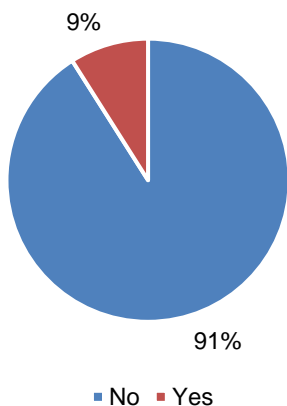# Veterans' Risk of Suicide

Wave 8 data-collection effort of the Veterans Engaging in Transition Studies (VETS) was coordinated by the Clearinghouse for Military Family Readiness at Penn State in collaboration with the Arthur M. Blank Family Foundation, The Heinz Endowments, the May & Stanley Smith Charitable Trust, and the Wounded Warrior Project. VETS was an extension of a large, longitudinal study called The Veterans Metrics Initiative: Linking Program Components to Post-Military Well-Being (TVMI). During TVMI implementation, six waves of data were collected from almost 10,000 post-9/11 veterans who had separated from military service in 2016. In 2020, of the original sample, 3,514 veterans voluntarily chose to participate in the Wave 7 data-collection effort via the online VETS Survey. Between March 2023 and April 2023, 2,970 post-9/11 veterans completed the Wave 8 VETS Survey; at that time, they were about 78 months or 6.5 years post-discharge/separation.

Veterans' suicide risk was assessed at Wave 8 with the Columbia Suicide Severity Rating Scale Screener (CSSRS; Posner et al., 2011). The CSSRS is a seven-item scale that uses a yes/no format. Items 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 ask respondents about increasingly intense suicidal ideation over the last month (i.e., wished I was dead, thought about suicide, thought of a plan, intended to act on a plan, worked out details of the plan). Items 6 and 7 ask respondents about suicidal behavior (i.e., did anything, started to do anything, or prepared to do anything to kill themself) over their lifetime and within the past 3 months, respectively.

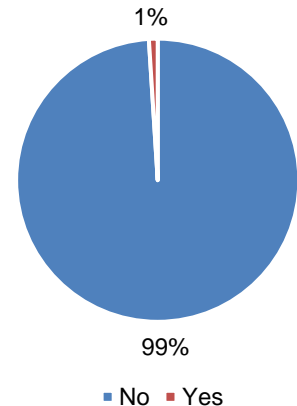## Overall Increasing Suicide Risk of Veterans at Wave 8: From Ideation to Recent Suicidal Behavior

Past Month Suicidal Ideation
(n=2,967)

9%

91%

■ No ■ Yes

Lifetime Suicidal Behavior
(n=2,967)

9%

91%

■ No ■ Yes
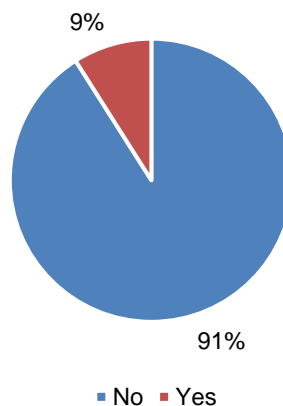
Past 3-Month Suicidal Behavior
(n=2,966)

1%

99%

■ No ■ Yes

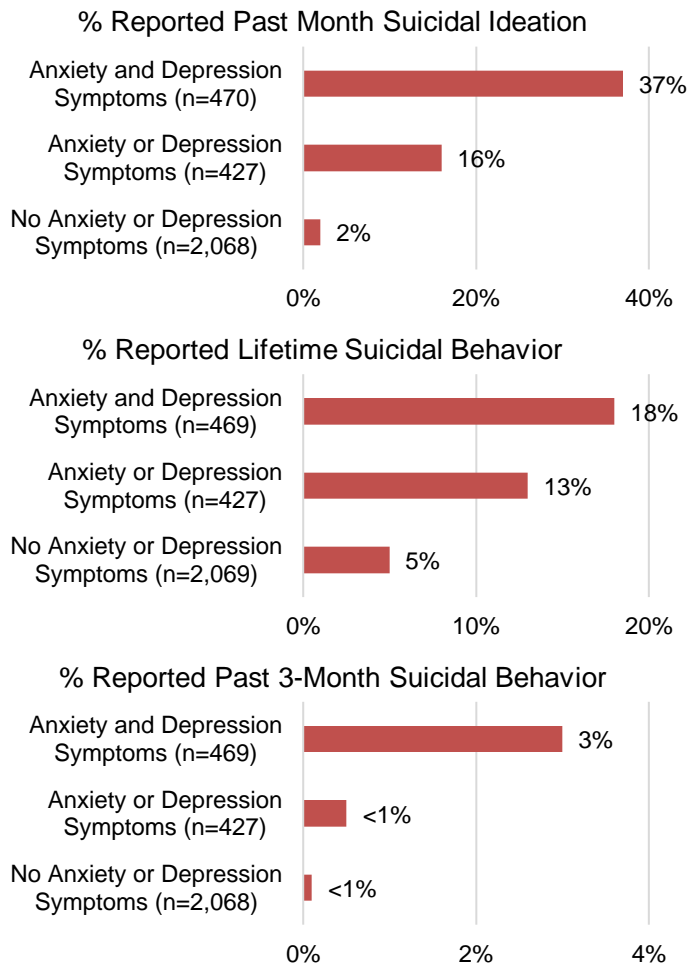Nine percent of veterans reported experiencing some level of suicidal ideation in the past month (i.e., answered "yes" to items 1, 2, 3, 4, or 5). Nine percent of veterans reported engaging in suicidal behavior in their lifetime; however, only 1% reported engaging in suicidal behavior in the last 3 months. Overall, suicide risk appears to be low among veterans who participated in the Wave 8 VETS Survey.

Suicide Risk by Gender

Past Month Suicidal Ideation

Male (n=2,420) 9%

Female (n=547) 11%

0% 5% 10% 15%

Lifetime Suicidal Behavior

Male (n=2,420) 8%

Female (n=547) 12%

0% 5% 10% 15%

Past 3-Month Suicidal Behavior

Male (n=2,419) <1%

Female (n=547) 1%

0% 1% 2%
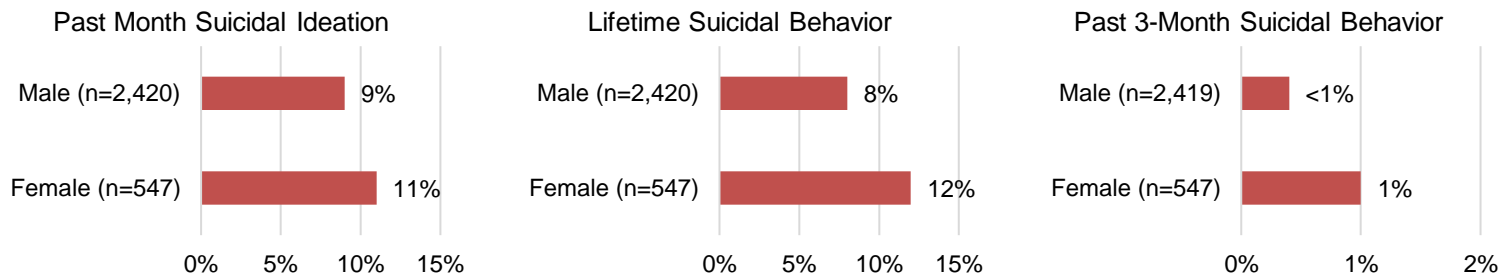
Suicide Risk by Anxiety and Depression

% Reported Past Month Suicidal Ideation

Anxiety and Depression Symptoms (n=470) 37%

Anxiety or Depression Symptoms (n=427) 16%

No Anxiety or Depression Symptoms (n=2,068) 2%

0% 20% 40%

% Reported Lifetime Suicidal Behavior

Anxiety and Depression Symptoms (n=469) 18%

Anxiety or Depression Symptoms (n=427) 13%

No Anxiety or Depression Symptoms (n=2,069) 5%

0% 10% 20%

% Reported Past 3-Month Suicidal Behavior

Anxiety and Depression Symptoms (n=469) 3%

Anxiety or Depression Symptoms (n=427) <1%

No Anxiety or Depression Symptoms (n=2,068) <1%

0% 2% 4%

Predictors of Suicide Risk

Past Month Suicidal Ideation	
Participants reported anxiety **and** depression symptoms vs. no symptoms	13.9X More Likely
Participants reported anxiety **or** depression symptoms vs. no symptoms	7.5X More Likely
Participants reported problematic social connections vs. successful connections	3.1X More Likely
Participants reported psychological resilience	5% Less Likely

Lifetime Suicidal Behavior	
Paygrade (increasing)	4% Less Likely
Participants reported anxiety or depression symptoms vs. no symptoms	1.7X More Likely
Participants reported having experienced 3+ ACEs vs. no ACEs	2.8X More Likely
Participants reported having experienced military sexual trauma	1.8X More Likely
Participants reported having experienced self-induced moral injury	1.1X More Likely
Participants reported having experienced moral injury from betrayal	1.1X More Likely
Participants reported having experienced psychological resilience	5% Less Likely

Past 3-Month Suicidal Behavior	
Participants reported anxiety and depression symptoms vs. no symptoms	4.4X More Likely

Note. ACEs = adverse childhood experiences. VA = Department of Veterans Affairs.

- Non-significant predictors in the suicidal ideation model: gender, race/ethnicity, paygrade, ACEs, military sexual trauma, combat exposure, moral injury (self), moral injury (betrayal), moral injury (witnessing), and VA disability rating.
- Non-significant predictors in the lifetime suicidal behavior model: gender, race/ethnicity, combat exposure, moral injury (witnessing), social connections, and VA disability rating.
- Non-significant predictors in the past 3-month suicidal behavior model: gender, race/ethnicity, paygrade, ACEs, military sexual trauma, combat exposure, moral injury (self), moral injury (betrayal), moral injury (witnessing), social connections, VA disability rating, and psychological resilience.

References

Posner, K., Brown, G. K., Stanley, B., Brent, D. A., Yershova, K. V., Oquendo, M. A., Currier, G. W., Melvin, G. A., Greenhill, L., Shen, S., & Mann, J. J. (2011). The Columbia-Suicide Severity Rating Scale: Initial validity and internal consistency findings from three multisite studies with adolescents and adults. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, *168*(12), 1266–1277. https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.ajp.2011.10111704

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