

Beliefs about Life after Death

Although it can take many forms, most Americans believe in some type of life after death. While some religions have very specific and detailed descriptions about the afterlife, other religions believe the afterlife is a mystery. Still, most believe that those who live good, ethical lives will enjoy a rewarding life in the hereafter. In this learning module you will explore the various beliefs Americans hold about life after death.

Open your web browser and go to the homepage for the Association of Religion Data Archives (www.theARDA.com).

Let's start by exploring some of the basics. Locate the "QuickStats" link along the top of the page and click on it.

The QuickStats page provides a list of links to tables and graphs presenting national survey data on the religious beliefs, behaviors, and experiences of the American people. For this learning module, we will focus on an item in the "Religious Beliefs" category.

Locate and click on the "Life After Death" link. (Hint: Look under "About heaven/angels")

1. What is the survey question presented here?

2. From what national survey has this question been taken?

3. According to the data presented, what percentage of Americans believes in life after death?

Next, click on the gray tab marked "Patterns." This screen contains tables that show how the belief in life after death varies by gender, race, age, and other characteristics.

4. Which age group is least likely to believe in life after death? Why do you think this is?



5. Next, scroll down to the category marked “Life after death by Religion.” Overall, does belief in life after death vary by religion?

Up until now we have explored whether people believe in an afterlife. Next, we’ll examine some more specific beliefs about the afterlife.

Go back to QuickStats main page and click on the link marked “Belief in Heaven.” (Hint: look under “About heaven/angels”.) Much like the page titled “Life after Death,” this page also has a pie chart of the percentage of people who hold varying beliefs about the afterlife.

6. From what national survey has this question been taken?

7. What percentage of people “absolutely” believe in heaven? Why do you think this number is different from the people who believe in an afterlife?

8. Return to the QuickStats main page and select the links marked “Belief in Heaven” and “Belief in Hell.” (Hint: Look under “About evil”.) Fill in the following table:

	Absolutely	Probably	Probably not	Absolutely not
Belief in Heaven	_____	_____	_____	_____
Belief in Hell	_____	_____	_____	_____

9. Are the percentages the same for each category of “Belief in Heaven” and “Belief in Hell”? If not, how do they differ? Why might these differences exist?

Next we will look at how beliefs in the afterlife vary by age.

10. Complete the following table with the percentage of those who “absolutely” believe in Heaven and Hell:

	18–29	30–44	45–59	60-74	75+
Belief in Heaven	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Belief in Hell	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____

11. Which age group was most likely to “absolutely” believe in Heaven? Which group was most likely to “absolutely” believe in Hell? What might explain these patterns?

Lastly, we will look at how beliefs in the afterlife vary by religion.

12. Complete the following table with the percentage of those who “absolutely” believe in Heaven and Hell:

	Protestant	Catholic	Jewish	None	Other
Belief in Heaven	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Belief in Hell	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____

13. Describe the differences between the religious groups in their beliefs in Heaven and Hell. From what you know about each religious group, what might explain these patterns?
