Civilian Life, Not Combat, May Drive Many Veterans to Drink

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Difficulties in civilian life, rather than war experiences, are a source of drinking problems among U.S. National Guard soldiers back at home, a new study suggests.

Setbacks such as job loss, divorce and financial problems -- all common for returning vets -- may make as many as 13 percent of vets turn to drink, researchers found.

"Exposure to combat-related traumatic events has an important effect on mental health in the short term, but what defines long-term mental health problems among Guardsmen is having to deal with a lot of daily life difficulties that arise in the aftermath of deployment when soldiers come home," said lead researcher Magdalena Cerda, an assistant professor of epidemiology at Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health in New York City.

These difficulties don't just aggravate existing drinking problems; "they may lead to new cases of alcohol use disorder," Cerda said. "To prevent the problem of alcohol abuse in the military from growing, we need to help Guardsmen who return home to find jobs, rebuild their marriages and their families, and reintegrate into their communities."

Nearly 7 percent of Americans have drinking problems, but the rate of alcohol abuse is twice that for reserve soldiers returning from deployment, according to background information in the study.

Rachel Yehuda, a professor of psychiatry at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mt. Sinai in New York City, agreed more attention should be paid to reservists after deployment.

"We need to make sure that we support veterans through homecoming and readjustment to civilian life, because it seems like those are the stressors that might contribute to alcohol abuse," she said. "The findings also remind us that even though our soldiers put themselves in harm's way and are exposed to multiple life-threatening events and losses during deployment, the military environment may offer a type of social support that is protective against self-damaging behaviors," Yehuda added.

For the study, published online July 31 in the American Journal of Preventive Medicine, researchers collected data on about 1,000 Ohio National Guard soldiers who had served in Iraq or Afghanistan in 2008 and 2009.

Over three years, the soldiers were interviewed three times and asked about their alcohol use. They also were asked about exposure to traumatic events, such as land mines, vehicle crashes, enemy fire and the deaths of fellow soldiers. They answered questions about their own injuries and about stressors in their lives since returning.