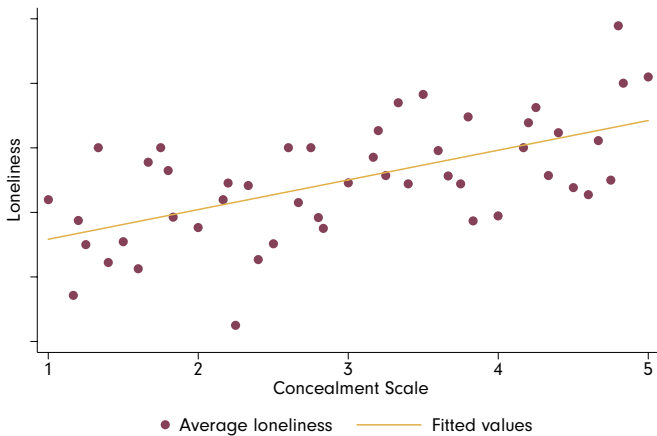
“My community is hardcore religious, so I have to hide my secular belief and any beliefs/thoughts or activities that don’t align with what is described in the bible. Having to watch what I say around my community limits my ability to speak freely, as I don’t want to get caught out and exposed.”

—Male, Texas

Black participants also had significantly higher rates of likely depression than other participants. **One in four (24.6%)** Black participants were likely depressed, compared to 17.0% among participants of other races, meaning that Black participants were **1.6 times as likely** to be depressed. Moreover, Black nonreligious youth (ages 18-24) were **more than three times as likely** to be depressed as older Black participants (44.4% vs. 20.5%, odds ratio 3.09). A similar pattern was found in LGBTQ Black participants, who were **twice as likely** to be depressed as other Black participants (34.1% vs. 19.9%).

In addition to concealment, stigmatization of nonreligious people can have a significant negative impact on their health and well-being. We found that, overall, Black participants were subject to **slightly more (5.7%)** stigma than other nonreligious participants. Certain types of stigmatizing experiences were more frequently experienced by Black participants than others. For example, **nearly three quarters (73.8%)** of Black participants were sometimes, frequently, or almost always asked to join in thanking God

Concealment and Increased Loneliness FIGURE 11



“I am the only Black atheist that I know, in my area. It’s quite lonely. I have not experienced any discrimination, but there is definitely stigma associated with being an atheist in my area. I am planning to relocate to a more progressive city soon.”

—Female, Florida

for a fortunate event, compared to 65.4% of other participants. Moreover, Black participants were significantly more likely than other participants to report almost always encountering each of the stigmatizing experiences listed in Figure 12.

In very religious communities, Black participants encountered an even greater level of stigmatization. Compared to “not at all” religious communities, Black participants in very religious communities experienced **35.1% more** stigma. Black LGBTQ participants reported **6.2% more** stigmatization than non-LGBTQ Black participants. On average, participants who experienced more stigmatization were also more lonely ($\rho = 0.25$, p -value $0 < 0.001$).

“It is really hard for me to find open minded people that are comfortable with me being nonreligious. I have to pretend around many people that I’m religious when I’m not. I get really irritated thinking about it because it feels like I cannot truly be myself around people. I often wonder if I’m ever going to find someone that’s going to like me for me.”

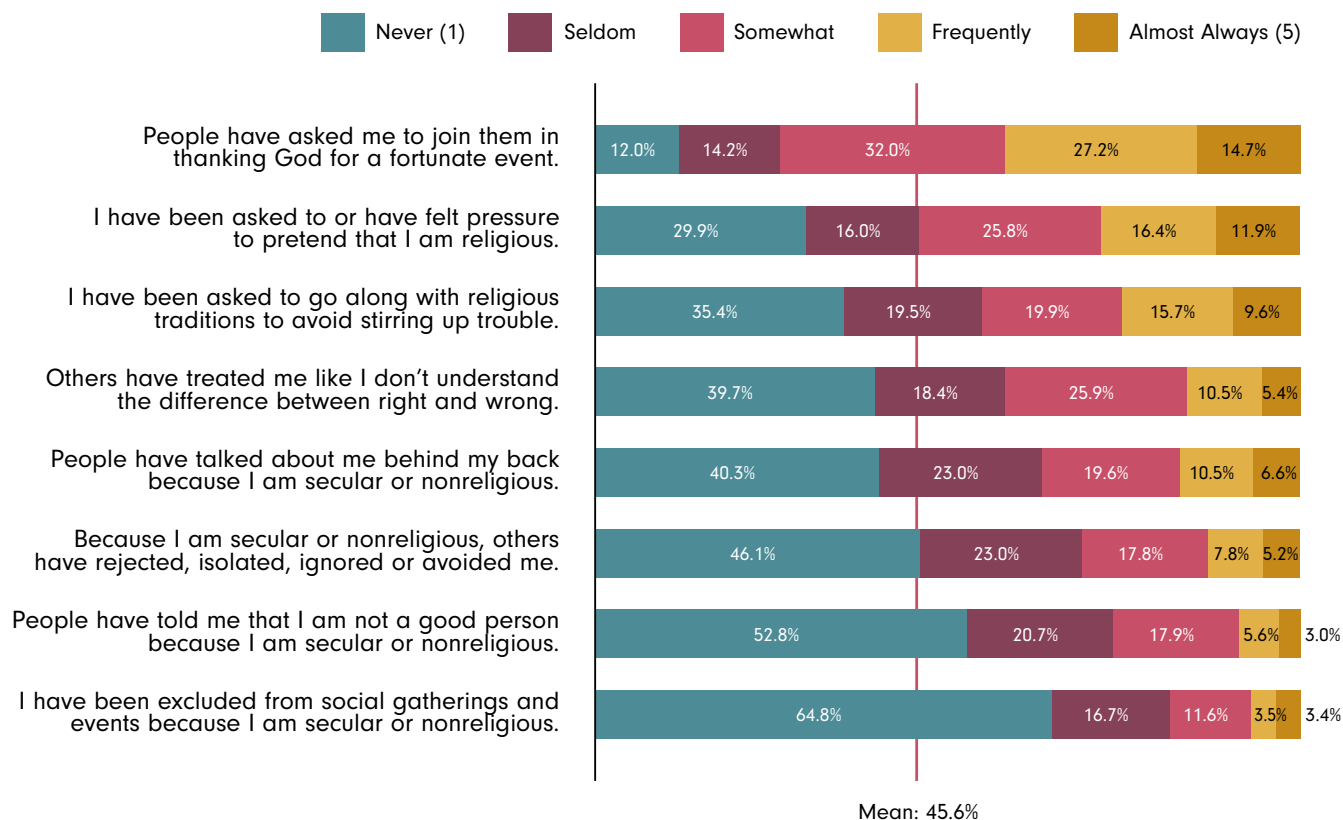
—Female, Georgia

“There is not so much stigmatization in my community as there is a non-recognition that we are among them. People speak ill of non-believers not out of malice, but because we are perceived as mere abstractions.”

—Male, Puerto Rico

Stigmatizing Experiences

FIGURE 12



Discrimination & Criminal Incidents

Because Black nonreligious people face multiple types of social stigma based on at least two marginalized identities, we expected our data to show that Black participants encountered a higher rate of discrimination than other participants. However, our data shows that Black participants within our sample had negative experiences as a result of their nonreligious identity at approximately the same rate as other participants.

In the three years leading up to participation in the survey, the most common areas where Black participants reported having negative experiences due to their nonreligious identity were with their families (62.0%), using social media or commenting online (54.3%), and in education (23.6%). While negative experiences were not as prevalent when interacting with police (5.8%), a comparable percentage (5.6%) of Black participants were unsure whether what

“At my last job, I had to pretend to have a religion (ANY religion) or they could fire me. I also had to hide the fact that I’m trans for the same reason, I worked for a Texas state agency. It was a job that almost no one gets fired from, but I had to pretend to be religious and tolerate the constant proselytizing.”

—TGNC, Texas

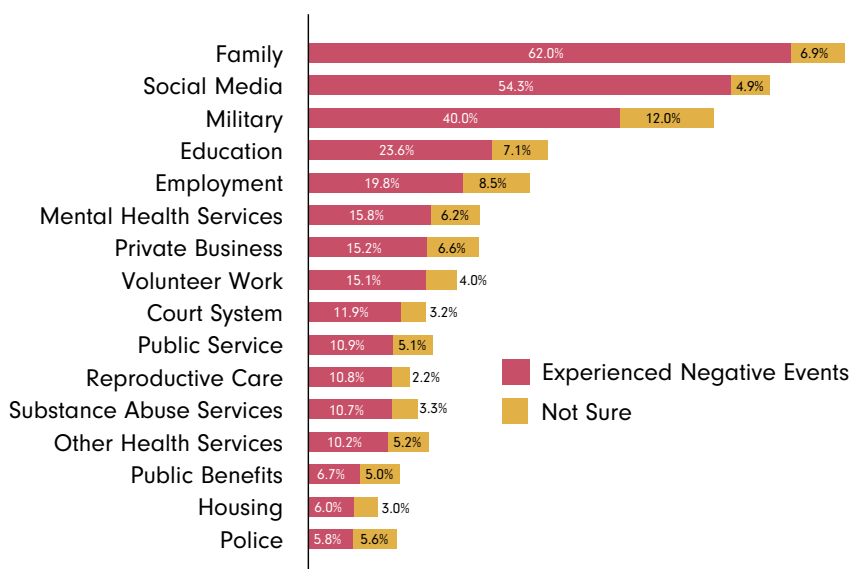
they experienced was discrimination. As with other participants, Black participants encountered significantly higher levels of discrimination in very religious communities, but the odds of increased discrimination did not differ significantly from other participants.

There are potentially several reasons why our data did not reveal increased discrimination against Black participants based on nonreligious identity. First, the experience of discrimination based on their beliefs may be different than the experience of discrimination based on their race because being

nonreligious is a concealable identity and race is more conspicuous (Abbott et al., 2020). Therefore, it is possible that Black nonreligious people may connect a discriminatory experience to their nonreligious identity only if it is overt. Secondly, research interviews with Black nonreligious people have revealed that negative experiences based on nonreligious identity may not be perceived as legitimate in communities of color, making those who experience

Negative Experiences and Discrimination

FIGURE 13

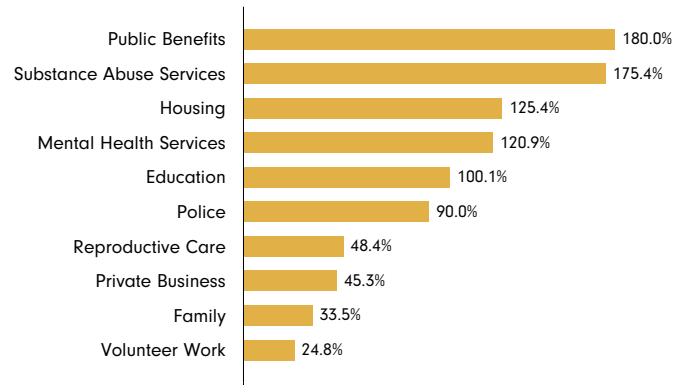


such discriminatory incidents less likely to share them. In one recent study, some interviewees expressed discomfort with comparing the discrimination they faced for being nonreligious with discrimination based on race because discrimination based on their beliefs was more manageable (Abbott et al., 2020). Similarly, it is possible that Black participants of the U.S. Secular Survey minimized the level of anti-atheist discrimination they encountered.

As with other U.S. Secular Survey participants, our data shows that Black participants who experienced a negative event related to being nonreligious were more likely to experience depression than those who did not. The increased odds of likely depression varied depending on the type of discrimination faced (Figure 14). Notably, participants who experienced discrimination related to being nonreligious in public benefits, substance abuse services, housing, education, and mental health services were more than **twice as likely** to experience depression than those who did not.

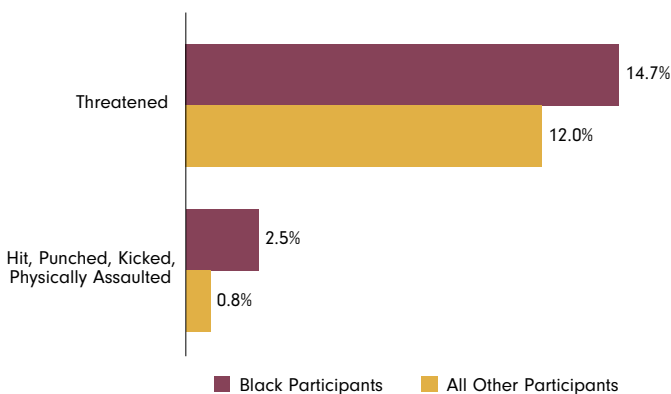
Compared to other participants, Black participants were subjected to significantly higher rates of criminal

Increased Odds of Likely Depression Among Black Participants with Discriminatory Experiences FIGURE 14

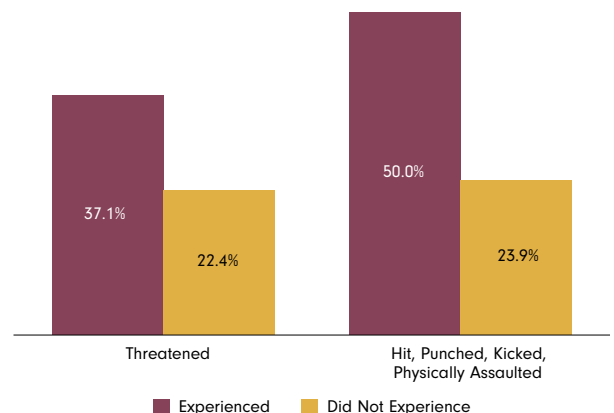


activities because of their nonreligious beliefs. They were **three times as likely** to report being physically assaulted because of their nonreligious identity than other participants (2.5% vs. 0.8%). As with stigmatization and discriminatory experiences, participants subjected to these criminal activities had significantly worse psychological outcomes. Black participants who experienced threats were about **twice as likely** as those who did not to screen positive for depression (37.1% vs. 22.4%), and Black participants who experienced violence were about **three times as likely** as those who did not to screen positive for depression.

Threats and Assault Experienced FIGURE 15



Criminal Incidents and Increased Depression FIGURE 16



FAMILY MATTERS AMONG BLACK NONRELIGIOUS PEOPLE

Religious Upbringing

Because religion plays a profound role in the culture of Black communities and in many Black families, we felt it was important to explore in depth the relationships between religious upbringing and family rejection and the impact this has upon Black nonreligious people.

Nine out of ten (89.7%) Black nonreligious participants of the U.S. Secular Survey were raised in Christian religions, either in Protestant (69.1%) or Catholic (20.6%) households. This aligns with population research on religious beliefs among Black Americans, which report that 79% of non-Hispanic Black Americans identify as Christian, and more than half (53%) identify with a historically Black Protestant denomination (Pew Research Center, 2015). Only **one in eleven (9.1%)** Black survey participants were raised in nonreligious households, compared to one in seven (14.4%) among other participants.

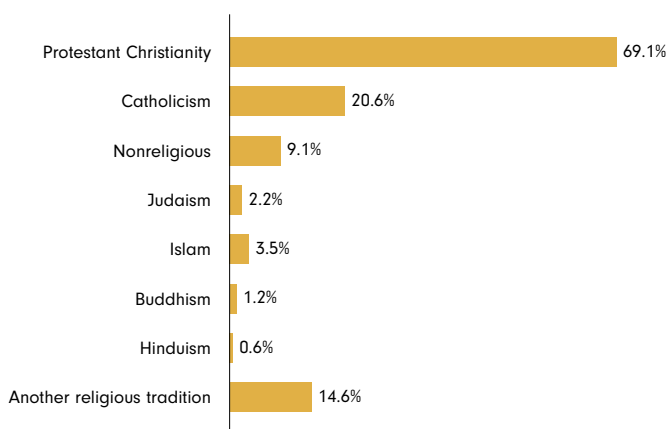
Nearly **one in five (20.4%)** Black participants

had very strict religious expectations growing up, in comparison to one in seven (14.1%) among other participants. **Two fifths (40.9%)** of Black participants who reported very strict religious expectations resided in very religious communities, meaning they were **61.5% more likely** to do so than other Black participants. Residing in religious communities, and/or growing up in strict religious households, had a substantial impact on the mental health of Black nonreligious participants. Black participants who reported having very strict religious expectations growing up were **20% more** lonely than those who had no religious expectations at all (5.91 vs. 4.91, scale range 3-9). Moreover, Black participants who were raised in a Protestant family reported **7.8% more** stigmatization than those who were not.



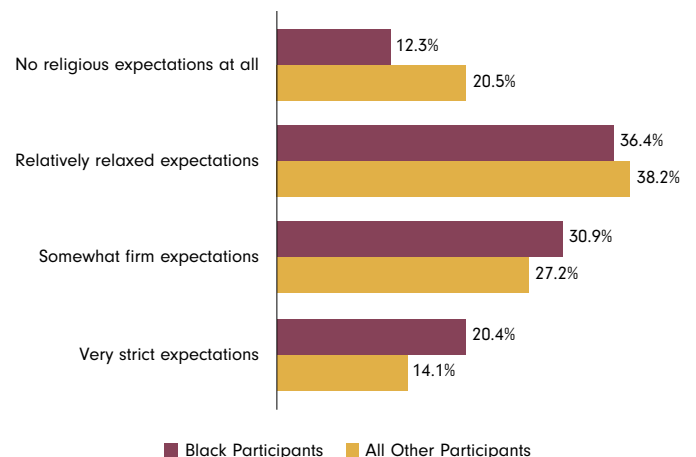
Religious Upbringing

FIGURE 17



Religious Expectations of Black Participants vs. All Other Participants

FIGURE 18



Family Rejection

Nearly half (46.8%) of all Black participants surveyed reported that their parents or guardians were unaware of their nonreligious identity when they were below age 25, in comparison to all other participants (41.9%). Of those Black participants whose parents were aware of their nonreligious identity, **more than one quarter (27.9%)** reported that their parents were very unsupportive of their nonreligious beliefs and only **one in eight (12.9%)** reported that their parents were very supportive. Overall, Black participants were about **50.0% more likely** than other participants to report that their parents were somewhat or very unsupportive of their nonreligious beliefs when they were under 25 years old.

Black participants with very unsupportive parents scored, on average, **14.4% higher** on the loneliness scale than those with very supportive parents. **More than three fifths (62.0%)** of Black participants

“I felt like I was going to die for not believing in god, more specifically for not wanting to be one of Jehovah’s witnesses. I still haven’t accepted that I’ll be shunned and hated by all of my friends and family. I’m still coming to terms with being raised in a cult.”

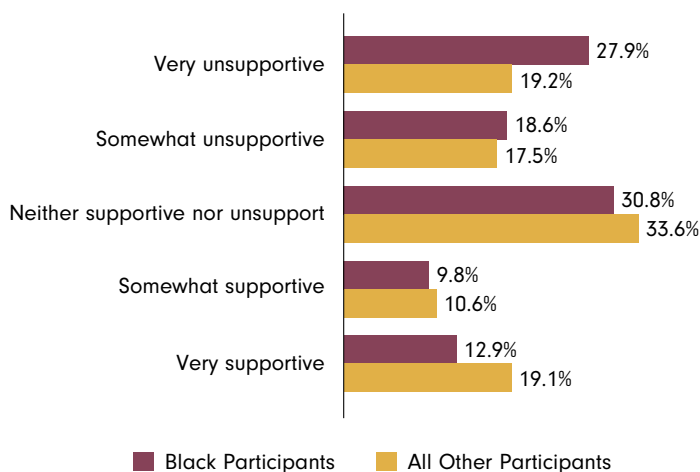
—TGNC, Georgia

reported negative experiences with their families due to their nonreligious identity, compared to 54.4% of other participants. These numbers were even higher for Black participants living in very religious communities, where **nearly three quarters (72.7%)** reported negative experiences with their families. Black participants who experienced negative events with their families because of their beliefs were **one third (33.5%) more likely** to screen positive for depression than other Black participants.

Our data also shows the important protective benefits of family that is supportive of nonreligious beliefs and identities. Black participants whose parents were somewhat or very supportive were **7.6% less** lonely than those whose parents were unsupportive, neutral, or unaware of their nonreligious beliefs. Further, Black nonreligious participants whose parents were very supportive had **18.4% lower** average concealment of their nonreligious identity than those whose parents were very unsupportive (2.61 v. 3.09, scale range 1-5).

Level of Family Support

FIGURE 19



STRONGER TOGETHER: COMMUNITY & ENGAGEMENT

Due to the prominence of religion, Black nonreligious people can feel especially isolated or misunderstood within Black communities. Our data shows how this isolation affects Black participants, who experienced higher levels of stigma and loneliness than other participants. Engagement with nonreligious communities is a significant protective factor for all nonreligious people, but these statistics demonstrate that it is even more important for Black nonreligious people.

In comparison to other participants, Black participants were significantly more likely to be members of local secular organizations. **More than one quarter (26.9%)** of Black participants were members of a local organization for atheists, humanists, or nonreligious people in their area, compared to 21.9% of all other participants. This means that Black participants were **nearly one third (32%) more likely** to seek out and join a local group than other participants. They were slightly less likely to be members of national secular organizations (32.2% vs. 34.2%). Black participants living in very

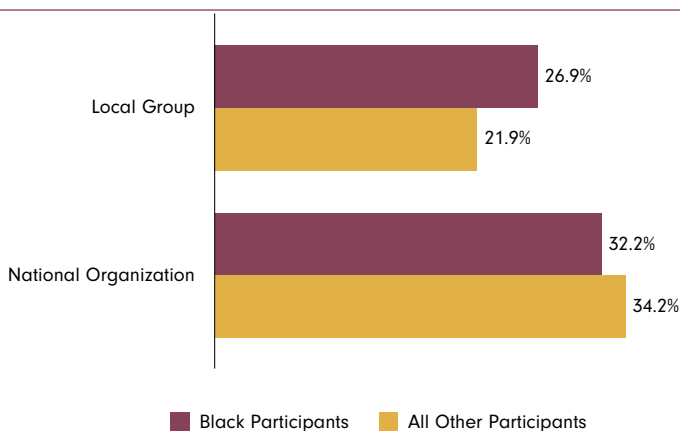
"I found Atheists on Youtube, and in my local Meetup groups. My husband and I have similar beliefs...secular, humanist, atheist, agnostic, freethinker, skeptic. There are several groups in our area, and we participate in activities and social events, several times a year."

—Female, Texas

religious communities were **significantly more likely** to be members of national organizations (39.4%) or local groups (31.8%), compared to those living in less religious communities (28.0% and 24.3%, respectively).

Previous research has found that engagement with secular communities can help alleviate loneliness and depression (Galen et al., 2015). Among Black participants, membership in both local and national secular organizations had a significant protective effect against adverse mental health. Black participants who were members of national secular organizations were **one third (33.9%) less likely** to be at risk for depression (19.5% vs. 26.8%). Members of local groups were also **one third (33.1%) less likely**

Membership in Secular Organizations **FIGURE 20**



"As an African-American woman, I hate how so many local chapters of our organizations--namely, the Urban League, NAACP--just assume that because we are Black, that we must be religious. Not only do many of the events take place at churches, but going to actual Sunday service was actual promoted as a membership engagement activity. On the one hand, I get it, but I wish there were more space for those of us who identify as nonreligious."

—Female, Virginia

than nonmembers to be at risk for depression (19.4% vs. 26.5%). Black participants who were members of national or local secular organizations were also, on average, slightly less lonely than Black participants who were not members of national (5.42 vs. 5.57, scale range 3-9) or local (5.39 vs. 5.58) organizations.

Survey participants were asked if they had participated in any events or services frequently offered by local secular groups within the last year, and if not, whether they were interested in such events or services. **More than one quarter (27.2%)** of Black participants have attended an in-person social event for nonreligious people in their area. Fewer Black participants attended debates or lectures by secular leaders or issue experts (18.0%), participated in local volunteer opportunities for nonreligious people (13.2%), or were involved in advocacy on secular issues (11.1%). The majority of Black participants who hadn't yet participated in various activities expressed interest in participating in each of the events or services.

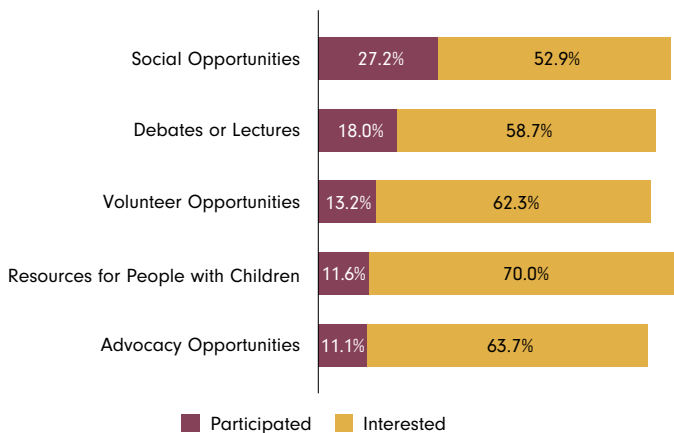
"I also think there's a lot of animosity in the Black community toward anyone who is vocally non-religious. I don't attack anyone personally, but I do point out viewpoints I find immoral even when they're couched in religion. I find that people just respond with anger and hostility, when they have the morality of their beliefs challenged."

—Female, Virginia

Black participants who were members of local secular groups were significantly more likely than those who did not belong to a local group to have participated in all activities assessed (Figure 22). Overall, Black participants were more likely to have participated in social opportunities (35.5% higher) and volunteer opportunities (25.9% higher), compared to other survey participants. This data helps demonstrate the importance of local secular groups offering a variety of secular activities, including those intended for people with children, in order to better engage Black nonreligious people.

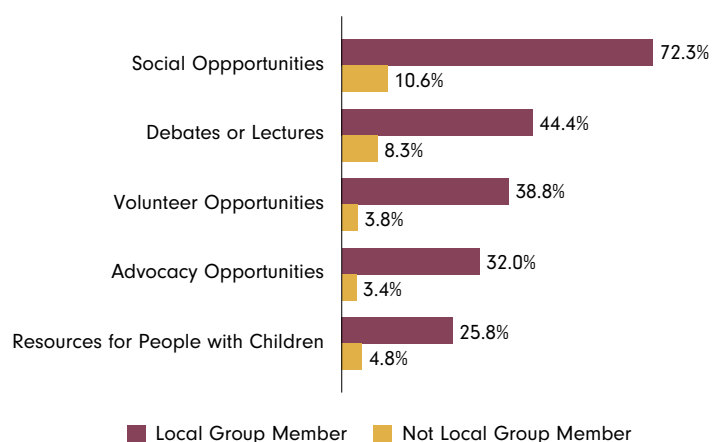
Participation and Interest in Local Secular Activities

FIGURE 21



Local Group Membership and Participation in Secular Activities

FIGURE 22



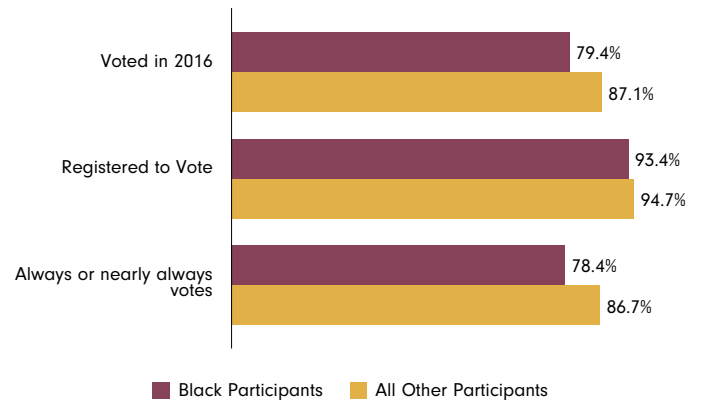
VOTING & POLICY PRIORITIES

While the vast majority (93.4%) of Black participants surveyed were registered to vote, a lower percentage of Black participants voted in 2016 and reported that they always or nearly always vote, compared to all other participants. Although not directly comparable, these rates are much higher than the voting rate in 2016 (55.7%) for members of the general voting age population (FEC, 2017).

U.S. Secular Survey participants were asked two sets of questions to better understand which policy priorities were most important to them as nonreligious people. First, they were asked to rate the importance of various policy priorities. Figure 24 shows the differences between those policy priorities that Black participants marked as “very important” compared to other participants. Notably,

Voting Patterns

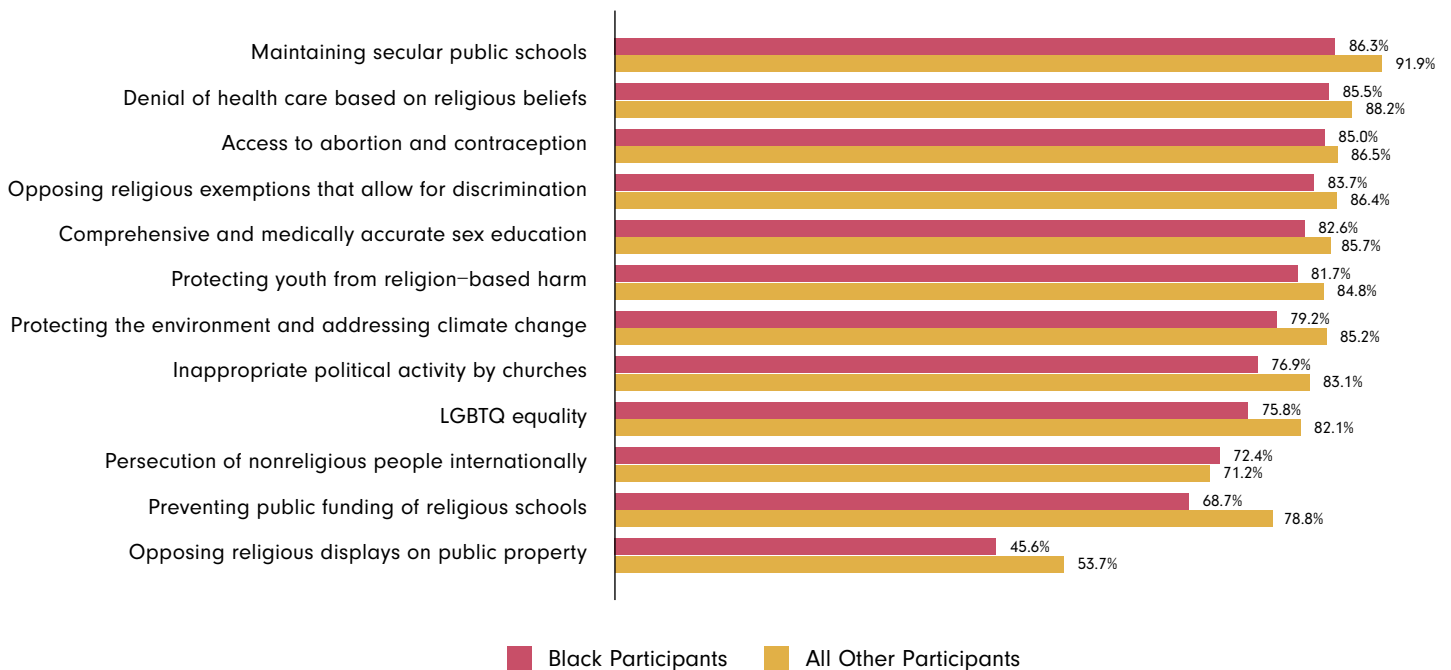
FIGURE 23



Black participants were less likely to view nearly all of the listed policy priorities as “very important.” The greatest differences were seen regarding public funding of religious schools, religious displays on public property, and LGBTQ equality.

Policy Priorities That Are Very Important

FIGURE 24



Next, survey participants were asked which of the policy priorities were their top three in importance for advocacy by secular organizations. We asked this question in order to help secular groups better understand their constituencies and set their advocacy agendas. **Nearly half (46.2%)** of Black participants stated that maintaining secular public schools should be a key priority for organizations representing nonreligious Americans. Black participants also reported that secular organizations should advocate to oppose religious exemptions that allow for discrimination (43.3%), ensure access to abortion and contraception (42.4%), and protect youth from religion-based harm (40.8%). The first two priorities aligned with those identified by other survey participants, however, non-Black participants instead selected opposing inappropriate political activity by churches as a top priority. Moreover, there were several areas where Black participants prioritized policy items differently than

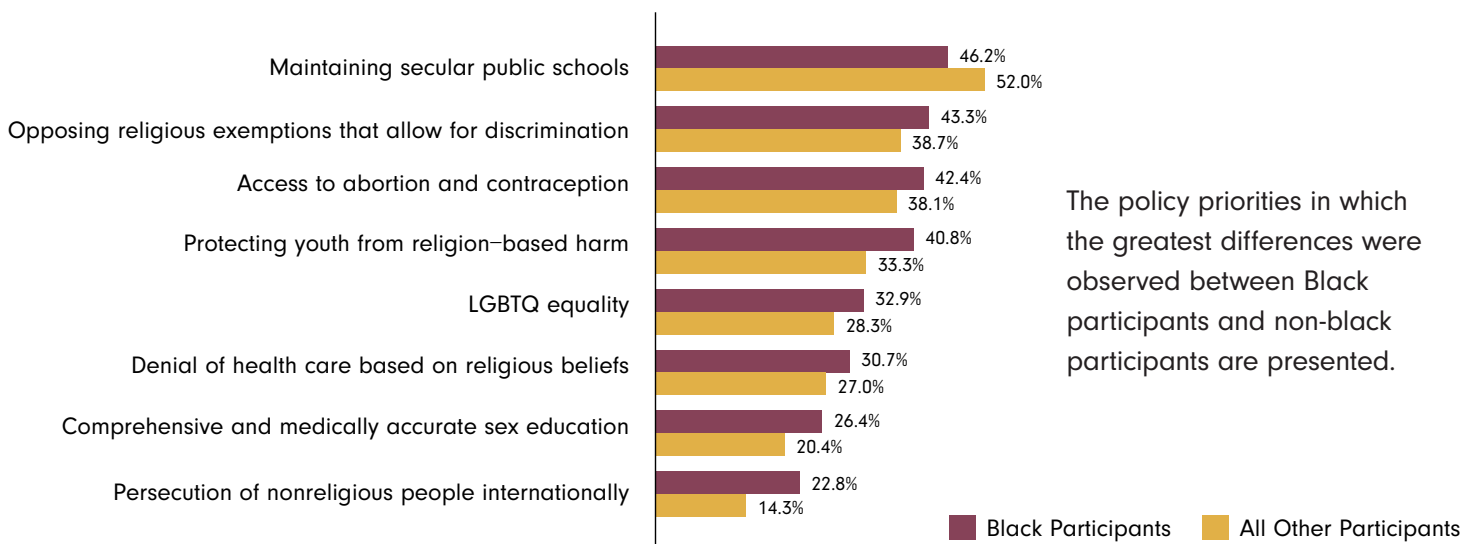
“Sociopolitics, especially within communities of color, have always been an issue relative to experiences of stigmatization and discrimination. As a black atheist-humanist woman, I am always expected to subdue, dilute, or submit myself to the bigotry and supremacy of others into my everyday life so they can feel privileged and/or better than I am. It does not help that governance in America is leaning more and more towards theocracy regardless of party and branch which also makes me feel that I do not have the same liberties and freedoms as many others. It is holistically unjust and unfair because atheists/non-theists are human beings, too. We deserve equal, equitable, just, and fair treatment as well as the same freedoms to be ourselves like everyone else.”

—Female, California

other participants (Figure 25). For example, Black participants were **1.8 times as likely** to identify persecution of nonreligious people internationally as a top policy priority for secular organizations, compared to other participants.

Policy Priorities for Secular Organizations

FIGURE 25



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COMMUNITY BUILDING & ORGANIZING

The U.S. Secular Survey provides valuable insights that can help both national and local secular organizations better meet the needs of Black nonreligious people and communities. But data alone has little value. If secular organizations want to better meet these needs, they must be willing to take meaningful steps to reach out to Black nonreligious people, to reexamine their activities and their missions, and to accept that changing membership and increasing diversity requires organizational change.

Our data shows that Black nonreligious participants experienced significantly more loneliness than other participants. At the same time, they were more likely to belong to local secular organizations than other participants, and membership in these groups can provide critical

"I experience the same instances of discrimination and stigmatization that are common among atheists in America. As urgently, there is a serious undercurrent of misogyny, homophobia, transphobia and scientific racism in many atheist and skeptic communities today, which don't necessarily take responsibility for policing themselves. This is dangerous and has become a tacit endorsement of this bigoted behavior, and an endorsement of the alt right. It sucks, and it is becoming untenable for marginalized populations to join mainstream atheist groups."

—Male, New York

"I think non-believer spaces would be more inviting to Black people who have doubts about religion if freethinking/humanist/skeptic/etc. communities were more culturally inclusive and acknowledged how white supremacy influences these spaces."

—Female, North Carolina

support. However, in a country where 78% of atheists are white (Pew Research Center, 2015), this sense of isolation can be amplified if the secular groups that Black nonreligious people turn to for support lack participation by nonwhite people or are even exclusionary. But this can change. Local secular groups can and should work to build communities that are inclusive and accepting of all nonreligious people and that are committed to working across difference. Based on our findings and the perspectives of national leaders with significant experience organizing Black nonreligious communities, we offer several recommendations for secular organizations to better engage Black nonreligious people.



1. Be aware of how white supremacy affects organizational and interpersonal dynamics; willingness to learn and accountability are essential.

Both national and local organizations should recognize that there is an imbalance of support between secular organizations primarily focused on nonreligious people of color and those that, while intended for everyone, can be exclusionary. Too often, organizations express a desire to engage Black nonreligious organizations and members of the community without taking real action to do so. The organizations may give awards to prominent nonreligious people of color, but may not give financial support for the work they are doing or provide opportunities for leadership and growth. Rather than platitudes and tokenism, leaders of secular organizations must realize that if they are serious about changing their organizations and supporting Black members, then real change starts with them.

To thrive, Black nonreligious people need genuine support from established secular organizations. And this can only happen when secular organizations are willing and able to listen to their Black members; to accept that, regardless

“Intersectionality is sorely needed in the humanist/secular community. Many Black people have familial and other ties that mean we are more tolerant of cultural religiosity that isn’t condemning.”

—Male, Ohio

“Lack of Black representation in the atheist community causes some discrimination and misinformation.”

—Male, Texas

of their intentions, engagement with Black nonreligious people has not been adequate; and to educate their leadership and members about the oppression and resulting inequalities that Black Americans continue to face in our society.

2. Understand that racism, discrimination, and other issues that have a disparate impact on Black nonreligious people are secular issues.

By examining what different subpopulations of nonreligious people view as policy priorities for secular organizations, it becomes evident that what is considered a “secular issue” depends on who is asked. Because most secular organizations, and indeed the movement as a whole, have been dominated by white men, the priorities of white men have had an outsized focus. Organizations can change this dynamic by focusing on intersectional issues that have a disproportionate impact on Black nonreligious people. Just like everyone else, Black nonreligious people tend to prioritize policy issues that directly impact them, their families, and their communities. Secular organizations must be aware of and responsive to these preferences when setting their advocacy agendas.

3. Be responsive to the needs of Black nonreligious members in terms of your activities, goals, and accessibility.

The U.S. Secular Survey data shows that Black participants were likely to be younger than other participants and that many are raising children. Moreover, because of the long history of racism and segregation in America, Black people in general are likely to have a lower income than other racial groups and to live in different neighborhoods, often with less access to transportation. Therefore, local organizations that seek to successfully engage Black nonreligious people should work to increase accessibility and provide programming that is suitable for people with children. Moreover, Black participants were significantly more likely than other participants to have participated in social and volunteer events, so these might be areas of focus—although it is especially important for groups to be open to suggestions and feedback on activities from their Black members.

“I kept it hidden because I had never met another Black person who did not believe in a god. I knew I would be ostracized. Then I attended a sci-fi/comic-con type conference many years ago and was completely shocked to see Black Nonbelievers had a booth at the conference. That changed everything for me. That was a defining moment for me because I knew there were others like me.”

—Female, Florida

Finally, groups should understand that not every activity needs to have broad appeal in order to be successful. Offering diverse opportunities for participation and engagement can help make organizations more inclusive, particularly if some activities are especially relevant to Black members, women, or other subsets of the membership.

“I just wish more Black Americans who are nonreligious would speak out & create a network for people like me to get together. I love being the catalyst of change but I am alone in my fight & I don’t know how much more fight I have in me.”

—Male, Nevada

4. Build connections with Black Nonbelievers, Inc. and other national or local organizations that serve Black nonreligious communities.

Despite the terrific national organizations like Black Nonbelievers and the many local Black nonreligious groups that serve Black nonreligious people across the country, most local secular organizations are not well-connected to these groups. We recommend that other local secular organizations reach out to local groups for Black nonreligious people and find ways to partner with them on events and activities. If there is no local Black Nonbelievers chapter in an area, and Black members of another local secular group are interested in forming a chapter, the

local secular group may be able to provide space and other resources to help them do so. We also recommend that established secular organizations support these organizations financially so that they are better able to provide resources that are lacking for Black nonreligious people.

We also recommend that secular organizations work to support and build relationships with other local organizations with compatible goals led by people of color. Secular organizations that broaden their policy agenda to work on intersectional issues that disproportionately affect Black nonreligious people may be able to better align with and support the advocacy of groups such as local NAACP chapters, Movement for Black Lives groups, Southerners on New Ground (SONG), and others.

5. Provide resources and support for people who are newly leaving religion.

Data from the U.S. Secular Survey shows that Black participants, on average, had identified as nonreligious for less time than other participants.

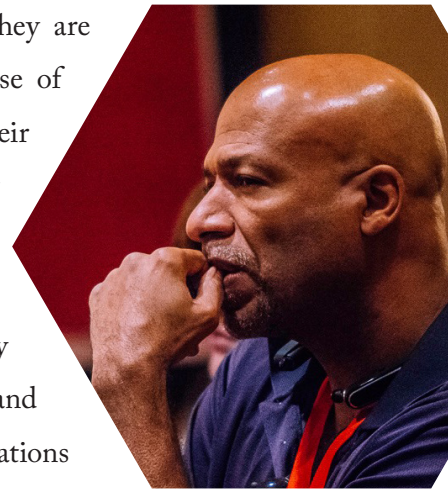
“I only started using the term atheist in the last year or so. I definitely feel like it’s affected my relationship with my in-laws and I’ve realized I’m really hesitant to let, for instance, my psychiatrist know, even though it’s a hard topic to avoid for various reasons, out of fear that it will affect my medication.”

—Female, California

“But personally the atheist groups and podcasts and ex Jehovah’s witness subreddit has helped a lot. Would have probably been very lost without those resources. We need more things like that though. Because I can’t seem to find anything local and in person to turn to when I’m a single atheist.”

—Male, New Mexico

Moreover, research on this population shows that many Black nonreligious people do not identify with labels such as atheist or humanist because they are not as familiar with use of those terms within their communities (Abbott et al., 2020). Therefore, Black nonreligious people may especially benefit from resources and support that organizations provide to help individuals deal with the difficulties of newly coming to terms with their nonreligious beliefs. This may include emotional support, mentorship, information about supportive therapists, and helping young people who have been rejected by their families. Similarly, secular organizations should ensure that published resources, advertisements, and other outreach materials include images and other representation of Black nonreligious people to help counter stereotypes and normalize atheism among this population.



OUR ORGANIZATIONS

American Atheists is a national civil rights organization that works to achieve religious equality for all Americans by protecting what Thomas Jefferson called the “wall of separation” between government and religion created by the First Amendment. We strive to create an environment where atheism and atheists are accepted as members of our nation’s communities and where casual bigotry against our community is seen as abhorrent and unacceptable. We promote understanding of atheists through education, outreach, and community-building and work to end the stigma associated with being an atheist in America. To find out more about American Atheists and our work, please visit www.atheists.org.

Black Nonbelievers, Inc. (BN) is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization. Headquartered in the Atlanta area, we provide a caring, friendly and informative community for Blacks (and allies) who are living free from religion and might otherwise be shunned by family and friends. Instead of accepting dogma, we determine truth and morality through reason and evidence. To learn more about Black Nonbelievers, please visit blacknonbelievers.org.

Strength in Numbers Consulting Group (SiNCG) is a progressive research, evaluation, and strategy firm. Incorporated in 2010, SiNCG offers nonprofit, government, and philanthropic clients high quality data and analysis using substantive input from the most affected communities. SiNCG focuses on marginalized and stigmatized groups in the United States and in international contexts. Please visit strengthinnumbersconsulting.com.



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