

'OPERATION DEEP DIVE' RESEARCH STUDY OVERVIEW

BACKGROUND & OBJECTIVES

Operation Deep Dive is a four-year, community-based, former service member, suicide prevention study taking place in 15 states (i.e., Alabama, Arizona, California, Florida, Georgia, Indiana, Kentucky, Minnesota, Montana, Nevada, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, South Carolina, and Texas) across the country. This study is a partnership between America's Warrior Partnership and researchers from the University of Alabama that is funded by the Bristol-Myers Squibb Foundation. Operation Deep Dive is focused on identifying *what we do not already know* about suicide and non-natural deaths among former service members. The study began in 2018 and is scheduled to conclude at the end of 2021.

This study is the first-of-its-kind to (1) investigate the impact of community environments on former service members as studies to date have generalized the indicators of suicide without focusing on the role of community factors (2) examine the impact of less-than-honorable discharges on former service member suicides and the differences in suicide rates between those who did and did not receive support services from the U.S. Department Veteran Affairs (VA) and (3) include former service members with Honorable Discharge, Entry Level Separation, General Discharge - Under Honorable Conditions, Other Than Honorable Conditions Discharge, Bad Conduct Discharge, Officer Discharge, or Dishonorable Discharge and cases of non-natural deaths (i.e., overdose, asphyxiation, accidental gunshot, drowning, suicide by law enforcement, and high-speed, single-driver accident) in addition to suicide.

Operation Deep Dive is a mixed-methods, community-based participatory research study that consists of a retrospective and prospective component. For the retrospective (quantitative) component, we are actively obtaining data from the Department of Defense (DoD) and Defense Manpower Data Center, Maxar, TransUnion, and local and state entities (e.g., Vital Statistics) for a comprehensive view of former service members who have died by suicide or from a non-natural cause of death from 2014-2018. The prospective (qualitative) component consists of conducting sociocultural death investigations to obtain information about former service members who have died by suicide or from non-natural causes in one of the 15 participating states *within the last 24 months*.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

To date, we have investigated 424,761 deaths, of which, 57,292 were identified as former service members. At the state level, we have received all death data for Florida, Minnesota, and most recently, Alabama. Florida has a population of approximately 21 million people, 16 million of whom are 18 and older; nine percent of those who are 18 or older are former service members and mostly males. From 2014 to 2018, there were 22,686 DoD verified former service member deaths. Of those deaths, 1,531 were identified as suicide deaths (overdoses = 218). A total of 937 civilians were improperly noted on their Florida death certificate as having served in the military and 3,147 former service members were not noted as having served on their Florida death certificate. Based on these numbers, regarding those who served in the military, the Florida death records for 2014-2018 are off by 20%. When using DoD verified former service member status, 10% of the former service members were not counted as such on the state death records, all highlighting discrepancies in death certificate data and the importance of verifying former service member status through the DoD.

Minnesota has a population of approximately 5.7 million people, 4.2 million of whom are 18 or older. Eight percent of those 18 and older are former service members and mostly males. From 2014-2018, there were 4,374 DoD verified former service member deaths. Of those deaths, 357 were identified as suicide deaths (overdoses = 55). Like Florida, discrepancies were found while analyzing Minnesota death certificate data. A total of 170 civilians were improperly noted on their Minnesota death certificate as having served in the military and 871 former service members were not noted as having served on their Minnesota death certificate. Based on these numbers, regarding those who served in the military, the Minnesota death records for 2014-2018 are off by 24%. When using DoD verified former service member status, 20% of former service members were not identified as such on the state death records.

AIM & DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The aim of Operation Deep Dive is to develop a methodology that any community can implement to identify the unique risk factors of former service member suicides and non-natural deaths within their area, which will empower that community with the insights needed to develop a proactive approach and support programs that improve former service members' quality of life and reduce risk factors associated with former service member suicides and non-natural deaths.

Currently, the researchers are actively seeking participants for the prospective component. Participants must be 18 years or older, and be the relative, loved one, friend, or co-worker of a deceased former service member who died by suicide or from non-natural causes within the last 24 months. The participant and former service member must have lived in the same community, (i.e., metropolitan statistical area) within one of the 15 participating states prior to the former service member's death. For additional information, please visit AmericasWarriorPartnership.org/Deep-Dive.

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