

Suicidality Among Military-Connected Adolescents in California Schools

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ABSTRACT

“Previous research indicates that suicidal ideation is higher among military-connected youth than non military-connected youth. This study extends prior work by examining suicidal ideation, plans, and attempts to military-connected and non military-connected adolescents. Data were gathered from 390,028 9th and 11th grade students who completed the 2012-2013 California Healthy Kids Survey. Bivariate comparisons and multivariate logistic analyses were conducted to examine differences in suicidal ideation, plans, and attempts requiring medical attention between military and not military-connected youth. In multivariate logistic analyses, military-connected youth were at increased risk for suicidal ideation (OR = 1.43, 95% CI = 1.36-1.49), making a plan to harm themselves (OR = 1.67, CI = 1.43-1.95), and an attempted suicide which required medical treatment (OR = 1.71, CI = 1.34-2.16). The results indicate that military-connected youth statewide are at a higher risk for suicidal ideation, plans, attempts, and attempts requiring medical care because of suicidal behaviors. It is suggested that policies be implemented to increase awareness and screening among primary care providers, school personnel, and military organizations that serve military-connected youth.”

RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

- In the United States, roughly 15% of adolescents report seriously considering suicide, with nearly 13% making a suicide plan, and 8% attempting suicide within the past year. Previous studies have found that suicidal ideation rates are higher in military-connected youth. This study sought to extend prior research on suicidality by examining the prevalence of suicidal ideation, suicidal plans, suicide attempts, and attempts requiring medical treatment amongst military-connected and non military-connected youth in California.
- Military-connected adolescents had higher prevalence of suicidal ideation, developing a suicide plan, attempting the suicide plan, and suicide attempts requiring medical treatment. Twenty-four percent of military-connected youth reported seriously considering suicide, compared with 18% of non military-connected youth. Almost 12% of military-connected youth had attempted suicide during the past 12 months compared with 7% of non military-connected youth.
- Given these findings, there is a great need for suicidality screening among adolescents connected to the military. Additionally, the high levels of suicidal ideation and behaviors in military-connected children and adolescents indicate the need for further mental health services and additional supports for families in the military system.

IMPLICATIONS

FOR PRACTICE

Pediatricians, mental health workers, school personnel, parents, and the general public should remain aware of the increased risk for suicidal ideation and suicidal behaviors (planning and/or attempting suicide) in military-connected youth. A result of the AVF is that only a small segment of society is personally affected by deployments. To reduce feelings of isolation or invisibility in military-connected youth, school personnel and mental health providers should discuss military family life with youth; teach coping techniques for anxiety, depression, and stress; and offer support services and programs for military-connected adolescents and their families. Since military connectedness could serve as a risk factor for suicidality in youth, mental health providers and school personnel should try to know which students are connected to the military so they can provide adequate resources if necessary. Since deployments and relocations can increase the risk for suicidal ideation, mental health providers and school personnel should offer support services to students they serve who might have a deployed family member or have recently relocated. Mental health providers should screen adolescents for suicidal ideation and suicidal behavior during medical visits. Since possession of a weapon in the home is connected to suicidality in military-connected youth, parents should safely store and secure weapons to reduce adolescent access.

FOR POLICY

U.S. policymakers are currently considering a bill that would establish a standardized system of tracking suicidal behaviors in military personnel and their family members. Policy makers might allocate funds to further explore suicidal ideation and suicidal behaviors in military-connected children, adolescents, and spouses. Accurate estimates of suicidal ideation and behavior or risk for suicidality in military-connected adolescents and families could result in improved support services and programs. To reduce adolescent access to firearms, the DoD might consider implementing a policy that forbids service members from bringing firearms home during extended leaves and weekends.

FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This study improves the general understanding of suicidal ideation and suicidal behaviors among adolescents. However, this study is limited by its sampling frame, which only assessed 9th and 11th graders in California. Future studies should sample military children of all grade levels, including college/university. Future researchers should study the relationship between military life stressors, depression, and suicidal ideation in military-connected adolescents. A limitation of this study is that use of self-reported measures could have resulted in under-reporting of suicidal ideation. Given the stigma associated with suicide, future researchers might use qualitative methods to reduce under-reporting. Another limitation of this study is that it does not include information on parental deployments or caregiver/parental mental health status or history. Future researchers should collect information on parents, caregivers, and siblings. Subsequent studies should explore what factors promote resiliency among military-connected youth, such as external supports or family closeness. It would be beneficial to study how the frequency and length of deployments affects suicidal ideation and suicidal behaviors in military-connected youth. Researchers should also study how peer and familial support impacts military-connected youth with suicidal behaviors or thoughts. Additional studies are needed on the mental health of military-connected children and youth, particularly as it relates to suicidal behaviors. Future researchers should conduct similar studies in other states and countries to improve generalizability.

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