



Gambling problems and suicidality among recently transitioned Australian military veterans

What this research is about

Military veterans are often vulnerable to mental health and other psychosocial challenges during the period of transitioning to civilian life. They may experience a lot of changes, including in their personal identity, social networks, finances, routines, and family roles. These challenges may raise their risk of mental health issues and suicide.

During the transition to civilian life, veterans may be exposed to more gambling-related products, services, and marketing. Previous research has found that veterans are at high risk of gambling harm. This may impact their risk of suicide. However, few studies have looked at the link between gambling and suicide among veterans. Most of the existing studies have taken place in the U.S. The purpose of this study was to examine the links between gambling problems and suicidality among recently transitioned veterans of the Australian Defence Force (ADF). Suicidality includes having suicidal ideas and planning or attempting suicide.

What the researchers did

The researchers conducted an online survey of recently transitioned ADF members. Participants had to have stopped full-time regular military service between 2010 and 2014. A total of 23,974 people were invited by email, and 4,326 people completed the survey. Participant responses were excluded from the analysis if they did not complete the Problem Gambling Severity Index (PGSI). A total of 3,511 responses were included in the data analysis.

As part of the survey, participants were asked their socio-demographics. They were also asked about their ADF service. These questions included service branch,

What you need to know

Military veterans can experience a lot of challenges during their transition to civilian life. Previous research has found that veterans are at high risk of gambling harm. This may impact their risk of suicide. The purpose of this study was to examine the links between gambling problems and suicidality among recently transitioned veterans of the Australian Defence Force (ADF). A total of 3,511 responses from ADF veterans who stopped full-time regular military service between 2010 and 2014 were included in the analysis. Veterans with at-risk gambling and problem gambling were more likely to report suicidal ideation and suicide planning or attempts. After taking into account depressive symptoms, gambling problems no longer predicted suicidality.

rank, duration of service, current serving status (reservist or ex-serving), years since transition, and whether they had ever been deployed.

Participants were asked about suicidal ideation and behaviour during the previous year by answering “yes” or “no” to whether they (1) ever felt their life was not worth living; (2) felt so low that they thought about dying by suicide; (3) made a suicide plan; and (4) attempted suicide. Most of these questions (#2–4) were adapted from the Australian 2007 National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing.

Participants completed the PGSI (0 point = “no gambling problems”; 1–4 points = “at risk gambling”; and 5 points or higher = “problem gambling”). Participants also completed the depression module of the Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-9) and the

Shuster Social Support Scale. Finally, participants answered whether they were currently having any problems paying money they owed (loans, rent, etc.).

What the researchers found

Most participants were male (84.3%) and between the ages of 28 and 47 years (54.3%). Almost three-quarters reported being in a relationship and living with a partner. Most participants had a certificate/diploma or a university degree (77.4%).

Of the 3,511 participants, 286 (8.2%) had at-risk gambling and 134 (3.8%) had problem gambling. About 1 in 5 participants (21.6%) reported experiencing suicidal ideation over the past year. About 8% reported suicide planning or attempts.

About 44% of veterans with problem gambling had suicidal ideation, and almost 20% reported suicide planning or attempts in the past year. Compared to participants with no gambling problems, participants with at-risk gambling were about twice as likely to have both suicidal ideation and suicidal planning or attempts in the previous year. Participants with problem gambling were almost three times as likely to have suicidal ideation than those without gambling problems. They were almost four times as likely to have suicidal planning or attempts than participants without problem gambling.

The relationship between gambling problems and suicidality remained significant, albeit weaker, when taking into account financial hardship and social support. However, after considering depressive symptoms, gambling problems no longer predicted suicidality.

How you can use this research

This study can inform mental health services for veterans. Such services may want to include problem gambling treatment and education programmes.

About the researchers

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Citation

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