

Suicide risk high for war veterans in college, study finds

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Nearly half of college students who are U.S. military veterans reported thinking of suicide and 20 percent said they had planned to kill themselves, rates significantly higher than among college students in general, according to a study presented at the American Psychological Association's 119th Annual Convention.

"These alarming numbers underscore the urgent need for universities to be adequately staffed and prepared to assist and treat student veterans," said M. David Rudd, PhD, of the University of Utah and lead author of the study entitled, "Student Veterans: A National Survey Exploring Psychological Symptoms and Suicide Risk." Rudd presented the findings during a convention symposium focusing on unique challenges of suicide prevention in the military.

Researchers with the National Center for Veterans' Studies at the University of Utah looked at survey results gathered in 2011 from 525 veterans -- 415 males and 110 females, with an average age of 26. Ninety-eight percent had been deployed in the wars in Iraq or Afghanistan and 58 percent to 60 percent reported they had experienced combat. The majority were Caucasian (77 percent), with the remainder African-American (7 percent), Hispanic (12 percent), Asian-American (3 percent) and Native American (1 percent). This ethnic background distribution is similar to that of all U.S. veterans, according to the paper.

The findings were startling: 46 percent of respondents indicated suicidal thinking at some point during their lifetime; 20 percent reported suicidal thoughts with a plan; 10.4 percent reported thinking of suicide very often; 7.7 percent reported a suicide attempt; and 3.8 percent reported a suicide attempt was either likely or very likely.

This is significantly higher than American College Health Association 2010 data concerning university students in general, which showed 6 percent of

college students reported seriously considering suicide and 1.3 percent reported a [suicide](#) attempt, according to the study. The survey data also indicated the student veterans' suicide-related problems were comparable to or more severe than those of veterans seeking mental health services from VA medical centers.

The Student Veterans of America distributed the survey to all of its college and university chapters nationwide. The survey targeted demographic information, college experience and psychological issues, but the participation solicitation did not indicate that it focused on emotional adjustment and psychological symptoms. The SVA is a national coalition of student veterans groups in 48 states, with 384 chapters representing about 20,000 student veterans.

"As nearly 2 million veterans return home from deployments overseas, the decade-long wars in Iraq and Afghanistan will have unanticipated impact on college and university campuses, with large numbers separating from military service and making use of available higher education benefits to return to campus," the researchers wrote.

The study authors said they were unaware of any data describing the preparedness of college and university counseling centers to meet these demands. They recommended expanding training to help counselors recognize and treat combat-related trauma, making training available to all student service offices that have significant contact with students in addition to clinics and counseling centers, and providing broad-based screening for student veterans as they transition to campus, such as during orientation.

Provided by American Psychological Association

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