

# Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:  
Multiple  
Branches

## Military Sexual Trauma Among Homeless Veterans

Pavao, J., Turchik, J. A., Hyun, J. K., Karpenko, J., Saweikis, M., McCutcheon, S., ... Kimerling, R. (2013). Military sexual trauma among homeless veterans. *Journal of General Internal Medicine*, 28(S2), S536-S541.  
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**SUMMARY:** Data from homeless Veterans who visited the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) between October 2009 and September 2010 were analyzed to examine gender and mental health differences between those who had experienced military sexual trauma and those who had not. Homeless Veterans who had experienced military sexual trauma were significantly more likely to have mental health concerns than homeless Veterans who had not experienced military sexual trauma. Females were significantly more likely than males to report having experienced military sexual trauma.

### KEY FINDINGS:

- The prevalence of military sexual trauma was significantly higher among women (40%) than men (3%).
- Homeless Veteran women who had experienced military sexual trauma had significantly more mental health concerns than homeless Veteran women who had not experienced military sexual trauma, including an increased incidence of depression, PTSD, substance use disorders, anxiety disorders, bipolar and personality disorders, and suicidal ideation.
- Homeless Veteran men who experienced military sexual trauma were significantly more likely to have more mental health concerns than homeless Veteran men without military sexual trauma experience across all domains of mental health issues studied, with the exception of adjustment disorders.
- Homeless Veteran men and women who had experienced military sexual trauma visited mental health care services significantly more frequently than homeless Veterans without military sexual trauma experience.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Provide special services for victims of military sexual trauma (e.g., opportunities for peer support, referrals to practitioners who provide evidence-based treatments)
- Educate couples who have a history of trauma before deployment on positive coping skills
- Collaborate with community programs to offer appropriate referrals to help Service members and their families receive appropriate services after a trauma

### IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Recommend annual screenings to try to uncover military sexual trauma so as to improve timely referrals to mental health services
- Continue to advocate for and support comprehensive services and research related to victims of military sexual trauma
- Continue to provide support for programs that work to increase family readiness

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## METHODS

- Data were collected by multiple databases within the VHA to gather information on homeless Veterans seeking care between October 2009 and September 2010.
- Military sexual trauma was assessed by asking patients whether they had ever received unwanted sexual touching, or been pressured or forced to complete sexual acts while in the military.
- Mental health status data were collected from the Agency for Health Research and Quality's Clinical Classifications Software, including information on depressive disorders, PTSD, substance- and alcohol-abuse disorders, anxiety disorders, bipolar disorders, adjustment disorders, personality disorders, schizophrenia, and suicidal ideation.

## PARTICIPANTS

- Participants included 126,598 homeless Veterans (female = 8,915; male = 117,683).
- The majority of homeless Veterans were White (48%) or Black (42%) and were divorced (44%) or single (39%). Branch of military service was not provided.
- Most female participants were between the ages of 45-54 years (39%), whereas males were split between 45-54 years (37%), and 54-64 years (37%).

## LIMITATIONS

- This study only included Veterans who had identified themselves as homeless with the VHA, so results may not generalize to homeless Veterans that have not self-identified as homeless or sought care from the VHA.
- Increased susceptibility to interpersonal violence (IPV) in general may be a greater risk factor for mental health issues that was not addressed in this study, making it difficult to determine if military sexual trauma is indeed a risk-factor.
- The cross-sectional design limits causal inference.

## AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Study the utilization of mental health services by homeless Veterans to determine overall utilization rates, and whether homeless Veterans experience any obstacles to receiving services
- Examine the relation between military sexual trauma and previous interpersonal violence to determine if IPV is a greater risk-factor for mental health issues
- Collect longitudinal data from Service members about their experiences of military sexual trauma to determine if certain risk factors increase or decrease over time

## ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



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