

Adolescents whose religious mothers die are likely to be less religious as young adults

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Baylor sociologist Renae Wilkinson. Credit: Sarah Cochran

Bereaved children whose late mothers were very religious are likely to be less religious after their mother dies than youths who did not suffer a maternal loss. Conversely, children whose late mothers placed no importance on religion are more likely to become religious—especially when it comes to praying often.

But overall—while youths who experienced a mother's death are less likely to attend church—they are more likely to say that religion is important in their lives as [young adults](#), a Baylor University study has found.

"These findings suggest that there is a complex relationship between mother loss and religiosity, and it is one that may depend on maternal religiousness," said researcher Renae Wilkinson, a sociologist and doctoral candidate in Baylor University's College of Arts & Sciences.

Wilkinson's study—"Losing or Choosing Faith: Mother Loss and Religious Change"—is published in the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*.

"For [children](#) dealing with a mother's death, the loss is not only distressing, but also likely to violate beliefs about the timing of life transitions and to challenge ideas about the fairness of the world," Wilkinson said. "This is a disruptive event at an already disruptive time of life—the transition from adolescence to young adulthood involves role changes related to education, family and romantic relationships that experiencing the death of one's mother may complicate."

Past studies have shown that in general, children tend to mirror their

parents in matters of faith over time, whether that be religiosity or atheism. And a study from the Pew Research Center suggests [mothers](#) have more influence on their children's religious upbringings than fathers, especially in families with parents of mixed religious backgrounds.

But a mother's death during one's childhood is "an off-time death, when our norms break down," Wilkinson said. "A child may wonder why God chose to take the mother away so soon and could turn away from God—or turn toward God as a compensatory figure."

For her research, she analyzed data from two waves of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health. The first was conducted in 1994 and 1995 with in-depth interviews of a nationally representative sample of American adolescents in grades 7-12. The other wave was conducted in 2008, when participants were young adults ages 24 to 34. The final sample was limited to 10,748 of the initial respondents, allowing comparison of those whose mothers were alive and those whose mothers were dead.

The study assesses four aspects of both mothers' and children's religiosity: affiliation with a religious tradition, attendance at religious services, prayer and how important religion was to an individual. (To assess mother's religiosity, prayer was not included because it is considered private and likely to be less observable to children.)

"This study is an initial contribution to an understudied topic," Wilkinson said.

She said that future research could compare the effects of the loss of a mother versus the loss of a father and how those results might differ by the gender of the bereaved child. In addition, research should examine other outcomes following experiencing a parental [death](#) over the

transition to adulthood, such as psychological well-being and physical health.

More information: Renae Wilkinson, Losing or Choosing Faith: Mother Loss and Religious Change, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* (2018). [DOI: 10.1111/jssr.12542](https://doi.org/10.1111/jssr.12542)

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