

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Army

Prevalence of Childhood Trauma Among U.S. Army Soldiers With Suicidal Behavior

Perales, R., Gallaway, M. S., Forys-Donahue, K. L., Spiess, A., & Milikan, A. M. (2012). Prevalence of childhood trauma among U.S. Army soldiers with suicidal behavior. *Military Medicine*, 177(9), 1034-1040. doi:10.7205/MILMED-D-12-00054

SUMMARY: The administrative records of 995 Active Duty U.S. Army Soldiers who had attempted or completed suicide over a five year period were used to examine the prevalence of childhood trauma and mental health problems in this population. There was a high prevalence of childhood trauma in the attempters (61%) and the completers (43%). The most common type of childhood traumas were family problems and abuse.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Sixty-one percent of Soldiers who had engaged in suicidal behavior had a history of childhood trauma.
- Seventeen percent of male Soldiers reported a history of sexual trauma compared to 51% of female Soldiers.
- The most common childhood traumas experienced by completers and attempters were family problems and abuse.
- Among suicide completers that experienced childhood trauma, there was a higher prevalence of having anxiety, adjustment disorders, or stress.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Offer educational curricula for Service members and their families regarding the link between childhood trauma and suicide
- Provide a list of local resources for Service members and their families when having suicidal thoughts
- Collaborate with mental health providers in creating peer support programs for Service members in emotional distress, including those with suicidal thoughts or behavior

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Encourage routine screening for childhood trauma at enlistment or prior to deployment
- Encourage the development and continuation of programs that can promote resilience in Service members, their partners and children
- Recommend that military installations participate in suicide prevention public awareness campaigns that educate their communities about resources, hotlines, and support services

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METHODS

- The records of Active Duty Soldiers who attempted or completed suicide as identified by completed Department of Defense Suicide Event Report were included in these analyses.
- Suicide cases from January 1, 2005 to December 31, 2010 were extracted from the Army Behavioral Health Integrated Data Environment.
- Data included answers to an open ended question about any known childhood or developmental history events. Childhood trauma was classified as personal (physical, sexual or emotional abuse), environmental (family substance abuse), family mental health problems, and witnessing violence in the home.
- Statistical analysis only included cases with complete information regarding childhood trauma (36%).

PARTICIPANTS

- Initially 2,112 records of attempt and 691 successful suicide cases were included; only 995 (36%) had complete information and were included in final analyses.
- Among the participants who were suicide attempters with no childhood trauma information (n = 293), most were male (83%), between 18-24 years old (62%), White (67%), and 43% had one deployment.
- Among the participants who were suicide attempters with childhood trauma information (n = 538): most were male (71%), between 18-24 years old (65%), White (73%), and 40% had one deployment.
- Suicide completers with no childhood trauma information (n = 93) were mostly male (97%), between 18-24 years old (52%), White (65%), and 37% had one deployment.

LIMITATIONS

- Only attempted suicides that were reported were included; these figures may underestimate the actual rates.
- Only cases determined to have complete childhood trauma assessments were included which resulted in a large number of excluded cases that may have biased results.
- The comparisons were conducted between those who attempted and completed suicide. Comparisons with Soldiers who did not attempt suicide may have been useful as well.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Collect data on military personnel from other branches to consider similarities and differences
- Identify a broader range of risk factors for suicide attempts and examine how those factors impact outcomes
- Gather data on those without suicidal behavior to use as a comparison group

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