

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Army

The Effects of Alcohol Problems, PTSD, and Combat Exposure on Nonphysical and Physical Aggression Among Iraq and Afghanistan War Veterans

Stappenbeck, C. A., Hellmuth, J. C., Simpson, T., & Jakupcak, M. (2014). The effects of alcohol problems, PTSD, and combat exposure on nonphysical and physical aggression among Iraq and Afghanistan war veterans. *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy*, 6(1), 65-72. doi:10.1037/a0031468

SUMMARY: Iraq and Afghanistan War Veterans completed questionnaires to determine whether aggressive behavior following deployment was related to alcohol problems, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), or combat exposure. Perpetration of nonphysical aggression was positively correlated with PTSD symptom severity, younger age, and alcohol use. Perpetration of physical abuse was associated with ethnic minority status, younger age, combat exposure, and PTSD symptom severity.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Eighteen percent of the Veterans reported perpetrating non-physical violence only, and 14% reported perpetrating either physical violence or both kinds of violence.
- Twenty-five percent of the Veterans reported symptoms of alcohol abuse, and 13% reported a history of childhood physical abuse.
- Participants who had perpetrated aggression were more likely to abuse alcohol, be young, and have greater PTSD symptom severity.
- Nonphysical aggression was positively correlated with younger age, PTSD symptom severity, and alcohol use.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Consider offering classes for military couples on the dangers of excessive alcohol use
- Host workshops for Service members on effective coping tools for a range of PTSD symptoms
- Provide concrete information on normative versus problematic children's responses to deployment and non-abusive strategies parents can use to address children's distress

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Recommend targeted violence prevention interventions for younger Service members with combat experience
- Continue to support the development of programs for military families that teach positive coping skills and awareness of available resources
- Recommend routine screening for substance use and family violence before and after deployment

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METHODS

- Veterans completed a survey on military deployment, combat exposure, and physical and mental health problems.
- Childhood physical abuse was assessed in a single question, and combat exposure, alcohol problems, PTSD severity, and aggression were assessed using validated survey instruments.
- Data were analyzed to explore potential relationships among the variables.

PARTICIPANTS

- Participants were recruited from a Veterans Affairs post-deployment health clinic between 2004 and 2007.
- Three hundred thirty-seven Iraq and Afghanistan War Veterans participated in the study. Most participants were male (91%) and White (69%).
- The average Veteran age was 31.1 years (SD = 8.5 years), and most Veterans served in the Army (75%) and were unmarried (54%).

LIMITATIONS

- The short time period under study (four months) may have contributed to lower-than-usual rates of aggression.
- The study did not assess if the Veteran was using alcohol when he/she was perpetrating the aggression.
- The study did not assess the quantity and frequency of alcohol consumption.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Replicate the study and assess whether Service members perpetrated physical aggression prior to military service
- Collect similar data from Service members who reside in more geographically representative locations and from other military branches
- Explore the relationships between drug use and perpetrating physical or nonphysical aggression among Service members

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