

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Multiple
Branches

Prevalence of Childhood Physical and Sexual Abuse in Veterans With Psychiatric Diagnoses

Koola, M. M., Qualls, C., Kelly, D. L., Skelton, K., Bradley, B., Amar, R., & Duncan, E. J. (2013). Prevalence of childhood physical and sexual abuse in veterans with psychiatric diagnoses. *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*, 201(4), 348-352. doi:10.1097/NMD.0b013e318288e333

SUMMARY: Researchers conducted a retrospective chart review of 603 consecutive psychiatric inpatients at one Veterans Affairs (VA) hospital to assess the prevalence of reported childhood physical and sexual abuse. The prevalence of reported childhood physical or sexual abuse was 19%. Researchers compared the rates of abuse with psychiatric diagnoses. More patients with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) reported physical and sexual abuse than did those without PTSD.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Overall, 19% of the Veterans reported childhood physical or sexual abuse (occurring before age 18 years); 13% reported physical abuse (23% women, 12% men), 11% reported sexual abuse (33% women, 8% men), and 5% reported both physical and sexual abuse.
- Among Veterans with PTSD, 18% reported childhood physical abuse compared to 12% without PTSD. Similarly, 16% of Veterans with PTSD reported sexual abuse compared to 9% without PTSD.
- Among patients with depressive disorders, 14% reported a history of sexual abuse compared to 9% without depressive disorders.
- Men with substance-induced mood disorder were more likely to report a history of childhood physical abuse than men without the disorder.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Provide supportive skills training to military families with Service members who are dealing with mental health issues such as depression, PTSD, and substance abuse
- Collaborate with community services and programs to provide a range of mental health referrals for Service members with childhood abuse
- Teach evidence-based parenting classes designed to help couples manage parenting stress and use respectful, healthy discipline strategies

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Continue to support programs for identification and prevention of domestic violence in military families
- Recommend education for service providers about the possible effects of deployment on Service members' families
- Promote the development of support groups and in-home services for military families at installations

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METHODS

- Data consisted of a retrospective chart review of patients admitted to a psychiatric ward from August 1, 2004 to July 31, 2005 at the Atlanta VA Medical Center.
- In the medical chart, information about the patients' childhood and current diagnoses were completed by the psychiatrists who admitted the patient into the hospital.
- Statistical analyses were used to test associations among the different types of abuse and psychiatric disorders.

PARTICIPANTS

- Six hundred and three consecutive psychiatric inpatients at Atlanta Veterans Affairs Medical Center participated.
- The sample was predominately male (86%), and either Black (56%), or White (28%). The average age of participants was 49.2 years (SD = 9.7; Range: 22–86 years).
- Only 13% of the sample reported a history of combat experience.
- The average number of days in the hospital was 11.7 days (SD = 11.7) and the average number of hospital admissions during the study period were 1.3 days (SD = 0.7).

LIMITATIONS

- Information on branch, component, rank, and conflict of the Veterans was not specified, making the ability to generalize this data to other Veterans uncertain.
- Data were collected from one VA medical center, limiting the generalizability of the findings beyond that hospital.
- As this study was solely a chart review of medical records, a possible limitation surrounds completeness of data. Information about abuse may not have been thoroughly or accurately reported in the medical records.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Investigate best-practices for treating psychiatric patients with histories of childhood abuse
- Explore the effects of childhood abuse on military functioning
- Use longitudinal designs to assess the effects of childhood abuse on the clinical course of psychiatric illnesses over time among Service members

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