



Building understanding of suicidality and self-harm hospitalisations of ex-serving Australian Defence Force members

This fact sheet contains information some readers may find distressing as it refers to data about mental health, suicide and self-harm.

With the Departments of Veterans' Affairs and Defence, the AIHW has created a first-of-its-kind dataset linking Defence and health data of ex-serving Australian Defence Force (ADF) members who accessed hospital services from 2010 to 2020. This dataset provides insight into the hospital care needs of ex-serving ADF members and how this varies from the broader Australian population.

Which ex-serving members were admitted to hospital and why?

Most ex-serving ADF members who received admitted patient care were aged 35 to 54 years (54.1% for males and 62.8% for females), which is a similar age profile to the ex-serving population, including those who weren't admitted.

The three most common principal diagnoses for ex-serving ADF males and all Australian males admitted to public hospitals were symptoms and signs, injury and poisoning and digestive diseases. The three most common principal diagnoses for ex-serving ADF males admitted to either public or private hospitals, based on data from Queensland only (due to data limitations) were digestive diseases, symptoms and signs, and musculoskeletal conditions.

What admitted patient care for conditions associated with suicidal behaviour do ex-serving members use?

AIHW examined admitted care data for patients with conditions associated with suicidal behaviour including mental health, alcohol and other drug use and intentional self-harm as a proportion of all admitted patients. This highlights the relative significance of these conditions for ex-serving members in comparison with the admitted Australian population but does not illustrate the prevalence of these conditions.

Quick facts



Of people admitted to public hospitals, the proportion of ex-serving ADF members who had at least one admission primarily for mental health, alcohol and drug use, or intentional self-harm was higher than the admitted Australian population.



In 2019-20, a higher proportion of admitted ex-serving males were admitted to public hospitals for mental health-related care compared to all admitted Australian males (8.1% vs. 6.6%). This pattern was observed for ex-serving males across all age groups from 25 to 64 years in comparison to Australian males.



One in 27 presentations to emergency department by ex-serving ADF members was for self-harm or suicidal behaviour between 2013 and 2020. This compares to one in 35 presentations to ED by all Australians.

Mental health

In 2019-20, a higher proportion of admitted ex-serving males were admitted to public hospitals for mental health-related care compared to all admitted Australian males (8.1% vs. 6.6%). In the same year, the proportion of admitted ex-serving females who were admitted for mental health-related care was higher in comparison to admitted Australian females for those aged 25-34 (7.4% vs 4.9%) with similar trends for ex-serving and all Australian females in other age groups.

Military service characteristics

There were similar themes associated with the military characteristics of hospitalised ex-serving members across mental health, alcohol and other drugs and intentional self-harm admitted patient care. For example, in 2019-20 the proportion of ex-serving ADF members admitted for mental health-related care was higher for males who:

- served in the Army (8.4%) or Navy (8.7%) compared to RAAF (5.9%)
- served for less than one year (10.8%), or less than 5 years (10.7%), compared to those who served for at least 5 years (8.5%), or 10 years or more (5.6%)
- were other ranks (9.2%) compared to officers (6.1%) or other senior ranks (4.7%)
- separated involuntarily (medical: 19.6%, other: 11.8%) compared to voluntarily (8.1%).

Alcohol and other drug related conditions

A higher proportion of ex-serving ADF males (3.8%) were admitted for alcohol and other drug related conditions compared to all Australian males (3.2%). This was also the case for ex-serving females (3.1%) compared to all Australian females (1.9%). However, when age-based comparisons were made, similar proportions of ex-serving ADF members and Australians were admitted for any alcohol and other drug-related condition, except for ex-serving males aged 65 and over who had a higher proportion of admission compared to similar aged Australian males.

Intentional self-harm

A greater proportion of ex-serving ADF members, male and female, was admitted to public hospital for intentional self-harm compared to the total Australian population every year between 2010 and 2020. There were 215 male ex-serving ADF members and 78 female ex-serving ADF members admitted for intentional self-harm in 2019-20. For the period 2010-20, 195 ex-serving members died after admission for intentional self-harm. Of these, 86 ex-serving members died from intentional self-harm.

Lives lost to suicide

There were 600 ex-serving ADF males and 68 ex-serving ADF females who served since January 1985 and died by suicide from July 2010 to June 2020. In the year before death, 171 ex-serving ADF males and 26 ex-serving ADF females who died by suicide, received admitted patient care at a public hospital. Admitted care was commonly for mental-health related care or injury, poisoning and the consequences of other external causes.

Emergency department care use by ex-serving members

Between 2013 and 2020, 117,300 ex-serving members attended an emergency department (ED) for any reason. Of ex-serving members who presented to ED, 4,400 (3.7%) presented for intentional self-harm or suicidal behaviour, above the rate of 2.8% for all Australians.

The proportion of ex-serving males who presented to ED for intentional self-harm or suicidal behaviour was 3.7% while the proportion for ex-serving females was 4.1%. Presentations to ED by ex-serving males of all age groups were 1.2 to 1.6 times more likely related to self-harm or suicidal behaviour compared to all Australian males of the same age group. This was similarly observed for the female ex-serving ADF population except for those aged 65+ years.

For more information, see the full report [*Characteristics of ex-serving Australian Defence Force members hospitalised for suicidality and intentional self-harm*](#)