



NATIONAL COALITION *for* HOMELESS VETERANS

Employment Status of Patients in the VA Health System: Implications for Mental Health Services

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Quick Takeaways

- Veterans in the study with bipolar disorder, depression, posttraumatic stress disorder, schizophrenia, or a substance use disorder were more likely to be unemployed, disabled, or retired than employed.
- Disabled VA patients had the highest rates of service-connected disabilities and the greatest number of medical comorbidities.
- Rates of all mental disorders were highest in the disabled population; substance use disorders were highest among the unemployed.

Summary

This study examined the employment experiences of veterans and evaluated the relationship between mental health and employment status in a nationally representative sample of veterans who received VA health care. The study also provided information relevant to the employment status of VA patients, other veterans, and the general U.S. population.

Findings

Of the 98,867 patients who met eligibility criteria, 36% were disabled, 35% were employed, 20% were retired, and 7% were unemployed. Those with bipolar disorder, depression, posttraumatic stress disorder, schizophrenia, or a substance use disorder were more likely to be unemployed, disabled, or retired than employed.

VA patients had a lower rate of labor force participation than both the general nonveteran U.S. population and the overall veteran population: 42%, 78%, and 81%, respectively. Confirming information found in Research Brief 13, unemployed persons were less likely to be married and had lower income than all other groups. Disabled VA patients had the highest rates of service-connected disabilities and the greatest number of medical comorbidities. Rates of all mental disorders were highest in the disabled population (except for bipolar disorders, which were highest in the other employed group), whereas substance use disorders were highest among the unemployed.

Conclusion

This study provided information about the relationship between mental disorders and work force participation in a national sample of veterans treated in the VA health system. The results indicate a negative relationship between mental disorders and employment among veterans. The researchers did not have repeated measures of employment status, therefore cannot determine how mental disorder status or employment status influenced each other over time. The researchers recommend that future research assess the relationship between mental disorders and work experiences over time, including the influence of work environment, type of job, and supportive employment programs or work therapy. Additional research could also explore if treatment for mental disorders influences work status and decreases disability.