

research snapshot

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Risk and protective factors of harmful gambling among currently serving personnel in the United Kingdom Armed Forces

What this research is about

Gambling can cause harms, including financial, interpersonal, psychological, cultural, and occupational harms. Armed Forces serving personnel (AFSP) may be at greater risk of harmful gambling than the general population. The current study examined the links between mental health, demographics, and harmful gambling among currently serving AFSP members in the United Kingdom.

What the researchers did

The researchers invited currently serving AFSP members to complete an online survey in 2023. The sample included AFSP from all three branches and services: the Royal Navy (including Royal Marines), the Army, and the Royal Air Force. The researchers recruited respondents through announcements on the Ministry of Defence DefNet intranet.

The responses from 608 currently serving AFSP members were used in this study. The respondents were asked about their demographics (gender, age, etc.) and military characteristics (branch of service, service status, rank, deployment in the last three years, etc.). The respondents were also asked to complete the following measures:

- The 2-item Patient Health Questionnaire (score of 3+ indicates likely experiencing depression).
- The Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD) assessment scale (score of 3+ indicates likely experiencing GAD).
- The 20-item PTSD Checklist (PCL-5; score of 33+ indicates clinically significant symptoms of PTSD).
- Past-year suicidal ideas and suicide attempts, assessed using two items from the Adult Psychiatric Morbidity Survey (APMS).
- Loneliness, measured by an item from the APMS.

What you need to know

The current study examined the links between mental health, demographic characteristics, harmful gambling among UK Armed Forces serving personnel (AFSP). A total of 608 currently serving personnel members completed the survey. Most (72%) respondents gambled in the past year. About 23% experienced any level of harmful gambling (PGSI score of 1+). Respondents who were male, aged 20–29 years, and living in service single-living accommodation were more likely to experience any level of harmful gambling. Being a junior non-commissioned officer was the strongest risk factor for problem gambling. Other risk factors included likely experiencing anxiety, engaging in strategic gambling activities, being male, and having suicidal ideas/attempts in the past year. Protective factors included being in a relationship and being a commissioned officer.

- The Modified-Single Alcohol Screening Questionnaire (M-SASQ).
- Past-year gambling activities.
- The Problem Gambling Severity Index (PGSI). Score of 1–2 indicates low risk; score of 3–7 indicates moderate risk; and score of 8+ indicates problem gambling. In this study, a cut-off score of 1+ was also used to identify any level of harmful gambling.
- The Combined Gambling Harms, which measures financial, interpersonal, and work-related harms.

What the researchers found

Demographics: On average, the respondents were 40 years old. Most respondents were men (86%), White British (87%), and in a relationship (84%). Almost half (46%) were living in service accommodation. The

majority had a full-time regular service status (95%). Around half (51%) had been deployed at least once in the past three years.

Mental health: A few respondents were likely experiencing depression (9%), anxiety (10%), or PTSD (5%). About 15% reported feeling lonely much or almost all the time. About 17% either had suicidal ideas or a non-fatal suicide attempt in the last year. Almost half (46%) reported higher-risk drinking. About 62% had at least one mental health condition.

Gambling: Most respondents (72%) gambled in the past year. Most respondents preferred non-strategic gambling (69%) over strategic gambling (13%). About 12% were at low risk, 4% were at moderate risk, and 6% experienced problem gambling. Overall, 22% experienced any level of harmful gambling (PGSI score of 1+). On average, the respondents experienced two types of gambling harms.

Predictors of harmful gambling: Respondents who were men, between 20 and 29 years, and living in service single-living accommodation were more likely to experience any level of harmful gambling. Other risk factors included being a junior non-commissioned officer; serving in the Armed Forces (AF) for less than 10 years; being deployed two or more times in the past 3 years; experiencing depression or anxiety; having higher-risk drinking, loneliness, and suicidal ideas/attempts in the past year. Those who engaged with strategic gambling activities were more likely to report any harmful gambling.

Protective factors of any level of harmful gambling included being 50+ years old; in a relationship; living in non-service accommodation; being a commissioned officer; having 30+ years of service; and not being deployed in the last three years.

The researchers identified seven factors that were related to PGSI scores. Being a junior non-commissioned officer was the strongest risk factor of higher gambling risk. Other risk factors included likely experiencing anxiety, engaging in strategic gambling, being male, and having suicidal ideas/attempts in the past year. Protective factors included being in a relationship and being a commissioned officer.

How you can use this research

This research can be used by military administrators to better target support and early identification of AFSP members who may experience gambling harm.

About the researchers

Matthew Jones, Hannah Champion, Glen Dighton, and Simon Dymond are affiliated with the Centre for Military Gambling Research in the School of Psychology at Swansea University in Swansea, UK. Simon Dymond is also affiliated with the Department of Psychology at Reykjavik University in Reykjavik, Iceland. **Justyn Larcombe** is affiliated with The Recovery Course in Tonbridge, UK. **Matt Fossey** is affiliated with the Veterans and Families Institute at Anglia Ruskin University in Chelmsford, UK. For more information about this study, please contact Simon Dymond at s.o.dymond@swansea.ac.uk.

Citation

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