

# What Difference Does Youth Group Make? A Longitudinal Analysis of Religious Youth Group Participation Outcomes

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*Though many congregations structure youth ministry programs to foster desired religious and social outcomes, questions remain regarding whether participation in religious-based youth programs is beneficial for the youth involved. Studies show that religion typically results in positive life outcomes for youth, but less is known about the causal mechanisms through which religion makes a difference in their lives. Data analyzed are from two waves of the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR). This article examines the effect of youth participation on adult support, church connections, and moral values. A multivariate analysis with lagged dependent variables indicates some effects of youth group participation as well as self-selection processes.*

Over half of American youth participate in religious youth groups at some point during their teen years (Smith 2003). Presumably, youth group leaders, parents, and even participating youth assume that religious group participation produces positive religious and life outcomes. Studies demonstrate that the majority of American youth consider their religious faith to be important in their lives (e.g., Donahue and Benson 1995; Gallup and Bezilla 1992; Johnston, Bachman, and O'Malley 1999; Regnerus, Smith, and Fritsch 2003; Smith and Denton 2005). Yet, aside from one study examining the effects of youth group participation (Smith and Faris 2002) on life outcomes, research has given inadequate attention to the question of whether participation in religious youth groups does in fact change the lives of attending youth.

I address this often-overlooked aspect of youth religiosity by examining the extent to which participation in a religious youth group contributes to change over time in adult support, church connections, and moral values net of control variables, which include lagged dependent variables. In doing so, I test for the possibility of self-selection into youth groups that may account for the religious and life outcomes. The potential outcomes examined here are selected for two reasons—they are the desired goals of most youth ministers and they may also account for the acquisition of other positive life outcomes. Youth group participation may act as a causal mechanism, explaining the well-documented puzzle of youth religiosity as consistently associated with positive life outcomes.

## **Youth Religiosity Link to Positive Life Outcomes**

Youth religiosity is related to several positive life outcomes (Ellison and Levin 1998; Smith 2003), including increased physical health (Wallace and Forman 1998), longer lifespan (Hummer

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et al. 1999), life satisfaction, problem-solving skills, friendship support (Varon and Riley 1999), coping mechanisms (Shortz and Worthington 1994), healthy familial relationships (Curran 1983; Johnson 1973; Stinnett and DeFrain 1985), and reduced incidences of depression (Harker 2001). However, less is known empirically about the causal social mechanisms explaining how increased youth religiosity relates to these positive life outcomes.

The first place to look for this connection is the research on religious service attendance and parental relationships. The importance of religious faith to youth and the positive outcomes of religious service attendance remain evident, despite findings that the adolescent years reflect a general decline in religious service attendance (e.g., Benson, Donahue, and Erickson 1989; Potvin, Hoge, and Nelson 1976; Regnerus, Smith, and Fritsch 2003; Roehlkepartain and Benson 1993). Participation in other church activities explains why youth religiosity may remain high while religious service attendance declines (King, Elder, and Whitbeck 1997).

The quality of parental and familial relationships contributes to religious involvement (Brody, Stoneman, and Flor 1995; Hogan, Eggebeen, and Clogg 1993; Mahoney et al. 2003; Pearce and Axinn 1998; Rossi and Rossi 1990; Smith and Kim 2003), or at the very least there exists a reciprocal relationship between the connection to parental and familial relationships and religiosity (Thornton 1985). Studies find that youth tend to replicate the religious beliefs and practices of their parents over time (Myers 1996; Smith and Denton 2005) and that the character of parental relationships is important for understanding the outcomes of youth religiosity (Ozorak 1989). Youth group participation may be another component to consider and may in fact be an extension of parental religiosity, considering that parents are often the reason for youth group participation.

Smith (2003) provides a convincing theory explaining how youth religiosity relates to positive life outcomes. He delineates three types of causal mechanisms: moral orders, learned competencies, and social and organizational ties. Smith defines moral orders as ideas of right and wrong based on morally acceptable standards that exist outside of individual wants and desires and therefore regulate and guide choices for behavior that can lead to more socially acceptable and less stressful lives (see Etzioni 1988; MacIntyre 1984; Taylor 1985, 1989; Wuthnow 1987). Learned competencies are skills and knowledge that youth gain through participation in religious organizations in leadership and coping skills as well as increased cultural capital (e.g., Ellison and Taylor 1996; Koenig, George, and Siegler 1988; Pargament et al. 1998; Worthington, Berry, and Parrott 2001). Social and organizational ties pertain to the relationships that youth acquire as they participate in religious activities, especially transgenerational ties to adults in religious congregations that are sources of social capital and social support (Ellison and George 1994; Krause et al. 2001; Wuthnow 2004).

There is a dearth of empirical studies examining the link between youth group participation and these theorized mechanisms of religious effects. The one empirical investigation that rigorously examines the effects of youth groups is that of Smith and Faris (2002), in which they find a significant relationship between long-term religious youth group participation and several positive life outcomes (e.g., decreased cigarette smoking, alcohol consumption, and drug usage).

### **Youth Ministry Intended Outcomes**

Stated purposes and goals of religious youth groups abound in the literature on youth ministry, with many models describing the goals of youth ministers (e.g., Hryniuk 2005; Jones 2003; Roebben 1999; Root 2007). Youth minister goals include that youth have fun, connect to adults at church, learn about their faith, and behave morally as a result of their participation. Youth ministers seek to make church relevant, to prevent youth from becoming bored with their religious participation, and keep youth interested in what happens at church by providing opportunities for recreation and entertainment. The groups create opportunities for youth and the adults in the congregations to form social relationships, especially with the youth minister. Youth ministers

structure the group as a time for participants to learn about the teachings of their faith tradition and seek to engender moral values by helping youth to learn about and demonstrate a commitment to acting right and avoiding wrong.

There are few empirical studies systematically examining how these models, or even youth group participation more generally, may result in observable differences for participating youth (e.g., Goreham 2004; Larson, Hansen, and Moneta 2006; Strommen, Jones, and Rahn 2001).

## Hypothesis

This analysis extends both the youth ministry and social science literatures reviewed above. I examine the effect of youth group participation on several religious and life outcomes: adult support and church connection (relating to Smith's emphasis on social and organizational ties) and moral values (relating to Smith's emphasis on moral orders).<sup>1</sup> I hypothesize that youth group participation contributes to at least some of the links between youth religiosity and positive life outcomes, and thereby satisfies at least some of the youth ministers' intended outcomes. Specifically, my hypothesis is that adolescents participating in religious youth groups will demonstrate greater adult support, connection to church, and moral value commitments.

## METHODS

To examine what difference participation in religious youth ministry programs might make in the lives of adolescents as they move toward adulthood, I examine data from two waves of the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR). The NSYR is a nationally representative longitudinal survey that began with a 279-question phone survey in 2001. A random digit dial (RDD) method sampled 4,161 English- and Spanish-speaking youth ages 13 to 17, with an 81 percent response rate. Eighty oversampled Jewish households were included, bringing the overall *N* to 3,370. One parent or guardian of each youth was also contacted for a telephone survey, which was completed with a 96 percent response rate (*n* = 3,235). Diagnostic analyses comparing NSYR data with U.S. Census data on comparable households and with comparable adolescent surveys—such as Monitoring the Future, the National Household Education Survey, and the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health—confirm that the NSYR provides a nationally representative sample without identifiable sampling and nonresponse biases of U.S. teenagers ages 13–17 and their parents living in households (for details, see Smith and Denton 2005). In 2005, the English-speaking original-survey respondents, then ages 16 to 21, were recontacted for a second wave of data collection with a 329-question phone survey with a 78 percent response rate (*n* = 2,604). My analysis operationalizes outcomes using the second wave of survey data and employs explanatory and control variables from Wave 1 and Wave 2. The lagged dependent variable for all outcomes is measured using Wave 1 responses.

## Response Variables

The aim of this analysis is to focus on how religious youth group participation relates to theorized religious effects leading to positive life outcomes. I concentrate here on the religious effects of moral orders and social and organizational ties by examining adult support, connection to church, and moral values. All question wording, variable labels, and response descriptions are outlined in Table 1.

<sup>1</sup> Because learned competencies vary across faith traditions, I do not explore the effect of youth participation on learned competencies.

Table 1: Variable labels, types, question wording, and response labels (mean and standard deviation)

<i>Response Variables</i>	
Adult support	
Adult talk W1, W2	“In general, how comfortable or uncomfortable are you talking to adults other than your parents or relatives?” <sup>a</sup> ( $M = 2.57, SD = 1.37; M = 2.13, SD = 1.20$ )
Adult support W1, W2	“Roughly how many total adults, if any, do you have in your life that you can turn to when you need support, advice, or help—not including your parents?” <sup>b</sup> ( $M = 5.68, SD = 7.20; M = 5.6, SD = 6.30$ )
Adult cong support W1,W2	[If attends religious services and answered one] “Is this person a part of . . .” and [If attends religious services and answered more than one] “Of those [insert number] adults that you can turn to, how many, if any, of them are part of a religious congregation or other religious group that you are involved in?” <sup>b</sup> ( $M = 2.76, SD = 4.99; M = 2.58, SD = 4.91$ )
Church connection	
Church think W1, W2	“Does your [religious congregation] make you think about important things?” <sup>c</sup> ( $M = 2.70, SD = 1.77; M = 3.04, SD = 1.87$ )
Church boring W1, W2	“Is your [religious congregation] boring to you?” <sup>c</sup> ( $M = 3.42, SD = 1.41; M = 3.72, SD = 1.38$ )
Attend when 25 W2	“When you are 25, do you think you will be attending religious services?” <sup>d</sup> ( $M = 1.64, SD = .73$ ).
Wish attend W1, W2	A combination of reported attendance and responses to the questions: “How much is it up to you whether, and how much, you attend religious services? Is it totally up to you, mostly up to you, somewhat up to you, or not up to you at all?” and [If not up to respondent] “If it was totally up to you, how often would you attend religious services? Would you attend never, a few times a year, many times a year, once a month, 2–3 times a month, once a week, or more than once a week?” <sup>e</sup> ( $M = 2.29, SD = .91; M = 2.08, SD = .76$ )
Moral values	
Parents secrets W1, W2	“In the last year, how often, if ever, did you do things that you hoped your parent would never find out about?” <sup>f</sup> ( $M = 4.10, SD = 1.48; M = 3.83, SD = 1.46$ )
Parents lies W1, W2	“In the last year, how often, if ever, did you lie to a parent?” <sup>f</sup> ( $M = 4.30, SD = 1.32; M = 4.15, SD = 1.36$ )
Morality God’s law W2	“What is morally right or wrong should be based on God’s law.” <sup>g</sup> ( $M = 2.49, SD = 1.31$ )
Morality relative W2	“Some people say that morals are relative, that there are no definite rights and wrongs for everybody.” <sup>g</sup> ( $M = 2.86, SD = 1.26$ )
Ok to break morals W2	“Some people believe that it is sometimes okay to break moral rules if it works to your advantage and you can get away with it.” <sup>g</sup> ( $M = 3.91, SD = .96$ )
Faith importance W1, W2	“How important or unimportant is religious faith in shaping how you live your daily life?” <sup>h</sup> ( $M = 2.57, SD = 1.13; M = 2.73, SD = 1.23$ )

(Continued)

Table 1 (continued)

<i>Explanatory Variables</i>	
Youth group W1	“Yes” response to the question: “Are you currently involved in your [religious congregation] youth group?”
Youth group W2	“Yes” response to the question: “Are you currently involved in your [religious congregation] youth group?”
<i>Control Variables</i>	
Age W2	16, 17, 18, 19, 20
Gender	0 = male and 1 = female
Race white	0 = not black, Latino/a, Asian, Other, Don’t know race and ethnicity and 1 = white
Southern location	0 = not located in the southern region and 1 = located in the southern region
Parent breakup	0 = never broken up or divorced and 1 = had one or more breakups or divorces
Parent education low	1 = either parent had less than an associates degree or unknown
Parent income \$100K or +	1 = parental income was reported to be more than \$100,000
<i>Additional Controls</i>	
Religious service attend W2	“Yes” response to “Do you attend religious services more than once or twice a year, not counting weddings, baptisms, and funerals?”
Youth group available W2	“Yes” response to [If attends church] “Does your [religious congregation] have an organized group for young people your age, such as a youth group or college age group? By this we mean an organized group of young people that meets regularly for social time together, prayer, or to learn more about their religious faith.”

<sup>a</sup>Responses = very, fairly, and somewhat comfortable to somewhat, fairly, and very uncomfortable.

<sup>b</sup>Responses = ranges from 0 to 100.

<sup>c</sup>Responses = usually, sometimes, rarely, or never.

<sup>d</sup>Responses = yes, maybe, or no.

<sup>e</sup>Responses = wish no or less attendance, wish same attendance, or wish more attendance.

<sup>f</sup>Responses = very often, fairly often, sometimes, occasionally, rarely, or never.

<sup>g</sup>Responses = strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree.

<sup>h</sup>Responses = extremely, very, somewhat, not very, or not at all important.

Connection to church is measured by a number of concepts, including current interest in church and potential to retain interest into the future. The questions used to measure these concepts were only asked of respondents who attend religious congregations, and therefore an additional category of “does not attend” was added to each of these variables to represent respondents who were not asked the questions. The concepts are measured using Wave 2 responses to the questions listed in Table 1 and labeled Church Think, Church Boring, Attend When 25, and Wish Attend. Wish Attend is coded using responses from more than one question (see Table 1). Respondents who did not attend and reported that it was totally up to them whether they attended religious services as well as respondents who attended but said that if it were up to them, they would attend less or not at all were coded “wish less or no attendance.” Respondents who attended services and reported it is up to them to decide and respondents who said it is not up to them to decide but

they would attend with the same frequency were coded “wish same attendance.” Respondents who did not attend at all or indicated they would like to attend more frequently and also reported the decision to attend was not up to them were coded “wish more attendance.”

Indicators of moral values are measured by behavioral reports of how frequently the respondents lied to or kept secrets from their parents, beliefs about moral rules, and importance of faith in daily life. The concepts are measured by the variables listed in Table 1 as Parents Secrets, Parents Lies, Morality God’s Law, Morality Relative, Ok to Break Morals, and Faith Importance. Morality God’s Law, Morality Relative, and Ok to Break Morals were only asked in Wave 2.

### Explanatory and Control Variables

Participation in a youth group is the explanatory variable for all statistical models. Responses to this question were included in both Wave 1 and Wave 2 telephone surveys. I first run the models with the Wave 2 youth group variable, to examine the results that cross-sectional data would typically report, with the addition of only the longitudinal Wave 1 lagged dependent control. To look at trajectories over time, I then run the same models with the Wave 1 youth group variable, still examining outcomes at Wave 2.

To minimize the possibility that results might be due to spurious effects, several control variables are included throughout the models. Demographic control variables include respondent age, gender, race and ethnicity, regional geographic location, and parental relationship status, educational background, and income level. Dummy variables representing religious traditions, as defined by Steensland et al. (2000), are also included. In addition to demographic and denominational control variables, two other control variables are used in the statistical models to account for the possibility of a spurious effect with the availability of a religious youth group in which to participate. One control represents religious service attendance. The second represents the availability of a youth group.

To examine the causal effect of youth group, a lagged dependent variable, representing NSYR Wave 1 responses to the same question, is included in each model (see Table 1). The inclusion of the lagged dependent variable focuses the analysis on change between waves of data collection and allows for causal inference about youth group participation.<sup>2</sup>

## RESULTS

To assess some potential outcomes of participating in youth group, I employ cross-lagged panel analysis using ordered least squares multiple regression analysis for all continuous response variables and ordered logistical regression for all ordinal responses.<sup>3</sup> Each response variable was run through a series of nested models, each one building on the prior model. The models

<sup>2</sup> For a more detailed description of the use of cross-lagged variables in panel analysis, see Finkel’s (2001) *Causal Analysis with Panel Data*, in which he describes the ability to draw causal inferences when examining the change in the variable of interest over time. For example: “The cross-lagged model’s parameters may be estimated consistently through ordinary least squares regression. . . . The coefficients of particular interest . . . are the cross-lagged effects from the wave 1 variables  $X_1$  and  $Y_1$  to  $Y_2$  and  $X_2$ , respectively, because these are presumed to represent the causal effect from each variable to the other. . . . The effect of  $X_1$  on  $Y_2$ , controlling for  $Y_1$ , represents the effect of  $X_1$  on the *changes* in  $Y$  over time, and the same interpretation holds for the effect of  $Y_1$  on  $X_2$ , controlling for  $X_1$ ” (Finkel 2001:27). It is important to note, however, that this technique allows for only the inference of causality and does not prove causality conclusively.

<sup>3</sup> Due to the small number of missing values, response variables were imputed with the median (if continuous) or mode (if ordinal) response. The percentage of cases with missing values for each of the response variables were .89, .97, .85, 1.00, .88, .96, .46, .46, .42, .57, .69, .62, and .35, respectively, in Table 1. When the missing values are less than 1 percent, this imputation does not introduce nonrandomized bias.

with ordinal response variables were tested postestimation using a likelihood ratio test, and the models with continuous response variables were tested using an *F*-test. Each model was found to statistically significantly build upon the prior model at the .01 significance level.<sup>4</sup> Model 1 for each dependent variable contains only the response variable and Wave 2 youth group participation. Model 2 for each contains the addition of the demographic controls. Church attendance and availability of youth group at church, if attends, are added in Model 3. Model 4 contains the addition of the lagged dependent variable, that is, the response variable measured at Wave 1. Model 4 controls for differences in the response variable at the baseline measure, as well as possible unmeasured influences associated with that first-wave response measure, isolating the second-wave response variable specifically to changes in that variable between waves. The lagged dependent variable controls for potential errors from unmeasured variables (Finkel 2001), such as effects due to personality traits of people who are more likely to join groups or some other preconditions that may have caused the youth to participate in youth groups.

Table 2 shows the coefficients and significance levels of the regression models with each of the adult support response variables, using the explanatory variable of *Wave 2* youth group participation, when the respondents were *16 to 20 years old*. These mostly statistically significant coefficients show a general pattern that the *Wave 2* NSYR youth, then ages 16 to 20, who participate in youth group at the same age, are less likely to feel uncomfortable in talking with adults, report a greater number of adults they feel they can turn to for support, and report a greater number of adults within their religious congregation who they feel they can turn to for support. This pattern holds when controlling for age, gender, race and ethnicity, regional location, parental education level, income, and relationship status. The pattern continues to hold after additionally controlling for the frequency of religious service attendance and whether or not a youth group is available.

The effect of religious youth group participation remains significant after controlling for the often statistically significant effects of social support as youth accumulate additional ties and become comfortable with those ties over time. The pattern of effects holds net of the number of adults and adults within their religious congregation they could turn to for support as reported in *Wave 1*. Statistically significant effects are found for gender, race and ethnicity, and parental income level. The pattern also replicates across the postulated additional explanations that result in no consistently statistically significant effects for location within the religiously concentrated south, parental education level, and relationship status. However, the pattern does not hold after controlling for whether or not the youth felt comfortable talking to adults at *Wave 1*. There may be some self-selection effects of youth who are more comfortable talking to adults at *Wave 1* participating in youth group activities at *Wave 2*, but those who do participate in youth group at *Wave 2* are more likely to have a greater number of adults, and greater number of religiously affiliated adults they can turn to for support than they did at *Wave 1*.

Table 3 displays a similar pattern for the church connection and moral values response variables. The four models were run the same as the models in Table 2, and other than minor variation in statistical significance of some of control variables, the results are the same. To conserve space, the coefficients for the control variables are collapsed. These models replicate a similar pattern to the results in Table 2, namely, that in most cases participation in religious youth group is significantly correlated with church connection and moral values. The nonstatistically significant response variables include wishing to attend more often, never keeping secrets from parents, and never lying to parents. Rating church as boring remains statistically significant across

<sup>4</sup> The only exception to this pattern of statistical significance for the nested models was for Model 4 of the Uncomfortable Talking to Adults response variable. This variable in Tables 2 and 4 did not have a statistically significant pseudo  $R^2$  value different from Model 3. This is likely due to the fact that, as discussed further in the findings section, this response variable does not appear to be a result of youth group participation.

Table 2: Wave 2 youth group participation effects on adult support variables Wave 2

Models	Uncomfortable Talking to Adults				No. of Adults Can Turn to for Support				No. of Church Adults Can Turn for Support			
	M1	M2	M3	M4	M1	M2	M3	M4	M1	M2	M3	M4
Youth group W2 participation	-.150	-.283***	-.206*	-.178	1.470***	1.478***	.858**	.899**	2.840***	2.472***	1.339***	1.265***
Demographic controls												
Age W2		-.236***	-.237***	-.201***		.294***	.294***	.258**		.178*	.169*	.177**
Gender W2		.145*	.144*	.124		-.869***	-.891***	-.647**		-.424*	-.467*	-.386*
Race/ethnicity W2 (reference category, white)												
Black		.534***	.538***	.459**		-.496	-.536	-1.010*		.482*	.417	.019
Latino/a		-.783	-.067	-.132		-.467	-.529	-.241		-.121	-.225	-.133
Asian		.720*	.739*	.675*		-2.211*	-2.201*	-1.720		-1.052	-.928	-.952
Other		.343	.349	.274		.236	.204	.023		.488	.523	.395
Don't know		.108	.116	.296		.039	-.013	.230		1.869	1.671	1.861
South		-.000	-.000	-.011		-.204	-.007	-.118		.087	.027	-.017
Parental breakup		.087	.078	.044		-.548	-.237	-.354		-.347	-.228	-.112
Parental education level low		.168	.163	.132		-.042	-.003	-.091		.014	.086	.051
Parental income level (reference category, \$100K or more)												
Less than \$20K		.354*	.346*	.244		-.297	-.170	-.376		-.249	-.044	-.113
\$20K to \$40K		.193	.186	.110		-.073	.018	-.067		.134	.275	.105
\$40K to \$60K		.265*	.258*	.232		-.125	-.068	-.274		.082	.167	-.050
\$60K to \$100K		.169	.173	.135		.088	.106	-.199		.093	.121	-.059
Don't know		-.033	-.036	-.104		.433	.472	.397		.963	.976*	.828

(Continued)

Table 2 (continued)

Models	Uncomfortable Talking to Adults				No. of Adults Can Turn to for Support				No. of Church Adults Can Turn for Support			
	M1	M2	M3	M4	M1	M2	M3	M4	M1	M2	M3	M4
Religious tradition (reference category, mainline Protestant)												
Evang. Protestant	-.011	.232	.034		.190	-.093	-.057		1.095***	.594*	.462	
Black Protestant	-.059	-.353	-.031		.787	.556	.987		1.366**	.988	1.130*	
Catholic	.051	.064	.068		.200	-.167	-.141		.399	.070	.040	
Jewish	-.312	-.365	-.292		-.247	-.081	-.191		-.284	.047	.050	
Mormon	.163	.201	.179		2.587**	2.259**	1.555		3.810***	3.220***	2.654***	
Don't know	.144	.152	.119		-.375	-.512	-.515		-.165	-.376	-.320	
Additional controls												
Attend religious services		-.060*	-.051*			.266***	.182**			.496***	.384***	
Church youth group available		.143	.151			-.061	-.078			-.161	-.165	
Lagged dependent variable			.315***				.282***				.248***	
N	2,604	2,604	2,604	2,604	2,604	2,604	2,604	2,604	2,314	2,314	2,314	2,314
R <sup>2</sup> /Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	.000	.019	.020	.037	.010	.029	.139	.065	.089	.129	.188	

\*p < .05; \*\*p < .01; \*\*\*p < .001.

Data Source: National Study of Youth and Religion.

Table 3: Wave 2 youth group participation collapsed models for four church connection variables and six moral values outcomes

Models <sup>a</sup>	M1	M2	M3	M4	M1	M2	M3	M4
<b>Church Connection</b>								
Youth group W2	-2.294***	-2.155***	-.290**	-.280*	-1.259***	-1.106***	.926***	.864***
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	.105	.135	.474	.481	.035	.052	.277	.294
<b>Youth group W2</b>								
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	.824***	.682***	-.075	-.096	-2.115***	-2.040***	-.604***	
<b>Moral Values</b>								
Youth group W2	.398***	.374***	.161	.182	.357***	.385***	.161	.182
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	.003	.008	.011	.373	.002	.013	.015	.052
<b>Youth group W2</b>								
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	-1.544***	-1.300***	-.337***		.869	.642***	.223*	
<b>Youth group W2</b>								
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	.046	.102	.155		.016	.037	.048	
<b>Youth group W2</b>								
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	.765***	.656***	.228*		-1.823***	-1.710***	-.589***	-.529***

\*p < .05; \*\*p < .01; \*\*\*p < .001.

<sup>a</sup>Models: M1 = youth group participation Wave 2; M2 = demographic controls added; M3 = attends religious services and youth group available added; M4 = lagged dependent variable added.

Note: Blank cells occur because question was not asked in Wave 1 telephone survey.

Table 4: Wave 1 youth group participation effects on adult support variables Wave 2, control variables not shown (see Table 2)

Models <sup>a</sup>	M1	M2	M3	M4
Uncomfortable Talking to Adults <sup>b</sup>				
Youth group participation W1	-.200**	-.215**	-.144	-.080
Attend religious services			-.065*	-.058*
Church youth group available			.117	.124
Lagged dependent variable				-.315***
$R^2$ /Pseudo $R^2$	.001	.019	.020	.037
No. of Adults Can Turn to for Support				
Youth group participation W1	.167***	1.050***	.577*	.288
Attend religious services			.288***	.225**
Church youth group available			.057	-.078
Lagged dependent variable				.281***
$R^2$ /Pseudo $R^2$	.008	.017	.024	.129
No. of Church Adults Can Turn for Support				
Youth group participation W1	1.972***	1.558***	.670**	.356
Attend religious services			.549***	.452***
Church youth group available			.044	-.060
Lagged dependent variable				.246***
$R^2$ /Pseudo $R^2$	.038	.077	.115	.172

<sup>a</sup>Models: M1 = youth group participation Wave 1; M2 = demographic controls added; M3 = attends religious services and youth group available added; M4 = lagged dependent variable added.

<sup>b</sup> $N = 2,604$  for all models except, No. of Church Adults Can Turn to Support ( $N = 2,314$ ).

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

the models, but the effects turn positive for Models 3 and 4. Wave 2 youth group participants report that church bores them less frequently, net of attendance at religious services (the variable added in Model 3). Youth who attend religious youth groups at Wave 2 are more likely to be thoughtfully engaged at church, wish to continue their attendance when they are older, believe that morality is based on God's law, think there are definite rights and wrongs in life, and consider their faith to be important in their daily lives.

Table 4 shows the coefficients and significance levels of the regression models with each of the Wave 2 adult support variables, examining the results based on youth group participation during the *Wave 1* survey when the youth were *13 to 17 years old*. The results indicate that the NSYR Wave 2 16- to 20-year olds, who participated in youth group when they were ages 13 to 17, are less likely to feel uncomfortable talking with adults, report a greater number of adults they can turn to for support, and report a greater number of adults within their congregation they can turn to for support. This pattern holds in Model 2, net of effects for age, gender, race and ethnicity, regional location, and parental education level, income, and relationship status (coefficients not shown).

However, in Models 3 and 4 the effect of youth group participation is attenuated. The effect of youth group participation at Wave 1 on comfortable talking to adults is not significant when attendance at religious services is included in the analysis. Rather than an independent effect of youth group participation, religious services appears to be the mechanism by which youth feel more comfortable talking with adults. The effect of youth group participation at Wave 1 on number of adults and number of church adults they can turn to for support is no longer significant

when the lagged dependent variable is added in Model 4. What appeared to be a youth group participation effect may be a self-selection effect, namely, youth who already feel comfortable turning to adults for support are more likely to attend youth group. Other mechanisms may be at work. Either a socially oriented personality trait or parental socialization may encourage relationships with adults and interest in youth group participation.

Table 5 displays a more complicated pattern of statistical significance across the same models for the church connection and moral values variables. The four church connection models in Table 5 are similar to those reported in Table 4; other than minor variation in statistical significance of some of the control variables, the results are the same. Youth who attended youth group when they were 13 to 17 years old were significantly less likely to say that church never makes them think net of demographic and denominational controls (Model 2). However, similar to comfort talking with adults, the effect of youth group participation is no longer significant after controlling for religious service attendance. Youth who attended youth group at Wave 1 are less likely to report church never makes them think, but this is primarily a function of their religious service attendance.

Youth at Wave 2 who participated in youth group at Wave 1 were significantly less likely to report that church is never boring net of controls for demographic and denominational controls (Model 2). However, after controlling for religious service attendance, the coefficient becomes positive (Models 3 and 4). Young people who participated in a youth group at Wave 1 were actually more likely to report that church is boring net of effects for religious service attendance.

Youth who participated in youth groups when they were 13 to 17 years old are more likely to report that they wish to attend religious services more frequently than they currently do and are more likely to attend when they are 25. This pattern holds after controlling for demographic and denominational control variables, religious service attendance, and whether or not a youth group is available to them at their religious congregation. Youth group participation increases the likelihood that a person will attend religious services in the future.

In Models 1 and 2, participating in a youth group at Wave 1 (when 13 to 17 years old) does not influence the respondent's likelihood of keeping secrets or lying to parents at Wave 2. However, once religious service attendance is included in the model, the coefficients for these two response variables become statistically significant. Controlling for religious service attendance, Wave 2 participants who participated in youth group at Wave 1 are actually more likely to keep secrets and lie to their parents at Wave 2.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, the pattern of significance does hold for the other moral values items. Youth who participated in youth group at Wave 1 are less likely to disagree that morality is based on God's law, more likely to disagree that morals are relative, and more likely to disagree that it is okay to break moral rules if it works to their advantage. This pattern holds net of the demographic and denominational control variables, whether or not youth attend religious services at Wave 2, and whether or not they have a youth group available at their religious congregation at Wave 2. These questions were not asked during the Wave 1 survey and so it is not possible to include the lagged dependent variables as a control. Nevertheless, it appears likely that youth group participation in the early teenage years increases the likelihood that youth profess stronger morals in later teenage years.

Wave 2 youth are also significantly more likely to report that their faith is important to them if they participated in a youth group during Wave 1. This pattern holds net of all the typical control variables. However, this statistical significance disappears after controlling for the lagged dependent variable of faith importance during Wave 1, indicating a self-selection effect for importance of faith.

<sup>5</sup> A correlation matrix reveals that religious service attendance at Wave 2 is only marginally (.42) correlated with youth group participation at Wave 1, and therefore is unlikely that religious service attendance has a suppression effect on youth group participation.

Table 5: Wave 1 youth group participation collapsed models for four church connection variables and six moral values outcomes

Models <sup>a</sup>	M1	M2	M3	M4	M1	M2	M3	M4
<b>Church Connection</b>								
Youth group W1	-1.524***	-1.329***	-.208	-.002	-1.133***	-1.004***	1.146**	.271**
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	.066	.098	.474	.480	.032	.050	.268	.287
<b>Youth group W1</b>								
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	.754***	.714***	.320***	.248**	-1.450***	-1.329***	-.540***	
<b>Moral Values</b>								
Youth group W1	.056	-.031	-.224*	-.232**	.576	-.020	-.222**	-.202**
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	.000	.006	.011	.038	.000	.010	.016	.052
<b>Youth group W1</b>								
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	-1.115***	-.845***	-.237**		.845***	.607***	.346***	
<b>Youth group W1</b>								
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	.0315	.0895	.1545		.0191	.0379	.0498	
<b>Youth group W1</b>								
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	.675***	.488***	.204**		-1.249***	-1.088***	-.360***	-.003
<b>Youth group W1</b>								
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	.014	.038	.053		.036	.096	.189	.245

\*p < .05; \*\*p < .01; \*\*\*p < .001.

<sup>a</sup>Models: M1 = youth group participation Wave 1; M2 = demographic controls added; M3 = attends religious services and youth group available added; M4 = lagged dependent variable added.

Note: Blank cells occur because question was not asked in Wave 1 telephone survey.

## CONCLUSION

This analysis extends the study of religion literature by examining an underexplored area of youth religiosity—youth group participation. Social science literature demonstrates a link between youth religiosity and positive life outcomes (e.g., Smith and Faris 2002), but less is known about which elements of youth religiosity cause such consistency. Religious service attendance and parental socialization are two elements of youth religiosity that have been explored as potential causal mechanisms connecting youth religiosity to positive life outcomes. A majority of American youth also participate in youth groups at some point during their teenage years, but youth group participation has not been sufficiently explored as an element of youth religiosity that may link to positive outcomes. I explored in this analysis the hypothesis that youth group participation is part of this puzzle, explaining part of the connection between youth religiosity and positive life outcomes.

I analyzed data from the NSYR, employing both cross-sectional and longitudinal analysis. I specified the outcome, or response variables, of interest by drawing on a combination of the intended outcomes specified in the youth ministry literature and the causal mechanisms that Smith (2003) theorizes explain the connection between youth religiosity and positive life outcomes, namely, by operationalizing measures of adult support, connection to church, and moral values. The models that I employ to study the link between youth group participation and these outcomes move the data through a series of models employing additional control variables, first with demographic and denominational controls, then with religious service attendance and youth group availability controls, and then, when available, with the lagged dependent variable for the response variable at Wave 1. The findings from the first set of models show that youth group participation at Wave 2, when youth are ages 16–20, is consistently correlated with the measured outcomes, net of demographic characteristics, faith traditions, availability of a youth group, and religious service attendance.

However, examining the same models using Wave 1 youth group participation changes this story somewhat. A less consistent pattern of association is found, indicating that youth group participation over time may influence some outcomes and not others. Religious service attendance and unmeasured self-selection effects appear to be better explanations for some outcomes, specifically adult support, thinking about important issues, and importance of faith. After controlling for religious service attendance, 16- to 20-year olds who participated in youth group when they were ages 13 to 17, are actually *more likely* to keep secrets from and tell lies to their parents. Despite this mixed pattern, youth group participation does appear to influence the other outcomes, namely, not finding church boring, wishing to attend more frequently, planning to continue attendance when 25 years old, believing that morality is based on God's law, not thinking that morals are relative, and not agreeing that it is ok to break moral rules.

In summary, participating in a youth group appears to have a significant effect on outcomes when we examine only cross-sectional-level data in the later teenage years. This may be due to the decrease in youth group participation over the course of the teenage years, leaving a group of more committed 16- to 20-year-old participants at Wave 2. These youth show a fairly general pattern of youth group effectiveness. However, after examining the response variables employing youth group participation at an earlier point in time, it appears that youth group participation does not have as consistent of an effect. The pattern in this analysis indicates that self-selection into youth group and religious service attendance may at times be better predictors of the response variables than the youth group participation at Wave 1. However, a number of the church connection and moral values variables are more likely to be positively reported by youth who participated in youth group during Wave 1.

Youth group participation should be an essential component of research examining religious socialization outcomes. This analysis provides a first step in understanding what role youth group participation plays in the youth religiosity puzzle. Further research will need to continue

this exploration by studying youth group participation in a more nuanced fashion, by examining frequency of attendance and historical data on attendance (i.e., newcomers as opposed to long-time participants) as related to the specified outcomes, as well as the possibility of interaction effects between youth group participation and friend networks. Learned competencies, or knowledge of faith, will need to be explored as a potential outcome of youth group participation that could link to positive life outcomes, and an analysis exploring this will need to break down youth group participation by traditions in order to isolate the learned competencies taught by different faiths. It will likely also be necessary to examine more localized data in order to adequately address that component of the puzzle, as learned competencies may vary not simply by denomination but also by particular religious congregation teaching styles.

Further research is also needed to explore youth groups more specifically, by expanding youth group study to examine what types of youth groups are particularly effective at creating what types of outcomes. It will also be important to study what perception youth have of their participation in youth groups, as well as how they evaluate the effect it has or has not had in their lives. Future studies can also continue the investigation of the pattern shown here by studying youth group participation over longer periods of time, into early and later adult lives.

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