

Justice System-involved Veterans and Suicide Risk



From Science to Practice

Using Research to Promote Safety and Prevent Suicide

Overview

People with a history of involvement in the criminal justice system are at increased risk for suicide.¹ This applies to individuals at any point along the justice-system continuum: arrest, arraignment, adjudication, incarceration, and community re-entry. In fact, suicide is a leading cause of death among people in local jails,² and one of the leading causes of death for people in state and federal prisons.³ Justice system-involved Veterans, who make up about one-tenth of the incarcerated population in the United States are also at increased risk for suicide. Understanding the research on justice-involved Veterans can help guide resources and encourage research for this at-risk population.

Key Findings

General Population

- Individuals involved with the justice system are at increased risk for suicidal behaviors.⁵ In a nationally representative survey, the 12-month prevalence of suicide attempts was 3.2% for individuals reporting any recent parole, 2.7% for those under recent probation, and 3.3% for those with a recent arrest, all of which were significantly higher than in individuals without justice involvement.⁵ Arrest was associated with suicide attempts, and adults with a recent arrest had a higher risk of suicide attempts than those with parole, probation, or matched controls with no justice involvement.⁵
- Suicide accounted for 22% of arrest-related deaths between fiscal years 2018 and 2019.⁶ Between 2000 and 2019, nearly 40% of suicides in local jails occurred within the first week of custody.²
- In 2019, suicide was the leading cause of death among local jail inmates, and they were twice as likely to die by suicide as their counterparts in the US general population.² While illnesses were the leading

cause of death among individuals in federal and state prisons from 2001 to 2019, suicide was the next most frequent, followed by drugs and alcohol intoxication, homicides, and accidents.³

- A meta-analysis found that the factors most strongly associated with suicide among individuals in prison were current suicidal ideation, a history of suicide attempts, one or more current psychiatric diagnoses, single cell occupancy, having no visitors, remand status, serving a life sentence, and being convicted of a violent offense.⁷

Veterans

- Veterans were not statistically more likely to have been incarcerated at some point during their lifetime compared to non-Veteran adults in the US.⁸ However, among Veteran and non-Veteran adults with a history of incarceration, Veterans were more likely to be male, older, and unemployed.⁸
- In 2016, an estimated 98,100 (7.86%) individuals in state prisons and 9,300 (5.36%) in federal prisons were Veterans.⁹ Twenty-eight percent (28%) of male Veterans in state prison and 20.6% of male Veterans in federal prison served in combat roles.⁹
- Justice-involved Veterans were over three times more likely to have attempted suicide in their lifetime compared to Veterans without a history of justice involvement.¹⁰
- Compared to Veterans without any justice involvement, Veterans with a lifetime history of justice involvement had more severe PTSD and depression symptoms and reported recent suicidal ideation more often.¹⁰ Furthermore, justice-involved Veterans were almost three times more likely to report a lifetime suicide attempt than Veterans without any justice involvement.¹⁰
- Among Veterans, justice involvement in the past 12 months was significantly associated with increased severity of suicidal ideation and endorsing lifetime suicide attempt.¹⁰
- Among male Veterans, a history of justice involvement was associated with recent suicidal ideation and more severe PTSD and depression symptoms. Female justice-involved Veterans were three times more likely to report a

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history of suicide attempt compared to female Veterans without justice involvement.¹⁰

- Veterans on probation or parole were more than four times more likely to report a lifetime suicide attempt than justice-involved Veterans not on probation or parole.¹⁰ Furthermore, Veterans currently on parole or probation reported more severe depression symptoms and suicidal ideation compared to those not on parole or probation.¹⁰
- An internal study of Veterans Health Administration patient data found that Veterans involved in either the Health Care for Re-entry Veterans (HCRV) or the Veterans Justice Outreach (VJO) program were generally at greater risk than other Veterans for suicide attempts and deaths.¹¹ They were also more likely than other Veterans to have a mental health or substance use disorder and to experience homelessness.¹¹
- Prison release is a risk factor for near-term suicide attempt.¹² Veterans who were released from correctional facilities had elevated rates of suicide attempts at 30 days, six months, and one year when compared to Veterans who were never incarcerated.¹²
- Veterans aged 50 or older who transitioned from correctional facilities were at increased risk for suicide attempt (but not suicide death), death by drug overdose, and other accidental injury compared to Veterans who were never incarcerated.¹² However, suicide deaths were not significantly different between re-entry Veterans and Veterans who were never incarcerated.¹²

Ways You Can Help

- VA has programs that can connect Veterans who have been involved in the justice system with resources to help them in their transition out of incarceration, such as medical and mental health care, and programs that provide employment and housing assistance.
- Health Care for Reentry Veterans Specialists conduct outreach and provide such assistance to Veterans existing state and Federal prisons. They can provide resources and direct Veterans to community legal assistance. **Find out more at:** www.va.gov/homeless/reentry.asp#contacts.
- VA's Veterans Justice Outreach (VJO) program works with local criminal justice partners to identify Veterans at earlier stages of justice involvement and connect them to resources. **Find out more at:** <https://www.va.gov/homeless/vjo.asp>. These local partnerships include Veterans Treatment Courts (VTCs), in which VJO specialists connect Veteran participants to VA health care services. Find out more at: <https://www.va.gov/HOMELESS/docs/VJO/Veterans-Treatment-Court-Inventory-Update-Fact-Sheet-Jan-2021.pdf>
- In a video sponsored by VA, a VJO Coordinator explains suicide risk factors among justice-involved Veterans and provides resources for Veterans which may be beneficial to those working with justice-involved Veterans within VHA and the community. **Find out more at:** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7oRe-2POqwm&feature=youtu.be>.

There is no single cause of suicide. It is often the result of a complex interaction of risk and protective factors at the individual, interpersonal, community, and societal levels. To prevent Veteran suicide, we must maximize protective factors and minimize risk factors at all of these levels.

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