

Technical Abstract

The Association between Suicide and OIF/OEF Deployment History

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Background:

There have been numerous reports of increased suicide among the OIF/OEF military cohort, which has heightened concern that OIF/OEF deployment is a suicide risk factor. However, neither the actual suicide rate nor the extent to which OIF/OEF deployment might increase suicide risk is known, as the literature on this topic is equivocal and characterized by significant methodological limitations. Recently, the Blue Ribbon Workgroup on Suicide Prevention in the Veteran Population reviewed this literature and put forth recommendations for addressing the significant gaps in knowledge and biases in the existing epidemiological methodologies. The proposed research project is directly aligned with the Blue Ribbon Workgroup's recommendations. As such, the proposed Department of Defense-Department of Veterans Affairs collaborative project will yield seminal results that will significantly advance our understanding of suicide among the OIF/OEF military cohort.

Objective/Hypothesis: The overarching objective of the proposed research project is to utilize population level data in collaboration with other governmental agencies to examine suicide in the OIF/OEF military cohort specifically addressing the gaps and limitations highlighted by the Blue Ribbon Workgroup. In accord with the Blue Ribbon Workgroup's recommendations, the proposed project is designed to use precise, population-level methodology to calculate the suicide rate for the entire OIF/OEF military cohort (including potentially vulnerable subgroups such as the Guard and Reserve) and to assess the extent to which potential suicide trends might exist. It is also designed to examine the extent to which OIF/OEF deployment might be associated with suicide. We hypothesize that after controlling for demographic variables OIF/OEF deployment will not be associated with suicide.

Study Design: We will use the enterprise level data through collaboration with other governmental agencies to identify OIF/OEF cases and deployment status and to determine confirmed suicide mortality. In order to realize the full and long-term potential of the database, the database will be transitioned to the Defense Centers of Excellence (DCoE) to further support DoD/VA.

Relevance: Empirical research on suicide among the OIF/OEF military cohort is sparse and equivocal. It is also marked by significant methodological shortcomings that render interpretation of reported findings quite limited. There is a patent need for research that incorporates large population-level databases to accurately calculate the prevalence of suicide among the entire OIF/OEF military cohort and to investigate the extent to which OIF/OEF deployment might relate to suicide. The proposed research project is very well-positioned to make a seminal contribution to the literature on this topic by fulfilling these needs.