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Exaggerating religious attendance

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When I was young, church attendance was considered really important -- for both Catholics and Protestants. In my early innocent years, I thought people went to church to pray. But I soon learned that some people went to be "seen."

I remember my parents saying that so-and-so had to be seen at church, or risk losing business. And someone else went because "well, if he or she didn't show what would the neighbors say?" In sociologists' lingo, attending church was "socially desirable behavior."

It still is. People today want others to think that they go to church "even if they don't." A new poll by the Public Religion Research Institute finds that people exaggerate their attendance at houses of worship, even to pollsters. When asked by a live telephone interviewer how often they go, people are a lot more likely to say they attend than if they're answering a poll online -- where no one can see them or hear them.

And the answer people are most reluctant to give? Saying they "never" go to a house of worship. That's where most of the "inflation" is evident.

The most frequent "exaggerators" are young adults, white mainline Protestants and Catholics! Among Catholics, 15 percent are willing to tell pollsters on the phone that they "never" go to church, but 33 percent are willing to own up to that on line: an 18-point gap.

Even the unaffiliated -- the so-called "nones" in sociological parlance these days -- do not easily admit that they don't attend religious services.

Why the gap? I interviewed Robert P. Jones, CEO of PRRI this week on *Interfaith Voices*. It's the first in a new, occasional series called "Faith by the Numbers." He says that attending religious services is still

?code language? in American society for moral uprightness.

The radio interview will be available on www.interfaithradio.org on Friday, May 23.

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