Prevalence of Childhood Physical and Sexual Abuse in Veterans with Psychiatric Diagnoses


Researchers conducted a retrospective chart review of 603 consecutive psychiatric inpatients at one VA hospital to assess the prevalence of reported childhood physical and sexual abuse. The prevalence of reported childhood physical or sexual abuse was 19%. Researchers compared the rates of abuse with psychiatric diagnoses. More patients with PTSD reported physical and sexual abuse than did those without PTSD.

Key Findings:
- Overall, 19% of the Veterans reported childhood physical or sexual abuse (occurring before age 18). 13% reported physical abuse (23% women, 12% men), 11% reported sexual abuse (33% women, 8% men), and 5% reported both physical and sexual abuse.
- Among Veterans with PTSD, 18% reported childhood physical abuse compared to 12% without PTSD. Similarly, 16% of Veterans with PTSD reported sexual abuse compared to 9% without PTSD.
- Among patients with depressive disorders, 14% reported a history of sexual abuse compared to 9% without depressive disorders.
- Men with substance-induced mood disorder were more likely to report a history of childhood physical abuse than men without the disorder.

Implications for Programs:
- Programs could provide supportive skills training to military families with Service members who are dealing with mental health issues such as depression, PTSD, and substance abuse.
- Programs could provide a range of mental health referrals for Service members with childhood abuse.
- Programs could teach evidence-based parenting classes designed to help couples to manage parenting stress and use respectful, healthy discipline strategies.

Implications for Policies:
- Policies could recommend ongoing funding for a range of mental health services for military personnel.
- Policies could dedicate funding to a variety of efforts and campaigns to remove the stigma associated with seeking assistance for mental health issues.

Avenues for Future Research:
- Future research could investigate best-practices for treating psychiatric patients with histories of childhood abuse.
- Future research could explore the effects of childhood abuse on military functioning.
- Future research using longitudinal designs could assess the effects of childhood abuse on the clinical course of psychiatric illnesses over time.

Prepared by the Military REACH Team.
For additional information, please visit reachmilitaryfamilies.umn.edu
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Background Information

Methodology:
- Data consisted of a retrospective chart review of patients admitted to a psychiatric ward from August 1, 2004 to July 31, 2005.
- Chi-square tests and stepwise logistic regression was used to test associations.

Participants:
- 603 consecutive psychiatric inpatients at Atlanta Veterans Affairs Medical Center participated.
- Demographics: Gender: 86% male, 14% female
- Age: mean = 49.2 years (SD = 9.7; Range: 22–86)
- Race/Ethnicity: 56% Black, 28% White, 16% other.

Limitations:
- Information on branch, component, rank, and conflict of the Veterans was not specified, making the ability to generalize this data to other Veterans uncertain.
- Data was collected from one VA medical center.
- Veterans may have underreported their abuse experiences.
- As this study was solely a chart review of medical records, a possible limitation surrounds completeness of data. Information about abuse may not have been thoroughly or accurately reported in the medical records.

Assessing Research that Works

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