Suicidal Ideation Among Sexual Minority Veterans: Results From the 2005-2010 Massachusetts Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance Survey


**SUMMARY:** Researchers investigated suicidal ideation among sexual minority Veterans using data from the 2005-2010 Massachusetts Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance Survey. The authors had two aims: 1) document the proportion of Veterans who reported sexual minority status and 2) compare mental health and suicide ideation between those reporting sexual minority status and those who did not.

**KEY FINDINGS:**
- Nearly four percent (3.76%, n = 1,700) of the Veterans sampled in this study reported suicidal ideation. This percentage is similar to findings from other studies of Veterans or the U.S. general population.
- Sexual minority Veterans reported significantly less availability of social and emotional support and higher prevalence of suicidal ideation.
- Although sexual minority Veterans had higher odds of suicidal ideation, the difference was explained by poor mental health and lower social and emotional support; therefore, this study supports the idea that it is not the sexual orientation status itself that causes problematic outcomes for minority Veterans.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:**
Programs could:
- Host trainings for professionals who work with military families on sexual minority status among Service members and how sexual identity may be related to mental health and other factors
- Tailor suicide prevention workshops to specific groups (e.g., LGBTQ Service members) as different groups have different social and emotional needs
- Disseminate information on suicide prevention and positive coping skills to all military couples, especially those who have a history of trauma

**IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:**
Policies could:
- Continue to support efforts to address the stigma surrounding sexual orientation and accessing mental health services among Service members
- Encourage research that examines effective intervention methods to address discrimination based on sexual orientation or identity
- Recommend integrating suicide prevention education into existing service delivery systems for military families

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METHODS
- Participants responded to the Massachusetts Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance Survey (2005–2010), which used random samples of non-institutionalized adults.
- Most data were ascertained with just one item on the survey; for example, social and emotional support was assessed by asking, "How often do you get the social and emotional support you need?"
- Statistical analyses were used to assess for group differences among sexual minority and heterosexual subgroups.

PARTICIPANTS
- The sample included 1,700 Veterans (n = 61 sexual minority, n = 1,639 heterosexual). The sample composition was predominately male, between the ages of 40-64 years, and heterosexual.
- Ethnic composition of the sample is as follows: sexual minority (97% White, 3% Non-White); heterosexual (89% White, 11% Non-White).
- No information was provided on specific service branches of the sample.

LIMITATIONS
- The number of sexual minority respondents reporting suicidal ideation was small, thereby limiting generalizability.
- Other untested variables may be influencing results, such as, substance abuse, which were not included in the analyses.
- Causation between sexual minority status and outcomes cannot be determined because only cross-sectional data were collected.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH
Future research could:
- Replicate this study using a national sample to assess for suicidal ideation among sexual minority Service members
- Collect additional data to clarify the mechanisms underlying suicidal ideation among sexual minority Service members
- Gather data on personality and individual factors that may impact Service members’ suicide risk, especially among LGBTQ Service members

ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS
- Design: Appropriate Research Plan and Sample
- Methods: Appropriate Measurement and Analysis
- Limitations: Few

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