

Christians and Social Metrics

By Rick Bowers

I recently read another book by Brian McLaren, *Do I Stay Christian?*, and encountered an incredible set of statistics showing states with high church attendance scoring low on social metrics. I had to track down the data and see for myself, and of course, as expected, Brian was spot-on. I actually shifted my attention to the percent of Christians in various states... instead of church attendance. Spoiler alert — the data tends to show that the states with the highest percent of Christians also tend to be ranked toward the bottom in various social metrics (i.e., overall happiness as well as births to unmarried women). Not good.

A Brief Aside

Point 1. Right up front I want to address the statistical voice in my head that's saying "correlation does not mean causation!" Absolutely true. I'm not trying to say Christians are *causing* these low rankings in social metrics. I will say however I would not have been as quick to question the data if high scoring social metrics were associated with Christians.

Point 2. These are not the findings of a scientific study. Instead, this is the first part of an inquiry where we look at the data and start asking some basic questions... like "what's going on here?"

The Data

First, we'll look at how Christian states (states with a high percentage of Christians) score on social metrics. Then we'll look at "nones" and a couple of Christian subgroups.

How do Christians as a Group Fare?

The following table is our first glance at the situation. As it turns out, 86% of the population of Alabama identifies as Christian. That's the highest rate of any state. Nine states are listed in the "top 5" because four states tied for the 5th spot.

Top 5 Most Christian States (4 States Tie for 5th Place)						
State	Percent Christian	Well-Being State Rank Best is 1 Worst is 50	Happiness State Rank Best is 1 Worst is 50	Poverty State Rank Best is 1 Worst is 50	Teen Birth State Rank Best is 1 Worst is 50	Unmarried Birth Mothers State Rank Worst is 50
Alabama	86%	44	43	44 tie	46	46
Louisiana	84%	43	48	49	48	49
Mississippi	83%	50	47	50	50	50
Tennessee	81%	42	44	40	44	37
Arkansas - 5th	79%	49	49	46	49	42 tie
Georgia - 5th	79%	32	35	42	36	40
Oklahoma - 5th	79%	45	46	43	47	36
South Dakota - 5th	79%	30	6	28 tie	37 tie	14



The right five columns under the long red brace show the states ranking in various categories. For each category states are ranked 1 to 50 with 1 being the best while 50 is at the bottom of the heap. The first category, the Well-Being Index, is created by Sharecare Community in partnership with the Boston University School of Public Health. States are assigned an overall score and then ranked from 1 to 50, top to bottom. Another category, the Poverty Rank, is based on data from the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Economic Research Service. The state with the lowest percentage of its population in poverty is assigned #1 — the top. All of the other categories are similar in that the #1 rank is the best. All data sources are identified at the end of this report.

To be blunt, Alabama, the state with the highest percent Christian, doesn’t shine in these rankings. For both Well-Being and Poverty, only six or seven states are worse off. Which means 43 states rank higher. And consider this... I’m guessing most Christians would value mothers giving birth within an intact marriage. Yet Alabama has a higher percentage of out of wedlock births than 45 other states. This is not great news for being the most Christian state in the nation. I would expect better. All of the other top five Christian states don’t fare much better — except for South Dakota which is kind of a mixed bag.

How do “Nones” as a Group Fare?

So, which religious group does rank well in these categories? It turns out, the “Nones.” The Pew Research Center lumps together those identifying as atheist, agnostic, and nothing-in-particular into the nones. Again, there were ties for 5th place so there are a total of seven states in the “top 5.”

Top 5 Most Religiously Unaffiliated States (the "Nones")						
State	Percent Unaffiliated	Well-Being State Rank Best is 1 Worst is 50	Happiness State Rank Best is 1 Worst is 50	Poverty State Rank Best is 1 Worst is 50	Teen Birth State Rank Best is 1 Worst is 50	Unmarried Birth Mothers State Rank Best is 1 Worst is 50
Vermont	37%	22	12	10 tie	3	24
New Hampshire	36%	16	19	1	2	5
Massachusetts - 3rd	32%	1	10	10 tie	1	8
Washington - 3rd	32%	8	13	13	13	4
Alaska - 5th	31%	23	42	14	33	16
Maine - 5th	31%	29	20	20 tie	10	22
Oregon - 5th	31%	14	33	25 tie	9	17

As is obvious from the above table, Vermont, having the highest percentage of nones, does not rank at the top in any of these social metrics. But it’s consistently in the top 25. That can’t be said for the top five Christian states.

How do the Evangelicals as a Group Fare?

Four out of five of the states with the highest percentage of Evangelicals are also in the top overall Christian states so it isn’t a surprise that their state rankings on the social metrics are... not great.

Top 5 Most Evangelical Protestant States

State	Percent Evangelical	Well-Being State Rank Best is 1 Worst is 50	Happiness State Rank Best is 1 Worst is 50	Poverty State Rank Best is 1 Worst is 50	Teen Birth State Rank Best is 1 Worst is 50	Unmarried Birth Mothers State Rank Worst is 50
Tennessee	52%	42	44	40	44	37
Alabama - 2nd	49%	44	43	44 tie	46	46
Kentucky - 2nd	49%	46	45	44 tie	45	33
Oklahoma	47%	45	46	43	47	36
Arkansas	46%	49	49	46	49	42 tie

Interestingly Kentucky is not in the top Christian states but does make it into the list of the top Evangelical states. Unfortunately, its score on the social metrics is about the same as the other top Evangelical states.

How do the Catholics as a Group Fare?

Much better than Christian states in general... more similar to the religious “nones” than to Christians in general.

Top 5 Most Catholic States

State	Percent Catholic	Well-Being State Rank Best is 1 Worst is 50	Happiness State Rank Best is 1 Worst is 50	Poverty State Rank Best is 1 Worst is 50	Teen Birth State Rank Best is 1 Worst is 50	Unmarried Birth Mothers State Rank Worst is 50
Rhode Island	42%	12	21	20 tie	7	38
Massachusetts - 2nd	34%	1	10	10 tie	1	8
New Jersey - 2nd	34%	3	9	10 tie	6	10 tie
New Mexico - 2nd	34%	48	41	48	41	48
Connecticut	33%	7	11	15	4	20 tie

New Mexico is the outlier here. This state is one of the top Catholic states yet ranks in the bottom 20% of the social metrics.

Conclusion

I would be cautious drawing too many conclusions from this data. But from a correlation perspective, the Christian states in general do not fare well in the social metrics. Catholics are mostly an exception. I do wish a strong Christian affiliation was associated with strong social metrics.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2020). *Percent of babies born to unmarried mothers by state*. Retrieved September 9, 2022, from <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/pressroom/sosmap/unmarried/unmarried.htm>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2020). *Teen birth rate by state*. Retrieved July 9, 2022, from <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/pressroom/sosmap/teen-births/teenbirths.htm>

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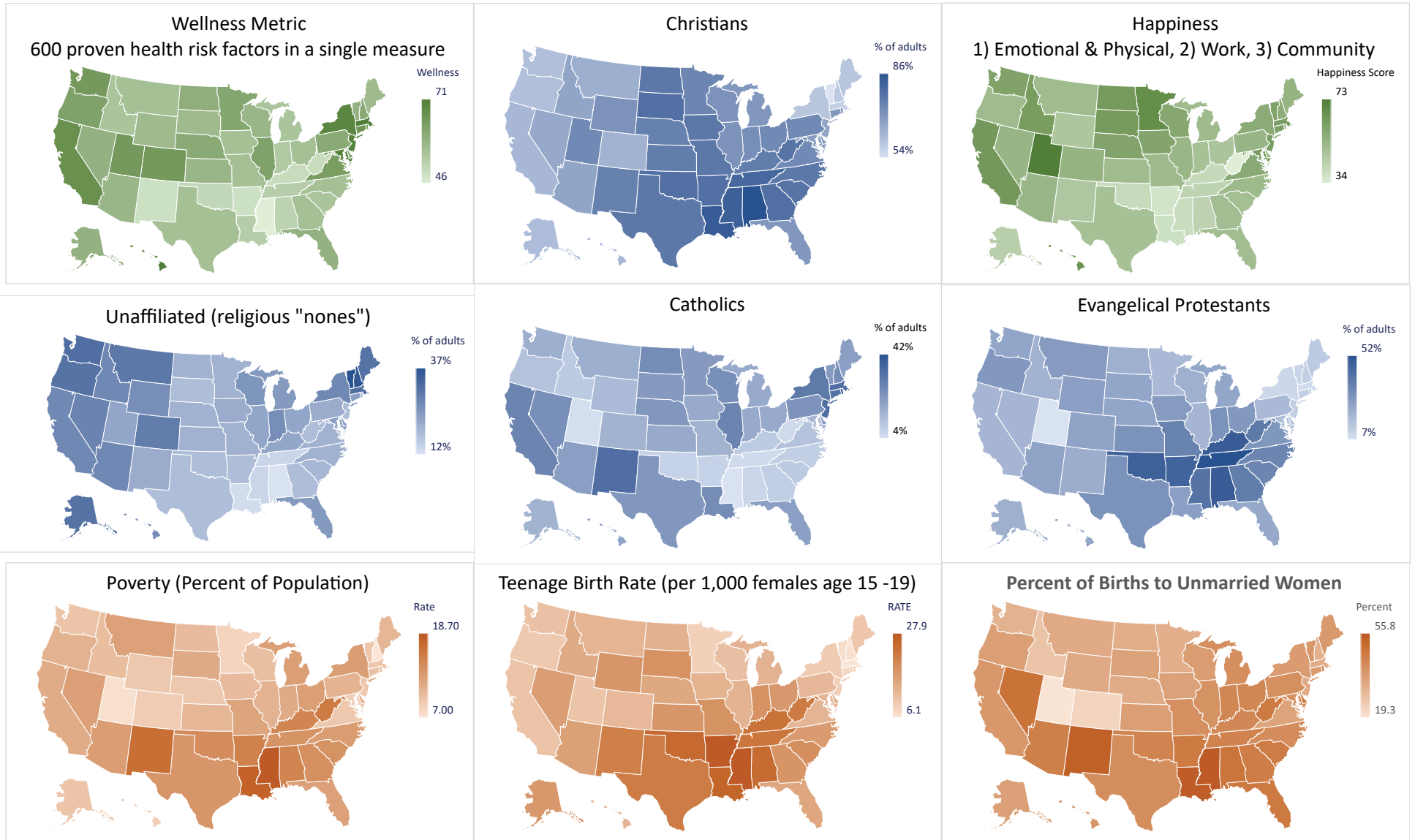
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sharecare. (2020). *Well-being Index*. Retrieved July 9, 2022, from <https://wellbeingindex.sharecare.com/interactive-map/>

U.S. Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service. (2020). *Percent of population in poverty*. Retrieved July 9, 2022, from <https://data.ers.usda.gov/reports.aspx?ID=17826>

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Comparisons by State



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Top Five States

State with the highest percent of Christians

Top 5 Most Christian States (4 States Tie for 5th Place)

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State ranks 46 out of 50 with many unmarried mothers

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Top 5 Most Catholic States

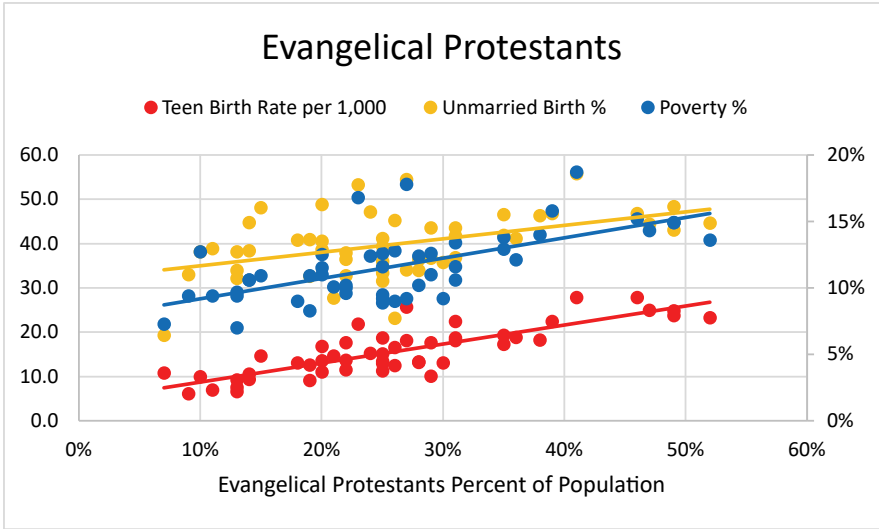
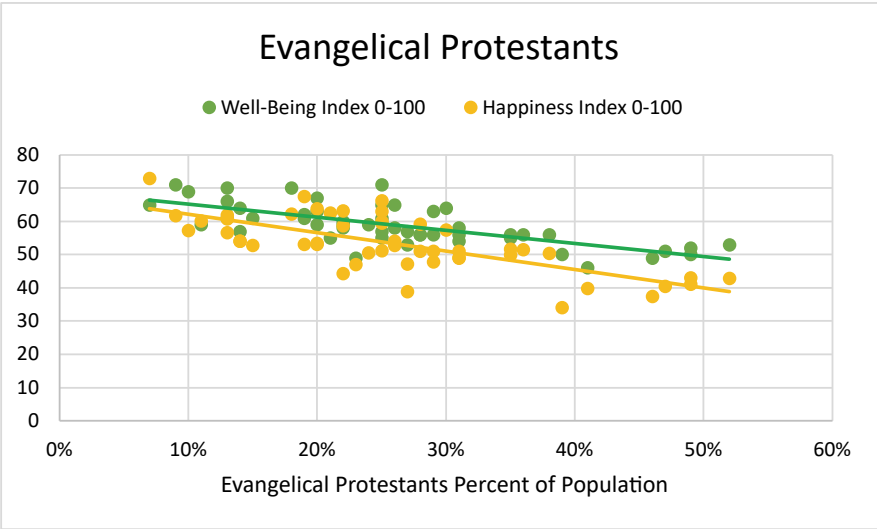
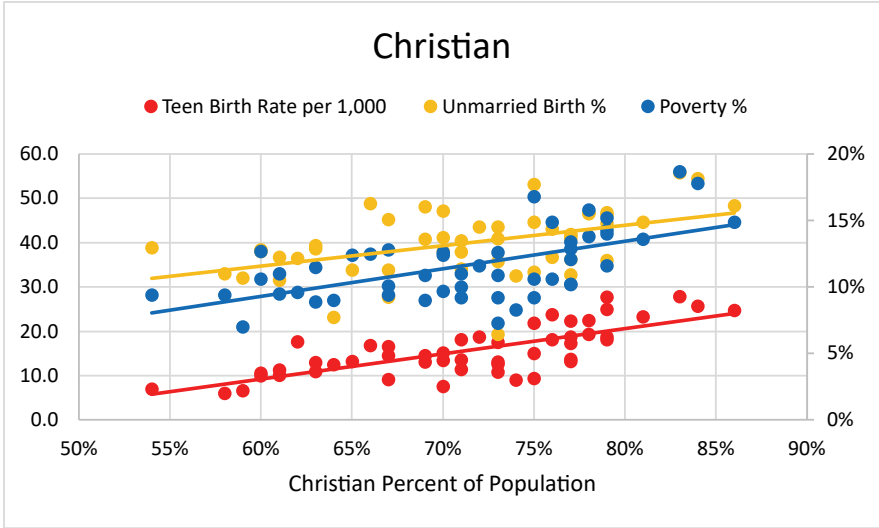
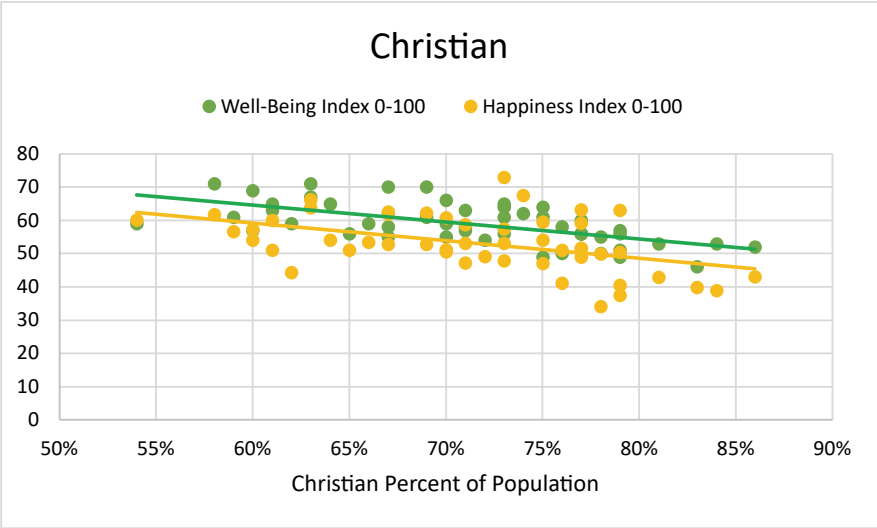
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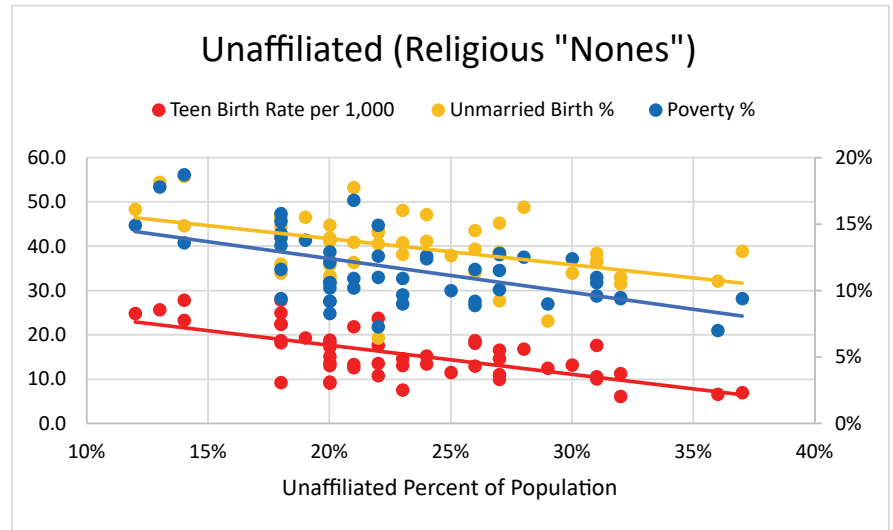
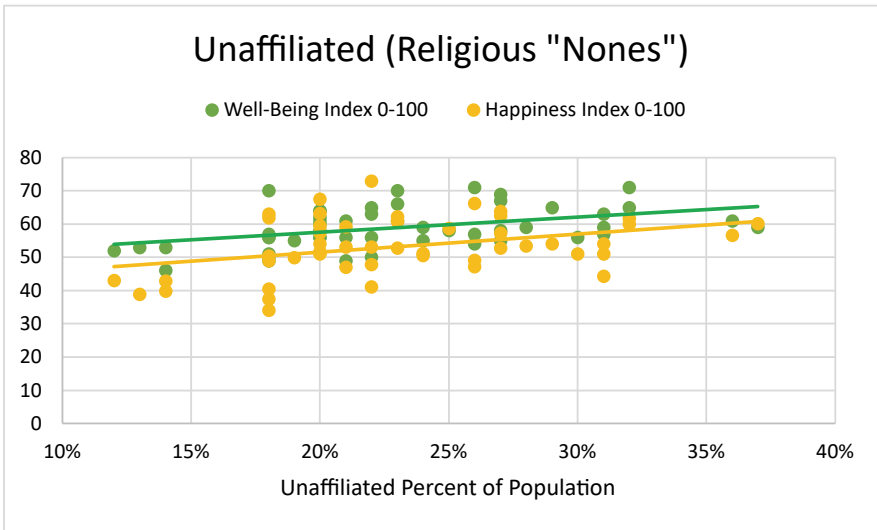
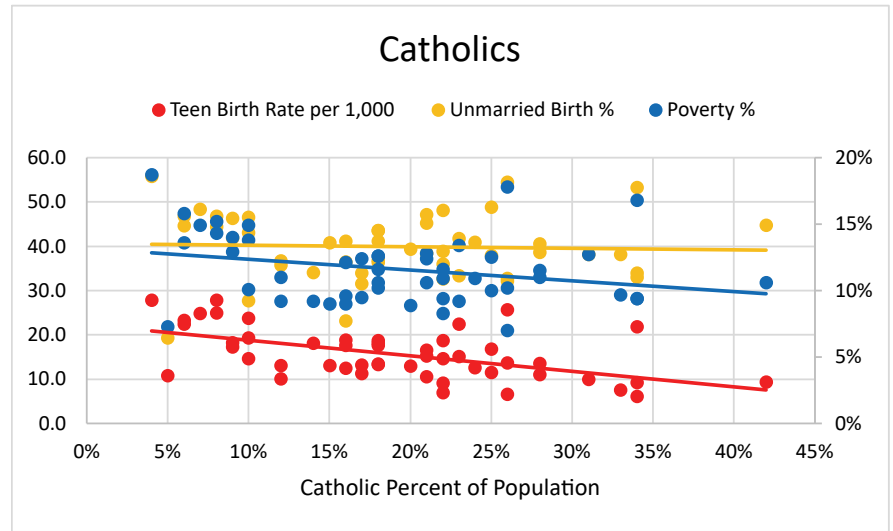
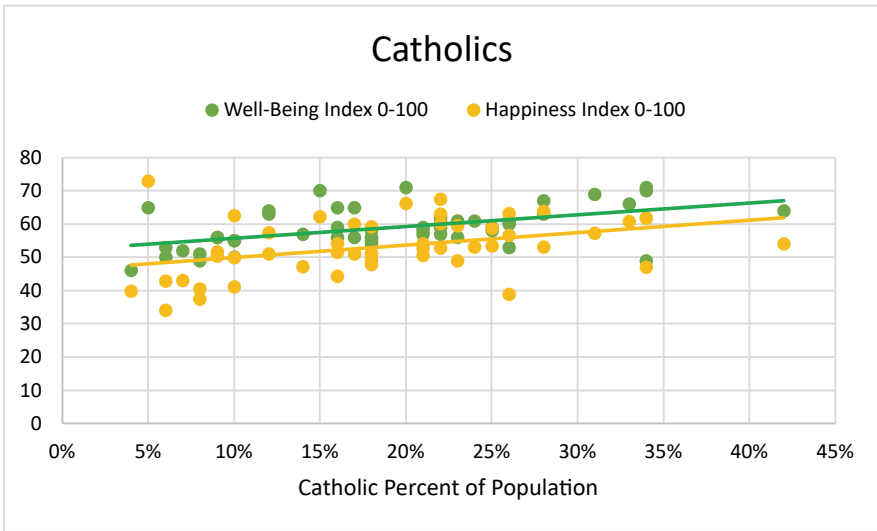
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Denomination vs. Social Metrics





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