

# Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:  
Marines

## Effects of Combat Deployment on Risky and Self-Destructive Behavior Among Active Duty Military Personnel

Thomsen, C. J., Stander, V. A., McWhorter, S. K., Rabenhorst, M. M., & Milner, J. S. (2011). Effects of combat deployment on risky and self-destructive behavior among active duty military personnel. *Journal of Psychiatric Research*, 45(10), 1321-1331. doi:10.1016/j.jpsychires.2011.04.003

**SUMMARY:** Survey data was used to examine whether deployment among Active Duty military personnel increases risky or self-destructive behavior. The researchers also examined whether deployment effects on risky behavior varied depending on mental health status (depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder [PTSD]) and pre-deployment risky behavior. Previous engagement in risky behavior, military service, and mental health status influenced the association between deployment and risky behavior.

### KEY FINDINGS:

- Seventy-three percent of participants reported engaging in at least one type of risky behavior (i.e., risky recreational activities, unprotected sex, self-injurious behavior, and suicide attempts) in their lifetimes.
- Risky behavior was much more prevalent when participants were civilians compared to when they were in the military.
- Deployment did not affect risky behavior (i.e. risky recreational activity, illegal drug use and self-harm) for those who had not previously engaged in risk behavior.
- Although mental health status was associated with higher levels of risky behavior in general, it did not account for relations between deployment and risky behavior, suggesting a unique effect (independent of mental health status) of deployment on risky behaviors (among those with previous experience with risky behaviors).

### IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Offer workshops for Service members who previously engaged in risk behaviors focused on developing more positive coping mechanisms to reduce risky behaviors
- Incorporate curriculum for Service members on understanding and preventing risky behaviors particularly after deployment
- Provide support groups for Service members and their families who are struggling with reintegration issues following deployment

### IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Continue to support and implement outreach activities and services to ensure Service members and their families are aware of and able to access health care services if needed
- Recommend the use of evidence-based screening tools for risk behaviors along with referral systems that ensure Service members receive appropriate treatment
- Encourage collaboration among DoD and community-based services in an effort to provide comprehensive support for Service members engaging in risky behaviors

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## METHODS

- Data for this cross-sectional study was collected between August 2006 and August 2007.
- Self-report surveys were administered at Marine Corps installations in Southern California and Arizona within three major commands that represent air, support, and infantry units; the Naval Health Research Center (NHRC) Combat Stress and Substance Use survey was conducted.
- This study focused on Active Duty Service members: 93% Marine Corps, 7% Navy.

## PARTICIPANTS

- This study included 2,116 Active Duty Service members; most were males (92%) with an average age of 24 years (SD = 5.30 years).
- The racial composition of the sample was not specified.

## LIMITATIONS

- Compared to the Marine Corps population as a whole, the present sample was somewhat younger, lower in rank, and more likely to be enlisted (vs. officers). Hence, these findings may not generalize to others in the Marine Corps or other branches of the military.
- Comparisons across different time periods surveyed did not account for amount of time considered. For instance, the civilian period included childhood, adolescence, and perhaps some adulthood thus comprising more years and different developmental periods than during the pre- and post-deployment periods.
- Although participants were asked about behavior during three different time periods (i.e., civilian, pre-deployment, and current or post combat deployment), participants were only surveyed once. Recall reports of behavior can be unreliable.

## AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Utilize a longitudinal study design in order to determine causation or the order of effects
- Replicate the current study in a more diverse sample (e.g., age, race, and military branch)
- Explore how partners of Service member's engagement in risky behaviors influence Service members engagement in risky behaviors

## ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



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