

Who's religious?

by Warren Clark and Grant Schellenberg

There has been much debate about whether Canada is becoming increasingly secularized. Many argue that institutional religion has a reduced influence on Canadian society. Certainly, religious attendance rates between the late 1940s and late 1990s have declined significantly while the percentage of people reporting no religious affiliation has increased. But does this imply that there is an erosion of individual faith, based on the supposition that attendance rates decrease because people lack the belief that motivates attendance? Well-known social researcher Reginald Bibby asserts that others have been wrong in predicting the demise of religion in Canada because people continue to have spiritual needs.¹

This article uses data from the General Social Survey (GSS) and the 2002 Ethnic Diversity Survey (EDS) to track the religious views and practices of Canadians and identify those groups most likely to be religious. An index of religiosity is developed based on the presence of religious affiliation, frequency of attendance at religious services, frequency of private religious practices and the importance of religion to the respondent.

The decline in religious affiliation and attendance

Since the mid-1980s, Statistics Canada's General Social Survey (GSS) has provided insights into Canadians' public religious behaviour by asking

about their religious affiliation² and frequency of attendance at religious services, the first two dimensions of religiosity considered in this article. There have been noticeable declines in these measures over the past twenty years.

Between 1985 and 2004, the share of Canadians aged 15 and older reporting no religious affiliation increased by seven percentage points from 12% to 19%.³ In addition, a growing share of Canadians had not attended any religious services in the previous year, even though they reported an affiliation (19% to 25%). Together, the proportion of adult Canadians who either have no religious affiliation or do have a religion but don't attend religious services increased from 31% to 43% over this period.

This upward trend was evident among all age groups and in all regions of the country, although young people and British Columbians were most likely to have weak ties with religious organizations. Indeed, in 2004 over half of Canadians aged 15 to 29 and almost 60% of British Columbians either had no religious affiliation or did not attend any religious services.

Since 1985, a widening divergence in the public religious behaviours of immigrants and persons born in Canada has also emerged. The percentage of Canadian-born 15 to 59-year-olds with no religious affiliation or not attending religious services has increased from 33% in 1985 to 48% in 2004. In contrast, immigrants in this age group have changed very little, from 36% to 35%.⁴ All in all, public

GST Religious affiliation and attendance among Canadians aged 15 and older

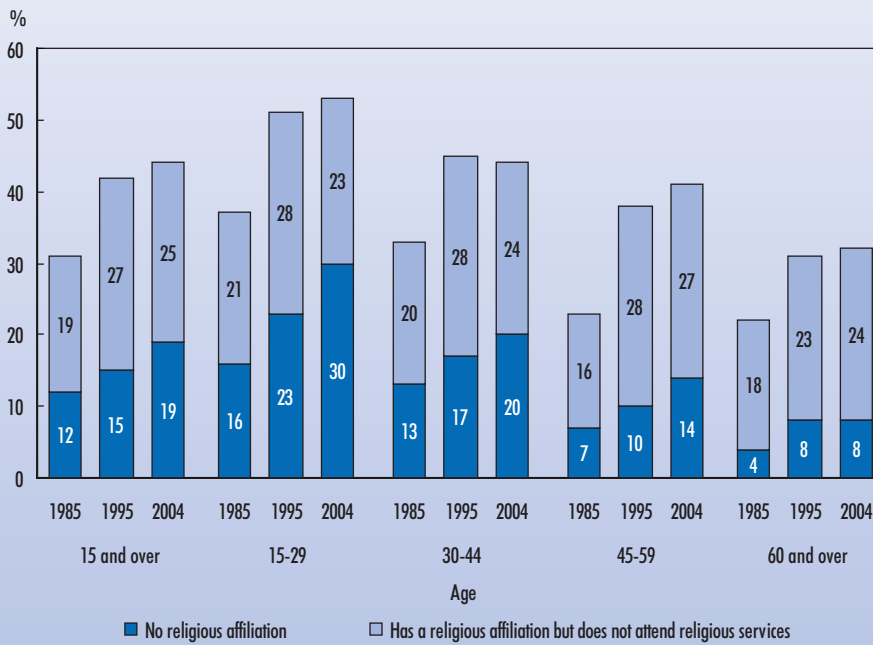
	1985	1990	1995	2000	2004	% point change 1985-2004
%						
Population aged 15 & over	100	100	100	100	100	...
No religious affiliation	12	12	15	20	19	7
Frequency of attendance						
Not in the last 12 months	19	23	27	21	25	5
Infrequently ¹	28	28	24	28	25	-3
At least monthly	41	37	33	31	32	-9

... not applicable

1. Attended religious services, but only a few times a year or less frequently.

Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey.

Young adults are most likely to have no religious affiliation



Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey.

religious behaviours among persons born inside and outside Canada became more dissimilar, although this divergence conceals considerable diversity in levels of religiosity among immigrants from different regions of the world.

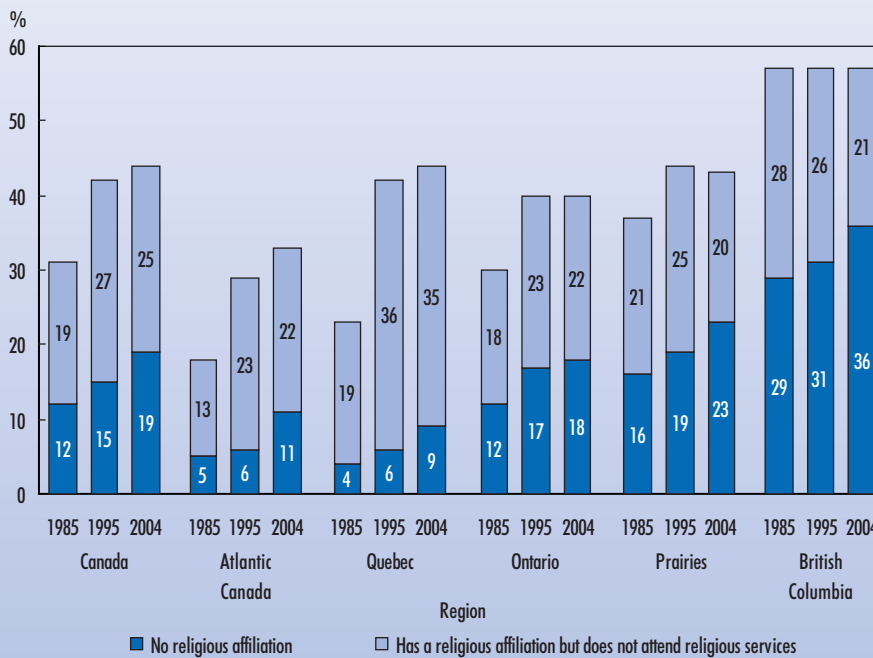
Half of adult Canadians regularly engage in religious activities on their own

Public religious behaviour, religious affiliation and attendance, have been declining among much of the population, but this captures only one aspect of peoples' religiosity. To get a more complete picture, private religious behaviour such as prayer, meditation, worship and reading of sacred texts on one's own is examined.⁵ Although some Canadians have little or no connection with religious organizations, the 2002 EDS shows that they do engage in such private religious behaviour either at home or in other locations.

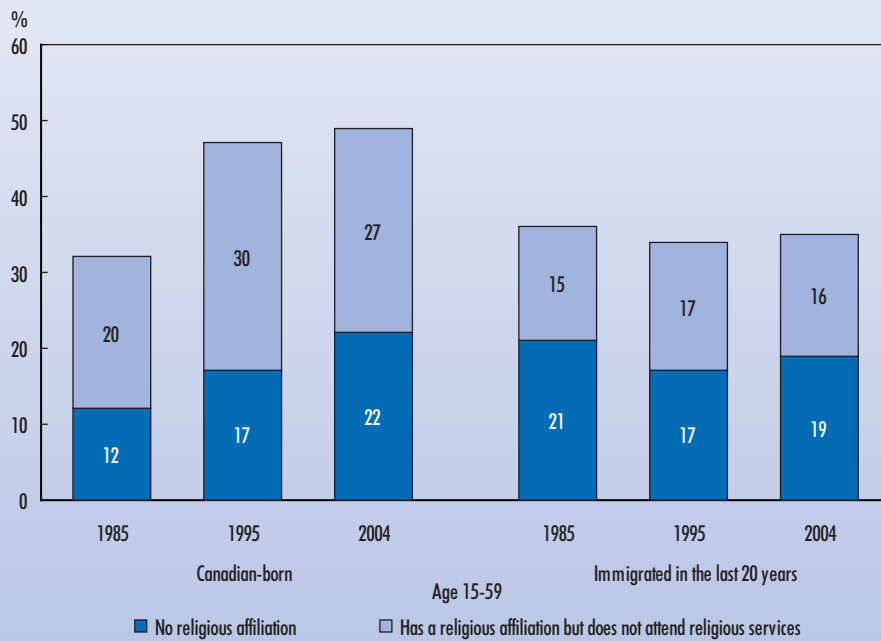
While only about one-third (32%) of adult Canadians attend religious services at least monthly, over one-half (53%) engage in religious activities on their own at least monthly. Eleven percent engage in religious activities on their own a few times a year, while 18% never engage in such activities. Those who said they have no religious affiliation (17%) were not asked this question on the EDS.

As with religious attendance, the likelihood of engaging in religious activities on one's own was more prevalent in older age groups. Similarly, individuals in the Atlantic region were most likely to engage in such practices while individuals in British Columbia were least likely to do so. Immigrants were more likely to engage in such activities than persons born in Canada.

British Columbians are least likely to have a religious affiliation or to attend religious services



Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey.



Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey.

Not surprisingly, individuals who frequently attended religious services were also most likely to regularly engage in personal religious practices. In fact, 75% of Canadians who attended religious services at least monthly also engaged in religious practices on their own on a weekly basis.

Perhaps most striking is the many Canadians who infrequently or never attend services yet regularly engage in personal religious practices. Of those who infrequently attended religious services over the previous year, 37% engaged in religious practices on their own on a weekly basis. And of those who had not attended any religious services over the previous year, 27% engaged in weekly religious practices on their own. Overall this group of adults who regularly engage in private religious practices, but infrequently or never attend religious services, represent 21% of the adult population.

This pattern was most prevalent among older Canadians. Among Canadian adults who do not regularly

attend religious services, 45% of those aged 60 or older engaged in personal religious activities compared with 27% of those aged 15 to 29. Religious attendance is prevalent among people in their 60s but declines as age advances because of factors such as illness, disability and access to transportation. But despite these barriers to attendance, seniors retain their religious attitudes and beliefs and continue to engage in private religious practices.⁶

Is my religion important?

Going beyond public and private religious practices to measure religiosity, a fourth dimension can be added reflecting the level of importance that religion has in peoples’ lives. Overall, 44% of Canadians place a high degree of importance on religion in their life.⁷ Again, this is associated with age, region of residence, immigration status and the frequency of public and private religious practices.

Almost half (45%) of those Canadian adults who do not regularly

attend services but who engage in religious activities on their own at least once a month place a high degree of importance on their religion. This suggests that more Canadian adults attach a high degree of importance to religion than attendance figures alone would indicate. Not surprisingly, individuals who regularly attend services and engage in personal religious practices are most likely to place high importance on religion (87%). In contrast, only 15% of those who infrequently or never participate in public or private religious practices place high importance on religion.

Religiosity index

Finally, the four dimensions of religiosity – affiliation, attendance, personal practices and importance of religion – can be combined into a simple additive ‘religiosity index’.^{8,9} People may attend religious services or choose religious denominations to please their loved ones, so an index which also captures the importance of religion and personal religious practices may be a better indicator of religiosity.

Individuals with no religious affiliation were assigned a score of 0, while those with an affiliation received a score ranging from 1 to 13. A score of 1 indicates that the person does not attend religious services, does not engage in religious practices on their own, and places no importance on religion. A score of 13 indicates that the person attends religious services at least once a week, engages in personal religious practices at least once a week, and places a great deal of importance on religion. To simplify the analysis of religiosity, Canadians were grouped into three broad categories based on their religiosity index, low (0-5), moderate (6-10) and high (11-13). The group with ‘low religiosity’ includes persons with no religious affiliation.

Based on these criteria, 40% of Canadians have a low degree of religiosity, 31% are moderately religious and 29% are highly religious.

	Frequency of religious practices on one's own					Total
	Weekly	Monthly	A few times a year ¹	Not in past 12 months	No religion	
	%					
Total	43	11	11	18	17	100
Men	34*	10	13*	23*	20*	100
Women	51	11	10	14	15	100
Age						
15 to 29	32*	12	12	19	25*	100
30 to 44	39	11	12	19	19	100
45 to 59	44*	10*	11	19	15*	100
60 or older	58*	9*	8*	17	9*	100
Region of residence						
Atlantic	48	13	13	19	8*	100
Quebec	43	11	14	24*	7*	100
Ontario	44	11	10	17	17	100
Prairies	41	11	10	16	22*	100
British Columbia	35*	8*	8	14*	36*	100
Immigration Status						
Canadian-Born	40	11	12	20	17	100
Immigrated before 1982	51*	8*	8*	17*	16	100
Immigrated in 1982-2001	50*	9*	8*	12*	21*	100
Frequency of attendance at religious services or meetings						
At least monthly	75	13	5	6	...	100
Infrequently	37*	17*	25*	21*	...	100
Not in last 12 months	27*	8*	13*	51*	...	100
No religious affiliation	...	...	...	...	100	100

1. Attend religious services, but only a few times a year or less frequently.
 * Statistically significant difference from reference group in italic ($p < 0.05$).
 Source: Statistics Canada, Ethnic Diversity Survey, 2002.

Again, religiosity is lowest among young people and higher among individuals in older age groups. Men are also much more likely to have low religiosity than women. Across the country, low levels of religiosity are most prevalent in British Columbia. One might guess that the prevalence of Chinese visible minorities in British Columbia may contribute to the British Columbia's low level of religiosity since levels of religiosity (as measured here) are low among this group and they comprise a larger share of British Columbia's population

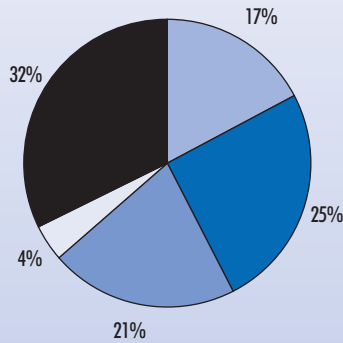
than other provinces. They do in part, but by far the greatest contributor is the low religiosity among non-visible minorities in British Columbia. Non-visible minorities in British Columbia are one and half times as likely as non-visible minorities in Ontario to have low religiosity (57% versus 38%).

The degree of religiosity expressed by Canadians is associated with the religious background of their parents. Of those who say that neither of their parents had a religion, 85% have a low degree of religiosity and 10% have

a high degree. In contrast, of those who say that both of their parents had similar religious backgrounds, 32% have a low degree of religiosity and 33% have a high degree. This is consistent with other studies that show religious parents are most likely to pass their religion on to their children and this occurs most often when both parents have similar religious backgrounds.¹⁰

About four in ten (41%) of the immigrants who arrived in Canada between 1982 and 2001 have a high degree of religiosity, compared with

About one in five adults infrequently engage in or never attend religious services, but do regular religious practices on their own



- No religion
- Regular public practice only³
- Infrequent public and private practice¹
- Regular public and private practice⁴
- Regular private practice only²

1. Infrequent public and private practice - infrequently or never attends religious services or does religious practices on their own.
2. Regular private practice only - infrequently or never attends religious services, but does religious practices on their own at least once a month.
3. Regular public practice only - attends religious services at least once a month, but does religious practices on their own infrequently or never.
4. Regular public and private practice - attends religious services and does religious practices on their own at least once a month.

Source: Statistics Canada, Ethnic Diversity Survey, 2002.

26% of persons born in Canada. However, there is considerable variation in levels of religiosity among immigrants from different regions of the world. High levels of religiosity are most prevalent among immigrants from South Asia (e.g. India and Pakistan), South East Asia (e.g. the Philippines) and the Caribbean and Central and South America. In contrast, high levels of religiosity are least prevalent among immigrants from East Asia (e.g. China and Japan) and Western/Northern Europe (e.g. France and the United Kingdom) and Eastern Europe (e.g. Hungary).

Summary

The last several decades have witnessed an increasing share of the population reporting no religion and a decreasing share reporting monthly or weekly attendance at religious services. However, declining attendance may overstate the extent to which Canada is becoming

The importance of religion to one's life, Canada, 2002

Importance of religion to you¹

	High	Moderate	Low	No religion	Total
--	------	----------	-----	-------------	-------

%

Total	44	20	19	17	100
Men	36*	21	23*	20*	100
Women	51	20	14	15	100
Age					
15 to 29	34*	20*	22	25*	100
30 to 44	39	23	20	19	100
45 to 59	43*	22	20	15*	100
60+	62*	16*	13*	9*	100
Region of residence					
Atlantic	54*	22	17	8*	100
Quebec	41*	26*	26*	7*	100
Ontario	47	19	16	17	100
Prairies	42*	19	17	22*	100
British Columbia	34*	15*	15	36*	100

Importance of religion to you¹

	High	Moderate	Low	No religion	Total
--	------	----------	-----	-------------	-------

%

Immigration Status					
Canadian-born	40	22	21	17	100
Immigrated before 1982	55*	15*	15*	16	100
Immigrated in 1982 to 2001	57*	12*	10*	21*	100
Religious practices					
Attendance at religious services	Private religious practices				
At least monthly	87	11	2	...	100
At least monthly	60*	27*	12*	...	100
Infrequently or never	45*	36*	18*	...	100
Infrequently or never	15*	31*	54*	...	100
No religion	...	...	...	100	100

1. Importance of religion to you is scored from 1 (not important at all) to 5 (very important). High importance is defined as a score of four or five, moderate importance — a score of three and low importance — a score of one or two. Those reporting no religious affiliation were not asked this question.

* Statistically significant difference from reference group in italic (p < 0.05).

Source: Statistics Canada, Ethnic Diversity Survey, 2002.

	Degree of religiosity			Total
	Low (0-5)	Moderate (6-10)	High (11-13)	
	%			
Total	40	31	29	100
Men	48*	28*	24*	100
Women	32	33	35	100
Age				
15 to 29	48*	30*	22*	100
30 to 44	43	32	25	100
45 to 59	39*	31	30*	100
60+	26*	30*	44*	100
Region of residence				
Atlantic	29*	35*	36	100
Quebec	39*	37*	24*	100
Ontario	37	30	33	100
Prairies	42*	28*	31	100
British Columbia	54*	22*	25*	100
Immigration Status				
Canadian-born	41	32	26	100
Immigrated before 1982	33*	27*	40*	100
Immigrated 1982 to 2001	34*	25*	41*	100
Religion of parents				
Both parents same religion	32	34	33	100
Parents from different religions	50*	28*	22*	100
Neither parent religious	85*	6*	10*	100

* Statistically significant difference from reference group in italic ($p < 0.05$).

Source: Statistics Canada, Ethnic Diversity Survey, 2002.

secularized, since a considerable proportion of Canadians do not attend religious services but do engage in religious practices on their own. Similarly, some Canadians who do not attend services still attach a high degree of importance to religion in their life. This suggests that while attendance rates have declined, many Canadians continue to practice their religion in private.

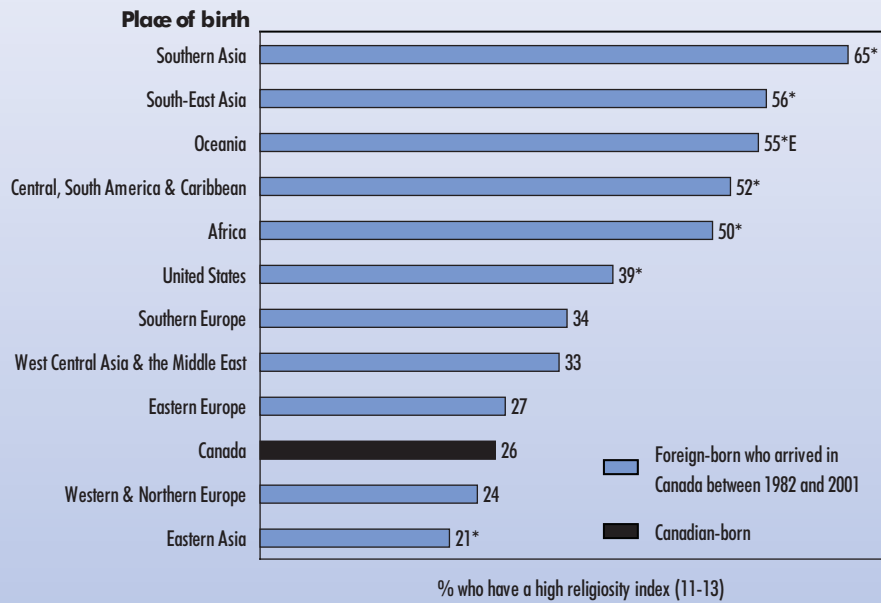
Consistent with previous studies, young adults are the group with the weakest attachment to organized religion. However, even when other forms of religious behaviour are considered, almost half of Canadians aged 15 to 29 still have a low degree of religiosity. Similarly, most individuals in British Columbia exhibit a low level of religiosity whether this is measured in terms of attendance,

personal practices or importance attached to religion. There also appears to be a wide variation in religiosity of immigrants associated with the religious traditions of their country of birth, which may differ substantially from persons born in Canada.



Grant Schellenberg and **Warren Clark** are senior analysts with Social and Aboriginal Statistics Division, Statistics Canada.

1. Bibby, Reginald W. 2002. "Restless Gods — The renaissance of religion in Canada" Toronto: Stoddart Publishing, pp. 58-59.
2. For example: Catholic, Anglican, Lutheran, Jewish, Muslim or Buddhist.
3. The Census indicates 4% in 1971, 7% in 1981, 12% in 1991 and 16% in 2001 of the population aged 15 and over reported no religious affiliation.
4. This comparison is limited to immigrants who arrived in Canada during the 20-year period from 1982 to 2001.
5. Cornwall, Marie et al. 1986. "The dimension of religiosity: A conceptual model and an empirical test." Review of Religious Research, Vol. 27, No. 3, pp. 226-244.
6. Broyles, Phillip A., & Cynthia K. Drenovsky. 1992. "Religious attendance and the subjective health of the elderly." Review of Religious Research, Vol. 34, No. 2, pp. 152-160.
7. A high degree of importance is defined as a score of 4 or 5 on a 5 point scale where 1 means "not important at all" and 5 means "very important." Individuals who did not have a religious affiliation were not asked this question.



E High sampling variability. Use with caution.

* Statistically significant difference from estimate for Canadian-born ($p < 0.05$).

Source: Statistics Canada, Ethnic Diversity Survey, 2002.

8. The religiosity index is obtained by adding a score from each of the groups in the following table (dimensions of religiosity). Those with no religious affiliation were not asked about the other dimensions of religiosity and therefore have a religiosity index of "0". For example, the religiosity index for someone who has a religion (add 1), does not attend religious services at all (add 0), who does personal religious practices on their own at least once a month (add 3) and considers religion to be at an importance level of 1 (add 1) would have a religiosity index of $1+0+3+1=5$, in the low range of the religiosity index.

Religious affiliation

No affiliation (0)

Has a religion (1)

Religious attendance

Not at all (0)

Once or twice a year (1)

At least 3 times a year (2)

At least once a month (3)

At least once a week (4)

Frequency of religious

Not at all (0)

Once or twice a year (1)

At least 3 times a year (2)

At least once a month (3)

At least once a week (4)

Importance of practices on your own religion to one's life

Not important at all (0)

(1)

(2)

(3)

Very important (4)

9. The giving of time and money to religious organizations were not collected by the EDS, but may also be important dimensions of religiosity.

10. Bibby, Reginald W. 1997. "The persistence of Christian religious identification in Canada" *Canadian Social Trends*, No. 44, Spring 1997. pp. 24-28.

Sherkat, Darren E., Christopher G. Ellison. 1999. "Recent developments and current controversies in the sociology of religion" *Annual Review of Sociology*, Vol. 25, No. 1, pp. 363-394.

GST What you should know about this study

Almost every year since 1985, Statistics Canada's General Social Survey (GSS) has interviewed adults aged 15 and over living in private households in the 10 provinces. The GSS has collected information about religious affiliation and the frequency of attendance at religious services (excluding special occasions such as weddings, funerals and baptisms). This article uses GSS data to identify trends in adult religious attendance rates and in the percentage of the adult population that has no religion.

Prior to 2003, GSS respondents who indicated they had a religion were asked how frequently they attended religious services. Beginning in 2003, GSS respondents who had a religion were asked how important their religious or spiritual beliefs were to the way they lived their lives. Those who indicated that religious beliefs were not at all important were not asked about their frequency of attendance at religious services in order to reduce response burden. In theory, this implies that pre- and post-2003 religious attendance rates are different, but a comparison of the rates for 2003 and 2004 with those in 2000 and 2001 shows very little difference, suggesting that the impact of the question changes is minimal.

Respondents to the 2002 Ethnic Diversity Survey (EDS)¹ were also asked: "In the past 12 months, how often did you do religious activities on your own? This may include prayer, meditation and other forms of worship taking place at home or in any other location." Information was not collected on individuals' specific beliefs or on the specific types of religious activities in which they engage.² Respondents were also asked: "Using a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is not important at all and 5 is very important, how important is your religion to you? Again, 1 is not important at all and 5 is very important." Those who reported they had no religion were not asked about their religious practices on their own or about the importance of religion to them, presumably because they would not engage in religious practices or view religion as important to them. However, this does not imply that those with no religious affiliation are not interested in spiritual issues or may not be keenly interested in spiritual growth and spiritual philosophies.

1. The 2002 Ethnic Diversity Survey surveyed the non-Aboriginal population aged 15 and over only.
2. General Social Survey (GSS) and Ethnic Diversity Survey (EDS) questions on the frequency of religious attendance are worded differently. GSS respondents are asked "Other than on special occasions, (such as weddings, funerals or baptisms) how often did you attend religious services or meetings in the last 12 months?" EDS respondents were asked "In the past 12 months, how often did you participate in religious activities or attend religious services or meetings with other people, other than for events such as weddings and funerals?" In short, EDS respondents are asked about a somewhat broader range of religious activities (i.e. religious activities or religious services/meetings) than GSS respondents. Consequently, the EDS yields a slightly larger share of Canadians who attend services/meetings on a monthly basis (37% versus 31%).

Need more information from Statistics Canada?

Call our National enquiries line:

1 800 263-1136

To order publications:

National order line: 1 800 267-6677

Internet: infostats@statcan.ca

National TTY line: 1 800 363-7629

(Catalogue no. 11-008-XPE; aussi disponible en français, n° 11-008-XPF au catalogue) is published quarterly.

Subscription rates:

Paper version: CANS12.00 per issue, CANS39.00 for one year subscription. Students: 30% discount (plus applicable taxes in Canada or shipping charges outside Canada)

Electronic version available on Internet (Catalogue no. 11-008-XIE): CANS9.00 per issue, CANS29.00 for a one-year subscription (plus applicable taxes in Canada)

Standards of service to the public

Statistics Canada is committed to serving its clients in a prompt, reliable and courteous manner and in the official language of their choice. To this end, the Agency has developed standards of service which its employees observe in serving its clients. To obtain a copy of these service standards, please contact Statistics Canada toll free at 1 800 263-1136. The service standards are also published on www.statcan.ca under About Statistics Canada > Providing services to Canadians.

If you're on the move...

Make sure we know where to find you by forwarding the subscriber's name, old address, new address, telephone number and client reference number to:

Statistics Canada
Finance Division
R.H. Coops Bldg., 6th Floor
120 Parkdale Avenue
Ottawa, ON K1A 0T6

or by phone at 1 800 263-1136 or
1 800 267-6677; or
by fax at 1 877 287-4369;
or by Internet at infostats@statcan.ca.

We require six weeks advance notice to ensure uninterrupted delivery, so please keep us informed when you're on the move!