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LOCAL NEWS

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RELIGION Adults who are religiously unaffiliated

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by the Pew Research Center in May. One in five Virginians identifies as religiously unaffiliated.

More than 35,000 adults were surveyed in the center's 2014 U.S. Religious Landscape Study, following up on the same one conducted in 2007.

In those seven years, those who identified as religiously unaffiliated, as the study calls them, increased by half from just more than 16 percent of the American adult population in 2007. That number also includes people who say they are spiritual but not religious.

Among those who are religiously unaffiliated, about a third describe themselves as atheist or agnostic. This group makes up about 7 percent of all American adults, up from 4 percent in 2007. The others within the group, who said they believed or followed nothing in particular, rose from 12 percent to almost 16 percent of adults in that same time frame.

The majority of Americans — 70.6 percent — identified as Christian in the 2014 survey. That number fell from 78.4 percent since the last survey.

Chuck Harrison, director of missions for the Peninsula Baptist Association, thinks attendance at churches or other faith organizations may be down now because the baby boomers began questioning authority, including the traditional church, in their youth. The worldview, in turn, shaped the way they raised their children, he said.

"If I weren't involved in church, my children aren't going to be in church," said Harrison, part of the baby boomer generation.

In his view, churches that are bucking that trend, maintaining steady membership or growing, especially with millennials, either offer contemporary worship services that are attractive to potential members, or are engaged in the community to address the needs of the people, whether that be poverty or race relations.

The study also noted an increase of those who were part of non-Christian groups, up one percentage point to almost 6 percent of Americans. Members of Judaism make up the largest part of that number.

Behind the numbers

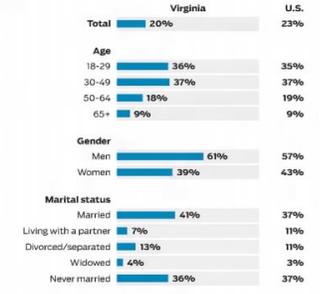
Millennials are helping drive the growth of religiously unaffiliated Americans, with 35 percent of them identifying as such, according to the study, compared to 17 percent of baby boomers and 11 percent of the silent generation, roughly defined as those older than 70.

Over the years, millennials are moving away from affiliations with other organized groups, both religious and political, said Kelly Danner, the interim executive director for the Secular Coalition for America, an advocacy group representing 17 nontheistic organizations.

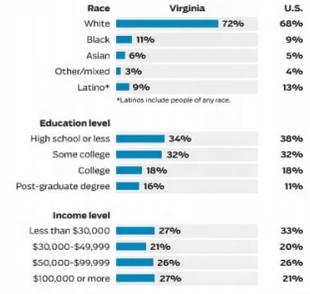
"We've seen growth in all generations," she said.

Paul Prezessa, 49, a Newport News resident who is a member of

Includes those who identify as atheist, agnostic and "nothing in particular"



Source: Pew Research Center 2014 U.S. Religious Landscape Study. Note: Numbers may not equal 100 percent due to rounding.



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Southeastern Virginia Skeptics, thinks millennials are bringing on a "large sweeping social change" to American society.

"I don't think they're necessarily atheists," he said. "They're just not interested in religion in general."

He also thinks that social media helps like-minded people connect with each other in a way that was not possible in his 20s.

"Millennials are more multicultural and tolerant of different things," said Prezessa. "It's driving a lot of social change that 10 to 15 years ago I thought would've never happened."

Nationally, about two-thirds of nonbelievers are white, and there are about six men for every four women who identify as such. Barnes said more women are joining the group and participating in more activities, helping even out the gender ratio.

The Pew study's statistics about Virginia's nonbelievers falls closely in line with trends nationwide. Danner said more people of all races are becoming religiously unaffiliated.

"We're seeing this shift in every category, blacks, Hispanics, they're all moving toward disaffiliating (with) religion," she said.

The study also indicates that 18 percent of Americans, or almost one in five, were raised in a faith tradition and now do not adhere to any faith. For every person not raised in a faith tradition who joins an organized religion as an adult, there are four who leave the religion they grew up with and become religiously unaffiliated.

The increase of people identifying as religiously unaffiliated now may reflect a backlash against the Christian right that rose between the 1980s and the early 2000s, said Maureen Fitzgerald, an associate religion professor at the College of William and Mary.

During the past hundred years, there have been several waves of liberal and conservative movements, with the social upheaval of the 1960s partially a reaction to the

conservative '50s, for example. The current movement may indicate a rejection by millennials of their parents' values in favor of issues such as same-sex marriage and the environment, as well as mainstream religious institutions.

"We've got a long way to go in terms of a long-term liberal shift," Fitzgerald said.

The influence of organized religion tends to be stronger for some groups, such as African-Americans and immigrants, because of the sense of community it offers. Fitzgerald also thinks the response may vary by region. While seeing backslash against the Christian right in the South, it does not appear to elicit the same reaction in northern states where it has less influence.

Those who are religiously unaffiliated use a number of terms for the way they view the world, including:

- Atheist, or someone who doesn't believe in God or a god.
- Agnostic, or someone who thinks it can't be known whether there is a god.
- Skeptic, who approaches the world with a scientific-minded, evidence-based approach.
- Humanist, or someone who emphasizes human values and well-being over a higher power.

Barnes identifies himself as all four.

"Each of these labels means a different thing, and they're not mutually exclusive," he said.

Wanda Brooks, 48, of Franklin, identifies with the term secular humanist. She became a nonbeliever about two years ago after a long time spent asking questions about her faith. She also disagreed with the stance her church took on some social issues, such as opposing gay rights.

"Even though I thought they have rights, I wasn't open about it (in church)," she said.

Those in Hampton Roads looking to connect with nonbelievers have options. Besides the

Southeastern Virginia Skeptics, there is also the Tidewater Atheists Group, which is based in Virginia Beach and has almost 630 members.

"Some people are members of both groups, though each has a slightly different focus."

The skeptics group is aimed at the scientifically minded, while the Tidewater Atheists Group is centered around not believing in God.

Organizers of both groups point out that there are atheists who don't look at the world through a scientific lens, while there are skeptics who are also religious believers.

Groups like the Southeastern Virginia Skeptics and Tidewater Atheists Group provide a place for people like Star LaBranche, 29, of Williamsburg, to come together. She grew up Catholic, but when she "came out" as an atheist in 2012, she wanted a place where she could connect with like-minded people. LaBranche found the skeptics group online, and when she saw it was dormant at that time she decided to take charge and revive the group, which now has more than 560 members.

"We're trying to build a sense of community that people feel like they're losing when people leave the church," said LaBranche, who became the group's organizer in 2012 and served in that role for about three years.

Lyle Sanders joined the Tidewater Atheists Group in 2003, not long after it started. There, he found a place where he could connect with other atheists.

"I felt like I (was) the only atheist in Pat Robertson's backyard, basically," said Sanders, who now serves as the group's organizer.

He's identified as an atheist for 30 years, although for a long time, he was something he didn't tell anyone at first. Now, he'll talk about it if asked, but he tends not to bring it up on his own.

Prezessa said he is able to

connect with fellow nonbelievers by pursuing his other interests, including photography and role-playing games.

"We kind of find each other," Prezessa said.

Despite the growth in numbers, many nonbelievers are still trying to find understanding and acceptance in broader society.

Through Internet dating, LaBranche said she has come across men who want her to accept Christianity or tell her they feel sorry for her, even though she is upfront about being an atheist.

"You're not a person anymore. You're just atheist," she said. "I just see it as part of my identity. There's no reason for it to color my entire existence."

Brooks, who attended a Baptist church before she became a nonbeliever, said she has come estranged from her son, who still attends church, over the issue. LaBranche said she has some church friends when she began identifying as an atheist.

Sanders expressed concern that his nonbelief could be used to discriminate against him. Barnes and Sanders also take issue with the claim that those who don't believe in a higher power don't have morals.

Several members said they aren't out to attack people of faith and only want others to respect their lack of it.

"We don't mind if theists or believers believe what they want, as long as you're not using your beliefs to harm anyone else," Prezessa said.

Barnes thinks the numbers show more people are rejecting organized religion, especially over issues such as same-sex marriage. "We have groups like this all over the country. It's OK to come out this way, to be seen this way. We're normal, just like everyone else," Barnes said.

"We're not perfect, but neither is anyone else."

Castillo can be reached by phone at 757-247-4635.

ASTHMA

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entire fooding for its concerns about the neighborhoods' disproportionate asthma rates. "We want to know specifics if there's a cause, then there's a cure. We'll be better armed to deal with the triggers," said DeBrew.

The group has set up a wedding camp for children with asthma that will include an education component. By the end of the week participants will know how to find air quality indexes on local media sites and at airnow.gov, recognize asthma triggers, such as dust mites and diesel fumes, and explain to others about contributing factors, DeBrew said. A dozen children will attend free; others will pay a small contribution to cover costs.

On Sept. 12, the group will host a play-in at the Hampton Roads Boys & Girls Clubs in conjunction with Southeast Community Day to demonstrate that those with asthma can participate safely in physical activities, said DeBrew. He described it as a mini-health fair and he's hoping that an EPA representative will attend.

There also will be an Asthma Walk. A cancer survivor, DeBrew took the idea from the Relay for Life events that he's participated in. Even if they can't walk the whole way — from Booker T. Washington School to Zion Baptist Church — individuals toward a goal of 1,000 and endorsement from 25 businesses and churches, said Crawford.

The Care Coalition, whose EPA funding ended six months ago, has partnered with the Sierra Club on an air pollution campaign. Kendyl Crawford, conservation program coordinator for the Sierra Club, is coordinating the gathering of petitions to present to Mayor William B. Bryant, the Virginia's secretary of natural resources, for the placement of machines to measure air quality in the Southeast Community. So far it has gathered the support of 700 individuals toward a goal of 1,000 and endorsement from 25 businesses and churches, said Crawford.

distributed hundreds of fliers. A self-described "foot soldier" in improving the quality of life for area residents, Harris is not only involved in the Southeast Asthma Network, spawned by the new EPA grant, but is also working on filling the gap in fresh produce for neighborhood residents by tending a nursery, distributing plants and raised beds to the community, and connecting students with local grocer Joe Brothers at Old Town Market to teach them business basics.

The Southeast Asthma Network is the new public health arm of the Greater Southeast Development Corp., which also oversees the Southeast Care Coalition, said Erica Holloman, project coordinator. Taking a public health approach will empower members of the community, she said.

"They can't leave, and the shipping, the expressways, the coal's not leaving. This will teach the community what they can do to improve their health," she said.

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The new grant and the establishment of the Southeast Asthma Network has also allowed for greater reach, with new partnerships being formed with the American Lung Association, the Virginia Asthma Coalition and MOMS, a parent-led group, as well as CINCH, a children's health group at Eastern Virginia Medical School in Norfolk, and the Peninsula Health District.

"We're not trying to be adversarial. We want to be advocates for a better quality of life," said DeBrew.

Salasky can be reached by phone at 757-247-4784.



Angela Harris, a cancer survivor, shows off a vegetable nursery for the Southeast Community.