

FAQs About Homeless Veterans



FAQ ABOUT HOMELESS VETERANS

Who are homeless veterans?

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) states that the nation's homeless veterans are predominantly male, with roughly 9% being female. The majority are single; live in urban areas; and suffer from mental illness, alcohol and/or substance abuse, or co-occurring disorders. About 11% of the adult homeless population are veterans.

Roughly 45% of all homeless veterans are African American or Hispanic, despite only accounting for 10.4% and 3.4% of the U.S. veteran population, respectively.

Homeless veterans are younger on average than the total veteran population. Approximately 9% are between the ages of 18 and 30, and 41% are between the ages of 31 and 50. Conversely, only 5% of all veterans are between the ages of 18 and 30, and less than 23% are between 31 and 50.

America's homeless veterans have served in World War II, the Korean War, Cold War, Vietnam War, Grenada, Panama, Lebanon, Persian Gulf War, Afghanistan and Iraq (OEF/OIF), and the military's anti-drug cultivation efforts in South America. Nearly half of homeless veterans served during the Vietnam era. Two-thirds served our country for at least three years, and one-third were stationed in a war zone.

About 1.4 million other veterans, meanwhile, are considered at risk of homelessness due to poverty, lack of support networks, and dismal living conditions in overcrowded or substandard housing.

How many homeless veterans are there?

Although flawless counts are impossible to come by – the transient nature of homeless populations presents a major difficulty – the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) estimates (<https://www.hudexchange.info/resources/documents/2015-AHAR-Part-1.pdf>) that 47,725 veterans are homeless on any given night.

Approximately 12,700 veterans of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and Operation New Dawn (OND) were homeless in 2010. The number of young homeless veterans is increasing, but only constitutes 8.8% of the overall homeless veteran population.

Why are veterans homeless?

In addition to the complex set of factors influencing all homelessness – extreme shortage of affordable housing, livable income and access to health care – a large number of displaced and at-risk veterans live with lingering effects of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and substance abuse, which are compounded by a lack of family and social support networks. Additionally, military occupations and training are not always transferable to the civilian workforce, placing some veterans at a disadvantage when competing for employment.

A top priority for homeless veterans is secure, safe, clean housing that offers a supportive environment free of drugs and alcohol.

Doesn't VA take care of homeless veterans?

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To a certain extent, yes. Each year, VA's specialized homelessness programs provide health care to almost 150,000 homeless veterans and other services to more than 112,000 veterans. Additionally, more than 40,000 homeless veterans receive compensation or pension benefits each month.

Since 1987, VA's programs for homeless veterans have emphasized collaboration with such community service providers to help expand services to more veterans in crisis. VA, using its own resources or in partnerships with others, has secured nearly 15,000 residential rehabilitative and transitional beds and more than 30,000 permanent beds for homeless veterans throughout the nation. These partnerships are credited with reducing the number of homeless veterans by 70% since 2005. More information about VA homeless programs and initiatives can be found here (<http://www1.va.gov/HOMELESS/Programs.asp>).

What services do veterans need?

Veterans need a coordinated effort that provides secure housing, nutritional meals, basic physical health care, substance abuse care and aftercare, mental health counseling, personal development and empowerment. Additionally, veterans need job assessment, training and placement assistance.

NCHV strongly believes that all programs to assist homeless veterans must focus on helping them obtain and sustain employment.

What seems to work best?

The most effective programs for homeless and at-risk veterans are community-based, nonprofit, "veterans helping veterans" groups. Programs that seem to work best feature transitional housing with the camaraderie of living in structured, substance-free environments with fellow veterans who are succeeding at bettering themselves.

Government money, while important, is limited, and available services are often at capacity. It is critical, therefore, that community groups reach out to help provide the support, resources and opportunities that most Americans take for granted: housing, employment and health care. Veterans who participate in collaborative programs are afforded more services and have higher chances of becoming tax-paying, productive citizens again.

What can I do?

- **Determine the need in your community.** Visit with homeless veteran service providers. Contact your mayor's office for a list of providers, or search the NCHV database (http://nchv.org/index.php/help/help/locate_organization/).
- **Involve others.** If you are not already part of an organization, align yourself with a few other people who are interested in attacking this issue.
- **Participate in local homeless coalitions.** Chances are, there is one in your community. If not, this could be the time to bring people together around this critical need.
- **Make a donation** to your local homeless veteran service provider.
- **Contact your elected officials.** Discuss what is being done in your community for homeless veterans.

HOMELESS VETERANS FACTS

DEFINITIONS, DEMOGRAPHICS AND ESTIMATED NUMBERS

What is the definition of "homeless"?

The United States Code (<http://uscode.house.gov/>) contains the official federal definition of homelessness, which is commonly used because it controls federal funding streams. In Title 42, Chapter 119, Subchapter 1, "homeless" is defined as follows:

§11302. General definition of homeless individual
(a) In general

For purposes of this chapter, the term "homeless" or "homeless individual or homeless person" includes—

1. an individual who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence; and
2. an individual who has a primary nighttime residence that is—
 - A. a supervised publicly or privately operated shelter designed to provide temporary living accommodations (including welfare hotels, congregate shelters, and transitional housing for the mentally ill);
 - B. an institution that provides a temporary residence for individuals intended to be institutionalized; or
 - C. a public or private place not designed for, or ordinarily used as, a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings."

Who is a veteran?

In general, most organizations use U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) eligibility criteria to determine which veterans can access services. Eligibility for VA benefits is based upon discharge from active military service under other than dishonorable conditions. Benefits vary according to factors connected with the type and length of military service. To see details of eligibility criteria for VA compensation and benefits, view the current benefits manual here (http://www1.va.gov/opa/publications/benefits_book.asp).

DEMOGRAPHICS OF HOMELESS VETERANS

- 11% of the homeless adult population are veterans
- 20% of the male homeless population are veterans
- 68% reside in principal cities
- 32% reside in suburban/rural areas
- 51% of individual homeless veterans have disabilities
- 50% have serious mental illness

- 70% have substance abuse problems
- 57% are white males, compared to 38% of non-veterans
- 50% are age 51 or older, compared to 19% non-veterans

INCARCERATED VETERANS

In May 2007, the Bureau of Justice Statistics released a special report on incarcerated veterans. The following are highlights of the report, "Veterans in State and Federal Prison, 2004," which assessed data based on personal interviews conducted in 2004:

Numbers and profiles:

- There were an estimated 140,000 veterans held in state and federal prisons. State prisons held 127,500 of these veterans, and federal prisons held 12,500.
- Male veterans were half as likely as other men to be held in prison (630 prisoners per 100,000 veterans, compared to 1,390 prisoners per 100,000 non-veteran U.S. residents). This gap had been increasing since the 1980s.
- Veterans in both state and federal prison were almost exclusively male (99 percent).
- The median age (45) of veterans in state prison was 12 years older than that of non-veterans (33). Non-veteran inmates (55%) were nearly four times more likely than veterans (14%) to be under the age of 35.
- Veterans were much better educated than other prisoners. Nearly all veterans in state prison (91%) reported at least a high school diploma or GED, while an estimated 40% of non-veterans lacked either.

Military backgrounds:

- The U.S. Army accounted for 46% of veterans living in the United States yet 56% of veterans in state prison.
- In 2004, the percentage of state prisoners who reported prior military service in the U.S. Armed Forces (10%) was half of the level reported in 1986 (20%).
- Most state prison veterans (54%) reported service during a wartime era, while 20% saw combat duty. In federal prison two-thirds of veterans had served during wartime, and one quarter had seen combat.
- Six in 10 incarcerated veterans received an honorable discharge.

Mental health:

- Veteran status was unrelated to inmate reports of mental health problems.
- Combat service was not related to prevalence of recent mental health problems. Just over half of both combat and non-combat veterans reported any history of mental health problems.
- Veterans were less likely than non-veteran prisoners to have used drugs. Forty-two percent of veterans used drugs in the month before their offense compared to 58% of non-veterans.
- No relationship between veteran status and alcohol dependence or abuse was found.

Convictions and sentencing:

- Veterans had shorter criminal histories than non-veterans in state prison.
- Veterans reported longer average sentences than non-veterans, regardless of offense type.
- Over half of veterans (57%) were serving time for violent offenses, compared to 47% of non-veterans.
- Nearly one in four veterans in state prison were sex offenders, compared to one in 10 non-veterans.
- Veterans were more likely than other violent offenders in state prison to have victimized females and minors.
- More than a third of veterans in state prison had maximum sentences of at least 20 years, life or death.

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SOURCES

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