

The Preventing and Treating Gambling Disorder in the Military Act of 2017

The National Council on Problem Gambling estimates that as many as 56,000 active duty members of the Armed Forces meet criteria for gambling disorder, and studies have shown that veterans have elevated rates of gambling problems— at least twice the rate of the general adult population.¹ Gambling disorder is an addiction similar to other substance-use disorders, such as those associated with alcohol and drugs.² In addition to causing financial and legal problems, it is also correlated with an increased incidence of suicide attempts, substance-use disorders, and other behavioral health conditions.³ Prevalence of gambling disorder in the military is a serious health and financial issue, and also poses a national security concern, harming individual readiness and human performance and increasing affected service members’ susceptibility to blackmail and other malign influence.⁴

A 2017 report by the Government Accountability Office (GAO) found that while slot machines were removed from all domestic military installations after 1951 – when Congress prohibited gambling devices from being installed or used on any possession of the United States – the Department of Defense (DOD) currently has 3,141 slot machines on overseas U.S. military installations. However, the GAO also found that the DOD does not systematically screen military personnel for gambling disorder and also does not address gambling disorder in a similar manner to other addictive disorders, such as alcohol-related disorders.⁵

According to the DOD, about 120 military personnel were diagnosed with gambling disorder or were seen for problem gambling each year between FY2011 and FY2015 – yet these estimates rely only on records of military personnel seeking treatment within the Military Health System. In addition, less than 10 percent of people with gambling problems seek help, due to the shame, stigma and misunderstanding of gambling disorder. The GAO recommended that the DOD incorporate questions on gambling disorder in its annual health assessments and DOD-wide surveys in order to better understand the prevalence of gambling disorder in the military and improve the military’s ability to offer treatment.⁶

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The Preventing and Treating Gambling Disorder in the Military Act of 2017 implements recommendations from GAO on screening for gambling disorder in the military, by requiring the inclusion of gambling disorder in health assessments for members of the armed forces, both in the Annual Periodic Health Assessment and the Health Related Behavior Surveys.

Endorsed by the National Council on Problem Gambling.

¹ “GAO Report Talking Points,” *National Council on Problem Gambling* (February 2017) (online at: <http://www.ncpgambling.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/GAO-Report-Talking-Points-v4.pdf>); J. Westermeyer, J. Camive, P. Thuras, and M. Spring, “Pathological and problem gambling among veterans in clinical care: prevalence, demography, and clinical correlates,” *The American Journal on Addictions* (April 25, 2013) (online at: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/23617862>)

² “What is Gambling Disorder?” *American Psychiatric Association* (2017) (online at: <https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/gambling-disorder/what-is-gambling-disorder>)

³ “Gambling Problems: An Introduction for Behavioral Health Services Providers,” *Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration* (2014) (online at: <http://www.ncpgambling.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/Gambling-Addiction-An-Introduction-for-Behavioral-Health-Providers-SAMHSA-2014.pdf>)

⁴ “DOD and the Coast Guard Need to Screen for Gambling Disorder Addiction and Update Guidance,” *U.S. Government Accountability Office* (Jan. 30, 2017) (online at: <https://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-17-114>)

⁵ U.S. Government Accountability Office, *Supra*.

⁶ U.S. Government Accountability Office, *Supra*.