



The Association Between Religion and Depression



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Introduction

- **Prevalence of Religion and Depression:** Religion is becoming less and less popular in the United States as the number of U.S. adults that identify as Christian has decreased from 78% to 63% since 2007. Since 2005, depression has become more prevalent in the United States going from depression in 6.6% of Americans to 9.2% in 2020. (Pew Research Center, 2022), (NCBI, 2020).
- **Current Findings:** Religion is a minor factor in the avoidance of depression, meaning if someone is religious, they are slightly less likely to suffer from depression. (Garssen Visser & Pool, 2021). Many studies have all unequivocally found religion to have a small, but positive, effect on mental health and general outlook on life. (Koenig, H. G., Hill, T. D., Pirutinsky, S., & Rosmarin, D. H., 2021).
 - This effect seems to become stronger during a time of stress. For example, during COVID-19, those who were religious were more able to cope with the issues that rose as a result of the pandemic. (Koçak, 2021).
 - On the other hand, this effect can be suppressed in a religiously regulated society where social and political strain is imposed on religious minorities. For example, a study in China, where religion is highly regulated and even discriminated against, showed being religiously involved led to a higher chance of depression. (Wang & Vaughan, 2020).
- **Gap in Literature:** While it is true that religion has a minor positive effect in the avoidance of depression, it is unclear whether this effect comes from people who are serious about their religion or just consider themselves to be religious in general. A stronger sense of religion may lead to a stronger positive effect in the avoidance of depression.

Methods

Sample

- Data were drawn from the fifth wave of the U.S. National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health study (ADDHEALTH). ADDHEALTH is a nationally representative sample of over 20,000 adolescents who were in grades 7-12 during the 1994-1995 school year in the United States that were followed over time. The fifth wave, taken from 2016-2018, represents these adolescents later in life when they are in their late 30's/early 40's. ADDHEALTH collected rich demographic, social, familial, socioeconomic, behavioral, psychosocial, cognitive, and health survey data from participants and their parents. The Wave 5 sample for this study included 4,196 participants.

Measures

- Variables for religion examined in the present analysis were measured with the following questions:
 - "How often have you attended church, synagogue, temple, mosque, or religious services in the past 12 months?" Possible responses ranged from 1 (never) to 6 (more than once a week).
 - "How important (if at all) is your religious faith to you?" Possible responses ranged from 1 (not important) to 4 (more important than anything else).
- Our variables for depression examined in the present analysis was measured with the following question:
 - "During the past 12 months, have you ever seriously thought about committing suicide?"

Research Questions

1. Is there a relationship between religion and depression?
2. Is this relationship strengthened by those with a stronger sense of religion?

Results

Univariate

- Figure 1 shows 38.7% of the sample did not attend a religious service in last 12 months, while only 21.4% of the sample claim religion is not important.

Bivariate

- Shown in Figure 2, graphing importance of religion vs suicidal thoughts shows as religion becomes more important, there are less suicidal thoughts among the sample.
- The Chi-Squared Test of Independence for this association showed 8.6% of people who think religion is not important had suicidal thoughts, while 5.3% of people who think religion is more important than anything else had suicidal thoughts
- The Chi-Squared Test of Independence also resulted in a p-value of 0.078, meaning this relationship is not significant enough to have any real conclusions.

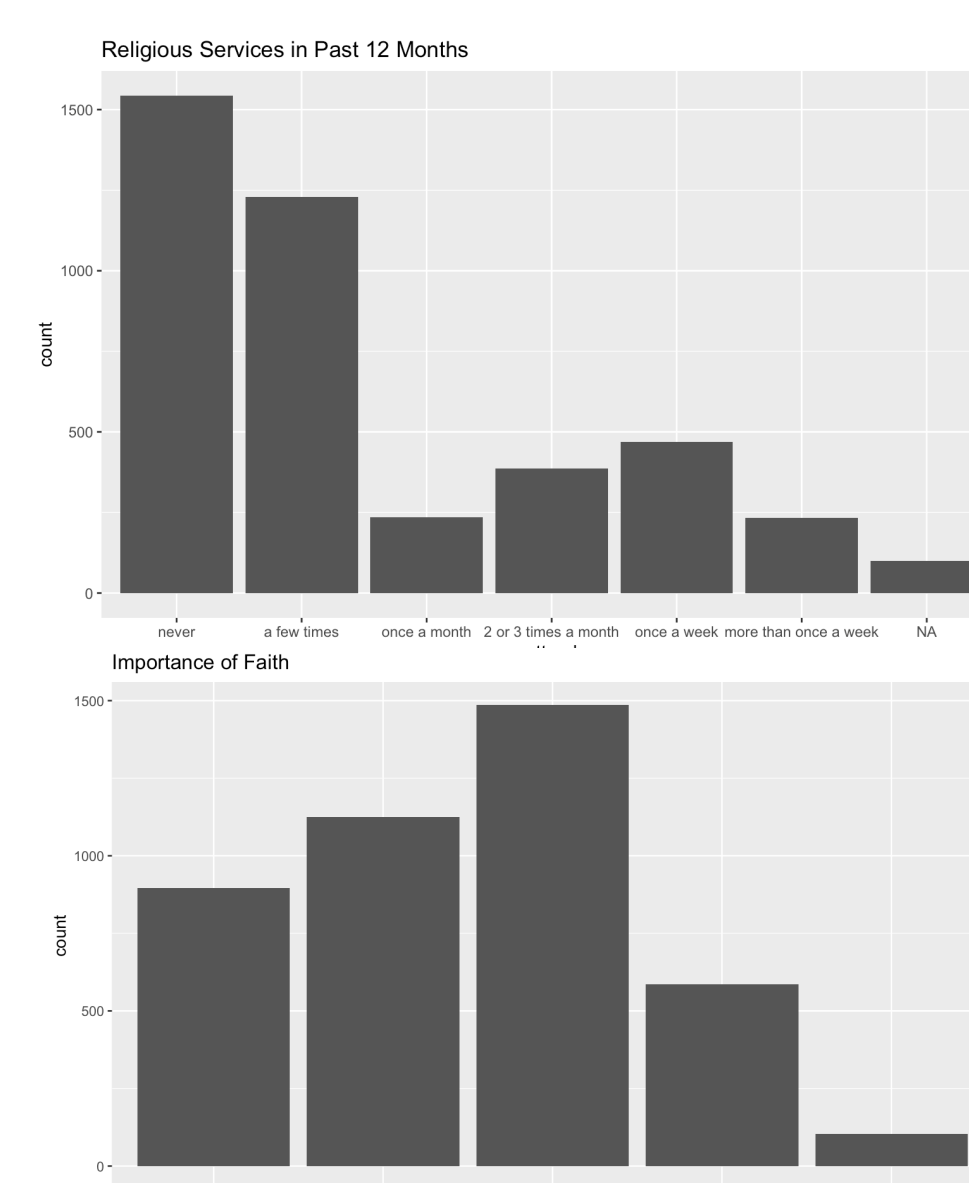


Figure 1. Religious services and importance of faith

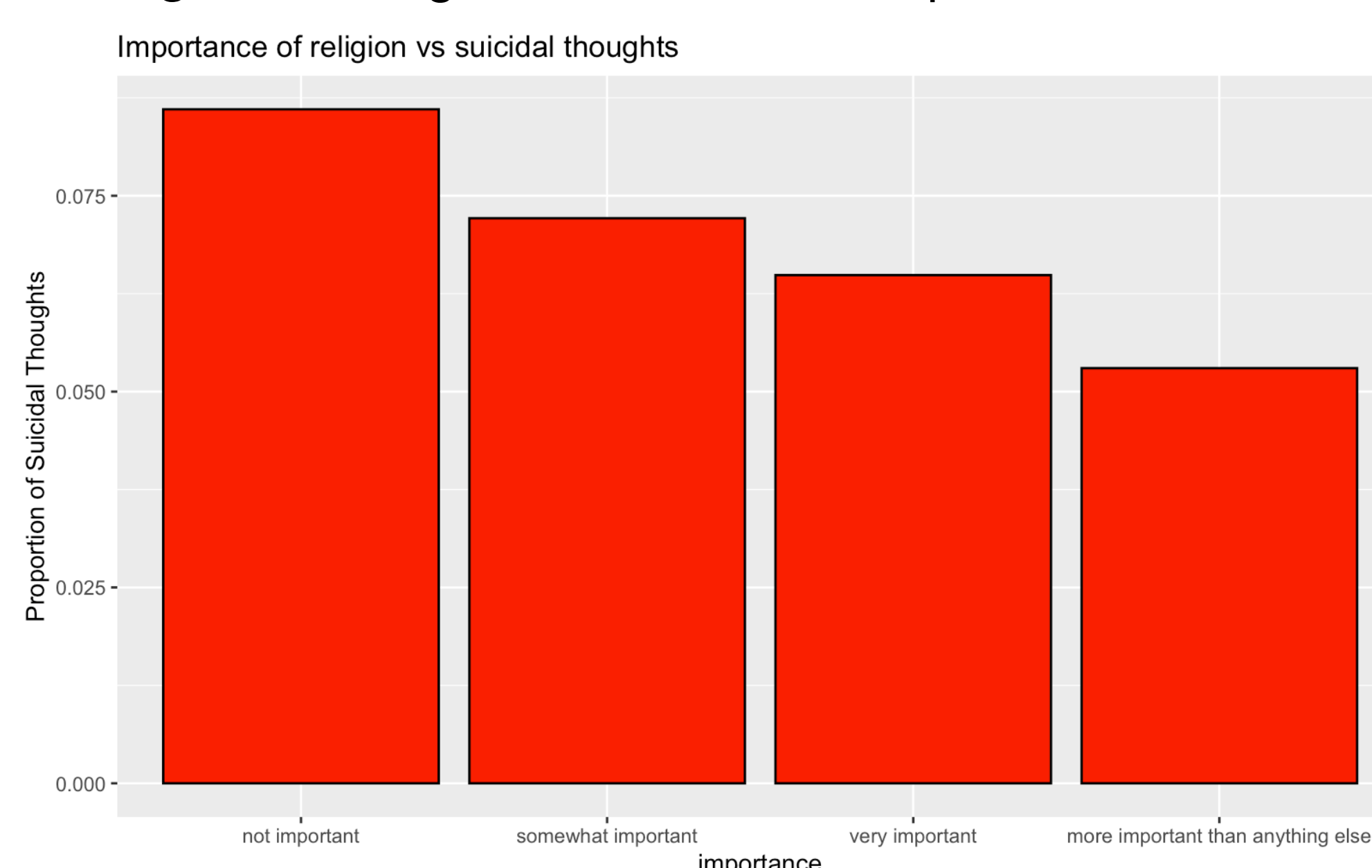


Figure 2. Graph showing importance of religion vs suicidal thoughts

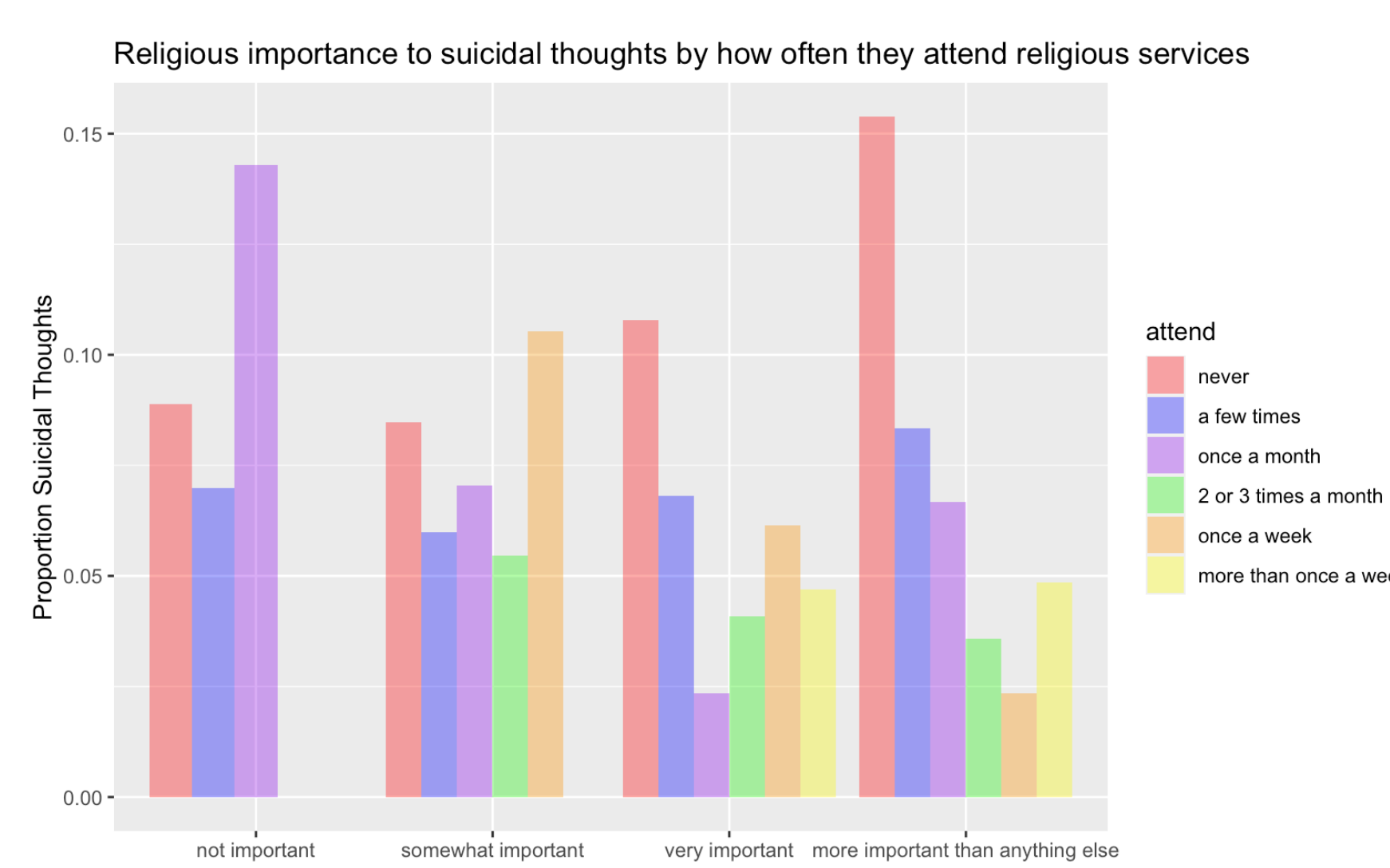


Figure 3. Religious importance to suicidal thoughts by how often they attend religious services

Discussion

- The decrease in suicidal thoughts as importance of religion becomes stronger shows that the minor positive effect religion has in the avoidance of depression is slightly strengthened when religion is more important.
- Perhaps our most interesting finding is that the largest percentage of people with suicidal thoughts are those who think religion is more important than anything else, but never attend religious services. Why do we think this is?
 - Maybe those in this classification are subconsciously upset with themselves for not attending religious services while thinking religion is more important than anything else.
- **Our regression tests limit the legitimacy of the results**
- Further studies must consider/include the following:
 - A sample strictly of people who are depressed to find their causation.
 - A study with an additional variable to find a significant link between religion and depression.

Garssen, B., Visser, A., & Pool, G. (2021). Does Spirituality or Religion Positively Affect Mental Health? Meta-analysis of Longitudinal Studies. *The International journal for the psychology of religion*, 31(1), 4-20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10588619.2020.1729570>

Goodwin, R. D., Dierker, L. C., Wu, M., Galea, S., Hoven, C. W., & Weinberger, A. H. (2022). Trends in U.S. Depression Prevalence From 2015 to 2020: The Widening Treatment Gap. *American journal of preventive medicine*, 63(5), 726-733. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.amepre.2022.05.014>

Koçak, O. (2021). How Does Religious Commitment Affect Satisfaction with Life during the COVID-19 Pandemic? Examining Depression, Anxiety, and Stress as Mediators. *Religions (Basel, Switzerland)*, 12(9), 701. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12090701>

Koenig, H. G., Hill, T. D., Pirutinsky, S., & Rosmarin, D. H. (2021). Commentary on "Does Spirituality or Religion Positively Affect Mental Health?". *The International journal for the psychology of religion*, 31(1), 27-44. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10588619.2020.1766868>

Nadeem, R. (2022, September 13). How U.S. religious composition has changed in recent decades | Pew Research Center. Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project. <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2022/09/13/how-us-religious-composition-has-changed-in-recent-decades/>

Suicide Data and Statistics | Suicide Prevention | CDC. (n.d.). <https://www.cdc.gov/suicide/suicide-data-statistics.html>

Wang, X., & Vaughan, K. (2020). Religious Involvement, Social/Political Strain, and Depression in Contemporary China: How Does Religion Affect Subjective Well-Being Differently in a Regulated Society? *International journal of sociology*, 50(5), 396-418. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00207659.2020.1797264>

Multivariate

- Shown in Figure 3, the graph showing religious importance to suicidal thoughts by how often they attend religious services shows the largest percentage of people with suicidal thoughts are those who think religion is more important than anything else, but never attend religious services.
- Religion being more important than anything else (O.R. 1.1, C.I. 0.63, 1.79) is no longer significantly associated with the likelihood of depression after controlling for how often one attends religious services.
- If it was significant, those who think religion is more important than anything else would have an expected odds of depression that is 1.1 times higher than those who think religion is not important.