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


**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

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