

# research snapshot

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## UK Royal Air Force personnel may be at higher risk of problem gambling

### What this research is about

Gambling is an addictive behaviour that can lead to gambling disorder. Even people who do not meet the clinical criteria for gambling disorder can experience problem gambling. Problem gambling is when someone's gambling behaviour causes harms. These harms can include financial hardship, emotional distress, and relationship problems.

Military service is linked to an increased risk of mental health issues and addictive behaviours. Gambling problems have also been linked to mental health and alcohol use issues. So, military personnel may be at higher risk of experiencing problem gambling. For example, 2% of UK Royal Air Force (RAF) personnel have reported a problem with gambling, even though gambling is forbidden on all armed forces sites.

This study surveyed active UK RAF personnel to ask them about their experiences with gambling. It also asked them about their mental health, alcohol use, and experiences with COVID-19 to see if these were linked to their gambling behaviours.

### What the researchers did

The researchers invited currently serving members of the UK RAF to participate in a survey in January 2021. In total, 2119 personnel participated. All participants were at least 18 years old, and 72% were men.

Participants completed an online survey. This survey first asked general questions, such as their age, sex, rank, type, and length of RAF service, etc. Then, the survey asked participants if they had spent money on different gambling activities in the past year. Those who said they engaged in any gambling in the past year were asked to complete the Problem Gambling

### What you need to know

Military service is linked to an increased risk of addictive behaviours. So, military personnel may be at higher risk of experiencing problem gambling. This study surveyed 2119 active UK Royal Air Force personnel to ask them about their gambling, alcohol use, and mental health. Overall, 68% of participants gambled. Of those who gambled, 1.6% had problem gambling and 11% were at low to moderate risk of problem gambling. Participants who were male, aged 18–24, and in a non-commissioned rank were more likely to experience gambling problems. Additionally, participants with anxiety, depression, or hazardous drinking were more likely to experience gambling problems. Finally, many participants with problem gambling increased their gambling during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Severity Index (PGSI). The PGSI has nine items that measure problem gambling in the past year, with higher scores indicating a higher risk of problem gambling. The PGSI categorizes participants as having no gambling problems, low-risk gambling, moderate-risk gambling, or problem gambling.

Next, the survey asked participants if they consumed alcohol in the past year. Those who consumed alcohol then filled out the Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test (AUDIT). AUDIT measures whether someone has problems related to alcohol use.

Finally, all participants completed the Patient Health Questionnaire-9 (PHQ-9) and the Generalized Anxiety Disorder-7 assessment (GAD-7). The PHQ-9 measures depressive symptoms in the past two weeks. GAD-7

measures anxiety in the past two weeks. The survey asked all participants if the COVID-19 pandemic had affected their gambling, alcohol use, or mental health.

### What the researchers found

Overall, 68% of participants gambled. Based on the PGSI scores, 88% of participants who gambled had no gambling problems. However, 8% had low-risk gambling, 2.9% had moderate-risk gambling, and 1.6% had problem gambling. On average, participants gambled on two gambling activities. Participants with problem gambling gambled on three times as many activities as those who were not at risk.

Most participants (94%) consumed alcohol. About 65% had low risk drinking and 28% had harmful or hazardous drinking. Additionally, 10% of participants had severe anxiety and 3.3% had severe depression.

Next, the researchers looked at how the COVID-19 pandemic affected participants' gambling, alcohol use, and mental health. For participants with problem gambling, 44% said they signed up on more gambling apps or websites during COVID-19. Additionally, 44% increased the amount of time they spent gambling, and 35% increased the amount of money they spent.

About 32% of participants said they increased alcohol use during COVID-19, while 24% said they decreased alcohol use. Additionally, 49% of participants said the COVID-19 pandemic negatively affected their mental health and 7.0% said it improved their mental health.

Finally, the researchers looked for characteristics that were linked to an increased risk of experiencing any gambling problems (PGSI score of 1 or higher). They found that participants who were male, aged 18–24, and in non-commissioned ranks were more likely to experience gambling problems. Participants who had served for 20+ years and had higher education were less likely to experience gambling problems.

Further, participants with higher depression and anxiety scores were more likely to have problem gambling. Participants with hazardous drinking were four times more likely to have problem gambling. So, problem gambling appears to be linked to hazardous drinking, depression, and anxiety in RAF personnel.

### How you can use this research

This research shows that 12.5% of currently serving RAF personnel have at least some gambling problems. Currently, the UK military does not screen personnel for problem gambling. Screening could help identify personnel in need of treatment or other services. This could reduce gambling harms among current and ex-military personnel.

### About the researchers

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