

THE DEMOGRAPHICS OF SPIRITUALITY AND RELIGIOSITY AMONG YOUTH: INTERNATIONAL AND U.S. PATTERNS

Laura H. Lippman and Hugh McIntosh

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OVERVIEW

The idea that humans have a basic need to connect to a transcendent universe or to have transcendent experiences suggests that spiritual beliefs and practices would be equally distributed in the world population. Surveys, however, consistently find wide variation among population groups in the prevalence of particular spiritual beliefs and practices (such as belief in God and frequency of prayer) and in measures of religiosity (such as frequency of religious attendance or religious identity), both within the United States and across countries of the world.

This Research Brief uses data from international and U.S. surveys to describe current patterns of religiosity and spirituality among youth and young adults around the world. It then takes a closer look at these phenomena among young people in the United States. The emergence of several new surveys over the last decade or so allows us to draw a more detailed picture of the international demographics of spirituality and religiosity among youth and young adults, suggesting that spirituality varies widely in this age group around the world and that variation may be linked to historic, cultural and economic differences. A pattern noted is the clear imprint of religion on beliefs in countries with a history of an influential dominant religion, such as Islam or Catholicism, so that young adults from these countries score relatively high on questions of spirituality and religiosity. But as countries develop economically, there is less emphasis on traditional religious values. The findings also corroborate research that spirituality does not go hand-in-hand with religiosity. Many young persons who consider themselves to be “spiritual” do not participate in traditional “religious” practices. The brief also reviews evidence of racial and gender differences in spirituality and religiosity among young adults in the United States.

Spiritual beliefs and practices among youth are important to monitor, since research from developmental science, sociology, and character education has found they are positively related to identity and moral development; purpose and goal attainment; educational achievement and attainment; emotion and attention regulation; positive physical and mental health; life satisfaction and happiness; conflict resolution and social skills; prosocial behaviors, and a successful transition to adulthood.^{2,6,7,13-18,20}

Spirituality can be experienced and expressed in diverse ways, including being or becoming aware of the sacredness of one’s soul, a connection to a unity of life that transcends oneself, and to a divine Creator and/or beings in a spiritual realm such as angels, ancestral spirits or guides. To date, population-level surveys of these spiritual dimensions have been limited, focusing on, for example, belief in God. Thus, our understanding of the diversity of spirituality and spiritual

development is limited. Emerging theory-driven frameworks of spiritual development promise, with time, to expand and refine understanding of spirituality as a multi-faceted dimension of human experience.¹ Religiosity is often seen as overlapping with some aspects of spirituality, such as belief in divinity², but also generally involves following the specific practices of, attending services of, or identifying with the beliefs of a specific religion or religious community.

INTERNATIONAL PATTERNS

Data from four international surveys allow us to explore spirituality and religiosity in a limited way among adolescents and young adults in many regions around the globe: the World Values Survey, the Civic Education study by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA), “The Young Europeans” survey, and the Religion Monitor survey. Although the different measures and samples used do not permit direct comparison, the surveys reveal consistent patterns that help explain the demographics of selected aspects of spirituality and religiosity that have been measured among the world’s youth using nationally representative surveys. It should be noted, however, that these survey items do not adequately capture the diversity of how young people experience and shape their spiritual identities across different cultures, contexts, and religious traditions.

World Values Survey

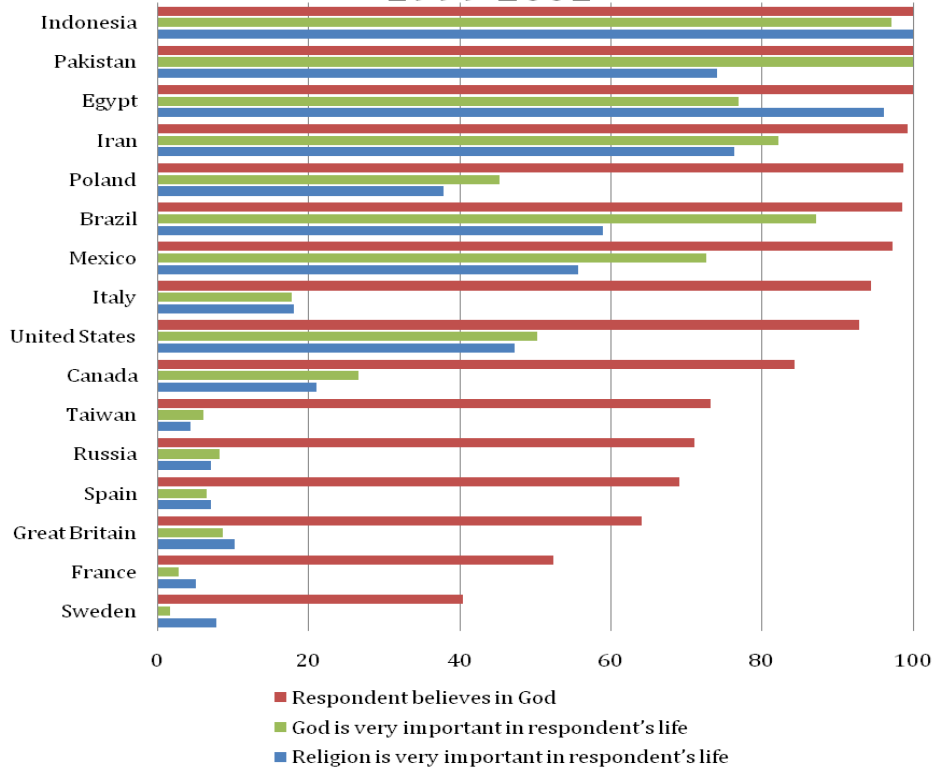
The World Values Survey has been conducted five times between 1981 and 2008, interviewing adults 18 years and older in nationally representative samples around the world about their views on civic values and beliefs.²⁵ The 1999-2001¹ survey included three questions that can be used to explore spirituality and religiosity: “How important is religion in your life?” (very, rather, not very, not at all), do you “believe in God” (yes, no), and “How important is God in your life?” (10-point scale from “not at all” to “very”). Figure 1 and Table 1 display the proportion of young persons responding “very,” “yes,” and “very” to the three questions, respectively, in a sample of 20,000 18-24-year-olds from 41 countries representing the regions of the world. The data show three general patterns of spirituality and religiosity that reflect the influence of different religious, economic, and cultural heritages in these countries:

- **High spirituality and religiosity.** In some countries, 75 percent or more of young adults believe in God and find both God and religion to be important in their lives. In Indonesia, Pakistan, Egypt, and Iran, for example, nearly all young adults said they believe in God. Three-fourths or more of young adults reported that God is important and that religion is important in their lives. Many of these countries have a history of an influential dominant religion (e.g., Islam) and a developing economy.
- **High belief in God, moderate importance of God and religion in life.** High proportions of young adults in other countries also report a belief in God. However, God and religion are only moderately important in their lives. In Poland, Brazil, Mexico, Italy, the US, and Canada, for instance, more than 80 percent of young adults said they believe in God. But, while 18 percent (Italy) to 87 percent (Brazil) reported that God is important in their lives, just 18 percent (Italy) to 59 percent (Brazil) said religion is important. These countries represent a mix of traditional faiths and other

ⁱ A more recent round of data collection was completed in 2005-2008, but the 1999-2001 data set is used because it contains questions on spirituality and religiosity not found in the more recent data set.

- religions, as well as more developed economies.
- **Moderate belief in God, low importance of God and religion in life.** In still other countries, only moderate proportions of young adults believe in God, and the importance of God and religion in their lives is quite low. Examples of these countries are Taiwan, Russia, Spain, Great Britain, France, and Sweden. In these countries, 40-73 percent of young adults reported a belief in God, but neither God nor religion was important to more than about 10 percent. Like the countries described immediately above, this group of countries includes both dominant religious traditions and other religions, as well as more developed economies. Some are located in Europe and have a history of a secular social welfare system (e.g., Sweden, Russia).

Figure 1. Spirituality and Religiosity Among 18-24-Year-Olds in Selected Countries, 1999-2001



Note. For additional countries, see Table 1.

IEA Civic Education Study

While the World Values Survey can report on young adults, the IEA Civic Education Study is one of the few international surveys to have data on adolescent spirituality or religiosity. The survey was given in 1999ⁱⁱ to nationally representative samples totaling 90,000 14-year-old students in 28 countries, most of them in Europe, with a few in South America and the Asia/Pacific region, as well as the United States. Part of the survey asked youth about their participation in civic activities, including “an organization sponsored by a religious group”.²¹ Responses to this item are presented in Table 2.

- **Only a minority of 14-year-olds participate in religious organizations across the world.**
- **The highest participation rates are in the United States (42 percent) and Cyprus (47 percent).**
- **The lowest participation rates (less than 19 percent) are in Northern, Western, and Eastern Europe, especially the latter, except for Germany (20 percent) and Slovenia (30 percent).**
- **Intermediate participation rates (19-30 percent) are found in Southern Europe (except Cyprus), South America, and the Asia/Pacific region.**

European Surveys

According to the two surveys above, the vast majority of young adults in Europe believe in God, but they do not regard God or religion as very important and are unlikely to participate in religious groups in adolescence. “The Young Europeans” survey, administered in 1997 (and not repeated more recently), explores this phenomenon in a sample of 9,400 respondents 15 to 24 years old in 15 countries. Respondents were asked to choose a category that best corresponds to their personal spiritual and religious beliefs: “I believe and I practice,” “I believe but I don’t practice,” “I practice religion but I don’t really believe,” or one of five other responses.⁸ The results are presented in Table 3.

- **Young Europeans show low religious involvement but moderate adherence to beliefs.** Forty-three percent of young Europeans said they have spiritual and religious beliefs but do not practice a religion. Such nonpracticing believers were more common than practicing believers in all countries except Ireland, ranging from 26 percent in the Netherlands to 56 percent in Spain. The second highest category was practicing believer, chosen by 19 percent of EU youth.
- **Nonpracticing belief in young Europeans is linked to age.** Older youth (20-24 years) were more likely to be nonpracticing believers, whereas younger youth (15-19 years) were more likely to be practicing nonbelievers (European Commission, 1997).

More recent data on European countries are available from the Religion Monitor survey, conducted in 2007 by the Bertelsmann Foundation among 21,000 persons in 21 countries. The Religion Monitor found that 71 percent of European young adults (age 18-29) reported believing in God or something divine (41 percent strongly, 30 percent somewhat). Although 72 percent of young adults reported being religious, only 18 percent said they were “highly” religious whereas

ⁱⁱ The IEA’s 2009 International Civic and Citizenship Study, which builds on the earlier Civic Education Study, did not include the US or participation in an organization sponsored by a religious group and thus is not reported here.

more than half (54 percent) said they were “somewhat” religious.³ While comparisons across time cannot be made given the different surveys and samples in each study, the Religion Monitor reports levels of spirituality and religiosity that are higher than those found on average for European countries in the World Values or the Young Europeans surveys.

Summary of International Patterns

This quick tour of data from around the world reveals several patterns of spirituality and religiosity among youth and young adults around the world. One is the relationship between a country’s level of economic development and the spirituality and religiosity of its population. As countries develop economically, there is less emphasis on dominant religious traditions and values and more emphasis placed on secular institutions, as well as educational and economic accomplishment, powered by the need for trained workforces in industrialized societies.¹⁰

Another pattern is the clear imprint of religion on beliefs in countries with a history of an influential religious tradition, such as Islam or Catholicism, so that young adults from these countries score relatively high on questions of spirituality and religiosity. Likewise, there is an imprint of the secular traditions of communist, socialist, and welfare states, reflected in the low importance given to religion and God in countries of the former Soviet Union, where religion was suppressed for so long and atheism was espoused by the state and widely adopted by citizens, and in the Nordic welfare states. In addition, formerly Confucian societies (Japan, China) have a tradition of secular bureaucratic authority that is reflected in the low importance attached to God and religion in those countries.¹⁰

U.S. PATTERNS

Three U.S. surveys contain measures that allow us to explore spirituality and religiosity in more detail among American adolescents and young adults: National Study of Youth and Religion, Spirituality in Higher Education, and Monitoring the Future. Two of the studies are longitudinal, enabling us to explore changes in spirituality and religiosity among youth over time, while Monitoring the Future provides trend data.

National Study of Youth and Religion

The National Study of Youth and Religion provides a rich source of data on the spiritual lives of adolescents.^{5,19} Wave 1 of the study involved a nationally representative telephone survey of households containing at least one teenager age 13-17 in 2002-2003 and generated a sample of 3,290 youth. Some 2,530 of these youth were re-surveyed during Wave 2 in 2005. Although the surveys contain a vast array of items on spirituality, we describe items similar to the questions in the international surveys.

- **U.S. adolescents age 13-17 express a strong belief in God.** Wave 1 of the NYSR found that more than four out of five (84 percent) adolescents believe in the existence of God.
- **Religion plays a very strong role in the lives of U.S. adolescents age 13-17.** When asked about the importance of their religious faith in shaping daily life and major life decisions, about half of adolescents said that their faith was very or extremely important.

- **Belief in God and in the importance of religion declines somewhat as adolescents age.** At Wave 2 of the study, when they were ages 18-23, 78 percent of youth in the longitudinal sample said they believe in God (vs. 84 percent at Wave 1), and 44 percent said that their religious faith was very or extremely important in shaping their daily lives (vs. 49 percent at Wave 1).

Spirituality in Higher Education

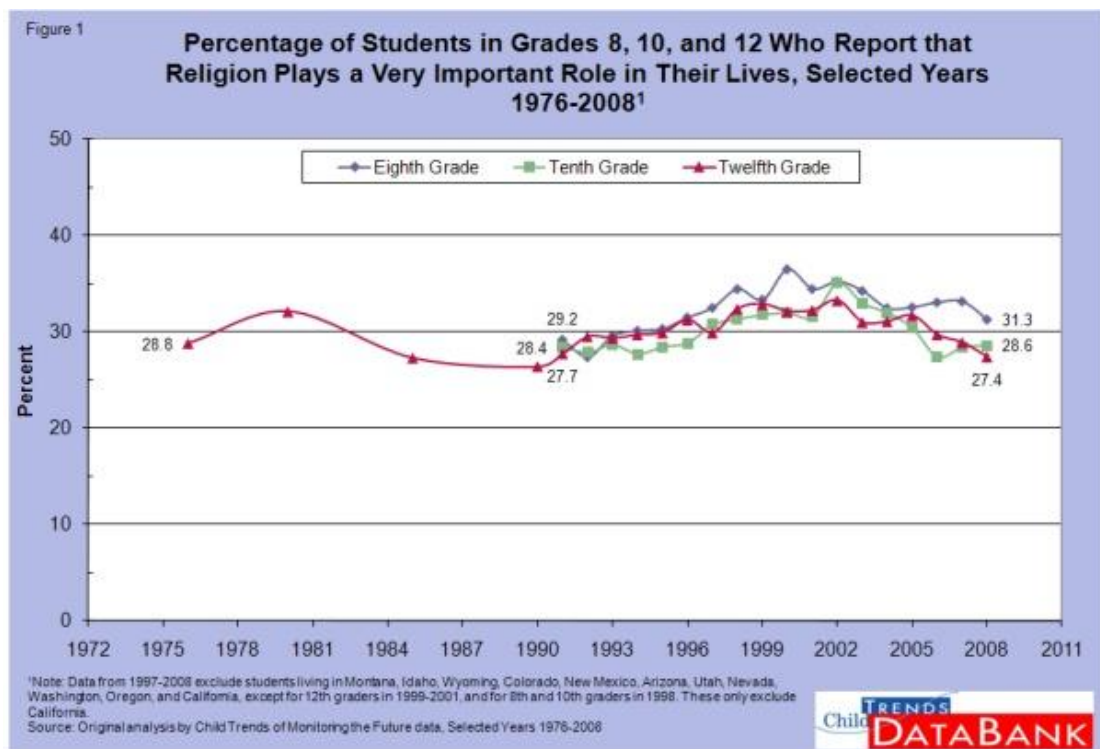
Spirituality in Higher Education: A National Study of College Students' Search for Meaning and Purpose sheds light on the spirituality of American college students. The project involves a pilot study conducted in 2000-2003 with a sample of 3,680 students at 46 diverse colleges and universities across the country, a survey in fall 2004 of 112,232 entering freshman at 236 colleges and universities throughout the nation, and a follow-up survey of 14,527 of those students in spring 2007, when they were juniors.²²⁻²⁴

- **College freshmen report a strong belief in God.** In the 2004 survey, 79 percent of college students reported that they believe in God.
- **Religion and spirituality play important roles in the lives of many college freshmen.** Sixty-nine percent of college freshmen reported that “my spiritual/religious beliefs provide me with strength, support, and guidance,” 69 percent pray, and 40 percent said they place high value on “seeking to follow religious teachings in my everyday life.”
- **Belief in God, religiosity, and some measures of spirituality decline slightly during the college years, but other measures of spirituality increase.** The 2007 follow-up survey in a longitudinal sample of students who were then juniors found slight decreases in the proportion of students who believe in God (from 77 percent to 74 percent), pray (from 69 percent to 67 percent), and attend religious services (from 44 percent in high school to 25 percent in college). But it also found increases in the proportion of students who state that “most people can grow spiritually without being religious (from 63 percent to 75 percent), and place high value on “integrating spirituality in my life” (from 42 percent to 50 percent).
- **College women are more spiritual and committed to religion than college men.** Results from the pilot study in 2000-2003 found that 26 percent of women but only 16 percent of men scored high on a spirituality scale. Also, 37 percent of women scored high on a scale of religious commitment, whereas only 25 percent of men had high scores on the scale.

Monitoring the Future Study

Trend data on the importance of religion among U.S. adolescents can be obtained from Monitoring the Future, an annual study using nationally representative samples of nearly 50,000 students per year in grades 8, 10, and 12. The study has been monitoring 12th graders since 1975 and 8th and 10th graders since 1991. Many of the survey items are geared toward understanding teenage drug and alcohol use and risk-taking behaviors; there is, however, a question asking students to indicate how important religion is in their lives, with response categories of “Not important,” “A little important,” “Pretty important,” and “Very important.”^{4,11-12}

- **Religion has gradually become somewhat more important in the lives of adolescents in recent years.** In 1991-1995, the average annual proportion of students reporting that religion plays a very important role in their lives was 29 percent for 8th graders, 28 percent for 10th graders, and 29 percent for 12th graders. By 2003-2007, the proportion had increased to 33 percent for 8th graders, 30 percent for 10th graders, and 31 percent for 12th graders.
- **Religion is slightly more important among 8th graders than among 10th graders.** Over the 17 years from 1991 to 2007, the average annual proportion of students who said that religion plays a very important role in their lives was 32 percent among 8th graders but only 30 percent among 10th graders. In 2003-2007 (the five most recent years for which data are available), the proportion was 33 percent among 8th graders and 30 percent among 10th graders. (Comparable figures for 12th graders were 31 percent in both time periods.)



- **Religion is more important among female adolescents than among male adolescents.** In 2007, 60 percent of 12th-grade girls surveyed reported that religion is “pretty” important or “very” important in their lives, compared with 52 percent of 12th-grade boys.
- **Religion is more important among black high school students than among white high school students.** In 2007, black 12th graders were more than twice as likely as whites (54 percent compared with 24 percent) to report that religion played a very important role in their lives.

Summary of U.S. Patterns

To some degree, the patterns of spirituality and religiosity among youth and young adults in the United States resemble those of developing countries in the Southern Hemisphere where the prevalence of belief in God rises above 90 percent. But in the US, less importance is given to religion and God than in developing countries. In addition, the US appears to be unique among wealthy countries in the strength of young people's belief in God, in their participation in religious organizations, and in the importance they give to religion and spirituality in their lives. Black and female high school students place even higher importance on religion in their lives than do whites and males. Finally, although longitudinal studies show slight declines in spirituality and religiosity during adolescence, some American youth seem to find renewed interest in exploring spirituality as they make their way through college.

This review of international and national representative data on spirituality among youth, while limited by a lack of comparability of the various data sources and definitions, suggests consistent patterns that beg for continued monitoring and verification. With further conceptual and measurement work, eventually this important domain of youth well-being can be as well measured, and thus as valued, as other domains of well-being such as physical health; cognitive development; and social and emotional development.

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Table 1 Spirituality of 18- to 24-Year-Olds, 2000 World Values Survey

	Importance of Religion in Respondent's Life	Does Respondent Believe in God?	Importance of God in Respondent's Life
	Very	Yes	Very
North America			
Canada	21.0	84.3	26.6
United States	47.2	92.9	50.3
Latin America			
Argentina	35.2	95.1	46.9
Mexico	55.6	97.2	72.6
Brazil	58.9	98.5	87.2
Dominican Republic	51.5	94.7	77.2
Uruguay	10.9	76.3	29.1
Western Europe			
Great Britain	10.2	64.0	8.6
France	5.1	52.4	2.8
Italy	18.0	94.4	17.7
Finland	7.8	70.1	6.4
Norway	9.2	53.3	8.5
Spain	7.1	69.0	6.5
Sweden	7.8	40.4	1.6
Switzerland	11.3	68.1	12.6
Germany	5.6	54.4	4.1
Eastern Europe			
Bulgaria	15.6	62.7	9.2
Croatia	14.9	87.9	22.5
Estonia	2.4	40.9	3.9
Georgia	58.6	96.4	43.9
Lithuania	7.9	78.0	17.7
Poland	37.8	98.7	45.2
Russia	7.1	71.1	8.2
Serbia	27.6	82.9	18.2
Ukraine	15.8	84.7	19.6

Table 1 (continued)

	Importance of Religion in Respondent's Life	Does Respondent Believe in God?	Importance of God in Respondent's Life
	Very	Yes	Very
Africa			
Egypt	96.1	100.0	76.9
South Africa	62.1	98.7	69.3
Nigeria	93.4	99.7	84.4
Asia/Pacific			
Australia	14.8	74.3	11.2
China	1.3	–	–
Indonesia	100.0	100.0	97.1
Japan	0.0	50.0	1.8
Philippines	86.9	99.5	86.8
South Korea	22.0	–	14.1
Taiwan	4.3	73.2	6.1
Middle East			
Azerbaijan	38.2	98.6	63.4
Iran	76.3	99.3	82.2
Turkey	76.1	97.4	75.2
South Asia			
Bangladesh	87.1	98.8	91.7
India	52.9	94.3	0.0*
Pakistan	74.0	100.0	100.0

Note. Dashes indicate there was no response to that question.

* = 91 percent responded affirmatively to the next highest category.

Source. Original analysis by Child Trends of World Values Survey data, 1999-2001.

Table 2 Religious Group Participation, IEA Civic Education: 1999

	Participated in Religious Group	Did Not Participate in Religious Group
North America		
United States	41.9	51.7
South America	27.9 avg.	52.6 avg.
Chile *	30.3	53.9
Colombia *	25.5	51.2
Western Europe	14.4 avg.	74.3 avg.
Belgium *	9.0	72.7
England	13.2	86.0
Germany	20.1	65.4
Switzerland	15.2	73.1
Eastern Europe	10.3 avg.	82.7 avg.
Bulgaria	5.5	90.2
Czech republic	8.1	89.8
Estonia	9.3	82.7
Hungary	15.2	83.3
Lithuania	4.4	80.6
Latvia	4.9	85.8
Poland	10.0	84.7
Romania	12.0	80.8
Russian Federation	2.0	84.3
Slovak Republic	12.6	83.4
Slovenia	29.7	64.5
Northern Europe	13.1 avg.	73.3 avg.
Denmark	6.3	81.4
Finland	11.0	82.3
Norway *	16.9	67.2
Sweden *	18.1	62.3
Southern Europe	27.6 avg.	64.1 avg.
Cyprus	47.1	43.8
Greece	21.4	76.6
Italy	20.3	75.7
Portugal *	21.6	60.2

Table 2 (continued)

	Participated in Religious Group	Did not Participate in Religious Group
Asia / Pacific	19.9 avg.	71.5 avg.
Australia	20.8	69.6
Hong Kong	19.1	73.4

Note. * These countries had a nonresponse rate of more than 15 percent for the religious organization variable.

Source. IEA Civic Education Dataset, 1999.

Table 3 Religious Involvement, Eurobarometer

	Practicing Believer	Non-practicing Believer	Practicing non-Believer	Belongs to Spiritual Group	Wants to Belong to Religious Group	Agnostic	Atheist	Don't know
Western Europe								
Austria	26.1	38.0	18.0	1.0	0.6	2.7	4.9	8.8
Belgium	8.9	33.8	23.4	0.5	0.8	11.7	14.3	6.1
France	8.6	44.2	3.8	1.1	2.1	13.9	23.4	3.0
Germany	17.2	32.9	12.2	0.5	0.9	7.5	22.2	6.4
Fmr. W. Ger.	19.6	38.4	13.8	0.5	0.8	6.3	14.2	6.3
Fmr. E. Ger.	7.3	9.8	5.4	0.5	1.3	12.4	55.6	7.2
Ireland	48.9	32.5	7.2	0.4	0.0	3.4	4.8	2.5
Luxembourg	13.9	35.1	15.8	0.0	0.9	9.5	21.1	3.0
Netherlands	15.1	25.5	5.2	2.3	0.8	24.7	22.7	3.7
United Kingdom	8.2	42.6	1.8	0.6	0.2	20.2	18.5	7.1
Northern Europe								
Denmark	5.1	43.4	8.7	1.6	1.0	15.3	19.3	5.7
Finland	14.1	47.6	5.2	0.6	1.5	16.1	10.4	4.5
Sweden	7.5	35.3	12.2	0.5	0.7	22.8	16.4	4.5
Southern Europe								
Greece	41.9	52.8	1.5	0.0	0.7	0.7	1.9	0.5
Italy	41.0	46.3	2.3	0.4	1.7	4.7	2.9	0.7
Portugal	32.6	48.9	2.0	0.6	1.7	7.9	6.2	0.1
Spain	16.5	56.2	2.6	0.0	0.1	11.5	11.1	2.0
EU Total	19.4	42.6	5.6	0.6	1.0	11.6	15.1	3.9

Source: Table reproduction from *The Young Europeans, Eurobarometer 47.2, 1997*