



NATIONAL COALITION *for* HOMELESS VETERANS

Trends and Risk Factors for Mental Health Diagnoses Among Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans Using Department of Veterans Affairs Health Care, 2002-2008

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Quick Takeaways

- Active duty veterans younger than 25 years had higher rates of PTSD and alcohol and drug use disorder diagnoses compared with active duty veterans older than 40 years.
- The youngest active duty veterans (aged 16-24 years) were at higher risk for all new mental health diagnoses and problems (except depression) than were active duty veterans older than 40 years.
- The analyses showed a distinct difference based on age in mental health diagnoses between active duty and National Guard and Reserve veterans entering the VA health care.

Summary

Over 1.6 million service members have served in Afghanistan and Iraq since September 11, 2001. The researchers investigated long-term trends and risk factors for mental health diagnoses among Iraq and Afghanistan veterans. They explored the prevalence and predictors of mental health diagnoses among a sample size of 289,328 Iraq and Afghanistan veterans that entered Veterans Affairs (VA) health care from 2002 to 2008. Of the 837,458 separated OIF and OEF veterans eligible for VA health care, 41% have enrolled in VA health care since 2002, making VA the single largest health care provider for OIF and OEF veterans.

Findings

- 36.9% - mental health diagnoses
- 21.8% - diagnosed with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD)
- 17.4% - diagnosed with depression
- 58.6% - active duty
- 66.7% - active duty under 30 years
- 41.4% - National Guard or reserve
- 50.0% - National Guard or reserve over 30 years

Of those with mental health diagnoses, 29% had 2 and one-third had 3 or more different mental health diagnoses. Active duty veterans (*the researchers studied veterans who served on active duty during his/her term*) younger than 25 years had higher rates of PTSD and alcohol and drug use disorder diagnoses compared with active duty veterans older than 40 years. Women were at higher risk for depression than were men, but men had over twice the risk for drug use disorders. Greater combat exposure was associated with higher risk for PTSD. While men faced higher risk of alcohol and drug use disorder, these two diagnoses were less prevalent and occurred at a slower rate.

The youngest active duty veterans (16-24 years) were at higher risk for all new mental health diagnoses and problems (except depression) than were active duty veterans older than 40 years. The researchers did find a continued increase in the prevalence of new mental health diagnoses, but only when following the veterans over a four year period from their first VA visit (after the 2-year period of free medical care expired).

Conclusion

Mental health diagnoses increased substantially after the start of the Iraq War among specific subgroups of returned veterans entering VA health care. The analyses showed a distinct difference based on age in mental health diagnoses between active duty and National Guard and Reserve veterans entering the VA health care. The authors offer several recommendations, including targeted screening and early intervention with evidence-based treatments tailored to the problems of particular subgroups of OIF and OEF veterans.