

# Putting Research to Work for Military Families



**Focus:**  
Multiple  
Branches

## Socioeconomic Disparities in Sleep Duration Among Veterans of the US Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan

Widome, R., Jensen, A., & Fu, S.S. (2015). Socioeconomic disparities in sleep duration among veterans of the US wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. *American Journal of Public Health*, 105 (2), e70-e74. doi:10.2105/AJPH.2014.302375

**SUMMARY:** Quality and duration of sleep is an important component of one's health for the general population and especially so for Veterans. Associations between short sleep duration and greater number of deployments, more children in the household, and a lower subjective social status-including perceptions of racism or discrimination-relative to one's community or the nation generally were observed in this study of OEF/OIF/OND Veterans.

### KEY FINDINGS:

- Over 45% of participants indicated getting an average of 6 hours or less of sleep nightly.
- Female Veterans reported greater sleep duration, an average of 6.75 hours in contrast to previous studies.
- Factors such as having a greater number of deployments, more children in household, lower food security and a lower subjective social status compared to the United States or one's own community were strongly related to having fewer hours of sleep.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Assist Service members and families by navigating and overcoming socioeconomic stressors to improve their sleep, overall well-being, and long-term health
- Provide additional support for Service members and families who have experienced discrimination
- Include sleep quality and duration as a significant part of health curriculum to Service members and families

### IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Recommend that Service members be extended an offer for sleep consultations as a part of an overall health and wellness program
- Highlight the value of collaboration among Department of Defense programs with community-based organizations to care for Service members who may be encountering discrimination
- Encourage awareness campaigns on self-care and self-esteem in relation to subjective social status for Service members who may be suffering from poor self-worth and, subsequently, poor sleep

This product is the result of a partnership funded by the Department of Defense between the Office of Military Community and Family Policy and the USDA's National Institute of Food and Agriculture through a grant/cooperative agreement with The University of Minnesota.



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## METHODS

- A random selection of 1,200 male and 800 female OEF/OIF/OND Veterans who had interacted with the Minneapolis Veterans Affairs (VA) Health Care System were mailed an invitation to participate, and 867 were included in the final sample.
- Gender, age, and posttraumatic stress disorder diagnosis were collected from VA administrative data while the remaining data came from self-reports.
- Associations between demographic, socioeconomic status, discrimination-related variables and sleep duration were examined.

## PARTICIPANTS

- Veterans of OEF/OIF/OND who had interacted with the Minneapolis VA Health Care System were recruited.
- Over half (55%) of the participants were male and 90% were White. Most (56%) were married but half of the sample had no children in their household.
- The majority (63%) of participants had one deployment and most (53%) were employed, while slightly over a quarter (27%) of participants experienced either low or very low food security.

## LIMITATIONS

- There were noteworthy differences between responders and non-responders who were not in the final study sample—such as responders being older, more likely to be female, and less likely to have a PTSD diagnosis—meaning selection bias may have played a factor in the overall results.
- The participants were predominately White, which potentially reduces the ability to uncover perceived racism-related difference.
- The study was cross-sectional, meaning that the data were collected and analyzed without the ability to determine causality.

## AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Compare Service members to civilians to measure any sleep duration differences, accounting for socio-economic factors between the groups
- Conduct a similar study with a more racially diverse sample in order to better examine the differences in perceived racism as a potential factor related to short sleep duration
- Expand a similar study to include spouses of Service members and whether they are sharing similar sleep disruption

## ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



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