

# Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:  
Air Force

## The Associations of Physical and Sexual Assault with Suicide Risk in Nonclinical Military and Undergraduate Samples

Bryan, C. J., McNaughton-Cassill, M., Osman, A., & Hernandez, A. M. (2013). The associations of physical and sexual assault with suicide risk in nonclinical military and undergraduate samples. *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior*, 43(2), 223-234. doi:10.1111/sltb.12011

**SUMMARY:** Little is known about the link between previous experiences with assault and suicidal thoughts and behaviors in military populations. This study assessed the relationship between physical and sexual assault and suicide attempts and ideation in a sample of Active Duty Air Force personnel as well as in a sample of undergraduate students. Results indicated that different experiences of abuse may influence suicidal thoughts and behaviors in Airmen and undergraduate students, with more experiences of abuse leading to a higher risk of suicidal ideation.

### KEY FINDINGS:

- Physical abuse and battering as an adult was the only variable associated with recent suicidal ideation among Airmen.
- A trend emerged where rape, robbery, or violent assault was associated with an increased risk for suicide attempts among Airmen.
- Across both Airmen and undergraduate students, experiencing multiple forms of assault was associated with an increased risk for suicidal ideation.
- Unwanted sexual experiences as an adult as well as physical and sexual abuse as a child were associated with an increased risk for suicide attempts among undergraduate students, while only unwanted sexual experiences was associated with recent suicidal ideation.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Enhance education, activities, and curriculum related to coping behaviors following an experience of sexual or physical assault
- Provide workshops to help Service members and their families learn about available supportive services when recovering from an assault
- Disseminate information to Service members and their families regarding possible symptoms of suicidal thoughts and behavior to enable the recognition of problematic symptoms in themselves or other family members

### IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Recommend education of professionals who work with military families on the possible additive effect of experiences of sexual or physical assault on suicidal ideation
- Continue to support programs for identification and prevention of domestic violence in military families
- Recommend professional development courses for community providers to educate them about unique factors that contribute to suicidal thoughts and behaviors in Service members and their families

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## METHODS

- Airmen were recruited from two Air Force installations and given survey packets to complete anonymously.
- Undergraduate students were recruited at a large state university through undergraduate psychology courses and were given extra credit for participation. Survey packets were given to students to complete anonymously.
- Both Airmen and undergraduate students answered the same questions about current suicidal ideation, past suicide attempts, current emotional distress, belongingness, and gave a history of past physical and sexual victimization or assault.

## PARTICIPANTS

- Participants included 273 Active Duty Airmen, 82% of which were men with a mean age of 26 years ( $SD = 5.9$  years). Airmen were 68% White, 21% Black, 10% Other, while 15% identified as Latino. About two thirds of the sample reported being married (57%).
- Airmen reported being in the military for an average of 6 years ( $SD = 5.37$  years), with 48% junior enlisted, 38% non-commissioned officers, 7% senior non-commissioned officers, and 3% officers.
- The undergraduate sample included 309 students, 46% of which were men, with a mean age of 20 years ( $SD = 3.15$ ). About half the sample was White (52%), 11% Black, and approximately half (44%) endorsed being Latino.

## LIMITATIONS

- A lack of details were given about recruitment procedures, which limits the ability to interpret whether the results can generalize to a wider population.
- No eligibility criteria were included, which makes it difficult to understand exactly who the researchers included (or excluded) in the sample.
- The questions used to determine experiences with assault did not specify if the perpetrator was family, friend, or stranger, which could be a key variable in the survivor's reaction.

## AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Detail recruitment and sampling procedures in order to convey if results can be generalized to a wider population
- Include eligibility criteria in order to communicate the exact population being studied
- Use questions that specify the relationship with the perpetrator in order to gain a better understanding of the types of physical and sexual assault that lead to suicidal thoughts and behaviors

## ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



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<https://reachmilitaryfamilies.umn.edu/content/assessing-research-that-works>