




Thoughts on the Afterlife Among U.S. Adults 50+

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Thoughts on the Afterlife Among U.S. Adults 50+

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Survey conducted by
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

PURPOSE AND METHODOLOGY 1
KEY FINDINGS 2

Purpose and Methodology

The purpose of this study was to understand what Americans age 50 and older think about the afterlife, including what they believe about life after death, heaven and hell, religion and spirituality, and spirits and ghosts. The information was gathered to inform an upcoming article for *AARP The Magazine*. Results provide some insight into how the 50+ population envisions life after death for themselves as well as for others.

Questions were included on an omnibus survey June 29-July 10, 2006. The omnibus survey, conducted by International Communications Research (ICR), is a bi-weekly national telephone survey of U.S. households. ICR conducted a stratified, random-digit-dialing sample of telephone households. The survey included demographic and lifestyle questions, as well as questions about the afterlife and other topics.

The survey was conducted with 1,011 respondents age 50 and older and all responses were subsequently weighted to be nationally representative of the U.S. population 50+, balanced by key demographics. The margin of error is +/- 3.08%.

Key Findings

- Three-quarters (73%) of respondents 50+ agree strongly or somewhat with the statement “I believe in life after death.” Women are more likely to believe in the afterlife (80%) compared to men (64%).
- Almost all respondents 50+ believe in God (94%). Respondents who characterize themselves as “somewhat religious” are almost as likely to say they believe in God (97%) as those who consider themselves “very religious” (100%).
- Approximately one-half (53%) of respondents 50+ believe that spirits or ghosts exist. Two-fifths of respondents (38%) say that they have felt the presence, or seen something, that they thought may have been a spirit or a ghost. Those more likely to say they have had this experience include women (45%), younger (50-59) respondents (42%), those who label themselves “very” religious (43%), and respondents from the West (50%).
- While almost nine in ten respondents believe in heaven (86%), fewer respondents believe in hell (70%).
- Almost nine out of ten respondents (88%) who believe in heaven think that they personally will get into heaven. Women are more likely to say they will get into heaven (91%) compared to men (85%). Additionally, those who consider themselves “very” religious almost unanimously think they would get into heaven (97%) compared to eighty-five percent of those who consider themselves “somewhat” or three-quarters of those “not at all” (75%) religious.
- While 88% of respondents who believe in heaven say that they expect to go to heaven, when asked what percentage of people they think will get into heaven, respondents, on average, say that 64% of people will go to heaven.
- When asked whether heaven is an actual place or a state of being, respondents who believe in heaven are divided with almost half conceptualizing heaven as a state of being (47%) and two-fifths conceptualizing heaven as a place (40%). Respondents who believe in hell are almost equally divided between conceptualizing hell as a state of being (43%) or as a place (42%).
- Two-thirds of respondents say that their confidence in life after death has increased as they have gotten older (66%). In addition, most respondents are not scared about death and what happens to them after they die: only one in five (20%) say they are frightened by these thoughts.

- Fear of death is most strongly related to uncertainty in one's religious beliefs and the possibility that something negative could happen after death. A belief that once one dies, that's the end, was the strongest predictor of fear of death. Respondents who say they are only slightly religious and those who believe in hell are also more likely than most to be afraid of death.
- Respondents with the lowest household incomes (29% under \$25,000) are almost twice as likely to be afraid of death and what happens to them after they die as those with higher incomes (an average of 16% for \$25,000 and over).

Beliefs in the Afterlife

Almost three-quarters (73%) of respondents age 50 and older agree either strongly or somewhat with the statement “I believe in life after death.” Women are more likely to believe in the afterlife (80%) compared to men (64%). Interestingly, the youngest respondents (50-59) are also more likely to believe in the afterlife (78%) compared to the eldest (70+) respondents (67%). Not surprisingly, those who consider themselves “very religious” are more likely to believe in the afterlife (85%) compared to those “somewhat religious” (71%) and those “not at all religious” (44%). Less than one-quarter of respondents (24%) believe that when they die, that’s the end. Those who consider themselves “not at all” religious are more likely to believe when they die it’s the end (58%) compared to those “somewhat” religious (27%) and those “very” religious (11%).

Almost all respondents 50+ believe in God (94%) and/or in a higher power (90%). Women are more likely to believe in God (97%) compared to men (90%). Respondents who characterize themselves as “somewhat religious” are almost as likely to say they believe in God (97%) as those who consider themselves “very religious” (100%). While almost nine in ten respondents believe in heaven (86%), seven in ten respondents believe in hell (70%). One-half of respondents believe that spirits or ghosts exist (53%) and one-quarter believe in reincarnation (23%). Respondents in the north east are more likely to believe in reincarnation (31%) compared to respondents in all other regions; and younger respondents (50-59) are also more likely to believe in reincarnation (28%) compared to their older counterparts.

Statement	Strongly or Somewhat Agree	Strongly or Somewhat Disagree	Don't know/ refused
I believe in God	94	5	1
I believe in a higher power	90	7	2
I believe there is a heaven	86	10	3
I believe in life after death	73	22	5
I believe there is a hell	70	23	6
I believe that spirits or ghosts exist	53	41	5
I believe that when I die, that's the end	24	72	3
I believe in reincarnation	23	69	7

More women believe in spirits or ghosts (60%) compared to men (44%). Respondents in their 50s are also more likely to believe in ghosts or spirits (64%) compared to those in their 60s (51%) or those age 70 or older (38%).

Two-thirds of respondents say that their confidence in life after death has increased as they have gotten older (66%). More women agree with this statement (69%) than men (61%), and respondents who say they are “very” religious are the most likely to agree with this statement (78%). In addition, most respondents are not scared about death and what happens to them after they die: only one in five (20%) say they are frightened by these thoughts.

The majority of respondents consider themselves spiritual (87%) and almost as many respondents consider themselves religious (82%).

Statement	Strongly or Somewhat Agree	Strongly or Somewhat Disagree	Don't know/refused
I consider myself a spiritual person	87	11	2
I consider myself a religious person	82	16	1
My confidence in life after death has increased as I have gotten older	66	29	4
Thinking about my own death and what happens to me after I die scares me	20	77	2

Heaven and Hell

As mentioned previously, almost nine in ten respondents age 50 and older believe in heaven (86%). Some demographic groups are more likely to believe in heaven than others. More women (91%) than men (80%) believe in heaven; those with the lowest household incomes (90% under \$25,000 and 88% \$25,000-\$50,000) are more likely to believe in heaven than those with the highest (\$75,000+) household incomes (78%). Those living in the north central areas of the country are more likely to believe in heaven (90%) compared to those living in the west (81%). Respondents with only a high school education (89%) or some college (88%) are more likely to believe in heaven compared to those with a college degree or higher education (77%). As expected, those who consider themselves “very” religious are more likely to believe in heaven (99%) than those “somewhat” (87%) or “not very” (43%) religious.

Seven in ten respondents believe in hell (70%). The demographic groups more likely to believe in hell are similar to the groups more likely to believe in heaven: more women (75%) than men (65%); more lower (under \$25,000) income (76%) than higher (\$75,000+) income (61%); more southern (77%) and north central (73%) residents than western (61%) and northeastern (65%); and more high school (or less) graduates (74%) or those with some college (75%) or college graduates (57%). “Very” religious respondents are more likely to believe in hell (86%), compared to respondents “somewhat” religious (69%) and “not at all” religious (31%).

	I believe in heaven. (agree strongly or somewhat)	I believe in hell. (agree strongly or somewhat)
Total	86	70
Men	80	65
Women	91	75
Income		
Under \$25k	90	76
\$25k-\$49.9k	88	72
\$50k-74.9k	84	69
\$75k+	78	61
Region		
North East	84	65
North Central	90	73
South	88	77
West	81	61
Education		
H.S. or less	89	74
Some college	88	75
College, post graduate	77	57
Religiosity		
Very religious	99	86
Somewhat religious	87	69
Not at all religious	43	31

Respondents were asked if there is a heaven, who do they think gets in to heaven.¹ The question was asked open-ended and responses were grouped and categorized. Three in ten respondents (29%) say that people who believe in Jesus Christ get into heaven. One-quarter (25%) say that people who are good go to heaven. One in ten respondents say people who believe in one God go to heaven (10%) and/or “everyone” goes to heaven (10%).

If there is a heaven, who do you think gets in to heaven? (n=784)	%
People who believe in Jesus Christ	29
People who are good	25
People who believe in one God	10
Everyone	10
People who are religious/have faith	8
Other	5
People who are repentant/feel bad for their sins	3
People who do not sin	2
Babies/children	1
Don't know	13
Refused	1

When asked if they think they will get into heaven, almost nine out of ten respondents (88%) think that they will get into heaven (2% said “no,” 9% said “don’t know,” and 1% refused to answer).² Women are more likely to say they will get into heaven (91%) compared to men (85%). Additionally, those who consider themselves “very” religious almost unanimously think they will get into heaven (97%) compared to eighty-five percent of those who consider themselves “somewhat” or three-quarters of those “not at all” (75%) religious.

While 88% of respondents say that they expect to go to heaven, when asked what percentage of people they think will get into heaven, respondents, on average, say that 64% of people will go to heaven.³ Less than one-tenth of respondents (8%) say that 100% of people will go to heaven.

¹ Respondents who disagreed strongly with “I believe in life after death” or “I believe there is a heaven,” or who agreed strongly with “I believe that when I die that’s the end” were not asked questions about heaven.

² Respondents who disagreed strongly with “I believe in life after death” or “I believe there is a heaven,” or who agreed strongly with “I believe that when I die that’s the end” were not asked questions about heaven.

³ Among respondents who gave a response. Respondents who disagreed strongly with “I believe in life after death” or “I believe there is a heaven,” or who agreed strongly with “I believe that when I die that’s the end” were not asked questions about heaven.

Respondents were also asked whether heaven is an actual place or a state of being.⁴ Respondents are divided, with almost half conceptualizing heaven as a state of being (47%) and two-fifths conceptualizing heaven as a place (40%). A handful of respondents (2%) think heaven is both a place and a state of being, and one-tenth say they do not know.

Younger respondents (50-59) are more likely to think heaven is a state of being (47%), as are respondents from the west (51%) or northeast (63%), respondents with a college degree (67%), respondents with higher household incomes (62% of \$50,000-\$74,900 and 63% of \$75,000+) and respondents who are “somewhat” (60%) or “not at all” (72%) religious. By the same token, many of these demographic counterparts are more likely to think of heaven as a place (respondents with lower household incomes, respondents from the north central and south, respondents with some college education or less, and respondents who consider themselves “very” religious). There are no statistically significant gender differences in responses.

	Heaven is a state of being	Heaven is a place
Total	47	40
Age		
50-59	52	39
60-69	45	42
70+	40	39
Income		
Under \$25k	40	46
\$25k-\$49.9k	41	48
\$50k-74.9k	62	31
\$75k+	63	26
Region		
North East	63	23
North Central	46	43
South	37	47
West	51	36
Education		
H.S. or less	37	47
Some college	44	44
College, post graduate	67	23
Religiosity		
Very religious	28	60
Somewhat religious	60	28
Not at all religious	72	14

⁴ Respondents who disagreed strongly with “I believe in life after death” or “I believe there is a heaven,” or who agreed strongly with “I believe that when I die that’s the end” were not asked questions about heaven.

Respondents were asked if there is a hell, who do they think goes to hell.⁵ The question was asked open-ended and responses were grouped and categorized. One in three respondents (31%) say that people who are bad go to hell. Seventeen percent say people who do not believe in Jesus Christ go to hell and fifteen percent say people who do not believe in God go to hell.

If there is a hell, who do you think will go to hell? (n=692)	%
People who are bad	31
People who do not believe in Jesus Christ	17
People who do not believe in God	15
People who have sinned	9
People who have not repented/feel bad for their sins	6
Other	6
No one	2
The percentage who do not go to heaven	2
Do not believe hell is a place to go to	1
Politicians	1
Don't know	18
Refused	1

⁵ Respondents who disagreed strongly with “I believe in life after death” or “I believe there is a hell,” or who agreed strongly with “I believe that when I die that’s the end” were not asked questions about hell.

Respondents were also asked whether hell is an actual place or a state of being.⁶ Respondents are almost equally divided between conceptualizing hell as a state of being (43%) or as a place (42%). A handful of respondents (2%) think hell is both a place and a state of being, and one-tenth (11%) say they do not know.

Younger respondents (50-59) are more likely to think hell is a state of being (48%), as are respondents from the west (48%) or northeast (60%), respondents with a college degree (59%), respondents with higher household incomes (55% of \$50,000-\$74,900 and 61% of \$75,000+) and respondents who are “somewhat” (57%) or “not at all” (56%) religious. By the same token, many of these demographic counterparts are more likely to think of hell as a place (respondents with lower household incomes, respondents from the north central and south, respondents with some college education or less, and respondents who consider themselves “very” religious). There are no statistically significant gender differences in responses.

	Hell is a state of being	Hell is a place
Total	43	42
Age		
50-59	48	42
60-69	43	42
70+	33	44
Income		
Under \$25k	34	49
\$25k-\$49.9k	44	46
\$50k-74.9k	55	38
\$75k+	61	24
Region		
North East	60	25
North Central	42	46
South	34	52
West	48	34
Education		
H.S. or less	35	49
Some college	44	42
College, post graduate	59	28
Religiosity		
Very religious	26	63
Somewhat religious	57	29
Not at all religious	56	17

⁶ Respondents who disagreed strongly with “I believe in life after death” or “I believe there is a hell,” or who agreed strongly with “I believe that when I die that’s the end” were not asked questions about hell.

Fear of Death—Demographic Differences

Only one in five respondents (20%) say they are frightened about what happens to them after they die. There are no statistically significant differences by gender, age, or region. However, those with the lowest household incomes (29% under \$25,000) are almost twice as likely to be afraid of death than those with higher incomes (17% \$25,000-\$50,000; 17% \$50,000-75,000; 15% \$75K+). Furthermore, respondents with only a high school education (23%) are more likely to fear death than those with some college (17%) or a college degree higher education (17%). Interestingly, respondents who consider themselves to be somewhat religious (25%) are more likely to fear death than those who report being very religious (16%) or not religious at all (13%).

	Thinking about my own death and what happens to me after I die scares me (Agree Strongly/Somewhat)
Total	20%
Gender	
Men	21
Women	19
Age	
50-59	20
60-69	22
70+	17
Income	
Under \$25k	29
\$25k-\$49.9k	17
\$50k-74.9k	17
\$75k+	15
Region	
North East	22
North Central	22
South	20
West	16
Education	
H.S. or less	23
Some college	17
College, post graduate	17
Religiosity	
Very religious	16
Somewhat religious	25
Not at all religious	13

Fear of Death—Relation to Other Afterlife Beliefs

Although, overall, most respondents report not being afraid of what happens to them when they die, there are significant differences in this number when other afterlife beliefs are considered. Those who report believing in heaven (22%) are more likely to report a fear of death than those don't believe in heaven (8%). Similarly, those who report a belief in hell are more likely to feel scared about what happens to them when they die (22% vs. 14%). A belief in ghosts and spirits is also linked to greater fear of death, with 24% of those who believe in ghosts also claiming that they are afraid of death (only 16% of those don't believe are afraid). However, this difference does not extend to people who actually say they have felt the presence of or seen a ghost. Those who believe in reincarnation fear death more than those who do not (32% vs. 17%). Somewhat confusingly, those who report gaining greater confidence in life after death as they've aged, are also more likely to say they are scared of death than those who don't report an increased confidence level (23% vs. 12%). It is likely that this difference is being driven by a third variable that is not accounted for in these percentages.

	Thinking about my own death and what happens to me after I die scares me (Agree Strongly/Somewhat)
Total	20%
Belief in an Afterlife	
Agree (strongly/somewhat)	21
Disagree (strongly/somewhat)	16
Belief in a Higher Power	
Agree	21
Disagree	9
Belief in Heaven	
Agree	22
Disagree	8
Belief in Hell	
Agree	22
Disagree	14
Belief in Ghosts/Spirits	
Agree	24
Disagree	16
Greater Confidence in Life After Death with Age	
Agree	23
Disagree	12
Belief in Reincarnation	
Agree	32
Disagree	17
When I Die, That's the End	
Agree	27
Disagree	18
Been in the Presence Of or Seen A Spirit or Ghost	
Agree	22
Disagree	19

Fear of Death—Predictive Factors

In order to tease out the influence of demographic variables and other afterlife beliefs on fear of death, a series of logistic regressions were performed with fear of death as the dichotomous dependent variable (agree strongly/somewhat vs. disagree strongly/somewhat). Reported findings are statistically significant at $p < .05$ level.

Overall, fear of death seems to be related to uncertainty in one's religious beliefs (i.e., those who say they are *somewhat* religious), or the possibility that something negative could happen to them when they die (i.e., a belief that death is the final ending and/or a belief in the existence of hell). Although positive beliefs did have a small relation to fear, these are not as strongly related to a fear of death as the main three: being somewhat religious, a belief that death is the end, and a belief in the existence of hell. After taking into account all other variables, income was the only demographic factor to be significantly related to fear of death. One potential explanation for this finding is that for those whose financial status is less secure, thinking of death may be a stressful reminder of the uncertainties in their lives and the potential strain their death would cause on family members.

Income as a Significant Demographic Predictor of Fear of Death

Gender, employment, and marital status did not predict respondents' fear of death. Income continued to be a strong predictor of being afraid to think of death. Even after taking into account other demographic variables including gender and age, those with a lower income are more likely to fear death than those with higher incomes. Education was significantly related to a fear of death when looked at alone; however, when combined with income and other afterlife beliefs, education was no longer significantly related to fear of death.

Demographic Variables Cannot Completely Explain the Relation between Afterlife Beliefs and Fear of Death

Once all demographic and afterlife variables are taken into account, a belief that *once one dies, that's the end* is the strongest predictor of fear of death. The second best predictor was respondents' religious beliefs. Specifically, those who say they are only *somewhat* religious are more likely to fear death than those who are *not at all* religious or those who are *very* religious. A belief in hell was the third best predictor of fear of death. Interestingly, once all the variables were taken into account, the converse of this variable—a belief in heaven—was not related to one's fear of death. Following these three main factors, a belief in ghosts, reincarnation, and in a higher power were also significantly, if somewhat weakly, related to fear of death. Finally, although gaining confidence in life after death with age initially looked like it was related to fear of death, when all the other factors were taken into account, it was not related.

Spirits and Ghosts

As mentioned previously, approximately one-half of respondents 50+ agree with the statement “I believe that spirits or ghosts exist.” Almost two-fifths (38%) of all respondents (and more than one-half (57%) of respondents who believe in spirits or ghosts) say they have felt the presence, or seen something, that they thought may have been a spirit or a ghost. Those more likely to say they have had this experience include women (45%), younger respondents (42% of 50-59 year olds, 40% of 60-69 year olds), and those who label themselves “very” religious (43%). Respondents from the West (50%) are especially likely to say they have felt the presence of spirits or ghosts.

Have you ever felt the presence or seen something that you thought may have been a spirit or a ghost?	Yes	No
Total	38	62
Men	29	70
Women	45	55
Age		
50-59	42	57
60-69	40	59
70+	27	71
Region		
North East	34	66
North Central	36	64
South	33	66
West	50	49
Religiosity		
Very religious	43	56
Somewhat religious	36	64
Not at all religious	28	70

Religiosity

One-half of respondents age 50 and older describe themselves as “somewhat” religious, more than one-third describe themselves as “very” religious (37%), and about one in ten (12%) describe themselves as “not at all religious.” Respondents who say they are not at all religious were asked if they consider themselves agnostic, atheist, or something else. One-quarter of these respondents (25%) consider themselves agnostic, one-tenth (12%) consider themselves atheist, and more than one half (57%) say they are something else.

Women are more likely to consider themselves “very” religious (44%) compared to men (29%). Respondents with household incomes under \$50,000 are more likely to describe themselves as “very” religious (39%) compared to respondents with household incomes \$75,000+ (27%). Respondents in the south are more likely to say they are “very” religious (42%) than respondents in the north east (27%).

Would you describe yourself as very religious, somewhat religious, or not religious at all?	Very religious	Somewhat religious	Not at all religious
Total	37	50	12
Men	29	53	17
Women	44	47	7
Age			
50-59	35	48	16
60-69	35	54	10
70+	43	48	6
Income			
Under \$25k	39	50	10
\$25k-\$49.9k	39	50	10
\$50k-74.9k	36	48	14
\$75k+	27	51	19
Region			
North East	27	57	14
North Central	37	49	13
South	42	48	8
West	35	48	15
Education			
H.S. or less	39	52	8
Some college	39	49	11
College, post graduate	31	46	20