

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Multiple
Branches

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

Wickman, M., Greenberg, C., & Boren, D. (2010). The relationship of perceptions of invincibility, demographics, and risk behaviors in adolescents of military parents. *Journal of Pediatric Health Care*, 24(1), 25-33.
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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

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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

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