

# Religion and Contraceptive Use Among Female High School Students: The Case of Ribeirão das Neves, Brazil

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Brazil has experienced important changes in religious affiliation in the last four decades. In 1970, 92% of the population declared to be Catholic. Thirty years later, the proportion had fallen to nearly 74%. The proportion of Pentecostals almost tripled (5% to 15%), whereas those who declared to have no religion raised from 1% to 7%.

Ribeirão das Neves had 296,000 inhabitants in 2010 and was the second poorest municipality of the Belo Horizonte Metropolitan Region, state of Minas Gerais. Table 1 indicates that its population is less Catholic than the overall Brazilian population and there is an overrepresentation of Evangelicals (25%) if compared to the country as a whole (15%)<sup>1</sup>.

Table 1  
Population distribution by religious affiliation (%)  
Brazil and Ribeirão das Neves, 2000

Religious affiliation	Brazil	Ribeirão das Neves
Catholic	73,6	62,9
Evangelical	4,1	6,4
Pentecostal	10,4	17,3
Other Evangelical	1,0	1,3
Other religions	3,4	2,5
No religion	7,4	9,3
No declaration	0,2	0,3

Source: IBGE, 2000 Census

<sup>1</sup> Census data on religious affiliation in 2010 is not available yet. Therefore, the latest available data on the municipality level is from 2000.

The number of studies that bring together religion and reproductive health has increased in the last years (Gaydos et al, 2010), although this is still not the case in Brazil. Most of the literature is related to sexual initiation among Brazilian adolescents (Verona, 2010; Coutinho, 2011). Regarding contraceptive use, female adolescents who attend religious services regularly in the US are less likely to have used effective contraception if compared to those who rarely attend ceremonies (Studer & Thornton, 1987). In Brazil, Evangelical adolescents of the state of Minas Gerais are less likely to have used modern contraception in their last sexual intercourse than Catholic adolescents (Viana et al, 2007).

The data analyzed in this study come from the longitudinal sample survey *Pesquisa Jovem* (Youth Survey), financed by the State Secretary of Social Development and Sports of Minas Gerais (Sedese) and conducted by the Centro de Desenvolvimento e Planejamento Regional (Cedeplar) of Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais from 2007 to 2010 in several municipalities of Minas Gerais. The research methodology consisted of three consecutive years of interviews with a representative sample of adolescents, all of whom were enrolled in their first year of high school within the state education system at the start of the study. The first cohort, the focus of this study, was interviewed for the first time November 2007. Our analysis concentrates on females 16-21 years-old, not in union, interviewed in the third wave of the first cohort, for which data collection occurred in November 2009 (n=386).

Descriptive statistics indicate that our sample is even less Catholic than the municipality as a whole and nearly half of the sample is Evangelical (Table 2). That result is by no means surprising. Young people tend to be less Catholic than the overall population due to conversion to other religions, more common at younger ages. In addition, Ribeirão das Neves has a significant number of Evangelical churches and, at the same time, very few leisure options for youth. Therefore, going to the church becomes an important leisure activity – in our sample, it ranks sixth, after dating, listening to music, interacting with family, talking to friends, and dancing.

Table 2  
 Percentage distribution, females 16-21 by religious affiliation  
 Ribeirão das Neves, 2009

Religious affiliation	Ribeirão das Neves
Catholic	44.3
Mainline Protestant	11.4
Pentecostal	21.2
Neopentecostal	13.7
Other religions	2.9
No religion	6.5

Source: *Pesquisa Jovem*, 2009

Pill use is higher among committed neopentecostals and those who declare no religious affiliation. Occasional Catholics and occasional neopentecostals are less likely to use any contraceptive method. Are they less informed? Do they have less information about methods? Are they willing to get pregnant? Do they think that a pregnancy only happens to others (magic thinking)?

Committed Catholics and committed Pentecostals are more likely to use condoms and less likely to use the pill. Because the pill is associated with planned sex, it is possible that those who attend services regularly tend to avoid (consciously or unconsciously) planned sex. It is also true that committed Catholics and Pentecostals are more protected from STIs, including HIV/Aids.

Preliminary logistic regression results suggest that those female students who attend services regularly are 44% less likely to have used condom in their last sexual intercourse if compared to those who rarely attend services.