

# Putting Research to Work for Military Families



**Focus:**  
Multiple  
Branches

## Criminal Justice Involvement, Trauma, and Negative Affect in Iraq and Afghanistan Era Veterans

Elbogen, E. B., Johnson, S. C., Newton, V. M., Straits-Troster, K., Vasterling, J. J., Wagner, H. R., & Beckham, J. C. (2012). Criminal justice involvement, trauma, and negative affect in Iraq and Afghanistan era veterans. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 80*(6), 1091-1102. doi:10.1037/a0029967

**SUMMARY:** Self-report survey data were used to examine the relationship between posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), traumatic brain injury, anger and irritability, as well as criminal justice involvement among Veterans who served after September 11, 2001. Results indicate that PTSD and irritability were associated with criminal involvement among this sample of Veterans.

### KEY FINDINGS:

- Veterans with PTSD and high irritability were most likely to have a criminal arrest after returning from deployment.
- Veterans who were young and male, came from troubled family backgrounds, abused substances, or had criminal backgrounds were at higher risk of breaking the law.
- Nine percent of participants reported arrests since returning from military service.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Develop courses for Service members that provide strategies for resolving negative affect, such as anger and irritability
- Offer classes for military families regarding ways to de-escalate emotional situations and how to best support the Service member coping with PTSD symptoms
- Disseminate information regarding the impact of PTSD on emotional and behavioral outcomes

### IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Recommend training for program staff working with Service members and their families regarding de-escalating tense situations (high anger, irritability)
- Recommend Service members are regularly assessed for persistent, debilitating negative affect (e.g., anger) postdeployment
- Continue to support programs and services that work with Service members and their families who are coping with PTSD symptoms are issues with the criminal system

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## METHODS

- This study was part of the National Post-Deployment Adjustment Survey using a random sample of Veterans who served on or after September 11, 2001 and were separated from Active Duty or served in the Reserves or National Guard.
- Possible participants were drawn by the U.S. Department of Veterans' Affairs Environmental Epidemiological Service (EES) in May 2009 from a random selection of a roster developed by Defense Manpower Data Center of over one million veterans who served in the U.S. military on or after September 11, 2001.
- Participants completed a paper or online survey that asked questions about criminal justice involvement, demographics, combat experiences, drug and alcohol abuse, PTSD, and traumatic brain injury.

## PARTICIPANTS

- One thousand three hundred and eighty-eight Veterans completed the survey (67% male). A weight-adjusted N = 1,102 was used to make the proportion of women (16%) comparable to U.S. Military.
- Seventy percent of participants were White, and the mean age was 36.2 years.
- Fifty-two percent were Army, 18% Air Force, 16% Navy, 13% Marines; 52% were Active Duty and 27% had multiple deployments.

## LIMITATIONS

- All measures were self-report and may result in over or underreporting of symptoms or arrest history.
- The data were cross-sectional and causal conclusions can not be drawn.
- Military experiences and mental health status of non-responders is unknown and may differ from responders; data could be biased.

## AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Evaluate the efficacy of interventions aimed at reducing anger and irritability in Service members to lower the risk of criminal involvement
- Investigate how these symptoms (e.g., anger, irritability, PTSD) change over time and how they impact long-term involvement in the justice system
- Continue to explore the different pathways to criminal arrests among Service members to better treat and reduce the risk of criminal involvement

## ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



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