

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Multiple
Branches

Smoking and Drinking Behaviors of Military Spouses: Findings from the Millennium Cohort Family Study

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SUMMARY: While smoking and drinking behaviors are well documented among Service members, little is known about smoking and drinking behaviors among military spouses. This study used participant self-report to determine presence of smoking (at least 100 cigarettes in the past year), risky drinking (five or more drinks per day on at least one occasion in the past year), and problem drinking (endorsement of any alcohol-related problem happening on more than one occasion, such as driving a car while drunk, in the past year) along with Service member deployment status, communication, and stress. The findings suggest that characteristics such as communication about deployment and stress are the most impactful on military spouses.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Current smoking was reported by 17.2% of spouses, risky drinking by 36.3%, and problem drinking by 7.3%.
- All three problem behaviors (smoking, risky drinking, and problem drinking) increased when the spouse cared for an ill, injured, or disabled Service member.
- Service members who communicated about their deployment experiences had lower odds of being current smokers than spouses who did not communicate.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Educate military couples who have a history of trauma before deployment on positive coping skills
- Offer workshops during reintegration to help families and Service members adjust to the Service member's return
- Provide workshops to help deployed Service members' spouses learn about available supportive services to handle increased responsibilities and stress during deployment

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Encourage the development and continuation of programs that can promote resilience in Service members, their partners, and children
- Continue to support programs that address the unique challenges faced by spouses of deployed Service members
- Recommend training for professionals who work with military families to educate them about unique factors that contribute to marital strain for military couples

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METHODS

- The population for this study was drawn from 9,872 spouses from the Millennium Cohort Family Study who were married to Millennium Cohort Study family members.
- Among Service members who completed a Millennium Cohort questionnaire, their spouses were invited to participate in the Family Cohort Study.
- Spouses were asked to report if they had experienced any of the following events in the past year: 1) Service member combat-related deployment or study assignment, 2) Service member combat-related injury, and 3) providing care for an ill, injured, or disabled Service member. Stress levels were assessed based on responses.

PARTICIPANTS

- Of the participants 9,282 were current smokers, 9,242 were risky drinkers, and 9,182 were problem drinkers.
- The race/ethnicity of the participants who were current smokers was 7,313 White, 376 Black, 835 Hispanic, and 754 other.
- Participants were mostly female (87%) with an average age of 28.5 years, were mostly White (79%), and had an associate degree or less (59%). Service members had two to five years of military service and were from all branches.

LIMITATIONS

- All participants in this study were in heterosexual relationships; therefore, the findings may not generalize to all military couples.
- Current smoking behaviors may not be represented as the measure used to assess tobacco use was from the past year, not the current year.
- Much of the data in this study was self-report from participants and may be subject to social desirability bias.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Assess the long-term effects of parents' risky drinking and smoking behaviors has on children in military families
- Examine how agreement and lack of agreement in smoking and drinking behaviors of military couples may impact deployment, communication, and spousal reaction to communication
- Conduct studies on racial and gender differences of military spouses' drinking and smoking behaviors and differential effects on health outcomes

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