

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Multiple
Branches

Sexual Victimization, Health Status, and VA Healthcare Utilization Among Lesbian and Bisexual OEF/OIF Veterans

Mattocks, K. M., Sadler, A., Yano, E. M., Krebs, E. E., Zephyrin, L., Brandt, C., ... Haskell, S. (2013). Sexual victimization, health status, and VA healthcare utilization among lesbian and bisexual OEF/OIF veterans. *Journal of General Internal Medicine*, 28(S2), 604-608. doi:10.1007/s11606-013-2357-9

SUMMARY: Three hundred sixty-five female OEF/OIF Veterans receiving care at two Veterans Affairs (VA) medical centers were surveyed to examine the prevalence of mental health and gender specific conditions, VA healthcare satisfaction, and trauma exposure. Lesbian and bisexual Veterans were significantly more likely to have experienced both military sexual and childhood sexual trauma compared to heterosexual Veterans.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Ten percent of the sample identified as either lesbian (5%) or bisexual (5%).
- Lesbian and bisexual Veterans were more likely to have been the victims of military or childhood sexual abuse compared to heterosexual Veterans.
- Lesbian, bisexual, and heterosexual Veterans did not differ significantly on most demographics; lesbian and bisexual Veterans were less likely to be married than heterosexual women.
- Lesbian and bisexual Veterans were more likely than heterosexual Veterans to rate their current mental health as worse than before deployment, and were more likely than heterosexual Veterans to be smokers and hazardous drinkers.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Develop services and outreach specifically to meet the needs of lesbian and bisexual Veterans
- Provide education and training to staff about lesbian and bisexual Veterans' health and psychological concerns
- Disseminate information regarding possible symptoms of mental health problems Service members may face after deployment and where individuals and families can find help for those problems

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Continue to support programs that provide staff training and education about the unique needs of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender health issues and how to provide culturally-responsive services
- Encourage the development and continuation of programs that can promote resilience in Service members, their partners, and children
- Promote reintegration programs that include attention to assisting Service members who have experienced a sexual assault find help upon their return

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METHODS

- Letters describing the study were sent to 3,251 female OEF/OIF female Veterans enrolled at one Midwestern and one Northeastern VHA facility; 11% returned surveys.
- Participants were asked questions about their sexual orientation, post-deployment health status, access to care/utilization, combat trauma, military and childhood sexual trauma, smoking habits, and hazardous drinking.
- Statistical analyses compared the demographics, health care utilization and clinical characteristics of lesbian and bisexual to heterosexual Veterans.

PARTICIPANTS

- Three hundred sixty-five female OEF/OIF Veterans participated in the study.
- The characteristics of lesbian and bisexual Veterans were the following: 55% were younger than 30 years old; 83% were White and 9% were Latina; 74% were not married, while 20% married; and 66% were Army, 20% were Air Force, and 9% were Marines.
- The characteristics of heterosexual Veterans were as follows: 56% were younger than 30 years old; 81% were White, 4% were Latina; 52% were not married, while 35% were married; and 69% were Army, 17% were Air Force, and 3% were Marines.

LIMITATIONS

- The sample of lesbian and bisexual Veterans was small and may not generalize to other Service members.
- There were no data on pre-military mental health concerns; elevated rates of mental health issues and problem drinking behavior could have made these Veterans more vulnerable to military sexual trauma.
- This research was part of a larger study that was not focused on lesbian and bisexual Veterans.
- The researchers combined lesbians with the bisexuals in analyses that could have mis-estimated the associations with other variables.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Expand this study to include a larger and more diverse sample of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender Service members receiving care at a variety of hospitals across the country
- Examine other issues of concern to lesbian and bisexual Service members
- Gather qualitative data on services, resources, and other supports that help to increase the likelihood female Service members will disclose sexual assaults and other traumas

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