

**VETERAN STUDENT HEALTH BEHAVIORS ON MISSOURI UNIVERSITY CAMPUSES**

Partners in Prevention (PIP) is Missouri's higher education substance abuse consortium focused on promoting healthy behaviors on college campuses. In order to gain an understanding of the current health behaviors of college students, PIP implements the Missouri College Health Behavior Survey (MCHBS) each spring. The information gained from the MCHBS not only allows PIP to learn more about the risky behaviors of Missouri college students as a whole, but also provides the opportunity to focus on the behaviors of particular demographics and sub-populations of Missouri's college campuses.

**DISCUSSION**

Of the nearly 9,000 students who participated in the 2014 MCHBS, 279 students report affiliation with the U.S Armed Forces. Though this is a small pool of students (.031%), student veterans represent a unique, growing population of the student body at higher education institutions in Missouri. The MCHBS collects data on students who are currently enlisted in the armed forces, and those who have completed their tenure with the military. This is an important differentiation, because the two groups report a variety of unique, different health and behavior trends.

Distinguishing currently enlisted from previously enlisted veterans is apparent when assessing binge drinking levels, defined as having five or more drinks within a two-hour period in the previous two weeks. Currently enlisted veterans binge drink slightly more (30%) than their non-veteran counterparts (26%) and nearly twice

as much as previously enlisted veterans (16%), however, student veterans report comparable levels of marijuana and prescription drug abuse compared to the non-veteran student. When compared to the rest of the student body, veterans are far more likely to use tobacco. For example, both enlisted and previously enlisted students report higher levels of cigarette smoking, higher reported use of cigars, higher use of smokeless tobacco, higher use of pipe tobacco, and, more frequent daily cigarette use than non-veterans. Finally, both enlisted and previously enlisted men and women report higher rates of gambling than non-veterans. The majority of these occurrences happen among friends rather than at a casino or other gambling niche.

Though veterans report similar levels of stress in both their academic and personal lives, when taking a close look at the mental health data, glaring differences emerge. Enlisted, previously enlisted, and civilian students report differing levels of suicidal thoughts,

	Currently Enlisted <i>N</i> = 112	Previously Enlisted <i>N</i> = 167	Non Veteran <i>N</i> = 8685
Binge Drinking	30%	16%	26%
Reported gambling in past year	36%	42%	26%
Any tobacco use in past year	51%	45%	37%
Of smokers, use 3 or more times per week	33%	68%	31%
Suicidal thoughts in past year	12%	20%	15%
Attempted suicide in past year	1%	2%	1%
Sought assistance for your suicide attempt/thoughts	11%	29%	33%
Experienced Depression in past year	16%	24%	19%
Experienced sleep issues in past year	26%	31%	19%
Experienced Anxiety in past year	27%	50%	44%

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suggesting that one-fifth of previously enlisted men and women report suicidal thoughts. When assessing mental health issues, such as major depressive disorder, mixed results emerge. For major depression disorder, previously enlisted students report higher rates than any other population. Both previous enlisted and currently enlisted students report higher rates of chronic sleep issues than civilians. Interestingly, mixed results surface when students are asked to self-reported anxiety disorders. Previously enlisted students report the highest rates of general anxiety, followed by civilians and currently enlisted students, respectively.

## **SUMMARY**

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In sum, the growing population of veteran students at Missouri universities and college campuses report unique and specific health needs and behaviors different than their non-veteran counterparts. A better understanding of the problems and needs of this population will help to develop more targeted and effective solutions to assess their health behaviors and concerns.

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