

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Army

Post-Combat Invincibility: Violent Combat Experiences are Associated with Increased Risk-Taking Propensity Following Deployment

Killgore, W. D. S., Cotting, D. I., Thomas, J. L., Cox, A. L., McGurk, D., Vo, A. H., ... Hoge, C. W. (2008). Post-combat invincibility: Violent combat experiences are associated with increased risk-taking propensity following deployment. *Journal of Psychiatric Research*, 42(13), 1112-1121. doi:10.1016/j.jpsychires.2008.01.001

SUMMARY: U.S. Army Soldiers survey data was used to assess the relationship between combat experiences and risk-taking propensity and behaviors. Specific combat experiences predicted greater risk-taking propensity post-deployment and actual risk taking behaviors (e.g., more frequent and greater quantities of alcohol use and increased verbal and physical aggression toward others).

KEY FINDINGS:

- Soldiers with high levels of violent combat, who had killed another person, and had been exposed to intense human trauma endorsed somewhat greater willingness to engage in risky behaviors at home (e.g., driving fast and taking dangerous shortcuts).
- Being exposed to violent combat was most consistently predictive of risk-taking behaviors.
- Combat experiences were predictive of reported actual risk-taking behavior in the previous month (e.g., frequency and quantity of alcohol use and frequency of verbal and physical aggression to others).
- The experience of having a buddy killed or injured was somewhat protective against later drunk driving or riding with a driver who had too much to drink.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Provide education to Service members regarding strategies to de-escalate potentially distressing situations (e.g., time out process)
- Offer workshops to military family members to help them effectively cope with potentially unsettling risk-taking behaviors in their Service member, including the provision of resources for domestic violence
- Disseminate information to military families regarding mental health issues common, including risk-taking behaviors, after combat deployments and resources to cope with these issues

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Recommend that Service members are regularly assessed for risk-taking propensity post-deployment; Service members with high risk-taking potential could be provided additional resources or education
- Recommend professional education for program staff regarding the dangers of risk-taking behaviors and how to help Service members make healthy choices when dealing with stress
- Continue to support post-deployment reintegration programs that help military families positively adjust following a deployment

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METHODS

- Within the first three days of returning from year Iraq deployment in 2006, U.S. Army Soldiers completed a baseline survey; three months later, they completed a second survey.
- The baseline survey contained questions about combat experiences, while the second survey asked questions about emotional and mental health issues, use of alcohol, aggressive behaviors, and risk-taking propensity.
- Participant recruitment methods were not provided.

PARTICIPANTS

- Participants included 1,252 U.S. Army Soldiers (94% male).
- The majority of participants were White (70%), with a mean age of 27 years (SD = 5.90).
- Mean length of military service was 6.5 years (SD = 5.80); 49% of participants were ranked E1-E4 and 39% were non-commissioned officers.

LIMITATIONS

- The magnitude of the effect sizes were small and indicates that risk-taking behavior is affected by other unmeasured variables.
- Participants were not anonymous and this may have impacted the Soldiers responses.
- The data are correlational and causal statements cannot be made.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Assess the persistence of risk-taking behaviors among Service members after deployment
- Examine the effectiveness of interventions aimed at curbing high risk-taking behaviors among Service members
- Include pre-deployment assessments in order to identify subgroups most at risk for developing behavioral changes post-deployment

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