

Homelessness soars among US Iraq and Afghanistan war veterans

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According to a new government report, the number of US Iraq and Afghanistan war veterans who are homeless or at risk for becoming homeless is rising at an alarming rate, more than doubling over the past two years. The US Veterans Administration said that through the end of September 2012, 26,531 veterans were living on the street, at risk of losing their homes, staying in temporary housing or receiving federal vouchers to pay rent. That compares to 10,500 in 2010.

The numbers cited are only those veterans the VA is aware of. The Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) estimates that 62,619 veterans are homeless on a given night over the course of a year, and more than twice that number are at risk of homelessness.

The National Coalition for Homeless Veterans estimates that some 1.5 million veterans are at risk of homelessness due to poverty, lack of support networks and dismal, overcrowded, living conditions. Veterans are much more likely than the population at large to suffer from homelessness, comprising 23 percent of the homeless population even though only 8 percent of the population at large can claim veteran status.

Afghanistan War veterans are particularly at risk because of their young age and their exposure to combat with its psychological effects. Some seventy percent of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans had exposure to combat. About 30,700 are expected to leave the military in each of the next four years as the military reduces its ranks. About 13 percent of homeless Afghan and Iraq war veterans are women, and almost 50 percent of all homeless veterans are African American.

The increase in homelessness among younger veterans comes despite a campaign by the Veterans Administration to identify and assist veterans that has resulted in a reported overall decline in the number of

homeless veterans over the past several years. About 22,000 veterans were assisted last year, still only a fraction of the total number homeless or at risk. The agency is nowhere near on target to achieve the stated goal of the Obama administration of eliminating homelessness among veterans by 2015, and the VA faces the possibility of funding cuts.

The veteran population makes up a wide range of ex-military personnel, from those who served in WWII to Afghanistan and Iraq. Vietnam and post-Vietnam veterans comprise the largest proportion of the homeless population. However, recent veterans often have severe disabilities that are correlated with homelessness.

There are many factors behind the high level of homelessness among veterans. In addition to the problems of lack of affordable housing, lack of decent paying jobs and inadequate access to health care, many veterans suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and substance abuse. Further, the training that veterans receive in the military is not always useful when it comes to seeking civilian employment.

While most programs that assist the homeless are targeted to families with children, most veterans are single adults.

A corollary of the high incidence of veteran homelessness has been a rise in rural homelessness. Experts at the 2012 National Rural Housing Conference held earlier this month in Washington, DC reported that homelessness is growing in many rural areas because youth from small towns are 21.5 percent more likely to join the military than youth from urban areas.

The Center for American Progress reports that according to unpublished 2011 US Bureau of Labor Statistics data, 30.2 percent of veterans age 18 to 24 were unemployed, and nearly 1 in 10 with disabilities

were unemployed. More than 968,000 veterans from the WWII era to the present lived had lived in poverty in the past year in 2010.

A new Yale University study of recent veterans participating in the Housing and Urban Development-Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing (HUDVASH) program found a lack of care for those suffering from PTSD. The study assessed nearly 100 Iraq and Afghanistan war veterans who went through the program between January 2008 and April 2011.

The study found that the typical homeless veteran of Iraq and Afghanistan was younger and was less likely to have had a criminal record than veterans of other military conflicts.

The Yale report also found that the majority of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans had been exposed to combat and had been diagnosed with PTSD, yet did not receive any Veterans Administration service connected disability payments. Of those who did receive service-related disability payments the male veterans reported receiving a paltry \$641.94 a month and females just \$553.86.

Sixty-three percent of male homeless veterans and 77 percent of female homeless veterans suffered from PTSD and/or a mood disorder. Of these more than 90 percent of male veterans and 75 percent of female veterans suffered from combat-related PTSD. The number of recent veterans suffering from combat-related PTSD is much higher than previous groups of veterans studied, who suffered only an 8-12 percent rate of PTSD.

Joe Leal, an Iraq war veteran and a founder of the Vet Hunters Project told *NBC News*, "It used to be where a homeless vet was typically about 60 years old. Now they're 22 years old. And a lot of them are female veterans who have witnessed combat. They are coming back messed up. They are coming back homeless."

Leal said that it was not uncommon to find Army reservists, who are still part of the military, but are homeless. "These guys show up for work looking sharp. Then they leave at the end of the day and go sleep in a Chevy."



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