

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
National
Guard

A Description of Suicides in the Army National Guard During 2007-2014 and Associated Risk Factors

Griffith, J. (2017). A description of suicides in the Army National Guard during 2007-2014 and associated risk factors. *Suicide and Life-threatening Behavior*, 47(3), 266-281.

SUMMARY: Suicide is a significant concern among military and civilian communities. This study examined the risk factors related to Guard Soldiers who performed their duties as full-time Service members while living among civilians. Findings revealed National Guard members most at risk are young adult White males who are no longer on Active Duty.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Suicide risk factors within the National Guard included: young age (18-24 year olds are at the highest risk), race (White), current or past mental health problems, alcohol and substance abuse, and marital/interpersonal relationship dilemmas.
- The most common method of suicide within the National Guard was self-inflicted gunshot.
- The most frequent events that occurred before suicide included poor military performance, parent-family-relationship problems, substance abuse, and current behavioral health problems.
- Although the Guard Soldiers differ from Active Duty members and civilians, suicide characteristics between these groups are similar for both age (young adult), gender (male), and race (White). The results showed no unique aspects of military personal associated with suicidal possibilities.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Provide mental health support groups for the National Guard Service members and their families
- Offer suicide prevention programs post-deployment for the National Guard and Active Duty Service members
- Host classes to teach Service members and their spouses who have a history of interpersonal conflict about healthy coping and conflict-resolution skills

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Encourage programs for military families on the risk factors associated with suicide among National Guard Service members
- Recommend standardized methods of screening for mental health needs and suicide for Service members with a history of combat or traumatic experiences
- Recommend integrating suicide prevention programming into existing service delivery systems for military families

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METHODS

- Data on suicides included in this study were those recorded by the National Guard from 2007 to 2014.
- For the eight years of data included in this study, the rate of suicides are as follow: 65 (2007), 66 (2008), 64 (2009), 115 (2010), 99 (2010), 110 (2012), 120 (2013), and 67 (2014) suicides per year.
- A comparison group was created from an annual random sample of 1,000 Soldiers to compare demographic and military characteristics from 2007-2014.

PARTICIPANTS

- Data consisted of 706 suicide deaths of National Guard Soldiers. The comparison sample consisted of 8,000 National Guard Soldiers (gathered random data from 1,000 Soldiers from each of the study years) who had not committed suicide.
- Among the sample of Soldiers, most were between 17 and 29 years old (n = 449), White (n = 620), male (n = 668), junior enlisted rank (n = 414), and had six or fewer years of service (n= 435).
- In this sample, most Soldiers who committed suicide were previously involved in combat (n = 430).

LIMITATIONS

- This study is cross-sectional, so no conclusions about what causes suicide can be determined.
- Although there are numerous demographic variables reported in the study, there were no data provided about to what extent those variables are associated with suicide risk, which limits the ability to understand why those demographic variables were analyzed instead of other factors (e.g., history of domestic violence).
- Definitions of many variables (e.g., school problems or employer problems) were vague and lacked context, which makes it difficult to understand the associations among these variables and suicides as well as limits the ability to replicate the study.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Gather data from Service members who attempted but did not complete suicide to explore differences between this group, those who completed suicide, and those who have never attempted suicide
- Interview family members of survivors to gain another perspective of the issues and concerns that precipitated the Service member's suicide
- Conduct longitudinal studies on risk factors and suicide among National Guard Soldiers

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