

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Multiple
Branches

Student Veterans: A National Survey Exploring Psychological Symptoms and Suicide Risk

Rudd, M., Goulding, J., & Bryan, C. J. (2011). Student veterans: A national survey exploring psychological symptoms and suicide risk. *Professional Psychology: Research And Practice*, 42(5), 354-360. doi:10.1037/a0025164

SUMMARY: Psychological symptoms, symptom severity, and suicide risk in a national sample of student Veterans attending college were explored. Findings suggest a relatively high risk of suicidal ideation among college Veterans. A large number of the sample of student Veterans also experienced anxiety, depression, and symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

KEY FINDINGS:

- Mean scores for anxiety, depression, suicidality, combat exposure, and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) were all at clinical levels. Almost 35% of the sample experienced “severe anxiety,” 24% experienced “severe depression,” and almost 46% experienced significant symptoms of PTSD.
- Forty-six percent reported thinking about suicide with 20% having a plan, 10.4% thinking about suicide “often or very often,” 7.7% making an attempt, and 3.8% believing that suicide is either “likely” or “very likely.”
- PTSD and severe depression were strongly linked with suicide attempts. Of those reporting a previous suicide attempt, 82% had significant symptoms of PTSD and 60% had severe depression.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Host workshops on suicide risk factors for professionals who work with Service members and their families
- Educate couples who have a history of trauma and depression before deployment on positive coping skills
- Disseminate information regarding possible symptoms of mental health problems Service members may face after deployment and where individuals and families can find help for those problems

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Encourage the development and continuation of programs that can promote resilience in Service members, especially those attending post-secondary education
- Encourage collaboration among DoD programs and post-secondary based organizations to support Service members
- Recommend integrating education on suicide risk factors into existing service delivery systems for military families

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METHODS

- Data were collected from a national sample of college student Veterans via a distribution list and a website associated with the Student Veterans of America group: 81% indicated they are currently using VA educational benefits, 60% reported direct combat exposure during deployment(s), and 98% of deployed participants reported having participated in OIF/OEF.
- Participants completed self-report surveys that assessed emotional adjustment and psychological symptoms.
- Data were analyzed to determine to what extent college Veterans experience emotional and psychological symptoms and how they were adjusting to college.

PARTICIPANTS

- Of the Veterans (N= 525) who participated, 81% indicated they are currently using VA educational benefits, 60% reported direct combat exposure during deployment(s), and 98% of deployed participants reported having participated in OIF/OEF. 79% males; 21% females; M = 26 years (range 18–73 years).
- Ethnic composition was 77% White, 12% Latino/Latina, 7% Black, 3% Asian-American, and 1% Native American.
- This study focused on Military Veterans: 34% Army, 18% Marines, 19% Navy, 13% Air Force, 2% Coast Guard, and 10% of the sample were National Guard.

LIMITATIONS

- Those who participated may differ from non-participants in a way that is not measured, but affected the outcome variables. For instance, those who participated may be functioning better than those who did not participate. Veterans who are members of Student Veterans for America may also differ from non-members.
- The study is cross-section and the findings cannot be used to determine causation among the variables.
- The PTSD measures are brief, and their shortened structure may make them prone to finding false-positive results.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Replicate the current study using longitudinal methods to permit exploration of predictive relationships over time
- Gather data from Service members in the workplace to determine if they report similar psychological symptoms and adjustment difficulties as student Veterans
- Examine gender and age differences to determine if Service members of different ages and genders differ in their adjustment experiences

ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



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