Gambling Disorders Among Active Duty & Veterans

Integration of Services Summit: Preventing, Intervening & Treating Gambling Disorders Within Active Duty and Veteran Personnel Systems

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Keith Whyte, Executive Director
National Council on Problem Gambling
Executive Summary

- Active duty, veterans and dependents are likely to gamble and have substantial risk factors for problem gambling.
- Problem gambling among military personnel is a serious health and policy issue.
- Prevention, education & treatment services non-existent or severely lacking.
- DoD involvement in slot operations likely creates additional resistance to addressing this issue.
Why Soldiers Gamble?

- Readily available during downtime
- Relieve stress/negative feelings
- Supplement income, competition
- Belief in luck, superstition
- Fills a void, use gambling to elevate mood
- Relieve boredom/social isolation
- Cope with trauma
What Are The Odds?

- Winning a Powerball jackpot: 140,000,000 to 1
- Struck by lightning: 576,000 to 1
- Becoming a pro football player: 3,000 to 1
- KIA or WIA in Iraq: 11 to 1
Senior Airman Lenyatta Tinnelle

“Started gambling when she was stationed in South Korea in the mid-1990s, but her addiction intensified when in 2000 she was deployed to Keflavík, Iceland, where the slot machines available on the former naval base offered a respite from dark, cold evenings and boredom.”

Gambled all her $40,000 in savings and wrote about $50,000 in bad checks on the base.

Court-martialed for bad checks and put on suicide watch as she was threatened with hard labor, brig and demotion, even though she had asked for medical help for her addiction. Lenyatta avoided jail, but was demoted and eventually pushed out of the Air Force.
Military PG Risk Factors

- Male
- Younger
- Low SES/Higher % of minorities
- Prone to risk taking/Highly impulsive
- Substance use & abuse
- PTSD
- Link to suicide
- Loneliness & social isolation
- Grief/loss
- Other mental health issues
- Face extreme stressful situations/anxiety
Subtypes

**Action**
- More likely to be male
- Prefer “skill” games
- Narcissistic
- Uses gambling to elevate mood

**Escape**
- More likely to be female
- Prefer “continuous” games
- Uses gambling to withdraw “zone out”
Recruits

- N=31,104 AF recruits
- 10.4% weekly gambling
- 6.2% current problem gambling
- 1.9% current pathological gambling
- Higher rates among minorities

## Rates of Gambling Problems Among Active Duty Personnel

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>At Risk</strong></td>
<td>7.1%</td>
<td>8.1%</td>
<td>6.3%</td>
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<tr>
<td>(1-2 criteria)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Problem</strong></td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
<td>2.1%</td>
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<tr>
<td>(3-5 criteria)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pathological</strong></td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
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<tr>
<td>(5 or more)</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2002 WWSHB</th>
<th>At-Risk/Prob (1-4 criteria)</th>
<th>Pathological (5+ criteria)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstain/Light Drinker</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Moderate/Heavy Drinker</td>
<td>11.6%</td>
<td>6.8%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Serious</td>
<td>13.4%</td>
<td>15.9%</td>
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2008 WWHS: Risk Taking

- 46% of military personnel high risk takers
- High risk takers were more than 2x as likely to be heavy drinkers* (29%) compared with moderate risk takers (13%), and were nearly 5x times more likely to be heavy drinkers than low risk takers (6%).
  *5 or more drinks on at least one occasion in past 30 days.
- High risk takers also were more likely to have seriously considered suicide in the past year (6%) compared with low or moderate risk takers (both 3%).

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Active Duty

➢ N=584 Naval Outpatient Psychiatric Clinic
➢ 1.4% current pathological gambling
➢ Only 0.04% were diagnosed
➢ Lower rate of PG than expected, but only 25% response rate and more than ½ were female.

Comorbidity Among VA MH Users

- 1.1 million VA MH users screened.
- Only 0.2% pathological gambling diagnosis.
- Homelessness most strongly associated with PG (2.8 OR); bipolar, alcohol use disorder all at least 2x as well.
- “Pathological gambling is very likely under-identified by VA mental health clinicians.”

• Rates and Correlates of PG Among VA MH Users
Civilian PTSD

Among treatment-seeking pathological gamblers, 34% had a high level of PTSD symptoms with the latter assessed by self-report checklist.

The common pattern appears to be greater pathology and worse functioning among pathological gamblers with a trauma history or PTSD.

Substance Abuse & Problem Gambling Among Veterans

- 66% of problem gamblers in residential program met lifetime substance abuse or dependence criteria.
- Most substance abuse preceded gambling problems.
- 33% of substance abusing veterans in a treatment program met criteria for problem gambling.
- Current alcohol consumption significantly higher in problem gamblers.
Suicide, PTSD & PG Among Veterans

- 40% of veterans with problem gambling in treatment had made a lifetime suicide attempt.
- 64% of those who attempted suicide reported their most recent attempt related to gambling.

  • *Suicide Attempts Among Veterans Seeking Treatment*. Kausch, O. *Journal of Clinical Psychiatry* (2003)

- 17% of veterans entering treatment for PTSD also met criteria for problem gambling.

Warrant Officer Aaron Walsh

- Decorated Army Apache helicopter pilot.
- Developed severe gambling problem.
- Unsuccessful treatment attempts.
- AWOL, resigned 2005 before court martial.
- Committed suicide 2006.
Providing Entertainment/Creating Addiction?
Gambling in the U.S. Military…

- US service members may legally engage in slot machine gambling at the age of 18.
- It is estimated that at least 36,000-48,000 active duty US service members may have a gambling problem.
- None of the gaming revenue is dedicated to fund problem gambling prevention, education or treatment services.
History

- Slot machines have been on some military bases since the 1930s.
- The machines were banned from domestic military bases in 1951 but enjoyed a resurgence in the 1960s.
- They were removed from Army and Air Force bases in 1972, after a cash skimming scandal.
- Fifteen hundred machines remained on Navy and Marine Corps bases overseas, and in 1980 the Army and Air Force began restoring machines at overseas bases.
Scope of Military Slots Program

- 5,000, 7,000, 10,000?
- Each service runs its own program
- Located OCONUS
- On-base at MWR facilities—O clubs, bowling alleys, etc…
Program Results

- 2005 slots: $2 billion handle, $120 million revenue.
- Revenue goes back to MWR.
- Military claims high payout percentage provides greater entertainment—but in most jurisdictions it is a marketing tactic.
Not Just Slots

- Army bingo, 2005: $45 million.
  - 11 of the largest games average more than $100,000/month.

- Casinos in close proximity to bases:
  - Nellis AFB-Las Vegas, Camp Pendleton-Pechanga, Kessler AFB-Biloxi

- Poker & social gambling in barracks.

- Military lottery?
Barriers

- Doesn’t fit comfortably with existing structure—is it addiction, mental health, financial, discipline or moral (chaplain) issue?
- Concerns about confidentiality & promotion.
- Military uses stricter definition of insanity.
- Lack of behavioral health care resources.
- Problem gambling often accompanied by crimes—risk of courts martial/DD
- Profitable and hard to replace funds from gaming.
Private Andrew Foster

- Chaplains Assistant, 8th Army, Korea.
- Stole money from chaplains fund to gamble.
- “He went to Army Community Services; they said they couldn’t help and sent him to Mental Health Services. There, they said, ‘No, we can’t help you-go to your chaplain.’ So he goes to his chaplain, who says he’s not qualified to help with addiction and refers him to…Army Community Services.”

- So Private Foster, whose career is hanging by a thread, is serving out a six-month sentence in South Korea without treatment, Major Dillahunt said. "He's said he hoped to be sent to Iraq when he gets out, because there is no gambling there," she said.
NCPG Mil/Vets Project

- Increase awareness of impact of PG.
- Understand unique circumstances surrounding gambling in military.
- Improve responses within DoD & VA.
- Outcomes include legislation & peer-reviewed study & lit review.
Dr. Rena Nora Military And Veterans Gambling Care Act

- Directs DoD and VA to develop programs to prevent and treat gambling problems.
- Study feasibility of digitizing Brecksville archive—potentially largest database (35+ years) of gambling treatment in world.
- Report to Congress in one year.
- Builds foundation for future efforts.
Dr. Rena Nora


“In our day-to-day work with problem gamblers, we emphasize behavior that has gotten them into trouble, how their use of poor judgment and their character flaws generated chaos in their lives. But in the last few minutes of a session, I look for something positive they can use when they leave. The big word is HOPE.”
National Council on Problem Gambling

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