

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Multiple
Branches

Alcohol Misuse in Reserve Soldiers and Their Partners: Cross-Spouse Effects of Deployment and Combat Exposure

Vest, B. M., Cercone Heavey, S., Homish D. L., & Homish, G. G. (2017). Alcohol misuse in reserve soldiers and their partners: Cross-spouse effects of deployment and combat exposure. *Substance Use & Misuse*, 1-8.
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SUMMARY: Individuals' alcohol use can be impacted by their spouses' alcohol use and certain characteristics their spouses may have. This study considered the impact of deployment and combat exposure on Soldiers' and their spouses' alcohol use. Combat exposure did have an impact on alcohol use for both Soldiers and their spouses.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Among the Soldiers, 19% misused alcohol and on average drank heavily (five or more drinks on an occasion) once per month; 10% of their female spouses misused alcohol and on average drank heavily (four or more drinks on an occasion) a few times per year.
- Combat exposure was associated with frequent heavy drinking for both Soldiers and their spouses even after accounting for Soldiers' age, number of deployments, and PTSD symptoms. The relationship between Soldiers' combat exposure and female spouses' frequent heavy drinking was independent of Soldiers' level of drinking.
- Soldiers had relatively low rates of combat exposure (score of 32 on a scale of 17-102) and PTSD symptoms (10 on a scale of 0-80).
- Number of deployments was not associated with alcohol misuse or frequent heavy drinking for either male Soldiers or their female spouses.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Provide education to military couples on the impact of one spouse's experiences and alcohol use on the other spouse
- Offer workshops for Service members who have had combat exposure and their spouses to reduce alcohol use and increase other types of coping skills
- Provide alcohol misuse screening for military spouses, particularly for those in a relationship with a Service member who has experienced combat

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Promote the development of an alcohol screening program for Service members who have been exposed to combat and their spouses
- Encourage collaboration between DoD and civilian service providers who may work with Reserve and National Guard Service members and their spouses to assist in healthy coping
- Recommend professional development for professionals who work with Service members and their spouses regarding the increased alcohol risk in both spouses when the Service member has had combat exposure

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METHODS

- Participants were part of a larger longitudinal study on the health and well-being of Reserve and National Guard soldiers and were recruited in upstate New York.
- Researchers attended drills to recruit participants and this resulted in a 78% participation rate with a 56% completion rate. No significant differences were found between participants and non-participants at the screening step.
- Data were collected via computer-based, self-report questionnaires either by having participants complete them in person at the university or by sending a secure email to each spouse to complete at home.

PARTICIPANTS

- Participants included 248 male Army Reserve and National Guard Soldiers and their female spouses; 75% of the couples were married and 25% were cohabiting.
- The participants' races/ethnicities were reported for males: 89% White, 4% Black, 10% Latino, and 3% another race/ethnicity; and for females: 89% White, 1% Black, 5% Latina, 4% other race/ethnicity. Most reported having at least some college education (86% of males, 90% of females), and the median income was \$60,000-\$79,000.
- Soldiers reported having an average of 12 years of service and 1.6 deployments. The data included both currently serving Soldiers and Veterans, though no military status data were provided on the participants in this study. No other military information was provided.

LIMITATIONS

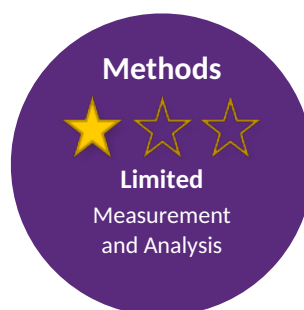
- Data were self-reported which could have limited validity because alcohol use is a sensitive subject and participants may under-report, particularly those with higher levels of use.
- The study exclusively focused on male Army Reserve and National Guard Soldiers and their female spouses, and therefore cannot be generalized to all Army Reserve or National Guard Soldiers.
- The data were cross-sectional and therefore causality could not be determined.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Consider total amount of time in deployment and/or type of deployment (combat vs. non-combat) rather than number of deployments
- Replicate the study with female Soldiers and also with Soldiers who identify as being in a same-sex partnership
- Explore the reasons for spouses' heavy drinking to help establish the ways Soldiers' combat exposure might impact spouses' alcohol use

ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



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