



HEALTH

Studies Link Mental Issues and the Rigor of the Military

By BENEDICT CAREY OCT. 23, 2014

New recruits enter the Army with roughly the same rates of mental problems as their civilian peers, but those disorders can persist for longer amid the demands of service than in civilian life, new research suggests.

These conclusions, drawn in two papers published Thursday by the journal *Depression and Anxiety*, help to explain a puzzle that has nagged the military during the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. Experienced soldiers have reported higher rates of mental problems than young men and women who do not enlist, even though soldiers have historically been more mentally fit than the general population.

The new research, which draws on surveys of more than 38,000 men and women in basic training, suggests that the higher rates of mental problems are rooted in the rigors of service, not in the loosening of enlistment standards. The surveys were anonymous.

Enlistees “are not much different from civilians” in terms of mental health, said Anthony J. Rosellini, a postdoctoral fellow at Harvard and lead author of the paper on mental disorders. “We suspect what’s going on is that disorders that appeared in childhood or adolescence might become more persistent in the context of the demands of the Army.”

The two papers are part of a large investigation into mental health in the

Army that began in 2008, after the suicide rate among active-duty soldiers exceeded the suicide rate among young, healthy civilian adults for the first time. The annual soldier suicide rate more than doubled from 2004 to 2009, to more than 23 per 100,000. (It has fallen since then, toward 20 per 100,000, the rate among civilians in the same age group.)

Over the past five years, the study team, a coalition of academic, government and military researchers, has begun to fill out a mental portrait of new soldiers that looks a lot like the civilian one. Some 38 percent of new soldiers reported having had at least one mental problem, like depression or attention deficit disorder, compared with 36 percent of civilian peers: no real difference. “Those sound like high numbers, but keep in mind that many of these disorders are mild and people function very well despite them,” Dr. Rosellini said.

About 14 percent of the recruits reported having had suicidal thoughts before enlistment, and 2 percent said they had attempted suicide — again, about the same rates found in surveys of young civilians.

“We’re working to understand the transitions, from thinking to planning to making an attempt,” said Dr. Robert J. Ursano, director of the Center for Traumatic Stress at the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences, and lead author of the paper on suicide. “Once you understand transitions, you can begin to think about interventions.”

The findings from both papers suggest that early treatment of mental health symptoms could avert problems later on, Dr. Ursano said. The results also present the military with a familiar conundrum: How do you identify vulnerable people without driving them underground?

“This is the dilemma you’re up against in this work,” Dr. Ursano said. “We had all kinds of protections in place to keep the answers anonymous.”

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