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US Military Service Buffers Suicide Risk among Individuals with Disabilities

Individuals in the United States with disabilities are at heightened risk for suicidal ideation, planning, and attempt, with risk growing as disability status increases. Military veterans have increased rates of suicide deaths and disability relative to civilians, yet it is unclear whether veteran status confers higher risk for suicide in those with disability. This secondary data analysis utilized a nationally representative, cross-sectional study using 2015-2020 National Survey on Drug Use and Health data (N=231,099, representing 236,551,727 U.S. adults). Disability status included problems with hearing, vision, mobility, cognitive function, or executing complex activity, and counts ranged from 1, 2, or ≥ 3 limitations. Multivariable logistic regression examined suicidal ideation, planning, and attempt as a function of veteran status and disability variables. Veterans represented 10.71% of the sample (weighted n=25,334,073). Suicide risk was reported by 4.39% of the sample (weighted n=10,401,065). Among those with 1 or 2 disabilities, being a veteran was associated with a lower risk of suicide planning (AOR:0.57, 95%CI:0.34-0.95) and history of attempt (AOR:0.46, 95%CI:0.24-.88), respectively. No significant differences in suicidal ideation were observed by veteran status among those reporting 3+ limitations. Among those with no disability, veteran status was associated with higher risk of suicide planning (AOR: 1.71, 95%CI: 1.17-2.49). Veteran status among those with disabilities may mitigate suicide risk given increased receipt of more disability-related care through the Department of Veterans Affairs. Further research would extend this line of inquiry by examining the cause of disability. It is possible that physical wounds of war are protective because of the meaning and value of service to one's country.

Keywords: Military; Suicide Risk; Disability; Veterans

Biography:

Rebecca K. Blais, is an associate professor of psychology. She is currently completing a 12-month mission at the Department of Defense, serving on the Suicide Prevention and Response Independent Review Committee. She received her PhD in Clinical Psychology from the University of Utah. She is an associate editor of *Military Psychology*, acting Chair for Science, and serves on the executive committee of the Society for Military Psychology (APA). She is the recipient of Early Career Research Awards from the Society for Military Psychology and Trauma Psychology (APA). She is also the recipient of the Gersoni Award from the Society for Military Psychology.