

Poverty and Homelessness Among US Veterans

INTRODUCTION

Recent estimates suggest that there are currently over 610,000 homeless persons in the United States and of these nearly 10%, or 58,000, are veterans.¹ Veterans consistently had greater odds than nonveterans of experiencing homelessness.² Homelessness is associated with an array of deleterious health problems, including malnutrition, violence, incarceration, diabetes, tuberculosis exposure, substance use, and mental health diagnoses.^{3,5} Additionally, lack of resources available to homeless individuals is associated with disproportionate rates of hospitalization and emergency department utilization.⁶

Among homeless veterans, comorbid mental health and substance abuse problems are highly prevalent, with studies suggesting that nearly half experience significant mental illness and 70% report substance use problems.^{7,8} Veterans with comorbid alcohol or drug use disorders have more extensive homeless histories when compared to homeless veterans with only alcohol or drug disorders, while those with no history of substance use disorders have the least extensive homeless histories.⁹ Research on veterans has also shown that hazardous drinking increases the risk of homelessness one year later.¹⁰ Furthermore, alcohol use increases the length of homelessness and significantly prevents a successful exit from homelessness to stable housing.^{11,13}

substance use among homeless veterans decreases opportunities for obtaining housing or employment, increases levels of interpersonal conflict, increases risks for HIV infection and other serious health problems, and increases exposure to criminal behavior, whether through arrest or victimization.^{14,16} Researchers have also identified recent incarceration as a risk factor for significant mental health and substance abuse among homeless veterans compared to non-homeless veterans.²⁵ Veterans experiencing housing instability have been found to be at greater risk for mental distress and suicidal ideation compared to veterans with stable housing. Researchers found that 12% of older homeless veterans in a housing program reported suicidal ideation, which was predicted by psychiatric disorders and substance abuse. Depression and violent behavior have also been shown to be among the strongest predictors of suicidal behavior among homeless veterans.¹⁹ Homeless veterans also experience greater odds of chronic physical health problems compared to nonveterans.^{20,22} Such medical concerns may include chronic pain or infectious diseases, including HIV and Hepatitis C virus.²³

Risk of Homelessness Among US Veterans

For male veterans, those in the 45- to 54-year-old age group made up 41% of the homeless veterans and also had the highest risk for becoming homeless. This cohort, whose key characteristic was service during the initial years of the All Volunteer Force, instituted in 1973, has continuously been the veteran age group at highest risk for homelessness as these veterans have aged over the last 2 decades. Similarly, members of the general population who are now aged 45 to 54 have continuously been at the highest risk for homelessness.

Among women, particularly black women, the youngest age groups were at highest risk for homelessness. Women who served in more recent conflicts such as those in Iraq and Afghanistan are more likely than older female veterans to be homeless²⁴. Among women in general, the period of highest vulnerability for homelessness is during the time period when they are heading families with young children²⁵. Because younger cohorts are most at risk, female veterans stand to benefit more from existing homelessness-prevention efforts tied to reentering civilian life, which focus on housing needs, than from efforts that combine housing with health care services.

Veterans who are living in poverty are more vulnerable to homelessness, an effect that is magnified by black race. For example, for the youngest age group living in poverty, more than 50% of black male veterans and more than 30% of black female veterans were homeless (compared with only 7% for nonblack males and 12% for nonblack females), according to HMIS data. These alarmingly high rates suggest that homelessness-prevention activities—including tenant/landlord mediation or short-term rent and utility payments—among veterans may be particularly effective because they can target a finite poverty population and can further refine this effort by focusing on black veterans.

Too Many Veterans Battle With Hunger

Millions of veterans face food insecurity. According to a U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Economic Research Service report, 11.1 percent of veterans between the ages of 18 to 64 lived in households reporting food insecurity. After controlling for demographic characteristics that normally predict food insecurity, such as age, educational attainment, and income, this report found that risk of food insecurity is 7.4 percent higher among veterans than nonveterans ages 18–64.

Certain subgroups of veterans are particularly at risk for food insecurity. Pooler et al found 22.5 percent of veterans earning low incomes (e.g., below 200 percent of the federal poverty level) reported food insecurity, especially those that were younger than 65, unemployed, in poor health, or had experienced serious psychological distress.

Higher rates of food insecurity are associated with “medical and trauma-related comorbidities, as well as unmet social needs including housing instability,” according to a study focused on veterans screened by the U.S. Veterans Health Administration. Additionally, this study found that veterans of color and women veterans were at higher risk for food insecurity.

Veterans may be at higher risk of food insecurity because military service and/or resulting work-limiting disability may affect educational attainment and job opportunities, and therefore, earnings. In addition, veterans, especially those who experience combat, have a higher likelihood of poor physical and mental health conditions that may result in higher medical expenses.²⁶

Substance Use Disorder

In addition to combat exposure and its associated physical and mental health problems, substance use is commonly cited as an essential risk factor for criminal justice involvement among veterans. Across different samples of justice-involved veterans, estimates suggest that 21% to 71% have alcohol use disorder and 26% to 65% have drug use disorder.²⁷ Research

also shows that substance use disorder and substance abuse are associated with 2 to 3.5 times greater odds of arrest among veterans.^{28,29} In 2013, a study of more than 99,000 male veterans who participated in the VA's substance use treatment programs indicated that 58% of the patients had been arrested three or more times and 46% reported one or more criminal convictions.³⁰

Recommendation

To effectively tackle homelessness among veterans, a robust, multifaceted approach is essential. Here are the imperative components that must be prioritized:

- **Adopt the Housing First Model:** We must implement a Housing First strategy that provides stable, permanent housing for veterans without prerequisites. This fundamental step is critical for establishing a secure foundation for recovery and long-term stability.
- **Integrate Support Services:** It is crucial to ensure that access to integrated services, including mental health care, substance abuse treatment, job training, and social services, is readily available. This coordinated care is vital for addressing the complex challenges veterans encounter.
- **Enhance Outreach Programs:** Increasing outreach efforts to identify and engage homeless veterans is non-negotiable. Partnerships with local organizations, shelters, and community centers must be strengthened to effectively reach those in need.
- **Create Employment Opportunities:** We must develop job training programs specifically designed for veterans to facilitate their reintegration into the workforce. Collaborating with businesses to create job opportunities for veterans is essential for sustainable employment.
- **Foster Community Engagement:** It's critical to encourage active community involvement and awareness campaigns that highlight the challenges faced by homeless veterans. Educating community members about how they can contribute is key to building support.
- **Advocate for Policy Change:** We need to advocate fiercely for policies that provide adequate funding and resources to combat veteran homelessness at local, state, and federal levels. This will ensure programs are not only sustainable but also effective.
- **Implement Peer Support Program:** Establishing peer support programs where veterans can share experiences and assist one another is vital. This initiative fosters a sense of community and significantly encourages recovery.
- **Invest in Prevention Programs:** We must prioritize prevention efforts targeting at-risk veterans before they become homeless. This includes providing financial counseling, mental health support, and family services.

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