

EX-MUSLIMS  
OF NORTH AMERICA



# APOSTATE REPORT

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LEAVING ISLAM IN NORTH AMERICA



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OF NORTH AMERICA**

Ex-Muslims of North America (EXMNA) has conducted a first-of-its-kind survey on the experiences of American and Canadian apostates from Islam. With this survey, we wish to provide insight into the distinct lives ex-Muslims lead in North America and, in so doing, advance understanding and awareness of the process of apostasy and the challenges, disappointments, and joys that comprise it.

Ex-Muslims of North America is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization which advocates for acceptance of religious dissent, promotes secular values, and aims to reduce discrimination faced by those who leave Islam.

**[exmuslims.org](http://exmuslims.org)**

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# I.

# INTRODUCTION

**To date, quantitative research on apostasy in general has not been extensive, and this is especially true of apostasy from Islam.**

## AUTHORS:

Sarah Haider  
Muhammed Syed  
Hasan Tauha  
Jason Mickevich

This is at least partially due to the newness of the phenomenon of non-belief in significant numbers. Today, however, “nones” in the West increasingly receive the attention of religious scholars and pollsters. This growing lack of belief raises the question: is this largely a phenomenon of religions associated with the West? Does the well-documented rise in “nones” have a parallel in Muslim communities as well? If so, what do these non-believers look like?

The high level of intolerance towards apostasy, both in Muslim communities and across the Muslim world, however, makes this question a uniquely difficult one to study. Until

fairly recently, “ex-Muslims” had been an almost entirely invisible, underground population, fearing severe persecution upon disclosure. Therefore, a quantitative study of ex-Muslims would have been impossible, even if desired.

With this survey, we aim to add to a growing body of quantitative data on leaving religion and fill a gap in that data on the subject of leaving Islam. In addition, our approach places greater emphasis on apostates’ personal journeys and the choices they made as free agents to leave Islam behind, and by doing so with a significant sample, we hope to advance a greater understanding of what it means to be an ex-Muslim.

# II.

The survey was conducted online by researchers at George Mason University contracted by EXMNA. Participants were selected based on affiliation with EXMNA support communities and invited to take the survey via email. Those who consented were then sent the questionnaire. Over 550 respondents answered the survey.

## METHOD AND SAMPLE

Some peculiarities of the sample might be worthy of note. The population of ex-Muslims captured in this survey is not representative of the ex-Muslim population as a whole — especially outside of North America, since this survey questioned only people living in the United States and Canada. Even within North America, non-immigrant black Muslims surely represent a sizeable portion of those who leave Islam, but they are not well-represented in our data, which is primarily a population of immigrants originating from South Asia, the Middle East, and Africa.

Some of the peculiarities of our data are necessary consequences of the fact that respondents were sampled from EXMNA communities. These were communities based in major American cities where like-minded ex-Muslims could congregate and receive support or refuge if their personal situations warranted it. Ex-Muslims who wished to join these communities went through a screening process, including video

interviews, before they were admitted in order to ensure that they were not merely questioning/doubtful Muslims or under the age of 18. As a result, our population is explicitly non-theistic — largely atheists and agnostics, rarely deists — who are part of no faith community and believe in no personal God.

Furthermore, because those who seek out EXMNA communities have usually lost their community as a result of losing their faith, our results are affected. Very few converts to Islam, and very few third-generation or higher immigrants, are represented. In light of how respondents were reached, this is to be expected; those who did not grow up in the faith, or who grew up less culturally immersed in the faith, are less likely to desire involvement in something like an EXMNA community. In addition, EXMNA is an organization that relies largely on the internet for exposure. Therefore, populations more likely to use the internet frequently (such as the young) may be disproportionately represented.

# 01

## WHO ARE THE APOSTATES?

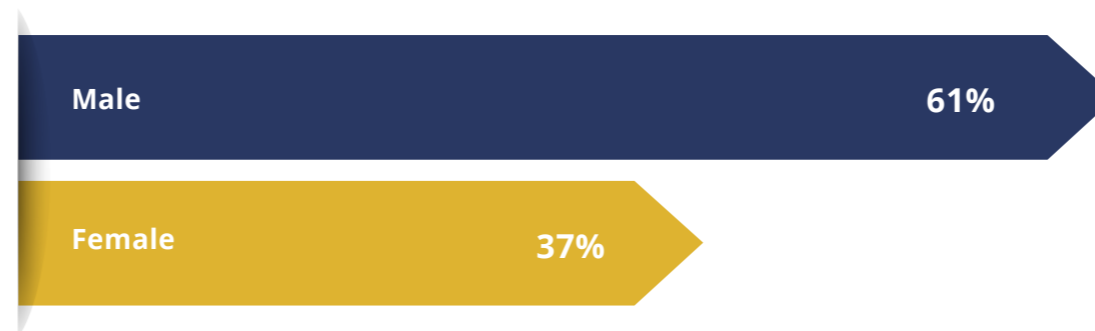
Before discussing the intricacies of leaving Islam, it is worthwhile to determine: who, exactly, leaves the faith? The answer, for our respondents, is young, well-educated men and women—males somewhat more frequently than females, immigrants more than non-immigrants—but a group nonetheless diverse in its makeup. They, like all ex-Muslims, represent a changing religious landscape—not only in North America but across the world.

### WHAT DO THEY LOOK LIKE?

#### SEX

Men and women are both well-represented in the survey, with 61% male respondents and 37% female.

% who identified themselves as \_\_\_\_\*



\*About 1% preferred not to say or identified as something else

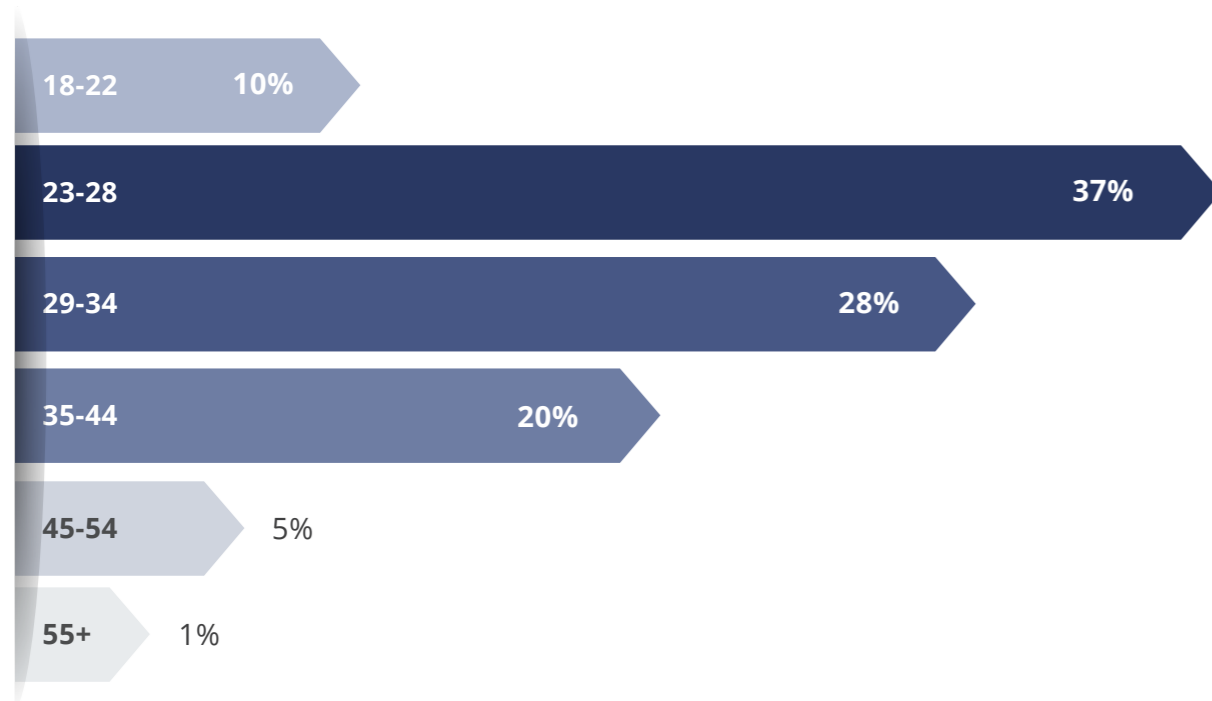
Throughout this report, we compare patterns in our results to wider populations (e.g., North American Muslims, North American atheists, and certain immigrant populations). In many cases, such comparisons help illuminate the ways respondents are most different from—or most similar to—groups with which they share some significant characteristics.

The greater prevalence of men lines up with the general non-religious population. According to findings from Pew Research Center's Religious Landscape Study, American unaffiliated and atheists especially skew male at similar rates.

## AGE

Respondents skewed young; only about 26% were 35 or older and only about 6% were older than 45. By contrast, about 47% were 28 or younger, with 10% being between 18 and 22. The remaining 28% were between the ages of 29 and 34.

% who were between \_\_\_\_ years old

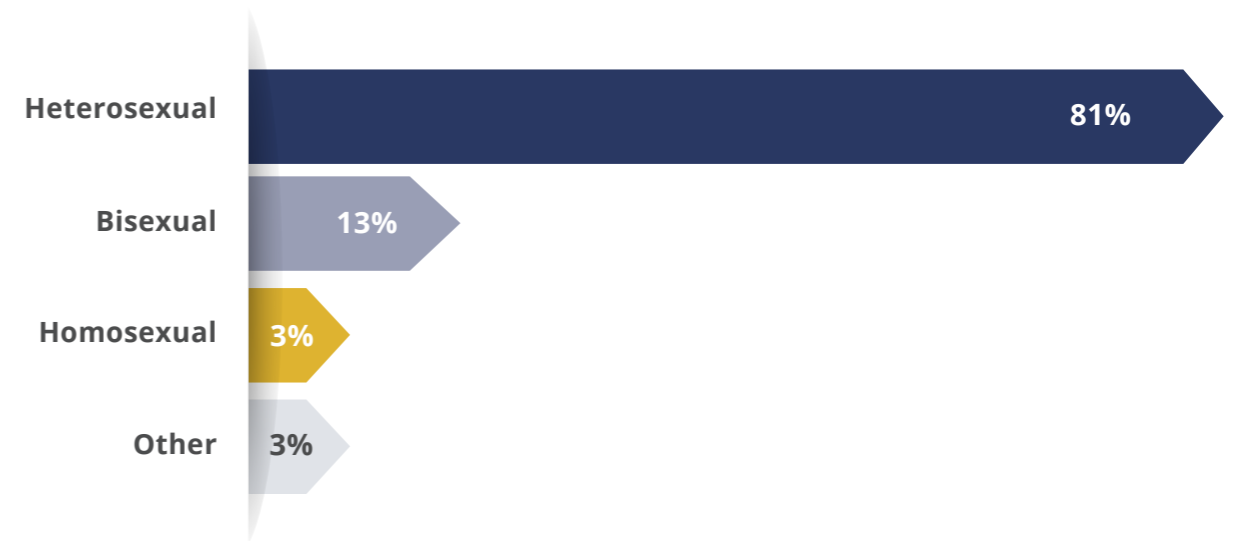


As reported in Pew Research Center's Religious Landscape Study, atheists and religiously unaffiliated individuals are overwhelmingly young in America, usually under the age of 50. Our respondents, however, were even younger; while more than one in five American atheists are older than 50, only around one in 20 of our respondents were the same.

## SEXUAL ORIENTATION

A significant proportion of respondents identified as LGBTQ—nearly one in five.

% who described their sexual orientation as \_\_\_\_



Our respondents were almost four times more likely than the average North American to identify as LGBTQ, per findings from Gallup and Forum Research. Later findings in this survey show that concern for human rights, including LGBTQ rights, was one of the most common factors in respondents' choices to leave Islam.

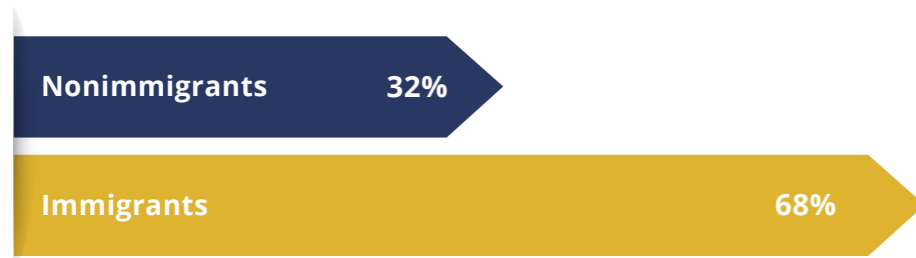


# WHERE ARE THEY FROM?

## IMMIGRATION

Most respondents were immigrants or children of immigrants. Specifically, a little over two-thirds—68%—of respondents were first-generation immigrants to North America.

% who described themselves as \_\_\_\_



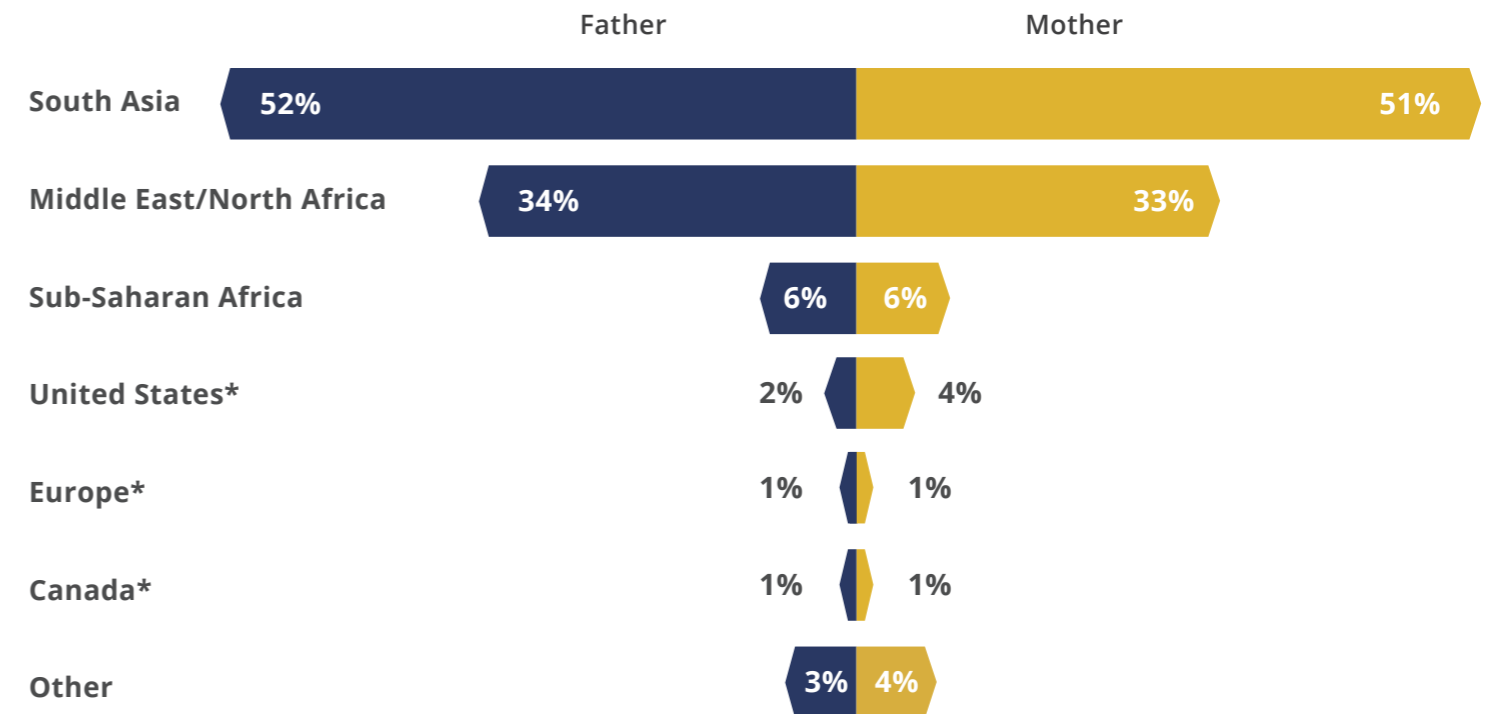
Pew Research Center has found that the majority of American Muslims are immigrants, and a survey commissioned by the Canadian Dawn Foundation found the same regarding Canadian Muslims. This pattern was exaggerated in our respondents: compared to 76% of American Muslims, nearly all of our respondents were first- or second-generation immigrants. As immigrants are a unique population in many respects, the disproportionate representation of immigrants in our sample likely has wide-ranging implications on nearly every aspect of our findings.

## PARENTS' BIRTHPLACES

In order to provide an approximate sense of respondents' ethnic origins, respondents were asked about the regions in which their parents were born. South Asia was the most common answer: 52% of respondents' fathers and 51% of respondents' mothers were born there.

This region, along with the Middle East and North Africa, comprised the overwhelming majority of respondents' parents' birthplaces: 34% of respondents' fathers and 33% of respondents' mothers were born in the Middle East/North Africa region. A small but significant minority traced their parents' origins to sub-Saharan Africa (6% of fathers and mothers), and the remainder traced their parents' origins to a Western country or somewhere else.

% whose father/mother was born in \_\_\_\_



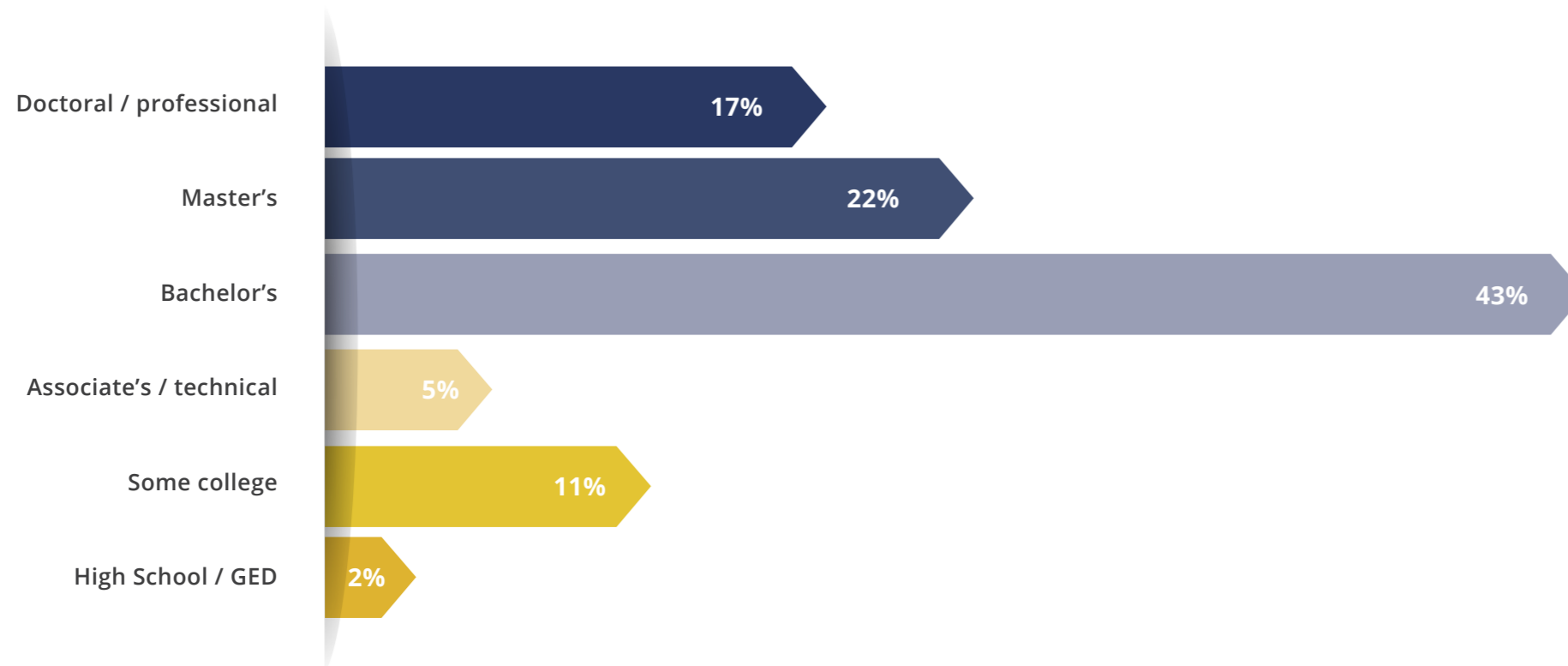
\*Parents born in Western nations may be second-generation immigrants rather than persons of caucasian descent

# APOSTATES' EDUCATION AND OUTLOOK

## EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

On the whole, our respondents were highly educated. Around 43% reported attaining a bachelor's degree or international equivalent, about 22% a master's degree or international equivalent, and about 17% a doctoral or professional degree or international equivalent. About 11% attended some college but obtained no degree, although much of this may be due to the large number of college-aged respondents in our sample. About 5% obtained an associate's degree or international equivalent, and 2% only obtained a high school education or equivalent.

% whose highest academic credential was a \_\_\_\_ degree



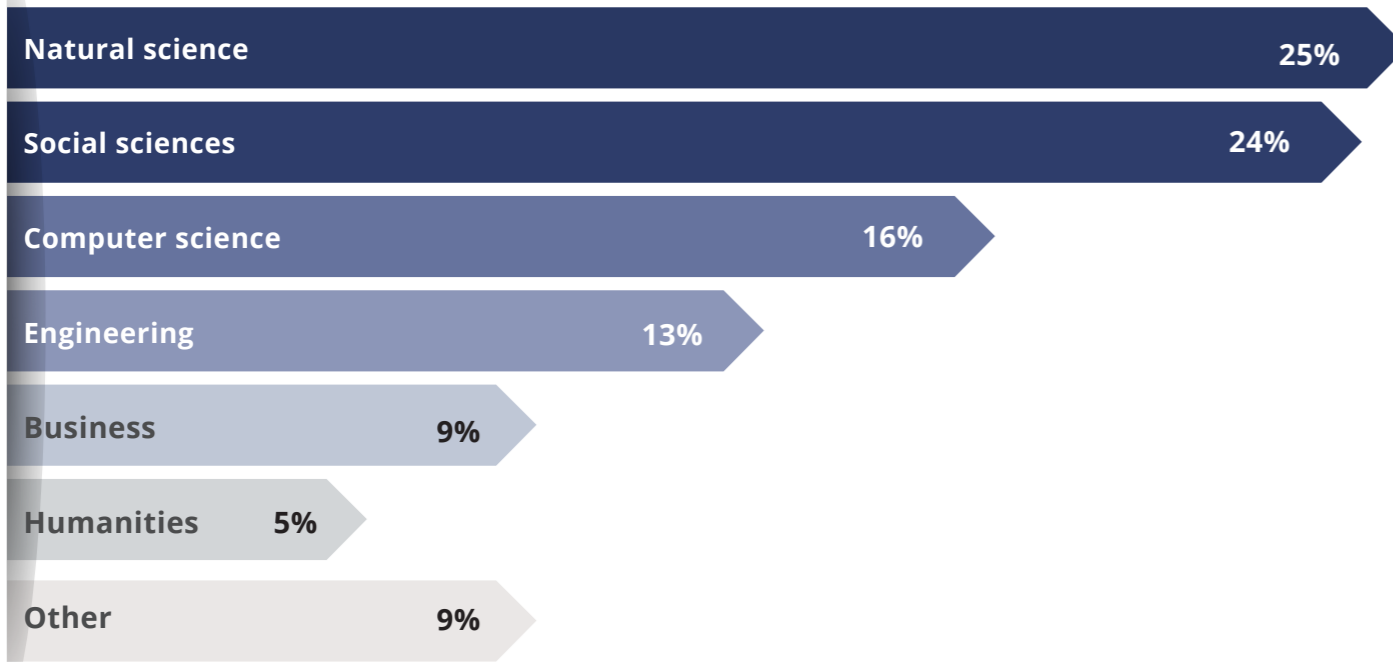
Our respondents' high levels of education far exceed those of the average American or Canadian. According to Pew Research Center, South and East Asian immigrants to the United States comprise one of the best-educated populations in the country, with 52% over the age 25 holding a bachelor's degree or higher. By contrast, our respondents, many of whom were South Asian immigrants, were even more highly educated - over 80% held at least a bachelor's degree. This, besides immigration, may be the most noteworthy demographic characteristic of our population.

There is some evidence to suggest that higher education is associated with lower religiosity, which may explain the levels seen in our data. Pew Research Center's 2014 Religious Landscape Study found that college graduates were more likely to be atheist or agnostic than non-graduates, and some evidence suggests religious conviction and devotion are lower in college graduates than in the general population.

## WHAT DID THEY STUDY?

Respondents most often studied natural, social, or computer sciences; they least often studied business and the humanities. More than half studied a STEM subject.

% who specialized in a subject in the field of \_\_\_\_

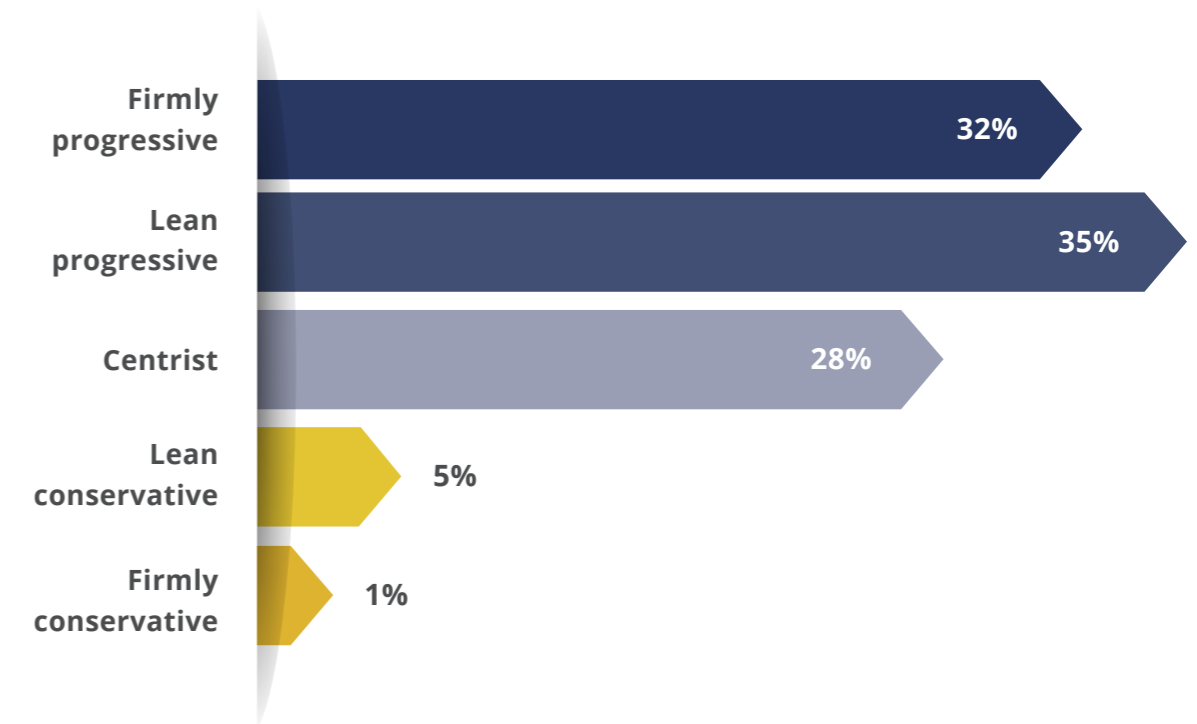


According to the National Center for Education Statistics, only 18% of bachelor's degrees granted in 2015-16 in the US were in a STEM field. In this regard, our respondents were almost opposite the general population: about three times as many (54%) of our respondents have a STEM degree. It is worth noting that one of the most significant factors in respondents' decisions to leave Islam was the conflict between religion and science.

## POLITICAL AND SOCIAL VIEWS

When asked about their social and political views, respondents were overwhelmingly likely to identify as progressive: 32% were firmly progressive and 35% leaned progressive. Another significant portion were politically centrist, 28%. Only 5% leaned toward a conservative stance and only 1% described themselves as firmly conservative.

% who described their political and social views as \_\_\_\_



# 02 | BEFORE APOSTASY

Before respondents were ex-Muslim, they were Muslim. Like all Muslims, they displayed varying levels of devotion to their faith.

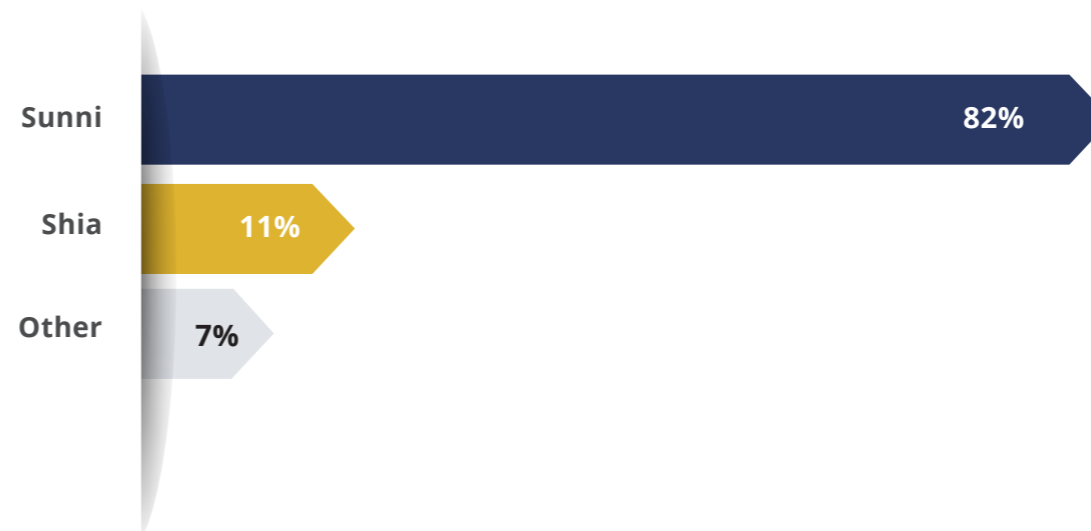
Most participated in religious social activities; many actively organized them. Whatever their motivations for leaving the faith, they were not, on the whole, misfits at the fringes of religious practice: they were typical and often practicing Muslims, little different in outward behavior from the average North American Muslim.

In other words, respondents do not appear to have changed their perspective on religion due to unique feelings of isolation from the Muslim community, and they did not conceive of their situations in this way. For many, in fact, it was precisely because of their disaffiliation and apostasy that they found themselves newly severed from the fabric of their religious communities.

## FORMER SECT

When they were still religious, about 82% of respondents practiced some form of Sunni Islam, while 11% practiced some form of Shia Islam. The remaining 7% belonged to some other non-mainstream sect (e.g., Ahmadi, Sufi, etc.). Out of the Sunni respondents, more than 80% practiced a mainstream form of Sunni Islam, with just 17% practicing Salafism or some other interpretation of Sunni Islam.

% who described their former sect as \_\_\_\_



Pew Research Center estimates Sunnis comprise 87-90% of the global Muslim population while Shias comprise 10-13%. Our respondents' former sectarian affiliation reflects that of Muslims at large.

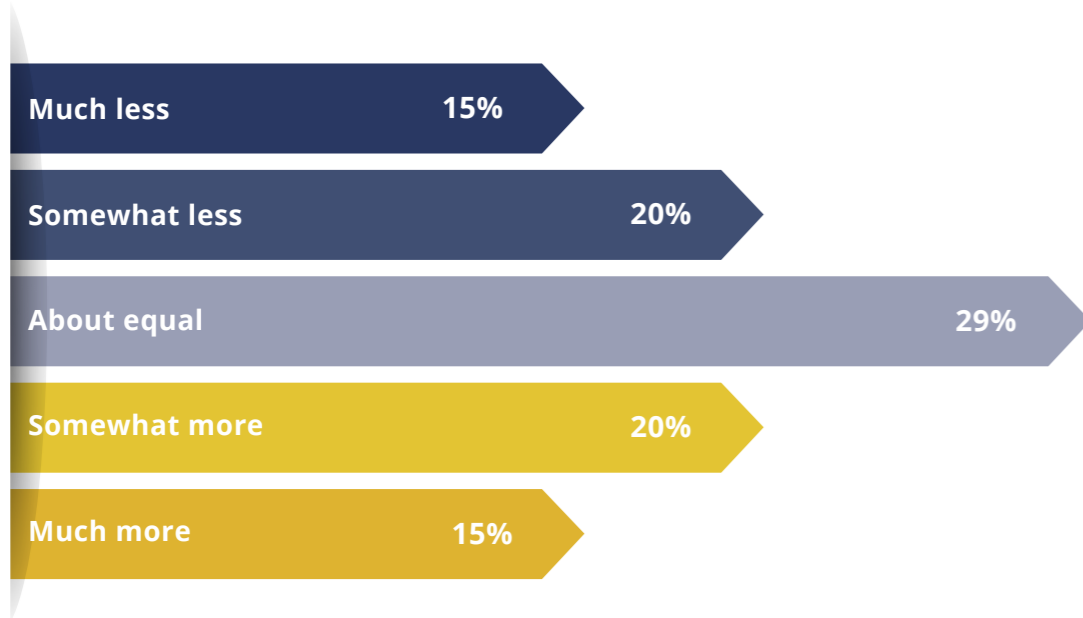
# THE FAITH OF FUTURE APOSTATES

## HOW DEVOUT WERE THEY?

To gauge whether respondents were, before their apostasy, unusually engaged or disengaged in the faith relative to their environment, respondents were asked: *“In the household you were raised in, were you generally more or less devout in your faith than other family members of your generation?”*

Responses were remarkably balanced. Nearly 30% fell in the middle, placing their former devoutness at similar levels as their family’s; about 20% each said they had been somewhat less and somewhat more devout; and about 15% each said they had been much less or much more devout.

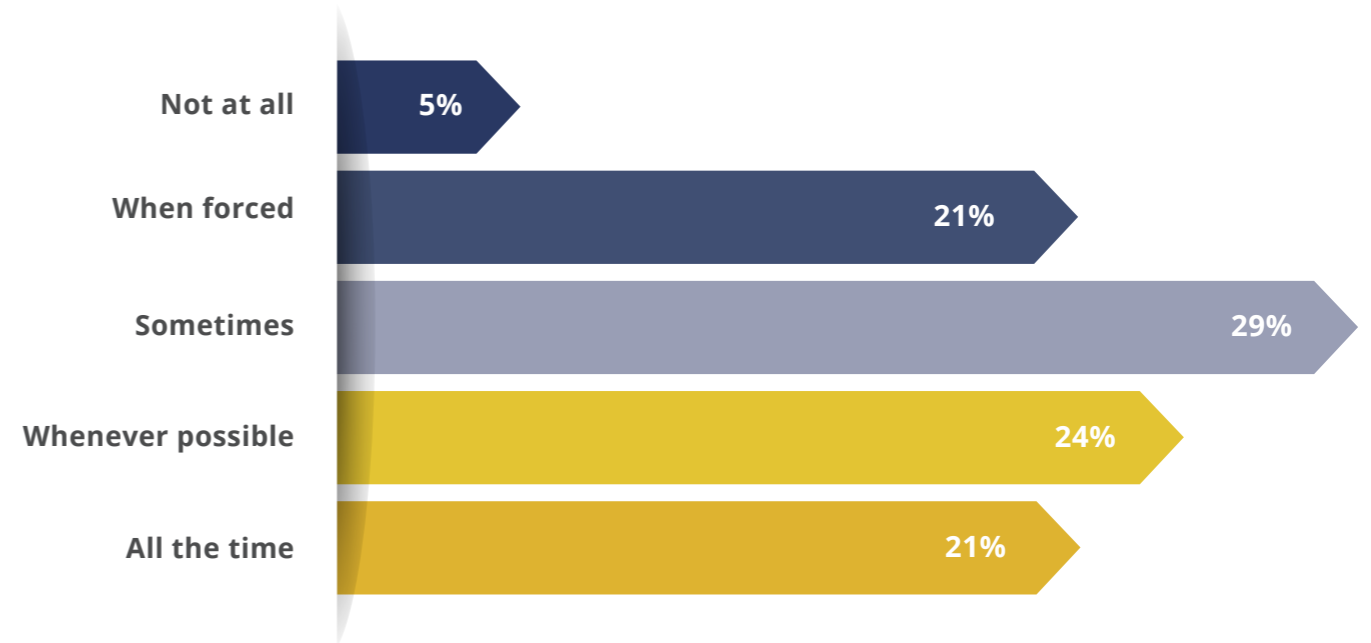
**% who described themselves as \_\_\_ devout compared to members of their household before apostatizing**



## HOW OFTEN DID THEY PRAY?

As an alternative measure of devoutness, respondents were asked how often they had prayed before apostatizing (Muslims are required to perform five formal prayers per day). Only 5% of respondents said they had never prayed while Muslim, and an additional 21% said they had prayed “only when made to.” A plurality, 29%, said they had prayed “sometimes.” About a quarter (24%) reported having prayed “as often as possible” and 21% reported having prayed “all the time.”

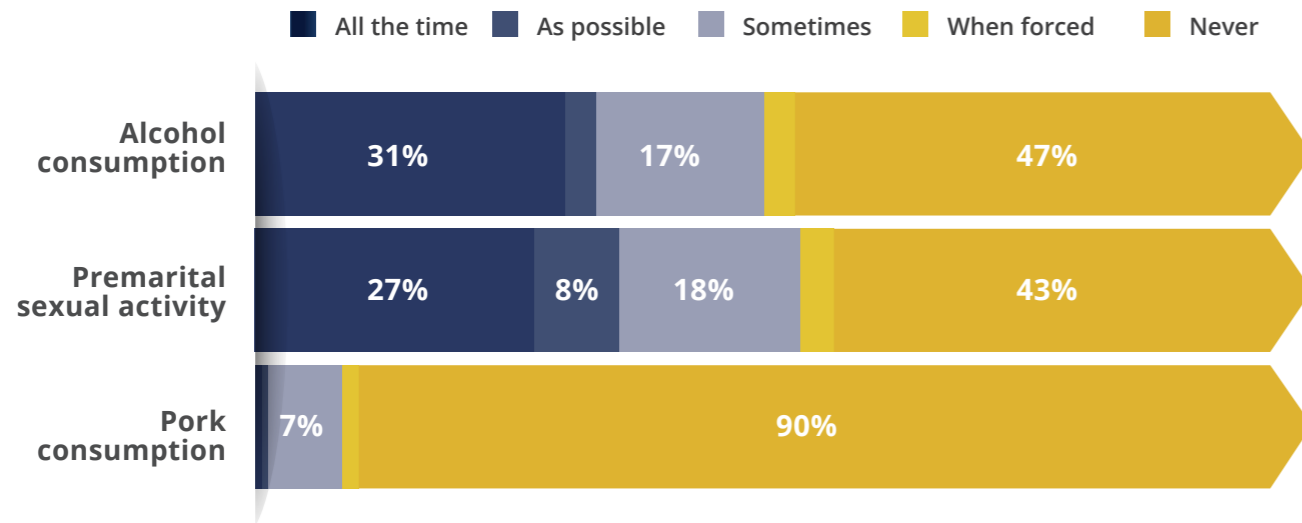
**% who prayed \_\_\_ before apostatizing**



## ENGAGEMENT IN PROHIBITED ACTIVITIES

In order to explore whether they had possessed long-standing difficulties with Islamic restrictions, respondents were asked about how often they had engaged in various haram (prohibited) activities before their apostasy.

% who engaged in \_\_\_\_ before apostatizing



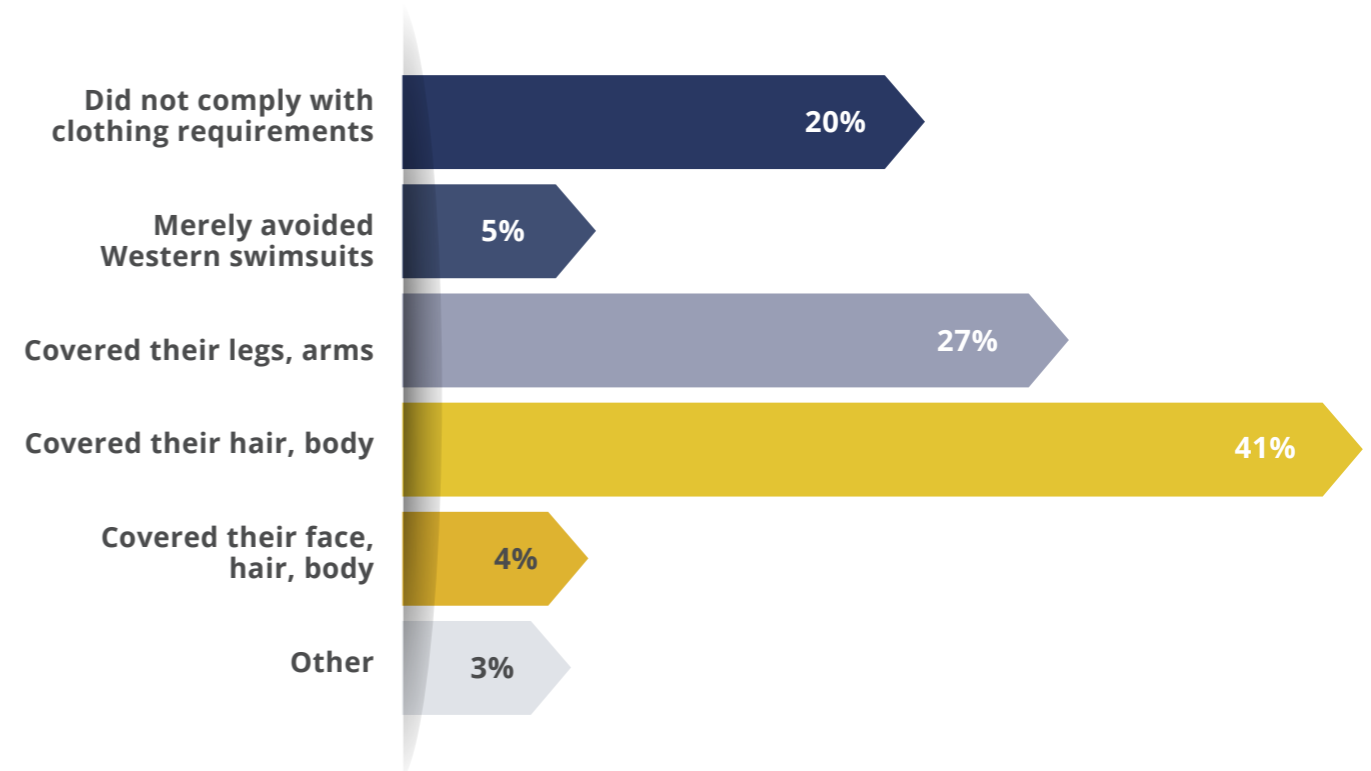
Respondents had violated the prohibitions on alcohol consumption and premarital sexual activity most often, although nearly half of respondents had still avoided both. Pork consumption, on the other hand, had been exceptionally rare among all respondents.

## WOMEN AND MODESTY

As another potential gauge of religiosity and practice, female respondents were asked about the extent of their adherence to Islamic clothing requirements before they apostatized.

A fifth (20%) said they had not complied with religious clothing requirements at all, while 5% said they had merely refrained from wearing western swimsuits. On the other hand, 27% said they had covered their legs and most of their arms in public, and a plurality, 41%, said they had covered their hair and body in public. Only 4% said they had worn face coverings.

% of females who \_\_\_\_ before apostatizing





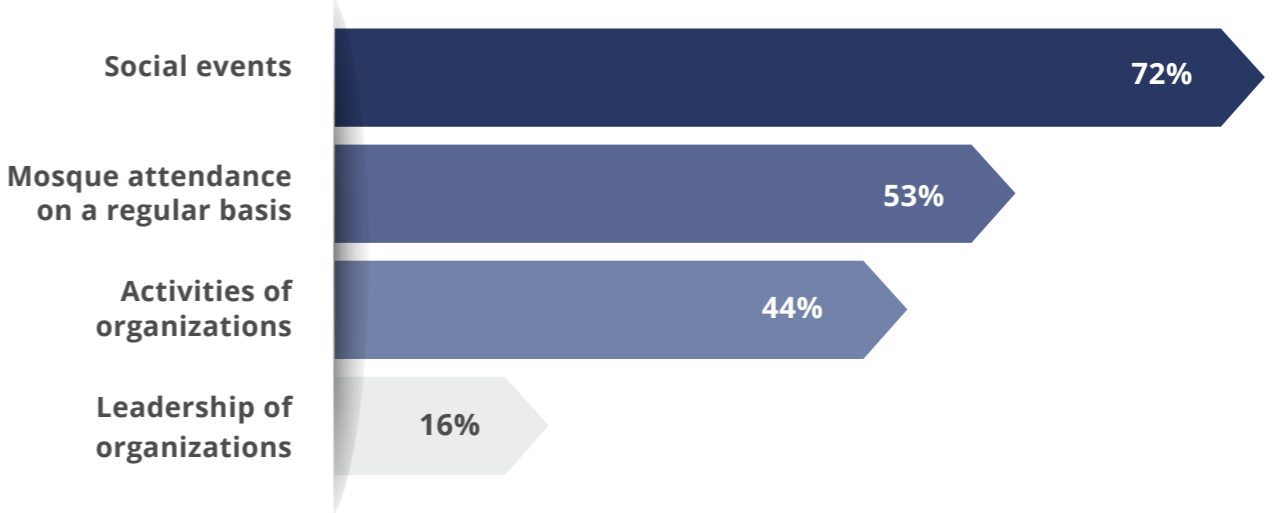
American and Canadian Muslims have both reported similar rates of mosque attendance to our respondents, according to Pew Research Center and the Environics Institute. This suggests that respondents' journeys out of Islam were not primarily motivated by unique feelings of isolation from the community—which findings discussed in Chapter 3 (Page 15) of this survey corroborate. This stands in contrast to common assumptions and assertions, especially from some Islamic religious institutions, that insufficient integration or identification with the religious community is often the true cause of unease about the religion itself.

## COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

Respondents were asked several questions to gauge their investment in their religious communities prior to apostasy.

Over two-thirds (72%) of respondents had formerly attended religion-based social events; over half (53%) had attended mosque on “a regular basis”; 44% had participated in the activities of Muslim organizations such as Islamic Society of North America, Council on American-Islamic Relations, or Muslim Students Association; and 16% had served as an officer, founder, or employee of a Muslim organization. In addition, 31% said they had participated in their former faith community “in some other social or communal way.”

% who participated in \_\_\_\_ within their religious community before apostatizing



Respondents were also given the opportunity to elaborate on the degree of their pre-apostasy community involvement and embeddedness in a write-in response. Some notable responses follow:

“ I was an imam at small prayer groups. As a teenager, I ran a Quran club and read Quran at my school’s end of year ceremony. ”

*32-year-old male*

“ Memorized the Quran and led prayers and Tarawih. [I] was very well-known for my religiosity in my community. ”

*19-year-old male*

“ [I] ran [a] mosque library for years. ”

*25-year-old male*

“ [I partook in] public Shia rituals in Tehran like Ashura, with practices such as self-flagellation. Also, [I visited] Shia holy sites in places like Mashhad. ”

*35-year-old male*

“ [I was a] member of [a] student Islamic organization. ”

*25-year-old male*

Many respondents said they had engaged in community or charity volunteer work, sometimes in a leadership role:

“ Community volunteer work; ghostwriting of 3 books on fiqh/ Islamic history. ”

*30-year-old female*

“ [I was a] youth leader, proofread religious material, wrote articles, gave speeches at the mosque, [and] ran charity events through the mosque. ”

*46-year-old male*

Many others said they had attended Islamic schools—and a few even reported teaching in Islamic schools or in Sunday school:

“ I attended a Muslim school for two years; my sister did for like six or seven years. Many other events at the mosque, from taking Koran lessons, Taekwondo lessons, to biweekly potlucks. I miss the food! ”

*22-year-old male*

“ Started a Sunday school in a city with no Islamic education or Islamic social venue. ”

*37-year-old female*

“ [I was] coerced into teaching kids at the weekend Islamic school. ”

*35-year-old male*



# 03

## THE ACT OF APOSTASY

Apostasy is an undertaking of immense gravity. Respondents fully disaffiliated from religion; they are not merely “lapsed” Muslims or Muslims who no longer attend mosque. They no longer believe the teachings of Islam or participate in its rituals, and they actively reject the religion—all religion—as part of their identity. Such a change represents a radical transformation of one’s worldview.

This survey finds that respondents’ reasons for leaving Islam are complex and multi-layered. Even so, there are common elements: most respondents cited concerns over human rights, logical coherence, and scientific validity as factors that motivated a re-examination of their worldview.

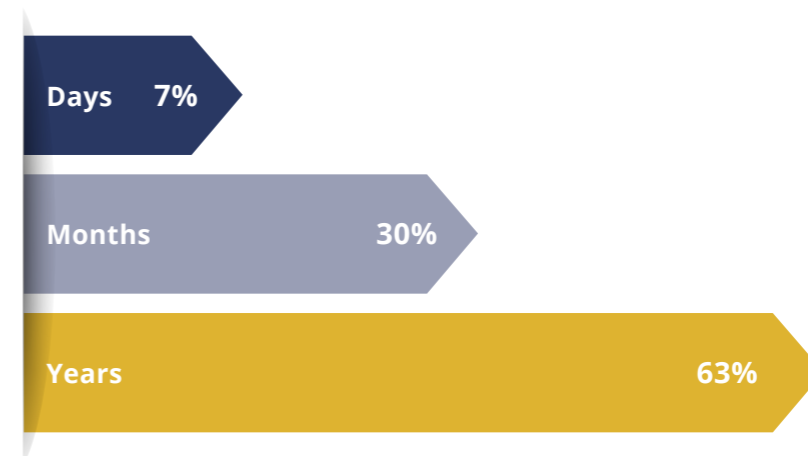
Ultimately, all crossed the same threshold, which, above all, was no simple task; more often than not, apostatizing is a years-

long struggle where the apostate is forced to grapple with fundamental issues of identity and belief.

### HOW LONG DOES IT TAKE?

Respondents indicated that their apostasy was generally a lengthy process. A majority (63%) said it was a matter of years from when they first began to question the faith before they ultimately left. Thirty percent (30%) said it took months, and only 7% said it was a matter of days.

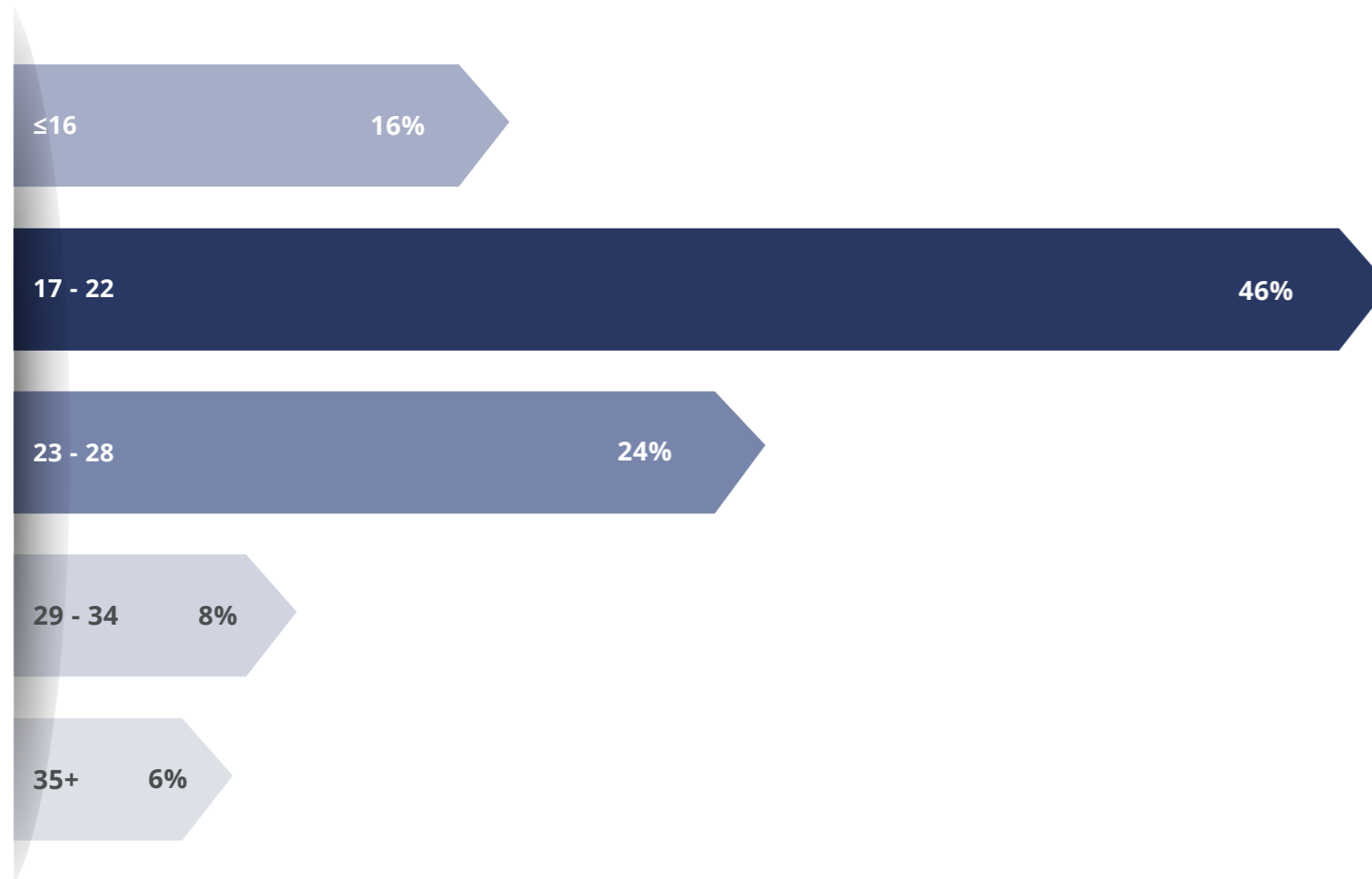
% who questioned Islam for a matter of \_\_\_\_ before leaving



## AGE OF APOSTASY

Respondents were generally quite young when they left Islam. A significant number, 16%, left at or before the age of 16. The great plurality, 46%, left between the ages of 17 and 22, and another 24% left between 23 and 28. Only 8% left between 29 and 34, and a minuscule 6% at age 35 or later.

% who left Islam at the age of \_\_\_\_



## DRIVERS OF APOSTASY

### REASONS FOR APOSTASY

Respondents were asked to “*consider each of the following factors and whether or not they influenced your choice to leave the faith.*” They were asked to rank the importance of internal contradictions in the scriptures; conflicts between Islam and human rights principles; conflicts between Islam and science; other problems with logic and conceptions of God; feeling disconnected from the Muslim community; and other, nonreligious motivations such as the discrimination they experienced as Muslims. They were also given the option to write in a response and offer any additional information.

### CONFLICTS BETWEEN ISLAM AND HUMAN RIGHTS

A little over a third (35%) of respondents cited conflict between Islam and human rights principles—issues like women’s rights and gay rights—as the most important factor in their apostasy, more than any other factor. Almost six in ten (58%) called this a contributing factor, and only 7% said it was not a factor.

## CONFLICTS BETWEEN ISLAM AND SCIENCE

Twenty-eight percent (28%) reported conflict between Islam and the scientific view of the natural world as the most important factor in their apostasy, while 65% labeled it a contributing factor. Only 7% said it was not a factor.

## LOGICAL CONTRADICTIONS AND CONCEPTIONS OF GOD

Respondents were asked about objections over the logical coherence of ideas about God in scripture, as well as other logical problems with Islamic doctrines and teachings. Nearly one in five (19%) labeled such concerns the most important factor in their apostasy, with another 68% labeling them a contributing factor. Only 13% said this was not a factor.

## INTERNAL CONTRADICTIONS IN THE SCRIPTURES

Three-fourths (75%) of respondents reported internal contradictions in Islamic scriptures as a contributing factor in their decision to leave the faith, and a further 9% described this as the most important factor. Only 16% said this was not a factor.



“...Islam was just a rehash of older religions and most of it was just copied and repackaged. I cannot follow a faith that is basically someone’s attempt at a power grab.”

35-year-old male

”

This factor is unique in that more respondents chose it as a “contributing factor” than any other—but very few called it the most important.

## DISCONNECTION FROM MUSLIM COMMUNITY

Though a common assumption is that a lack of social belonging often leads to the abandonment of Islam, a majority of respondents (59%) said feeling disconnected from the Muslim community was not a factor in their apostasy. Less than half (40%) called this a contributing factor, and less than 2% called this the most important factor.

“

As a gay man, I could not align my sexuality with how the Qur’an talked about gays and women. It was especially hard to accept Islam’s view of women.

30-year-old male

”

“

It is important to note that the conflict between religion and science caused me to stop believing a long [time] ago. Still, I kept practicing it because I was unaware of all the human rights issues.

36-year-old male

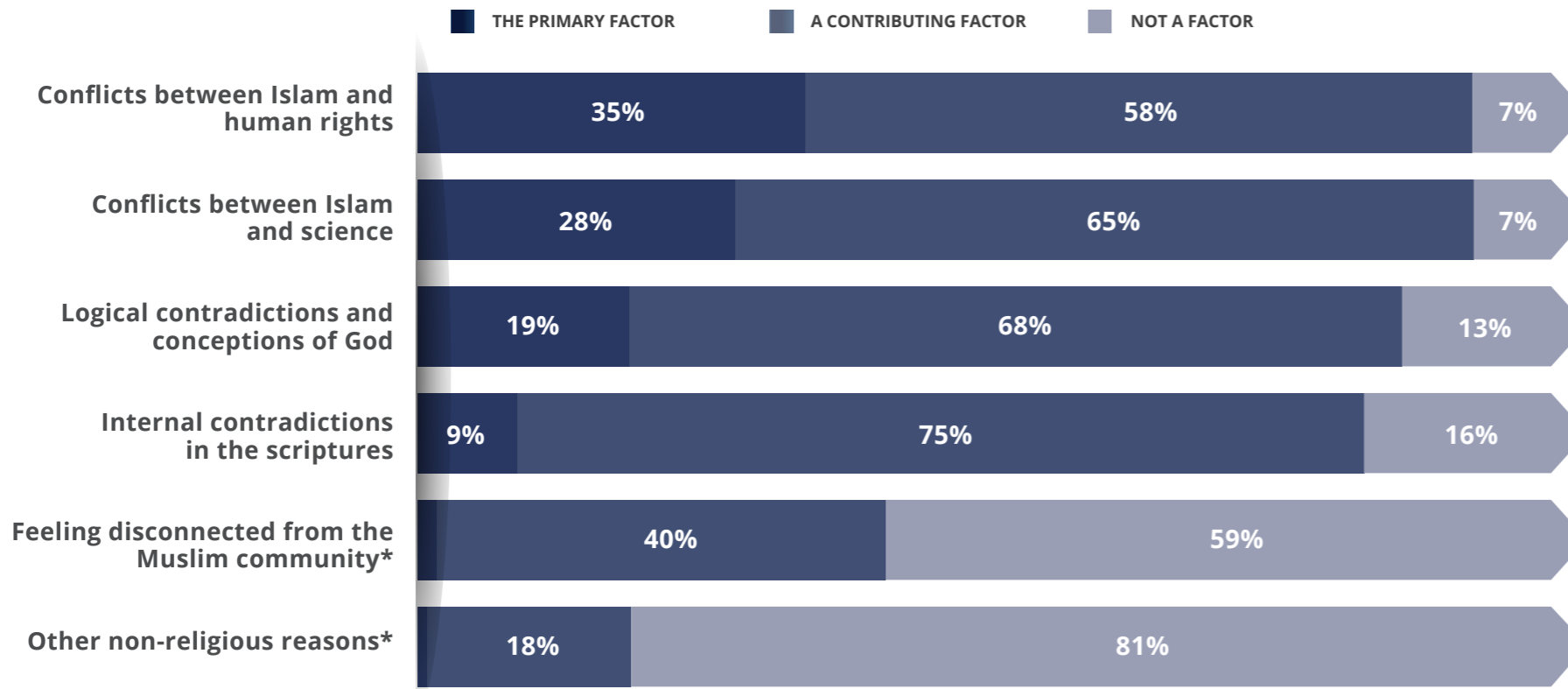
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## OTHER NON-RELIGIOUS REASONS

When asked whether non-religious reasons such as harassment for being a Muslim or lack of acceptance in Western society motivated their decision to leave the faith, an overwhelming majority of respondents—81%—rejected this idea completely.

This was the question for which respondents most frequently chose “not a factor.” Only 18% called this a contributing factor in their apostasy, and less than 1% listed this as the most important factor, the lowest rate for any response.

% who described \_\_\_\_ as a factor contributing to their apostasy



\*These questions were introduced into the survey after a number of respondents had already completed it. Only 41% of respondents answered these questions.

Islamic authorities and external commentators often assume that apostasy from Islam, rather than being a product of conscience, is primarily a result of the social stigma surrounding Islam, the at-times uncultured and uncouth “behaviors of those in authority” (i.e., imams), or trauma. These diagnoses, however, conflict with available data.

The trauma diagnosis in particular, which amounts to a pathologization of doubt, is described in a 2016 survey by Yaqeen Institute as “the most common.” “The apparent problem,” the survey concludes, “is one of the perceived theological incongruities in Islam. Beneath this surface-level discontent, however, is a traumatic life experience.” The “intellectual bases for doubt,” it follows, may simply serve to “mask a deeper, more intimate grievance.” Another more recent Yaqeen article states that, beyond ignorance, atheism can only result from “willful blindness and

recalcitrance, corrupted epistemic foundations, or a physiological explanation.”

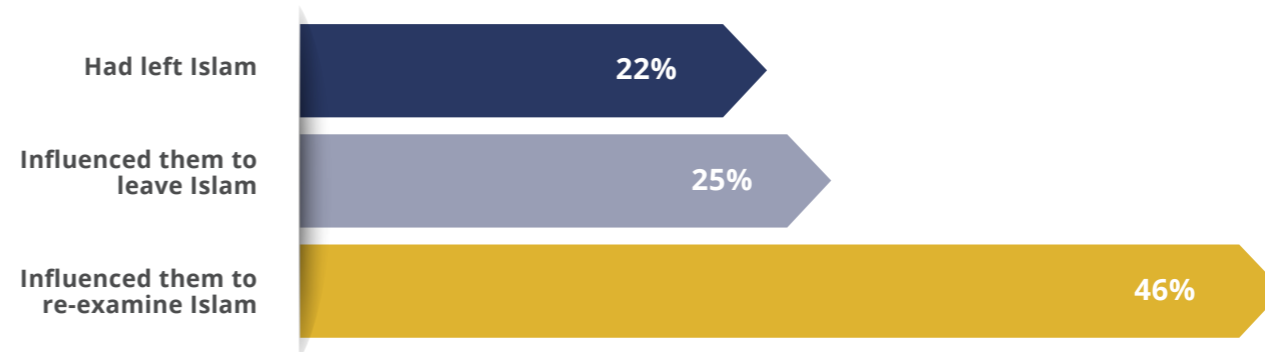
Other diagnoses made by Islamic authorities include: “emotional reasons... the convenience of atheism to fit in, to have unrestricted access to self gratification” (according to Sheikh Mohammad Elshinawy), “disparity between the Muslim world and the Western world” (according to Dr. Yasir Qadhi), “a life of false expectations” (according to Sheikh Yasir Birjas), and “the proliferation of those things that will poison a person’s spiritual well being” (according to Sheikh Hamzah Maqbul). These diagnoses likewise lack empirical bases.

## SOCIAL INFLUENCES

When asked whether anyone they knew influenced them to re-examine their beliefs, a majority of respondents—54%—said no. While this means just under half, 46%, said the opposite, respondents were also asked whether anyone they knew personally influenced them to apostatize: 75% said this was not the case while only 25% said otherwise.

Significantly, a high proportion of respondents—78%—reported not personally knowing any ex-Muslims before they left the faith, while only 22% said they did.

% who, while Muslim, knew someone who \_\_\_\_



## OTHER FACTORS

In addition to the listed options, respondents could offer further explanations or other motivations for apostatizing in a write-in section.

Some respondents spoke of their mortification with the idea that non-Muslims were going to hell or were somehow lesser than Muslims.

*“One of the first things I recall being told was that all non-Muslims were going to hell. I was the only Muslim in my class at public school, so that pretty much did it.”*

41-year-old female

*“I could not justify the hate in the scriptures (Qur’an and Hadith) towards non-Muslims (Kufaar), when I had met so many good people who were not Muslims.”*

25-year-old female

## APOSTASY AND ANTI-MUSLIM BIGOTRY

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As part of the survey, respondents were asked a small number of open-ended write-in questions, one of which asked: *“In what ways did the experience of bigotry against Muslims affect your decision to leave the faith?”*

In this way, respondents could explain how anti-Muslim bigotry was—or was not—a factor in their apostasy.

The majority maintained that anti-Muslim bigotry had no effect on their apostasy. Nonetheless, several interesting patterns did emerge. Many respondents were keenly aware of the bigotry Muslims can experience in the West, often as a result of experiencing it themselves while believers. They expressed sympathy for their former co-religionists even as they opposed the teachings of Islam. In addition, anti-Muslim bigotry occasionally served to slow respondents’ eventual apostasy, as they felt a need to remain loyal to their religious “tribe” in the face of discrimination.

### DRIVEN AWAY BY BIGOTRY

Only two people indicated that bigotry against Muslims made them more likely to apostatize—seemingly as a simple result of not wanting to deal with it.

*“I didn’t want to be called a terrorist by random people.”*

21-year-old female

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*“9/11 happened, and I live in the South.”*

27-year-old male

### DRIVEN TO INVESTIGATION

For some respondents, seeing or experiencing bigotry against Muslims motivated them to investigate or learn more about their faith.

*“If anything, [anti-Muslim bigotry] helped me realize that I want to understand Islam more because what I was seeing on the news was appalling. After I did months of research, I realized a lot of it (not all) is true.”*

27-year-old female

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*“The dialogue about [anti-Muslim bigotry] certainly did. For example, when people would claim offensive drawings of Muhammad were ‘bigoted and Islamophobic,’ it actually led me to question their sanity (like the Denmark boycott, for example).”*

26-year-old male

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*“If anything [anti-Muslim bigotry] allowed me to examine my beliefs, but it never made me feel forced to leave the faith. It made me examine it by making me cling onto it harder which caused a domino effect where I began learning more and questioning more.”*

25-year-old female

Some mentioned probing deeper into their faith for the purpose of refuting bigots' arguments, which indirectly jump-started their departure from Islam.

*"It affected my decision in a way that I was more introspective about my faith, and I wanted to provide counterarguments to bigoted people; that caused me to learn more about the flaws in Islam."*

22-year-old male



*"It didn't make me want to leave the faith. It did, however, set me on a course of reading and reflection about Islam (I wanted to "do my research" to be able to refute people who said Islam was an oppressive and backward religion), which I believe ultimately culminated in my conclusion that Islam, like other religions, was man-made."*

32-year-old female

## HESITATION TO LEAVE

Several respondents mentioned that anti-Muslim bigotry made them hesitate to leave the faith. They often reacted defensively to bigotry, feeling it necessary to continue identifying as Muslim for the sake of solidarity and group loyalty.

*"I guess [bigotry against Muslims] made my questioning take longer. When I was younger, I attributed all the negative things people said against Islam to bigotry and ignorance, so I had to overcome that to realize that some things that people said against Islam weren't bigoted at all—they were just right. But differentiating the bigots from the critiques made things more confusing."*

24-year-old female

*"I felt Muslims were treated unjustly and stayed in the faith for years after I stopped believing, almost solely to affect negative views publicly and defend the people I loved."*

27-year-old female

*"After 9/11 I became more religious because I felt that Islam was being targeted, but then that made me read the Qur'an in English, and then I realized that there were so many contradictions and it made me really rethink my worldview. I used to think women were valued in Islam. But unfortunately it's the complete opposite."*

Age and sex withheld

*"I don't receive any less discrimination/bigotry as an ex-Muslim than I did as a Muslim (if anything, I now receive more); I did feel pressure to identify as a cultural Muslim for solidarity purposes, despite not actually believing, which delayed my eventual decision."*

23-year-old, sex withheld

### DIGGING IN THEIR HEELS

A smaller number of respondents said bigotry against Muslims inspired a temporary increase in religiosity.

*"The perceived bigotry I faced as a Muslim only worked to make me more radical and conservative as a Muslim."*

24-year-old male

### SYMPATHY AFTER LEAVING

Some respondents became more mindful of how they treated Muslim issues, and many said they had taken steps to ensure that bigots would not use them as props.

*"[Anti-Muslim bigotry] made me want to keep quiet about my leaving the faith for fear that it would be interpreted by the right as fuel for more bigotry."*

27-year-old female



*"It made me seriously think about my decision. I needed to confirm that I was making this decision on my own and was not being influenced by anti-Muslim sentiments around me."*

26-year-old male

*"Bigotry made me feel stronger about my faith and about being a Muslim."*

30-year-old, other gender

*"I think it delayed it. It made me think both sides are equally guilty of bigotry and human rights issues and many terrorists are retaliating to violence and bigotry."*

36-year-old male

*"Bigotry made me further recoil into the religion I was certain was none of the things as described by perceived bigots."*

Age withheld, male

*"I was always hesitant to explore my doubts of Islam due to often being the target of anti-Muslim bigotry. That bigotry made me defensive about a faith I didn't even believe in. I felt guilty doubting my faith because it felt as though I were betraying the Muslims I knew, and it felt like I was contributing to anti-Muslim bigotry by rejecting Islam and making it look bad, therefore casting a negative spotlight on its followers. I genuinely did not think that leaving the faith was a possibility until a family member told me about their apostasy and invited me to leave with them. When I did leave, I affirmed to myself that I will always fight against anti-Muslim bigotry, even when defying Islam and all other religions."*

21-year-old female



*“The ongoing bigotry against Muslims made me careful and strategic about how I choose the places for conversations and how I talk to people about the problems of Muslim communities I passed through. For instance, I am more open to talking about domestic abuse, racism, and queerphobia in Muslim communities in leftist political forums than conservative political forums. I understand that even though I will share the same stories, they will arouse and fuel distinctly different dispositions (especially when there’s no room for nuanced conversations).”*

*When I talk to multiculturalist liberals, I make it clear to them that their self-flagellating approach to our histories and present politics is not helping Muslim communities. When I talk to conservative friends, I make it clear that their reading of Muslim communities is coming from a place of prejudice and that’s not going to help solve the conflicts we find ourselves in. When I talk to Muslim identitarians, I tell them that there has to be room for self-critique and not just West-critique, otherwise Muslim communities won’t grow towards social justice. I have immense difficulty aligning myself with ex-Muslim speakers and public personas who only talk about Muslim community issues*

*without seeing their connections to the broader world politics or without contemplating how their narratives will strengthen the hatred against Muslim communities (which will further entrench fundamentalist ideologies).”*  
28-year-old male

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Some respondents even expressed hesitance about openly identifying as non-Muslim or ex-Muslim in certain contexts, fearing that doing so could fuel bigotry.

*“I still dislike bigotry against Muslims and to some extent feel those people [bigots] are still talking about myself and people like me even though I am not religious. I suppose there is still a pull to identify as a “Muslim” ethnically even though it is a religious identity.”*  
29-year-old female

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*“I continue to feel a strong association with Islam and Muslims. Any attack on the religion frustrates me. I didn’t leave Islam because of antagonism towards Islam, and I don’t think it would be a good reason to. Antagonizing Islam and Muslims hurts our cause. I think independence and inspiration are much*

*healthier ways to leave religion. I am still ethnically and culturally related to Muslims and I intend to stand with the Muslim community in defense against bigotry.”*  
35-year-old male

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*“Setting aside the religion aspect of Muslims, it is pretty blatant that they are victim to targeting and racism. My decision to leave Islam was solely based on the reasoning that I do not believe there to be veracity in their claims, but I don’t feel like I could ever abandon my people when they are being victimized and targeted. Leaving Islam has been a personal and internal choice for me, and I do not believe I can be entirely openly nontheist when I have a sense of duty to my family and friends in the faith.”*  
28-year-old male

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*“Although I have left the faith, I do not identify myself as an ex-Muslim or an atheist in Western circles as I feel that I will be feeding into the stereotype of what it means to be a Muslim. I also do not want to help the right-wing white fundamentalists define my culture and the faith that so many people are part of. To somehow*

*characterize Islam as being anything different that Christianity or Judaism is a lie. There is very little difference between a Muslim living in a small town somewhere in India and a Christian living in a small town in America with respect to their religious views. As ex-Muslims we need to be very careful about how we play into the hands of bigots who try and portray this wrong image of how Islam is so unique and dangerous. It is not - it is as dangerous as Christianity and Judaism.”*

30-year-old male

Islamic authorities and other observers often assume that bigotry against Muslims is causally related to apostasy from Islam. This idea is, in a certain sense, valid—though not at all for the reasons usually assumed. Whereas only two written respondents described anti-Muslim bigotry as an experience they directly sought to avoid through apostasy, all other respondents who mentioned anti-Muslim bigotry described it as something that drove them to learn more about Islam, grow more committed to both their religion and coreligionists, hesitate from leaving Islam, commit to defending Muslims against bigotry, or even stay in the closet after apostatizing.

## **BIGOTRY WITHIN ISLAM**

Contrary to most other respondents, a few respondents made it a point to reverse the terms of this question. Dismissing the idea that bigotry against Muslims affected their decision to leave Islam, they instead raised the issue of Muslim bigotry against non-Muslims, some citing this as a motivating factor in their apostasy.

*“If anything, it was Muslims’ bigotry against others that played a significant role in my decision to openly become an ex-Muslim and a vocal critic of fundamentalist and political interpretations of Islam.”*

35-year-old male

*“I lived most of my life in a Muslim-majority country. I’m familiar with Muslims’ prejudice and intolerance towards people of other faiths, but not bigotry against Muslims.”*

Age withheld, male

*“I left the faith while I was still in a Muslim-majority country (Pakistan). Got to experience our (Pakistani Muslims’) bigotry towards the minorities in Pakistan, which helped me with the decision to leave Islam.”*

29-year-old male

*“Logically, it no longer made sense to me that a God exists. Some of the ‘clues’ that the Quran was not written by a deity were the passages related to sexism, racism, slavery, apostasy, etc. The bigotry within Islam was a considerable factor in my decision to leave the faith.”*

40-year-old female

# 04

## AFTER APOSTASY

Reflecting the diversity of the ex-Muslim population, respondents approached their lives after faith in a variety of ways. Some feared the possible consequences of their decisions and concealed their identities as apostates, while others revealed themselves and suffered real consequences as a result.

Evident in our respondents' fears and experiences is the intense stigma attached to apostasy and non-belief.

At the same time, respondents indicated that life after apostasy can be rich and rewarding. Doors open with new opportunities, both intellectual and social, as the constraints of religious doctrine are lifted. Respondents were often grateful for their new secular worldview, even if the adjustment to this new world can be fraught with challenges they never before faced.

### THE CLOSET

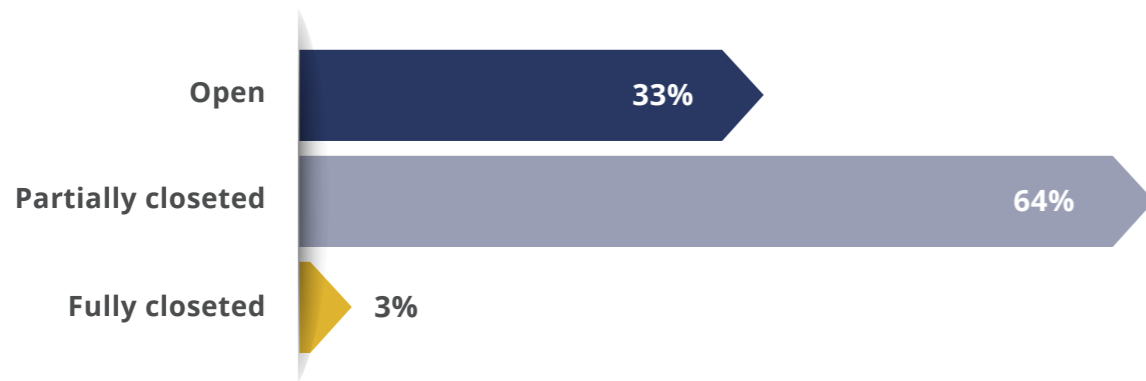
Respondents were asked to what extent they were open about their lack of faith. They could answer that they were "open," "partially closeted" (open to some people but not to others), or "fully closeted" (open to no one).

The majority of respondents concealed their ex-Muslim identity to at least some degree. Many feared the consequences they could face for coming out. In some cases, these were fears of physical violence, but more often, respondents feared what could happen to their relationships with friends and family. The experiences of those who opened up about their apostasy show that many of these worries were well-founded.

## HOW OPEN ARE THEY?

Almost two-thirds (64%) of respondents were partially closeted; only 3% were fully closeted. The remaining 33% were open.

% who described themselves as \_\_\_ about their apostasy



That respondents concealed their apostasy primarily from their families and revealed it primarily to their friends inverts stereotypical relationship roles. On fundamental issues, family members are often the most trusted confidants, but when religion becomes a wedge issue, this dynamic deteriorates or breaks down entirely. To avoid frayed relationships—or to avoid hurting their siblings and especially their parents—respondents steer clear of confrontation.

In addition, 43% said they avoided revealing their apostasy to “those from a similar ethnic background,” and 34% said they concealed from “those who appeared to be Muslim.”

## FROM WHOM DO THEY CONCEAL?

Partially closeted respondents were asked from whom they hid their apostasy, which provided a sense of the relationships where apostates felt revealing themselves would be most damaging or untenable.

The most common response (61%) was concealment from some family members, while 29% concealed their apostasy from their entire family. In contrast, 45% hid their apostasy from some friends, and only 2% hid from all of their friends.

Respondents could additionally offer further information in a write-in response. Some notable answers follow.

*“I am not fully public due to the fear of reprisal from the Saudi government and possibly not having the ability to visit family in my country of origin.”*

58-year-old male

*“My father works in Riyadh. None with ties to the region are aware, such as his work colleagues, or my friends with whom I spent my last year of high school there.”*

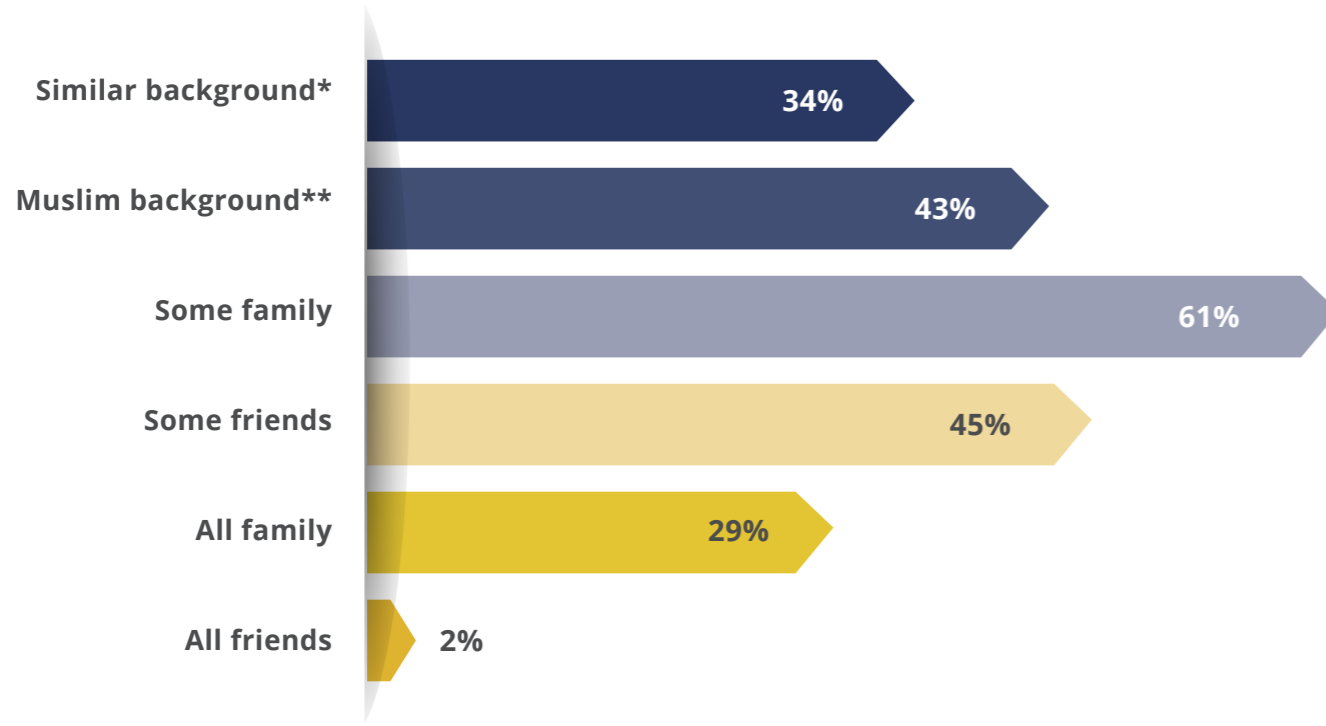
24-year-old male

*“Anyone (coworkers, strangers, new people, etc.) whose religiosity I’m uncertain of, regardless of whether they are or appear to be Muslim or of another faith.”*

27-year-old female

## PARTIES APOSTATES HID THEIR APOSTASY FROM

% of partially closeted respondents who hid their apostasy from \_\_\_\_



\* "Similar background" refers to "those from a similar ethnic background"

\*\* "Muslim background" refers to "those who appeared to be Muslim"

## WHY DO THEY CONCEAL?

Fully and partially closeted respondents were each asked: "Why do you hide your apostasy?" They were then given a list of possible reasons, to each of which they could answer "yes," "no," or "maybe." At the end of the section, they were also given the

opportunity to offer any additional reasons in a write-in response. Unsurprisingly, fully closeted respondents exhibited much higher rates of concern about every potential consequence of revealing themselves.

### FAMILY

Reasons related to family were the most important for partially closeted respondents. When asked whether they stayed in the closet for fear of losing family (through being shunned or ostracized), 60% said yes, 23% said maybe, and only 17% said no. A majority also feared damage to their family's reputation (53%), with 24% answering maybe and another 24% answering no.

In households with multiple children, it is sometimes the case that the apostasy of one child prompts a change in parental style. Immigrant parents in particular may blame the apostasy of a child on the influence of the adopted country's more liberal culture, and thus take steps to prevent this outcome in the other children. To gauge whether this had an effect on respondents' willingness to be open, they were asked about the possibility of impact upon their siblings. This produced a more split response; 37% said they feared this, while 19% answered maybe and 45% answered no.

Respondents, it appears, do not fear physical and emotional abuse primarily from their friends, but rather from their families and especially their parents.

***"Possibility of serious life threats to family members back home; possibility of my sister losing her marriage as a result of my apostasy."***

35-year-old female

***"If I am open/go public about my apostasy, it could put my mother's life at risk who lives in Pakistan."***

29-year-old male

*"[There is a] constant paranoia of worrying that your family might learn you're an atheist, and shunning you for the rest of your life."*

24-year-old male

*"I am in constant fear. Fear of losing my family, having to think of either leaving my family and losing myself, my freedom, or leaving and missing my family and comfort and safety they provide."*

Age withheld, female

*"[I feel an] impending doom of losing my family, especially when my father has already temporarily kicked out some of my siblings for much more minor offenses (like sneaking out at night or getting a small wrist tattoo)."*

26-year-old male



The fully closeted were also most concerned about potential impact on family and family relations. Every respondent indicated that they feared at least some loss of family (76% yes and 24% maybe) and damage to their family's reputation (80% yes, 20% maybe). Here also, fear of impact on siblings was less pronounced, but a majority answered yes (59%), while 18% said maybe and 24% said no.

*"My husband will definitely divorce me if I ever told him openly. His family is very religious."*

42-year-old female

*"Possibility of problems with husband who is Muslim, knows I'm not, and is choosing to accept it because, I'm assuming, he loves me enough to. But could be pressured by my family if they were to know."*

37-year-old female

*"I have three younger sisters; my parents are kind of liberal, but slowly got to that. If I come out as an ex-Muslim, I am afraid they will cut a lot of freedom for my sisters immediately thinking my freedom is what led to my apostasy."*

23-year-old female

## EMOTIONAL MANIPULATION

Half of partially closeted respondents feared the possibility of emotional manipulation upon coming out and a further 20% said maybe, while 30% said they did not conceal their apostasy for this reason. Meanwhile, more than two-thirds (71%) of fully closeted respondents said they feared the possibility of emotional manipulation, 18% said maybe, and only 12% said no.

## ABUSE

Fear of verbal abuse was fairly common among the partially closeted, with 40% citing it as a reason for concealment and a further 24% answering maybe. Thirty-six percent (36%) said they did not conceal their

apostasy for this reason. Meanwhile, 76% of fully closeted respondents hid their apostasy for fear of verbal abuse, compared to 12% who said maybe and another 12% who said no.

Fear of physical abuse was less common. The majority of the partially closeted, 63%, said they did not conceal their apostasy for this reason. Only 19% answered yes and a further 19% answered maybe, though these are significant proportions in themselves. Among the fully closeted, physical abuse was feared more often: 41% answered yes, 29% answered maybe, and 29% answered no.

## LOSS OF FRIENDS

About one quarter (26%) of partially closeted respondents hid their apostasy for fear of losing friends. Slightly less (23%) answered maybe to this question, and a majority, 52%, answered no. Fully closeted respondents, however, greatly feared losing friends if they came out, with 71% answering yes, 18% answering maybe, and only 12% answering no.

## MATERIAL CONSEQUENCES

Fear of consequences to one's physical well-being were the least cited as reasons for concealment. However, a small but significant number of respondents still feared physical harm, especially among the fully closeted.

Eight percent (8%) of partially closeted said they feared the possibility of being relocated to another country if they came out, with another 7% answering maybe. The vast majority, 85%, answered no. Among the fully closeted, 18% said yes, 18% said maybe, and 65% said no.

Most respondents similarly dismissed fears of being kicked out of their homes and losing financial support, though not as overwhelmingly. However, this may be due more to the age distribution of respondents than the actual likelihood of these consequences among those capable of experiencing them.

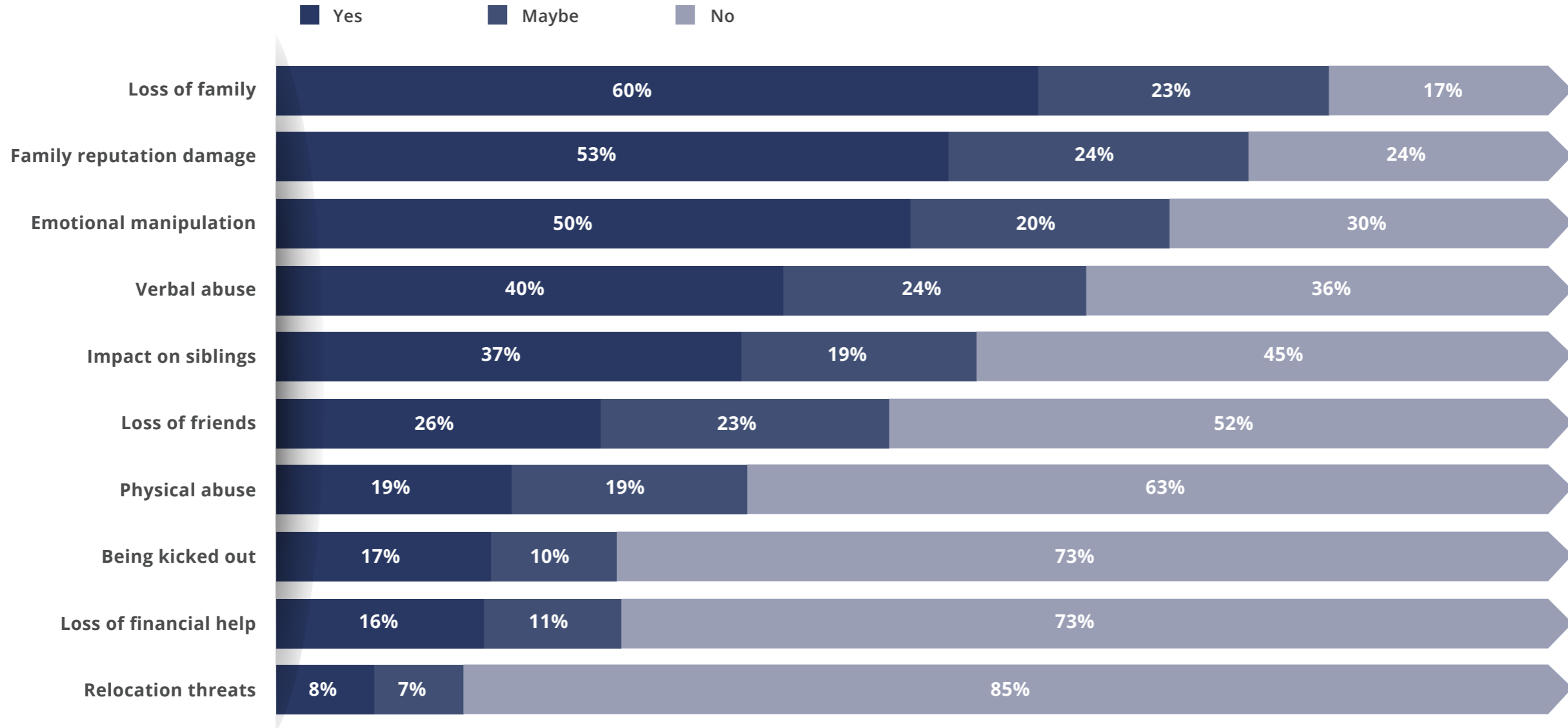
Almost three quarters (73%) of partially closeted respondents said they did not conceal their apostasy for either of these reasons. On fear of being kicked out, 10% and 17% said maybe and yes, respectively; on loss of financial support, 11% and 16% answered maybe and yes, respectively.

The fully closeted were again more wary: on fear of losing financial support, 29% said yes and another 29% said maybe, while 41% said no. On being kicked out, 35% answered yes, 29% answered maybe, and 35% answered no.



## REASONS FOR STAYING PARTIALLY CLOSETED

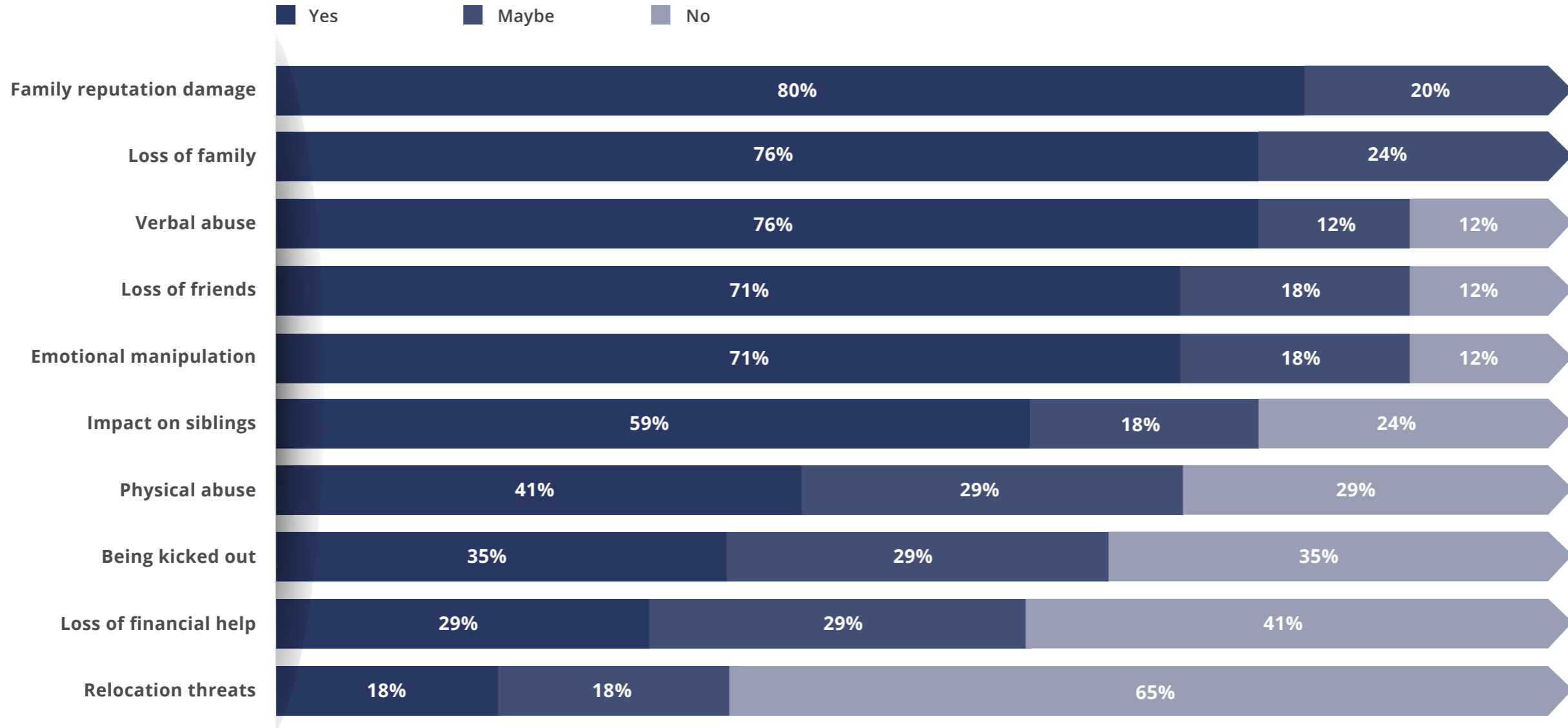
% who described \_\_\_\_ as something they feared for coming out





## REASONS FOR STAYING FULLY CLOSETED

% who described \_\_\_\_ as something they feared for coming out



## SOCIAL PRESSURE

In addition to questions asking about their reasons for concealment, partially closeted respondents were separately asked whether family or friends pressured them to keep quiet about their lack of faith.

A little more than half (55%) answered that this happened to them.

% of partially closeted respondents who \_\_\_\_ pressured to keep quiet about their apostasy by a friend or family member



## OTHER FEARS

In a write-in response, respondents were given the opportunity to offer any additional reasons for concealing. Some notable answers follow.

*"Fear for my safety. I'm worried crazy Muslims that I don't even know might try to hurt me because the [punishment] for apostasy is death. For example, I was in a cab late at night after partying with friends and the Muslim driver asked me if I was Muslim. I had been drinking and was alone in the cab so I said no I'm not Muslim. He asked where I was from so I lied and said Mexico."*

41-year-old female

*"Ethnic and religious background plays a major role in physician referral patterns. I worry by announcing my atheism that I am excluding myself from taking care of a large proportion of patients from my background. It may have financial implications on me but even more so I exclude myself from caring for people who share my background, which is unsettling."*

32-year-old male

A few traveled regularly in Muslim-majority countries and feared for their physical safety if their atheism were to become known.

*"I travel a lot in Muslim countries. It can be dangerous."*

Age withheld, male

*"I like visiting Pakistan. Being open about my apostasy would take that away from me."*

29-year-old male

*"To keep my head firmly attached to my neck when I visit Dad [in Saudi Arabia]."*

24-year-old male

*“Most of the philanthropic [work] that I do is in the Muslim world. It’s easy to navigate through the different nonprofits and countries themselves without any atheist stigma.*

*I also like the fact that I can talk to very influential people within the Muslim community about progressive subjects without their guard being up.*

*Ironically, I find that I’ve made more friends working the Muslim ummah being a semi closeted atheist than I did as a practicing Muslim.*

*I attribute it to being more open to everyone along the human spectrum of thought, regardless of [whether] they’re Muslim or not.”*

34-year-old male

Some did not want to cause emotional pain for their parents or other members of their family.

*“To protect my father from feeling sad. He is too old and there is no benefit of dragging him through emotions and issues he cannot understand.”*

58-year-old male

*“[I worry about] the stress accidentally killing one of my parents.”*

23-year-old male

*“I love my parents. I don’t want to hurt them.”*

23-year-old female

*“I don’t want my mother to live in misery.”*

32-year-old male

*“My mother’s health (80 years old and weak).”*

42-year-old male

*“It’d hurt my parents, and I live too far away for it to really matter.”*

30-year-old male

*“I do not want to disappoint or hurt family members.”*

31-year-old female

Finally, some respondents simply did not want to deal with any possible interpersonal conflict that might arise.

*“This news may complicate things with the wife’s family. Also, I don’t want to deal with people in my extended family trying to convert me back.”*

Age withheld, male

*“The biggest reason is because I don’t have the time or energy to explain it to people. Being open about my atheism invites questions and attempts to convert me back.”*

25-year-old male

*“Unnecessary to tell some; it would be a futile conversation with unknown impacts.*

*Also, I’m worried they will bombard my children with Islamic doctrine.”*

41-year-old female

## THE CONSEQUENCES OF LEAVING

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Open and partially closeted respondents were asked: *“When you opened up about your lack of faith, did you experience any of the following from believers?”* This question accompanied several listed consequences, to

each of which respondents could answer yes or no. At the end of the section, they could offer additional write-in responses on any other experiences they may have had.

Open respondents were generally more likely to experience negative consequences, since they did not hide from anyone, but there was similarity across both groups in the frequencies of each response.

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### EMOTIONAL MANIPULATION

Emotional manipulation was the most common consequence respondents experienced after coming out, reported by about two-thirds (67%) of open respondents and 59% of partially closeted respondents.

### LOSS OF FRIENDS

Loss of friends was another very common negative consequence, which 62% of open respondents and 43% of partially closeted respondents experienced.

### ABUSE

Verbal abuse was fairly common, reported by 61% of open respondents and 38% of partially closeted. Physical abuse, however, was the rarest consequence apostates actually experienced; 13% of open respondents and 7% of partially

closeted respondents reported it. These numbers are not insignificant, but they are low compared to the frequencies at which respondents experienced other consequences listed in the survey.

In addition, 34% of open respondents received threats of violence, compared to 18% of partially closeted respondents.

### LOSS OF FAMILY

Almost half (45%) of open respondents lost family after coming out, compared to 23% of partially closeted respondents.

### FORCED RELIGIOUS INSTRUCTION

Almost a quarter (23%) of open respondents

experienced forced religious instruction, compared to 19% of partially closeted respondents.

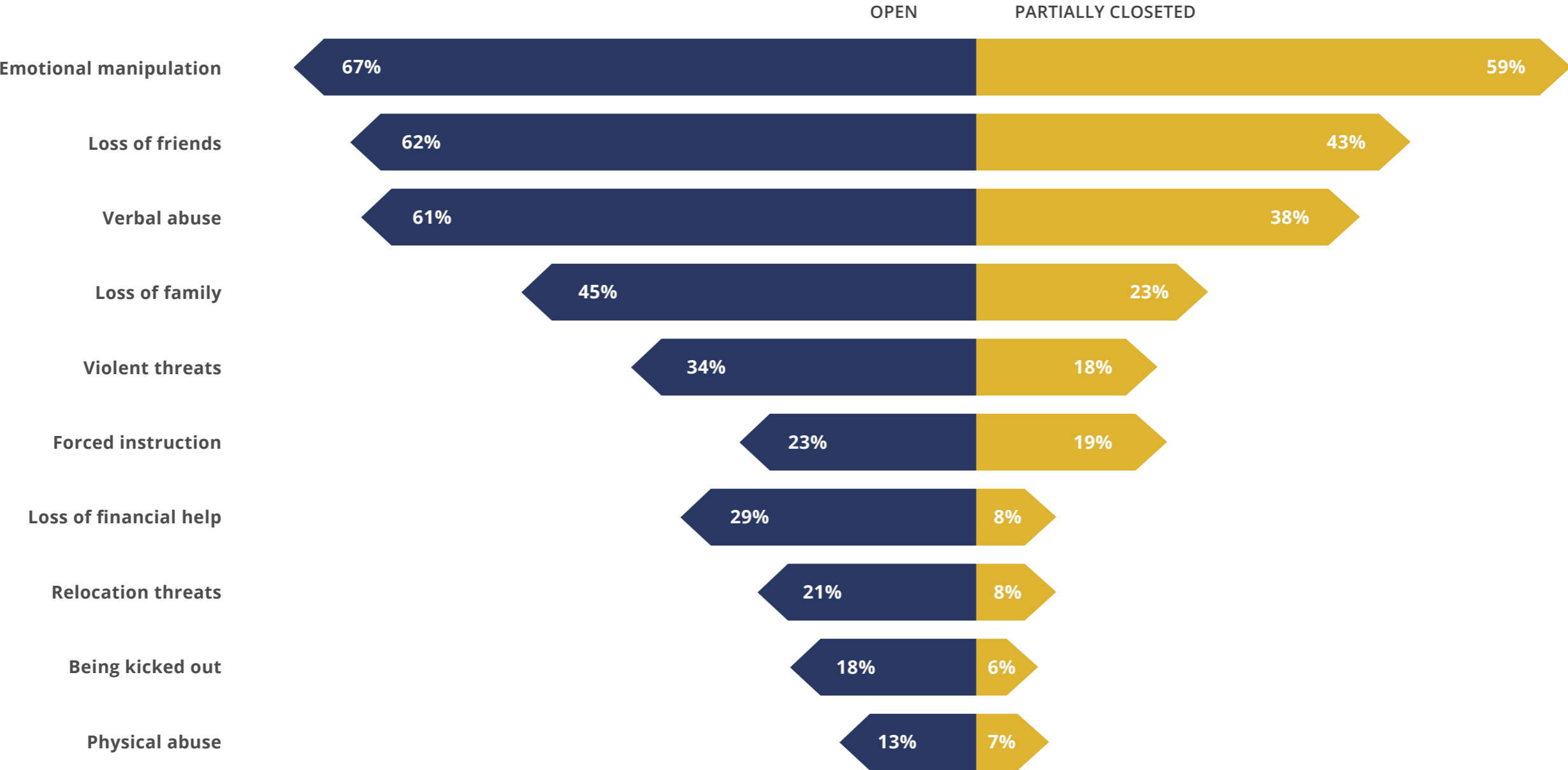
### MATERIAL CONSEQUENCES

Material consequences for leaving Islam were not very common, but respondents still experienced them, especially open respondents. Almost one in three (29%) of open respondents experienced a loss of financial support, 21% experienced threats of relocation to another country, and 18% were kicked out from home.

In contrast, these numbers for partially closeted respondents were 8%, 8%, and 6%, respectively—presumably because they most often hid from family.

# CONSEQUENCES OF APOSTASY

% who experienced \_\_\_ as a consequence of their apostasy



## OTHER CONSEQUENCES

Both groups of respondents were given the opportunity to offer further input on consequences they experienced as a result of their apostasy as a write-in response. Some notable answers follow.

*“Was accused of abuse to get my daughter away from me because I was an atheist and my ex does not want that influence on her.”*

48-year-old male

*“I divorced before leaving, and ended up in a custody battle with [my children’s] father who was trying to save the children’s souls from my influence.”*

46-year-old female

*“I basically moved out of my parents’ home and out to another province, basically proving to them that I could handle myself, and they eventually perhaps accepted that I was no more a child. Over the years, not only I as an individual, but my family together has been in a religious regression, in a process of ‘secularization’ if you will.”*

22-year-old male

*“Best friend’s wife, also a close friend, did not come to my son’s same-sex wedding.”*

Age withheld, male

*“Loss of respect; my parents didn’t disown me (because they don’t want to lose contact with their grandchildren). However, they definitely lost respect/love for me. Their feelings toward me changed. I feel like they only maintain a relationship with me in an attempt to ‘save’ my children.”*

41-year-old female

A few mentioned that others in their life doubted their sincerity after they apostatized.

*“[I experienced an] immediate rejection of my good or altruistic intentions, factual statements about my rationale, etc. The sincerity of my willingness to be a part of Indian/Desi culture was doubted.”*

27-year-old female

*“[I received] accusations that I never was Muslim to begin with or that I lacked sufficient knowledge to leave Islam from an intelligent perspective.”*

40-year-old male

*“[A cousin my age] not taking my apostasy seriously. Shrugged it off as a phase.”*

23-year-old female

A handful, however, reported that they either experienced no serious consequences or that their Muslim friends and family were generally respectful, or at least not hostile to, their decision.

***“Didn’t open up to any Muslims that weren’t ex-Muslims (siblings are ex-Muslim) and didn’t have many Muslim friends, but those that are didn’t care much.”***

32-year-old male

***“Only one Muslim knows I left Islam and he says he understands and doesn’t care. the others don’t know what’s going on.”***

62-year-old female

***“[A] friendly lecture by [my] uncle trying to get me to convert back.”***

Age withheld, male

***“Family was disappointed, but they still respect my viewpoint.”***

30-year-old male

***“Spouse and siblings don’t understand why I did what I did, but are accepting of me nevertheless.”***

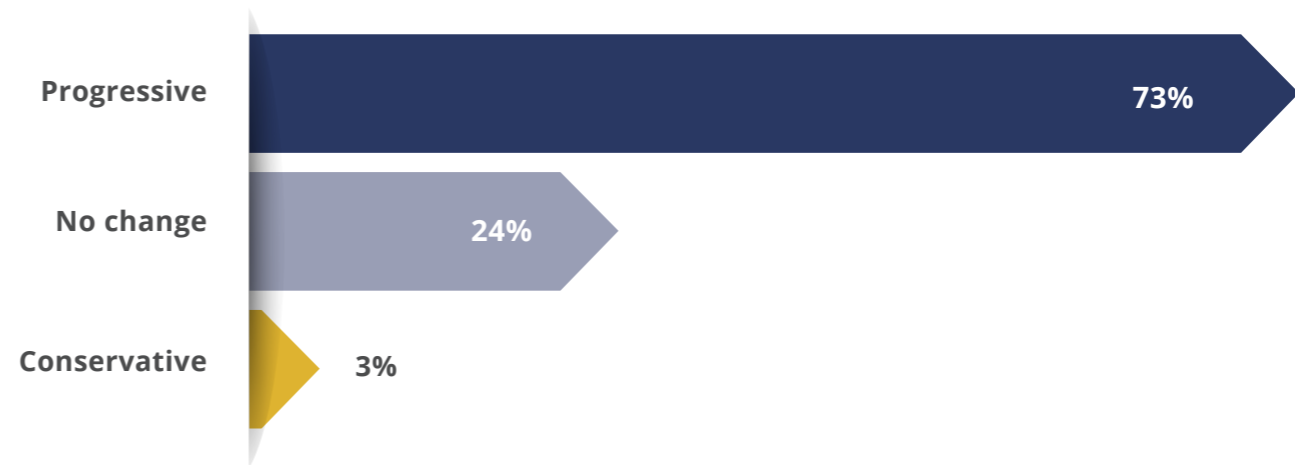
50-year-old male

## ADJUSTING TO NEW REALITIES

### CHANGES IN POLITICAL AND SOCIAL VIEWS

As respondents let go of conservative religious beliefs, so too did they embrace more progressive views on other issues: an overwhelming 73% became more politically and socially progressive after leaving, while only 24% experienced no change. Curiously, a few—3%— became more conservative.

% who became more \_\_\_ in their political and social views after leaving Islam



## ADJUSTING TO PROHIBITED ACTIVITIES

To gather information about the transition from religious to non-religious life, respondents were asked: **“After leaving, did you experience internal difficulties participating in ‘haram’ or otherwise frowned upon behaviors?”**

About six in ten (61%) indicated they had some difficulty. These respondents were then asked a series of questions about which behaviors, in particular, they found difficulty with. After this, they could offer additional input in a write-in response.

Much of the discomfort in adjusting to a non-religious life—especially with regard to religions like Islam which so emphasize different roles for the sexes—lies in how one relates to the opposite sex. Among our respondents, 28% found great difficulty socializing with the opposite sex, 37% found some difficulty, and 35% found none.

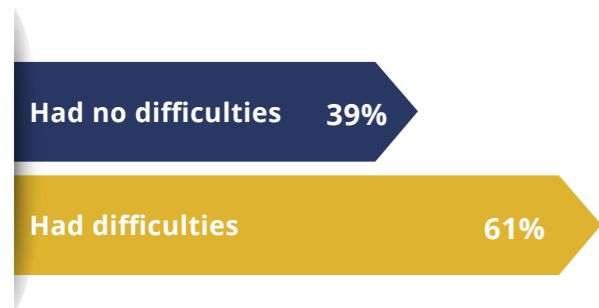
These numbers are striking, but dating and sexual activity predictably posed even more of a problem: 47% of respondents found great difficulty adjusting to dating,

29% found some difficulty, and 24% found none. Likewise, 44% found great difficulty with pre-marital sexual activity, 29% found some difficulty, and 27% found none.

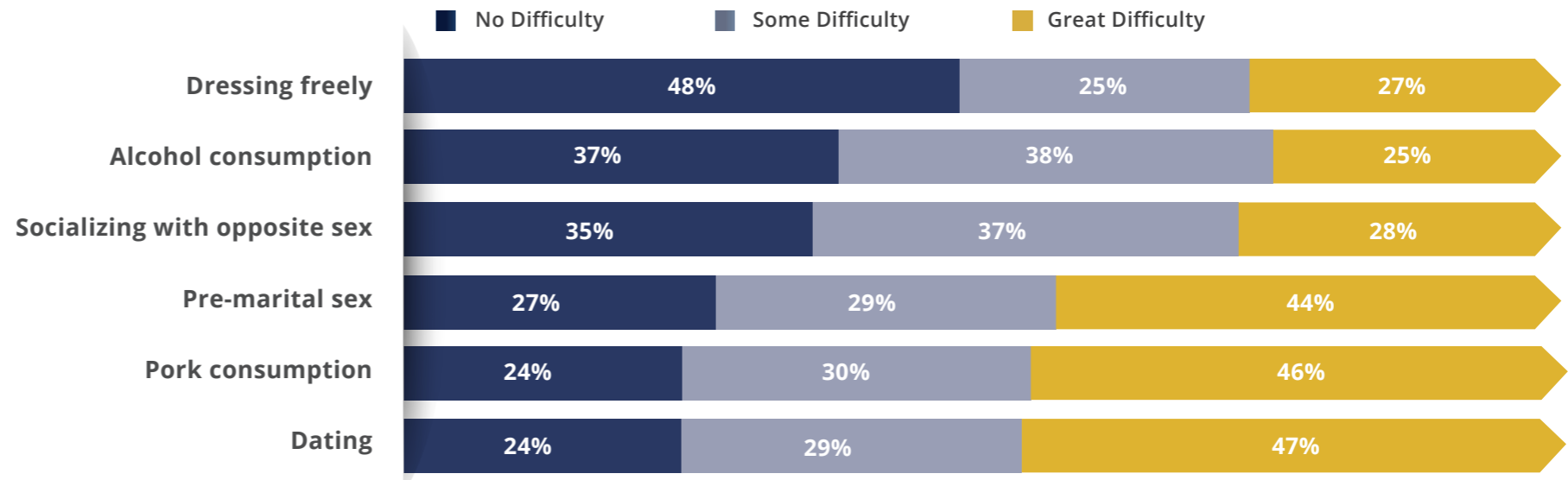
Respondents had to contend with other behavioral taboos as well. Pork consumption proved about as much an obstacle as dating, with 46% finding great difficulty, 30% some, and 24% none. Alcohol consumption was easier: 25% found great difficulty, 38% found some, and 37% found none.

Finally, 27% found great difficulty adjusting to dressing without regard to Islamic rules, 25% found some difficulty, and fully 48%—almost half—found none. Doubtless, this greater ease is due to the fact that in Islam, one sex bears far more of the burden of clothing restrictions than the other. Men will of course have less difficulty with this issue: they are not held to the same standard as women, and they do not feel the same weight of modesty culture’s shame.

% who \_\_\_\_ adjusting to prohibited activities in general after leaving Islam



% among those who had difficulties adjusting to prohibited activities who had difficulty with \_\_\_\_ in particular





## OTHER ADJUSTMENTS

Respondents could also provide further answers on what they struggled with in write-in responses.

“ Listening to music, dancing, owning my own property as a woman, making my own decisions as a woman without a male guardian.”  
*25-year-old female*

“ Being in a classroom with the opposite sex.”  
*23-year-old male*

“ Becoming financially independent.”  
*23-year-old male*

“ It took me a long time to get used to having privacy and autonomy over my body. I had a lot of decision paralysis at first because I wasn't used to not having other people policing my behavior everywhere. I couldn't stop looking over my shoulder for several years as well.”

A few respondents mentioned that, despite letting go of their belief in Islam, they held onto some practices or superstitions—even as they recognized their irrationality.

“ Stepping into the washroom with my right foot... I still don't do it.”  
*33-year-old male*

“ I can't eat pork or drink.”  
*32-year-old male*

“ Sexual attraction to the same sex.”  
*35-year-old male*

“ Western social norms.”  
*Age withheld, male*

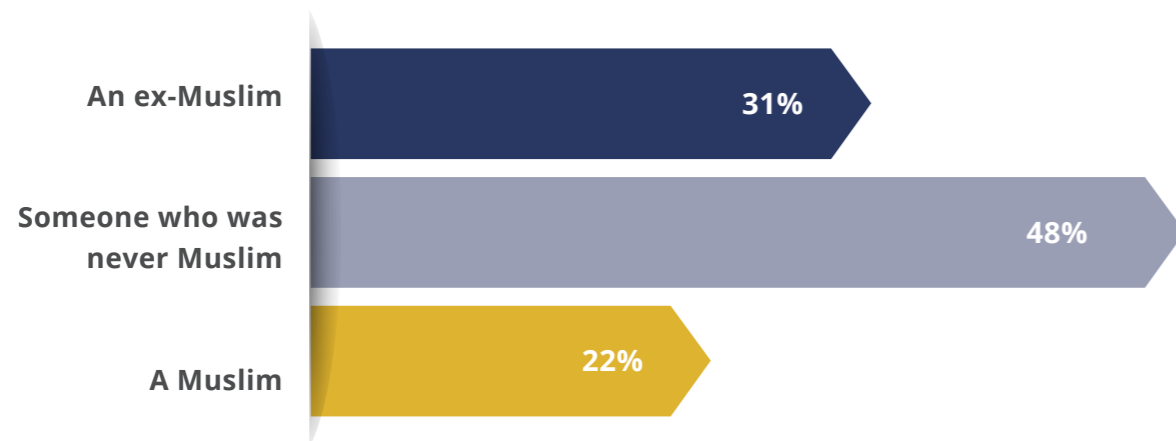
“ Eye contact.”  
*Age withheld, female*

## RELATIONSHIPS WITH FRIENDS AND FAMILY

### PARTNER'S RELIGION

For a sense of what close relationships were like after apostasy, respondents with a partner or spouse were asked about the religion of their partner or spouse. While most respondents went on to connect with someone of secular background, a significant proportion remained with—or perhaps found—Muslim partners or spouses. Almost half described their partner or spouse as someone who was never Muslim, 31% as ex-Muslim, and 22% as Muslim.

% who described their partner as \_\_\_\_



### CHANGE IN SOCIAL CIRCLE

In an open-ended write-in question, respondents were asked: *“How has your social circle changed since you left the faith?”* Only about a fifth said their social circles did not change; the rest reported both negative and positive developments.

### FRIENDS LOST AND GAINED

Most commonly, respondents reported losing Muslim friends and/or gaining non-Muslim friends.

*“... a long initial period of widening my circle and hanging out with different people and exploring everything that was haram or frowned upon including drugs, then an eventual return to a more centered lifestyle and friends with higher values...”*

31-year-old, other gender

*“I was a regular member of MSA at my university. The majority, if not all of the females in MSA were my friends. I never “came out” but I did take off my veil. A few posts on Facebook that respectfully disagreed with Islamic scripts and teachings, etc. were enough for me to lose every single friend I had. They were like my family and they never spoke a word to me after I unveiled the following semester. We don’t talk at all to this day. It was a hard transition but about six years later, I have new friends who are either non-religious or somewhat religious (mainly Christian) but don’t throw it in my face. Everyone is respectful of my views now. I rarely have any Muslim friends now sadly. I tried to continue having Muslim friends but it was too hard for me to be silent when they’d say certain things about non-Muslim issues. I felt myself being fake and feeling uncomfortable.”*

27-year-old female

“I lost most friends due to relocation (running away, keeping hidden for over a year, and moving back to the US from the Middle East after nearly a decade), but also due to my change in beliefs/world-view. I find it more difficult to trust people who look like they come from a similar background out of fear they might react aggressively or even violently due to my apostasy (and the stark difference between who I am now and how I was brought up/“not honoring my family”).

My social anxiety has skyrocketed, and I have trouble interacting with just about anyone. Most of all, I was always accustomed to only be around Muslims (only went to Islamic schools and conservative Muslim gatherings while in the US) and I feel out of place most of the time in Western style gatherings...

My closest friends are now two gay guys, which is significant coming from my background where homosexuality was hidden and viewed with disgust. Most of my friends are male, also not acceptable to my upbringing. I live in a rather conservative Christian area in the US, so I also feel threatened by conservative Christians, in a similar way to Muslims, but admittedly to a lower degree.”  
25-year-old female

“It has been a difficult transition as my decision to leave my faith coincided with a decision to ask for divorce from my Muslim husband. So, I not only lost a whole set of friends (in our Pakistani community who were friends with him), but my family disowned me also. They could not accept my loss of faith, divorce and finding love with a non-Pakistani, non-Muslim man. In losing my family I also lost my social circle associated with them. While much of it was a welcome loss (I couldn’t stand the community), I also felt very sad, isolated and alienated. Since then, I have found a few like-minded people which has helped immensely. In addition, leaving faith triggered a deep depression. This has kept me from socializing to a large extent and thus, my social circle has grown much smaller.”

29-year-old female

“I have never picked friends since leaving the faith who wouldn’t accept as the person I am or what I believe.”

23-year-old male

“My friends these days tend to be nonreligious. I have very few truly good friendships, but the ones I have matter a lot. In the days of Islam, I used to have a pre-built set of friends and a community. It was incredibly comforting going to the mosque, seeing smiling faces, and spending time with friends from that community. Although I cringed whenever someone would make a bigoted comment, I still loved them as my peers and my community. Losing that has been one of the most difficult aspects of apostasy for me, and I have never truly replaced that community. There’s no such thing as an atheist church, and the few communities that do exist for atheists simply aren’t the same.

I accept this consequence as a necessary price to live a truly authentic life, but I do miss having a true community to call my own. Muslims that I knew used to help each other out. I always felt like I had someone watching my back, and I don’t feel that as much anymore. Though, admittedly, most Muslims still treat me well since I don’t usually speak about being an atheist until asked.”

32-year-old male

## DIVERSE FRIENDSHIPS

Among those who reported gaining new non-Muslim friends, common themes included a reported increase in the diversity of their social circles. Some also highlighted new friendships with ex-Muslims like themselves.

*“I have more guy friends now. Growing up, I was always warned about being alone with a guy. The implication was that they could assault me or rape me. It turns out that most guys are pretty decent. Or not less decent than women I mean. I also have less religious friends. The only very religious friends I have now are the ones I grew up with.”*

24-year-old female

*“Since leaving the faith, I have widened my social circle drastically. When still a Muslim in my teens, I spent most of time with Muslim kids my age. After leaving, I began to interact and spend time with people from any background. It did not matter what someone’s religious affiliation was or their race or nationality. Leaving Islam allowed me to see all people equally and not just search out the ones who looked like me to talk to. I attribute me leaving the faith (along with other factors) to my continued interest in people from all walks of life. I believe my “Muslim” identity held me back from truly putting myself out there. And since losing that identity, I gained an appreciation for people based on their character and interests rather than their religious affiliation.”*

27-year-old male

*“I inform even new Muslim friends I am not religious / don’t believe in Islam. My social circle now is also a lot more non-religious or questioning, and many groups I associate with have even been formed due to relating over apostasy.”*

26-year-old male

*“Not until very recently. I left 15 years ago but my spouse at the time was Muslim. We separated 1.5 years ago. He continues to be associated with our old social circle of Pakistani-Muslim friends. I have been searching for another group to belong to. That’s when I found EXMNA. I have been participating in EXMNA activities as much as possible now and feel like I have found a great new social circle that I am proud to be a part of.”*

41-year-old female

*“I gravitate towards people who are more progressive and more accepting of my atheism, and/or me talking about my lack of faith in Islam. My friends from before I accepted my atheism were not as willing to accept the change. When I look for new friends now, it’s less about what we have in common, and more about the ability to accept diversity in thought. I’m also wary of accepting new close friends who have a strong attachment to our shared cultural background, regardless of their religiosity. I feel as though they are the strongest proponents of equating my lack of religiosity to an unwillingness to be a part of that culture.”*

27-year-old female

## STRAINED SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

Some respondents reported experiencing difficulty in their existing social relationships as a result of leaving Islam.

*“Initially I came out to my very close friends, and while they were shocked the relationship hasn’t changed much. However, recently word has gotten out in some way or other, and gossip about me being an ex-Muslim and “preaching and promoting atheism to the community” has spread like wildfire. I have noticed getting some dirty looks recently, and so I’m going to really put in more effort in trying to expand my social circle in the future.”*

21-year-old male

*“I tried to be open with some of my peers when I left Islam but then I saw they were very upset by some of the things I tried to tell them. My friendship turned sour with two of my good friends after which I realized this is not worth it and stopped talking about doubts on Islam.”*

37-year-old male

*“Lots of blocking on Facebook, childhood friends and neighbors sending me threatening messages that God will ruin me, my mom cutting contact for almost two years. Friends who stayed have become very awkward; they respect my choice but no longer have anything to talk to me about.”*

33-year-old female

*“Family is more reserved. Have much fewer friends than before. Almost seems like my sibling looks down on me for leaving my faith (she doesn’t say it, just the actions suggest it).”*

31-year-old male

## AVOIDING THE FAITHFUL

Some said they no longer felt as comfortable around religious people or in religious settings and made efforts to avoid them.

*“I tend to stay away from Muslims in general. Moreover, I reduced the communication level with Muslims who used to know me as a Muslim to almost zero. The reason is, I don’t want to be around people who, in their presence, I have to lie and pretend to be someone I’m not.”*

*However, I don’t mind meeting and establishing new relationships with Muslims when they happen in mixed non-Muslim gatherings and without introducing myself as a Muslim or ex-Muslim.”*

41-year-old male

*“I have a tighter knit circle of friends I rely on and can speak to openly with. Although I participated in more religious-based social activities while I identified as a Muslim (i.e., MSA), I have found that no longer keeping in touch with that social circle has benefited me greatly, as I don’t feel the need to be cautious with what I say and do.”*

24-year-old female

*“I live in a very diverse area but honestly it hasn’t much. If someone is very religious that will annoy me and I probably won’t try to associate too much with them.”*

26-year-old male

*“I no longer spend as much time around the more practicing folks that attend my local Mosque. I spend most of my time with more moderate, liberal and open-minded Muslims that I met at school. I am the only one among them that has left the faith and they know it and are comfortable with it.”*

20-year-old male

## INFLUENCES ON OTHERS

Finally, a few respondents mentioned that since apostatizing, they had also convinced others in their lives to question the doctrines of Islam, sometimes to the point of leaving the faith themselves.

*“A lot of them have become more liberal, though they still claim they are still Muslims.”*

31-year-old male

*“My brother renounced Islam and some of my friends started to question hadith and even some verses in the Quran. They have become more accepting to the concept of apostasy.”*

Age withheld, male

*“My closest friend now identifies as a cultural Muslim/deist, and another is identifying as spiritual. Both came around after we had prolonged discussions.”*

30-year-old female

## HIGHS AND LOWS OF APOSTASY

In two write-in questions, respondents were asked what had been the most negative and the most positive consequence of leaving Islam. These answers, more than any other, revealed a wide and diverse range of thoughts, feelings, and experiences.

Respondents spoke of lost connections with family and with a God they no longer believed in. They recounted disappointment and anger from people in their lives or stress and apprehension as a result of hiding their true feelings. But they also expressed gratefulness—for their newfound freedom, for a clearer view of the world, for a more open experience of life. Though respondents’ choices to apostatize were wrought with ups and downs, these were parts of a human experience they could now approach more honestly, refusing to lie to themselves about what they believed or who they were.



## THE MOST NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCE OF LEAVING

### ALIENATION

The most common response when respondents were asked about the most negative consequence of leaving Islam was a sense of alienation or isolation—either from their family, friends, or Muslim community as a whole.

*“I lost my entire family, with the exception of three cousins and my two brothers. After I married my non-Muslim husband, I was cut out from both my mother and father’s side of the family. No one speaks to me and I am not in their lives at all.*

*My parents were verbally and emotionally abusive when I first came out and told them I was not a believer anymore. It only got worse when I married a non-Muslim. The stress from that situation was a lot and it triggered an autoimmune response in my body. I was in therapy for two years throughout law school and am much more well-adjusted now—with a much healthier perspective on boundaries and the parent-child relationship. But, the truth of it is, being cut out hurts and for something that Muslims demand others to do for them - respect their beliefs.”*

28-year-old female

*“The more time passed, the more I became unable to explain my reasons for leaving the faith to people in my family or even outside. Early on I used to think about the departure a lot and had more to say, but as I started to live a life outside rigid Islam, created friendships with diverse people, created homes with queer partners, and expanded my reading beyond mainstream Islam (plus other common recipes about life/success/faith) and moved into exploring various other philosophies and ways of living, I am now way less prepared to communicate why rigid Islam does not make sense to me.*

*That is, I’ve lost the faith-group language to talk to people in the faith about why their way of life had been really problematic for me. Without using the language, I am immediately considered an outsider now and my opinions are disregarded, which is why I mostly avoid the topic of Islam. Why is this negative? Because it means I don’t have a shared language space anymore with currently practicing Muslims or even with recent ex-Muslims who are very committed and spirited about proving Islam to be wrong etc.*

*I am rather indifferent to proving Islam false and more interested in changing the very conditions that make it possible to practice Islam (or any religion) in collectively-destructive ways.”*

28-year-old male



“By far the most negative consequence of leaving Islam is the social repercussions. The initial months after leaving are accompanied by existential dread and depression from losing one’s world view and losing an objective purpose in life, but I believe most people could get past that sooner or later. What lasts are the social consequences. Of course every person’s situation is different, but for people that come from really religious backgrounds such as myself, I think the social consequences are extremely difficult to deal with.

You will become pitied, “the other,” the disgrace, the one who brought shame to the family, etc. No one will understand where you’re coming from, and it’s not really something that one can simply have a conversation about over a cup of coffee. One will lose the community that was always there as a safety net. No matter where Muslims go, even if they’ve never been there and they know literally no one else in the city, they can always go to the local Islamic center and find like-minded people, new friends, and even financial support. Losing that is definitely really difficult.”

21-year-old male

*“The loss of community and security, especially around major holidays. Ramadan is tough since everyone feels more connected and I don’t. Also, major life events like funerals when I don’t feel connected through prayer and others do. It makes me feel a little empty inside.”*

35-year-old female

*“Up until finding EXMNA, I had no friends that could relate to my experiences. Being in non-Muslim social circles was fine but I longed to be able to celebrate my cultural traditions without the religious aspects (e.g., Iftar with traditional foods but before sunset, without the obligatory prayers plus alcohol and a mixed gathering!)”*

41-year-old female

*“I am a misfit in my society. I can’t say what I want to say. I have to agree with things of which I am not convinced, things which are not based on reasoning and sometimes even against nature, things which are dangerous to humanity, things which make people blindfolded to learning. I have to agree because disagreeing would cause more damage to my life and to my family. Sometimes I disagree with close friends. Instead of cross-talk, they started avoiding me.”*

37-year-old male

*“I am very disconnected from my past, which is painful. I had a very hard time connecting with others immediately after leaving the faith. I still feel a lot of sadness around holidays related to family and coming together (Mother’s Day, Father’s Day, Eid, etc.)”*

28-year-old female



*“Becoming ostracized and disconnected with the social circle that I spent 18 years around. I basically had to build a new family, a new system of friends, and a new support network.”*

22-year-old female

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*“Even though my family is slowly communicating with me more, there is a divide now that will never be bridged.”*

44-year-old female

## **SOCIAL TENSION**

Concerns over strained relationships were prominent: many reported that their relationships became more difficult, tense, or conflict-ridden.

*“My relationship with my mom has deteriorated considerably, to the point of being impossible to fix. She got used to seeing me read the Qur’an regularly and attend all five daily prayers at the Mosque. She can’t adjust to the idea of a new, different me. She has explicitly told me that if I don’t want to pray, I shouldn’t call her ‘mother’ anymore (in other words, she won’t acknowledge me as her son if I don’t pray).”*

20-year-old male

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*“The backlash from the community and my family. I disappointed my parents. They used to be really proud of me when I was practicing. I used to pray, fast, and wear hijab. Since I stopped, the dynamic in my household has also changed. They started to trust me less. In their eyes since I don’t have Islam I no longer carry a set of morals, which is definitely not the case. I have been trying to slowly gain their trust back. I know that my decision will ruin some of the relationships with my family members. When it comes to the Muslim community I have noticed cold distance.”*

19-year-old female

*“I can never be the child my parents wanted me to be and that will always be a bridge that can’t be overcome in our relationship.”*

25-year-old male

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*“It has wrought unavoidable conflict with family that has brought about life-long and irreversible consequences. My family’s idea of ‘fixing’ me was to have me married away. Divorced and single parent of a young child, I have yet to find out what it feels like to trust and depend upon anyone outside my tight circle of confidants.”*

29-year-old female

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*“Pressure from family members to have discussions and debate the validity of Islam. Trying to maintain a balance between good family relations and living my non-Muslim lifestyle. Anxiety about what will happen if I share certain parts of my life with my Muslim family (e.g., having a non-Muslim boyfriend) while also deflecting unwanted conversations (e.g., look at this science connected to the Qur’an, listen to this video of this sheikh, think about marrying a nice Muslim man and starting a family).”*

22-year-old female

*“Hurting my parents deeply; causing an estrangement with my older brother, and a severe rift within my family.”*

43-year-old female

## FAMILY REACTIONS

Some respondents spoke of immediate negative reactions from their family members. A few mentioned feelings of guilt they now carried, usually for disappointing loved ones.

*“Having to watch parents’ emotional distress that their child is becoming less religious. Mine don’t know I left the faith completely, but they see that I don’t pray, that I don’t cover my hair in the US (still do when in the Middle East). I feel bad for them because they truly believe I will burn in hell, so I can’t blame them for being distraught. Also, it makes me not want to meet up with them, just to avoid having to pretend, hear religious advice, etc. And that makes me feel horrible, that Islam has created a situation where it’s easier for me to be distant from my parents. It is the only issue we have.*

*I actually have loads in common with my mom otherwise and we always got along perfectly. My brother and sister were never as religious as me, so I was their “good one” that they never had to worry about. So it’s so unexpected for them and even harder. So this emotional torture I’m causing has been the hardest part.”*

32-year-old female

*“Personal attacks on my character and an inability to keep my family together when my position is debased for being an atheist.”*

27-year-old male

*“I went through a very painful period during which much of my family almost completely stopped speaking to me unless I would agree to embrace Islam again. Thankfully, after about a year of gradual effort, our relationships normalized and we are now back to interacting with one another the way we used to before my apostasy. Some of them probably still worry about my fate in the afterlife, but it seems to me that they have now pushed my lack of faith to the back of their minds.”*

32-year-old female

*“Death threats from my father, resulting night terrors, and loneliness.”*

27-year-old female



*“I lost the relationship I had with my parents, though sometimes it feels like I lost the illusion of the relationship I wanted to have. I don’t know if that makes sense. They don’t know that I’m not a Muslim, and already the decisions I’ve made have caused a permanent strain on our relationship. They disowned me and threatened me when I took off the hijab. I was shattered. We’re on speaking terms again, but our relationship will never be the same.”*

24-year-old female

*“My parents became more intensively religious and imposing of religion on my younger brothers. Their increase in religiosity hasn’t worked well for my general depression.”*

27-year-old male

*“I went through years of horrible depression when I officially left the faith. My parents went through years of disappointment and crying and guilt tripping me because I left. Every time I went to visit my mom, she would destroy my mood, my confidence, and leave my heart crying and deeply wounded.*

*My family is still disappointed in me, even though they have come to accept that I pretty much don’t want to get back into religion.*

*It’s the stigma it carries. Even though I’m kind of open about being an ex-Muslim, there are still quite a few people that don’t know. Unless they specifically ask me, I don’t want to cause unnecessary strain for my parents in the Afghan community. It’s a very complicated matter, sadly.”*

32-year-old male

*“I am constantly burdened with lying and keeping track of my lies. Once my mom found a book under my bed of Hitchens’ God is Not Great as well as Rushdie’s The Satanic Verses. She broke out in a bawl when I came home from school and rolled around on the floor beating her chest. I convinced her that “Mom, I have to face these infidels’ criticisms soon in college so I must be well-versed in them if I want a chance to represent Muslims to my best ability” and she bought it and I have since smoothed it over.*

*This single event has caused me much paranoia about how I conduct myself, and requires much discipline to keep my books, writings, notes, and other illicit intellectual infidel content hidden securely. This causes me a huge amount of stress and occasionally nightmares as a man who usually sleeps like a baby.”*

19-year-old male

## FEAR

Some reiterated their fear of coming out of the closet or their fear of possible consequences, often losing family, should their apostasy be revealed.

*“Realizing my family’s love is conditional, and I will never truly be loved by them due to my different beliefs. And, when I decide to come out, I am 99.99% sure I will be disowned.”*

20-year-old female

*“I have to take my safety into account in nearly everything I do. This can be a big hassle because it prevents me from going to certain places and engaging certain people. But I’ve slowly come to accept the fact that I’m never going to be guaranteed 100% safety, especially as I continue to speak out against the abuse done in the name of Islam.”*

21-year-old male

*“Being afraid of death threats, etc. A friend who left before I did got death threats. She was also a convert like me.”*

62-year-old female

*“Visiting Pakistan seems too risky.”*

30-year-old female

*“No negatives so far - but, the threat of being murdered for leaving Islam is always there.”*

45-year-old male

## THREATS AND RETRIBUTION

A handful of respondents mentioned experiencing retributive acts of violence, consequences as severe as imprisonment, and other genuine and serious threats.

*“Getting beaten down and hospitalized by Islamists.”*

36-year-old male

*“Loss of family. Loss of that safety net, and the people you love. Most of all, I can’t talk to my nephews and nieces because my sisters treat me as toxic. Also death threats if I ever go back to a Muslim majority country. I have bounties on my head and it’s not a safe way to live.”*

26-year-old male

*“My family put me in jail twice just to stop me from leaving. It’s just scary how Islam can control families to hurt their own kids.”*

21-year-old female



## STRESSES OF CONCEALMENT

Many respondents mentioned the stresses of concealing their lack of faith, sometimes speaking in terms of “living a double life.” Some also reported feeling inauthentic as a result.

*“Additional stress and anxiety from having to hide it from family and hiding who I am on a daily basis.”*

29-year-old male

*“Constant stress about leading a double life and trying to make my parents happy. It’s incredibly emotionally draining.”*

25-year-old male

*“I cannot be myself around Muslims. I have to teach my kids to lie when seeing my parents.”*

49-year-old female

*“Not being able to be truthful with my family makes me feel like a fake person.”*

32-year-old male

*“Loss of community and intense pain of being closeted. I am secretly married and live a double life.”*

34-year-old female

*“I am still partly in the closet about my atheism (to parents mostly), and it has put a constraint on my relationship with them. I feel I cannot be open about things with them, and often catch myself holding back or even lying to keep the peace. Makes me unhappy.”*

35-year-old male

*“The negative consequence has definitely been the effect it has had on my family. Since I am closeted about my lack of faith, I have had to pretend to be something I am not for a very long time now. It has become my routine. This double life has been a constant factor for over a decade now. As a result of leaving the faith, my relationship with my parents has suffered greatly.*

*It has affected how we communicate, how we act, and what we say to each other. I have to constantly watch my tongue and am stressed about what the future holds for us. I am uncertain at times of how long I will be able to hide my lack of faith from them. Other times, I get angry for choosing to do so out of fear of hurting them or losing their presence in my life.*

*These internal battles have become so routine and that’s why they are perhaps the most negative consequences of leaving the faith.”*

27-year-old male

## LOSS OF EXISTENTIAL COMFORT

Another common theme was the loss of comfort in the belief that a benevolent God was watching over respondents, of believing in an afterlife, or of a sense of overarching purpose that religion gave life.

*“Loss of community, accountability, and the warm fuzzies one gets from belief in God. Having faith is such a powerful shield against the horrors of life. One can rest easy at night, knowing that ‘good will triumph over evil, because God said so.’ To be able to speak with God as a diary through prayer does wonders for one’s mental health, especially when somewhat isolated from others due to the restrictions of faith.”*

24-year-old male

*“After leaving the faith and through the process of questioning/re-examining, I experienced a massive amount of loneliness and existential crisis. Losing faith and coming to the acceptance that God isn’t a certainty leads to a void and lack of meaning in life. I still feel depressed at times.”*

22-year-old female

*“The realization that you are alone in the universe, no afterlife, no heaven/hell, no second chance to see your loved ones. Poof, you’re gone. This realization depressed me a lot for a long time, but it gave me a new perspective on life. Now I want to live every moment, and enjoy everything that is on this planet before I go.”*

35-year-old male



*“Belief in the afterlife was a major crutch for me for a long time. My life has been incredibly terrible and so the idea that things would be better in the future was a big help to me; now I feel a sense of responsibility for making my own future better and not relying on Allah to balance the books. This was a difficult adjustment.”*

30-year-old female

*“I lost my best friend (Allah); he always seemed to answer my prayers and he always seemed to listen and take care of me and my family. He gave me everything I asked for in life. I also lost my immortality. And with that, I also lost the chance to see all the people who I knew that died in my lifetime. It’s like they were all dead all over again.”*

32-year-old male

*“I had to rethink the purpose of life and I had to reconstruct my reasoning to why committing suicide in this purposeless universe is not an extremely valid option to end suffering.”*

32-year-old male

## REGRET

Finally, a few talked about regret that they did not apostatize sooner, feeling that they had wasted much of their life following the rules and restrictions, practical and intellectual, of an untrue belief system.

*“I feel stunted compared to my peers. Everyone has already had the chance to discover themselves and what they want to do with their lives for years already. I still struggle in social environments (with the opposite sex) and am very immature in my romantic relationship. It is a bit daunting knowing how much there is still for me to learn when it comes to social relationships and discovering myself and my passions.”*

21-year-old female

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*“I feel I lost a lot of my years for a big lie and I cannot get the years back.”*

Age withheld, female

## THE MOST POSITIVE CONSEQUENCE OF LEAVING

### FREEDOM

By far, the most common response when asked about the most positive consequence of leaving Islam was a newfound sense of freedom. This could be freedom from religious restrictions or freedom of thought. Many mentioned a stronger feeling of autonomy.

*“Breaking the chain! Giving my kids (two daughters) the freedom to live their lives exactly as they please. That makes EVERYTHING worth it.”*

43-year-old female

*“The top two most difficult aspects of Islam were, in no particular order, dealing with the social aspects of the process (response from family and friends) and the realization that I wasted a big chunk of my life and energy chasing a fake idea of a perfect, divine life on earth and after death, with all the things that I did and believed in order to attain it.”*

29-year-old male

*“The mental liberation that was given to me. When I was a Muslim, I didn’t even REALIZE that I had an option to leave the faith. You can’t leave the faith - that is what Islam tells you! It takes away power from the individual - the ability to allow your conscience to be free - to not shame our thoughts. To realize we have the power to choose the direction we feel is right and most comfortable to ourselves; what is true to us.”*

32-year-old female

*"A much better relationship with my younger sister. I used to think it was my duty, as an older brother, to protect my sister at all times. And by "protecting", the implication was keeping an eye on all her activities. That tarnished the idea of a relationship where I imagined her trusting me with her problems. Since leaving Islam, my relationship with my sister has gotten so much better. She trusts me to talk about her dating dilemmas, and asks me for advice. I'm very happy with our relationship now."*

33-year-old male

*"I have complete freedom and control over how I want to experience life. I don't have to force myself to accept a certain point of view with insufficient evidence. I can always re-evaluate my perspectives on different things and change them in whichever manner I want to. So, just like Muslims and religious people can endure hardship with the help of their beliefs, I can create my own perspectives to suit myself and enjoy life in the way I want to. Nobody can take that away from me."*

*"Whenever I feel really sad, depressed, or anxious, I can just remind myself that all humans are just another species and anxiety and depression are parts of an evolutionary toolkit that we possess so that we can survive. Deep feelings of sadness can often be made easier to cope with, when I think about this."*

20-year-old male

*"Freedom of conscience. Living it, not just feeling/thinking it. Being free to be myself. I would rather suffer honestly than be happy in a lie."*

37-year-old female

*"Being able to be myself fully, including but not limited to marrying who I wanted, dressing how I wanted, eating what I wanted, having views that I believed in, etc."*

31-year-old female

*"The amazing relief that comes from realizing that life now makes more sense and seizing the futile attempts of trying to console an outdated belief system with the realities of the world as revealed through science, history and sociology."*

29-year-old male

*"Freedom to live my life, and live it in such a way that I can live up to my potential. Islam was holding me back in all aspects, physical, mental, psychological, political, social, economic, and many more. Also, the heart-pounding dread that comes with the threat of eternal damnation... it's nice not to feel that so much anymore."*

24-year-old male

*"I am able to live completely in accordance with my humanist values. This authenticity has allowed me to be a better parent and spouse. The ability for me to rely on reason (rather than dīn/faith) has given me the flexibility to change when necessary. I also am no longer ashamed of my sexuality or the struggles of my youth."*

41-year-old male



*“I am free and my children are free. We don’t have to live double lives under the pressure of patriarchy.”*

45-year-old female

*“I have ownership over my person now. I have bodily autonomy and financial independence and privacy. I can wear and eat what I like and go where I like and have friendships and relationships with who I like and I can write and say what I like.”*

30-year-old female

*“I can now experience things that were once ‘haram’ to me before. More empathetic towards people. Feel like my quality of life has been significantly impacted in a positive manner.”*

29-year-old male

*“I feel completely free. I do not have to hold opposing beliefs, such as egalitarian values vs homophobia and patriarchy in my faith. I feel like I can finally and proudly state what I believe in, and not be countered with “it’s against our religion, you’re wrong, period,” and be forced to shut up.”*

19-year-old male

## **LESS STRESS, LESS ANXIETY**

Another very common response was that respondents simply felt less stress in their lives—less guilt for religious transgressions, less fear of divine consequences for misbehavior, or a general peace of mind. Some respondents also reported feeling happier or more content.

*“Internal peace with self & everyone no matter who they are. Much less depression.”*

37-year-old female

*“I am less frustrated and angry since I started distancing myself from the Muslim community.”*

22-year-old female

*“I am much happier than I have ever been in my entire life and much more open with my family.”*

Age and sex not given

*“I think one of the most positive consequences has been the reduction of guilt and shame in certain actions that arose due to religious ostracization. I have become more comfortable with my sexuality and more free in my thinking and willing to experiment.”*

25-year-old male

*“Being able to critically think for myself, and not having the guilt of hell attached. I feel more relaxed; I can have a civilized conversation with a guy and not feel that it’s wrong. I don’t feel threatened anymore when others try to use religion as a way to control me.”*

19-year-old female

*“I am no longer bound by the emotional and psychological chains of Islam. I am able to live my life with a lot more peace of mind and am able to explore in the areas I would have never even thought about.”*

32-year-old male

*“Not feeling as guilty anymore, or constantly thinking that I’m going to burn in hell for little things such as not eating halal food, dating, engaging with the opposite sex.”*

23-year-old female

*“I am less afraid of many things I used to consider supernatural or that in which the supernatural existed, or I had no control over. For example, I used to be afraid of flying, the dark, and jinn. Now, I am not.”*

24-year-old male

*“I’m happier, and more at peace with who I am. As a queer person, reconciling my faith with my sexuality was very difficult, and now that I’ve let go of it, it’s a lot better to accept myself.”*

25-year-old male



## CLEARER THINKING

Many respondents found themselves better able to think critically or objectively. Many also found they no longer had to suffer through the cognitive dissonance and mental gymnastics required to profess belief in ideas they weren’t truly convinced of.

*“I am honest with myself right now. I don’t have to lie to myself saying that I follow a religion that doesn’t suit my vision of the world and humanity. I won’t go through mental gymnastics to explain how this is a religion of peace anymore, or how the verses are out of context.”*

*It’s a weight off my chest. It’s not the alcohol, the sex, or the bacon, it’s a decision to be a real human being. That’s what made me leave this religion. I am a decent human being, and I will not follow someone who I think is a bloody warlord, or something which asks me to fight other people just because they are different.*

*I feel relaxed, and clean.”*

35-year-old male

*“Clarity. I no longer carry the burden of constantly searching for the truth. I see life more clearly, I’m no longer confused, irritated or anxious about the contradictions and problems I have found in my former faith.”*

23-year-old male

*“I no longer have internal conflicts or attempt to justify inconsistencies in Islam.”*

36-year-old female

*“Everything makes sense; no more believing in fairytales while trying to convince myself they are logical.”*

36-year-old male

## TOLERANCE

Many respondents also reported feeling more able to accept people of various backgrounds, faiths, ethnicities, worldviews, and genders without prejudice.

*“I am more open minded! Equality for all — LGBTQ. Less racist.”*

32-year-old female

*“Finding happiness, self-love and love for others, feeling free, deserving of good things and feeling compassion towards others beyond what I thought I’d ever feel.”*

23-year-old female

*“I am more understanding and tolerant of people who are different from me.”*

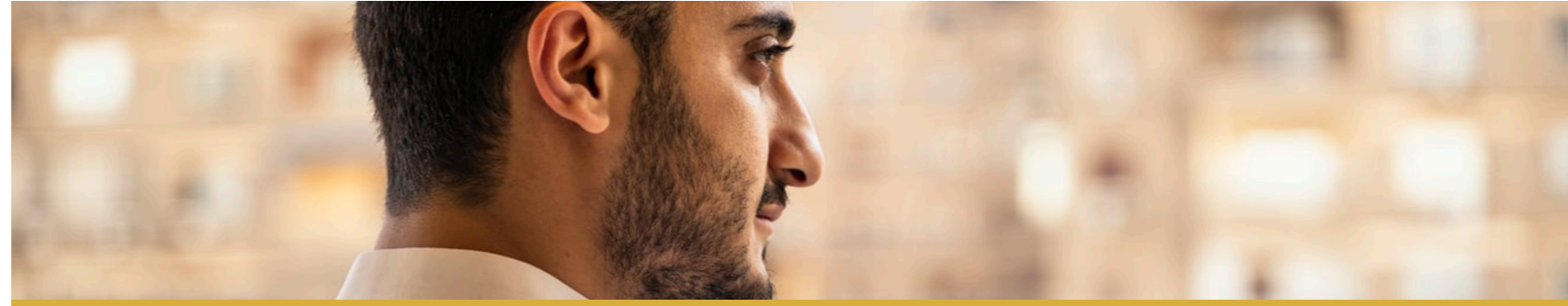
36-year-old male

*“I treat all human beings with respect and dignity instead of judging them.”*

38-year-old male

*“I have been able to undo the many misconceptions and lies in other areas of my life due to the critical thinking skills I gained in the process of losing my faith.”*

31-year-old male



*“Most importantly, I began seeing people from different backgrounds through the lens of our commonalities [rather] than differences.”*

31-year-old male

## AUTHENTICITY AND CONFIDENCE

Some respondents reported feeling more authentic, truer to themselves, or more confident.

*“I feel like I can truly live my authentic life. I’ve been able to travel, learned to love dogs, gone backpacking for months at a time in the wilderness without any concerns about cleanliness or prayer, just me and the wilderness. I’ve been more effective in my career and non-Muslim social relationships because I feel I can be a more authentic version of myself and spend as much time as I need without prayer breaks, concerns about what I eat or drink, or other such concerns.”*

*However, I still struggle sometimes because I don’t have a lifetime of practice at this the way most non-Muslims do. I still sometimes feel like I’m a teen learning how things work.”*

32-year-old male

*“I felt doomed to Islam, that it was not an option for me to ever become myself and be free. Now as an adult, I cherish my freedom every day and am so happy that I am able to be myself fully without being held back by faith or anyone holding me accountable to the faith.”*

25-year-old female

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*“I have started to value and see the humanity in myself. I know it’s an odd thing to say, but though I would never have admitted it at the time, I had internalized a lot of misogyny as a Muslim. The tangible result of this is that I’m living on my own and making my own decisions—my own mistakes. Many of the friends I grew up with—all well into their 20s—are still asking permission from their parents to go out and still forbidden from traveling certain places alone. I would have accepted that for myself too if I didn’t begin to doubt the religion. I love the family bond and the concept of showing deference to your parents and your elders, but I think Muslim parents tend to demand too much of their girls.”*

24-year-old female

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*“Empowerment. Although the adjustment was hard, and often continues to be, I feel confident in who I am and the choices I make. I trust myself to do the right thing for the right reasons.”*

35-year-old male

*“Gaining ownership of myself. I am more than God’s creation and my parents’ daughter. I am my own individual person with my own values and standards. I’m now able to give myself the credit that I have deserved.”*

23-year-old female

## LIVING IN THE MOMENT

Some respondents also felt a new sense of urgency—a greater need to make the most of and take control of their earthly life in the absence of an afterlife.

*“Taking control of my life. I used to believe that Allah had a plan and that good times were on their way so I would not take any actions or make any decisions for myself. Once I stopped believing in fate or an afterlife, I began to take control of my life. After that, my life blossomed. I had no idea I was capable of so much.*

*I now have a very successful career in IT. I have two very well-behaved children whom I’m raising with the help of scientific research (not with threats of hellfire!). I am well respected within all my circles. I own three properties, have a healthy college fund for my children plus a retirement fund for myself (bring on the interest!). I have managed to separate myself and my children from a toxic spouse (who says women have to “compromise” forever?!). I eat healthy and exercise regularly (who says women cannot be athletic?!). I am in the best shape of my life at 40! And last but not least, I have found EXMNA; a group of intellectuals from which I find support, stimulation, comfort and joy! All these achievements have been motivated by the fact that I now believe this is the only life I have, no one controls its outcome except myself and therefore, I need to make the best of it!”*

40-year-old female



*"I get to experience and celebrate life instead of wasting my time preparing for a fantasy."*

31-year-old male

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*"I now feel more responsible for the suffering of other people (homelessness/disaster victims/false imprisonment). When I was religious, I trusted sufferers in this life would be rewarded in the next."*

Age withheld, male

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*"As I don't believe in the afterlife, I appreciate every single day of my life because it's the only time I have."*

37-year-old male

## **PURPOSE AND MEANING**

Finally, and interestingly, a few respondents reported that leaving Islam actually gave them a greater sense of meaning or purpose in life.

*"Not worrying or planning for the afterlife. I feel like leaving the faith has given my life more meaning, even though many religious people claim that atheists don't have a direction in life. I live to make myself better and happy, and do the same for others around me."*

25-year-old female

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*"I became more moral and ethical. I also have a better meaning and purpose in life, while when I was in the faith, I was confused and felt like I was forced to hate certain people."*

Age withheld, male

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*"A burden has been lifted. Doors have been opened. Love makes more sense. Humanity seems more important. Life is more meaningful and true and valuable."*

48-year-old male

## FINAL THOUGHTS

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The findings of this survey illuminate the unique position of ex-Muslims in American and Canadian society.

On the one hand, they are often shunned by their loved ones. For this reason, some never “come out” as ex-Muslims at all, and those who do often hide from family more than anyone else. If they do come out, our findings show that ex-Muslims experience verbal abuse, physical abuse, being kicked out of the family home, or loss of financial support.

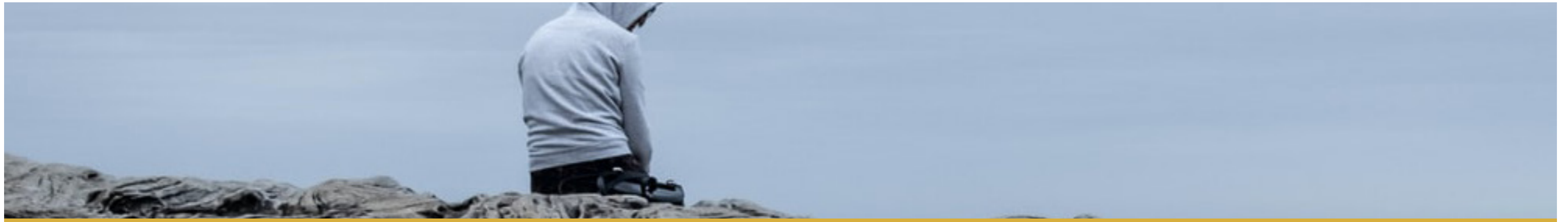
On the other hand, ex-Muslims meet considerable consternation in adjusting to Western lifestyles after leaving. Our survey revealed that while they left Islam because they viewed its rules as unreasonable and unscientific, an upbringing under its authority left them inhibited. Dressing freely, engaging with the opposite gender, and other adjustments were often difficult for respondents, particularly women.

Despite their invisibility until recent times, ex-Muslims represent perhaps better than anyone else the defining religious trend of the 21st century:

secularization that now penetrates even the most cloistered communities. Given the growing number of religiously unaffiliated “nones” in the West, the intimate profile of the ex-Muslim population provided by this survey is both timely and important.

Our work should also serve as a stepping-stone for further research. While this survey was limited to individuals affiliated with EXMNA communities, future surveys should aspire to studying more randomized and representative samples of ex-Muslims. This survey also encountered relatively few fully-closeted apostates and former converts to Islam, and further investigations into these populations would doubtless prove useful.

This survey constitutes a new building block toward a fuller understanding of ex-Muslims. We hope its insights will help foster an environment of greater empathy and understanding towards apostates and apostasy. And, ultimately, we hope its findings are of use to activists, researchers, educators, governments, and media in the coming years and decades as this population emerges from the shadows.



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**EX-MUSLIMS  
OF NORTH AMERICA**



Ex-Muslims of North America  
1069 West Broad St, Suite 142  
Falls Church, VA 22046

**exmuslims.org**  
info@exmuslims.org