

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Army

Relationship of Combat Experiences to Alcohol Misuse Among U.S. Soldiers Returning From the Iraq War

Wilk, J. E., Bliese, P. D., Kim, P. Y., Thomas, J. L., McGurk, D., & Hoge, C. W. (2010). Relationship of combat experiences to alcohol misuse among U.S. soldiers returning from the Iraq war. *Drug and Alcohol Dependence*, 108(1-2), 115-121. doi:10.1016/j.drugalcdep.2009.12.003

SUMMARY: One thousand one hundred twenty Soldiers who recently returned from Iraq completed surveys three to four months after homecoming to examine the association between specific types of combat experiences and alcohol misuse. Combat experiences were categorized as: (1) Fighting; (2) Killing; (3) Threat to Oneself; (4) Death-injury of others; (5) Atrocities; and (6) Positive experiences. Most combat experiences were significantly related to alcohol misuse.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Twenty-five percent of the Soldiers screened positive for alcohol misuse 3-4 months following redeployment. Twelve percent screened positive and revealed that they had experienced alcohol-related behavioral problems.
- The overall level of combat experience and five of the six individual combat questions were significantly related to alcohol misuse. Further, an increased rate of exposure to threat of death or injury to one's self explained the most variance in alcohol use.
- Experiencing hostile reactions from civilians did not significantly predict alcohol misuse.
- When using a more strict definition of alcohol use that included alcohol-related behavioral problems, all six combat exposure factors were significantly related to an increased likelihood of screening positive for misuse; experiencing atrocities explained the most variance in alcohol misuse.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Offer classes to Service members upon homecoming from a combat deployment about the range of possible challenges some people experience, including alcohol misuse
- Provide workshops for family members of recently deployed Service members, including information about possible difficulties their loved one may face in the reintegration process, the dangers of alcohol misuse. and how family members can be supportive in those circumstances
- Educate couples who have a history of trauma and substance abuse before deployment on positive coping skills

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Recommend that Service members returning from a combat deployment be assessed for a range of risky behaviors (including alcohol misuse), both upon homecoming and over the next year
- Encourage training for unit leaders and service providers about the dangers of alcohol misuse of their unit and available resources
- Continue to support programs for identification and prevention of substance abuse in military families

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METHODS

- Soldiers who had returned from an Iraq deployment three to four months prior were recruited from a large Army post in May of 2006. Soldiers were asked to complete an anonymous survey.
- The survey examined their experiences in combat, physical and mental health, perceptions of their unit and leaders, status of their relationship with their family, and the health of their family members.
- Statistical analyses assessed the relationships between demographic, military, and mental health variables.

PARTICIPANTS

- One thousand one hundred twenty Soldiers recently returned from Iraq participated in the survey (96% male).
- Fifty-nine percent were married and 59% were White, and the age breakdown of the sample is as follows: 41% were 18-24 years old, 30% were 25-29 years old, 25% were 30-39 years old.
- Among the sample, 48% were junior enlisted, while 68% had deployed once and 32% had deployed more than once.

LIMITATIONS

- The data were cross-sectional, and causal conclusions cannot be determined.
- All measures were self-report which may introduce biases.
- The alcohol measure was a screening tool and may not reflect actual alcohol use problems.
- These results are not generalizable to the entire Army as only members of infantry Brigade Combat Teams participated.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Use broader, more in-depth measures of alcohol use (rather than just a screener) to gather more nuanced data of substance abuse
- Conduct longitudinal studies that follow Soldiers from pre-deployment to reintegration in order to make stronger causal claims
- Gather data on personality factors that may impact Service members' substance abuse, especially alcohol abuse

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