



## RELIGIOUS ATTENDANCE OF CHILD WELFARE-INVOLVED CAREGIVERS AND YOUTH

RESEARCH BRIEF | JILL C. SCHREIBER AND THEODORE P. CROSS | June 2012

Research has shown that both caregivers' and children's attendance at religious services are associated with improved outcomes for disadvantaged youth,<sup>1</sup> but few studies have examined the role of religion in child welfare populations and no studies have presented national data on religious participation of children involved in child welfare. Religious practice could be an important factor in helping children cope with the trauma, loss, and anxiety associated with child maltreatment, and religious communities often provide material and social support for caregivers and youth. On the other hand, some religious beliefs may negatively affect youth's well-being (for example a gay youth placed in a conservative Christian foster home). Furthermore, religious dissimilarity in families has been connected to negative outcomes for youth in the general population<sup>2</sup> and foster youth may have religious backgrounds that differ from their foster families. While other aspects of foster home placement such as caregiver race and proximity to the home of origin have been given ample attention, religious attendance among foster youth and their foster care providers remains unexplored. This brief examines religious attendance<sup>3</sup> among youth and caregivers involved in the child welfare system and the relationship between caregiver attendance and youth attendance.

Data in this brief are from the second cohort of the National Study of Child and Adolescent Well-Being (NSCAW 2). NSCAW 2 is a longitudinal study of a nationally representative sample of children involved in child protective service (CPS) investigations from February 2008 through April 2009; it included 5,873 children and youth at the time of the initial sampling. Baseline interviews occurred approximately four months after the CPS investigation. If the child remained in the home following an investigation, the child's parent was interviewed.<sup>4</sup> If the child had been removed from the home and was in foster or kinship care, the foster or kin parent was interviewed. For this analysis, "placements" were divided into 3 groups based on caregiver type: biological parents (n=3,536), kinship foster parents including both formal and informal kinship foster parents (n=1,035), and traditional foster parents (n=1,105).

<sup>1</sup> Office of Health Policy, ASPE. (2009). *Role of Religiosity in the Lives of the Low-Income Population: A Comprehensive Review of the Evidence*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation.

<sup>2</sup> Petts, R. J., & Knoester, C. (2007). Parents' religious heterogeneity and children's well-being. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 46(3), 373-389.

<sup>3</sup> Religious attendance shows commitment to religious practice and is often used to quantify religiosity in social science and health research.

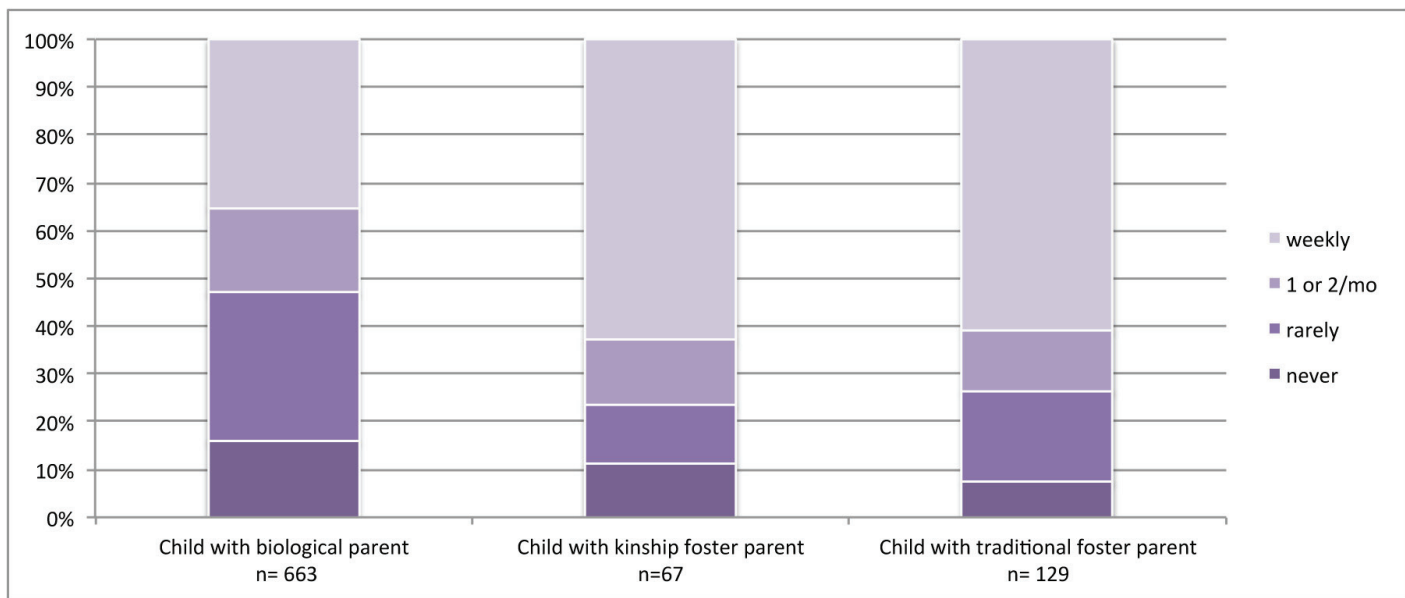
<sup>4</sup> These were primarily biological parents, although a few were adoptive parents.



### Youth Religious Attendance

Youth ages 11 and older were asked about their religious attendance (n=859). There were significant differences in the frequency of the youth's religious attendance by placement type (see Figure 1). Youth placed with kinship or traditional foster parents were more likely to regularly attend religious services (63% of children in kinship foster care and 61% of children in traditional foster care attended weekly), than youth who remained with biological parents (35% attended weekly). These differences in religious attendance among children in different placement types remained even after the effects of other child characteristics known to impact attendance, such as age, race, and gender, were statistically taken into account.

FIGURE 1: YOUTH RELIGIOUS SERVICE ATTENDANCE BY PLACEMENT TYPE

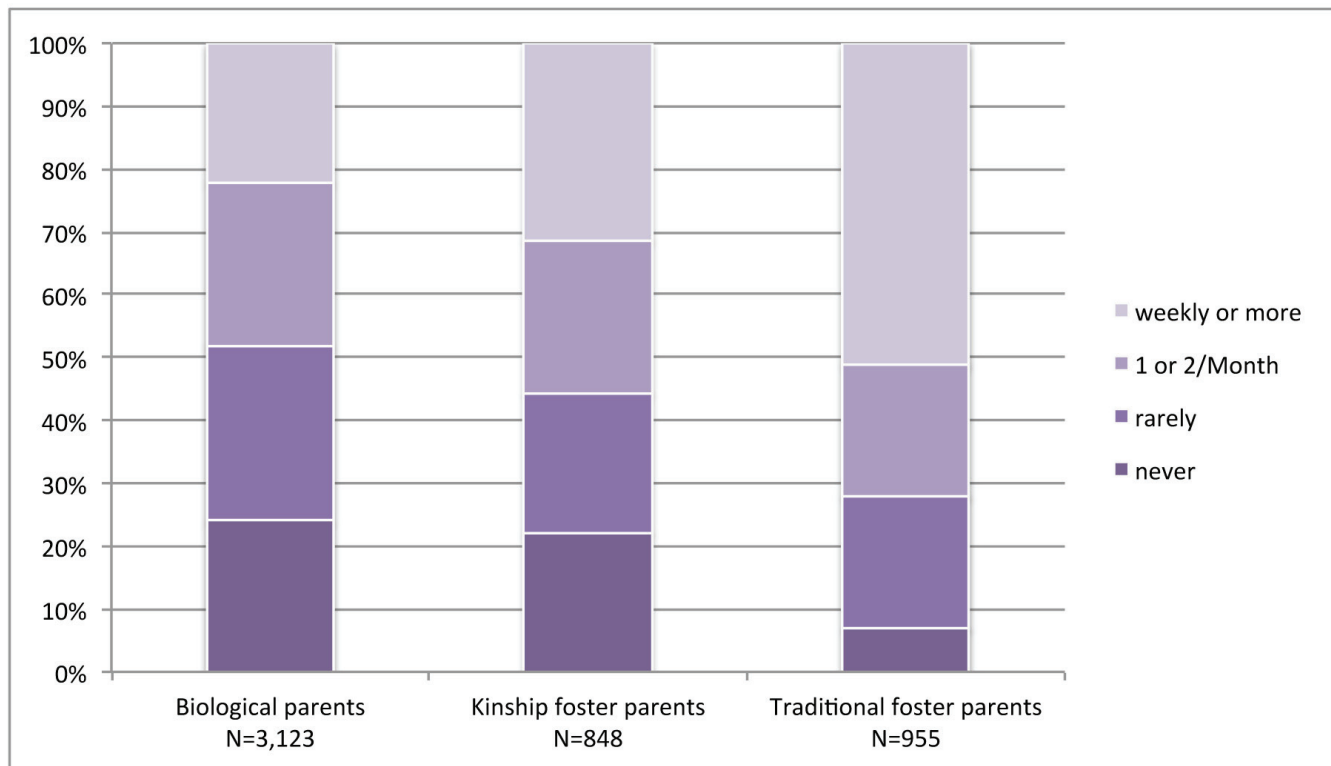




### Caregiver Religious Attendance

Caregivers of children in the NSCAW 2 sample were also asked about how often they attended religious services (n = 4,926). Traditional foster parents were substantially more likely to attend religious services weekly (51%) than kinship foster parents (31%), who were more likely to attend weekly than biological parents (22%). As a comparison, in the United States 39% of adults attend services weekly.<sup>5</sup> Conversely, 24% of biological parents never attended religious services, which is true for 22% of kinship parents but only 7% of traditional foster parents. These differences in religious attendance remained after controlling for caregiver age and race.

FIGURE 2: CAREGIVER RELIGIOUS SERVICE ATTENDANCE BY PLACEMENT TYPE



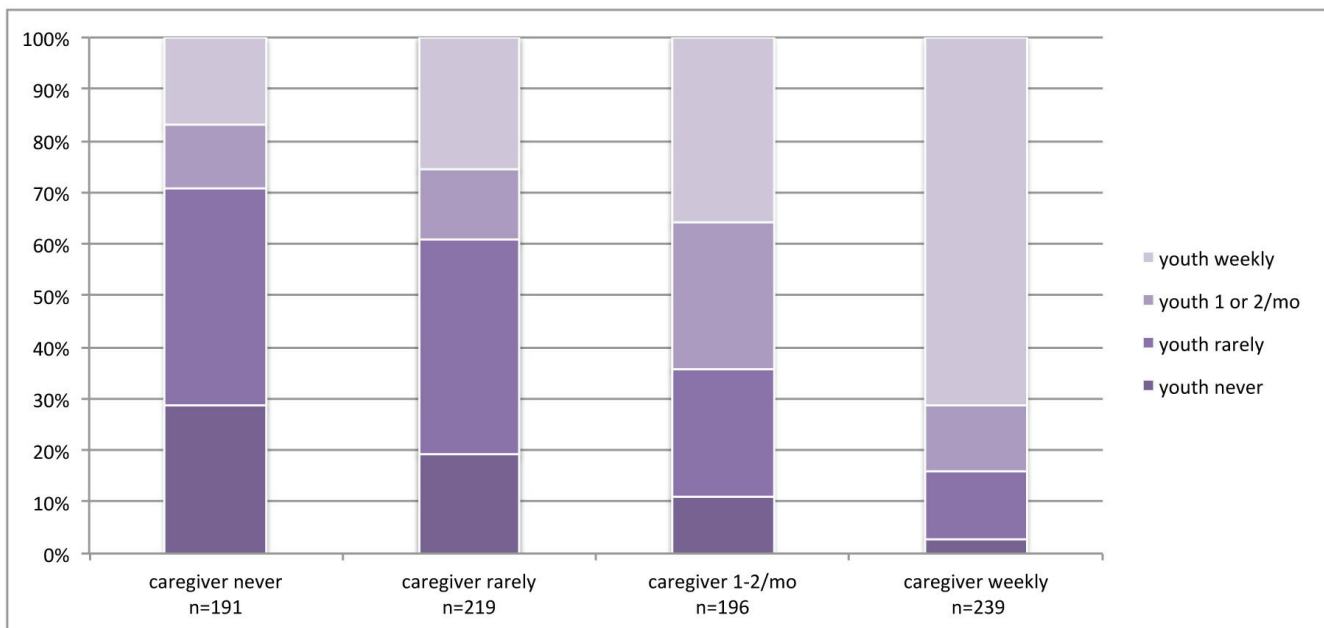
<sup>5</sup> Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life. (2008). *U.S. Religious Landscape Survey: Report 1: Religious Affiliation- Summary of key findings*. Retrieved June 29, 2008 from <http://religions.pewforum.org/reports#>.



### Relationship between Caregiver and Youth Religious Attendance

Youth's religious attendance is strongly correlated with caregiver attendance (see Figure 3). Increased youth attendance was related to two factors, higher caregiver attendance and younger youth age; all other factors, including placement type were not significant predictors of youth attendance. In other words, both biological and foster children were more likely to attend services if their caregivers were going regularly, so it seems likely that the reason that foster youth are attending more often is that foster parents attend more often. This finding suggests that this "religious socialization" occurs quickly after placement for children placed into foster care, since data were collected about four months after the investigation.

**FIGURE 3:** YOUTH RELIGIOUS SERVICE ATTENDANCE BY CAREGIVER RELIGIOUS ATTENDANCE



### Conclusion

Children are more likely to attend religious services when their caregivers attend religious services. This is true in the general population, and it is true for maltreated children who remain with their parents following an investigation and for children in foster care placements. Maltreating parents are less likely to attend religious services than foster parents, so it is likely that in addition to changes in their home and school, children entering foster care will also be experiencing changes in how often they attend religious services. Not enough is known about religious attendance and its meaning among children in substitute care to know if this type of change will have a positive or negative effect

on the well-being of children entering foster care. Additional research that examines the effects of religious attendance on youth well-being outcomes, including youth in foster care, is needed.

### Recommended Citation

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