

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Multiple
Branches

The Association Between Discharge Status, Mental Health, and Substance Misuse Among Young Adult Veterans

Brooks Holliday, S., & Pedersen, E. R. (2017). The association between discharge status, mental health, and substance misuse among young adult veterans. *Psychiatry Research*, 256, 428-434. doi:10.1016/j.psychres.2017.07.011

SUMMARY: Veterans' well-being may be influenced by whether they received an honorable discharge. For this study, Veterans completed questionnaires about their mental health and substance use to examine the associations between discharge status and Veterans' well-being. Results indicated that Veterans who were not honorably discharged were more likely to experience negative outcomes than Veterans who were honorably discharged.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Veterans who received General discharges (i.e., when Service members do not fully meet Honorable discharge standards but otherwise had good performance) and Other Than Honorable discharges (OTH; i.e., when service members display conduct that substantially depart from military standards) were more likely to report mental health symptoms than Veterans who received Honorable discharges.
- Compared to Veterans who received Honorable discharges, those who received General and OTH discharges reported more alcohol and cannabis misuse.
- Veterans who received General and OTH discharges perceived psychological help seeking more negatively than Veterans who were honorably discharged.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Offer support groups for Service members who are about to be discharged less than honorably to promote a healthy life style after their discharge
- Educate Service members on military conduct standards periodically in order to decrease the rate of less than honorable discharge
- Provide outreach services that increase Service members' awareness of available supports after they are discharged from the military

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Encourage awareness campaigns in the military regarding how mental health problems may potentially cause misconduct and less than honorable discharges
- Recommend training for professionals working with Service members to better understand the relationship between discharge status and mental health
- Encourage the development of programs that support Service members who are about to be discharged less than honorably to lower their possibilities of having mental health problems and substance misuse

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METHODS

- Participants were recruited through social media and Veteran Affairs by flyers and clinician referrals; they qualified for the study if they were U.S. Veterans and were between the ages of 18 and 34 years.
- Measures included Veterans' mental health (depression, anxiety, and posttraumatic stress disorder), traumatic brain injury, substance misuse (alcohol and cannabis), and treatment attitude.
- Data were analyzed to examine the associations between Veterans' discharge status, mental health, and substance misuse.

PARTICIPANTS

- Participants were 734 Veterans (643 male and 91 female); the average age of participants was 28.29 years (age range = 19-34, SD = 3.39).
- Most participants (76%) were White, Black (1%), or identified as others (23%). The military branches that participants served in were Army (59%), Navy (9%), Air Force (7%), and Marines (25%).
- Most participants (84%) reported Honorable discharges, 12% reported General discharges, and 4% reported OTH discharges.

LIMITATIONS

- The participants were between 18 and 34 years; therefore, caution must be taken to generalize the results to Veterans who are over 34 years old.
- The cross-sectional design of the study does not allow for examining the causal relationship between discharge status and Veterans' mental health and substance use.
- The discharge status was self-reported by the Veterans; therefore, it may not truly represent Veterans' real discharge status.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Extend the age range of participants so that Veterans of different age groups can be represented
- Conduct longitudinal studies to investigate the potential causal relationship between discharge status and Veterans' mental health and substance use
- Use official military records to determine each Veteran's discharge status so that the data are more accurate

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