Military Children and Suicide Risk

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A large study in California found that adolescents with parents or siblings serving in the military are at increased risk for suicidal ideation, feeling sad or hopeless, and depression. These risks increase if the family members in the military are deployed. Being female, a racial/ethnic minority, and being older were also factors associated with higher levels of feeling sad or hopeless.

In the 12 months before the survey, 19 percent of adolescents without parents or siblings in the military had experienced suicidal ideation. By comparison, 25 percent of adolescents with at least one parent in the military had experienced these feelings, along with 30 percent of those with a sibling (but no parent) in the military.

The deployment of a family member was associated with a further increase in the likelihood of an adolescent’s feeling sad or hopeless, or of experiencing depressive symptoms. The authors report that “among ninth and eleventh graders, reporting two or more family member deployments was associated with a 34 percent increase in the odds of suicidal ideation compared with those with no deployment experience.” The authors suggest that their findings both “highlight the need for physicians, clinical service providers, and public school teachers to be sensitive and proactive with this group, particularly with youth experiencing multiple family deployments” and “suggest the need to increase mental health screenings among all adolescents, particularly among those in military-connected families and experiencing deployment.”