

Study: ‘Spiritual’ youth more prone to crime than ‘religious’

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WACO—Young adults who deem themselves “spiritual but not religious” are more likely to commit property crimes—and to a lesser extent, violent ones—than those who identify themselves as either “religious and spiritual” or “religious but not spiritual,” according to Baylor University researchers.

The sociologists’ study, published in the journal *Criminology*, also showed young adults in a fourth category—who say they are neither spiritual nor religious—are less likely to commit property crimes than the “spiritual but not religious” individuals. But no difference was found between the two groups when it came to violent crimes.



Sung Joon Jang “The notion of being spiritual but not associated with any organized religion has become increasingly popular, and our question is how that is different from being religious, whether you call yourself ‘spiritual’ or not,” said [Sung Joon Jang](#), associate professor of sociology in Baylor’s College of Arts & Sciences. He is lead author of the study, “Is Being ‘Spiritual’ Enough Without Being Religious? A Study of Violent and Property Crimes Among Emerging Adults.”

Until the 20th century, the terms “religious” and “spiritual” were treated as interchangeable, he noted.

Previous research indicated people who say they are religious show lower levels of crime and deviance, which refers to norm-violating behavior.

National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health

The researchers analyzed data from a sample of 14,322 individuals from the [National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health](#). They ranged in age from 18 to 28, with an average age of 21.8.

In the confidential survey, participants were asked how often they had committed crimes in the previous 12 months—including violent crimes such as physical fights or armed robbery—while property crimes included vandalism, theft and burglary.

Past research shows people who report themselves as spiritual make up about 10 percent of the general population, Jang said.

“Calling oneself ‘spiritual but not religious’ turned out to more of an antisocial characteristic, unlike identifying oneself as religious,” said Baylor researcher [Aaron Franzen](#), a doctoral candidate and study co-author.

Spiritual but not religious

In their study, the Baylor researchers hypothesized those who are spiritual but not religious would be less conventional than the religious group—but could be either more or less conventional than the “neither” group.

“We were thinking that religious people would have an institutional and communal attachment and investment, while the spiritual people would have more of an independent identity,” Franzen said.

Theories for why religious people are less likely to commit crime are that they fear “supernatural sanctions” as well as criminal punishment and feel shame about deviance; are bonded to conventional society; exercise high self-control in part because of parents who also are likely to be religious;

and associate with peers who reinforce their behavior and beliefs.

Lower self-control

Significantly, people who are spiritual but not religious tend to have lower self-control than those who are religious. They also are more likely to experience such strains as criminal victimization and such negative emotions as depression and anxiety. They also are more likely to have peers who use and abuse alcohol, Franzen said. Those factors are predictors of criminal behavior.

"It's a challenge in terms of research to know what that actually means to be spiritual, because they self-identify," he said. "But they are different in some way, as our study shows."

In their research, sociologists included four categories based on how the young adults reported themselves. Those categories and percentages were:

- Spiritual but not religious, 11.5 percent
- Religious but not spiritual, 6.8 percent
- Both spiritual and religious, 37.9 percent
- Neither spiritual nor religious, 43.8 percent