Religious Affiliation

Version

2026B

Release Introduction

This small database fills an important gap in the AGS core demographics series. Religious affiliation has not been addressed by the census bureau in many decades, and most sources are based on consumer panel data or political polling and have minimal geographic content. Others have detailed data at the county or state levels, but lack small area estimates.

This dataset utilizes local demographic characteristics in combination with the location of religious establishments, balanced to county level data, in order to bridge the spatial gap.

Religious affiliation can have significant impacts on consumer spending and behavior. For some retail sectors, it can have a critical impact on product mix, shopping style, and even staffing.

Content

The database consists of the following attributes of the total population:

- Non-Affiliated
- Affiliated
    - Christian
        - Catholic
        - Orthodox
        - Mainline Protestant
        - Seventh Day Adventist
        - Amish and Mennonite
        - Latter Day Saints (Mormon)
        - Jehovah's Witness
        - Non-Denominational Christian
    - Non-Christian
        - Buddhist
        - Islamic

- Hindu
- Jewish
- Other

Base Geography Methodology

Block Group

The primary source of this database is the 2020 Census of Religion, a private survey of religious institutions undertaken by the Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies (ASARB) and published as the 2020 U.S. Religion Census. It is freely available at www.usreligioncensus.org.

The data consists of county level counts of adherents to a very broad range of faith groups and sub-groups, as well as estimates of the number of people who are unaffiliated with any religious group. In addition, the survey provides an estimated number of locations for each group by county, state, and nationally.

The primary issues with the county level data are:

- The sheer number of denominations, many of which are highly regionalized and in some cases non-responsive to the survey, were collapsed initially into about thirty major groups. The choice of which of these to retain separately was made on the basis of the ability to classify local churches by their name, and the extent to which members of specific religious bodies have known dietary and lifestyle distinctions (e.g. Jewish, Islamic, Seventh Day Adventist).

- Religious institutions were spatially grouped by the county in which they are located, but it must be recognized that the stated adherents need not be residents of that county. In most cases, the likely 'leakage' error is minimal and can be ignored. For small counties, the statistics required adjustment by grouping adjacent counties. In Virginia

especially, the smaller independent cities (which are classified as county equivalents) were joined with their surrounding county for control total purposes.

The data were modeled to the block group level using two primary components:

- The distribution of adherents (and non-adherents) at the county level was modeled to demographic characteristics using the AGS Dimensions dataset, supplemented by detailed ancestry data for specific groups. Separate logistic regression models were constructed for each of the groups chosen for analysis. These models were applied at the block group level.

- Religious institutions were extracted from the dmPlus business list which AGS uses for its business/daytime database products. Employee estimates were taken as an approximate guide to likely membership. The primary difficulty with the data is that in many cases it is not possible to determine the denomination of a church from its name in many cases. A classification scheme was developed which associated specific words (and the many variants of them) with a religious body. The remaining records were assigned based on the county level counts provided by the U.S. Religion Census.

  For each block group, an accessibility index to each of the thirteen groups was computed, then normalized to the county totals.

The final methodology included the differential weighting of the results of the two estimates. The effect is that widely dispersed groups (e.g. Catholic, mainline Protestant) are more dependent upon demographic characteristics, while others that tend to be

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spatially concentrated (e.g. Jewish, Islamic) are more heavily dependent upon the locational model.

Results were iteratively scaled to match the local block group population totals as well as the adjusted adherents totals at the county level.

Sources

Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies, 2020 U.S. Religion Census: Religious Congregations and Memberships.
AGS, Demographic Dimensions
AGS, Current year estimates of population by detailed ancestry
Devonshire Associates dmPlus business database

Further Information

Contact customer service at 877-944-4AGS or email support@appliedgeographic.com.