

Infant mortality rates higher in areas with more Christian fundamentalists, study finds

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Credit: Portland State University

The odds of an infant dying before their first birthday are higher in counties with greater proportions of conservative Protestants, especially fundamentalists, than in counties with more mainline Protestants and Catholics, according to a new Portland State University study.

The study, published online in May in the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, supports the idea that the more insular, anti-institutional culture of fundamentalists can lead to poorer health outcomes.

Ginny Garcia-Alexander, a sociology professor in PSU's College of Liberal Arts and Sciences and the study's lead author, examined the influence of religion on postneonatal infant [mortality rates](#), or the

number of deaths from four weeks through the first year, using data from 1990 through 2010.

Garcia-Alexander said a leading cause of [infant death](#) in the first 28 days is birth defects, which can be heavily influenced by advances in medical knowledge and technology. By contrast, deaths in the next 11 months of life are more often linked to external factors such as poverty, lack of insurance, [social support networks](#) and religion.

Garcia-Alexander said the findings mirror trends seen in adult mortality rates, where areas with more mainline Protestants and Catholics had better health outcomes than areas with more conservative Protestants.

The study's findings build on previous research that says that Catholicism and mainline Protestantism are civically minded, externally oriented faiths that emphasize community-level care. For example, church-affiliated hospitals and social-service providers such as Catholic Charities can bolster the health infrastructure of local communities.

"Both of those have more of a commitment to worldly pursuits," Garcia-Alexander said. "There is a concerted effort to make inroads with the community that they live in and to do good for the community, both for members and nonmembers alike."

On the flip side, conservative Protestants, including fundamentalists and Pentecostals, tend to be more insular and are more likely to reject science and health-related resources.

"This is continuing to show us that there are things that we can do in our communities to improve [health outcomes](#)," Garcia-Alexander said. "And to the extent that people who belong to religious organizations are aware of that, knowing that you are a communicator of health information, that can be a really valuable way to harness the power of the group and the

community to communicate helpful practices for [infant health](#) and [public health interventions](#)."

The study suggests that efforts could be made to implement prenatal and neonatal [health](#) promotion programs within congregations. Even in conservative congregations where scientific knowledge might be viewed with some suspicion, the study said the programs can be promoted as a means of caring for mothers, the unborn and newborns.

More information: Ginny E. Garcia et al. Religion and Infant Mortality in the United States: A Community-Level Investigation of Denominational Variations in Postneonatal Deaths, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* (2018). [DOI: 10.1111/jssr.12487](https://doi.org/10.1111/jssr.12487)

Provided by Portland State University

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