

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Prevalence of Mental Health Problems and Functional Impairment Among Active Component and National Guard Soldiers 3 and 12 Months Following Combat in Iraq

Thomas, J. L., Wilk, J. E., Riviere, L. A., McGurk, D., Castro, C. A., & Hoge, C. W. (2010). Prevalence of mental health problems and functional impairment among active component and National Guard soldiers 3 and 12 months following combat in Iraq. *Archives of General Psychiatry*, 67(6), 614-623. doi:10.1001/archgenpsychiatry.2010.54

SUMMARY: Researchers examined the prevalence rates of depression and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), determined the comorbidity of alcohol misuse or aggressive behaviors with depression or PTSD, and compared prevalence rates between Active Component and National Guard Soldiers (N = 13,226). Participants were surveyed at 3- and 12-months postdeployment to Iraq (OIF). In this sample, PTSD prevalence ranged from 6% to 11% and depression prevalence from 5% to 9%.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Using the most stringent criteria, PTSD prevalence ranged from 6% to 11%, depression prevalence from 5% to 9%, and either PTSD or depression prevalence from 9% to 14%.
- Approximately 50% of Soldiers who screened positive for PTSD or depression also met criteria for alcohol misuse or aggressive behavior.
- Between the 3- and 12-month time points, PTSD and depression symptoms increased significantly among National Guard participants. PTSD symptoms increased and depression symptoms remained stable in the Active Duty group.
- Between the 3- to 12-month time points, there was a significant increase in aggressive behaviors among National Guard Soldiers, but not among Active Duty Soldiers.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Provide comprehensive post-deployment screening of and referrals for mental health issues, alcohol misuse, and aggression
- Establish collaborations with military and community-based organizations to help Service members, particularly National Guard and Reserve, and their families during reintegration
- Offer training for service providers on evidence-based practices to reduce the symptoms of PTSD, depression, alcohol misuse, and aggression among Service members

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Continue to support programs for identification and prevention of substance abuse in military families
- Recommend integrating mental health education into existing service delivery systems for military families
- Recommend education of professionals (e.g. child caregivers, mental health, and education professionals) on the possible effects of parents' emotion regulation and parenting during deployment and post-deployment

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METHODS

- Between 2004 and 2007, researchers collected anonymous self-report surveys from members of four Active Component and two National Guard infantry brigade combat teams (response rate: 45%).
- Current PTSD, depression, functional impairment, alcohol misuse, and aggressive behaviors were measured.
- Statistical analyses were conducted to examine prevalence rates of mental health disorders and substance abuse.

PARTICIPANTS

- A sample of 13,226 Veterans of OIF participated.
- The sample was 96% male and 4% female. The participants' ages were between 18–24 years (45%), between 25–29 years (28%), between 30–39 years (23%), and 8% were 40 years and older.
- The sample's race/ethnicity was 64% White, 20% Black, 9% Latino/Latina, and 6% Other. Most were Active Duty (68%), while 32% were National Guard.

LIMITATIONS

- This study focused on Service members from the Army. Hence, findings may not generalize to Service members in other branches of the military.
- Participants may differ from non-participants in meaningful ways (e.g., those who responded may be functioning differently than those who did not respond) that were not accounted for in the analyses.
- This study relied on self-report rather than diagnostic measures of mental health, which means the data were more susceptible to social desirability and response biases.
- Data were cross-sectional; hence, causation cannot be inferred.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Assess whether increased dwell time between deployments is associated with improved mental health among returning Service members
- Explore specific factors (e.g., heavy training schedules, less access to mental health facilities) that might predict increases in mental health issues among National Guard Soldiers after deployment
- Investigate the effects of self-perceived serious impairment due to mental health issues in a variety of settings such as military occupational performance, work, family, and social relationships

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