Facts at a glance

Demographics: 03

Gambling and veterans

wesley mission
driven to do more good

OVERVIEW

Warning: this paper discusses suicide.

Although the link between veterans and gambling harm is well known in Australia, the conversations around prevention and holistic care of veterans affected by gambling are still evolving. Veterans recently transitioned to civilian life are more vulnerable to gambling harm due to experiencing a major change in life, often multiple changes at once.

A study conducted by the Victorian Responsible Gambling Foundation in 2021 found that 13.4% of transitioned veterans reported gambling problems. A follow-up study in 2023 also found that of veterans that reported problem gambling, 43.9% experienced suicidal ideation, and 1 in 5 also reported attempting or planning of suicide.[1] To develop more effective remedies and prevention strategies, we must first understand the risk factors that contribute to gambling damage in veterans.

Australian active military personnel and recently transitioned veterans report higher rates of gambling than in other military jurisdictions, most likely due to the high availability of gambling opportunities in NSW.

RISK FACTORS

Transitioning to civilian life.

The changes in lifestyle and finances can create a sense of disconnection from both the military and civilians. Trauma plays a part in problem gambling for both veterans and civilians, and the risk increases due to exposure to traumatic events during service.

Therefore, it is not surprising that veterans experiencing gambling problems gamble as a coping mechanism to avoid stress and distress.

Access to gambling.

Australia, New South Wales in particular, has a very high availability of gambling products. Returned and Services Leagues (RSL) and other ex-service clubs that have electronic gaming machines (EGMs) put veterans in significant danger of gambling harm, instead of fulfilling their mission of creating safe spaces for veterans and their communities. Veterans with family members who gamble are also much more likely to gamble.

Psychosocial implications.

Veterans who report gambling problems are 2.4 times more at risk of criminality, 19.9 times more at risk of suicidal ideation and 2.1 times more at risk of attempting suicide. They are also 2.4 times more at risk of threatening physical violence than veterans without reported gambling problems. The rate of suicide in veteran men of the Australian Defence Force is 18% higher than that of men in the general population, and for women, it is 115% higher than women in the general population.[2]

SOLUTIONS

The rates of help-seeking in veterans are very low, with most seeking help for issues that are not gambling-related. Only 2.1% of veterans report seeking help for problem gambling.[3]

Research suggests that effective approaches involve preventing gambling problems in veterans and providing meaningful support when it's needed. Preventative strategies include the removal of EGMs from veteran spaces and supporting those venues to diversify their income stream. Prevention also requires a comprehensive public health approach which combines changing the environment and supporting the individual. When supporting an individual, it is recommended that professionals and services providing mental health support for veterans ensure that they have a high military cultural competency, and screen for indicators of gambling problems during other mental health checks.

Advocating for reform

Wesley Mission has put this fact sheet together as part of our advocacy for reform to minimise gambling harm. Our current campaign goals are to:

- implement universal cashless gambling with harm reduction measures built-in
- power-down poker machines after midnight
- fund an independent state-wide self-exclusion register
- let communities have a say
- have greater transparency in NSW – publish venue data.

Contact us: gambling.reform@wesleymission.org.au

For more information: https://tinyurl.com/PutPokiesInTheirPlace

Sources:

1. Metcalf, O., Roebuck, G., Lawrence-Wood, E., Sadler, N., Baur, J., Van Hooff, M., Forbes, D., O'Donnell, M., Hodson, S., Benassi, H., Varker, T., Battersby, M., McFarlane, A. C., & Cowlishaw, S. (2023, June). Gambling problems predict suicidality in recently transitioned military veterans. Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health, 47(3), 100038. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.anzjph.2023.100038
2. Metcalf, O., Lawrence-Wood, E., Baur, J., Van Hooff, M., Forbes, D., O'Donnell, M., Sadler, N., Hodson, S., Benassi, H., Varker, T., Battersby, M., McFarlane, A. & Cowlishaw, S., (2021) Gambling problems, risk factors, and implications in Australian veterans, Victorian Responsible Gambling Foundation, Melbourne.
3. Metcalf, O., Lawrence-Wood, E., Baur, J., Van Hooff, M., Forbes, D., O'Donnell, M., Sadler, N., Hodson, S., Benassi, H., Varker, T., Battersby, M., McFarlane, A. C., & Cowlishaw, S. (2022, May 25). Prevalence of gambling problems, help-seeking, and relationships with trauma in veterans. PLOS ONE, 17(5), e0268346.