



More Americans Are Dropping Out of Communal Participation Says Social Scientist

The Wired Word for the Week of May 5, 2024

In the News

A growing number of Americans have dropped out of the institutions that once were arenas of communal participation in this county. This group is no longer involved in religious activities, political pursuits, post-high-school education, social clubs (such as the Elks), Boy Scouts and/or even bowling leagues. And they have replaced these linkages with nothing at all.

That's social scientist Ryan Burge's conclusion after analyzing information from the Cooperative Election Study (CES), 2008-2022. He found a growing body of respondents he has labeled "the dropouts."

The CES asks about general political attitudes, various demographic factors, assessment of roll call voting choices, political information and vote intentions, and counts the responses of various affiliation groups: Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, Muslim, agnostic, atheist, etc., as well as those who claim no affiliation at all, listed as "nothing in particular" (NIP).

One identifying factor of the NIPs is that unlike agnostics and atheists, who have replaced religion with some other affiliation, the NIPs have not replaced

it with anything else. They are neither religious nor secular; they are uninvolved.

Burge points to the book *Bowling Alone*, published by social scientist Robert Putnam in 2000, which dealt with the decline of community in America in the mid-1990s, and said that if Putnam were writing that book today, the title would likely be changed to "Tweeting Alone," "Netflixing Alone" or something similar. "Everything that Putnam observed in the earlier data has only been amplified due to rapid advances in technology," Burge said.

Burge noted that in 2008, just 14% of the CES respondents said they were NIPs when it came to religion. Today, however, somewhere between 23-24% of American adults put themselves in that category.

When asked about their political participation, only 4% of people who identify as Protestant or Catholic Christians claim no political involvement, but 16% of NIPs do. That cluster of NIPs "refuse to classify themselves in the traditional way on partisanship and ideology," Burge said, observing that the percentage of NIPs unwilling to do so in 2012 was only 7.5%, so it has more than doubled since then.

In further analysis, Burge also found that a significant number of NIPs have dropped out of -- or never dropped into -- the American higher education system. The number of NIPs with bachelor's degrees today is 23%, which is behind the national average of 34%. In contrast, 51% of atheists had that level degree in 2002.

When percentages are translated to actual numbers, NIPs -- or *dropouts* as Burge calls them -- are in the tens of millions, and that cohort is growing all the time "as people retreat into TikTok and Instagram," Burge said, "Instead of being shaped by in-person interactions at the town council meeting, the

local Catholic Church, or the halls of the local community college or university, they are holed up in their rooms, letting algorithms feed them more of what they think they want to see," he said.

"And they are worse for it. And so is democracy," Burge said.

More on this story can be found at these links:

[Dropping Out of Everything.](#) *Graphs About Religion*

[Cooperative Election Study.](#) *Harvard University*

[What We Lose When We Drop Out of Community to Go It Alone.](#) *Bill's Faith Matters blog*

Applying the News Story

When talking about NIPs and dropouts, there are two losses involved: One is what such individuals might have received from communal participation and the other is what they might have contributed through such involvement.

The Big Questions

1. Is it important for our society that most people engage in the communal aspects of life? Why or why not?
2. How might our democracy be affected as a smaller percentage of the population participates in political activity? In church life? In higher education?
3. In what specific ways does your church reach out to NIPs?

4. Which is better for long-term Christianity: the revival of a nonparticipant believer or the conversion of a nonbeliever? What is our responsibility as believers with respect to our inactive brothers and sisters? with respect to nonbeliever friends and acquaintances?

5. Regarding the two losses -- what is received from communal participation and what is contributed through such involvement -- which one has greater impact on the dropout? Which one has greater impact on society?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Nehemiah 2:17-18

Then [Nehemiah] said to them, "You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, so that we may no longer suffer disgrace." I told them that the hand of my God had been gracious upon me and also the words that the king had spoken to me. Then they said, "Let us start building!" So they committed themselves to the common good. (For context, read [Nehemiah 2:11-18](#).)

The people of Judah had spent several decades in exile in Babylon, but after the Persians conquered the Babylonians, the new ruler allowed the Jews to return to their homeland, though not as a free people. The land that had once been the nation of Judah was now a province of the Persian Empire, called Judea.

The returnees to Jerusalem were living among the rubble of their ruined city, dispirited by the squalor. They were so overwhelmed by the immensity of what needed to be done and by the resistance from certain opponents that nothing was being accomplished.

The city walls were in ruin. And without walls, structures for the common good such as schools and shops could not exist in safety. The whole setting was a sad reminder of the glory that had once been the royal city of King David.

Then Nehemiah came along with a devotion to God, a plan for rebuilding and a willingness to lead. He called the people to join him in the rebuilding venture. Nehemiah started with a call to the work: "Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, so that we may no longer suffer disgrace." Before giving them a chance to agree or decline, he quickly added two important things: One was that the hand of God "had been gracious" to him; the other was that the Persian king had authorized the project. Then, with that twin basis laid, Nehemiah repeated the call: "Let us start building!" Responding to Nehemiah's zeal, the people enthusiastically "committed themselves to the common good."

The common good: The "common" part of the term implies a sense of community, of responsibility, of a willingness to look beyond one's own needs and desires. The "good" part of it indicates that what is sought for all is something beneficial. And we need both parts. It's possible for a group to work for their common enrichment through evildoing, such as a gang working together to force small business owners to pay "protection" money each week. It's possible for a group to work for their common advancement, such as a cadre of workers clawing their way up the corporate ladder by betraying others. But the common good means benefits for many or all involved, in a spirit of neighborliness.

Of course, the common good usually means some sacrifice on the part of those whose individual interests or gains might be further ahead if nothing were done for the good of all, but that is part of what makes the common good so ... well ..

. good. Being willing to work where we wouldn't have to, give where we aren't required to, speak up when nobody is forcing us to -- those are holy expressions of loving our neighbor, and they contribute to our neighbor's well-being. At the same time, however, though we have surrendered something, we too are better off in ways that really matter.

Questions: What happens to the common good when many in the populace decline to participate in making it happen? What's the value of working for the common good when you don't see direct benefit for yourself?

Ecclesiastes 4:9-12

Two are better than one because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up the other, but woe to one who is alone and falls and does not have another to help. Again, if two lie together, they keep warm, but how can one keep warm alone? And though one might prevail against another, two will withstand one. A threefold cord is not quickly broken. (No context needed.)

These verses make a case for communal participation. They maintain that by pulling together, people can have "a good reward for their toil."

Question: How might you explain this passage to a dropout?

1 Peter 3:15-16

... in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect. ... (For context, read [1 Peter 3:8-17](#).)

One way to respond to the growth of the NIPs demographic is to pay attention to how we express "the hope that is in us" -- our faith in Christ and in God's promises -- as Peter said above. One reason some people turn away from the faith is because they've not really seen the need for it. They've perhaps gone along with it because they were taken to church while growing up, but it never became their own.

Being able to account for the hope that is in us means giving credible witness to our faith. It's good for us to be able, when an appropriate occasion presents itself, to briefly tell the content of our faith and where it meets the reality of our lives. When we do that, those who hear us at least have a basis on which to give the Christian faith -- and participation in church life -- a fair hearing.

Questions: In what terms do you express the hope that is in you? How would you explain the value of church life, both in terms of what you receive and what you contribute?

Acts 2:44-47

All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts,

praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved. (For context, read [Acts 2:42-47](#).)

After the birth of the church on the Day of Pentecost (2:1ff), the disciples who lived in Jerusalem worshiped, learned, ate and socialized together. They also grew into a community of faith. They were "together," "spent much time together" day after day, and "had all things in common." People were more important than possessions; distribution of resources went first to whoever had need. This communal life brought them great joy as they practiced generosity.

Some may well have expected the Lord's imminent return, which could partially explain why they generally did not cling to earthly possessions so ferociously as later generations of believers sometimes did.

Questions: Are believers today called to adopt any of the practices found in this passage? If so, which ones apply, and how should they be implemented? Do you think the Acts 2:42-47 model works best as a short-term voluntary association, or would it be sustainable long-term? Explain your answer. Can any of this be translated in any form to achieve a more widespread common good?

For Further Discussion

1. Apparently dropouts and NIPs now have their own T-shirt: We saw the following on a T-shirt for sale in Walmart this week:

Ways to avoid people:

- Earbuds in
- Silent mode
- Daydream
- Avoid eye contact
- Take a nap

2. Discuss this, found in the reader comments following Burge's article: "Part of the problem is that nobody ever ASKS the NIPs what it would take to bring us back into the fold. Selling starts with ASKING the customer what's wrong with the product or price. After the salesman understands the objections, he can start working around them."

3. One commenter on Burge's article suggested that some churches are content to decline, saying "There are advantages to being a club with a lot of assets and a declining pool of members."

To which another commenter replied, "And one of [the advantages] (perhaps the most important of them?) is that your 'voice' carries a lot more weight and a lot further than it would in a packed and growing church ... with a future."|

Really? Do you think any congregation is content to decline?

4. Regarding the common good, read and discuss the last two paragraphs of commentary on the Nehemiah passage above.

Responding to the News

Now might be a good time to review all of the groups of which you're a member to see if membership still makes sense and, if so, whether you're contributing to the welfare of each group and whether the group is contributing to the welfare of the broader society. What other group(s) might you now consider joining, and why? What might you gain from

participation, and what might you contribute to the common good by your involvement?

Prayer

Keep us, O Lord, from letting statistics be the primary shaper of our work for you. And help us to know how to be your faithful church even when the spirit of the age seems to be prevailing against us. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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