

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Multiple
Branches

Alcohol Use and Alcohol-Related Problems Before and After Military Combat Deployment

Jacobson, I. G., Ryan, M. A. K., Hooper, T. I., Smith, T. C., Amoroso, P. J., Boyko, E. J., ... Bell, N. S. (2008). Alcohol use and alcohol-related problems before and after military combat deployment. *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 300(6), 663-675. doi:10.1001/jama.300.6.663

SUMMARY: This study's focus was to determine whether combat exposure was associated with new-onset or continued alcohol misuse. Scores were compared on a self-report measure of alcohol misuse in a sample of Service members who deployed with combat exposure, deployed without combat exposure, or did not deploy. Combat exposure was related to increased risk of new-onset alcohol misuse, particularly in Reserve and National Guard personnel and in younger Soldiers.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Active Duty Service members who experienced combat exposure were most likely to engage in binge drinking, heavy weekly drinking, and to experience alcohol-related problems.
- Service members with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and depression had higher odds of new-onset and continued alcohol-related problems at follow-up.
- Among Service members in the Reserve Component, new-onset problematic drinking behaviors were associated with combat exposure, younger age, being a Marine, having PTSD or PTSD and depression, and being a current smoker.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Develop pre-deployment classes for Service members to support them in managing the potential stressors that may be experienced immediately upon reintegration
- Provide workshops for Service members designed to increase coping skills and decrease problematic drinking behaviors
- Offer classes to Service members and their families that aim to increase family cohesion during transitions such as reintegration

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Continue to support programs for Service members and their families to assist with possible reintegration challenges
- Recommend collaboration among military-based and community-based programs to enhance continuity of care for Service members and their families
- Encourage training for professionals who work with military families regarding the possible challenges Service members and their families face during the post-deployment period

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METHODS

- Participants were randomly selected from all Service members as of October 1, 2000. They were included in the current study if they had not experienced a deployment before the baseline survey.
- Participants answered questions about basic demographics, life stressors, combat-related experiences, psychological symptoms, and drinking behavior.
- Data were analyzed to determine predictors of new and continuing problems with alcohol.

PARTICIPANTS

- Participants included members from all branches of the military. Of the initial participants, 37,310 participants did not deploy between baseline and follow-up, 5,661 deployed without combat exposure, and 5,510 deployed with combat exposure.
- Participants were predominantly male (73%), White (70%), and Active Duty (57%) without prior history of alcohol problems (82%).
- Most were members of the Army (47%), followed by Air Force (29%), Navy or Coast Guard (19%), and Marine Corps (5%).

LIMITATIONS

- The length of time between returning from deployment and completion of the follow-up questionnaire averaged one year, which did not allow for differentiation of short-term and long-term problems with alcohol use.
- The questions in the survey asked participants about their alcohol usage during the past year; Service members may have misremembered some information or attempted to answer in a way they thought was more socially acceptable.
- Measures of binge drinking differed slightly between the baseline and follow-up assessment, which may have influenced results.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Include additional time points to more closely identify associations between mental health and alcohol misuse
- Examine whether Service members' alcohol usage after returning from deployment has different patterns short-term versus long-term
- Investigate the efficacy of programs that aim to lessen the stressors of deployment and reintegration for Service members and their families

ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



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