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**PSIHOLOGIA MILITARĂ**  
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The views expressed in this chapter are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Ministry of Defence or the Armed Forces of the countries to which they belong.

## SUICIDAL BEHAVIOUR AMONG DANISH VETERANS 1992-2013

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#### Resume:

*In 2012, results of a large-scaled study of risk and protective factors for suicidal ideation and suicidal behaviour among formerly deployed Danish soldiers were available. The study uncovered suicidal behaviour among Danish veterans deployed between 1992 and 2009. The study was extended, so that the Danish soldiers who had been deployed between 1992 and 2013 could be followed for some further years. The methods used were a register study (N=29,774) and an interview study (N=9). The register study showed that those of 40 years or older at their first deployment, were significantly less susceptible to attempted suicides than those, who were between 19 and 24 years old. The interview study showed that ethical considerations and recognition of the family and the society protect against suicidal behaviour.*

#### I. BACKGROUND AND PREVIOUS RESEARCH

Since the end of the cold war, the focus of Danish armed forces has shifted from classic territorial defence to international operations aimed at securing and improving Denmark's strategic position. This has led to widespread involvement in international operations, especially since participation in the war in former Yugoslavia and up to and including ISAF, Afghanistan.

Very little knowledge of Danish soldiers' suicidal ideation, suicide attempt, and suicides exists. In 2001, the results from a pilot project conducted by Centre for Suicide Research and the Royal Danish Armed Forces Health Service (Hansen-Schwartz et al, 2002) showed that out of 3.895 UN personnel 4 people aged 21-31 years committed suicide between 1995 and 1997, where only 3 would be expected in the general Danish population when looking at a similar group (sex and age).

A study of Danish soldiers deployed between 1992 and 2009 (Lyk-Jensen et al, 2011) showed that the number of repatriated soldiers before their end

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of tour because of psychological symptoms increased from 2009 compared to previous years. It is assumed that these soldiers could be at risk of developing mental health problems.

A study of Danish soldiers deployed between 1990 and 2009 (Zøllner and Jørgensen, 2014) identified both risk and protective factors for veterans. The study was designed as

- 1) A register based study;
- 2) A questionnaire study;
- 3) A supplemental interview study;
- 4) An interview study.

1) The register based study included 25.645 persons having been deployed 46.841 times on international missions. The inclusion criteria were the registration of:

- A valid civil registration number;
- Deployment between 1990 and 2009;
- Which mission.

41 persons deployed 68 times between 1990 and 2009 have committed suicide. All are men aged 20-49 years. The suicides are evenly distributed over time after deployment during the study period. 13 suicides were committed by men aged 35-49 years.

The register study also includes suicide attempts. "Confirmed" suicide attempts are identified searching for poisonings due to suicide attempts and poisonings involving medication registered as suicide attempts. A person attempting to take his own life often makes another attempt within a short period of time.

134 soldiers have attempted suicide. 57 have attempted suicides 63 times before their first deployment, 76 persons have attempted suicide 93 times after completing their first deployment and 1 person attempted suicide while being deployed. None of the 134 persons attempted suicide both before and after deployment.

2) 1,264 soldiers were invited to participate in the questionnaire study. Of these, 60% completed the questionnaire. All participants had been deployed between 1<sup>st</sup> of January 1990 and 31<sup>st</sup> of December 2009 on the following missions: UNPROFOR, UNCRO, IFOR, SFOR, KFOR, IRAQ and ISAF.

More than 16% of the veterans had experienced suicidal ideation and a little over 2% had attempted suicide once or several times. However, more than 20% of the veterans with suicidal ideation and more than 30% of those who attempted suicide had displayed similar behaviour prior to their first deployment. Only very few had experienced suicidal ideation and none had attempted suicide during a deployment.

Based on the questionnaires the following risk factors of suicidal ideation and suicide attempt were identified:

- Substance abuse prior to first deployment;
- Having a mental breakdown during first deployment;
- Being injured during deployment;
- Meaningless tasks during a deployment;
- Thoughts of the risk of being killed during a deployment;
- Experiencing a buddy getting injured or killed during deployment;
- Witnessing dead people during a deployment;
- Witnessing violation of civilians during a deployment;
- Heavy workload during a deployment;
- Participation in an insufficient A&R programme when returning

home;

- Growing up with mentally ill parents;
- Growing up with parents that had attempted suicide.

The following protective factors against suicidal ideation and suicide attempts were identified:

- Being supported by your partner, close family, buddies, and superiors during deployment;
- Supporting your partner during deployment;
- Participation in an quality A&R programme when returning home;
- Being supported by your partner, buddies in your unit, and the population after a deployment.

3) During the supplemental interview study 70 veterans were interviewed. They had been deployed on 118 missions in total and of these, 57.6% had been to the Balkans (KFOR, UNPROFOR, IFOR/SFOR), 18.6% had been to Afghanistan (ISAF), 14.4% had been to Iraq (OIF) and the rest (9.3%) had been elsewhere. 42.2 % had had suicidal ideation, 11.1% had attempted suicide, 70.8% had been shot at and 68.1% had experienced attacks on their camp.

The majority of the soldiers have either short-term or long-term life goals and experience a sense of purpose of life. They state that deployment has changed them and that they have become more focused on a better everyday life upon returning home. However, more than one third feel lonely and have difficulties forming close relationships. The majority of the soldiers have lost contact with former friends after returning home. They prioritize having a happy family life and to live in freedom. The majority have had ethical considerations regarding right and wrong, good and bad.

Protective factors against suicidal ideation and suicide attempts were an experience of coherence and a sense of purpose in life, and that a balance exists between values and life goals and the demands and expectations they are met



with. It is crucial to the soldier's courage that he experiences support from both family, friends, Danish Defence, and the population.

#### 4) Interview study

30 research studies were conducted with male veterans previously deployed on different missions. The average age at the time of the interview was 34½ years (24-45 years). 76.7% were private first class, 16.7% were sergeants and 6.6% were officers. The veterans had been deployed on 48 missions in total.

Well-known risk factors of suicidal ideation and suicidal behaviour, e.g. child neglect, suicidal transmission, and previous suicide attempts were found in a number of the participants.

The type of mission and tasks were decisive for the soldiers' evaluation of their deployment. Being in battle, experiencing a profound sense of meaninglessness, or witnessing violation of civilians all greatly affected their mental well-being. Finally, the interviews indicate that it is of great importance that their relatives are doing well and that their relatives support the soldiers' deployment.

## II. AIM

The aim of this study was to investigate and analyse both risk and protective factors regarding suicide, suicide attempts, and suicidal ideation among previously deployed Danish soldiers.

## III. DESIGN

The research project is based on 1) a register study and 2) an interview study:

1) The register study population includes all Danish soldiers deployed to international missions between 1992 and 2013. The Danish Defence register of previously deployed soldiers is used for a cohort study together with a number of Danish registries. The linking of register data is based on civil registration numbers.

#### 2) Interview study

Some of the returned soldiers have experienced serious suicidal ideation and at least one suicide attempt after deployment(-s). The interview study includes the following themes:

- Well-being/failure to thrive during and after deployment;
- Experiences/events during deployment;
- Suicidal ideation/attempts;
- Support/treatment;
- Social network;
- Hope;
- Values;

- Recommendations on protection against mental illness, suicidal ideation, and suicidal behaviour.

## IV. CRITERIA AND PARTICIPANTS

1) To be included in the register study the following must be fulfilled:

- Valid civil registration number;
- Deployed during 1992-2013;
- At least, have been deployed at one mission.

In total, 29,774 Danish soldiers participated in the register study.

2) To participate in the interview study, the soldiers in the register study must have indicated that they have:

- Serious suicidal ideation;
- Attempted suicide.

Criteria for exclusion are

- Severe suicidal ideation/hospitalization.

All who meet the criteria have been contacted. Many soldiers have chosen not to respond to SMS, emails, letters or calls. Nine Danish soldiers participated in the interview study.

## V. RESULTS OF THE REGISTER STUDY

The Register study shows that soldiers, who are 40 years or older at their first deployment are less susceptible to attempt suicide than soldiers between 19 and 24 years old. Soldiers who have been deployed three or more times are less likely to attempt suicide when compared with soldiers who have been deployed only once. Finally, the suicide risk is significantly lower for soldiers who have been deployed to Afghanistan than for those who were deployed to Balkan. Regarding attempted suicides, results show that 298 soldiers have attempted suicide once or more times during 1995-2013. 96.0% are men while 4.0% are women. The majority (29.5%) committed their first attempted suicide at the age of 18-24 years, while app. 13.0% attempted suicide before they turned 18. Just above 10% were more than 40 years old when they committed their first attempted suicide. More than a third (36.2%) attempted suicide prior to being deployed. 43.9% of the attempted suicide after first deployment happened within the first five years, while the rest happened after 6 or more years. 47 soldiers have committed suicide from 1995-2013. Of these, more than 20% have one registered attempted suicide prior to the completed suicide. Only male soldiers have committed suicide.

## VI. RESULTS OF THE INTERVIEW

High among the factors that the soldiers themselves point out protect against suicidal behaviour is the significance of the family. Feeling secure with their family and children who depend on the soldiers' care may protect the soldiers



against attempted suicide. Relations, with whom the soldier can confide the experiences during deployment, also protect. Ethical considerations about suicide as a solution on the problems and the feeling, that there is coherence and meaning between the things the soldier has done during deployment and his or her personal values and priorities are also protective against attempted suicide. The society's recognition of the soldier's contribution is very important.

Many soldiers mentions powerlessness as a straining factor. Incomprehensible decisions in the Danish Defence and the Danish society in combination with both the Defence' and the society's poor handling of mental difficulties are also mentioned as straining. The majority of the veterans feel that they primarily are left to fend for themselves after returning; at the same time, it is difficult to get the help they need. This causes distrust in the system. Finally, some soldiers have experienced lack of cohesion and meaning in addition to lack of concord between life values and demands during the missions they have been deployed on. If the soldiers have witnessed inhuman actions without being able to act, it constitutes a major risk factor for suicidal ideation and suicidal behaviour. It is also a risk factor for the soldiers who remain in the Danish Defence, if they experience that the management withholds information concerning the future.

## VII. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the present study, to prevent suicidal behaviour in the Danish Defence the following must be centred on:

- Older soldiers have less risk of suicidal behaviour than younger soldiers;
- Many soldiers experienced suicidal behaviour before they joined the Danish Defence;
- Peace at the "home front" is important. The family should support while the soldiers are deployed;
- The Danish Defence and the society should recognize the veterans after deployment;
- Confidence in the Defence' psychologists should be restored.

These recommendations corresponds with those the Centre for Suicide Research recommended in 2012.

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## PENITENCIARUL – INSTITUȚIE DE LA CARE SE AȘTEAPTĂ PREA MULT

Conf. univ. dr. Florian GHEORGHE\*

### Rezumat:

*Ca ultimă autoritate, penitenciarul, pentru a-l înțelege, trebuie privit din înalt: doar când înțelegi viața sa internă și vecinătățile sale instituționale, care sunt dificultățile generate de modul de structurare a personalității deținuților, cum se explică lipsa unor modele umane de calitate în spațiul social, exasperarea personalului care nu poate face mai mult pentru a-i face mai buni pe deținuți, de ce banii sunt mereu insuficienți pentru funcționarea sa, devine evidentă contribuția lui specifică la ordinea socială, la siguranța publică, la încrederea în ziua de mâine.*

*Penitenciarul te sperie doar când nu ai ajuns între zidurile lui. De mai mulți ani, există o penurie de idei în privința optimizării rezultatelor unităților de detenție și asta din cauza dezinteresului pentru funcționarea lor și pentru înțelegerea fenomenelor umane din masa deținuților. Oamenii obișnuiți și instituțiile statului așteaptă prea mult de la penitenciare, uitând faptul că ele doar găzduiesc delincvenții pentru un timp, cauzele criminalității rămânând afară, acolo unde penitenciarul nu poate da nicio bătălie.*

*Am ales pentru comunicarea de astăzi câteva probleme tipice închisorilor de oriunde care pot fi fecunde și pentru psihologii din alte domenii.*

## I. FUNCȚIILE SOCIALE ALE PEDEPSEI PENALE

O societate nu poate exista fără pedepse, deoarece valorile fundamentale pe care le impune au nevoie de norme care să le apere atunci când sunt nesocotite. Jean Piaget spunea că fără pedepse, educația copiilor nu poate fi concepută. „După ce am aruncat în utopie ipoteza unei lumi fără pedepse, cum să concepem o pedeapsă inteligentă? Nu putem ieși din impasul actual decât măsurând mai bine provocarea delincvenței și a efectelor ei asupra pedepsei... depășind perspectiva drepturilor subiective și regândind noțiunea de demnitate” (Garapon, Salas, 1995, p. 174). Tocmai de aceea, intensitatea reacției sociale a membrilor unei comunități față de delincvenți este un indicator de sănătate socială, o dovadă a faptului că acestora le pasă de calitatea vieții pe care o duc. Când reacția cetățenilor lipsește, înseamnă că un proces de disoluție socială a început...

\* Universitatea Hyperion din București și fost director de penitenciar.