

# Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:  
Army

## Prior Mental Disorders and Lifetime Suicidal Behaviors Among US Army Soldiers in the Army Study to Assess Risk and Resilience in Servicemembers (Army STARRS)

Millner, A.J., Ursano, R.J., Hwang, I., King, A.J., Naifeh, J.A., Sampson, N.A., ... Nock, M.K. (2017). Prior mental disorders and lifetime suicidal behaviors among US Army soldiers in the Army study to assess risk and resilience in servicemembers (Army STARRS). *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior*, 1-20. doi:10.1111/sltb.12394

**SUMMARY:** The U.S. Army has seen an increase of suicides among Service members over recent years. The Army has addressed this increase by creating and administering a large-scale survey to assess risk and protective factors for suicidal thoughts and behaviors, titled the Army Study to Assess Risk and Resilience in Service members (Army STARRS). Data were used to analyze pre- and post-enlistment mental disorders in order to predict the time of onset for suicidal behaviors. Results highlight risk factors associated with suicide for and provide insight into the time of onset for suicidal ideation and behaviors.

### KEY FINDINGS:

- Approximately one-half of suicidal thoughts, suicidal behaviors, and mental disorders occurred post-enlistment instead of pre-enlistment.
- Certain mental disorders Service members experienced during the time of pre-enlistment (Major Depressive Disorder, Posttraumatic stress disorder, Panic Disorder, and Intermittent Explosive Disorder) were associated with suicidal attempts post-enlistment.
- For men and women, Service members in the Army were at an increased risk for suicide attempts on Active Duty.
- Men who had a junior enlisted rank, as opposed to being an officer, were at a greater risk for post-enlistment suicide attempts.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Tailor suicide prevention efforts to Service members experiencing Major Depressive Disorder, Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, Panic Disorder, and Intermittent Explosive Disorder
- Provide programs for Service members and their partners post-enlistment that focus on decreasing suicide risk
- Enhance education and curriculum related to emotional regulation and suicide prevention for Service members and their families

### IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Encourage the development and continuation of programs that can promote suicide prevention for Service members, their partners, and children
- Continue to support programs for Service members and their partners that address post-enlistment challenges regarding suicide, particularly for men of a junior enlisted rank
- Recommend suicide prevention professional education, especially for those in contact with Active Duty Service members since they are more at risk

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## METHODS

- Data were collected from surveys administered to three groups: Active Duty Service members, Guard Soldiers, and Reservists not deployed to combat zones, Active Duty Service members deployed to combat zones in Afghanistan and Kuwait, and Service members in three Brigade Combat Teams.
- Surveys included measures assessing suicidal behaviors, mental disorders, and Army career variables (e.g., rank and status and deployment history).
- Researchers analyzed associations between the initial onset of suicidal behavior, mental disorders, and Army career characteristics.

## PARTICIPANTS

- Participants were Service members in the U.S. Army who completed the Consolidated All-Army Survey of the Army Study to Assess Risk and Resilience in Service members (n=29,982).
- The sample included both men (n=26,927) and women (n=3,055).
- The male sample was 63.4% White, 18.5% Black, 11.2% Latino, and 6.9% Multiracial. The female sample was 42% White, 34.6% Black, 13.5% Latina, and 9.9% Multiracial.

## LIMITATIONS

- Respondents may have under reported mental disorders or current or past suicidal thoughts and behaviors which could have increased bias in the results.
- There is an increased chance that mental health data included inaccurate diagnoses or estimates since full diagnostic measures for mental disorders were not used.
- Only deployed Service members were surveyed, therefore results are inconclusive for post-deployment Service members.

## AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Include more women in future samples to more accurately compare results across gender
- Survey Veterans and Reservists in future studies in order to determine if results subsist post-deployment
- Use full diagnostic measures for mental disorders in order to improve accuracy

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