

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Multiple
Branches

Evaluating Risk-Taking Behaviors of Youth in Military Families

Hutchinson, J. W. (2006). Evaluating risk-taking behaviors of youth in military families. *Journal of Adolescent Health, 39*(6), 927-928. doi:10.1016/j.jadohealth.2006.05.015

SUMMARY: It is often assumed that military youth face greater stressors than civilian youth, which may increase risk for problematic behavior; however, that may not necessarily be the case. Youth risk behaviors were compared between a sample of adolescent patients at two military clinics (i.e., Army, Air Force) and a national sample of youth completing a risk behavior survey. Military youth in this sample engaged in lower levels of risk taking behaviors (e.g., sexual activity, use of alcohol, marijuana, and cigarettes) compared to youth from the national survey.

KEY FINDINGS:

- The prevalence of risk taking behavior (i.e., sexual intercourse, smoking cigarettes, drinking alcohol, marijuana use) among military youth in the sample was significantly lower than for students in a large national survey.
- Thirty-one percent of this sample reported a history of sexual intercourse (compared to 47% nationally); this rate was significantly lower across all grades, gender, and ethnicities of youth.
- Current alcohol, cigarette, and marijuana use were consistently and significantly lower in military youth than the national survey; the only exception was for marijuana use among 12th grade students, which was lower among military youth but not significantly different from civilian youth.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Educate Service members and their families about the lower rates of risk-taking behaviors among military youth than other groups of adolescents, emphasizing how the supports available in military culture may help young people make positive lifestyle choices
- Continue to support health and well-being among military youth by offering peer support groups, opportunities for socializing (e.g., summer camps), information about health promotion and wellness, and access to prosocial activities (e.g., recreation centers)
- Provide health screenings for military adolescents and refer adolescents to extra supports or resources for problematic risk-taking behavior

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Continue to support programs that address health problems and improve the health of Service members' families
- Encourage the development and maintenance of programs and facilities that afford military youth healthy environments in which to socialize and improve well-being
- Promote further research regarding the health and risk behaviors of Service members' children

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METHODS

- Adolescents who presented to two military youth clinics in Texas (one Army, one Air Force) between May and June 2004 were recruited for participation.
- Adolescents completed a survey with questions regarding demographic information and risk behavior
- Participants' rates of risk-taking behavior were compared to a 2003 national survey of American adolescents.

PARTICIPANTS

- Participants included 477 high school-aged adolescents (61% female) in military families who presented to one of two military clinics.
- Participants were drawn from grades 9 (24%), 10 (25%), 11 (30%), and 12 (21%).
- Adolescents were 42% White, 21% Latino, 20% Multiracial or another race, and 16% Black.

LIMITATIONS

- This study sampled a population who utilized healthcare, which may differ from youth as a whole.
- The method of collecting data and the questions were different in the military youth survey and the national survey, making direct comparisons difficult.
- Participants included only children of Service members in the Army or Air Force, and results may not generalize to other military branches.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Compare youth risk behaviors between military youth and a national youth sample using the same questions and methodology
- Examine factors that may contribute to the finding of less risk-taking behavior among military youth (e.g., access to services, military culture, frequent relocation)
- Explore whether levels of risk behavior among military youth differ between military branches or children of Active Duty versus National Guard or Reserve members

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