

research snapshot

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Gambling and help-seeking experiences of serving United Kingdom Royal Air Force members

What this research is about

People who serve in the United Kingdom (UK) Armed Forces are more likely to have mental and physical health difficulties. This is because serving in the military is a risky and stressful occupation. The nature of military service might be a risk factor for risky behaviour, such as problem gambling. However, the culture and social norms of the Armed Forces might create barriers to help-seeking. In this study, the researchers examined the lived experiences of serving members of the UK Royal Air Force (RAF) with regard to problem gambling, alcohol use, mental health needs, and help-seeking.

What the researchers did

This study was part of a larger survey of gambling and wellbeing in the UK Royal Air Force (RAF). Survey participants had to be currently serving members of the RAF and be at least 18 years old. A total of 2,119 participants completed the survey. Gambling severity was assessed through the Problem Gambling Severity Index (PGSI). Participants were also asked about their mental health, alcohol use, substance use, and the impact of COVID-19. These participants were then invited to complete follow-up interviews.

A total of 647 people from the larger survey were interested in participating in follow-up interviews. Among them, 20 people were purposefully selected because of the range of their gambling severity (PGSI) scores. This sample size was decided based on level of interest and when data saturation was reached. Data saturation is the point by which no new information or pattern is being discovered.

Of the 20 people, 17 were interviewed in March–April 2021 (three did not reply to follow-up invitations). Most (71%) identified as male, while 24% identified as female,

What you need to know

Serving in the military is a risky and stressful occupation. The nature of military service might be a risk factor for risky behaviour, such as problem gambling. This study examined the lived experiences of serving members of the United Kingdom Royal Air Force (RAF) with problem gambling and help-seeking. A total of 17 currently serving members were interviewed. The findings identified several factors that influenced perceptions and experiences of gambling and help-seeking. These included harmful and protective occupational factors; socio-cultural and personal influences; organizational attitudes towards mental health and help-seeking; and support pathways and provision.

and one person identified as non-binary. Two people experienced problem gambling (PGSI score 8 or higher). Seven participants experienced moderate risk gambling (PGSI score 3–7). One person experienced low risk gambling (PGSI score 1–2). Two people had no gambling problems (PGSI score 0), and five did not gamble.

The interviews were guided by questions that focused on mental health, gambling, alcohol, and substance use, and how they related to four areas: (1) personal experience; (2) context of the RAF and its influence; (3) knowledge and experiences of gambling treatment and support services; and (4) impact of COVID-19.

What the researchers found

Harmful occupational factors

Participants struggled with aspects of military life, including high levels of stress, traumatic experiences, deployment, and expectations to perform well.

Increased gambling and alcohol intake helped participants cope with stress. COVID-19 restrictions also led many participants to feel more anxious and have lower mood. During lockdowns, more than half of the participants increased their gambling and alcohol consumption. Also, because of travel and social restrictions, participants had more disposable income than usual to spend on these activities.

Occupational factors that promote wellbeing

Participants described factors that they believed reduced their vulnerability to mental health problems. They felt that the RAF helped them be more confident, resilient, determined, and flexible. The RAF also provided camaraderie, stable employment, high income, and career development opportunities.

Socio-cultural and personal influences

Participants discussed how gambling and alcohol use were normalized and influenced by their peers. These activities were rarely seen as risky or problematic. They described how they took part in these activities because they wanted to feel a sense of belonging. Participants also described how the culture around gambling and alcohol use in the RAF was changing (e.g., the RAF began to discourage the use of slot machines and limit alcohol consumption). However, there were concerns that younger personnel might engage in harmful behaviour in private (e.g., online gambling and use of steroids).

Organizational attitudes

Participants described how the RAF tried to promote personnel mental health over the last 5–10 years. This effort included training and educational programmes. But there was still stigma around mental health. This was accompanied by strong feelings of shame, fear of being seen as weak or incompetent, and concerns that help-seeking could negatively impact one's career. RAF personnel did not always feel comfortable approaching their manager to discuss wellbeing issues. Several participants who disclosed their mental health struggles to their manager had felt belittled.

Current support pathways and provision

Participants were aware of how to access help for mental health and wellbeing-related problems with the RAF. But there was some confusion over where to start

looking for help for specialist services. Few participants knew about what gambling-specific support was available other than help with the financial effects (rather than the psychological and social impacts). Participants acknowledged that although the RAF 'said the right things' about mental health, this did not always lead to action and support. But many participants who did access RAF support described positive experiences.

How you can use this research

The Armed Forces can use this research to normalize help-seeking for mental health and gambling problems through new programs and policies.

About the researchers

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