Reaching Hidden Suicide Risk in Military Units

Peter A. Wyman, Anthony R. Pisani

Center for the Study and Prevention of Suicide, University of Rochester School of Medicine
January 2025

This document outlines a new approach to military suicide prevention that addresses a critical gap: reducing suicide risk among service members whose suicide concerns are not disclosed or otherwise identified. This overview focuses on the innovative strategy and evidence supporting the Core Connections program's peer-network-based approach. Comprehensive program details are available separately.

The Critical Gap in Military Suicide Prevention

Most military suicide deaths occur among personnel who are not identified as high-risk and are not receiving mental health care. In the Active Component in 2023:

- 58% had no behavioral health diagnosis.
- Two-thirds received no mental health services in the 90 days before death.

These "hidden suicidal members" remain outside traditional prevention efforts despite having:

- Active suicidal thoughts.
- Significant emotional difficulties.
- Social isolation.
- Unmet prevention needs.

Limitations of Current Prevention Strategies

Traditional military suicide prevention centers on health services through:

- Encouraging help-seeking behavior.
- Reducing the stigma of mental health services.
- Improving treatment effectiveness.
- Teaching individual coping skills
- Offering self-help resources and apps.

These approaches, while undoubtedly saving lives and essential to continue, face fundamental limitations. Most military suicide deaths occur among personnel who have not accessed mental health care in the months before death.

Many suicidal members are reluctant to seek help, while others show few recognizable warning signs or have risk factors that do not match traditional screening criteria. Even with reduced stigma and improved access, an individually-focused treatment approach cannot reach all members who need protection. **A new approach is needed to reduce suicide risk without requiring the identification of individual members at high risk.**

Core Connections: A New Approach to Risk Reduction

Core Connections (known as Wingman Guardian Connect in the Air Force, Wyman et al 2020, 2022) **strengthens the natural peer networks that protect and support all unit members** - a fundamentally different approach to suicide prevention that builds unit-wide protective factors while providing the greatest help to those at highest risk.

Developed as Wingman-Connect through a 10-year collaboration between the University of Rochester and the Department of the Air Force (DoD-funded, 2014-2023), this program delivers six hours of interactive group training, followed by six months of text/video reinforcement and team booster activities. Through this structured approach, members develop essential individual and group skills across four core strengths (Kinship, Purpose, Guidance, and Balance), learning through interactive exercises that make these skills practical and memorable.

- Members develop skills essential for mental health, resilience, and job fitness.
- Groups build stronger peer networks and healthy practices that contribute to operational effectiveness.
- Creates multiple channels of protection and support through enhanced unit cohesion.
- Those at highest risk benefit the most from this approach.

Rather than depending solely on individual help-seeking or risk identification, the program strengthens the everyday relationships and unit culture that research shows are crucial for preventing suicide. The program demonstrates how stronger peer networks benefit both unit readiness and individual protection, especially for members who might otherwise remain disconnected from support.

Key Evidence: Direct Impact on Existing Risk

A gold-standard randomized controlled trial with 1,500 Air Force early-career personnel demonstrated that Wingman-Connect significantly reduced suicide risk, depressive symptoms, and occupational problems (Wyman et al., 2020). Program participants showed improved mental health outcomes and 50% fewer incidents requiring corrective training.

Importantly, the trial revealed a crucial finding about how the program works: Wingman-Connect embedded members into a cohesive peer network unified around healthy practices. This process had an out-sized effect that benefitted suicidal members by preventing their typical trajectory of becoming increasingly isolated over time (Wyman et al., 2022). Specifically:

- Members with elevated suicide risk in untrained units showed increasing isolation from peers over time.
- The same high-risk profile members in Wingman-Connect-trained units increased their healthy peer connections.
- This prevention of isolation occurred without identifying which members were at risk.
- The program's positive effects were strongest among those who needed it most.

This evidence demonstrates that Core Connections is not only an "upstream" prevention program that “gets to the left of problems” – **it also actively addresses existing suicide risk among members who would otherwise remain hidden and become more isolated.**

Why This Peer Group Approach Works for At-Risk Members

Developed as a military-specific program with input from early-career personnel and leaders, the program was designed to ensure alignment with members' motivations and needs.

1. **Participant role is acceptable and meaningful.**
    - Members participate as teammates, not patients.
    - Training occurs within normal duty settings.
    - Role aligns with military values and career development.
2. **Strengthens the group to strengthen the individual.**
    - Builds protective peer networks within existing units.
    - Reduces isolation among at-risk members naturally, without singling anyone out.
    - Creates shared healthy coping practices.
    - Those at highest risk gain the most benefit.
3. **Prevention through mission enhancement.**
    - Integrates prevention directly into unit functioning.
    - Strengthens both readiness and protective factors.
    - Creates lasting culture change through military structures.
    - Ensures sustainable prevention by improving mission capability.

Scientific Foundation

Research demonstrates that relationship networks are intimately connected to suicide risk and protection (Cero, De Choudhury, & Wyman, 2023), specifically:

- Peer relationships fulfill essential psychological needs.
- Group cohesion creates collective responsibility for member well-being.
- Social norms shape healthy behavior and coping strategies.
- Network enhancement particularly benefits those with the greatest need.

Reducing Critical Barriers in Military Suicide Prevention

Core Connections addresses several critical barriers in current suicide prevention:

1. **Reaches hidden risk.**
    - Works without requiring members to self-identify as struggling
    - Benefits at-risk members through natural peer interactions.
    - Creates protective environments that support all members
2. **Eliminates access barriers while improving performance.**
    - Delivered in standard work and training settings.
    - No special referral or help-seeking required; avoids stigma of mental health services.
    - Maintains career and role confidence.
    - Reduces occupational problems by 50%.
3. **Sustainable implementation.**
    - Integrates with existing military structures.
    - Improves both prevention and readiness.
    - Creates lasting cultural change.
    - Builds on military strengths and values through practical skills development.

Building Protective Networks Across Settings: Program Adaptability

Ongoing projects with law enforcement and other civilian settings suggest that Core Connections can be successfully adapted to other high-stress environments and career stages while maintaining its core protective components.

Implementation with civilian law enforcement demonstrated strong engagement, acceptability, and relevance (Pisani et al., under review), with context-specific content emerging naturally through participant interactions. This adaptability suggests strong potential for broader implementation to enhance protective networks.

Conclusion: A Critical Tool for Comprehensive Prevention

Core Connections provides military leaders with a powerful new capability to reduce suicide deaths by:

- Directly addressing risk among members who will not be identified through traditional means.
- Creating protective environments that benefit all members, with the strongest effects for those at highest risk.
- Strengthening unit functioning while preventing isolation of vulnerable members.
- Complementing existing clinical services with a population-level approach that reaches hidden suicidal members.

This evidence-based program demonstrates that we can reduce suicide risk without requiring individual identification of risk – a crucial breakthrough for reaching the majority of military members who need prevention but do not access traditional services.

Selected References

Cero, I., De Choudhury, M., & Wyman, P. A. (2024). Social network structure as a suicide prevention target. Social psychiatry and psychiatric epidemiology, 59(3), 555–564.

Pisani, A. R., Wyman, P., Yates, B., Elliot, C. K., Schmeelk-Cone, K., Larke, P., Carruthers, J., Heise, J., & Dockum, C. (under review). Network enhancement for high-stress occupations: Adaptation of the Connect Program for law enforcement. Manuscript submitted for publication.

Wyman, P. A., Pickering, T. A., Pisani, A. R., Cero, I., Yates, B., Schmeelk-Cone, K., ... & Pflanz, S. E. (2022). Wingman-Connect Program increases social integration for Air Force personnel at elevated suicide risk: Social network analysis of a cluster RCT. Social Science & Medicine, 296, 114737.

Wyman, P. A., Pisani, A. R., Brown, C. H., Yates, B., Morgan-DeVelder, L., Schmeelk-Cone, K., ... & Pflanz, S. E. (2020). Effect of the Wingman-Connect upstream suicide prevention program for air force personnel in training: A cluster randomized clinical trial. JAMA Network Open, 3(10), e2022532-e2022532.