

Are Canadians Religious?

In this activity students step into the shoes of a researcher of Religion who uses sample statistics to estimate population parameters related to Canadian mindsets about religion

Length  1-2 hours (Medium Problem)

Prerequisites Proportions, Sampling, Confidence Intervals

Concepts Sampling, Confidence Intervals

Theme Spirituality

Discipline Religion



Scenario

While picking up some groceries you notice the headline “Canadians less religious than ever” on a newspaper at the cash. You’ve heard people make this claim before but, as a professor of Religion, you can’t help but wonder: is that really the case? And, what’s the evidence for this? When you get home you pull up the 2011 National Household Survey from Statistics Canada online and notice the results indicated that “about 7.9 million people, nearly one-quarter of the population (23.9%), had no religious affiliation. This was up from 16.5% a decade earlier, as reported in the 2001 Census.”¹ This piques your interest...

As it turns out, you’ve been looking for a new research project to pitch to your colleagues in order to get some feedback, and that newspaper headline, along with the Statistics Canada data, leaves you with some questions that seem worth pursuing – you might just be onto something! You remember that in your Religion classes students often initiate conversations with you about religious beliefs, and you can’t help but notice that many of them seem to tell you that they are “spiritual, but not religious,” or that they believe in something, but they don’t participate in a formal religion. You wonder how those who might describe themselves in these sorts of ways would have answered a question about their religious affiliation in the 2011 National Household Survey, as the survey does not seem to have left room for these sort of ambiguities as it asked people to identify either with specific religious traditions, or none at all. This leads you to wonder whether there might be another way to measure religion and spirituality... perhaps in a way that emphasizes the degree to which people understand themselves as believers or spiritually-inclined, instead of their affiliation with a specific religion (as the National Household Survey did). You start working on your plans to present your idea to your colleagues at your next department meeting.

What you need to produce

- A brief sampling plan (~100 words)
- Estimates of religious mindsets in Canada as a whole, based on sample data
- A brief overview of religious mindsets in Canada, including a comparison with religious mindsets in Quebec (~150 words)



Evaluation grid

Understanding & Interpretation	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The sampling plan is clearly explained and demonstrates a strong understanding of relevant concepts (4 points) The overview text clearly explains patterns in terms of religious mindsets for Canada as a whole, and presents a thoughtful comparison to patterns within Quebec (6 points) 	/10
Writing & Style	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Writing is formal in tone, and explains key concepts and data points in clear language 	/2
Requirements	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sampling plan text meets required length (~100 words; 2 points) Estimates of religious mindsets in Canada for ‘non-believers,’ ‘religious,’ and ‘spiritual but not religious’ are accurately computed (4 points) Overview text meets required length (~150 words; 2 points) 	/8
Total	/20

Breakdown of the problem

Guiding question – Part 1

What’s involved in selecting a sample?

After a little more thought you decide that you’d like to survey Canadians about the degree to which they consider themselves to be religious or spiritual. You decide you will operationalize people’s mindsets in terms of their spirituality by giving them the following response options: non-believer; spiritually uncertain; privately faithful; or religiously committed.

Now you need to figure out your sampling plan, as you already know you don’t have the resources to survey *all* Canadians, but you also know you want your results to be representative of the population as a whole... How might you solicit a sample of Canadians that would allow you to generalize your survey results



to the population of Canada as a whole? Write up a **brief sampling plan** that you can present it to your colleagues at your next department meeting in order to get feedback (~100 words).

Sampling plan

Guiding question – Part 2

How can you make estimates about an entire population, based on results from a sample?

A year has passed, and your research has advanced quite a bit. After receiving some helpful feedback from your department colleagues, you moved forward with drafting your survey questions, fine-tuned your sampling plan, got ethics approval to run the survey from your college’s Research Ethics Board, and you administered your survey. Now you have gathered your results and it’s time to see what you’ve found! (Take a look at the corresponding Excel file to view the results.)

As you begin organizing your results, you decide that you would like to present an overview of a few key features to your colleagues at your next department meeting. You want to know:

- What is the proportion of all Canadians who identify as non-believers? As religious? And as “spiritual but not religious”?
- How does Quebec compare to Canada as a whole in these regards?

Prepare the following for your presentation to your department colleagues:

- **Your estimates for Canada as a whole** (you know they will ask about how you computed your results – so be sure to have this ready to share!),



- **A short overview of your results (~150 words), including:**
 - **Your explanation of the process you followed to make your Canada-wide estimates,**
 - **Your interpretations of the Canada-wide estimates** (be sure to include some specific data points to make your case and to highlight what stands out), and
 - **An explanation of how the patterns of belief you found in Quebec compare to your estimates for Canada as a whole** (again, don't forget to include specific data points to support your interpretation).

♀ One last hint: Notice that the categories you have decided to work with at this stage (non-believers, religious, and “spiritual but not religious”) do not match exactly the way you operationalized your variable in the survey questions... You will need to find a way to work with the data that as it was collected in order to produce your estimates!)

Estimates for Canada as a whole
Non-believers
Religious
Spiritual but not religious



Overview of results

References

Statistics Canada. (2016). Two-thirds of the population declare Christian as their religion. Retrieved from: <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/91-003-x/2014001/section03/33-eng.htm>

Additional reference

Angus Reid Institute. (2017, April 13). A spectrum of spirituality: Canadians keep the faith to varying degrees, but few reject it entirely. Retrieved from: http://angusreid.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/2017.04.12_Faith_Wave_1_Part_1.pdf

