

Study Published in JAMA Psychiatry Examines Suicide Attempt Risk Factors, Methods and Timing, Related to Deployment Among Active Duty Soldiers

Released: 25-May-2016 11:05 AM EDT

Bethesda, Md. - Suicide attempts, like suicides, have increased in the U.S. Army over the last decade. To better understand and prevent suicidal behavior, researchers from the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences (USU), the University of California, San Diego, Harvard Medical School, and the University of Michigan examined timing and risk factors for suicide attempts among U.S. Army enlisted Soldiers. They found the highest risk was among those who never deployed, and those who never deployed were at greatest risk during their second month of service.

The study, which included more than 975,000 enlisted Soldiers, was published online (May 25) in JAMA Psychiatry, and was a component of the Army Study to Assess Risk and Resilience in Servicemembers (Army STARRS). Dr. Robert J. Ursano, the study Co-Principal Investigator and chair of the Department of Psychiatry at USU, and coauthors, used administrative records to examine risk factors, methods and timing of suicide attempts by Soldiers currently deployed, previously deployed and never deployed from 2004 through 2009. Of the Soldiers included in the study, 9,650 had attempted suicide. About 86 percent of those were younger than 30, about 60 percent were non-Hispanic white, about 76 percent were high school educated, and about 55 percent were currently married.

According to this study, these findings suggest predictors of suicide attempts, which could provide greater opportunities for prevention of suicidal behavior in the military as well as in other populations.

The authors also report that about 40 percent of enlisted Soldiers who had never deployed accounted for about 61 percent of the enlisted Soldiers who attempted suicide. Among those who never deployed, risk of a suicide attempt was highest in the second month of service. For Soldiers on their first deployment, the risk of suicide attempt was highest in the sixth month of deployment. For previously deployed Soldiers, the risk was highest five months after they returned.

Additionally, Soldiers who were currently and previously deployed were more likely to attempt suicide with a firearm. Across deployment status, suicide attempts were more likely among Soldiers who were women, in their first two years of service, and had received a mental health diagnosis in the previous month. Soldiers with a previous deployment also had a higher risk of suicide attempt if they screened positive for depression or post-traumatic stress disorder after they returned from deployment, especially at a follow-up screening about four to six months after deployment.

According to the study, deployment context is important in identifying suicide attempt risk among Army enlisted Soldiers, and a life/career history perspective can also help identify high-risk segments of a population based on factors such as timing, environmental context and individual characteristics.

“Our findings while most relevant to active-duty U.S. Army Soldiers, highlight considerations that may inform the study of suicide risk in other contexts, such as during the transition from military to civilian life,” the study concludes.

#

About the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences

The Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences, founded by an act of Congress in 1972, is the nation’s federal health sciences university and the academic heart of the Military Health System. USU students are primarily active duty uniformed officers in the Army, Navy, Air Force and Public Health Service who receive specialized education in tropical and infectious diseases, TBI and PTSD, disaster response and humanitarian assistance, global health, and acute trauma care. A large percentage of the university’s more than 5,200 physician and 1,000 advanced practice nursing alumni are supporting operations around the world, offering their leadership and expertise. USU also has graduate programs in biomedical sciences and public health committed to excellence in research, and in oral biology. The University’s research program covers a wide range of clinical and other topics important to both the military and public health. For more information about USU and its programs, visit www.usuhs.edu.