



## The Army Study to Assess Risk and Resilience in Servicemembers (Army STARRS)

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### **INTRODUCTION:**

Army STARRS is the largest and most comprehensive research project of mental health ever conducted in the U.S. Army. The project was designed to examine a broad range of risk and resilience (protective) factors across a complex set of outcomes. Army STARRS scientists created a series of extensive databases with the potential to achieve groundbreaking results. These databases will allow scientists to investigate a diverse combination of factors from demographic, psychological, biological, neurological, behavioral, and social domains to help identify risk and resilience factors for soldier suicidal behaviors and associated mental health issues. The project was designed using an adaptive approach which means it evolved as new information became available over the course of the project. With the goal of generating actionable findings, the research team shared preliminary findings with the Army as they become available so that the Army could apply them to its ongoing health promotion, risk reduction, and suicide prevention efforts.

Army STARRS includes the following component studies:

- 1) the Historical Administrative Data Study (HADS) of Army and Department of Defense (DoD) administrative data systems (including records of suicidal behaviors) for all soldiers on active duty from 2004 to 2009 aimed at finding administrative record predictors of suicides;
- 2) two retrospective case-control studies of fatal and nonfatal suicidal behaviors;
- 3) a study of new soldiers assessed just before beginning basic combat training (BCT) with self-administered questionnaires (SAQ), neurocognitive tests, and blood samples;
- 4) a cross-sectional study of soldiers representative of all other active duty soldiers (exclusive of BCT);
- 5) a pre-post deployment study (with blood samples) of soldiers in brigade combat teams about to deploy to Afghanistan, with sub-samples assessed again one, three, and nine months after returning from deployment;
- 6) a pilot study to follow-up post-deployment respondents transitioning to civilian life.





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Army/DoD administrative data were linked prospectively to the large-scale survey samples to examine predictors of subsequent suicidality and related mental health outcomes.

## **SUMMARY OF FINDINGS:**

The following is a brief summary of some of the Army STARRS findings to-date. Findings followed by an asterisk (\*) were included in USU press releases.

### **1. The Army Study to Assess Risk and Resilience in Servicemembers (Army STARRS)**

- Component study cooperation rates are comparatively high.
- Sample biases are relatively small.
- Inefficiencies introduced into parameter estimates by using nonresponse adjustment weights and time-space clustering are small.
- Initial findings show that the suicide death rate, which rose over 2004–2009, increased for those deployed, those never deployed, and those previously deployed.
- Analyses of administrative records show that those deployed or previously deployed were at greater suicide risk.
- Receiving a waiver to enter the Army was not associated with increased risk.
- Being demoted in the past two years was associated with increased risk.
- Time in current deployment, length of time since return from most recent deployment, total number of deployments, and time interval between most recent deployments (known as dwell time) were not associated with suicide risk.
- Initial analyses of survey data show that 13.9% of currently active non-deployed regular Army soldiers considered suicide at some point in their lifetime, while 5.3% had made a suicide plan, and 2.4% had attempted suicide.\*
- 47–60% of these outcomes first occurred prior to enlistment.\*
- Prior mental disorders (in particular major depression and intermittent explosive disorder) were the strongest predictors of these self-reported suicidal behaviors.





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- Most onsets of plans-attempts among ideators (58.3–63.3%) occurred within the year of onset of ideation.
- About 25.1% of non-deployed U.S. Army personnel met 30-day criteria for a DSM-IV anxiety, mood, disruptive behavior, or substance disorder (15.0% an internalizing disorder; 18.4% an externalizing disorder) and 11.1% for multiple disorders.\*
- Three-fourths of these disorders had pre-enlistment onsets.\*
- Integration across component studies creates strengths going well beyond those in conventional applications of the same individual study designs.
- These design features create a strong methodological foundation from which Army STARRS can pursue its substantive research goals.
- The early findings reported here illustrate the importance of the study and its approach as a model of studying rare events particularly of national security concern.
- Continuing analyses of the data will inform suicide prevention for the U.S. Army.

TABLE 1. Army STARRS Component Studies and Approximate Soldier Sample Size

Historical Administrative Data Study (HADS)	>1.6 million
Soldier Health Outcomes Study A (SHOS-A)	150 cases and 300 controls
Soldier Health Outcomes Study B (SHOS-B)	150 cases and 300 controls
New Soldier Study (NSS)	51,000
All Army Study (AAS)	35,000
Pre-Post Deployment Study (PPDS)	9,400
Pre-Post Separation Study (PPSS)	1,500

## 2. Sociodemographic and career history predictors of suicide mortality in the United States Army 2004–2009

- Several novel results were found that could have intervention implications.
- Significantly elevated suicide rates (69.6–80.0 suicides per 100,000 person-years compared with 18.5 suicides per 100,000 person-years in the total Army) among enlisted soldiers deployed either during their first year of service or with less than expected (based on time in service) junior enlisted rank





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- Substantially greater rise in suicide among women than men during deployment
- Protective effect of marriage against suicide only during deployment.
- Career history approach produces several actionable insights missed in less textured analyses of administrative data predictors.
- Expansion of analyses to a richer set of predictors might help refine understanding of intervention implications.

### **3. Predictors of Suicide and Accident Death in the Army Study to Assess Risk and Resilience in Servicemembers (Army STARRS)**

- The suicide rate rose between 2004 and 2009 among never deployed and currently and previously deployed Regular Army soldiers.
- The accident death rate fell sharply among currently deployed soldiers, remained constant among the previously deployed, and trended upward among the never deployed.
- Increased suicide risk was associated with being a man (or a woman during deployment), white race/ethnicity, junior enlisted rank, recent demotion, and current or previous deployment.
- Sociodemographic and Army experience predictors were generally similar for suicides and accident deaths.
- Time trends in these predictors and in the Army's increased use of accession waivers (which relaxed some qualifications for new soldiers) do not explain the rise in Army suicides.
- Predictors of Army suicides were largely similar to those reported elsewhere for civilians, although some predictors distinct to Army service emerged that deserve more in-depth analysis.
- The existence of a time trend in suicide risk among never-deployed soldiers argues indirectly against the view that exposure to combat-related trauma is the exclusive cause of the increase in Army suicides.





#### **4. Thirty-Day Prevalence of DSM-IV Mental Disorders among Nondeployed Soldiers in the U.S. Army: Results from the Army Study to Assess Risk and Resilience in Servicemembers (Army STARRS)**

- A total of 25.1% of respondents met criteria for any 30-day disorder (15.0% internalizing; 18.4% externalizing) and 11.1% for multiple disorders.
- A total of 76.6% of cases reported pre-enlistment age at onset of at least one 30-day disorder (49.6% internalizing; 81.7% externalizing).\*
- 12.8% of respondents reported severe role impairment.
- Controlling for sociodemographic and Army career correlates (which were broadly consistent with other studies) 30-day disorders with pre-enlistment and post-enlistment ages at onset both significantly predicted severe role impairment
- Pre-enlistment disorders were more consistent powerful predictors than post-enlistment disorders.
- Population-attributable risk proportions of severe role impairment were 21.7% for pre-enlistment disorders, 24.3% for post-enlistment disorders, and 43.4% for all disorders.
- Interventions to limit accession or increase resilience of new soldiers with pre-enlistment mental disorders might reduce prevalence and impairments of mental disorders in the U.S. Army.

#### **5. Prevalence and Correlates of Suicidal Behavior among Soldiers Results from the Army Study to Assess Risk and Resilience in Servicemembers (Army STARRS)**

- The lifetime prevalence estimates of suicidal ideation, suicide plans, and suicide attempts are 13.9%, 5.3%, and 2.4%.\*
- Most reported cases (47.0%-58.2%) had pre-enlistment onsets.\*
- Pre-enlistment onset rates were lower than in a prior national civilian survey (with imputed/simulated age at enlistment).
- Post-enlistment onsets of ideation and plans were higher, and post-enlistment first attempts were equivalent to civilian rates.





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- Most reported onsets of plans and attempts among ideators (58.3%-63.3%) occur within the year of onset of ideation.
- Post-enlistment attempts are positively related to being a woman, lower rank, and previously deployed, and are negatively related to being unmarried and assigned to Special Operations Command.
- Five mental disorders predict post-enlistment first suicide attempts in multivariate analysis:
  - pre-enlistment panic disorder
  - pre-enlistment posttraumatic stress disorder
  - post-enlistment depression
  - pre-enlistment intermittent explosive disorder
  - post-enlistment intermittent explosive disorder
- 4 of these 5 (posttraumatic stress disorder is the exception) predict ideation.
- Only post-enlistment intermittent explosive disorder predicts attempts among ideators.
- Population-attributable risk proportions of lifetime mental disorders predicting post-enlistment suicide attempts are:
  - 31.3% for pre-enlistment onset disorders
  - 41.2% for post-enlistment onset disorders
  - 59.9% for all disorders
- The fact that approximately one-third of post-enlistment suicide attempts are associated with pre-enlistment mental disorders suggests that pre-enlistment mental disorders might be targets for early screening and intervention.
- The possibility of higher fatality rates among Army suicide attempts than among civilian suicide attempts highlights the potential importance of means control (i.e., restricting access to lethal means [such as firearms]) as a suicide prevention strategy.





## 6. Risk Factors for Accident Death in the U.S. Army, 2004-2009

- Delayed rank progression or demotion and being male, unmarried, in a combat arms specialty, and of low rank/service length increased odds of accident death for enlisted soldiers.
- Unique to officers was high risk associated with aviation specialties.
- Accident death risk decreased over time for currently deployed, enlisted soldiers and increased for those never deployed.
- Mental health diagnosis was associated with risk only for previous and never-deployed, enlisted soldiers.
- Models did not discriminate not-line-of-duty from line-of-duty accident deaths.
- Adding more refined person-level and situational risk indicators to current models could enhance understanding of accident death risk specific to soldier rank and deployment status.
- Stable predictors could help identify high risk of accident deaths in future cohorts of Regular Army soldiers.

## 7. Predicting Suicides after Psychiatric Hospitalization in U.S. Army Soldiers: The Army Study to Assess Risk and Resilience in Servicemembers (Army STARRS)

- Sixty-eight soldiers died by suicide within 12 months of hospital discharge (12.0% of all U.S. Army suicides), equivalent to 263.9 suicides per 100,000 person-years compared with 18.5 suicides per 100,000 person-years in the total U.S. Army.
- The strongest predictors included sociodemographics:
  - male sex
  - late age of enlistment
  - criminal offenses (verbal violence and weapons possession)
  - prior suicidality
  - aspects of prior psychiatric inpatient and outpatient treatment (e.g., number of antidepressant prescriptions filled in the past 12 months), and disorders diagnosed during the focal hospitalizations (e.g., non-affective psychosis)





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- A total of 52.9% of post-hospitalization suicides occurred after the 5% of hospitalizations with highest predicted suicide risk (3,824.1 suicides per 100,000 person-years).\*
- These highest-risk hospitalizations also accounted for significantly elevated proportions of several other adverse post-hospitalization outcomes (unintentional injury deaths, suicide attempts, and subsequent hospitalizations).\*
- The high concentration of risk of suicide and other adverse outcomes might justify targeting expanded post-hospitalization interventions to soldiers classified as having highest post-hospitalization suicide risk, although final determination requires careful consideration of intervention costs, comparative effectiveness, and possible adverse effects.

### **8. Lifetime Prevalence of DSM-IV Mental Disorders among New Soldiers in the U.S. Army: Results from the Army Study to Assess Risk and Resilience in Servicemembers (Army STARRS)**

- Lifetime prevalence of having at least one internalizing, externalizing, or either type of disorder did not differ significantly between new soldiers and civilians
- Three specific disorders (generalized anxiety, posttraumatic stress, and conduct disorders) and multi-morbidity were significantly more common among new soldiers than civilians.
- Several socio-demographic characteristics were significantly associated with disorder prevalence and persistence (these associations were uniformly weak).
- New soldiers differ somewhat, but not consistently, from civilians.

### **9. Prevalence and Correlates of Suicidal Behavior among New Soldiers in the U.S. Army: Results from the Army Study to Assess Risk and Resilience in Servicemembers (Army STARRS)**

- Lifetime prevalence estimates of pre-enlistment suicide ideation, plans, and attempts were 14.1, 2.3, and 1.9%, respectively.
- Most reported onsets of suicide plans and attempts (73.3–81.5%) occurred within the first year after onset of ideation.







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- Odds of these lifetime suicidal behaviors among new soldiers were positively, but weakly associated with being female, unmarried, religion other than Protestant or Catholic, and a race/ethnicity other than non-Hispanic White, non-Hispanic Black, or Hispanic.
- Lifetime prevalence estimates of suicidal behaviors among new soldiers are consistent with retrospective reports of pre-enlistment prevalence obtained from soldiers later in their Army careers.
- Given that prior suicidal behaviors are among the strongest predictors of later suicides, consideration should be given to developing methods of obtaining valid reports of pre-enlistment suicidality from new soldiers to facilitate targeting of preventive interventions.

### **10. Mental Disorders, Comorbidity, and Pre-enlistment Suicidal Behavior Among New Soldiers in the U.S. Army: Results from the Army Study to Assess Risk and Resilience in Servicemembers (Army STARRS)**

- Most new soldiers with a pre-enlistment history of suicide attempt reported a prior mental disorder (59.0%).
- Each disorder examined was associated with increased odds of suicidal behavior.
- Only PTSD and disorders characterized by irritability and impulsive/aggressive behavior (i.e., bipolar disorder, conduct disorder, oppositional defiant disorder, and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder) predicted unplanned attempts among ideators.
- Mental disorders are important predictors of pre-enlistment suicidal behavior among new soldiers and should figure prominently in suicide screening and prevention efforts.

### **11. Understanding the Elevated Suicide Risk of Female Soldiers during Deployments**

- The suicide rate of currently deployed women (14.0/100,000 person-years) was 3.1 to 3.5 times the rates of other (i.e., never-deployed/previously deployed) women.
- The suicide rate of currently deployed men (22.6/100,000 person years) was 0.9 to 1.2 times the rates of other men.





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- The adjusted (for time trends, sociodemographics, and Army career variables) female to male odds ratio comparing the suicide rates of currently deployed vs. other women vs. men was 2.8 (95% confidence interval 1.1–6.8), became 2.4 after excluding soldiers with Direct Combat Arms occupations, and remained elevated (in the range 1.9–2.8) after adjusting for the hypothesized explanatory variables.
- None of the explanatory variables considered could fully account for the disproportionately elevated female suicide rate during deployment among Regular Army enlisted soldiers over the years 2004–2009.
- These results are valuable in excluding otherwise plausible hypotheses for the elevated suicide rate of deployed women and point to the importance of expanding future research on the psychological challenges of deployment for women.

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