

## MILITARY POPULATIONS AND PROBLEM GAMBLING\*

Compared to civilian populations, military and veteran populations are more likely to engage in problem gambling behaviors.<sup>1</sup> Veterans and active military members alike have shown double the score on problem gambling screens compared to civilians.<sup>2</sup> The severity of gambling behaviors varies across Veterans and active-duty service members. An estimated 35.1% of U.S. Veterans engage in recreational gambling while 2.2% engage in at-risk or problem gambling.<sup>3</sup>

Broadly, *military populations* include: (1) all branches of the US military, National Guard, and Reserve and (2) veteran and activity duty service members

Among military population, individuals with problem gambling behaviors are more likely to have increased risk of comorbid mental health disorders such as, suicidality, substance use, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and depression.



Among Veterans who gambled and were seeking treatment in a VA substance use outpatient treatment program (34.3%), 78.8% reported cravings/urges to gamble, 20%–27% reported difficulty controlling their gambling behavior and they perceived relationship, legal, and daily life problems related to their gambling behavior.<sup>4</sup>



In a large study of Ohio Army National Guard members (*N* = 1553), 13% reported gambling at least once per week in the past year and 8% screened positive for lifetime potential problem gambling.<sup>5</sup>



Active-duty service members were 3 times more likely to engage in online gambling than veterans or civilians<sup>2</sup>; online gambling is observed to be related to higher rates of gambling disorder compared to land-based venues, such as casinos.

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# PROBLEM GAMBLING RISK FACTORS AMONG MILITARY POPULATIONS

## AGE

- Although age has consistently been shown to be a risk factor for problem gambling behaviors in veterans, findings vary across studies. For example, some studies suggest that older age places veterans at greater risk,<sup>3</sup> while others suggest younger (24+) age places veterans at greater risk for problem gambling.<sup>6</sup>

## IDENTITY

- For veterans, identifying as non-White Hispanic.<sup>3</sup> For active-duty populations, identifying as Asian American, or Black/African American.<sup>6</sup>
- For veterans, identifying as male.<sup>7,8</sup> Additionally, in a study with active-duty service members, males were 3.5 times more likely than females to receive a gambling disorder diagnosis.<sup>6</sup>

## SOCIAL

- For veterans, being single<sup>3</sup>, and among active-duty populations being formally married.<sup>6</sup>
- Among veteran and active-duty service members, being retired or not having a job.<sup>3,6</sup>

Close proximity to gambling venues and slot machines on military bases and having a history of mental/substance use disorders increases the risk of developing a gambling disorder by 200%.<sup>6</sup>

## OTHER RISK FACTORS AMONG MILITARY PERSONNEL

- Participating in a greater variety of gambling formats and having more friends and family members that regularly gamble.<sup>9</sup>
- Deployment environment (i.e., irritations and pressures related to life during military deployment), general harassment during deployment (e.g., scrutiny, questioning ability and commitment, non-sexual threats to safety), and stressful life events following deployment.<sup>8</sup>
- One study found the incidence of gambling disorder was lower among active-duty service members in the Army than in the Air Force, Marines, and Navy. The researcher's indicated that this finding could be related to less access to routine screenings in combat zones.<sup>6</sup>

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## PSYCHOPATHOLOGY AND PROBLEM GAMBLING

Veterans engaging in at-risk or problem gambling have a greater prevalence of substance use, anxiety,<sup>3</sup> depressive disorders,<sup>3,5</sup> trauma-related conditions, and suicidality.<sup>1</sup>

### SUICIDALITY

- Veterans who engage in problem gambling report greater past suicide attempts and suicidal ideation compared to Veterans who engage in recreational gambling and non-gambling veterans.<sup>3</sup>
- Veterans and active military service members have been shown to have almost 20 times the rate of suicidal ideation compared with civilians. Additionally, problem gambling scores have been positively associated with suicidal ideation among veterans and active-duty service members.<sup>2</sup>

### SUBSTANCE USE

- Compared to veterans who do not gamble, recreational and at-risk/problem gambling was related to having experienced military and emotional traumas and substance use.<sup>3</sup>
- A significant positive relationship has been found between tobacco use, substance use problems, and problem gambling among active military service members.<sup>2</sup>

### TRAUMA-RELATED CONDITIONS

- Veterans who engage in at-risk/problem gambling tend to have higher frequencies of PTSD, panic disorder, substance dependence, traumatic brain injury, and depression.<sup>8</sup>
- In a large sample of male twin veterans, veterans with gambling disorders were 13 times more likely to have been neglected as a child compared to veterans who did not. This study also found that gambling disorder was significantly related to witnessing someone being badly injured or experiencing a physical attack. Interestingly, combat exposure was not related to problem or disordered gambling.<sup>10</sup>

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## MARGINALIZED MILITARY POPULATIONS

Although historically marginalized racial and ethnic groups and women in military populations are not well represented in the larger body of problem gambling research<sup>1,11</sup> recent studies suggest these groups may be at a greater risk for problem gambling compared to historically included peers.

- Female-identifying veterans are generally younger and more likely to identify with historically marginalized racial and ethnic groups compared to the male- and White-identifying Veteran populations; these factors are associated with increased risk for gambling disorder.<sup>12,13</sup>
- At-risk and problem gambling is also related to a minority group status and life-time history of physical trauma or sexual trauma.<sup>3</sup>

## EMPIRICALLY SUPPORTED INTERVENTIONS

Research into gambling among military populations has yielded findings to inform efforts to reduce gambling related harms. Based on available literature, organizations serving veteran and military communities may consider programming based on the following:

- Interventions focused on building **resilience**, such as mindfulness training,<sup>14</sup> may reduce the risk of problem gambling behavior<sup>15</sup> as resilience has been determined to be an important mediator of gambling frequency among military populations.<sup>15</sup>
- **Post-deployment support** programs appear to be an effective strategy in reducing the likelihood of at-risk/problem gambling.<sup>8</sup>
- Despite psychosocial impairments related to gambling, treatment-seeking is low for military populations.<sup>16</sup> **Motivational interviewing** tactics may be appropriate for individuals who are experiencing gambling related problems.<sup>17</sup>
- Helping individuals identify, label, and **change maladaptive thought patterns** may be helpful in addressing gambling behaviors as greater engagement in problem gambling behaviors has been related to higher gambling-related cognitive distortions (e.g., illusion of control, luck).<sup>16</sup>
- Assessing **spiritual wellness** (religious- and non-religious-affiliated) may be useful in treatment planning. One study observed a correlation between spiritual struggles and gambling-related cognitive distortions.<sup>18</sup> Spiritual wellness may be affected when problem gambling behavior is observed.

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## RECOMMENDATIONS

- Greater levels of education and awareness specific to military culture (such as having providers/screeners trained and/or educated in military culture) are needed to promote the message that gambling among military personnel is an activity that too often escalates into an addiction, especially among higher risk individuals who use gambling to cope with physical or emotional pain. Stigma of diagnosis is prevalent in military culture; assure confidentiality.<sup>1</sup>
- Given the accessibility of gambling on overseas military bases, **regular screening of gambling behavior** among active-duty personnel is recommended.<sup>19</sup> In response to recommendations by the U.S. Government Accountability Office,<sup>20</sup> in 2018 the Army, Marine Corps, Air Force, and Coast Guard provided updates to their substance abuse and addictive behavior prevention programs to explicitly include gambling disorder as a behavior of concern. In 2021, the Navy followed suit.
- It is recommended healthcare providers working with military populations use **standardized screening** for problem gambling behaviors.<sup>1</sup> Particularly given large studies within the VA medical center system have shown **gambling disorder is highly under-diagnosed among Veterans**.<sup>21</sup>
- Given the strong preference for online gambling among active-duty service members, screening for and addressing online problem gambling among these individuals is recommended.<sup>2</sup>
- Efforts to address problem gambling among military personnel should include the reconsideration of policies permitting on-base lottery and/or slot machines.
- If a veteran is struggling with a gambling disorder, there are options for care. The Cleveland VA Medical Center and the Las Vegas VA Medical Center treat veterans from around the country in their residential gambling disorder treatment programs. Other VAMCs offer outpatient gambling disorder treatment. Gambling treatment experts are in the VAMC, utilize this expertise if you or someone you know needs consultation or treatment. Not all veterans may qualify.

### Key Takeaways

1. Increase messaging around problem gambling awareness and education
2. Regularly screen military and veteran populations for gambling activities
3. Carefully consider availability of gambling activities on military bases
4. Become familiar with resources available to military communities near you to streamline referrals

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