

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Marines

Spouse and Family Functioning Before and After a Marine's Suicide: Comparisons to Deaths by Accident and in Combat

Aronson, K. R., Kyler, S. J., Morgan, N. R., Perkins, D. F., & Love, L. (2017). Spouse and family functioning before and after a Marine's suicide: Comparisons to deaths by accident and in combat. *Military Psychology, 29*(4), 294-306.
doi:10.1037/mil0000156

SUMMARY: Military suicide is a significant mental health concern for both Active Duty Soldiers and Veterans and can have a lasting impact on their friends and families. To better understand the experiences of family and friend survivors of Service members who completed suicide, this study explored the survivors' experiences. Overall, there were differences in the experiences of Marine families before a death, shortly after, and four years after, for death by suicide compared to death by accident or in combat.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Marines who died by suicide had lower family cohesiveness, lower spousal psychological health, and higher family conflict compared to Marines who died in combat.
- Marine wives reported higher levels of perceived stigma and shame when their husbands died by suicide rather than in combat. However, they experienced friend support at a greater rate than those whose husbands died by accident or in combat.
- Current spouse and family functioning did not differ based on type of death, which could be related to increased resilience in military families.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Provide education to military couples about how to reduce family conflict and improve family cohesion
- Offer workshops that strengthen family resilience and functioning and use evidence-based programs such as Family Checkup (civilian), Essential Life Skills for Military Families, and Life Guard (military)
- Disseminate information regarding possible suicide risk factors and how to seek help if a Service member, spouse, or other notices a Service member may be at risk

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Promote unit members and families' engagement with spouses of recently deceased Service members, regardless of cause of death
- Encourage the development and continuation of programs that can promote Service member and military spouse mental health
- Encourage the training of professionals who work with military families to better recognize the warning signs of suicide risk in Service members and their families with whom they work

This product is the result of a partnership funded by the Department of Defense between the Office of Military Community and Family Policy and the USDA's National Institute of Food and Agriculture through a grant/cooperative agreement with The University of Minnesota.



Putting Research to Work for Military Families



METHODS

- Participants were recruited via the U.S. Marine Corps, which provided last known contact information for married Marines who died by suicide, accident, or combat (297 potential participants).
- The contact information was four years old on average, and of the 297 possible participants, only 140 were able to be contacted. Of this 140, 70 chose to participate.
- The U.S. Marine Corps sent an initial introduction and encouraged participation via mail. The researchers followed up with a mailed invitation and then a phone call. Participants were allowed to participate via recorded telephone call (33 participants) or via an online web survey (37 participants).

PARTICIPANTS

- Participants were 70 female spouses of deceased Marine Corps Service members who died by suicide, combat, or accident between 2008 and 2010. Seventeen deaths were by suicide, 34 were in combat, and 19 were by accident.
- Participants averaged 52.90 years old (SD = 5.85), with the following races/ethnicities: 74% White, 3% Black, 3% Asian American, and 19% Latina (about 1% identified as White, unknown if Latina).
- Forty-six participants had children, and 66.7% had children living with them at the time of the study.
- No specifics or examples were provided regarding the situations surrounding accident, combat, or suicide deaths.

LIMITATIONS

- The sample size was small, mostly related to inability to contact many potential participants, therefore limiting generalizability.
- The research methods required participants to recall how their families were functioning on average four years ago, leading to likely inaccuracies and possible bias in their reporting.
- Some of the measures used in the study were designed for use with Army Service members rather than Marines, and no data were provided indicating how this may impact their validity.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Conduct more studies on suicide closer to time of death, so the participants are easier to contact and may have more accurate recall
- Identify and track families with Service members who have known suicide risk factors so that information can be gathered in real time
- Examine the experiences of families of Service members who die by suicide with larger samples and with other Service branches

ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



For more information about the Assessing Research that Works rating scale visit:
<https://reachmilitaryfamilies.umn.edu/content/assessing-research-that-works>