

Military sexual trauma more likely among veterans with prior adversity, trauma

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Military service members who experienced adversity or trauma during childhood, combined with exposure to warfare, including as participants in the military or as bystanders, are more likely than others to experience

Military Sexual Trauma (MST) during their service, according to new research led by Penn State.

Military Sexual Trauma is [psychological trauma](#) resulting from a physical assault of a sexual nature, battery of a sexual nature, or [sexual harassment](#) occurring while serving on active duty, active duty training, or inactive duty training in the military. Although a significant number of incidents go unreported by [military service members](#) and veterans, previous research indicates as many as 53% of women and 9% of men experience MST.

"Not only is MST prevalent, but its impact on victims is also substantial," said Kimberly McCarthy, research project manager of the Clearinghouse for Military Family Readiness at Penn State. "Post-9/11 deployed veterans with MST are three times more likely to have a mental health condition than those screening negative for MST. For example, victimized women are four times more likely to develop [post-traumatic stress disorder](#) (PTSD) and three times more likely to develop a depressive disorder than those screening negative for MST. MST also increases the risk of suicide attempts and deaths."

There is evidence that exposure to prior adversity or traumas, such as [adverse childhood experiences](#) (ACEs), makes it more likely that a person will be exposed to at-risk or high-stress adult environments in the future and experience negative outcomes. Individuals in the military are more likely to have experienced ACEs (e.g., neglect, [emotional abuse](#), [physical abuse](#), [sexual abuse](#)) than their civilian peers. Those in the military may also experience traumatic stressors related to [warfare](#) (e.g., combat patrols, witnessing the collateral damage of war).

In this recent study with a large and representative sample of post-9/11 veterans, researchers examined the degree to which exposure to childhood adversity or warfare and the interaction of childhood adversity

and warfare were associated with MST. The study revealed that precursory traumatic experiences in childhood and the interaction of ACEs and warfare exposure during [military service](#) increases the likelihood of [unwanted sexual attention](#) and contact.

"Compared to female veterans who reported no ACEs or warfare exposure, those who experienced one or two ACEs and warfare exposure were three times more likely to report unwanted sexual attention, but there was no increased likelihood for unwanted sexual contact," said Daniel Perkins, principal scientist at the Clearinghouse for Military Family Readiness.

"Female veterans experiencing three or more ACEs and warfare exposure were five times more likely to experience unwanted sexual attention and three times more likely to report unwanted sexual contact," added Perkins. "Male veterans who experienced three or more ACEs and warfare exposure were nearly four times more likely to experience unwanted sexual attention and approximately three times more likely to experience unwanted sexual contact compared to those with no ACEs or warfare exposure."

Exposure to childhood sexual abuse, a particular kind of ACEs, was a strong risk factor for MST for both women and men. Compared to women with no reported history of child sexual abuse, women who were sexually abused as a child were 88% more likely to have experienced unwanted sexual attention as an adult. In addition, women were 80% more likely to experience unwanted sexual contact if they witnessed domestic violence as a child. Males with a history of childhood sexual abuse were more than two times more likely to report unwanted sexual attention than males with no childhood sexual abuse.

Further analyses examined the interaction between childhood sexual abuse and warfare exposure. In comparison to women with no childhood

sexual abuse or warfare exposure, women who reported both child sexual abuse and warfare exposure were nearly six times and more than three times more likely to receive unwanted sexual attention and contact, respectively. Male veterans so exposed were nearly four times more likely to receive unwanted sexual attention than males with no childhood sexual abuse or warfare exposure. Male veterans who were exposed to childhood sexual abuse but not to warfare were more than four times more likely to receive unwanted sexual attention and nearly six times more likely to experience unwanted sexual contact.

"This research suggests that identification of childhood adversity at the point of entry into military service could be a component of MST prevention efforts," Perkins said. "As part of a comprehensive mental health prevention strategy, the military services should screen service members as they transition out of the military to identify those who were exposed to childhood adversity and warfare. Then, military services can complete a warm effective handoff to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, who could provide evidence-based, trauma-informed care as service members transition out of active-duty. In addition, the trauma associated with combat should be addressed using evidence-based practices and programs."

The study was published in the *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*.

More information: Carly E. Doucette et al, The Effects of Adverse Childhood Experiences and Warfare Exposure on Military Sexual Trauma Among Veterans, *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* (2022).
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