

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Multiple
Branches

Involvement in Abusive Violence Among Vietnam Veterans: Direct and Indirect Associations With Substance Use Problems and Suicidality

Currier, J. M., Holland, J. M., Jones, H. W., & Sheu, S. (2014). Involvement in abusive violence among Vietnam veterans: Direct and indirect associations with substance use problems and suicidality. *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research and Practice*, 6(1), 73-82. doi:10.1037/a0032973

SUMMARY: A survey of Vietnam combat Veterans was conducted to test whether experiences of abusive violence toward enemies or noncombatants were directly and/or indirectly linked with drug or alcohol problems and/or suicidality via posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or guilt. Forty percent of the sample witnessed and/or were directly involved in acts of abusive violence while deployed in Vietnam. These experiences were indirectly linked with substance abuse via PTSD, and both indirectly and directly linked with suicidality via PTSD.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Thirty-five percent of Veterans in this sample witnessed and 12% were directly involved in acts of abusive violence against civilians or noncombatants while in combat.
- Of those directly involved in abusive violence perpetration, 7% reported using chemicals and bombs on villages, 5% reported terrorizing or mistreating civilians, 4% reported torturing prisoners, and 2% reported mutilating bodies.
- Exposure to abusive violence during combat was related to later drug problems, alcohol problems, and suicidality; these associations were indirect (via PTSD symptoms). Exposure to abusive violence was also directly related to suicidality.
- Combat exposure overall (not exposure to abusive violence) was positively linked with war-related guilt.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Offer classes for Service members who have experienced abusive violence, including information about PTSD, suicidality, and drug and alcohol problems
- Develop curricula to provide Service members with positive coping strategies
- Recommend education for service providers around the possible effects of deployment on Service members' families

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Recommend the formation of collaborative relationships between military healthcare organizations and community programs to increase referral services
- Recommend professional development for program staff regarding the relationship between various mental health concerns and substance use issues, and how to encourage healthy behaviors among Service members and their families
- Continue to provide support for programs that work to increase family readiness

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METHODS

- A subsample of the randomly sampled, nationally representative National Vietnam Veterans Readjustment Study was used, including Veterans who served in Active Duty between August 5th, 1964 to May 7th, 1975.
- Veterans answered a survey which contained measures of combat exposure, exposure to abusive violence toward others during combat, PTSD, drug and alcohol problems, suicidality, and guilt.
- Statistical analyses were used to test abusive violence and combat exposure's direct and indirect effects on drug problems, alcohol problems, and suicidality.

PARTICIPANTS

- A total of 1,203 Vietnam combat theater Veterans participated (100% male) in the study.
- In the sample, the mean age was 41.70 years (SD = 5.26), mean years of education was 13.47 years (SD = 3.40), and participants identified as either White (73%) or Black (27%).
- Among the participants, the mean years since last deployment in Vietnam was 18 years.
- No information on military branch was provided.

LIMITATIONS

- All measures were self-report and collected retrospectively (average of 18 years after deployment), which increased the odds of biased or incomplete reports.
- These findings may not generalize to female and non-Vietnam era Veterans.
- There was no accounting for the diversity of wartime experiences of these Veterans that may have impacted the results.
- Given the lag time between deployment and this study, it is possible that some of the most impacted Veterans may have already passed away; thus, these results may be skewed towards Veterans who were healthier or had higher functioning.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Replicate the study with Veterans of OEF/OIF/OND to determine whether similar relationships exist among variables
- Gather similar data with female and more racially and ethnically diverse Veterans
- Examine the relationship between experiences of life threat during deployment, mental health, and substance use/abuse over time

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