COMMENTARY

Suicidality Amongst Military-connected Youth in California

A Call for Increased Awareness and Support

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In the United States, recent national estimates show that more than 15% of adolescents reported seriousconsideration of suicide, 12.8% reported making a plan, and 7.8% reported making an attempt in the preceding 12 months. Suicidal thoughts and suicide attempts during adolescence have been linked to completed suicides and greater psychosocial difficulties in adulthood. Presently, a growing body of research demonstrates that mental health problems, including suicidal ideation in addition to depression and other internalizing and externalizing symptoms, arise more frequently among military-connected youth in the United States (i.e., children and adolescents with a parent/guardian in the military) as compared to their non-military connected peers.

Based upon these concerning findings, a study was designed to further examine the continuum of suicidal behavior amongst military-connected youth in California. This study used data from the 2012–2013 California Healthy Kids Survey (CHKS) which is implemented in approximately 85% of all districts statewide. Analysis of suicidal behaviors were conducted on 390,028 9th and 11th grade students. The continuum of suicidality included suicidal ideation, having a suicide plan, reported suicide attempts, and reported suicide attempts requiring medical attention between military and not military connected youth. Military-connected youth were defined as those who had a parent or guardian on active duty.

Military-connected youth reported higher rates of suicidal behavior than their non-military connected peers. Controlling for grade, gender, and race/ethnicity, logistic regression revealed military-connected youth were at increased odds for suicidal ideation, making a plan to harm themselves, attempting suicide, and attempting suicide which required medical treatment.

Overall, the findings emphasize the need to address suicidality among military-connected adolescents and their families. Today's military-connected adolescents tend to experience multiple geographic relocations and frequent parental deployments which can result in increased worry about a family member, difficult role transitions throughout the deployment cycle, and changes in relationships within the family system. Thus, these stressors associated with the prolonged war, in conjunction with normative adolescent stressors, may be driving an increase in suicide risk among military-connected adolescents.

Physicians, mental health providers, and school staff need tools to carefully assess military-connected youth and their families and resources to provide treatment and support for these youth. These entities should work to increase their awareness of the presence of military-connected youth and families that they serve. Special consideration should be given for the potential of deployments, relocations, and other adolescent stressors to impact the mental health of military-connected youth. These findings indicate that prevention and intervention programs and protocols should focus on all aspects of suicidality including ideation, plans, attempts and attempts requiring medical attention. These suggestions are particularly salient for California which according to the 2000 Census has the largest number of active duty military installations (San Diego Naval Station, North Island San Diego Naval Station, Camp Pendleton Marine Corps Base, and Travis Air Force Base) with 10,000 or more active duty military personnel

onsite in the United States.

The full study can be found in Tamika D. Gilreath, Stephani L. Wrabel, Kathrine S. Sullivan, Gordon P. Capp, Ilan Roziner, Rami Benbenishty and Ron A. Astor, "Suicidality among military-connected adolescents in California schools," European Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, March 2015.

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