

Gambling harm among UK Armed Forces veterans: Military culture, institutional practices, and transitions to civilian life

What this research is about

United Kingdom (UK) Armed Forces veterans have higher rates of gambling-related harm than the general population. The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of gambling-related harm among UK Armed Forces veterans. The study examined how military culture, institutional practices, and transitions to civilian life might influence gambling behaviours and prevent help-seeking, and the long-term impact on well-being.

What the researchers did

The researchers recruited former UK Armed Forces personnel from a larger survey of veterans, as well as through veteran-related charities, support organizations, and a Facebook campaign targeted at veteran communities. To be included in the study, participants had to have previously served in the Armed Forces and have been discharged from active service in 2010 or later. They also had to have experienced gambling-related harm either during or after their military service. All participants had to be living in the UK at the time of the interviews.

A total of 14 veterans were interviewed by video conference between September 2024 and May 2025. Thirteen participants were male and one was female. The interviews followed a flexible format. Open-ended questions were used to explore participants' experiences with gambling-related harm, including their gambling history, how they began gambling, reasons for gambling, and any control strategies and help-seeking efforts.

What you need to know

This study explored the lived experiences of UK Armed Forces veterans with gambling-related harm. Specifically, the study examined how military culture, institutional practices, and transitions to civilian life influenced gambling behaviours and prevented help-seeking, and the long-term impact on veterans' well-being. A total of 14 UK Armed Forces veterans were interviewed. The researchers identified four interconnected themes: (1) normalization of gambling in civilian and military contexts; (2) gambling as a way to cope; (3) stigma and fear of repercussions as barriers to help-seeking; and (4) escalation of gambling post-military.

What the researchers found

All participants had experienced gambling-related harm. Many described how they gradually moved from casual gambling to more compulsive and unmanageable gambling behaviours. The researchers identified four interconnected themes.

Normalization of gambling: Gambling is embedded in both civilian and military contexts. Participants discussed how gambling was introduced early in life as a routine and socially accepted activity. Gambling was often introduced within families and was widespread in local communities. Gambling was also a normalized part of the military. It was encouraged as a way to reduce boredom, connect with others, and relax during downtimes. But military norms of emotional control, discipline, and resilience meant

that problem gambling behaviour was rarely discussed.

Gambling preferences and motivations during

military service: Participants described a preference for chance-based gambling activities (e.g., fruit machines, fixed-odds betting terminals, roulette). These activities were used as a way to disconnect, self-soothe, or escape from emotional strain and stressors. Participants described how their gambling behaviour often escalated during military service. The structure of military life meant that they had few living costs because accommodation and meals were provided. This minimized the consequences and allowed them to continue to gamble.

Help-seeking during service: Some participants were aware of support systems available for problem gambling. But participants were reluctant to share their problem gambling due to stigma, shame, and fear of repercussions such as disciplinary or career consequences. This prevented participants from seeking help, and the secrecy contributed to a cycle of gambling and trying to win back losses. Participants experienced worsening distress and emotional crises, and a few mentioned having suicidal thoughts. Support was also seen as inconsistent. Some participants mentioned peers receiving support, but one participant described being disciplined for disclosing gambling-related financial problems.

Escalation of gambling post-military: Many participants described escalating their gambling post-military. Leaving the military meant that they had to navigate a loss of structure, identity, and camaraderie. Moreover, veterans faced new responsibilities such as rent and bills, and they were not used to budgeting and managing money. Participants described feelings of isolation and boredom, along with unstructured time, financial pressures, and easy access to online gambling. Gambling became a coping strategy for navigating post-service life. Some participants tried to self-regulate their gambling (e.g., self-exclusion), but this often failed. Many participants experienced damage to family relationships and friendships, which further hindered help-seeking.

How you can use this research

This research can inform military leaders, policy makers, and veteran healthcare providers to provide better support systems for service members and veterans struggling with gambling harm. For example, trauma-informed culturally sensitive interventions that recognize gambling harm as a public health issue connected to military culture and civilian life transitions can be developed.

About the researchers

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