

Vets' alcohol problems linked to stress on the home front (w/ Video)

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Regardless of traumatic events experienced during deployment, returning National Guard soldiers were more likely to develop a drinking problem if faced with civilian life setbacks, including job loss, legal problems, divorce, and serious financial and legal problems—all commonplace in military families. Results of the study by researchers at Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health are published online in the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*.

Alcohol abuse is a major concern for reservists returning home. Nearly 7% of Americans abuse or are dependent on [alcohol](#), but among reserve soldiers returning from deployment, the rate of [alcohol abuse](#) is 14%, almost double that of the civilian population.

The study looked at a group of 1,095 Ohio National Guard soldiers who had primarily served in either Iraq or Afghanistan in 2008 and 2009. Over three years, the soldiers were interviewed three times via telephone and were asked about their alcohol use, exposure to deployment-related [traumatic events](#) and stressors like land mines, vehicle crashes, taking enemy fire, and witnessing casualties, and any stress related to everyday life since returning from duty.

More than half (60%) of the responding soldiers experienced combat-related trauma, 36% of soldiers experience civilian stressors, and 17% reported being sexually harassed during their most recent deployment. Among the group, 13% reported problems consistent with an alcohol use disorder in the first interview, 7% during the second, and 5% during the

third. Alcohol use disorder is defined as alcohol abuse or dependence.

The researchers found having at least one civilian stressor or a reported incident of sexual harassment during deployment raised the odds of alcohol use disorders. The effect of the stressors was restricted to cases of new-onset alcohol use disorders, and wasn't seen among those with a history of problem drinking. In contrast, combat-related traumatic events were only marginally associated with alcohol problems.

The study highlights the important role civilian life and the accompanying stress plays in cases of alcohol use disorder in the National Guard.

"Exposure to the traumatic event itself has an important effect on mental health in the short-term, but what defines long-term mental health problems is having to deal with a lot of daily life difficulties that arise in the aftermath—when soldiers come home," explains lead investigator Magdalena Cerdá, DrPH, MPH, assistant professor of Epidemiology at the Mailman School of Public Health. "The more traumatic events soldiers are exposed to during and after combat, the more problems they are likely to have in their daily life—in their relationships, in their jobs—when they come home. These problems can in turn aggravate mental health issues, such as problems with alcohol, that arise during and after deployment."

With high rates of alcohol abuse among soldiers, there is a critical need for targeted interventions to help soldiers handle stressful life events without alcohol, the investigators observe. More than 1.6 million service members have been deployed in support of war efforts Operation Enduring Freedom, Operation Iraqi Freedom, and Operation New Dawn.

"Guardsmen who return home need help finding jobs, rebuilding their marriages and families, and reintegrating into their communities," says

Karestan Koenen, PhD, professor of Epidemiology at the Mailman School and senior author of the study. "Too many of our warriors fall through the cracks in our system when they return home. This is particularly true of Guardsmen who do not have the same access to services as regular military personnel. We need to support our soldiers on the home front just as we do in the war zone."

Provided by Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health

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