



Military REACH's review of
**ATTEMPTED SUICIDE AMONG ADOLESCENTS IN MILITARY FAMILIES:
THE MEDIATING ROLE OF ADVERSE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES**

Clements-Nolle, K., Lensch, T., Yang, Y., Martin, H., Peek, J., & Yang, W. (2020). Attempted suicide among adolescents in military families: The mediating role of adverse childhood experiences. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260519900976>

BRIEF SUMMARY: Previous research has shown that adolescents in military families are at greater risk of attempted suicide. However, it is not clear whether this increased risk is related to factors unique to the military context (e.g., parental deployment) or other factors that have been linked to suicide risk in civilian populations, such as adverse childhood experiences. Adverse childhood experiences are traumatic childhood events, like experiencing physical or sexual abuse, or witnessing domestic violence, that often have a long-term impact. This study explored the links between military family membership, exposure to adverse childhood experiences, and risk of attempted suicide in a sample of 5,030 high school students (4.5% were from military families). The results suggest that exposure to adverse childhood experiences explain the increased risk for adolescents attempted suicide in military families.

KEY FINDINGS

- In this sample, 7.9% of adolescents from civilian families had attempted suicide in the past year, and 15.4% of adolescents from military families had attempted suicide in the past year.
- Adolescents from military families reported a higher likelihood of experiencing adverse events in childhood compared to adolescents from civilian families, including a 3.3x greater risk for sexual abuse, 2x greater risk for physical abuse, and 2x greater risk for witnessing domestic violence.
- Adolescents from military families were also at approximately 2.5x greater risk of experiencing three or more adverse childhood experiences and were roughly 2x more likely to attempt suicide than adolescents from civilian families.
- Exposure to adverse childhood experiences explained (i.e., **mediated**) the relationship between military family membership and suicide attempt. In other words, military adolescents were at greater risk for attempted suicide given their heightened exposure to adverse childhood experiences.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FAMILIES

- Seek resources and support if your adolescent has experienced any type of abuse, witnessed domestic violence, household mental health problems, or household substance use.
- The [Family Advocacy Program](#) is available to promote victim safety and provide treatment for family members affected by abuse and neglect.
- Talk to your children about **suicide**, and know the signs (e.g., talking about wanting to die). Contrary to popular belief, talking about suicide does not increase the risk of suicide. Ask direct questions (i.e., are you thinking about killing yourself?) if you think your child may be experiencing symptoms (e.g., family history of suicide, mental disorders) that can lead to suicide.

IMPLICATIONS FOR HELPING PROFESSIONALS

- When working with adolescents who have attempted suicide or may be at risk for suicide, consider broader family contexts (e.g., past abuse, history of mental illness within the family) when creating treatment plans and safety plans.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY MAKERS AND MILITARY LEADERSHIP

- Regularly screen service members for behaviors that could put children at risk for adverse childhood experiences (e.g., substance misuse, mental health disorders, abusive behavior)
- Provide trauma-informed resources and advocacy to military families.

SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS

- ✓ 5,030 adolescents from high schools in Nevada
- ✓ 4.5% ($n =$ approximately 225) of the adolescents were in military families
- ✓ 51.5% were male and 63% were 16 years old or younger
- ✓ Majority of adolescents were Hispanic (41.3%) and non-Hispanic White (33.6%)
- ✓ 42.6% qualified for free/reduced lunch

METHODOLOGY

- This [secondary analysis](#) examined data from the Youth Risk Behavior Survey in 2017.
- Data were captured on demographic characteristics (e.g., sex, race/ethnicity), military family membership (i.e., are either of your parents serving on active duty in the military?), attempted suicide in the previous year, and prevalence of adverse childhood experiences, including sexual abuse, physical abuse, verbal abuse, witnessing household domestic violence, household mental illness, and household substance use.
- Participants stated whether they had experienced each type of adverse childhood experience (yes/no); responses were summed for a total number of adverse childhood experiences.
- Weighted [chi-square analyses](#) were utilized to examine group differences in the total number of adverse childhood experiences between adolescents in military versus civilian families. Weighted logistic and multinomial regressions were used to examine the likelihood of suicide attempt predicted by exposure to adverse childhood experiences, controlling for demographic variables.
- [Mediation analyses](#) were used to examine the relationship between military family membership, adverse childhood experiences, and suicide attempt. The prevalence of adverse childhood experiences was hypothesized (and confirmed) to be a factor that explained the association between military family membership and suicide attempt.

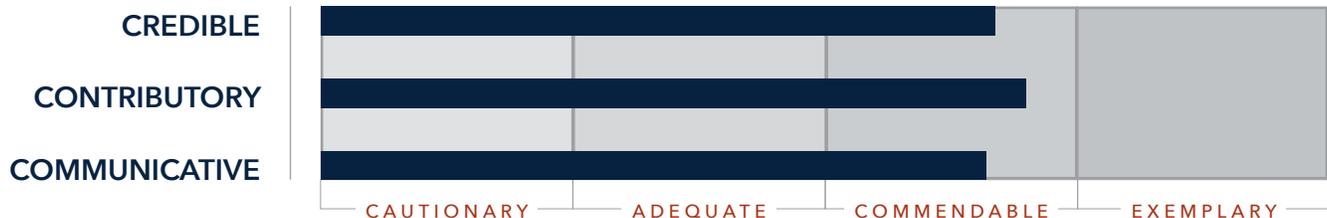
STRENGTHS

- This article examined data from a large sample in a methodologically rigorous manner.
- The analyses help explain an important mechanism in the link between military family membership and suicide attempt for adolescents.

LIMITATIONS

- Though the sample is large, the number of adolescents in the sample from military families was relatively small and non-representative of the broader military population. Therefore, the findings are likely limited in their ability to describe broader military family adolescents' experiences.
- Limited theoretical background and information from measures do not explain why these adolescents are at greater risk for adverse childhood experiences. Future work exploring why these events are more common for military families may provide helpful context for intervention.

ASSESSMENT OF THE STUDY



DIMENSIONS OF ASSESSMENT

- CREDIBLE: Research that is rigorous, transparent, consistent, and generalizable. This dimension reflects an evaluation of the study's scientific methodology.
 - CONTRIBUTORY: Research that is original, applicable, and has the potential to enhance the well-being of military families. This dimension examines the impact of the study.
 - COMMUNICATIVE: Research that is coherent, understandable, and readable. This dimension assesses how effectively the authors convey the content of the study.
- * These dimensions are adapted from the work of Mårtensson et al. (2016). For more information on the REACH evaluation framework and rubric visit: MilitaryREACH.org

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Underlined terms in [red font](#) are linked to the definition in the Military REACH Dictionary. To explore more terms visit: <https://militaryreach.auburn.edu/DictionaryResult>. Terms in blue font are linked to additional resources.

PARTNERSHIP

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