

Objectives

- Identify homogeneity and heterogeneity in social behaviors of veterans who died by suicide.
- Examine the causes and effects of social isolation, factors that may promote or prohibit social connection, and the positive or negative effects of social engagement.



"Just getting by" – A mixed methods exploration of social connectedness among US veterans who died by suicide

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← Background systematic review, bibliography, data analysis protocol, and Operation Deep Dive overview.

Definitions

Psychological Autopsy

Retrospective investigation technique used in research, clinical, and forensic settings to elucidate the clinical and psychological context of a decedent's suicide through the accounts of surviving individuals.

Social Connectedness

Combination of an individual's interpersonal attachments, community engagement, and societal belonging that confer meaning and purpose to life than an individual cannot obtain or replace on their own.

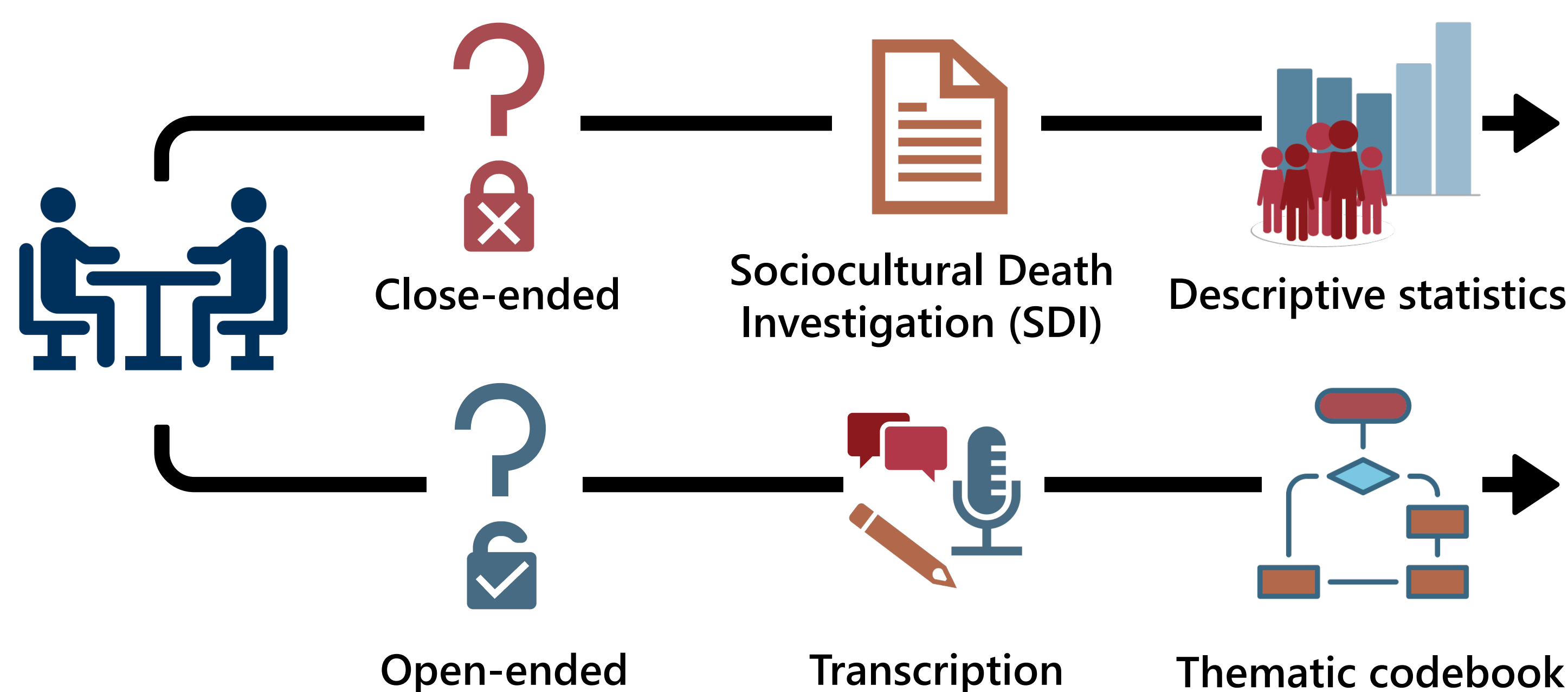
Background

Social connection, social integration, and community participation have long been accepted as **protective factors** against suicidality. Moreover, social **withdrawal and disengagement** are well-established, known **warning signs** of acute suicide risk. However, recent literature **challenges** the idea that social connectedness is universally beneficial for individuals at-risk for suicidality. It is critical to empirically **assess and understand** the social behaviors of veterans who have died by suicide, given the suicide rate of **US military veterans** is more than **twice** that of **civilians**.

Methods

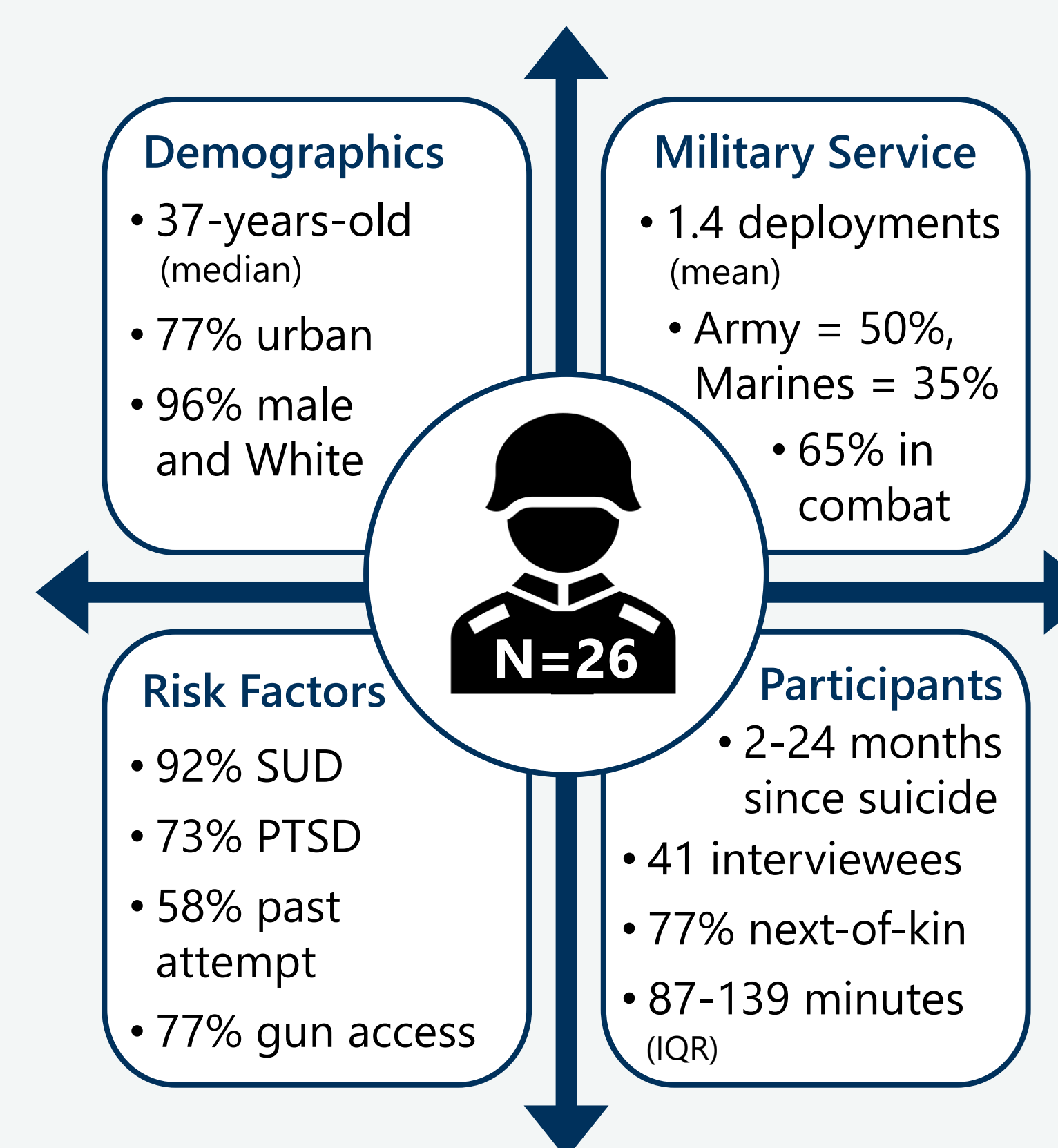
Sample: Friends and family of veterans who died by suicide, recruited through America's Warrior Partnership (AWP) and local veteran organizations.

Protocol: Sociocultural Death Investigation (SDI) – developed from **psychological autopsy** – asked closed- and open-ended questions focused on individual and community factors surrounding a veteran's death.

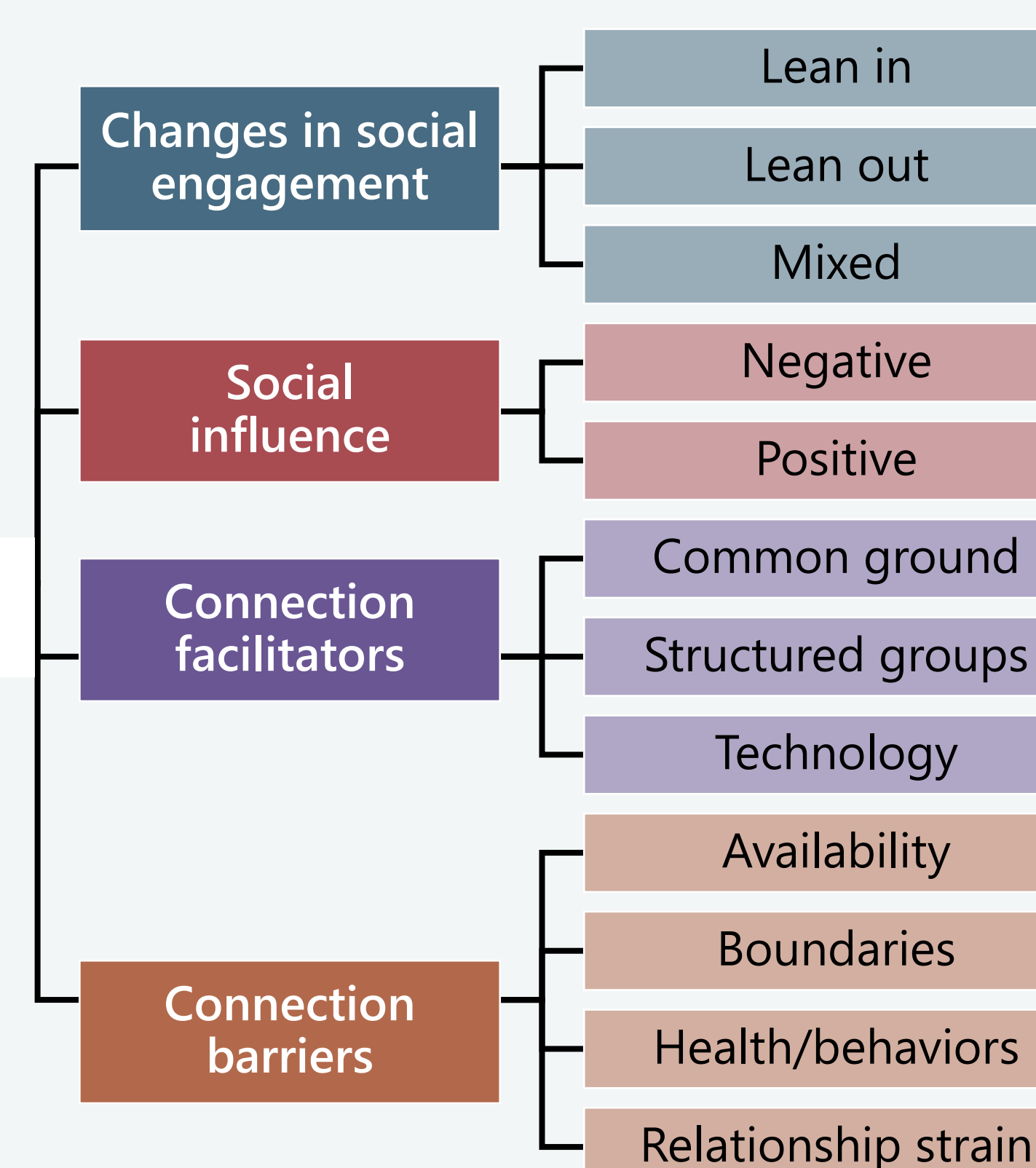


Results

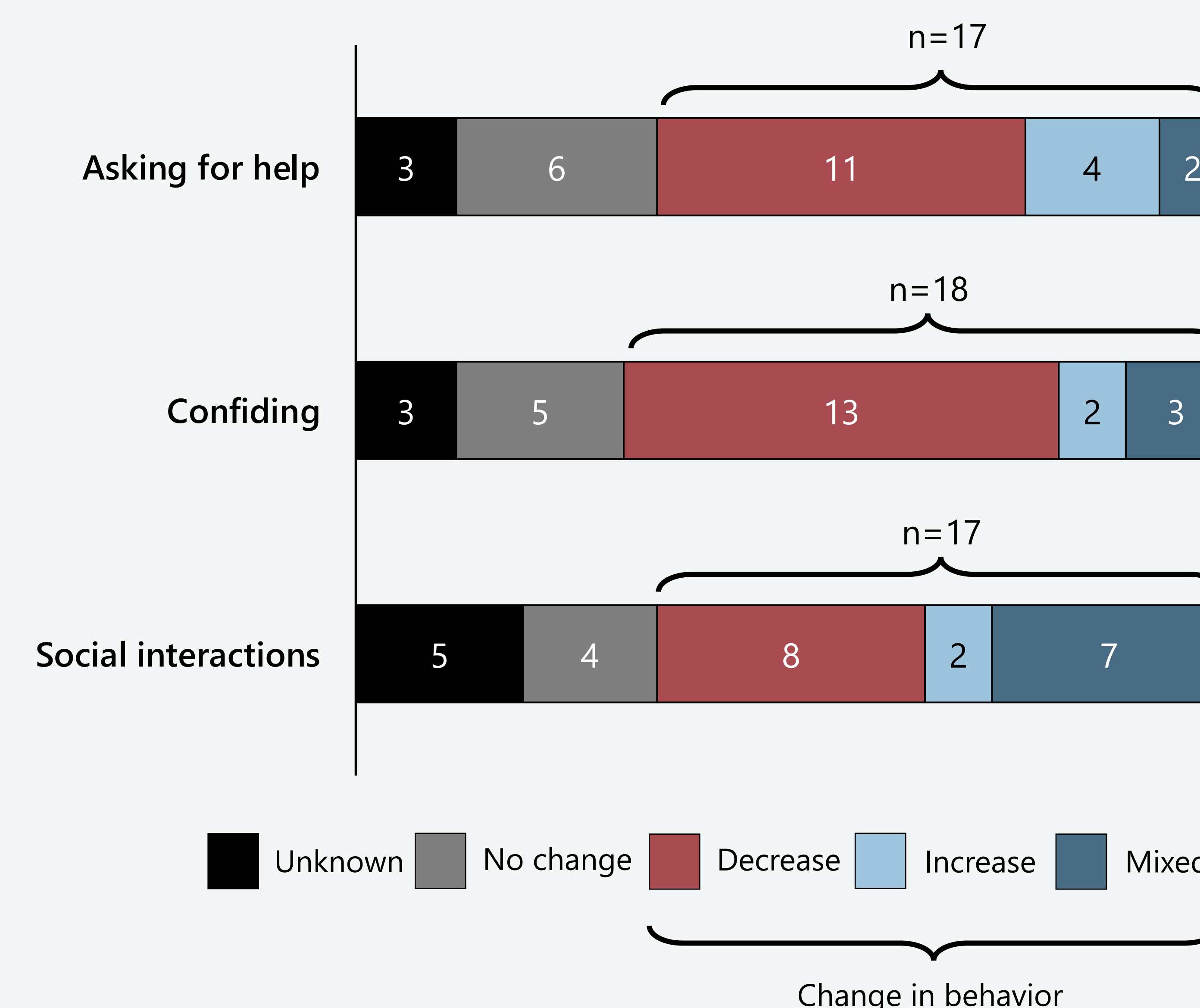
Decedent Characteristics



Codebook Overview



Changes in Social Behaviors in Last Year of Life



Discussion

Heterogeneity in social behaviors: Interview participants reported a **diversity of changes** in social engagement, indicating a **range of warning signs**.

“ Six months prior he completely withdrew. But then the last 30 days he...started confiding in people...more. ”

“ In hindsight...he was saying goodbye...he had a big dinner with all his friends...it was almost like he was saying goodbye to all his buddies. ”

Understanding social isolation: Deceased veterans often experienced **involuntary social isolation**.

“ While I was working was huge...he was home alone all day long with those dark thoughts from everything he did...he saw. ”

“ He got kicked out because he was just falling down drunk...his brother didn't want his kids to...be around him. ”

Social influences: Participants referenced **high social connection to negative influences** as a risk factor.

“ He had other acquaintances, but they didn't have [his] best interest at heart. ”

“ If they were negative friends, then he would have less contact with them...cause he was really trying to change in that negativity out of his life and do better. ”

Recommendations

- Veteran-centered community education efforts should **account for variance** in social behavior warning signs; bystanders must be aware of **both prosocial and antisocial** behavior changes that may be indicative of suicidal intent.
- Suicide prevention outreach in this population should **target** individuals who may have **involuntarily, acutely lost access** to important social supports.
- Future research should use **mixed-methods psychological autopsies** for in depth analysis of suicide risk factors and warning signs.

Acknowledgements:

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Ask me about...

The pros and cons of psychological autopsy methods.

Our new and replicable qualitative analysis protocol.

How our work fits into the existing literature landscape.

Other priority veteran suicide risk factors that require this type of investigation.

More research from the Operation Deep Dive Team at the Department of Family and Community Health.

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