

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Multiple
Branches

Health Risk Behaviors of Afghanistan and Iraq War Veterans Attending College

Widome, R., Laska, M. N., Gulden, A., Fu, S. S., & Lust, K. (2011). Health risk behaviors of Afghanistan and Iraq War veterans attending college. *American Journal of Health Promotion*, 26(2), 101-108. doi:10.4278/ajhp.090826-QUAN-278

SUMMARY: Students (Veterans and non-Veterans) attending private and public two and four year colleges in Minnesota completed an online survey in order to describe patterns of students' health-related behaviors. After controlling for demographic variables, Veteran students reported more safety, tobacco, and alcohol-related risk behaviors compared to non-Veteran students.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Being an OEF/OIF Veteran had a greater association with recent high-risk drinking and riding in a car with someone who was impaired by alcohol compared to non-deployed Veterans and civilians.
- Both previously deployed and non-deployed Veterans were less likely to report past month marijuana use compared to civilians.
- Veterans who smoked cigarettes were more likely to report planning to quit before graduation compared to non-deployed Veterans and civilians.
- Veterans were more likely to report engaging in strengthening exercises and less likely to have more than two hours of screen time a day compared to other Veterans and civilians.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Consider forming partnerships with college mental health centers in to provide services for Service members who are enrolled in higher education.
- Encourage professionals who work with military families to disseminate educational material about safety health behaviors (e.g., cigarette use, screen time, riding in a car with someone who is intoxicated)
- Offer post-deployment workshops that focus on stress management and how to engage in healthy coping behaviors

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Support the development and continuation of programs that can promote resilience in Service members, especially after deployment
- Recommend integrating stress management education into existing service delivery systems for military couples
- Promote reintegration programs that include teaching healthy behaviors and coping to Service members' family in adjusting to the Service member's return

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METHODS

- A random sample of students attending 15 different public and private, two- and four-year colleges in Minnesota and all the Veterans at these institutions were invited to complete an anonymous, web-based survey.
- The survey asked questions about health behaviors (tobacco and alcohol use, safety, weight-related behaviors), and participants completed a measure of that assessed symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD).
- Data were analyzed to estimate the relationship between Veteran status and health risk behaviors.

PARTICIPANTS

- Eight thousand six hundred fifty-one students (Veterans and non-Veterans) completed the survey.
- Among the sub-sample of non-Veteran students (n = 6,750, 79%), 71% were female, 62% were less than 25 years old, 89% were White.
- Among the sub-sample of the Veteran students (n = 1,901), 78% were male, 56% were 25-35 years old, and 89% were White.
- No information on military rank or service branch of the Veteran sample was presented.

LIMITATIONS

- The data were cross-sectional, therefore causal conclusions cannot be drawn.
- The response rate was approximately 33%, and it is unknown how responders differ from non-responders.
- The findings do not generalize widely and are primarily generalizable to the specific population from which it was drawn (largely White, Midwestern students).

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Explore the impact of PTSD on health-related behaviors in military samples
- Examine ways to effectively conduct health promotion activities for Service members and their families
- Conduct clinical trials that study effectiveness of stress management interventions on healthy behaviors in military and civilian samples

ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



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