Standardized Comparisons of the Use of Alcohol, Drugs, and Cigarettes Among Military Personnel and Civilians


Understanding the effectiveness of policies and programs aimed at combating substance abuse in the military requires comparison with the civilian population. Because military personnel are drawn from the civilian population, one would expect the prevalence of substance use to be similar. However, differences in living conditions, policies and programs, or sociodemographic characteristics between military and civilian populations could foster differences in substance use.

Standardized comparisons of the use of alcohol, illicit drugs, and cigarettes among military personnel and civilians were conducted with data from the 1985 Worldwide Survey of Alcohol and Nonmedical Drug Use among Military Personnel (now the Department of Defense Survey of Health Related Behaviors Among Active Duty Military Personnel) and the 1985 National Household Survey on Drug Abuse (now the National Survey on Drug Use and Health). We equated the two data sets for age and geographic location of respondents, and standardized civilian substance use rates to reflect the sociodemographic composition of the military.

Military personnel were significantly less likely than civilians to use illicit drugs, but were significantly more likely to use alcohol and cigarettes and to engage in heavy use of alcohol and cigarettes. Heavy drinking was especially likely among young military men. Military women were similar to military men in their smoking and illicit drug use patterns.

Findings suggest that military policies and programs have been notably effective in reducing illicit drug use, but efforts to limit alcohol and cigarette use should be intensified. Military efforts directed against alcohol abuse should target younger men, while smoking and drug prevention programs should target both men and women.