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


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:

- 61% of Soldiers who had engaged in suicidal behavior had a history of childhood trauma.
- 17% 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.
- Social problems were high for suicide attempters with a history of childhood trauma.

Implications for Programs:

- Programs could include information in their educational curricula for Service members and their families about the link between childhood trauma and suicide.
- Programs could provide a list of local resources for Service members and their families when having suicidal thoughts.
- Programs could partner 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 include routine screening for childhood trauma at enlistment or prior to deployment.
- Policies could continue to include regular screening for suicidal thoughts or plans for all Service members.
- Policies could recommend that military installations participate in suicide prevention public awareness campaigns, educating their communities about resources, hotlines, and support services.

Avenues for Future Research:

- Future research could collect data on military personnel from other branches to consider similarities and differences.
- Research could identify a broader range of risk factors for suicide attempts.
- Additional studies could collect data on those without suicidal behavior to use as a comparison group.
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 1/1/05-12/31/10 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 that may have contributed to the event. 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.

Only cases who had complete information regarding childhood trauma were included (36%). Descriptive statistics and prevalence rates were calculated; chi square tests compared groups.

2,112 records of attempt and 691 successful suicide cases were initially included; only 995 (36%) had complete information and were included in final analyses.

Suicide attempters with no childhood trauma information (n=293): 83% male, 62% 18-24 years old, 67% White, 43% had one deployment.

Suicide attempters with childhood trauma information (n=538): 71% male, 65% 18-24 years old, 73% White, 40% had one deployment.

Suicide completers with no childhood trauma information (n=93): 97% male, 52% 18-24 years old, 65% White, 37% had one deployment.

Suicide completers with childhood trauma information (n=71): 93% male, 51% 18-24 years old, 80% White, 47% had one deployment.

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.

**Methodology:**
- The design of the study (e.g., research plan, sample, recruitment) used to address the research question was...
- The research methods (e.g., measurement, analysis) used to answer the research question were...
- The limitations of this study are...
- The implications of this research to programs, policies and the field, stated by the authors, are...

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**Assessing Research that Works**

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☐ Not applicable because authors do not discuss implications

**Overall Quality Rating**