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Prevention Research Center  
PACIFIC INSTITUTE FOR RESEARCH AND EVALUATION

**Genevieve Ames, Ph.D.**  
Prevention Research Center  
1995 University Avenue  
Suite 450  
Berkeley, CA 94704  
Tel: (510) 486-1111  
Fax: (510) 644-0594

**Michelle Blackston**  
Media Relations Manager  
Office: (301) 755-2444  
Mobile: (619) 654-6068  
E-mail: [mblackston@pire.org](mailto:mblackston@pire.org)

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## News Release

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### FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

## Heavy drinking still acute among young military members

*Change in military culture necessary to reduce rates that are double those of civilians, new study says*

BERKELEY, CA -- Young military men in all branches of service drink significantly more alcohol than their civilian counterparts. And, military culture contributes to this ongoing problem, according to a recently published report.

Men ages 18-25 in the Marine Corps have the highest rate of heavy drinking at 38 percent, while Air Force personnel among the same age group are lowest at 24 percent. Heavy drinking rates among young men in the Army and Navy are 32 percent and 31 percent, respectively. All of these surpass the civilian population, where the heavy drinking rate among men of the same ages is 15 percent. Heavy drinking is defined as consuming five or more drinks in one setting for men and four or more for women. More than half of all young military personnel reported at least one episode of such binge drinking in the past month.

“Many of these young men and women say they are drinking as a way to fit in with their new work and social life and their peers. From their view, alcohol is the necessary ingredient for successful group socializing, and for the most part, the only thing there is to do during their off hours,” said study author Genevieve Ames, Ph.D., senior research scientist at PIRE Prevention Research Center, who is conducting studies with the U.S. Navy. “Alcohol is readily available to them, and military policies about alcohol are inconsistent,

which contributes to a culture that facilitates heavy drinking and binge drinking.”

The study, entitled “Alcohol use and preventing alcohol-related problems among young adults in the military,” was published in a recent special prevention edition of the journal *Alcohol Research & Health*. Carol Cunradi, Ph.D., a PIRE Prevention Research Center research scientist, co-authored the report.

In interviews with young Navy personnel, study authors found that the work environment sometimes supported and promoted drinking rituals and routines. These included regular heavy drinking with coworkers during the work week on land bases and during deployment liberties when sailors are permitted off the ships. Sailors said they viewed drinking as an appropriate response to the stress of the job, boredom, loneliness and lack of recreational activities. Additionally, these sailors said drinking five or more drinks in a two-hour period is part of a defined cultural tradition in the Navy, especially during shore leave.

Another factor contributing to heavy drinking is the easy availability of alcohol to young military personnel, according to the study. On military bases, beer and liquor are stacked for display at the entry to post exchanges. Underage recruits reported that they had easy access to alcohol in bars, in the barracks or in hotel rooms near the base. On shore leave in foreign ports, alcohol is inexpensive, bars are located near the ports of call, and few ports had underage drinking laws or enforcement. Young personnel who wanted to drink often organized drinking groups before liberty.

Women in the Marines and Navy also exhibit higher heavy drinking rates than civilians. Some 13 percent of female Marines and 11 percent of female sailors reporting binge drinking. The rates among women in the Army and Air Force are similar to those of civilian women, averaging 6 percent. Rates of heavy drinking in all branches of service were nearly four times higher among young men than young women. Furthermore, the younger the military members, the more adverse the affects of drinking, including productivity loss, getting arrested and dependence symptoms, according to the study.

The military needs to develop a systemwide approach to reducing alcohol abuse among its young members, the study said. Defense Department leadership needs greater understanding of those aspects of military culture that promote heavy drinking, and then set about to change them, it said.

The Berkeley-based Prevention Research Center is sponsored by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) and focuses on the social and physical environments that lead to alcohol and drug misuse. PIRE, or Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation, is a national nonprofit research institute, funded largely by federal grants and contracts, with centers in seven cities.

For more information on this study or to arrange an interview with the author, please contact Michelle Blackston at (619) 654-6068.

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