The Relationship of Perceptions of Invincibility, Demographics, and Risk Behaviors in Adolescents of Military Parents


**SUMMARY:** Adolescent children of military parents completed self-report questionnaires about their self-perception of invincibility (illusion of invulnerability) and level of risk-taking behaviors. Findings indicate a positive correlation between perceived invincibility and risk-taking; high invincibility scores were associated with high levels of aggressive and delinquent behaviors.

**KEY FINDINGS:**
- Thirty percent of military youth reported engaging in risky sexual behavior (e.g., sex without a condom), and 23% reported having had suicidal ideation in the past year.
- Military youth with high invincibility scores were significantly likely to also engage in high levels of aggressive and delinquent behaviors.
- Invincibility scores were highest among 16-19 year olds and 18-19 year olds; scores were lowest among 20-year-olds.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:**
Programs could:
- Develop services designed to meet the needs of military youth with high levels of perceived invincibility
- Expand and modified services to include youth up to 20-years of age
- Offer support groups for military connected youth struggling with mental health issues, including suicidal ideation

**IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:**
Policies could:
- Continue to support improved mental health screening services for military youth
- Recommend the development and continuation of programs that offer extracurricular activities for military youth as a preventative measure to buffer against potential high risk-taking behaviors and suicidal ideation
- Encourage the training of professionals to better identify military youth who are engaging in high-risk behaviors or struggling with mental health issues
METHODS
- Adolescents were recruited from a military medical facility that provided outpatient care.
- Participants were invited to participate via a letter given during check-in for their clinic appointment; participants who indicated interests were then approached by researchers who provide study information and answer questions.
- Teens and parents had to agree to participation; survey packets were completed during the appointment.

PARTICIPANTS
- One hundred twenty-five adolescents (age range 14-20) completed questionnaires.
- Most participants were female (62%), White (60%), and fell within the 16-17 year age range (36%), followed by 18-19 years (35%), 14-15 years (25%), and 20 year olds (4%).
- The majority reported having a parent on Active Duty (74%) who was enlisted (41%); service branch was not provided.

LIMITATIONS
- Due to the convenience sample used, the participants may not be representative of the broader military child population.
- Many of the results presented did not reach the statistical threshold of significance, limiting interpretability.
- Due to the study design, it is not possible to determine causality between the variables studied.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH
Future research could:
- Utilize a longitudinal design that allow for causality to be tested
- Aim for a more representative sample of military youth, and could include non-military youth for comparison purposes
- Explore whether adolescent invincibility scores vary based on parents’ branch of service

ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS

Design  ★ ★ ★
Limited Research Plan and Sample

Methods  ★ ★ ★
Appropriate Measurement and Analysis

Limitations  ★ ★ ★
Several

For more information about the Assessing Research that Works rating scale visit:
https://reachmilitaryfamilies.umn.edu/content/assessing-research-that-works