

# Exploring The Sustainability and Mental Wellness of Military Veterans in Agriculture



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## Abstract

This study utilized Critical Social Theory to gather existing academic literature on farmers from a mental health context. It then critically examines the mental wellbeing of military veterans in an agricultural enterprise. More specifically, it examines the effects that the stress of maintaining an agricultural business may have on a military veteran after the beginning farmer stage. Although this research considers veterans as an asset to the agriculture community, there are often additional physiological and physical challenges that veterans may have to face as they maintain their agricultural careers. Thus, as educators and community developers, we must anticipate these challenges to better serve veterans in agriculture. Although recent military veteran studies, voices from the community, and targeted resources have supported veterans entrance into agriculture, there is little research that explores the aspect of military veterans' sustainability in agriculture once they are considered launched or no longer beginner farmer and ranchers. The guiding objective for this research was to explore the stressors and supports for mil veterans after the launched stage. research.

## Keywords

Mental Wellness; Suicide; Military Veterans; Producers; Farmer; Ranchers

## Research Question

How (if at all) is military veterans mental health affected in agriculture?

- Is there increased risk of mental health challenges/suicide once veterans are launched, and no longer in the "beginner" category?
- Identify stressors and supports within the agriculture world for launched farmers.
- Are stressors and supports the same for veterans entering agriculture as civilian folk who are in agriculture already? (example: health care, disability payments, retirement money). And what are the stressors and supports for veterans at the launched stage? How do they compare/contrast with a civilian counterpart?

## Purpose

The purpose of this research is to explore and illustrate a more holistic agriculture health and wellness snapshot of the military veteran who farm.



## Mental Health

To add to the already increased mental health challenges of some veterans, Rural Behavioral Health's recently estimated that over 15 million rural residents, struggle with mental illness, substantial substance addiction, and/or psychiatric conditions<sup>10</sup>, leading to more serious consequences<sup>19</sup>. Farming is reported as one of the most stressful occupations<sup>7</sup>. Canadian Agricultural Safety Association identified the following farmer stressors: financial insecurity, changing government policies, disease epidemic, expectations by family members to continue a family farm, physical health changes, balancing on and off-farm work, and relationship difficulties as stressors that may influence overall mental health<sup>15</sup>. Financial insecurity is listed first. Financial stress parallels with military veterans stressors. Additionally, the last decade has experienced a major structural change in the farm management<sup>6</sup>. Experienced farmers are retiring or aging out, leaving inexperienced farmers to take over. Recently, farmers are reporting a historical low of income decline and commodity price increase that is adding additional concerns over farmers' repayment capacity<sup>6</sup>. Booth and Lloyd reported in 2000 that farmers as a whole dealt with record high levels of stress<sup>2</sup>. This unfortunately proves that this is not a new or isolated phenomena, and recent volatility of markets will only exacerbate the issues.

## Money, Friends, and Family

Numerous studies<sup>4, 14, 16, 18</sup> uncovered that a leading stressor for military members is caused by economic pressures, chronic debt, and lack of income. Other studies convey that there is a possible association between continued exposure to violence and intensive combat exposure and post-military antisocial behavior<sup>21, 22</sup>. Antisocial or isolation was another stressor identified by farmers<sup>20</sup>. Many farmers become isolated by working long hours on farms far away from their peers. Working long hours to complete necessary task can also cause separation from time spent with family living on the farm. This isolation often leads to feelings of even deeper depression. These can lead to the inability to cope with stress created on a farm. Coping indicates the action taken to navigate life's diverse barriers<sup>11</sup>. It involves the ability to continuously consciously change cognitive and behavioral efforts to navigate the demands of the situation. Coping techniques can occur in positive or negative ways<sup>13</sup>. A positive result would indicate successful adaption, while negative results would refer to PTSD or other mental challenges. One of these negative coping mechanisms is suicide. Suicide is an enormous problem in rural communities<sup>7</sup>. Meaning, farmers have a high rate of suicide<sup>20</sup>. The rate for farmer suicides is 34 per 100,000 farmers, as compared to 24 per 100,000 in the general population. The highest at risk age groups for male farmers who commit suicide are 25-34 years, 75-84 years, and 85 years and older<sup>15</sup>. The national suicide rate among veterans under the age of thirty increased 26 % between 2005 and 2007<sup>3</sup>. These veterans are less apt to cope with the transition and stress, leading to between 20 and 22 veterans committing or attempting to commit suicide daily<sup>17</sup>. It is within these commonalities of stressors, coping abilities, and suicide rates, that we recommend further critically needed research and additional resources for veterans who wish to continue Agricultural work.

## Methodology

This critical research was completed through three steps. First, we surveyed multiple data sources including relevant military veteran mental health articles, books and other sources pertaining to military personnel and agriculture. Next, we focused our findings and synthesized main ideas. Lastly, we summarized our findings into a literature review. Finally, we summarized the literature review for relevance and existing gaps to create a report.

## Background and Significance

There are numerous studies identifying that agriculture and military life partake in many parallels. Studies such as Kyle<sup>9</sup> show some of these parallels exists as physical and symbolic symbolism and identity, while others include parallels of community capitals such as human (skills), financial, and cultural capitals.<sup>12, 5, 1</sup> For the most part these studies directly highlight the positive community capitals and aspects of veterans in agriculture. However, there are challenges to starting and maintaining a farm that can affect the mental health of military veterans. These can be further examined to show the need for additional resources.

Rural communities often lack access to mental health professionals, which directly impacts the accessibility and availability of mental care<sup>7</sup>. Mohatt argues that more than 60% of Americans that live in rural communities are living in a behavioral health shortage area. This would make finding mental health assistance difficult for any farmer including those veterans that may be already dealing with additional challenges.

## Implications

Implications from this literature review are three gold. One, this review can be used to better inform program designers and funding organizations. Two, this literature can help inform mental health experts on the additional concerns that this vocation can have on a veteran. Three, this research can warn veterans of additional considerations that need to go into farm management. Further, this literature review can be used to conduct future research in the above mentioned areas.

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