

Military health research reveals potential pathway to reducing youth suicide

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Table 1. Participant Demographic Characteristics^a

Characteristic	Unweighted No. (weighted %)		
	Overall sample (N = 10 045) ^b	Military-connected youth (n = 398)	Non-military-connected youth (n = 9647)
Age category			
12-13 y	3327 (33.6%)	155 (38.4%)	3172 (33.5%)
14-15 y	3367 (32.5%)	132 (37.1%)	3235 (32.3%)
16-17 y	3351 (33.9%)	111 (24.5%)	3240 (34.2%)
Sex			
Female	4945 (49.0%)	179 (41.2%)	4766 (49.2%)
Male	5100 (51.0%)	219 (58.8%)	4881 (50.8%)
Race and ethnicity^c			
American Indian or Alaska Native	105 (0.7%)	6 (0.5%)	99 (0.7%)
Asian	477 (5.7%)	6 (1.3%)	471 (5.9%)
Black or African American	1370 (13.4%)	57 (12.5%)	1313 (13.5%)
Hispanic	2262 (24.7%)	82 (22.5%)	2180 (24.8%)
Multiracial	621 (3.5%)	26 (2.6%)	595 (3.5%)
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	35 (0.5%)	0 (0.0%)	35 (0.5%)
White	5175 (51.5%)	221 (60.6%)	4954 (51.2%)

^a All χ^2 significant at $P < .001$.

^b There were 10 743 youth aged 12 to 17 years in the 2021 National Survey on Drug Use and Health dataset. Data on parental military status were missing for 698 of these youths; thus, the total analytic sample was 10 045 youths.

^c Self-reported race and ethnicity data were analyzed due to differences in firearm carrying across these characteristics.

Participant Demographic Characteristics. Credit: *JAMA Network Open* (2024). DOI: 10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2024.24916

Military-connected youth that show elevated risk for suicidal ideation and suicide plans exhibit lower rates of gun-carrying, according to new research from emergency medicine faculty at the University of Colorado School of Medicine.

The [analysis](#), published in *JAMA Network Open* July 31 by members of the CU Center for Combat Medicine and Battlefield (COMBAT)

Research and Firearm Injury Prevention Initiative (FIPI), offers promising insight for potentially reducing gun-carrying among youths with recent suicidal ideation or plans. Researchers are also interested in how relevant strategies in military communities that reduce gun-carrying—which is associated with firearm-related harms, including suicide—could be applied to other populations.

"We began this research looking at how children of military service members are different than their peers who are not connected to the military," says study co-author Ian Eisenhauer, MD, a Center for COMBAT Research fellow and lieutenant commander in the U.S. Navy.

"We know that military-connected families tend to have a lot of association with weapons and they're around firearms quite a bit, so we expected to look at the data and find that these children with military connections are more likely to carry firearms than their peers who have similar risk factors, but we actually found the opposite to be true," he continues.

Diving into national data

The researchers analyzed data from the 2021 National Survey on Drug Use and Health, a representative survey of noninstitutionalized U.S. civilians, looking at responses from [youth](#) 12 to 17 years old. Of the 10,045 youths included in the study, 4% reported past-year handgun carrying.

Military-connected youth with past-year suicidal ideations or suicide plans were found to have 26% and 76% decreased odds of reporting past-year handgun carrying, respectively.

"This study used nationally representative data from youth across the country," explains Ian Stanley, Ph.D., assistant research professor of

emergency medicine and psychological health lead for the CU Center for COMBAT Research, who co-authored the study. "We specifically looked at handgun carrying and military-connectedness among high-risk youth, or those who are reporting suicidal thoughts and plans."

Risk and harm reduction efforts aimed at service members are common and service-wide, but researchers point out that these programs are not standard for all military dependents.

"Nonetheless, service-wide efforts to create community, reduce stigma, and promote lethal means safety specifically aimed at suicide prevention may have secondary effects on dependent youth. This includes registration requirements for weapons stored on a military base that specifically addresses child safety, including lock mandates and secure storage options," the researchers conclude in their analysis.

A foundation for future research

Future research to study this phenomenon is already in the works, Stanley and Eisenhauer say. They're designing further surveys tailored to [military families](#) that could reveal potential drivers of the positive association and what measures are working to reduce gun-carrying among youth who are at high risk of [suicidal ideation](#) and making suicide plans.

"The U.S. has a rich history of learning from the health care successes of its military. Many of the medical innovations and advancements that we benefit from today started in the military with servicemembers and their families," says Stanley, who also works as the military and veteran lead for FIPI to study firearm injury risk reduction measures.

"The same can be true for this finding—we can learn more about how to translate the findings and motivations around secure storage to the

civilian sector."

Eisenhauer emphasizes the positive news this study has for military families and how it may continue to push more progress forward.

"I hope that we can continue to support our kids to understand firearms and be safe around them," he says. "I'm hopeful that this research can make a difference so that communities, military and civilian, are not wracked by suicide and devastating loss."

More information: Ian H. Stanley et al, Gun Carrying Among Military-Connected Youth With Past-Year Suicidal Ideation and Suicide Plans, *JAMA Network Open* (2024). [DOI: 10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2024.24916](https://doi.org/10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2024.24916)

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