

## ***The CARA Catholic Poll Digest*** **Fall 2006**

### ***Measuring Mass Attendance Q&A***

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#### ***Question: How many Catholics attend Mass?***

***Answer:*** In survey research you often hear “it depends on how you ask the question.” This is true here as well, but even more important is the method of answering provided the respondent. The tendency for Catholics to over-report their Mass attendance (saying they attend more frequently than they actually do) is well known. Head counts and diocesan estimates of attendance often contradict higher levels of attendance reported in surveys. CARA has found that respondents report higher levels of attendance when an interviewer is asking them the question. When a response has to be made to a person recording the answer, over-reports are more common than when a survey method is used that does not require an interviewer. This is an example of a social desirability effect. Respondents want to give an answer that is socially desirable to the interviewer to avoid the embarrassment or implication that they are not a “good Catholic.” When no interviewer is involved, over-reports are much less common and Mass attendance estimates reflect estimates derived from head counts. In telephone polls, between three in ten and a third of Catholic adults say they attend Mass at least once a week. However, in the self-administered surveys only about a quarter say they attend this frequently. Thus, telephone polls likely overestimate weekly Mass attendance among Catholics by about 8 to 12 percentage points. There is no evidence in CARA’s national Catholic polls that Mass attendance has declined between 2000 and 2005.

#### ***CARA Telephone Polls, 2000 to 2005: Adult Catholic Mass Attendance*** ***Aside from weddings and funerals, about how often do you attend Mass?***

	<b>Every week</b>	<b>Once or a few times a month</b>	<b>A few times a year</b>	<b>Rarely or never</b>	<b>Sample Size (margin of error)</b>
Sept. 2000	33%	31%	15%	21%	1,190 (±2.9)
Jan. 2001	36	29	18	16	1,871 (±2.3)
Feb. 2002	39	27	16	19	2,083 (±2.2)
Apr. 2002	34	33	20	14	1,588 (±2.5)
May 2002	35	32	17	15	498 (±4.4)
Jan. 2003	33	31	19	17	794 (±3.5)
May 2003	34	31	17	17	994 (±3.1)
Oct. 2003	32	31	21	15	994 (±3.1)
March 2004	33	29	18	20	990 (±3.1)
Sept. 2004	31	32	19	18	986 (±3.1)
Sept-Oct. 2005	35	28	16	21	989 (±3.1)
Series average	34	30	18	18	
Standard dev.	2.2	1.9	1.8	2.5	

**CARA Self-Administered Polls, 2001 to 2005: Adult Catholic Mass Attendance**  
*Aside from weddings and funerals, about how often do you attend Mass?*

	Every week	Once or a few times a month	A few times a year	Rarely or never	Sample Size (margin of error)
Aug. 2001	22%	22%	26%	30%	890 (±3.3)
Sept. 2002	26	24	25	25	1,289 (±2.7)
Nov. 2005	23	17	25	35	1,255 (±2.8)
Series average	24	21	25	30	
Standard dev.	2.1	3.6	0.6	5.0	

Note: Rows may add up to 99 or 101 percent due to rounding error. Percentages reflect the combination of some of the response categories. Dates represent month and year during which interviews were completed. CARA telephone surveys include both English and Spanish language interviewing based on the respondent's preference whereas the self-administered surveys do not include Spanish language questions. The complete question and response set is: *Aside from weddings and funerals, about how often do you attend Mass? Rarely or never, a few times a year, once or twice a month, almost every week, every week, more than once a week.*

**Question: Why does CARA's Mass attendance data differ from what the Gallup Organization reports?**

**Answer:** On closer inspection one will find that these sources are consistent. The Gallup Organization's religious services attendance question does differ in wording from the one used in CARA's polls. Gallup measures attendance in the week prior to the survey, while the CARA question measures generalized attendance. Gallup's surveys estimate Mass attendance in *any given week* and the CARA Catholic Poll measures the percentage of Catholics who attend Mass *every week*. In 2004, Gallup surveys indicated that, on average, 45 percent of Catholics said they attended Mass within seven days of being surveyed (compared to 74 percent in 1958). The three polls conducted by CARA in 2003 indicated, on average, that 33 percent of Catholics said they attend Mass every week (compared to 33 percent in 2000).

These data are more alike than they may seem. Basically the data are consistent responses to slightly different questions. CARA uses the following question to measure frequency of Mass attendance: "Aside from weddings and funerals, about how often do you attend Mass?" Respondents select from the following responses: "rarely or never," "a few times a year," "once or twice a month," "almost every week," "every week," or "more than once a week." Gallup on the other hand asks, "Did you, yourself, happen to attend church or synagogue in the last seven days, or not?"

By chance, one might expect about 2 percent of those who say they "rarely or never" attend Mass to have attended Mass in any given seven-day period. If one takes the 18 percent of Catholics responding in this manner and multiplies that by 2 percent, one can estimate that 0.3 percent of Catholic Mass attendance in any given week is made up of

those who say they “rarely or never” attend. This same calculation can be done for each category of responses that indicate less than weekly attendance.

	<b>Percentage responding to the question as follows in Sept. 2004</b>	<b>Chance of being at Mass in any given week</b>	<b>Estimated percentage attending in any given week</b>
Rarely or never	18%	1 in 52 or less	0%
A few times a year	19	1 in 17	1
Once or twice a month	20	1 in 12 or less	2
Almost every week	12	1 in 2	6
Every week	27	1 in 1	27
More than once a week	4	1 in 1	4
			<b>Total: 40%</b>

With this calculation, the CARA and Gallup data are remarkably consistent. The CARA poll conducted in September 2004 estimates that 31 percent of Catholics attend Mass *every* week. Assuming the less frequent attendees are relatively random in their attendance we can estimate that an additional 9 percent of Catholics attend Mass in any given week. Thus, the estimated Catholic Mass attendance in any week using the CARA question is similar to the 2004 Gallup estimate – about 45 percent (identical to the 2003 Gallup estimate of 40 percent). However, Gallup samples the entire U.S. adult population and thus their Catholic sub-samples are subject to higher margins of error. Thus, the Gallup trends often suggest greater volatility in Catholic Mass attendance than what is represented in the larger Catholic samples used in CARA polls, which in turn have smaller margins of sampling error.