

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Multiple
Branches

Service Members and Veterans With Major Traumatic Limb Loss from Vietnam War and OIF/OEF Conflicts: Survey Methods, Participants, and Summary Findings

Reiber, G. A., McFarland, L. V., Hubbard, S., Maynard, C., Blough, D. K., Gambel, J. M., & Smith, D. G. (2010). Service members and Veterans with major traumatic limb loss from Vietnam War and OIF/OEF conflicts: Survey methods, participants, and summary findings. *Journal of Rehabilitation Research and Development*, 47(4), 275-298. doi:10.1682/jrrd.2010.01.0009

SUMMARY: A sample of 298 Vietnam and 283 Iraq and Afghanistan Service members/Veterans who sustained major traumatic limb loss during combat completed a self-report survey about their injuries, mental and physical health, quality of life, and their use and satisfaction with a prosthetic device. Health status was rated as good to excellent for a vast majority of respondents; most reported that they could cope with and had successfully adjusted to life with their prostheses.

KEY FINDINGS:

- The 298 Vietnam Veteran participants lost 378 limbs on average 38.6 years prior to the study. The 283 OIF/OEF participants lost 351 limbs on average 3.1 years prior.
- Overall good to excellent health status was reported by 71% of the Vietnam and 86% of the OIF/OEF participants.
- Ninety-three percent of the Vietnam and 97% of the OIF/OEF prostheses users report that they can cope with their prostheses; 94% report adjusting successfully to life with a prosthesis.
- Twenty-one percent of OIF/OEF participants returned to Active Duty status after the injury.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Offer supportive services to assist military families in understanding and coping with the challenges associated with limb loss
- Provide concrete information on normative versus problematic children's responses to having a parent who have experienced loss of a limb
- Host support groups for Service members who have phantom pain, residual limb and back pain, and skin problems

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Continue to support prostheses development and Service members rehabilitation to improve physical and mental health, mobility, and quality of life
- Continue to support programs that address the unique challenges faced by deployed Service members with physical injuries and loss of limbs
- Recommend education for service providers around the possible effects of deployment on Service members' families

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METHODS

- A group of rehabilitation and surgery clinicians developed the survey to address key issues for Veterans and Service members with major upper- and lower-limb loss.
- Five hundred-one Vietnam and 541 Iraq or Afghanistan Veterans with major traumatic limb loss were identified to participate; 65% of the Vietnam and 59% of the OIF/OEF Veterans that were contacted agreed to participate.
- Participants were invited to participate via mail; they could complete the survey online, via telephone, or on paper.
- Demographic information, combat-associated injuries, mental and physical health status, prosthetic and assistive device use and satisfaction, and service utilization were assessed.

PARTICIPANTS

- Two hundred ninety-eight Vietnam and 283 OIF/OEF Veterans with major limb loss due to participation in combat theater were included in the study.
- The following are details on the Vietnam cohort: mean age was 60.7 years (SD = 3); 100% were male; and 81% were White, 9% were Black, and 7% were Latino.
- The following are details on the OIF/OEF cohort: mean age was 29.3 years (SD = 5.8); 97% were male; and 73% were White, 10% were Black, and 9% were Latino/Latina.

LIMITATIONS

- Responders may have been at higher functioning levels than those who did not respond which may have influenced the outcomes of this study.
- Participants who chose to respond via mail, telephone, or online may have differed in important ways, which was not accounted for in the analyses.
- Recall, particularly for the Vietnam participants, may have been impaired due to time since injury and associated traumas or head injuries.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Explore in more detail the challenges experienced by Service members with phantom pain, residual limb and back pain, and skin disorders
- Gather data from spouses/partners of Service members with traumatic limb loss to elucidate their experience in dealing with Service members' loss of limb and associated challenges
- Conduct studies about how loss of limbs impact Service members' and their spouses' interest in leaving military service

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