

Gambling trajectories and experiences of harm and support seeking among UK Armed Forces veterans and family members

What this research is about

Gambling can cause harm related to finances, physical health, mental health, employment, and relationships. Members of the Armed Forces, including currently serving and ex-service personnel, are at higher risk of gambling-related harm because of service-related stressors. Yet, many do not seek help due to reasons like stigma, shame, and fear of dismissal. It is important to understand the lived experiences of veterans and their family members who are impacted by gambling-related harm. The purpose of this study was to examine gambling trajectories, motivations, and support-seeking behaviours among UK Armed Forces veterans and family members.

What the researchers did

The researchers recruited six UK Armed Forces veterans and three family members for this study. Participants were recruited using advertisements placed on social media and within support-service settings. All veterans identified as male. All family members identified as female.

The veterans completed the Problem Gambling Severity Index (PGSI). All veterans scored above 8 on the PGSI, suggesting that they experienced problem gambling. The researchers collected sociodemographic data, including age, gender, relationship status, and ethnicity. The veterans were also asked about their military characteristics, such as branch and length of service.

The researchers interviewed each participant. The interview focused on veterans' military and

What you need to know

This study examined gambling trajectories, motivations, and support-seeking behaviours among UK Armed Force veterans and family members. The researchers interviewed six veterans and three family members. The findings highlighted gambling behaviour and recovery of veterans, as well as the impact on, and experiences of, family members. The veterans' gambling trajectories were shaped by their personal histories, military culture, and post-service transitions. They described how gambling was a part of military life, with gambling being socially encouraged and readily accessible. Gambling also became a way to cope with stress and trauma. Both veterans and family members described severe negative consequences of gambling, including debts and mental health issues. Reasons for delaying seeking help included shame, stigma, and lack of tailored services.

gambling experiences, the impacts on them and their family, and support-seeking behaviours.

What the researchers found

The researchers identified four key themes that highlighted gambling behaviour and recovery of UK Armed Force veterans, as well as the impact on, and experiences of, family members.

(1) Gambling histories and trajectories: The veterans' gambling trajectories were shaped by their personal histories, military culture, and post-service transitions. Some participants grew up with family members who had difficulties with gambling or drinking. Two participants gambled before they

enlisted, while two others began to gamble during or after their enlistment. Another two participants gambled before joining the Armed Forces but only experienced harm after they had left the Armed Forces. These cases suggest that veterans may use gambling to cope with the challenges of reintegrating into civilian society. The veterans sought support and initiated recovery after they experienced a crisis due to their gambling (e.g., financial hardship, mental health issues).

(2) The role of armed forces in gambling behaviour: The veterans described how gambling was a part of military life. For example, fruit machines were present in mess halls and other social areas. Financial security was also a factor, as their income allowed them to gamble without immediate consequences. Both veterans and family members believed that the mentality encouraged in the military (e.g., competitiveness and resilience) contributed to gambling-related harm. The veterans also discussed how their willingness to accept high-risk roles in combat mirrored their gambling behaviour. Overall, military life normalizes gambling, with gambling being socially encouraged and readily accessible, while gambling is also used to cope with stress and trauma.

(3) Psychosocial and financial impacts of gambling: Both veterans and family members described severe negative consequences of gambling, including debts, mental health issues, suicidal behaviour, and relationship breakdown.

(4) Barriers and motivations for seeking support: Many veterans delayed seeking help due to shame and stigma. Both veterans and family members suggested that the 'military personality' may have prevented Armed Forces members from seeking out support services. Among those who did seek support, some found that Gamblers Anonymous and specialist counselling was helpful, while others felt that these interventions were either too short-term or did not address underlying trauma. Some described the lack of services tailored to veterans. Veterans who believed that they were stable in their recovery expressed a strong desire to help others.

The researchers discussed how these findings align with Blaszczynski and Nower's pathways model. This model identifies three main pathways to gambling harm: behavioural conditioning, emotional vulnerability, and antisocial/impulsive traits.

How you can use this research

Policy makers and practitioners can use this research to develop military-specific gambling interventions and additional support services for affected families.

About the researchers

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About Greo Evidence Insights

Greo Evidence Insights is an independent, non-profit organization specializing in research, knowledge mobilization, and evaluation in the health and well-being sectors. Greo transforms research and insights into actionable strategies to prevent and reduce harm related to gambling, gaming, technology use, and substance use. To learn more about funding for Research Snapshots visit [our website](#).

