



PREVENTION UPDATE

Problems Related to Alcohol, Other Drugs, and Violence Among Military Students

Overview

According to a [Research Update from the National Institute on Drug Abuse](#), ongoing operations in Iraq and Afghanistan “continue to strain military personnel, returning veterans, and their families. Some have experienced long and multiple deployments, combat exposure, and physical injuries, as well as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and traumatic brain injury (TBI). . . . Although less common, substance abuse is also a key concern. While the 2008 Department of Defense Health Behavior Survey reveals general reductions over time in tobacco use and illicit drug use, it reported increases in other areas, such as prescription drug abuse and heavy alcohol use. In fact, prescription drug abuse doubled among U.S. military personnel from 2002 to 2005 and almost tripled between 2005 and 2008.

“Alcohol abuse is the most prevalent problem and one which poses a significant health risk. A study of Army soldiers screened 3 to 4 months after returning from deployment to Iraq showed that 27 percent met criteria for alcohol abuse and were at increased risk for related harmful behaviors (e.g., drinking and driving, using illicit drugs). And although soldiers frequently report alcohol concerns, few are referred to alcohol treatment. Research findings highlight the need to improve screening and access to care for alcohol-related problems among service members returning from combat deployments.” In addition, drug or alcohol use frequently accompanies mental health problems and was involved in 30 percent of the Army's suicide deaths from 2003 to 2009 and in more than 45 percent of nonfatal suicide attempts from 2005 to 2009.

A [2011 Department of Defense Fact Sheet](#) states, “After more than a decade of ongoing operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, military personnel continue to experience strain—and in addition to the physical and psychological effects of combat exposure, service members may develop problems with substance abuse and dependence.”

Military students include veterans and military service members on active duty or in the reserves who are pursuing undergraduate or graduate studies. According to [Military Service Members and Veterans: A Profile of Those Enrolled in Undergraduate and Graduate Education in 2007–08](#), “approximately 657,000 undergraduates were veterans and another 215,000 were military service members on either active duty or in the reserves. Among graduate students, 107,000 were veterans and 38,000 were military service members. To put these numbers in context, military students represented about 4 percent of both the undergraduate and graduate student populations.”

The U.S. Department of Education's grant program for the development of campus-based [Centers of Excellence for Veteran Student Success](#) encourages model programs to support veteran student success in postsecondary education by coordinating services to address the academic, financial, physical, and social needs of veteran students. These centers support transition from military life to civilian college life and provide support for continued growth in mind, body, and spirit, providing a range of support services, including counseling.

What the Evidence Tells Us

According to a [study](#) presented at the 2011 American Psychological Association's annual meeting, veterans in college are six times more likely to attempt suicide than the typical student and more than a fifth have planned to kill themselves. In addition, universities are largely unprepared to meet the educational and mental



health needs of the more than one million veterans expected to enter institutions of higher education in the next decade, according to the report.

The study found that 46 percent of respondents indicated suicidal thinking at some point during their lifetime; 20 percent reported suicidal thoughts with a plan; 10.4 percent reported thinking of suicide very often; 7.7 percent reported a suicide attempt; and 3.8 percent reported a suicide attempt was either likely or very likely. This rate is significantly higher than American College Health Association (ACHA) 2010 data concerning university students in general, which showed 6 percent of college students reported seriously considering suicide and 1.3 percent reported a suicide attempt. The survey data also indicated the student veterans' suicide-related problems were comparable to or more severe than those of veterans seeking mental health services from Veterans Affairs medical centers.

A recent [study](#) found that college students who served in the U.S. conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan are more likely than their nonveteran peers to use tobacco, drink in excess, and engage in other behaviors that endanger their health and safety. Compared with nonveteran students, higher percentages of veterans reported binge drinking—more than five drinks at one time—during the previous two weeks, and riding in a car driven by an intoxicated person during the prior year.

Lessons Learned From Colleges and Universities

The purpose of the [ACHA Wellness Needs of Military Veteran Students Coalition](#) includes such things as:

- To help college health professionals identify the unique needs of student veterans as they transition from nonmilitary life as first time or returning college students.
- To encourage college health professionals to develop culturally competent health services that are reflective of the unique health needs of military veteran students.
- To provide continuing education, advocacy, and professional development across ACHA as it relates to the wellness needs of military veteran students.

The [Veterans Center at Citrus College](#) in Glendora, Calif., is the central hub for its veterans' program and offers a wide array of services to student veterans. More than 100 veterans are on campus, most have just recently returned from Iraq or Afghanistan. It offers the course “Strategies for College Success: Veterans' Emphasis,” which is for all veterans and current military members, their family members, friends, and supporters. Its goal is to assist the deployed, post-deployed, and veteran (DPV) student in making a positive transition from military to civilian life or from deployment to post-deployment life, including college survival skills. This curriculum was developed to help the DPV student succeed in academics, work, family, and other social settings. Funding for the Veterans Center has come from a Walmart grant and a U.S. Department of Education grant. The program was featured at the [2010 White House Summit on Community Colleges](#).

Higher Education Center and Related Resources

- [Catalyst \(Summer 2010\) Vol. 11 No. 3: Mental Health, Violence Prevention, and Alcohol and Other Drug Issues](#)
- [Depression, Anxiety, and Alcohol or Other Drug Use among College Students](#) (2004)
- [Integrating Mental Health Promotion and Substance Abuse Prevention on College Campuses](#) (July 2011 Prevention Update)
- [Safeguarding Your Students Against Suicide: Expanding the Safety Net](#) (2002)
- Web Site: [Make the Connection](#)
- Web Site: [Suicide Prevention Resource Center—Colleges and Universities](#)
- Web Site: [U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs](#)

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