

# research snapshot

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## Gambling problems, help-seeking, and trauma among Australian military service veterans

### What this research is about

Transitioning out of military service can be stressful and challenging for veterans. Veterans who recently left the military (i.e., “transitioned”) might be more likely to develop psychiatric disorders. Previous research suggests that gambling problems are an under-recognized issue among veterans and military personnel. Veterans also face barriers to seeking help for mental health issues. Barriers include stigma associated with mental health problems and delays in treatment engagement. Previous research also shows that there are high rates of trauma among civilians with problem gambling. Since military and veteran populations often have high rates of trauma, they may be more at risk of problem gambling. Trauma includes posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

The researchers of this study examined:

- (1) Frequency of gambling problems among Australian veterans who recently left service
- (2) Help-seeking among veterans with gambling problems
- (3) Trauma and posttraumatic mental health issues among veterans with gambling problems

### What the researchers did

The researchers used survey data from the Transition and Wellbeing Research Programme (The Programme). The Programme invited 23,974 Australian Defence Force (ADF) members who left the military to complete an online survey. A total of 4,326 ADF members completed the survey (18.0% response rate). For this study, the researchers used data from a subgroup of 3,511 ADF members who completed relevant sections of the survey. All veterans had left the military within the past five years.

### What you need to know

Transitioning out of military service can be stressful and challenging. This study examined gambling problems and help-seeking among Australian veterans. The study also considered trauma and posttraumatic mental health issues among veterans with gambling problems. The researchers used survey responses from 3,511 Australian Defence Force members who left the military within the past five years. A total of 13.4% experienced gambling problems, with 4.6% having problem gambling. Time since leaving the military was not linked to gambling problems. Only 2.1% of veterans with problem gambling sought help. Trauma exposure, depression, and PTSD were linked to at-risk and problem gambling. But only depression and posttraumatic arousal affect were associated with gambling problems after taking into account all these risk factors. Posttraumatic mental health problems might explain the link between trauma and gambling problems.

The survey included the following:

- Problem Gambling Severity Index (PGSI). This measure examined past year gambling problems.
- Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-9). This measure examined depressive symptoms.
- Posttraumatic Stress Disorder checklist for DSM-5.
- Non-military trauma exposure was measured using a list of 24 traumatic events from the Composite International Diagnostic Interview PTSD module.
- Trauma exposure during deployment.
- Whether participants had ever been concerned with their mental health in their lifetime.

- Whether participants ever had assistance for their mental health, and reasons for seeking help.

### What the researchers found

Most of the participants were men (84.3%). Most were between 28 and 47 years (54.3%). Half served in the Army (56.1%). About 19.9% served in the Navy and 24.0% served in the Air Force. About 40% of participants served more than 20 years.

About 4.6% had problem gambling (PGSI score of 5 or higher). An additional 8.8% were at-risk (score of 1 to 4). This means that 13.4% of transitioned veterans experienced gambling problems. Younger adults (18 to 27 years) were more likely to be at-risk for gambling problems (11.2%). Males were more likely to report at-risk and problem gambling. Veterans who were medically discharged had higher rates of at-risk and problem gambling. Those who were deployed had higher rates of at-risk gambling compared to those who had never deployed. Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) clients and those receiving DVA treatment support since transition were also more likely to have at-risk and problem gambling. But time since leaving the military was not linked to gambling problems.

Only 2.1% of veterans with problem gambling sought help for their gambling. Trauma exposure, depression, and PTSD were linked to at-risk and problem gambling. But only depression and posttraumatic arousal affect remained associated with at-risk and problem gambling after taking into account all these risk factors. These results suggest that posttraumatic mental health problems, and not the number of traumatic events experienced, might explain the link between trauma and gambling problems.

### How you can use this research

Practitioners and policy makers can use this information to develop prevention and treatment strategies for gambling problems among veterans.

### About the researchers

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