Suicidal Ideation and Mental Distress Among Adults With Military Service History: Results From 5 US States


**SUMMARY:** The association of military service history with past-year suicidal ideation and past-30-days mental distress in a sample of individuals was examined. Military service was defined as current or former active-duty service or National Guard or Reserve service. Results showed that military participants had higher odds of mental distress in the past 30 days than civilians.

**KEY FINDINGS:**
- Thirteen percent of the sample indicated military service.
- Among individuals 40-64 years of age, military service history was associated with both past-year suicidal ideation and past-30 day mental distress.
- Military participants were more likely to be married, have some college education, and be employed than civilians.
- Older (over 65 years of age) military participants had lower rates of mental distress than civilians within the same age range.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:**

Programs could:
- Provide information to military families about how to identify suicidal ideation in loved ones
-Compile and distribute a list of local, military- and community-based mental health resources
- Host classes to help Service members manage stress and emotional distress

**IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:**

Policies could:
- Promote reintegration programs that include attention to assisting Service members’ family in adjusting to the Service member’s return
- Recommend screening Service members for suicidal ideation at regular intervals
- Recommend professional development for service providers about assessment and identification of people at risk for self-harm behaviors

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METHODS
- Data from the Center for Disease Control and Prevention's 2010 Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System from five states were used.
- Participants were randomly selected and interviewed via telephone.
- Participants answered questions about past year suicidal ideation, past 30-day mental distress, and military service.

PARTICIPANTS
- Twenty-six thousand six hundred eighty-five people participated (84% female).
- Thirteen percent of the sample indicated some military history.
- The race/ethnicity of the sample was mostly White (76%) and Latino/Latina (11%).

LIMITATIONS
- The data were cross-sectional and any causal conclusions are inappropriate.
- The data only came from five states and may not be representative of the United States as a whole.
- There was variation across the wordings for suicidal ideation by state which may have yielded inconsistent results.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH
Future research could:
- Replicate the study and include a broader sample of participants
- Conduct a longitudinal study to evaluate suicide risk between Service members and civilians over time
- Develop a standardized measure of suicidal ideation and behavior that can be used with national studies

ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS

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