



The Civic Column

[[Strengthening our community through increased awareness and accountability]]

Report from the Mercyhurst Civic Institute

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The purpose of the Mercyhurst Civic Institute

- Enhance and facilitate citizen participation in decision-making.
- Provide high-quality, objective information to assist local decision-making.
- Convene community forums that encourage reasoned reflection and free and open discussion of regional issues.
- Educate the Erie community and Commonwealth of Pennsylvania about various issues through Institute reports and publications.
- Foster human networks that enhance communication, link resources, strengthen community participation and build social capital.
- Promote research, learning, teaching and service opportunities for the Mercyhurst community.

Making a Greater Connection: How Religious Participation Relates to Youth Behavior in Erie County

By: Andrea Bierer, Community Action Plan Coordinator

Can participating in organized religion play a role in protecting youth from problem behaviors? According to research, yes. A large body of research over the past two decades looking at the relationship between youths' religious participation and youths' alcohol use, drug use, and antisocial behavior indicates that religion plays a role in buffering youth against problem behaviors.^{1,2,3} But a report by the Pew Research Center released in 2010, indicates there is a declining level of religious attendance among young people.⁴ This was previously indicated by the 1996 "Monitoring the Future" survey which showed that between 1976 and 1996 there was a decline in religious service attendance.⁵ Recent data indicates, this national trend towards declining religious participation among youth is especially evident in Erie County, Pennsylvania.

In 2005, Erie County scored just one point below the normative average for youth participation in religion on the PAYS. In the years following, Erie County has seen that score fall each year, dropping all the way to 11 points below the normative average in 2011.

If participating in organized religion is a buffer against problem behaviors, then declining religiosity in Erie County is a problem worth addressing. This article will examine local data regarding religiosity and behaviors of youth in Erie County, Pennsylvania. Examining the relationship between specific categories

of youth behavior and how they associate to different levels of religious participation will provide a picture as to whether increased religiosity is currently connected to decreased problem behaviors in Erie County youth.

The data included in this report is from the Pennsylvania Youth Survey (PAYS). Conducted by the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency, the PAYS is a self-report measure administered every other year to 6th, 8th, 10th, and 12th grade students in Pennsylvania's public schools. The 2011 survey, which is the source of the local data in this report, was sponsored locally by the Erie County Office of Drug and Alcohol Abuse and was facilitated by the Mercyhurst University Civic Institute in partnership with the Erie County Policy and Planning Council and Erie Unified Youth Violence Reduction Initiative. Nine school districts participated in the survey, and the survey was completed by 3,570 students in Erie County.

Defining Religiosity

Religiosity is defined in this report as participating in an organized religion one or more hours per week. It is one of several protective factors measured by the PAYS because it has been tied to protecting and buffering youth from problem behaviors. In Erie County, "Religiosity" registers well below the normative average, while "Belief in a Moral Order" has stayed fairly constant at a rate much

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higher than the normative average. Religiosity has been falling at an alarming rate, plummeting from a score of 49 in 2005 all the way to 39 in 2011.

The following data and charts will compare information on various behaviors by breaking down answers from specific PAYS questions into four levels of religious participation. Those four levels of participation are defined as participating 1) once a week or more, 2) 1-2 times per month, 3) rarely, and 4) never.

Past 30 Day Use

As shown in Figure 2, there appears to be a direct relationship between past 30 day use of substances and the level of participation in organized religion. The more often a youth participates in religious activities, the less likely they are to have used substances in the past 30 days. Ninety percent (90%) of the youth surveyed in Erie County who participate in religious activities once a week or more have not smoked cigarettes in the last 30 days, compared with only seventy-four percent (74%) of students who never participate in religious activities reporting the same- a difference of 16 percentage points. The difference between the highest level of religious involvement and no religious involvement was 14 percentage points for alcohol use and 11 percentage points for marijuana use. The consistent stair-step connection between level of religious involvement and behavior choices suggests a strong relationship exists between the two.

Antisocial Behaviors

Data on antisocial behaviors shown in Figure 3 exhibits the same stair-step relationship found in data about past 30 day use. While the percentage point difference is smaller for several of the data sets within this category, the linear relationship between the behaviors and religiosity is still evident. Three different questions show an eight percentage point difference between those students participating highly in religious activity and those who never participate. Ninety-seven percent (97%) of students surveyed who participate in religious activities one or more times per week have not been suspended from school in the past year, while that is true of only 89% of respondents who never participate in organized religion. Ninety-three percent (93%) of students surveyed who participate in religious activities one or more times per week have not attacked someone with the idea of seriously hurting them, while that is true of only 85% of respondents who never participate in organized religion.

Moral Order

The data sets in this report showing the widest point of difference between high religiosity and no religiosity respondents can be found

Figure 1.

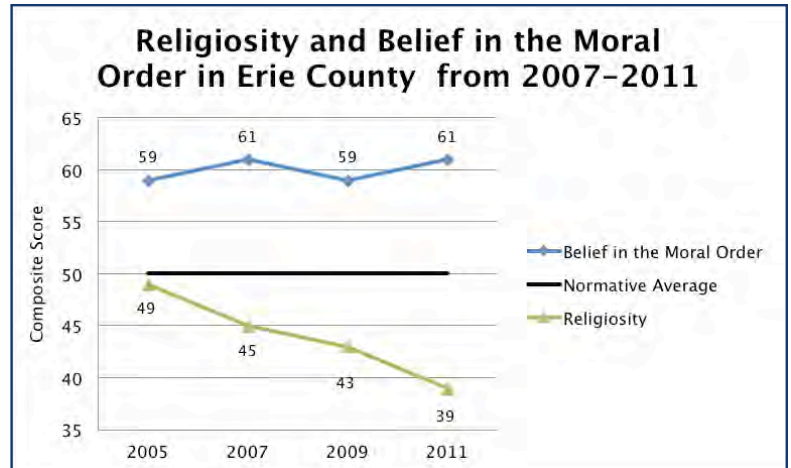


Figure 2.

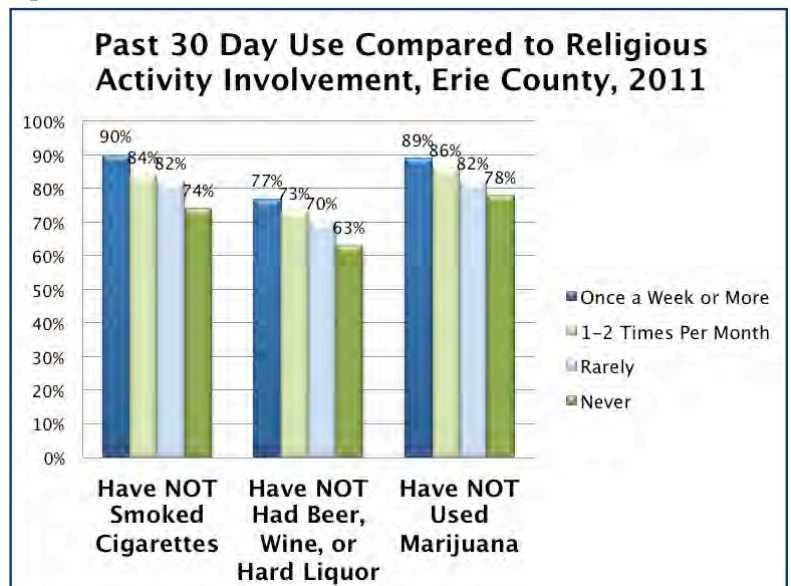
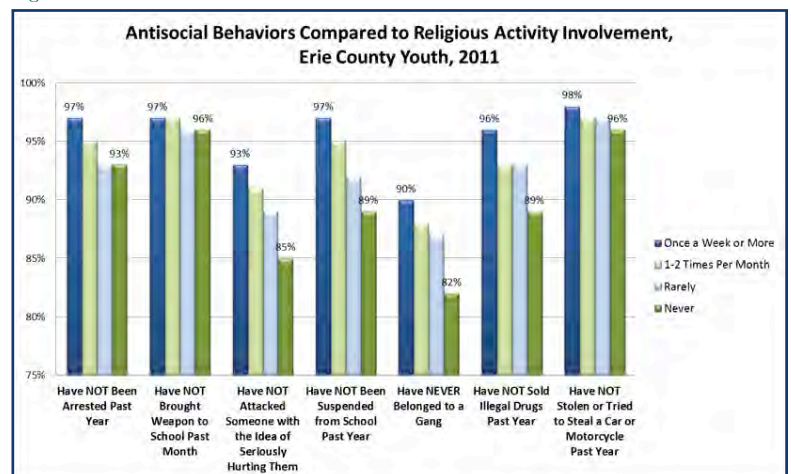


Figure 3.



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in the category of “moral order” questions, shown in Figure 4. These questions measured responses regarding issues such as cheating in school, beating up another person in a fight, and lying to parents. Sixty-seven percent (67%) of students who participate in religious activities weekly do not think it is acceptable to beat up another person if they start the fight, compared with 48% of students who never participate in religious activities- a difference of 19 percentage points. Of all the questions from the PAYS that were compared with religiosity, the 19 percentage point difference on this data set is the largest spread between the high religiosity and no religiosity respondents. The other two data sets measuring views on cheating and lying to parents show a 12 percentage point and 6 percentage point difference, respectively. The stair-step relationship remains in all three questions examined in this category.

Depression Symptoms

In Figure 5, the data again exhibits a linear relationship between religious involvement and behavior. Each of the questions examined within the category of depression symptoms shows an 8 or 9 percentage point spread between the highest and lowest levels of religious involvement. Students indicating a higher level of religiosity were less likely to feel depressed or sad most days, to think they are no good at all, to sometimes think life is not worth it, and to be inclined to think that they are a failure.

Parental Attitudes

One of the most interesting data sets in this research can be found in the category of parental attitudes. This is the only category where a linear relationship was not found. Figure 6 shows there is very little difference in the youth-reported parental attitudes regarding drinking alcohol, as well as stealing, when broken down by religiosity. This result seems to indicate that regardless of youth participation in organized religion, youth in each grouping believe their parents are communicating equally about what they believe is right or wrong regarding those topics. Without this set of questions, it is possible someone would make the assumption that parents of more religious youth have stronger views of the rightness or wrongness of the behaviors being measured; however, this question seems to indicate that is not true. Regardless of their religiosity, students report in almost equal amounts that they believe their parents feel it is wrong for them to drink alcohol or steal something over \$5 in value. Although this result seems to indicate that students in each category of religiosity have the same percentage of communication from their parents about what they believe is right and wrong, the reported behavior is still measurably different between the high religiosity and no religiosity respondents. Therefore, the connection is between religious participation of youth and youth behavior outcomes, not beliefs of parents and youth behavior outcomes.

Figure 4.

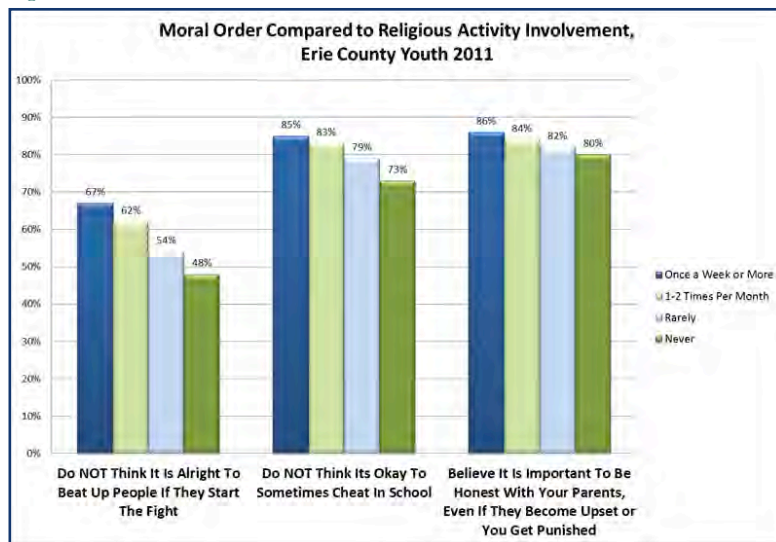


Figure 5.

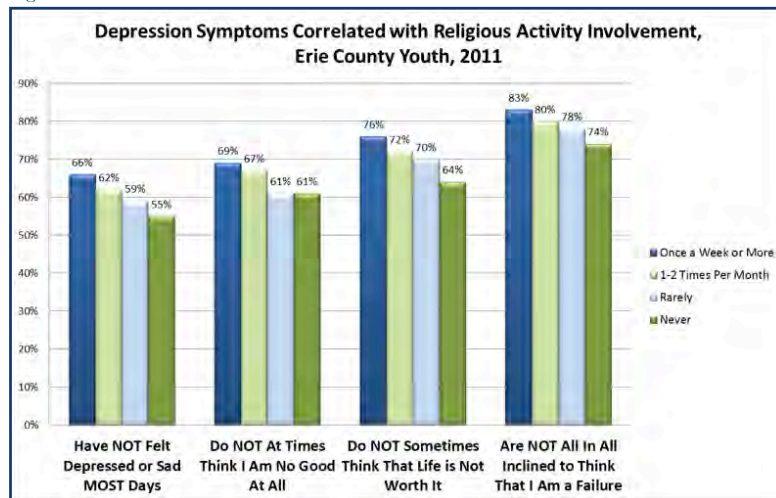
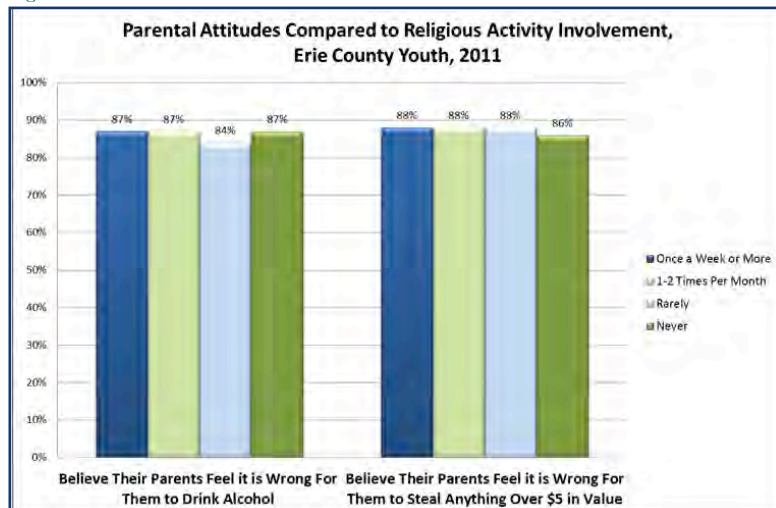


Figure 6.



Making a Greater Connection: How Religious Participation Relates to Youth Behavior in Erie County *continued*

Family Dynamics

In contrast to parental attitudes, family dynamics is strongly related to religiosity. While parents may be communicating what they feel is right and wrong at the same level, there appears to be a clear difference in the behaviors or outcomes within the family. According to Figure 6, the same percentage of students across all levels of religiosity indicated they believe their parents feel it is wrong for them to drink alcohol. However, Figure 7 indicates that there is an 18 percentage point difference between high religiosity respondents and no religiosity respondents regarding clear household rules regarding the use of alcohol. This 18 point difference is the second largest point difference found in this report. The other questions in this category again showed a strong linear connection to religiosity.

Family Relationships

Overall, high religious participation links with positive family indicators. While none of the questions in this category exhibited a perfectly stair-step linear relationship, the overall trend in each data set is still consistent with the other categories examined. The data consistently indicates a positive connection between religious participation and family relationships. Sixty-six (66%) of students that attend religious activities one time per month or more said that their parents tell them on a frequent basis they are proud of them for something they have done, compared with 52% of students who never attend religious activities—a difference of 14 percentage points. Answers regarding enjoying spending time with their mother or father were 14 percentage points and 15 percentage points apart, respectively.

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Figure 7.

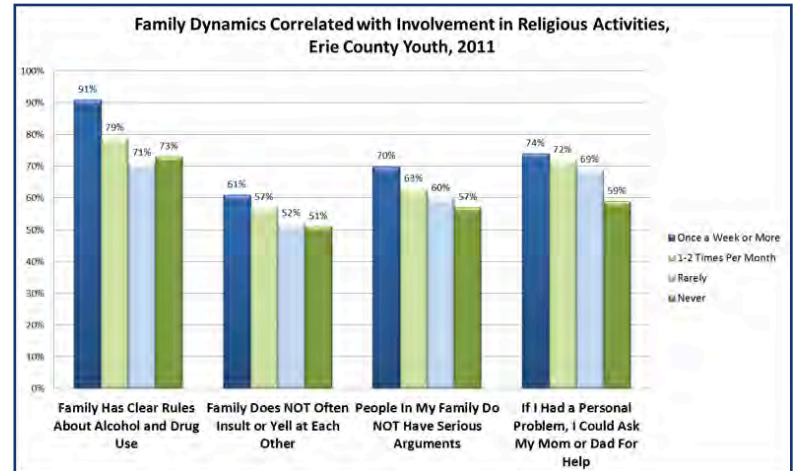
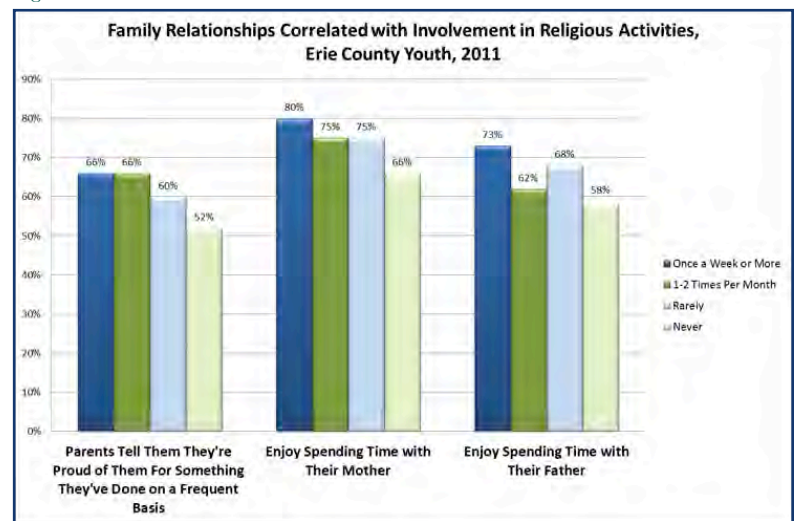


Figure 8.



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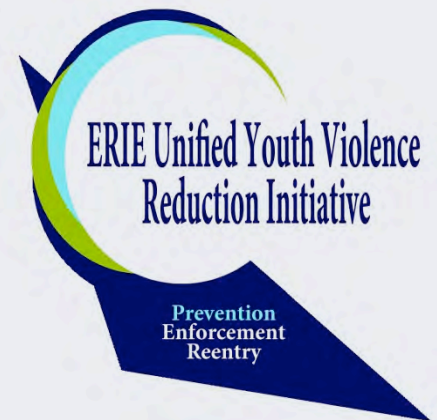
The Community Action Plan

In 2010, the ERIE Unified Youth Violence Reduction Initiative (EUYVRI) was formed as an initial effort from the US Attorney's Office, the Erie County District Attorney's Office, and local law enforcement. The three prongs of the EUYVRI were determined to be (1) prevention, (2) enforcement, and (3) reentry. The prevention portion of that effort is spearheaded by the Erie County Policy and Planning Council for Children and Families, a collaboration that consists of members representing more than 30 organizations in the community.

The Policy and Planning Council utilizes the Communities That Care (CTC) process to drive its prevention efforts. CTC is a coalition-based prevention process that uses a public health model to identify risk and protective factors that impact youth problem behaviors including substance abuse, delinquency, teen pregnancy, school dropout, violence, and depression/anxiety. Risk factors are proven through research to increase the likelihood of problem behaviors among youth, while protective factors are proven to buffer youth from problem behaviors and help them succeed in life.

This CTC process was utilized to develop and write the Erie County Community Action Plan, the first fully formed CTC plan committed to paper in Erie. Published June 2012, this document is a written strategic prevention plan consisting of very specific action items to be carried out between 2012 and 2015 in order to prevent problem behaviors in Erie County, Pennsylvania.

The full Community Action Plan, as well as all the handouts, presentations, and folder contents used at the Religiosity Summit, can be found on the Unified Erie web page: www.unifiedErie.org



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Religiosity Summit

According to the data of the Pennsylvania Youth Survey (PAYS), religiosity is one of the three lowest scoring protective factors in Erie County, Pennsylvania. As the Erie County Policy and Planning Council for Children and Families utilized local data to develop a prevention plan, members determined that increasing religiosity would be one of the focus areas of that plan. It quickly became apparent that there were not many other groups addressing this issue, and therefore there were not many proven, evidence-based strategies to implement. The planning team in Erie decided to host a Religiosity Summit, inviting as many religious leaders as possible in Erie County to the event. The purpose of the event was to share the data on religiosity in Erie County and then to get feedback from attendees. The event was held on June 4, 2013, and approximately 65 religious leaders and community members attended to represent a wide variety of religious backgrounds and beliefs.

The first portion of the summit was dedicated to presenting the data on religiosity in Erie County. Speakers from the steering committee of the Erie Unified Youth Violence Reduction Initiative shared the data, as well as the process used to evaluate the data, the process used to write the Community Action Plan, and the actions taken to implement those selected strategies. Presenters also shared a video clip compiled from interviews with youth in Erie County who discussed their participation in organized religion and the things that could encourage them to participate.

The second portion of the summit was dedicated to small group discussions led by trained facilitators. Attendees were broken into groups of ten or less, and were asked several questions focused on generating ideas for increasing religiosity in Erie County.

Finally, the summit ended by bringing all the participants back together, presenting "The Religiosity Summit Agreement," and asking participants to do their part to increase religiosity in Erie. Participants were given the opportunity to sign a poster-sized print of the agreement as the event concluded.

The feedback from the summit was overwhelmingly positive, and the most common request found on the evaluations from participants was to continue pursuing this topic and to "not make this a one-time event." As a result, the Erie County Policy and Planning Council for Children and Families created a standing subcommittee, the Religiosity Team, dedicated to increasing religiosity in Erie County. The team is currently evaluating the ideas generated during the facilitated break-out sessions and using them to draft an amendment to the Community Action Plan. The amendment will specify the strategies that will be implemented over the course of the next two years (before the 2015 PAYS survey is conducted) by members of the committee.



The Erie Unified Youth Violence Reduction Initiative

A three-pronged approach to reducing violence in Erie County Pennsylvania.



The Erie County Policy and Planning Council for Children & Families

Community Action Plan

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