

Born Again Christians Just As Likely to Divorce As Are Non-Christians

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(Ventura, CA) - Recent legislation, lawsuits and public demonstrations over the legality of gay marriage are just one battlefield regarding the institution of marriage. A new study released by The Barna Group, of Ventura, California, shows that the likelihood of married adults getting divorced is identical among born again Christians and those who are not born again. The study also cited attitudinal data showing that most Americans reject the notion that divorce is a sin.

Based on interviews with a nationally representative sample of 3614 adults, the Barna survey focused on the three-quarters of adults 18 years of age or older who have been married at least once. The study identified those who had been divorced; the age at which they were divorced; how many divorces they have experienced; and the age at which the born again Christians had accepted Jesus Christ as their savior. Comparing the ages when divorced adults had accepted Christ and when they underwent their divorce, the researchers were able to determine both the impact of one's faith commitment on the resilience of the marriage and whether the divorce occurred before or after their born again commitment. The survey also examined whether people believe that divorce is a sin in situations where adultery is not involved.

More Than One-Third Call It Quits

Among all adults 18 and older, three out of four (73%) have been married and half (51%) are currently married. (That does not include the 3% who are presently separated from their marriage partner.) Among those who have been married, more than one out of every three (35%) have also been divorced. One out of every five adults (18%) who has ever been divorced has been divorced multiple times. That represents 7% of all Americans who have been married.

The average age at which people first dissolve their initial marriage tends to be in the early thirties. Among people in their mid-fifties or older, the median age of their first divorce was 34. Among Baby Boomers, millions more of whom are expected to get a divorce within the coming decade, the median age of the first divorce is currently 31. The Barna Group expects the average age of a first divorce among Boomers to be similar to that of the preceding generations by 2015, as the aging members of that generation sustain divorces later in life.

The research revealed that Boomers continue to push the limits regarding the prevalence of divorce. Whereas just one-third (33%) of the married adults from the preceding two generations had experienced a divorce, almost half of all married Boomers (46%) have already undergone a marital split. This means Boomers are virtually certain to become the first generation for which a majority experienced a divorce.

It appears that the generation following the Boomers will reach similar heights, since more than one-quarter of the married Baby Busters (27%) have already undergone a divorce, despite the fact that the youngest one-fifth of that generation has not even reached the average age of a first marriage.

Christians Have Same Incidence of Divorce

Although many Christian churches attempt to dissuade congregants from getting a divorce, the research confirmed a finding identified by Barna a decade ago (and further confirmed through tracking studies conducted each year since): born again Christians have the same likelihood of divorce as do non-Christians.

Among married born again Christians, 35% have experienced a divorce. That figure is identical to the outcome among married adults who are not born again: 35%.

George Barna noted that one reason why the divorce statistic among non-Born again adults is not higher is that a larger proportion of that group cohabits, effectively side-stepping marriage – and divorce – altogether. “Among born again adults, 80% have been married, compared to just 69% among the non-born again segment. If the non-born again population were to marry at the same rate as the born again group, it is likely that their divorce statistic would be roughly 38% - marginally higher than that among the born again group, but still surprisingly similar in magnitude.”

Barna also noted that he analyzed the data according to the ages at which survey respondents were divorced and the age at which those who were Christian accepted Jesus Christ as their savior. “The data suggest that relatively few divorced Christians experienced their divorce before accepting Christ as their savior,” he explained. “If we eliminate those who became Christians after their divorce, the divorce figure among born again adults drops to 34% - statistically identical to the figure among non-Christians.” The researcher also indicated that a surprising number of Christians experienced divorces both before and after their conversion.

Multiple divorces are also unexpectedly common among born again Christians. Barna’s figures show that nearly one-quarter of the married born agains (23%) get divorced two or more times.

The survey showed that divorce varied somewhat by a person’s denominational affiliation. Catholics were substantially less likely than Protestants to get divorced (25% versus 39%, respectively). Among the largest Protestant groups, those most likely to get divorced were Pentecostals (44%) while Presbyterians had the fewest divorces (28%).

Is Divorce A Sin?

Although Bible scholars and teachers point out that Jesus taught that divorce was a sin unless adultery was involved, few Americans buy that notion. Only one out of every seven adults (15%) strongly agreed with the statement “when a couple gets divorced without one of them having committed adultery, they are committing a sin.” A similar percentage (16%) moderately agreed with the statement. The vast majority – 66% – disagreed with the statement, most of them strongly dismissing the notion.

Faith perspectives made a difference in people’s views on this matter – but not as much as might have expected. Born again adults were twice as likely as non-born agains (24% vs. 10%) to strongly affirm this statement. However, a majority of the born again group (52%) disagreed that divorce without adultery is sin. Three-quarters of all non-born again adults (74%) disagreed with the statement.

A majority of both Protestants (58%) and Catholics (69%) disagreed that divorce without adultery involved in the commission of sin.

There was no difference in point-of-view on this matter across the generational groups. The largest difference among subgroups of the population was between blacks and whites. Just half of the black segment (49%) disagreed with the survey statement compared to seven out of ten white adults (70%). Hispanics were in-between those extremes (64% disagreed.)

No End In Sight

Barna stated that there is no end in sight regarding divorce. "You can understand why atheists and agnostics might have a high rate of divorce, since they are less likely to believe in concepts such as sin, absolute moral truth and judgment. Yet the survey found that the percentage of atheists and agnostics who have been married and divorced is 37% - very similar to the numbers for the born again population. Given the current growth in the number of atheists and agnostics, and that the younger two generations are predisposed to divorce, we do not anticipate a reversal of the present pattern within the next decade."

Research Methods

The data described in this report are based on nationwide telephone interviews conducted by The Barna Group with a random sample of 3614 adults, age 18 or older, between January and August 2004. The maximum margin of sampling error associated with the aggregate sample of adults is ± 1.9 percentage points at the 95% confidence level. The maximum sampling error associated with the 1468 born again Christians interviewed is ± 2.6 percentage points; with the 2147 non-born again adults, ± 2.2 percentage points; with the 1246 Baby Busters, born between 1965 and 1983, ± 2.9 percentage points; with the 1275 Baby Boomers, born between 1946 and 1964, ± 2.9 percentage points; and with the 829 elder adults, born 1945 or earlier, ± 3.5 percentage points.

People in the 48 continental states were eligible to be interviewed and the distribution of those individuals coincided with the geographic dispersion of the U.S. population. The data were subjected to minimal statistical weighting to calibrate the survey base to national demographic proportions. Households selected for inclusion in the telephone sample received multiple callbacks to increase the probability of including a reliable distribution of qualified individuals.

"Born again Christians" were defined in these surveys as people who said they have made "a personal commitment to Jesus Christ that is still important in their life today" and who also indicated they believe that when they die they will go to Heaven because they had confessed their sins and had accepted Jesus Christ as their savior. Respondents were **not** asked to describe themselves as "born again." Being classified as "born again" is not dependent upon church or denominational affiliation or involvement.

The Barna Group, Ltd., and its research division (The Barna Research Group), is an independent cultural analysis and strategic consulting firm located in Ventura, California. Since 1984, it has been conducting and analyzing primary research to understand cultural trends related to values, beliefs, attitudes and behaviors. If you would like to receive free e-mail notification of the release of each new, bi-weekly update on the latest research findings from The Barna Group, you may subscribe to this free service at the Barna web site (www.barna.org).

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