

# Putting Research to Work for Military Families



**Focus:**  
Multiple  
Branches

## Socio-Cultural Factors That Foster Use and Abuse of Alcohol Among a Sample of Enlisted Personnel at Four Navy and Marine Corps Installations

Poehlman, J. A., Schwerin, M. J., Pemberton, M. R., Isenberg, K., Lane, M. E., & Aspinwall, K. (2011). Socio-cultural factors that foster use and abuse of alcohol among a sample of enlisted personnel at four Navy and Marine Corps installations. *Military Medicine*, 176(4), 397-401. doi:10.7205/MILMED-D-10-00240

**SUMMARY:** Fifteen focus groups were conducted with enlisted personnel at two Navy and two Marine Corps installations to explore the drinking climate of each installation in terms of shared attitudes and recognized norms. Study participants (N = 111 participants) were enrolled in the Program for Alcohol Training, Research, and Online Learning. The findings provide exploratory information on the context of various drinking behaviors among military personnel on the selected installations.

### KEY FINDINGS:

- The groups identified as most likely to use alcohol regularly and become intoxicated were personnel who were male, in their first enlistment, young, and unmarried. Based on themes, researchers categorized three general types of drinkers: social drinkers, recreational drinkers, and stress and coping drinkers.
- Findings suggest that the climate in which enlisted personnel live and work is conducive to drinking. The focus group discussions revealed attitudes and norms regarding alcohol use that are unspoken but appear to be shared by enlisted personnel across the participating military installations.
- Installation convenience stores and the exchange were reported to facilitate spontaneous and recreational drinking by providing ample supply of alcohol at reduced prices.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Educate Service members and their families about the types of drinking behaviors on installations and the environmental factors that influence the potential for high rates of alcohol use
- Include information about drinking climates on installations in staff training curricula to improve efforts and outcomes in the reduction of alcohol consumption
- Disseminate information regarding possible symptoms of substance abuse problems Service members may face after deployment and where individuals and families can find help for those problems

### IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Continue to support research designed to examine the relationship between military environments and alcohol consumption among Services members
- Recommend integrating substance abuse prevention education into existing service delivery systems for military families
- Encourage collaboration among DoD programs and community-based organizations to bridge mental health and substance abuse resources for Service members

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## METHODS

- Study participants were enrolled in the Program for Alcohol Training, Research, and Online Learning in 2006, a project to develop and test a Web-based program for reducing alcohol use among active duty military personnel.
- Focus groups were conducted with enlisted personnel at two Navy and two Marine Corps installations.
- Themes or patterns from across the sample of military installations were identified and analyzed.

## PARTICIPANTS

- One hundred eleven Service members completed the study. Most participants were junior enlisted (68%).
- Participants were either from the Marine Corp (55%) or Navy (45%).
- Ethnicity and gender composition of the sample was not specified.

## LIMITATIONS

- Participants were only from the Navy and Marine Corp on U.S. coasts, which limits generalizability to other military branches and installation locations.
- Objective self- or clinical-reports of drinking behaviors were not collected. Hence, focus group discussions, which described the general drinking climate at installations, may not reflect the full range of drinking behaviors.
- Lack of data on the race/ethnicity and gender of the sample limits the ability to understand how those factors may impact the findings.

## AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Explore alcohol use among Service members enlisted in different branches of the military
- Examine patterns of alcohol use prior to enlistment and how factors such as past trauma, race/ethnicity, and gender impact those patterns
- Evaluate the effectiveness of substance abuse prevention programs in reducing drinking

## ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



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