

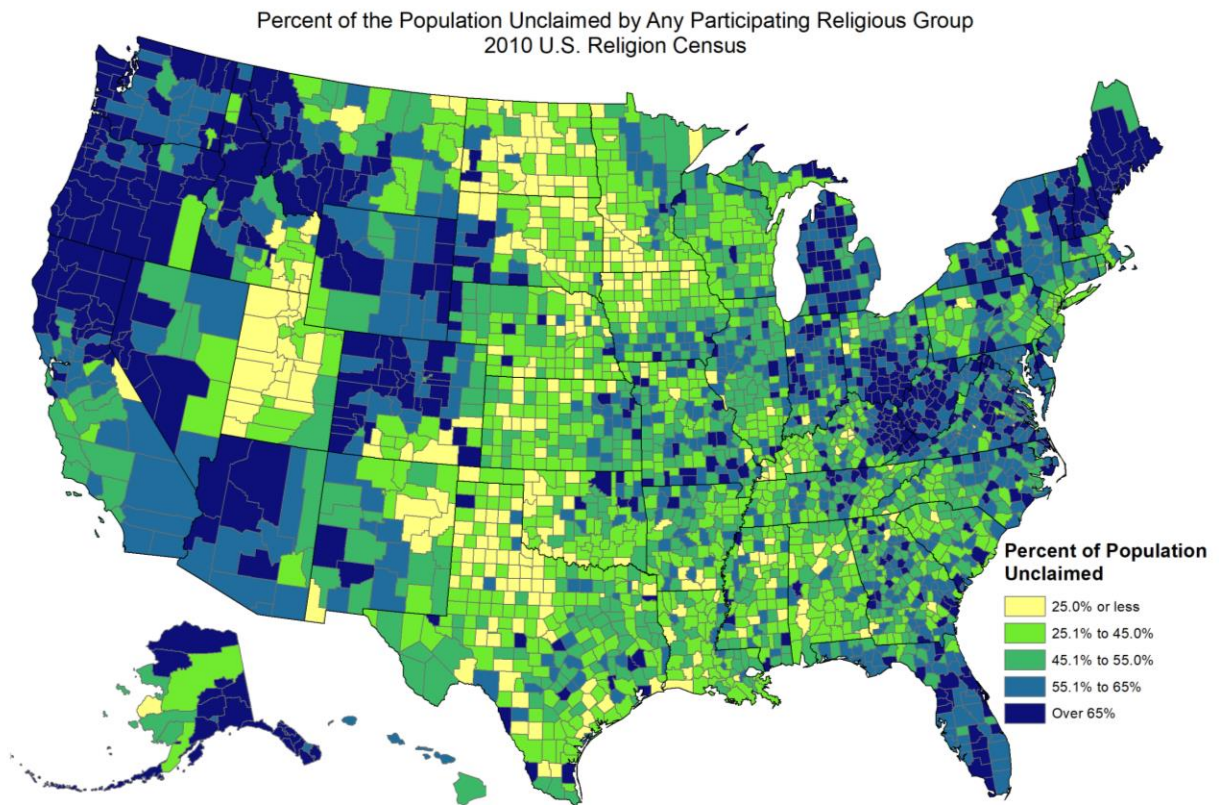
Religion Census Newsletter

April, 2018

Where Are the Unclaimed?

How the religion census can help identify the non-religious

When the topic of religious participation arises, the opposite topic often comes up as well: What about people who aren't religiously involved? Since the 2010 [U.S. Religion Census](#) includes data for 236 different groups, it is possible to compute how many people are claimed in individual counties*. In the map below, that computation was made by summing the adherents** from all the groups, then calculating the percentage in each county who were not claimed by any of those groups.



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2010 U.S. Religion Census: Religious Congregations & Membership Study
Created by Research Services using ESRI ArcMap 10.6

For many decades, the Pacific Northwest has been known as the least claimed part of the country. Other than the Utah corridor, much of the mountain west has also been less religiously involved. And the Southern Appalachia area has been largely unclaimed by religious groups.

But in the 2010 Religion Census, northern New England was revealed as another area with very low religious involvement. Indeed, Maine is now the state with the highest proportion (72.4%) of the population unclaimed by any of the participating groups.

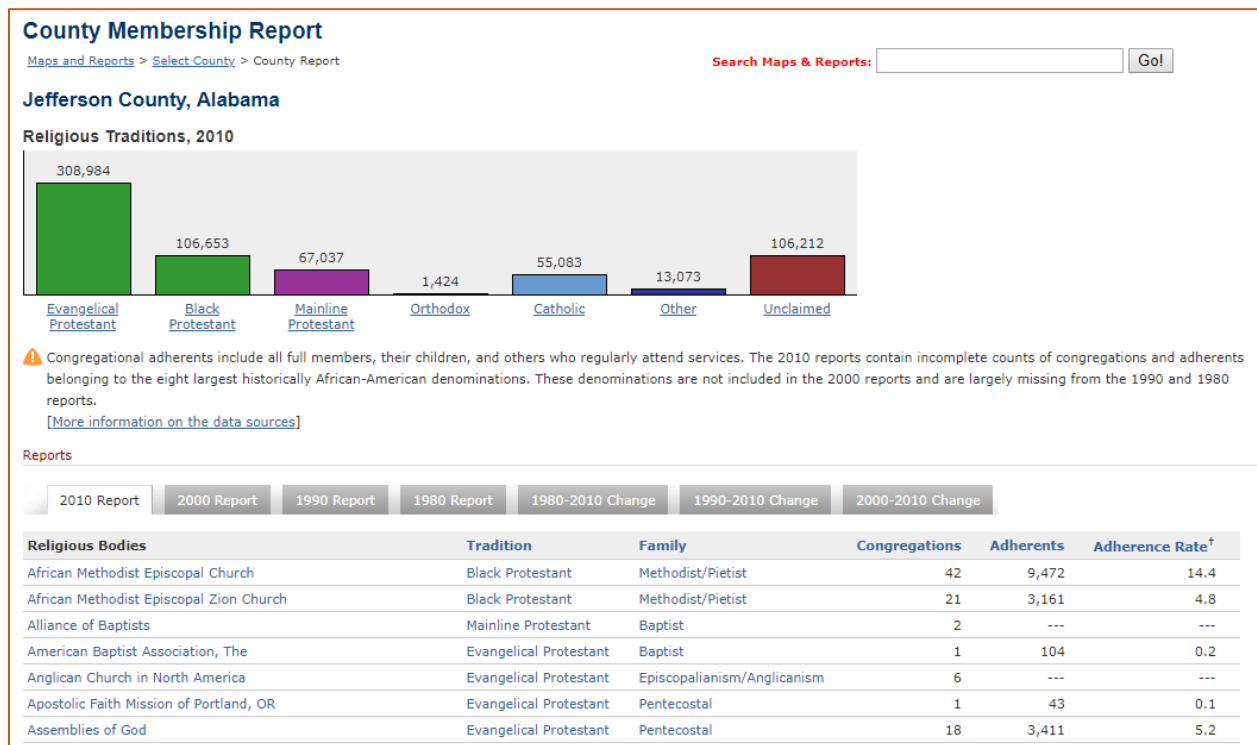
There are limitations to any such study. These ratios accurately reflect the percentage not claimed by any of the 236 groups, but are sometimes a bit higher than the actual percentages of non-affiliated religious people.

For instance, there were 84 groups that could not supply adherent figures for their congregations. Based on the national figures available for these groups, their total number of adherents is probably less than five million, or only about 3% of the total adherents that were reported. While the ratio will vary by location, it is reasonable to believe that the unclaimed figure for each county would rarely be more than 3% lower if every group had supplied adherent figures.***

Further, not every religious group took part in the 2010 census. Based on such figures as were reported to the *Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches: 2010*, these groups may have had as many as 2.5 million adherents that could have been included. If so, that changes the over count to a maximum of 4% for most counties.

This ratio of undercount is small enough that national comparisons such as the one above are strongly indicative of where the unclaimed populations are concentrated.

Many religious leaders, lay or clergy, use this information for their own location. Through our partners at the [Association of Religion Data Archives \(ARDA\)](#), reports for individual counties (or metros, states, or religious jurisdictions) are readily available.



At the bottom of each of these ARDA reports, the total number of people claimed is shown. In the case of Jefferson County, Alabama, that figure is 83.9%. This suggests that 16.1% of the county, or about one in six people, would be considered unclaimed.

For specific counties, it is always appropriate to note whether some locally prominent group was not included in the Religion Census. If so, then adjustments can be made by the local user.

And it is important to recognize that the Religion Census provides a ratio of religious affiliation, not religious belief. National polls strongly indicate that approximately three-fourths of the American population considers itself Christian, with smaller percentages for other faiths. But only about half the population is actually claimed by local churches, masjids, temples, or synagogues. This is the proportion that is shown on our site's maps and the ARDA's reports.

But all these comparisons depend on data supplied by individual groups. This is why we are counting on people like YOU to encourage your own religious group to take part in the 2020 study.

**As in nearly all national research, "counties" is a broad term that includes the District of Columbia, Louisiana's parishes, independent cities in several states, and boroughs and census divisions in Alaska. The more correct phrase is "counties or equivalent," but many reports use the verbal shorthand of "counties."*

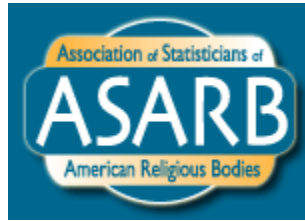
***Adherents: Every participating group is asked to provide an actual count or an estimate of the number of people associated with each local congregation. This number is termed "adherents." Ideally, adherents include all regular participants and/or all those regarding that congregation as their spiritual home. This is done because religious traditions differ in whether they would include children and regular worshippers in their normal membership counts; and some traditions do not even have a membership category.*

For specific adherent definitions for a particular group, see [Appendix A](#) on our [Methods](#) web page. For the general definition used when a group didn't have a specific adherent figure, see page xvi of the [introductory material](#).

****This is based on the following considerations: The total number of adherents could be increased approximately 3%. The total number of adherents would still represent essentially 50% of the total population. Therefore, for any single county to be more than 3% off, it would normally have to have twice the ratio of unreported adherents. This is of course possible, but it would be rare.*

Every decade the US Religion Census tries to include additional religious groups, making the US Religion Census increasingly accurate. The 236 groups that took part in 2010 are listed [online](#). If you know of other faith groups that would like to participate and be included in this census effort, please [send us](#) the group's contact information or contact person.

Meanwhile, over 6,800 people visited our website in March. Several have let us know how valuable this resource is, and how they are looking forward to the 2020 update. Naturally, we hope to include information from your group in the 2020 counts.



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This newsletter is intended for the following audiences:

Groups that participated in the 2010 Religion Census. *The newsletter is sent to the latest contact we have for the supplier of the statistics.*

Groups that are eligible to participate in the upcoming 2020 Religion Census. *The newsletter is sent to the latest contact we have for the supplier of the statistics.*

Members of the sponsoring agency for the Religion Census, the Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies.

Those who requested to receive the newsletter through our website.