

Self-Inflicted Deaths Among Women With U.S. Military Service: A Hidden Epidemic?

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Prospective analyses of National Health Interview Survey and National Death Index data found an adjusted risk of suicide among male veterans twice that of nonveteran males (1). That study also examined data for 11 female veterans and 246 female nonveterans who completed suicide and found that women with past military service were more likely to complete suicide (adjusted hazard ratio=3.62, 95% confidence interval [CI]=1.95–6.73).

This cross-sectional study used 2004–2007 data for 5,948 women (ages 18 to 64) who completed suicide in the 16 states that constitute the National Violent Death Reporting System. Denominators were from 2004–2007 veteran population data and American Community Surveys. We examined rates for female nonveterans and veterans, whose rates were computed using two denominators—female veterans and the broader military service population of veterans plus active duty, reserve, and National Guard.

Figure 1 shows standardized mortality ratios (SMRs) for female veterans, who were more likely than nonveterans to complete suicide, even when the broader military service denominator was used (ages 18–34, SMR=1.76, CI=1.32–2.27 and ages 35–44, SMR=1.30, CI=1.00–1.66).

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As the first general population study of current suicide risk among women with U.S. military service, limitations included inability to distinguish decedents on active duty versus those who were discharged, presumed undercounting of suicides, absence of data on military sexual trauma or combat exposure, and unavailable data on possible confounders (which were addressed in longitudinal analyses).

These findings suggest a hidden epidemic of suicide among younger women with military service. Clinicians should inquire about military service among women and should recognize that suicide prevention practices pertain to female veterans.

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Acknowledgments and disclosures

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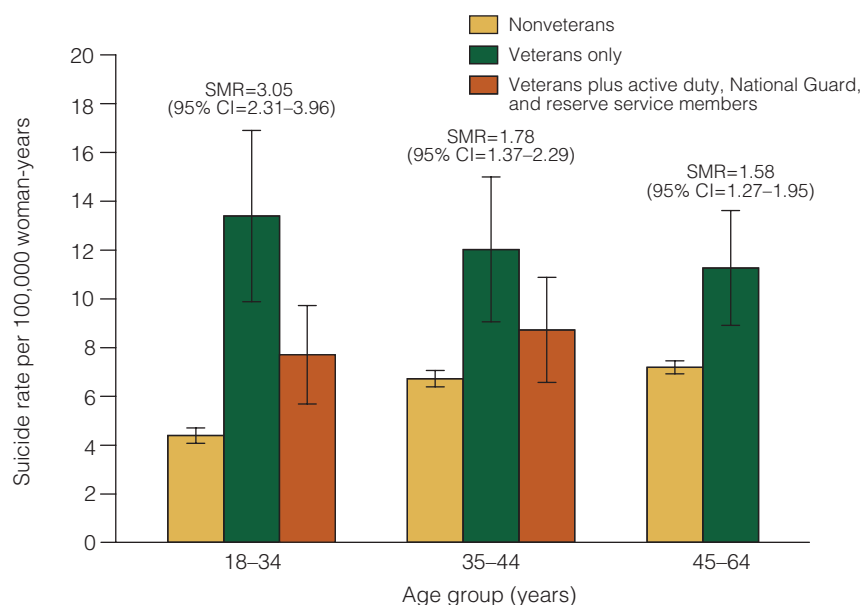
The authors report no competing interests.

Reference

1. Kaplan MS, Huguet N, McFarland BH, et al: Suicide among male veterans: a prospective population-based study. *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health* 61:619–624, 2007

Figure 1

Suicide rates and risks from 2004 to 2007 among female veterans and nonveterans, by age group^a



^a SMR (standardized mortality ratio) describes the age-specific suicide risk among veterans versus nonveterans. Suicides per person-year for females aged 18–34 were 1,461 per 33,257,362 for nonveterans, 56 per 418,132 for veterans, 56 per 726,401 for military service; aged 35–44 were 1,519 per 22,576,130 for nonveterans, 63 per 524,147 for veterans, and 63 per 721,867 for military service; and aged 45–64 were 2,761 per 38,363,658 for nonveterans and 88 per 781,291 for veterans. Very few women aged 45–64 were currently active in military service.