

## CIR POLICY BRIEF ADDENDUM: “TOGETHER WE STAND, DIVIDED WE FALL: CONNECTEDNESS, SUICIDE, AND SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE MILITARY”

ERIC RICE  
ANTHONY FULGINITI

*The Center for Innovation and Research on Veterans & Military Families (CIR) recently published a Policy Brief entitled “Together We Stand, Divided We Fall: Connectedness, Suicide, and Social Media in the Military,” about the potential role of social media in preventing suicides among servicemembers. Maj Michael McCarthy (Program Manager, Air Force Suicide Prevention Program) contacted CIR to reflect on the link that is often made in the media and academic literature between deployment or combat experience and servicemember suicide. In response, CIR reached out to the other services in order to gain their perspectives and build a comprehensive understanding of this issue and found representatives from several branches of the military who graciously offered timely and thoughtful responses to this policy brief.*

In a conference call with Dr. Anthony Hassan (CIR Director), Megan Hazle (CIR Communications Liaison), and Dr. Eric Rice (author), Maj McCarthy pointed out a key piece of data omitted from the published literature on suicide among servicemembers. In reference to data from the 59 suicides among National Guard and Reserve members of the Air Force and Airmen on active duty status in 2010, Maj McCarthy highlighted that most suicides were among those who had never deployed, with the lowest rate among those who had deployed multiple times. LCDR Andrew Martin (Program Manager, Marine Corps Suicide

Prevention Program) indicated that existing evidence also does not support the link between deployment and suicide in the Marine Corps, noting that less than half of suicides among Marines were ever deployed, and less than 25% of these suicides had ever been in combat. LCDR Bonnie Chavez (Behavioral Health Program Manager, Navy Suicide Prevention Program) added that deployment history is not a statistical risk factor in Navy suicides, as individuals deployed either at sea or on ground are proportionally represented.

In contrast to the stance that deployment confers added suicide risk, both Maj McCarthy and LCDR Chavez offered findings that suggest the potential protective effect of deployment. Maj McCarthy noted that the lowest rate of suicide occurred among servicemembers with multiple deployments while LCDR Chavez commented that a very low percentage of Navy suicides (typically less than 4%) occur on deployment. Furthermore, shipboard deployments, in particular, may prevent suicide by enhancing servicemembers’ sense of purpose and connectedness as well as reducing long periods of time alone with lethal means.

**The suicide process is a complicated pathway that cannot be reduced to any direct correlation to deployment... the processes of social integration at work during deployment transitions, and how such processes impact suicide risk, require further research.**

We welcome this rebuttal. These data make a great deal of sense from the perspective of social integration. As suggested by Braswell & Kushner (2010), while deployments may distance servicemembers from their non-military networks, deployments may also provide opportunities for integration with other servicemembers. We agree with the sentiment echoed by LCDR Chavez in that the suicide process is a complicated pathway that cannot be reduced to any direct correlation to deployment. Indeed, the day after our policy brief was published, Dr. Craig Bryan published data that supports the claims made by our contacts in the military.<sup>†</sup> While the recent CIR Policy Brief reviews the literature deline-

ating the relationship between deployments and suicide risk, the processes of social integration at work during deployment transitions, and how such processes impact suicide risk, require further research. It may also be prudent to consider how social connectedness prior to and upon entry into military life contributes to suicide risk. With social integration having been demonstrated as a protective factor against suicide, it seems a worthwhile endeavor to investigate how and whether social media might be used to augment the protective forces of social integration during deployment.

During our discussion with Maj McCarthy, he shared the concern that the focus of the current academic literature on the impact of deployment on suicide rates may have the unintended consequence of stigmatizing help-seeking for servicemembers who have not been deployed. A similar concern was offered by LCDR Martin, who expressed worry that the link between deployment and combat to suicide, often made by the media, distracts policy makers from the true causes of suicide, which in turn impairs prevention efforts.

We are thankful for these expressions of concern and wholeheartedly emphasize that the path to suicide is invariably tragic but may or may not be related to deployment or combat history; we do not endorse value judgments placed on the nature of the pathway to suicide. We encourage all servicemembers, veterans, and their family members to seek help and support during times of need, and CIR is working diligently to ensure that the services available to military-impacted populations is highly competent and available.

† Bryan, C.J. (July, 2011). Suicide among service members: Understanding the reasons for suicide ideation and treatment strategies. *UBM Medica Psychiatric Times*, 28(7).

---

#### POLICY BRIEF CITATION

Fulginiti, A., Rice, E. (2011). *Together We Stand, Divided We Fall: Connectedness, Suicide, and Social Media in the Military*. Los Angeles, CA: USC Center for Innovation and Research on Veterans & Military Families.

---

#### POLICY BRIEF AUTHORS

**Anthony Fulginiti, MSW, LCSW**, Doctoral Student, University of Southern California.

**Eric Rice, Ph.D.**, Assistant Professor, University of Southern California School of Social Work.

---

#### ADDENDUM CONTRIBUTORS

**LCDR Bonnie Chavez, Ph.D.**, Navy Suicide Prevention Program Behavioral Health Program Manager.

**Anthony Fulginiti, MSW, LCSW**, Doctoral Student, University of Southern California.

**LCDR Andrew L. Martin, Psy.D.**, Marine Corps Suicide Prevention Program Manager.

**Maj Michael McCarthy**, Air Force Suicide Prevention Program Manager.

**Eric Rice, Ph.D.**, Assistant Professor, University of Southern California School of Social Work.

---

#### FOR MORE INFORMATION

**Phone:** (213) 743-2050

**Email:** [cir@usc.edu](mailto:cir@usc.edu)

**Website:** <http://cir.usc.edu>

---

#### SUGGESTED CITATION

*CIR Policy Brief Addendum: Together We Stand, Divided We Fall: Connectedness, Suicide, and Social Media in the Military*. Los Angeles, CA: USC Center for Innovation and Research on Veterans & Military Families.