



## **NATIONAL COALITION *for* HOMELESS VETERANS**

### *“Perceived Stigma and Barriers to Mental Health Care Utilization Among OEF-OIF Veterans”*

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#### Quick Takeaways:

- For OEF/ OIF transitioning service members, positive PTSD screenings, lack of unit support, and negative perceptions of mental health are significant predictors of perceived stigma and barriers to mental health care utilization.
- Some of the risk factors associated with perceived stigma and barriers to receiving mental health care could be modified through education about the effectiveness of mental health care and the importance of unit support.

#### Study:

This study examined perceived stigma and barriers to receiving mental health care for returning OEF/OIF veterans. Researchers sent surveys to over 1,000 veterans identified through the Connecticut OEF/OIF Veterans Needs Assessment Survey and received 272 usable responses. Researchers used the results to compare perceived stigma and barriers to care for those with a positive psychiatric disorder screening to those without a positive screening. The survey also included questions on PTSD, alcohol dependency, anxiety, and depression.

#### Findings:

The vast majority of respondents (74 percent) were in the National Guard or Reserves with the remaining 26 percent on active duty. Researchers found that a positive PTSD screening was a significant predictor of perceived stigma and barriers to mental health care. Lack of unit support was also a significant predictor. Negative beliefs about therapy – that it is ineffective or a sign of weakness – were also associated with stigma and barriers to care.

The researchers suggested a connection between a soldier’s beliefs about mental health care and the type of care received. Respondents who believed medication can improve anxiety and depression were more likely to receive medication as treatment. Those who believed medication was not effective were more likely to seek treatment through counseling.

#### Conclusion:

For many OEF/OIF service members, especially those with PTSD, perceptions of stigma and barriers to care may prevent them from seeking the mental health care they need. Fortunately, many of the risk factors associated with these perceptions can be addressed. Providing information before and after deployment about the effectiveness of mental health treatment may help reverse this trend. Educating military leadership about the importance of unit support could create a culture that encourages service members and veterans to seek the help they need. Service providers working with this population need to be aware of the potential stigma and barriers associated with mental health issues and develop education and support strategies to support treatment.

Full citation: Pietrzak, Robert H, Johnson, Douglas C, Goldstein, Marc B, Malley, James C, Southwick, Steven M. "Perceived Stigma and Barriers to Mental Health Care Utilization Among OEF-OIF Veterans. *Psychiatric Services* 60, no. 8 (2009): 1118-1122.