

# research snapshot

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## Predictors of problem gambling among UK Armed Forces veterans

### What this research is about

Current military personnel and veterans are at higher risk of gambling problems than the general population. Studies from the USA, UK, and Australia have reported rates of problem gambling between 2% and 29% among veterans. Gambling problems often co-occur with other mental health disorders, including posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Mental health disorders also affect veterans more than non-veterans. To date, there is limited research on problem gambling in UK veterans. This study explored the predictors of problem gambling in a large sample of UK veterans. Potential predictors included sociodemographic, military service, mental health, and gambling characteristics.

### What the researchers did

The researchers surveyed UK veterans and non-veterans who were matched on age and gender. Veterans must have served in the UK Armed Forces but were no longer serving. Non-veterans had never served in the military. A total of 1,037 veterans and 1,148 non-veterans completed the online survey.

The survey asked participants about their sociodemographics. Veterans were also asked about their military service (e.g., years served, branch, number of deployments, type of discharge). The survey asked participants if they had gambled on 19 different activities in the past year. Participants who gambled completed the Problem Gambling Severity Index (PGSI) and the Gambling Functional Assessment – Revised (GFA-R). The PGSI was used to assess gambling problems. The GFA-R was used to assess gambling motivations. The survey included the International Trauma Questionnaire (ITQ) to screen

### What you need to know

This study examined the predictors of problem gambling in UK veterans. An online survey was completed by 1,037 veterans and 1,148 non-veterans who were matched on age and gender. Veterans were at higher risk of problem gambling than non-veterans. Various sociodemographic, military service, mental health, and gambling characteristics were found to be predictors of problem gambling in veterans. Of note, gambling to cope with stress was a strong predictor of problem gambling. Being diagnosed with likely PTSD or complex PTSD also increased the risk.

for PTSD and complex PTSD. It also screened for symptoms of depression and anxiety in the past two weeks, as well as alcohol use and smoking.

### What the researchers found

#### *Comparing veterans and non-veterans*

Most veterans were men (93.5%) with an average age of 47 years. Most veterans were white-British (92.6%), married (49.2%), living with family (81.4%), and in paid employment (67.9%). The non-veterans had similar sociodemographics, although there were some differences. For example, non-veterans were more likely to be house owners than veterans. The proportion of veterans receiving benefits was twice that of non-veterans (45.8% vs. 23.5%). Most veterans had served in the Army (64.7%) and had left the service between 9 to 13 years ago or longer (75.8%).

Veterans were more likely to gamble and to do so on more activities than non-veterans. Veterans were over 10 times more likely to experience problem

gambling. About 43.1% of veterans experienced problem gambling compared to 6.5% of non-veterans. Veterans were over 7 times more likely to gamble to escape or to cope with stress than non-veterans.

Most veterans and non-veterans did not have depression, anxiety, or a PTSD diagnosis. But, veterans were more likely to have symptoms of depression and anxiety than non-veterans. Veterans were over 4 times more likely to have PTSD and almost 7 times more likely to have complex PTSD. Around 8.6% of veterans had likely PTSD and 26.6% had likely complex PTSD. The rates were 2.3% for likely PTSD and 5.1% for likely complex PTSD among non-veterans. More non-veterans reported lower risk drinking, while more veterans reported higher risk drinking. Most veterans and non-veterans did not smoke.

#### *Predictors of problem gambling in veterans*

Younger age, living in supported housing or privately renting, receiving benefits, and being married were associated with a higher risk of problem gambling in veterans. Being white-British, having a Doctorate educational level, and living with non-family members lowered the risk. In terms of military service, serving for less than 4 years, being discharged 9–13 years ago, and serving in the Royal Navy predicted a higher risk of problem gambling. Serving for more than 10 years, being discharged more than 25 years ago, not being deployed when in service, and being discharged at one's request or for medical reason lowered the risk.

Gambling to cope with stress was strongly associated with a higher risk of problem gambling in veterans. Gambling to enhance positive emotion and gambling on more activities also increased the risk. In terms of mental health, higher risk drinking and mild anxiety were associated with a higher risk of problem gambling. Having no symptoms of depression, having severe anxiety, no diagnosis of likely PTSD, and lower risk drinking protected against problem gambling.

#### **How you can use this research**

This study suggests a need for routine screening of gambling problems in current and former military personnel. The findings may also be relevant to clinical treatment of gambling problems.

#### **About the researchers**

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#### **Citation**

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