Religion Linked to Stronger Social Health by 33-to-1 Margin

Final installment of landmark research series finds religious involvement associated with dramatically lower crime, stronger marriages, greater community support, and reduced substance abuse

Provo, Utah (June 25, 2026) — A new report finds that religious involvement is one of the most potent yet overlooked protective factors against societal problems including crime, domestic violence, substance abuse and falling fertility rates.

The Religion and Social Health Connection, the third and final installment in the Wheatley Institute at Brigham Young University's Religion and Human Flourishing series, examines 528 high-quality studies catalogued in the Oxford University Press Handbook of Religion and Health. Of those, 489 (93%) found strong positive associations between religion and social well-being while only 15 (3%) found negative associations, a ratio of more than 33 to 1. That makes social health the strongest domain in the entire series, surpassing the approximately 10-to-1 ratio found for mental health (Report 1) and the 7-to-1 ratio found for physical health (Report 2).

"These social benefits extend beyond the individual — shaping families, communities, and society as a whole," said Loren D. Marks, lead author of the report and Professor of Family Life at BYU. "When religion is studied carefully and rigorously, the evidence is not mixed or evenly divided. It is overwhelmingly positive."

Key findings from the report include:

- **Delinquency and Crime** — 98% of studies linked higher religiosity to lower rates of delinquent and criminal behavior.
    - In one study tracking more than 13,000 adolescents, religious importance and religious attendance both predicted lower rates of delinquency over a 12-year period. Among offenders, those who were more religious had a lower likelihood of engaging in future crime.
- **Substance Abuse and Addiction** — 94% of studies found religion correlated with lower rates of substance abuse and addiction.
    - The Handbook authors conclude "In almost no other area of mental health (except perhaps suicide) is there more evidence that religion makes a difference." A review of 27 studies found that religiously based Alcoholics Anonymous and Twelve-Step programs were more effective than other established treatments, such as cognitive behavioral therapy, for increasing abstinence, and more cost effective.
- **Social Support** — 92% of studies found that religiosity was associated with greater social support, altruism, generosity, volunteering and charitable giving.

Gallup World Poll data indicate that religious attenders are nearly twice as likely as nonattenders to volunteer their time in a given month (57% versus 31%).
    - A landmark study of over 180,000 individuals across five major world religions in 22 countries found that "individuals across religious affiliations are less lonely and less socially isolated than the nonreligious."
- **Marital and Family Stability** — 88.4% of studies link higher religiosity to stronger marriages and families, including lower divorce rates, greater marital satisfaction and less domestic violence. Men who attended religious services more than weekly were 72% less likely to abuse their female partners than comparable men who did not attend.
    - A recent 11-nation study found that women in relationships where both partners worshiped at home were twice as likely to report emotional closeness with their partner, alongside higher sexual satisfaction and fewer money-related conflicts.
- **Fertility** — The U.S. total fertility rate stands at 1.6 live births per woman, the lowest in recorded history. Researchers observe that "countries that reach the crucial replacement rate are, almost as a rule, religious … Secular societies are simply not replacing themselves."

The research suggests a clear "threshold effect" showing the benefits of religion are strongest among those with sustained, high levels of engagement. Active participation is linked to better physical health, more robust mental health and stronger marriages and families. Across ages and faith traditions, the greatest benefits are typically seen among the faithful who attend religious services weekly or more.

The authors offer several policy considerations including partnering with religious organizations to address crime, substance abuse, and other social challenges; conducting "religious impact analyses" on new and existing policies; and grounding policy judgments about religion in scientific evidence rather than popular assumptions. Public policy should support faith communities as partners in strengthening marriage, family formation, and child well-being.

The full report is now available at wheatley.byu.edu/religion-and-social-health. The complete *Religion and Human Flourishing* series — covering mental, physical, and social health — can be accessed at https://wheatley.byu.edu/research.

About Wheatley Institute
Wheatley Institute at Brigham Young University engages students, scholars, thought leaders, and the public in research-supported work that fortifies the core institutions of the family, religion, and constitutional government. For more information, visit **https://wheatley.byu.edu/**.

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