

Remembering the Lost: How Investigation of Military Suicides Can Improve Prevention Resources

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Acknowledgements

- This project is funded by the Advancing a Healthier Wisconsin Endowment at the Medical College of Wisconsin
- Dr. Stephen Hargarten, Principal Investigator
- Mary Neubauer, Policy Consultant



ADVANCING A HEALTHIER
WISCONSIN ENDOWMENT

Objectives

- Describe the background and aims of Remembering the Lost
- Summarize progress to date
- Discuss how the Mental Health Task Force could assist with Remembering the Lost

A small green seedling with several leaves is growing out of a crack in a dark, textured surface. A bright, circular spotlight illuminates the scene, creating a strong contrast between the illuminated area and the surrounding darkness.

Remembering the Lost

SUMMARY AND BACKGROUND

Project Summary

- This project aims to investigate the difference in circumstances which precede military-involved suicides
 - Specifically as it relates to variances in access to and eligibility for benefits (e.g. VHA care)
- New knowledge will be gained through qualitative analysis
 - To inform decision-makers on risk and protective factors for veteran suicide
 - To improve transitions of care and vital record reporting of military suicides
- Primary project partners
 - Brian Michel, MHA
 - Sara Kohlbeck, MCW
- Project start date: October 1, 2020

Background

- *Suicide in Wisconsin: Impact and Response* indicated approximately 20% of WI suicides are former service members
- Approximately 70% of veterans who die by suicide are not engaged with VHA care
 - **Why not?**
- Female veterans have suicide rates more than 2x that of civilian females
- Veterans aged 18-34 have suicide rate 3x that of civilians of same age range
- Suicide rate among married veterans is 2x that of married civilians
- Nearly 75% of veteran suicides involve a firearm, compared to 50% of civilian suicides

Background

- Updated *Military and Veteran Suicide Prevention Strategy* describes 5 priorities:
 1. Improve Lethal Means Safety
 2. Enhance Crisis Care and Facilitate Care Transitions
 3. Increase Access to and Delivery of Effective Care
 4. Address Upstream Risk and Protective Factors
 - 5. Increase Research Coordination, Data Sharing, and Evaluation Efforts**

Background

- Project inspired by research and findings from [Operation Deep Dive](#)
 - Investigating suicide and non-natural deaths of service members
 - Significant error rate in death certificates identifying veterans
 - No standard system to ID former service members at time of death



Discovery

- Understand and inventory the spectrum of resources for service members and qualifying criteria for each based on various factors (e.g. discharge status, service-connection, etc.)
- Recognize and describe the breadth of veteran suicide in Wisconsin
- Examine how biopsychosocial factors and discharge status affect access to and quality of mental health care service for veterans who died by suicide

Engagement

- Engage with the Wisconsin Dept of Veterans Affairs and other relevant partners to discuss current gaps in care identified through crisis intercept mapping
- Engage with Prevent Suicide Wisconsin coalitions and county-level Coroner/Medical Examiners to serve as pilot sites for psychosocial autopsies
- Involve veterans, and particularly veterans with lived experience of suicide, in qualitative data gathering process

Action

- Use data gained from intercept mapping to improve care transitions for veterans, regardless of their engagement with the VA, within the mental health system of care
- Improve training for Coroners/Medical Examiners on collecting military-related information as part of their suicide death investigations
- Disseminate findings and conclusions to resource providers, decision-makers, and affected communities

Progress
to
Date

Discovery

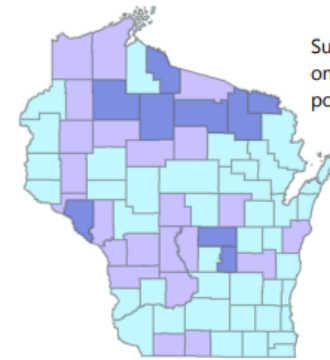
- Intercept mapping process underway
 - Sauk County
- Data summary on veteran suicide in Wisconsin developed and disseminated in early 2021
- Psychosocial autopsy interview protocol developed and implemented
 - 5 interviewees to date, 3 separate decedents
- Collected Wisconsin vital statistics on veterans who died by suicide
- IRB amendment to link vital statistics data with DoD service records submitted in August 2021.

Data Summary on Veteran Suicide

Wisconsin's Vulnerable Warriors: Focus on Veteran and Military-Involved* Suicide in Wisconsin

In Wisconsin, veteran suicides account for
nearly 1 in 5 of all suicides

Veteran suicide is a preventable public health issue in Wisconsin. According to a recently released report from the Wisconsin Department of Health Services, veteran suicides account for nearly 1 in 5 of all suicides in Wisconsin¹, and many veterans who die by suicide are not connected with mental health services. Understanding veteran suicide can help identify groups of veterans who are most at-risk for suicide, which can be used to guide and evaluate suicide prevention efforts that focus on veterans.



Suicide rates among veterans vary across Wisconsin counties. The map on the left provides county-level data on suicide rates in this population.

Veteran Suicide Rate per
100,000 population

10.0 to 19.9
20.0 to 29.9
30.0 to 39.9

Note: Data on county-level veteran population were determined using data from the VA's Veteran Population Projection Model, and therefore some veterans who do not have a relationship with the VA are not represented.

How do veteran suicides compare with suicides in the general public?

97% of WI veterans who died by suicide were white, Non-Hispanic men.²
78% of WI residents who died by suicide were white, Non-Hispanic men.²



The average age of WI veterans at the time of suicide was **58 years**.²
The average age of WI residents at the time of suicide was **45 years**.²

Approximately **43%** of WI veterans who died by suicide were married.²
Approximately **31%** of WI residents who died by suicide were married.²



65% of WI veterans who died by suicide used a firearm.²
47% of WI residents who died by suicide used a firearm.²

*Note: For the purpose of this report, the term "veteran" applies to both active and former military personnel.

Preliminary themes from psychosocial autopsy interviews

Lack of connection to military service

Interpersonal relationship issues

Financial stressors

Employment instability

Engagement

- Network of Prevent Suicide Coalitions engaged
- Three veteran interviewers/peer supporters identified
 - Training coming up on November 19

Action

WORK IN PROGRESS

How can members of the
Mental Health Task
Force help?

Ways to help

- Connect survivors of veteran suicide loss to our project team
- Share input about the project with the project team
- Disseminate veteran suicide data sheet with partners
- Review and share study results
- **Ask the Question of the people you serve/employ: "Do you/Did you serve in the Armed Forces?"**
 - vs. "Are you a Veteran?"

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Thank you!

