

# The association between closeness to parents in adolescence and considering suicide in adulthood

WESLEYAN  
UNIVERSITY

Vasilina Yordanova, Quantitative Analysis Center, Wesleyan University

## Introduction

- **Prevalence of Suicide:** In the United States, between 2000 and 2021, suicide rates have increased by 36%. 12.3 million adults in the U.S. seriously considered suicide in 2021, while 3.5 million planned suicide and 1.7 million followed through with an attempted suicide. (CDC, 2023).
- **Parenting Styles and Suicidal Ideation:** Lack of parental warmth in parent-child relationships and controlling and unsupportive parenting styles during adolescence are associated with many psychological issues, including suicidal ideation. (de Man et al., 1993).
  - Depression in adult life has a relationship with parental rejection, withdrawal of affection, mockery, and disdain in childhood (Crook et al., 1981).
- **Strengthening Parent-Child Relationship in Adolescence:** An earlier longitudinal study over five years found that parent-child connectedness and youth emotional functioning had a reciprocal relationship in the duration of the study, and strengthening the parent-child relationship in adolescence might have the potential to prevent psychological problems long term (Boutelle et al., 2009).
- **Gap in Literature:** There is broad evidence of an association between quality parent-child relationships in childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood and mental health simultaneously or in the future. However, no studies explicitly looked at the connection between adolescents' relationship with their parents and considering suicide (related to other depressive symptoms and suicide) in adulthood.

## Methods

### Sample

- Adolescents from the U.S. who were in grades 7-12 in the 1994-95 school year who participated in the first wave of The National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (AddHealth) ( $n=6,504$ )
- Of the same participants who participated in the first wave of the AddHealth study, those who could be reached and consented participated in the fifth wave, when they were adults in their late 30s and early 40s (between 2016 and 2018).

### Measures

- Participants' relationships with their mother figures during adolescence were measured with the question "How close do you feel to your {mother/adoptive mother/stepmother/foster mother/etc.}?"
- Participants' relationships with their father figures during adolescence were measured with a similar question with the same response options, except "mother" was replaced with "father."
- Possible responses for both questions ranged from 1 (not at all) to 5 (very much). There were also options for "refused," "legitimated skip (no mom)," and "don't know."
  - For both questions, responses were grouped into fewer categories. The options were "not at all," "very little or somewhat," and "quite a bit or very much."
- Suicidal thought in adulthood was measured with the question "During the past 12 months, have you ever seriously thought about committing suicide?" Possible responses were "yes" or "no."

## Research Questions

1. Are perceived weak relationships and lack of closeness between adolescents and one or both of their parents associated with those adolescents being at an increased risk of suicide later in life?
2. Are strong familial relationships in adolescence associated with a decreased risk of suicide and better mental health in adulthood?

## Results

### Univariate

- A total of 6.96% of the sample who responded to the fifth wave of the survey reported having seriously considered suicide in the past year.

### Bivariate

- A chi-square test ( $X^2$ ) indicated a **significant relationship between closeness to a mother figure during adolescence and considering suicide in adulthood** ( $p$ -value = 0.0019).
- An  $X^2$  test also indicated a **significant relationship between closeness to a father figure during adolescence and considering suicide in adulthood** ( $p$ -value = 0.0063).
- Furthermore, and  $X^2$  test revealed **significant associations between perceived levels of care from a mother figure during adolescence and considering suicide in adulthood** ( $p$ -value = 0.0013) and **between perceived levels of care from a father figure during adolescence and considering suicide in adulthood** ( $p$ -value = 0.0090).

### Multivariate

- A logistic regression model was run including closeness to the mother and father figures. This model found a significant difference in considering suicide only between those who were not at all close to their mother figures and those who were very close to their mother figures ( $p$ -value = 0.0301).

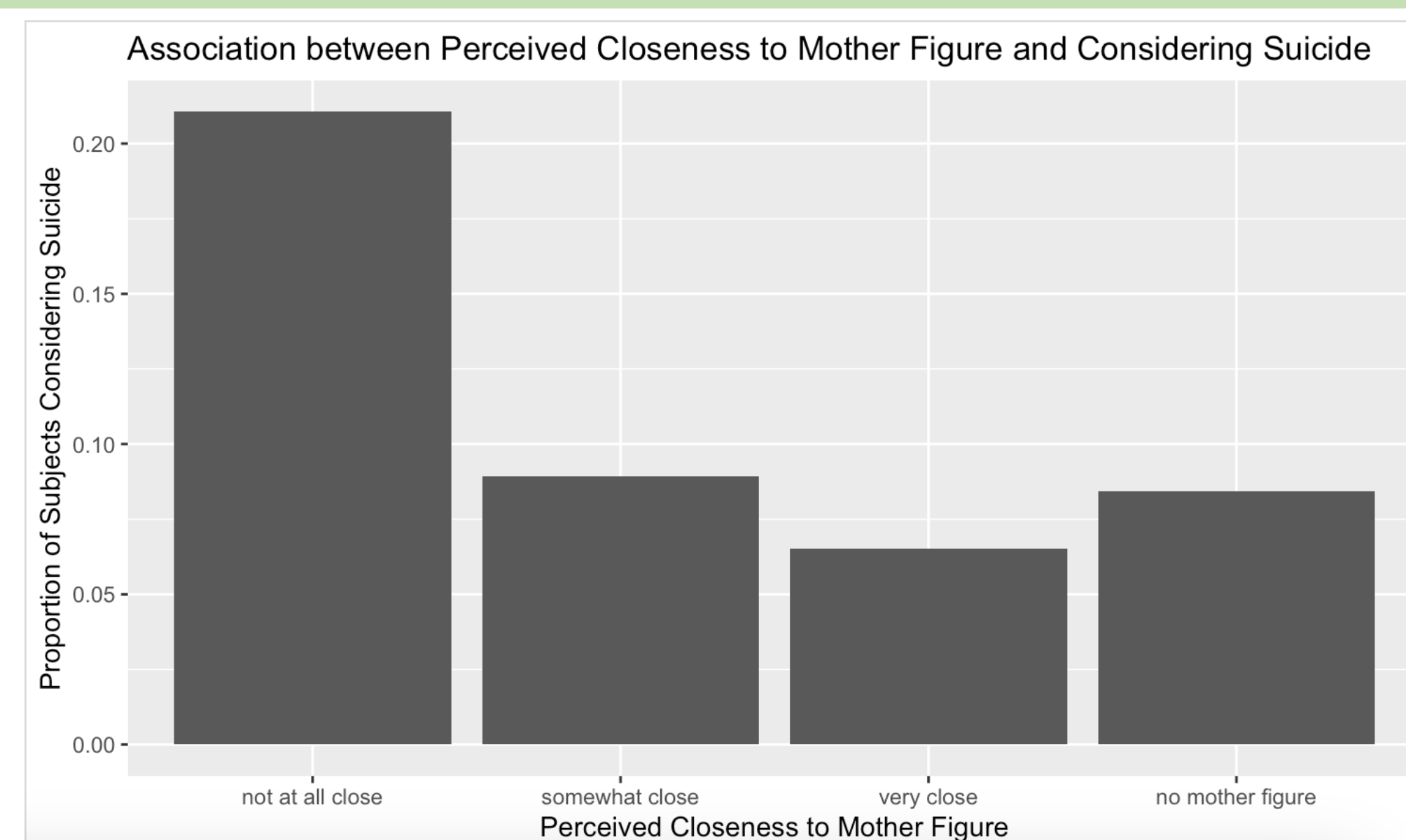


Figure 1. Association between Closeness to Mother and Considering Suicide.

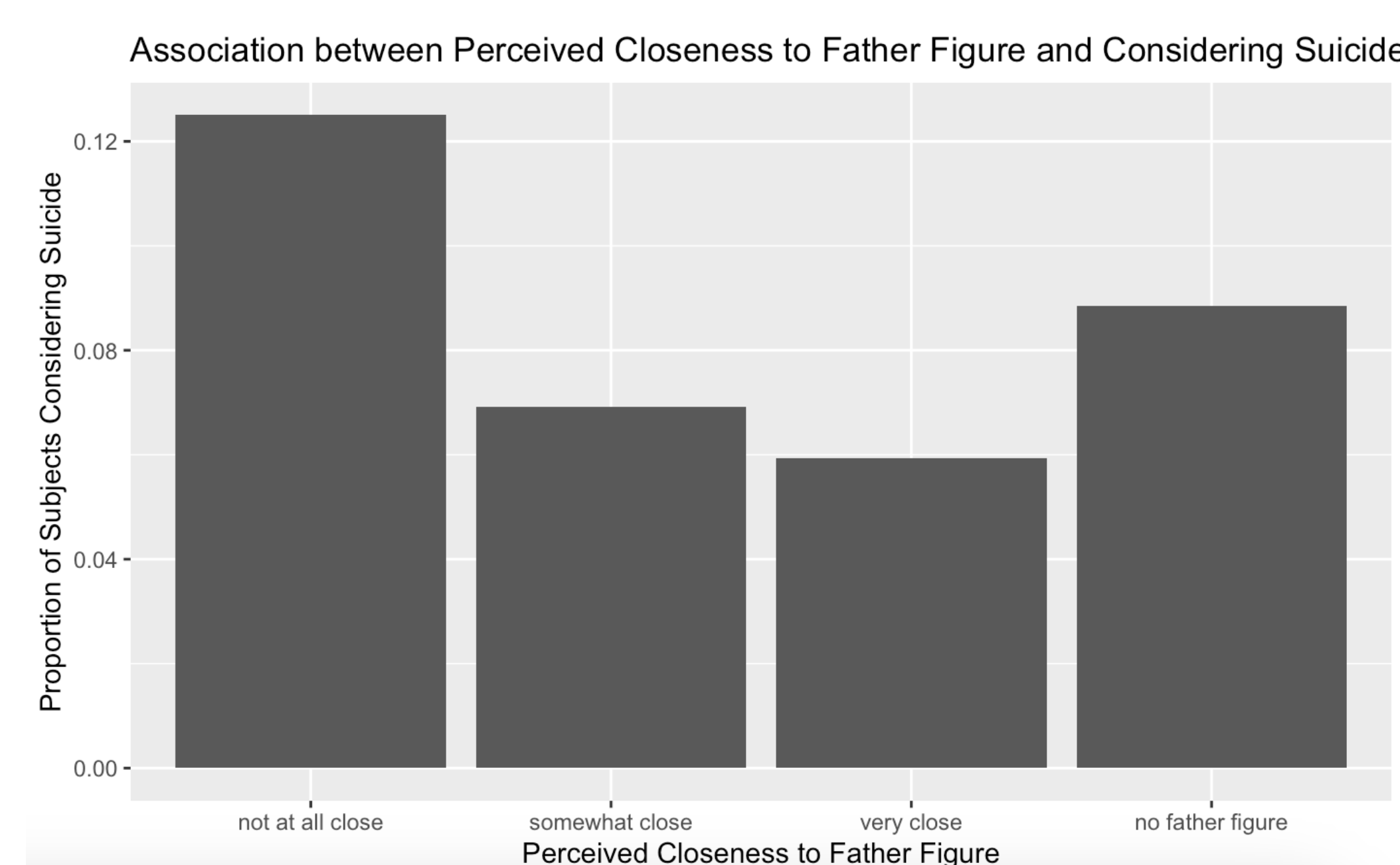


Figure 2. Association between Closeness to Father and Considering Suicide.

## Discussion

- Those who are very close to their mother figures in adolescence have significantly lower odds of considering suicide in adulthood than those who are not at all close to their mother figures in adolescence.
- Those who are not at all close to their mother figures during adolescence have 3.5 times higher odds of considering suicide in adulthood than those who are very close to their mother figures.
- There appears to be a significant relationship between closeness to a father figure and considering suicide in adulthood, but not when controlling for closeness to a mother figure.
- There also appeared to be significant associations between perceived care from the mother and father figures and considering suicide.
- Further studies should consider/include the following:
  - What parental behaviors positively influence the parent-child relationship during adolescence
  - If the adolescent's gender is associated with whether closeness to a mother or a father figure is more significant when considering suicide risk in adulthood

Boutelle, K., Eisenberg, M. E., Gregory, M. L., & Neumark-Sztainer, D. (2009). The reciprocal relationship between parent-child connectedness and adolescent emotional functioning over 5 years. *Journal of Psychosomatic Research*, 66(4), 309-316.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpsychores.2008.10.019>

CDC (2023) "Suicide Data and Statistics." from <https://www.cdc.gov/suicide/suicide-data-statistics.html>.

Crook, T., Raskin, A., & Eliot, J. (1981). Parent-child relationships and adult depression. *Child Development*, 52(3), 950-957.  
<https://doi.org/10.2307/1129099>

de Man, A. F., Labrèche-Gauthier, L., & Leduc, C. P. (1993). Parent-child relationships and suicidal ideation in French-Canadian adolescents. *The Journal of Genetic Psychology: Research and Theory on Human Development*, 154(1), 17-23.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00221325.1993.9914717>