

America: How Well Do We Know One Another?

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More Americans are acquainted with a gay or lesbian person than an evangelical, according to a recent study.

The latest research by Phoenix-based Ellison Research found that only 24 percent of all Americans who say they are not evangelical know an evangelical person very well and 40 percent have never known any evangelicals at all, even casually. Meanwhile, 53 percent say they know a homosexual person very well and 20 percent know such a person casually.

"The study raises questions about why members of some groups are largely invisible to so many Americans," Ron Sellers, president of Ellison Research, noted.

Sellers pointed out that homosexuals are estimated to make up less than 10 percent of the U.S. population while 17 percent of Americans call themselves evangelical. Despite the larger evangelical count, Americans are more likely to know a gay or lesbian person than an evangelical.

Also, the study showed that a majority of evangelicals (62 percent), along with 75 percent of Protestant churchgoers and 77 percent of all Catholics, know a gay or lesbian person at least casually.

"Is this because homosexuals are more open than evangelicals about who they are? Because Americans are more open to knowing a homosexual than an evangelical? Because evangelicals themselves are less likely to reach into the broader community to form relationships?" he posed. "These questions are certainly open to debate."

The questions Sellers posed can also be applied to other groups, he noted. "You could just as easily ask these questions about Mormons versus evangelicals, where Americans are just as likely to know a Mormon as an evangelical, even though by any measure the evangelical population in the U.S. is dramatically larger than the Mormon population."

According to the study, 21 percent know a Mormon very well.

Statistics were more positive for born-again Christians, but only to a small extent. Among Americans who do not call themselves born again, 38 percent say they know a born-again Christian very well and 18 percent have never known one.

Among other findings, half of all Americans know a member of the Christian clergy very well, 20 percent know one casually, and 12 percent have never known a clergyperson. More interestingly, the study pointed out that among people who regularly attend worship services, 30 percent say they do not currently know any clergy members very well and 14 percent say they do not even know one, including their own minister or priest, casually.

Younger Americans are less likely to know a Christian clergyperson. Only 39 percent of people under 35 know a Christian clergyperson very well compared to 48 percent

of people 35 to 54 years old and 61 percent of those 55 or older.

Even fewer Catholic churchgoers report knowing any clergy with 23 percent saying they do not know one even casually, according to the study.

Although Catholics may not know their own priest, many Americans are acquainted with Catholics. With Catholics representing a large segment of the U.S. population, 76 percent of all non-Catholics say they currently know a Roman Catholic very well. Only 3 percent have never known a Catholic.

In other findings, people who regularly attend worship services are as likely to know people across religious or irreligious lines – atheists, Muslims, Mormons, and Jews – as those who are not active in a church or the unchurched.

The Ellison study also measured Americans' acquaintances with other types of people, including those of another ethnic background and persons in a different political party.

Among non-white Americans, 92 percent currently know a white person very well. Among non-blacks, 68 percent know a black person very well. And among non-Latinos, 72 percent know a Latino individual very well. Only 44 percent know an Asian person very well and the numbers are similar for American Indians and for Jews.

The study additionally showed that many Americans are not acquainted with those on the opposite side of the political spectrum. Less than half (47 percent) of Americans who are not politically conservative say they know someone who is, and 24 percent have never known a conservative. Also, only 42 percent of adults who do not call themselves politically liberal know a liberal person and 25 percent have never known one.

Further looking into the relationships of conservatives and liberals, Sellers found the similarities more striking than the differences.

"Yes, conservatives are more likely to know a born again Christian, but two-thirds of liberals also know one at least casually," he said. "And yes, liberals are more likely to know a gay or lesbian person, but two-thirds of conservatives also know one at least casually. Liberals and conservatives may have very different worldviews, but the relationships they maintain aren't really all that different, despite the stereotypes."

Findings from the study, which was conducted on 1,007 adults, can be interpreted either positively or negatively, Sellers commented.

"On the positive side, the study shows the vast majority of Americans know someone of a different racial or ethnic background very well, and many also know people of different religious or political viewpoints," he stated.

"On the negative side, there are plenty of types of people many Americans have really never encountered. Four out of ten have never known – even casually – someone who has experienced homelessness. A third have never known an evangelical or a Mormon. Almost half have never known a Muslim. One out of five has never known an American Indian. One out of every four liberals has never known

a conservative, and vice versa. Not knowing a variety of people has implications for how we live our lives and how we think of others."