

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Army

Military Sexual Assault and Homeless Women Veterans: Clinical Correlates and Treatment Preferences

Decker, S. E., Rosenheck, R. A., Tsai, J., Hoff, R., & Harpaz-Rotem, I. (2013). Military sexual assault and homeless women veterans: Clinical correlates and treatment preferences. *Womens Health Issues, 23*(6), e373-e380.
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SUMMARY: Homeless female Veterans were interviewed about their experiences with military sexual assault, other potentially traumatic experiences, and mental health symptoms. Findings indicate that a large proportion of homeless female Veterans have experienced military sexual assault, and that military sexual assault is associated with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other psychiatric symptoms. However, those who have experienced military sexual assault also show more interest in and receptivity toward therapy than their peers who have not experienced military sexual assault.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Forty-one percent of homeless female Veteran participants reported experiencing sexual assault while in the military.
- Participants who experienced military sexual assault were significantly more likely to experience PTSD or other psychiatric symptoms, in addition to having lower self-esteem, quality of life, and an increased likelihood of experiencing recent nonviolent crimes.
- Those who reported experiencing military sexual assault were significantly more likely to also report experiencing various other forms of potentially traumatic experiences before age 18 compared to those without military sexual assault experiences.
- Participants who had experienced military sexual assault were more interested in therapy than those who had not experienced military sexual assault.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Provide special services for victims of military sexual assault (e.g., peer support programs, referrals to practitioners who provide evidence-based therapies)
- Continue to routinely screen Service members for mental health concerns and traumatic experiences (i.e., victimization and military sexual assault)
- Disseminate information regarding the prevalence of military sexual assault and the resource available to help Service members who were victims of an assault

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Recommend the development and evaluation of specific services for female Veterans who have experienced homelessness (e.g., support for both housing and possible mental health problems)
- Recommend routine screenings for military sexual assault and other potentially traumatic experiences
- Recommend education for service providers working with military families regarding military sexual assault

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METHODS

- Homeless Women Veterans Programs conducted program evaluations at 11 VA medical centers between January 2000 and December 2005.
- To meet eligibility requirements, participants had to be female, homeless, and a Veteran and had to have mental health or addiction problems.
- Participants who met the eligibility criteria were recruited via their case managers.

PARTICIPANTS

- Five hundred-nine homeless female Veterans completed interviews.
- The majority of participants were Black, Hispanic, or another racial/ethnic minority (66%), not married (94%), and had a mean age of 43.47 years (SD = 8.32).
- Participants had been homeless for a mean of 2.42 years (SD = 4.39).

LIMITATIONS

- Data were all based on self-reports provided in face-to-face interviews, so social desirability may have influenced results.
- Detailed demographic information was not provided for military branch, age range, break-down of racial/ethnic group, and marital status, limiting the generalizability of results.
- Several non-validated instruments were used to assess key concepts (e.g., childhood abuse, military sexual assault, victimization, interest in treatment), which could influence the validity of results.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Include groups of homeless female Veterans and female Veterans living in domicile to determine whether important differences exist between the two groups
- Utilize paper-based or online surveys to help participants feel more anonymous and reduce likelihood of social desirability
- Examine rates of military sexual assault among homeless male Veterans

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