

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Army

Risk Factors for Disability Retirement Among Healthy Adults Joining the U.S., Army

Niebuhr, D. W., Drampf, R. L., Mayo, J. A., Blandford, C. D., Levin, L. I., & Cowan, D. N. (2011). Risk factors for disability retirement among healthy adults joining the U.S. Army. *Military Medicine*, 176(2), 170-175. doi:10.7205/milmed-d-10-00114

SUMMARY: Risk factors for disability retirement were assessed using 2,453 disability cases compared to controls. Potential risk factors included sex, deployment status, military occupation, disqualification at accession, body mass index, age, education and race/ethnicity. Disability retirement cases differed statistically from control cases on all variables except education.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Disability retirement cases were more likely than controls to be women, older, overweight at accession, and Latino.
- Disability retirement cases were less likely to have been deployed to combat zones.
- Disability retirement was more common among older Soldiers.
- Musculoskeletal conditions, neurological conditions, mental health disorders, respiratory conditions, and eye diseases comprised 79-85% of all disability retirement cases.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Develop groups to support Soldiers with longer service histories who may be experiencing compounded stress and fatigue
- Provide concrete information on normative versus problematic responses to deployment and strategies to address the deployment-related distress
- Enhance education, activities, and curriculum related to coping behaviors and dealing with chronic medical conditions

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Encourage the development and continuation of programs that can promote resilience in Service members, their partners, and children
- Encourage collaboration among DoD programs and community-based organizations to support a smooth transition for departing Service members
- Recommend culturally relevant physical and mental support services targeted to at-risk groups

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METHODS

- The Army Physical Disability Agency provided data on disability retirees.
- Variables of interest included: sex, deployment status, military occupation, permanent or temporary disqualification, body mass index, age, education, and race/ethnicity.
- Statistical analyses compared men deployed to combat theaters to those specializing in combat support.

PARTICIPANTS

- Participants were Soldiers who entered the Army between 1997-2004 and were receiving disability retirement between 1997-2006.
- Two thousand four hundred fifty-three disability retirement cases were compared to 12,265 controls.
- Disability retirement cases included individuals with 30% disability rating or greater, and included temporary disability cases.
- The study population was primarily White, male, and under age 25 years.

LIMITATIONS

- No deployment information is available prior to 2001, which limits the range of time to use in comparisons.
- Observed sex differences among deployed Soldiers may result from other factors like exposure to gender-based violence or physical conditions more prevalent among certain sexes (e.g., breast cancer).
- Analyses were restricted to Veterans with 30% disability or greater, limiting the generalizability of the findings.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Examine the relationship between age, gender, and disability retirement
- Collect longitudinal data from Service members regarding disability condition and deployment
- Explore family variables (e.g., marital status) that may impact disability status and functioning among Service members

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