



Issue Brief on Gambling in the Military

June 2010

The past 30 years have seen phenomenal growth in the availability and accessibility of legal gambling, including lotteries and casinos but also electronic gaming machines in formerly non-gambling venues and, most recently, gambling on the Internet. Like the civilian population, military personnel, veterans and their families are finding more gambling available to them wherever they are stationed – whether in the United States or overseas. It is important to note that NCPG is neutral on legalized gambling and therefore does not take a position on slots operated by the military at OCONUS (Outside Continental United States) bases.

It is our underlying belief that:

- For a vast majority of those individuals who choose to gamble, the activity is a recreational opportunity causing no ill effects.
- A relatively small percentage of those who gamble will exhibit severe and chronic problems associated with pathological gambling, and research suggests that the socio-demographic characteristics of military personnel are associated with higher levels of gambling problems.
- Problem gambling is a condition that responds well to intervention.
- If the problem exists at levels suggested by contemporary research, and if left unaddressed, the readiness of our fighting forces may be compromised.

Background:

Military personnel are likely to gamble, and at a minimum are no less likely than the civilian population to have gambling problems. For example, a 2008 study of 31,000 recruits found 6.2% met criteria for problem gambling and 1.9% were pathological gamblers—rates approximately twice that of general public. The 2001 defense authorization bill required a study on the effects of slot machine gambling on service members and their dependents, and the 1992, 1998 and 2002 Worldwide Surveys of Health Behaviors included questions on gambling. Although there are concerns about the methodology, reporting and interpretation of these studies, based on the current force strength of 1.4 million there are likely at least 40,000 active duty service members with a gambling problem.

Yet this hidden addiction has not been adequately addressed by the military. As the House Armed Services Committee noted: “Compulsive gambling is a serious psychiatric disorder, as exhibited by the extraordinarily high rates of suicide and the high incidence of severe depression, alcohol abuse and crime associated with sufferers of this illness...Because compulsive gambling has an immediate association with financial matters, its effect on readiness and the overall mental health of service members has been largely overlooked and ignored.”

As the 2002 Worldwide Survey notes, military personnel are believed to have a number of risk factors that have long been associated with higher rates of gambling problems in the civilian population:

“Based on the socio-demographic characteristics of problem and pathological gamblers that were observed in many States, the prevalence of problem or pathological gambling in the military could potentially be higher than the prevalence in the general population by virtue of the socio-demographic composition of the Military, with higher proportions of males, younger persons, and nonwhites in the Military relative to the general population.” (p. 9-15)

The 2002 study noted a strong correlation between alcohol abuse and problem gambling, a relationship also found in civilian studies. The research literature suggests additional risk factors that are likely more present among military personnel and veterans, including tobacco use, depression and PTSD. The consequences of a gambling problem, which often co-occurs with the above health issues, can be severe. A 2003 study found that 40% of veterans in treatment for problem gambling had attempted suicide.

Recommendations:

We encourage the Departments of Defense and Veterans Affairs to take several simple steps—possibly incorporated within existing programs on substance abuse, financial management, health and wellness—to prevent and treat gambling addiction among service personnel, veterans and their dependents. In addition to general problem gambling prevention programs for all service members and their families, treatment must be available for those who develop problems. While most cases may probably be treated within the current command as other health/mental health problems are addressed, it is vital to ensure there is a center of excellence for more severe cases and to make sure that personnel and commanders are aware that gambling is a treatable disorder. Persons entering treatment for substance abuse should be screened for gambling problems, as well as certain offenders, especially those with financial crimes. The military should consider mandated treatment as an alternative to discharge, with full prosecution for failure to complete treatment or relapse.

The services need to develop clear policy and enforcement of current rules and regulations regarding gambling. Current approaches appear focused on treating problems associated with problem and pathological gambling as punishable offenses with potentially little or no concern for the individual’s underlying treatable disorder.

There is a dire need for independent research by specialists into gambling and problem gambling in the military. At a minimum, problem gambling questions should be added back into the Worldwide Survey of Health Behaviors.

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