

Does religion protect against suicide?

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Religion does not protect against the risk of suicide in parts of Europe and Asia, as it appears to do in other areas of the world including the United States, suggests a study by Michigan State University sociologist Ning Hsieh. Credit: Michigan State University

Religious participation is linked to lower suicide rates in many parts of the world, including the United States and Russia, but does not protect against the risk of suicide in sections of Europe and Asia, finds new research by a Michigan State University scholar.

In Catholic-dominant Western and Southern

Europe, residents appear to be placing less importance on God and religion and have less confidence in religious institutions. In East Asia, traditional faiths such as Buddhism and Confucianism focus on individual spirituality rather than collective spirituality, which entails social support and moral guidance.

"Secularization and the individual pursuit of spirituality are two important factors that weaken the strength of local religious communities, and this reduces the protective nature of [religious participation](#) against suicide," said MSU sociologist Ning Hsieh, whose findings are published in the *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*.

Suicide is one of the 20 leading causes of death worldwide. While the religion-suicide relationship is hotly contested among researchers, the current study is one of the first to examine that relationship outside Western industrialized countries.

Funded by the National Institutes of Health, the study analyzes data on suicides and religious participation from 1981 to 2007 in 42 countries encompassing seven regions. Religious participation is measured by the percentage of people attending [religious services](#) at least once a month

Hsieh found that religious participation is related to higher [suicide rates](#) in:

- Southern Europe, which includes Croatia, Greece, Italy, Portugal, Slovenia and Spain
- Western Europe, which includes Austria, Belgium, France, Germany and Netherlands.
- East Asia, which includes China, Hong Kong, Korea, Japan and Taiwan.

The regions are classified by geography except for English-speaking countries, which are grouped based on shared cultural values. Those countries are Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States.

Religious participation protected against suicide in many countries in the English-speaking region as well as in Latin America, Eastern Europe and Northern Europe.

Hsieh said the United States and other Western countries outside Europe, including Australia and Canada, have also experienced secularization, albeit more slowly than Western and Southern Europe. The United States in particular remains more religious than most Western societies, she said, in part due to immigration and more decentralized political and educational systems that are inclusive of religious views.

Although [suicide](#) is a global health concern, Hsieh noted, [suicide prevention](#) should consider regional and local norms, values and religious institutional circumstances.

"Without a careful consideration of context, a policy that is effective in one country or region may aggravate [suicide risk](#) in another," she said.

Provided by Michigan State University

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