

# Deployment to military operations negatively affects the mental health functioning of deployed military personnel



Photo: By Marines from Arlington, VA, USA

*For assessments taken more than 24 months since exposure, we consistently found adverse effects of deployment on all mental health domains (PTSD, depression, substance abuse/dependence, and common mental disorders), particularly on PTSD.*

## What is the aim of this review?

This Campbell systematic review examines the effects of deployment on mental health. The review summarizes evidence from 185 studies. All studies used observational data to quantify the effect of deployment.

**While additional research is needed, the current evidence strongly supports the notion that deployment negatively affects mental health functioning of deployed military personnel.**

## What is this review about?

When military personnel are deployed to military operations abroad they face an increased risk of physical harm, and an increased risk of adverse shocks to their mental health.

The primary condition under consideration is deployment to an international military operation. Deployment to a military operation is not a uniform condition; rather, it covers a range of scenarios. Military deployment is defined as performing military service in an operation at a location outside the home country for a limited time period, pursuant to orders.

The review included studies that reported outcomes for individuals who had been deployed. This review looked at the effect of deployment on mental health outcomes. The mental health outcomes are: post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), major depressive disorder (MDD), common mental disorders (depression, anxiety and somatisation disorders) and substance-related disorders.

By identifying the major effects of deployment on mental health and quantifying these effects, the review can inform policy development on deployment and military activity as well as post-deployment support for veterans. In this way the review enables decision-makers to prioritise key areas.

## What are the main findings of this review?

### What studies are included?

This review includes studies that evaluate the effects of deployment on mental health. A total of 185 studies were identified. However, only

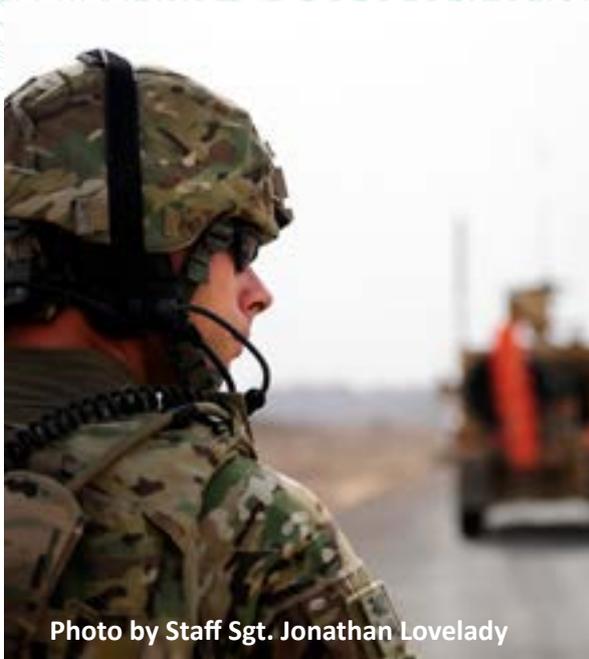


Photo by Staff Sgt. Jonathan Lovelady

#### How up-to-date is this review?

The review authors searched for studies up to April 2017. This Campbell Systematic Review was published in June 2018.

#### What is the Campbell Collaboration?

The Campbell Collaboration is an international, voluntary, non-profit research network that publishes systematic reviews. We summarise and evaluate the quality of evidence about programmes in the social and behavioural sciences. Our aim is to help people make better choices and better policy decisions.

#### About this summary

This summary was prepared by the authors of the Campbell Systematic Review 2018:6 “Deployment of personnel to military operations: impact on mental health and social functioning” by Martin Bøg, Trine Filges and Anne Marie Klint Jørgensen (<https://doi.org/10.4073/csr.2018.6>). Tanya Kristiansen (Campbell Collaboration) redesigned and edited the summary. Financial support from the American Institutes for Research for the production of this summary is gratefully acknowledged.



40 of these were assessed to be of sufficient methodological quality to be included in the final analysis. The studies spanned the period from 1993 to 2017 and were mostly carried out in the USA, UK and Australia. The studies all had some important methodological weaknesses. None of the included studies used experimental designs (random assignment).

#### *Does deployment have an effect on mental health?*

Deployment to military operations negatively affects the mental health functioning of deployed military personnel. For assessments taken more than 24 months since exposure, we consistently found adverse effects of deployment on all mental health domains (PTSD, depression, substance abuse/dependence, and common mental disorders), particularly on PTSD. For assessments taken less than 24 months (or a variable number of months since exposure) the evidence was less consistent and in many instances inconclusive.

*The odds of screening positive for PTSD and depression were consistently high in the longer term which suggests efforts should be increased to detect and treat mental disorders, as effects may be long-lasting.*

#### *What do the findings of this review mean?*

The odds of screening positive for PTSD and depression were consistently high in the longer term. This suggests that efforts should be increased to detect and treat mental disorders, as effects may be long-lasting.

Overall the risk of bias in the majority of included studies was high. While it is difficult to imagine a randomised study design to understand how deployment affects mental health, other matters such as changes to personnel policy, or unanticipated shocks to the demand for military personnel, could potentially be a rich source of quasi-experimental variation.