

Churches are losing the less educated

by [Nicole Neroulias](#) in the [September 20, 2011](#) issue

A recent study reports that white Americans without college degrees are dropping out of church faster than their more highly educated counterparts, and researchers are offering several possible explanations.

The study, by University of Virginia sociologist W. Bradford Wilcox, found that since the 1970s, white Americans with no more than a high school diploma have been leaving the pews twice as fast as other Americans.

Other research has connected higher education levels with liberal religious belief and less attraction to literal interpretations of the Bible. People with more education, the theory goes, may be better able to manage ambiguity and uncertainty in matters of faith.

In matters of religious practice, college-educated whites seem to have more time, money and motivation to attend religious services, Wilcox said. In other words, less-educated people may have to work weekend shifts or can't afford to spend money on gas or add to the collection plate.

"College-educated Americans are more likely to have the financial resources and the stable marriages that make a churchgoing lifestyle seem to fit," he said. "Financial limitations and a broader malaise among working-class and poor Americans—the sense that the American dream is slipping away from their reach—may be implicated in this retreat from religion."

Wilcox's study, "No Money, No Honey, No Church: The Deinstitutionalization of Religious Life among the White Working Class," was presented at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association in Las Vegas.

Wilcox said he focused on white churchgoers because African Americans and Latinos don't have the same kinds of education disparities. Researchers haven't examined possible regional differences yet, or which denominations have been hit hardest by the trend.

Using data from the General Social Survey and the National Survey of Family Growth, Wilcox found an across-the-board drop since the 1970s in those who attend religious services at least once a month:

- Among college-educated whites between ages 25 and 44, attendance slipped from 51 percent to 46 percent.
- Among moderately educated whites, attendance dropped from 50 percent to 37 percent.
- Among the least educated, attendance fell the most, from 38 percent to 23 percent.

Wilcox's findings are consistent with the conclusions recently reached by University of Nebraska sociologist Philip Schwadel, who also examined GSS data. Schwadel's study, published in the *Review of Religious Research*, found that with each additional year of education, the likelihood of attending religious services increased 15 percent, and the likelihood of occasional Bible reading increased by 9 percent.

"It certainly could be the case that college grads are attending church to keep up with the Joneses and meet the Joneses. An insurance agent, for instance, may attend church to make business contacts," Wilcox said.

"But, here, I think the biggest nonreligious motivation for many college grads has to do with kids. These helicopter parents plug their kids into good

schools, sports, violin, and church—all in the hopes of maximizing their kids' opportunities to do well in life."

Yet it's the

less-educated, lower-income families who could really use the social services, networking opportunities, spiritual guidance and safety nets that religious communities offer, he said. "This research suggests that religious communities need to do more to reach out and engage working-class Americans," Wilcox concluded.

John Green, an expert

on religion and public life at the University of Akron, said many religious institutions are finding it hard to reach lower socioeconomic classes for a combination of reasons.

"Churches in poor

neighborhoods are often less effective because they don't have resources, while the suburban churches have resources but are far away from the less well off," Green said. "Less-educated people may not have the time to be active in a church, and they may not feel comfortable because they are less well off." —RNS