

# HOMELESSNESS IN AMERICA: FOCUS ON VETERANS



**UNITED STATES INTERAGENCY  
COUNCIL ON HOMELESSNESS**

## Introduction

To prevent and end homelessness in America, we need to have a clear understanding of who is at risk of homelessness and who experiences homelessness. We also need to be attentive to differences within and between subpopulations of people who are at-risk or are experiencing homelessness. In our *Homelessness in America* series, we are summarizing the most relevant data and research regarding different subpopulations to help inform the work we must do, together, across the federal government, states, and local communities to end homelessness once and for all.

In this *Focus on Veterans* brief, we review data and information that help us answer the following questions:

- What is the scale of Veteran homelessness?
- What do we know about the Veterans who experience homelessness?
- What do we know about patterns of homelessness among Veterans?
- What do we know about Veterans' risks for homelessness?
- What are the most significant gaps in available data and our current understanding of Veterans who experience homelessness?

Future briefs in this series will focus on unaccompanied youth, families with children, individual adults, and people experiencing chronic homelessness.

### What is the scale of Veteran homelessness?

Just over 9% of all adults experiencing homelessness in the United States are Veterans of the U.S. military.

That means that on any given day, an estimated 40,056 Veterans experience homelessness in America, according to Point-in-Time counts conducted in January 2017 by communities across the country. Of that estimated number, two-thirds (24,690) were staying in shelters or transitional housing programs, while the other one-third (15,366) were unsheltered, living in cars, in encampments, or on the streets. And while there are Veterans experiencing homelessness in every state, nearly one-third reside in just two states, California (24.5%) and Florida (7.4%), according to PIT estimates.

Over the course of FY 2016, homelessness services programs across America provided emergency shelter or transitional housing to 124,709 Veterans, according to HUD's Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) data. In addition, the Department of Veterans Affairs' Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) program, which provides rapid re-housing assistance, served 67,581 Veterans in FY 2016. The federal government also funds nearly 90,000 permanent supportive housing opportunities dedicated to Veterans and their family members through the HUD-VASH program.

Through a concerted effort at the federal, state, and local level to increase opportunities for Veterans to access permanent housing, the number of Veterans experiencing homelessness in America on any given day was reduced by an estimated 46% between 2010 and 2017. During that same timeframe, the number of Veterans experiencing unsheltered homelessness was reduced by an estimated 50%.

## What do we know about the Veterans who experience homelessness?

Information regarding the demographic characteristics of Veterans who experience homelessness comes primarily from data about sheltered homelessness obtained from HMIS, as reported in HUD's Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress.

**Gender representation:** Most Veterans who experience homelessness are men over age 50 living in urban areas. Among Veterans experiencing sheltered homelessness in 2016, about 9 in 10 (91%) were men, about the same as for all U.S. Veterans.<sup>1</sup> Women make up about 9% of Veterans who were experiencing homelessness during 2016, and women also make up about 9% of the overall Veteran population in the U.S. While the number of Veteran women in the U.S. has increased significantly in recent years, the number of women Veterans experiencing sheltered homelessness in 2016 was about the same as in 2009.

Veteran women are more than twice as likely as non-Veteran women to experience homelessness.<sup>2</sup> The characteristics of Veteran women who experience homelessness are different from Veteran men. More than one third of Veteran women who experience homelessness have experienced military sexual trauma, and they have lower rates of substance abuse and mental health problems than Veteran men who experience homelessness.

Women make up more than 15% of all active duty members of the armed forces, and are expected to be about 12% of the nation's Veterans by 2025. With this increase, it is likely that there will be an increasing number of women Veterans who are experiencing or at risk of homelessness in the coming years.<sup>3</sup>

**Household composition:** Less than 3% of Veterans experiencing homelessness (2.9%) were in families with children. Veteran women experiencing homelessness are more likely to be a part of a family with children, compared to Veteran men. Of the 67,581 Veterans served through the Supportive Services for Veteran Families Rapid Re-Housing program, 12.6% were in households with children.<sup>4</sup> The average household size was 3.6 people.

**Representation of older adults:** Nearly 6 out of 10 (59.1%) Veterans experiencing sheltered homelessness in 2016 were age 51 or older, and the number of elderly Veterans (age 62 and older) experiencing homelessness increased 54.3% between 2009 and 2016.<sup>5</sup> More than half of all Veterans who accessed a VA specialized homeless



<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. (December 2017) The 2016 Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR) to Congress Part 2

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs National Center on Homelessness Among Veterans (July 2016). Homeless Evidence & Research Roundtable Series: *Women Veterans and Homelessness*. Accessed at: <https://www.va.gov/HOMELESS/nchav/docs/HERS-Womens-Proceedings.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Byrne, T. (August 2016). U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs National Center on Homelessness Among Veterans Research Brief: *Emerging Populations: Female, OEF/OIF/OND, and Older Veterans*

<sup>4</sup> U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) FY 2016 Annual Report

<sup>5</sup> 2016 AHAR part 2

program or were identified as experiencing homelessness when they accessed VA health care in 2015 were aged 55 and older.<sup>6</sup>

Older Veterans are expected to be a majority of the population of Veterans who experience or are at risk of homelessness in the coming years. As members of this group get older, they are likely to have increasingly complex and age-related needs. Among participants in the VA's transitional housing programs, a significantly greater proportion of Veterans age 55 or older have serious medical problems, compared to younger Veterans, making them especially vulnerable to experiencing negative consequences related to homelessness.<sup>7</sup>



**Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), and Operation New Dawn (OND) Veterans:** Compared to the number of older Veterans, those who served in the recent conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, who are part of the larger cohort of Veterans who have served in the post-9/11 era, make up a relatively small but growing number of Veterans experiencing or at risk of homelessness. This group of Veterans is more racially diverse than older Veterans, and includes more women. Post 9/11 Veterans have a higher rate of service-connected disability, and they are more likely to receive public assistance and have lower incomes, compared to older Veterans. There is some evidence that behavioral health needs among those who experience homelessness in this group of Veterans are different from the needs of older Veterans,

including higher rates of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and lower rates of substance use and other mental health disorders.<sup>8</sup>

**Racial demographics:** Veterans experiencing sheltered homelessness were 3.3 times more likely to identify as African American or Black, compared to all U.S. Veterans (38.2% vs. 11.4%) in 2016. Nationwide, only about one in five (21.8%) Veterans identified as belonging to groups other than white, or as white and Hispanic, but about half of all Veterans experiencing homelessness (50.5%)—and nearly two-thirds of Veterans experiencing sheltered homelessness in families with children (65.4%)—identified as such. Among Veteran women receiving VA health care services who were screened for housing instability or homelessness between 2013 and 2016, women who had some indicator of housing instability were much more likely to be African American compared to women Veterans who were stably housed (41% vs. 26%).<sup>9</sup>

**Disabilities and chronic health conditions:** A majority (55%) of Veterans experiencing sheltered homelessness had a disability.<sup>10</sup> Among Veterans experiencing homelessness who received health care services from the VA, more

<sup>6</sup> Byrne, T. (August 2016). *Emerging Populations: Female, OEF/OIF/OND, and Older Veterans*.

<sup>7</sup> Brown, L.M., Barnett, S.D., Frahm, K.A., Schinka, J.A., Schonfeld, L., Casey, R. J. (January 2015) Health Risk Factors and Differences in Outcomes Between Younger and Older Veterans Using VA Transitional Housing *Psychiatric Services*, 66(1), 33-40 Accessed at <https://ps.psychiatryonline.org/doi/full/10.1176/appi.ps.201400022>

<sup>8</sup> Byrne, T. (August 2016). *Emerging Populations: Female, OEF/OIF/OND, and Older Veterans*.

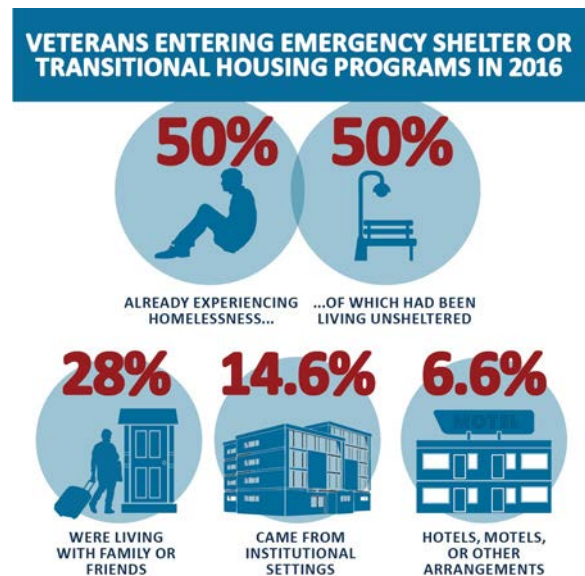
<sup>9</sup> Szymkowiak, D & Montgomery, A.E. (February 2018). VA National Center on Homelessness Among Veterans Research Brief: *Housing Instability among Women Veterans Accessing Care through the Veterans Health Administration*.

<sup>10</sup> 2016 AHAR part 2

than one in four (28%) received diagnoses of chronic medical conditions, more than one in four (28%) received a diagnosis of depression, one in eight (13%) received a diagnosis of PTSD, about one in five (19%) received a diagnosis of alcohol abuse, and about one in five (20%) received a diagnosis of drug abuse.<sup>11</sup> There is not very good data currently available regarding the health services Veterans receive outside of the VA system.

**Geographic locations:** Three-quarters of Veterans experiencing sheltered homelessness (74.5%) in 2016 were served in principal cities<sup>12</sup>. In comparison, only about one-third (33.1%) of U.S. Veterans living in poverty were living in principal cities, and almost one quarter of Veterans live in rural areas. Evidence suggests that Veterans in rural areas are less likely than those in urban areas to face literal homelessness, but they may face greater risk of other housing challenges related to residential mobility or instability and adequacy, availability, affordability, and accessibility of housing.<sup>13</sup>

About one out of six Veterans who have been identified as experiencing homelessness when they receive services from the VA are living in rural areas. Veterans who experience homelessness in rural areas are much more likely to be white, compared to Veterans in urban or suburban areas. Among people experiencing homelessness who are served by the VA, rates of diagnoses for depression, PTSD, and substance use disorders are higher for rural Veterans compared to those living in non-rural areas.<sup>14</sup> Veterans in rural areas who experience homelessness have lower rates of participation in most VA homeless service programs that provide housing assistance or other specialized services, and they often travel to more urban areas to access assistance from VA homeless programs.



### What do we know about patterns of homelessness among Veterans?

Half (50.1%) of the Veterans who entered emergency shelter or transitional housing programs during 2016 were already experiencing homelessness prior to entry, and just over half of them had been living on the streets or in other unsheltered locations before they entered shelters or transitional housing programs. Nearly 3 in 10 Veterans who experienced sheltered homelessness (28.7%) were in housing before entering shelter, most often staying with family or friends. Another 1 in 7 (14.6%) came from institutional settings, such as correctional

<sup>11</sup> Metraux, S. & Szymkowiak, D. (October 2017). VA National Center on Homelessness Among Veterans Research Brief: *Rural Homelessness among Veterans – What do we know?*

Diagnoses reported here are based on VA health services used during the year prior to the date when each Veteran was identified as experiencing homelessness. (personal communication with authors)

<sup>12</sup> The largest city in each metropolitan or micropolitan statistical area is designated a "principal city."

<sup>13</sup> VA National Center on Homelessness Among Veterans (June 2017). Homeless Evidence & Research Synthesis (HERS) Roundtable Proceedings: Rural Veterans and Homelessness. Accessed at: [https://www.va.gov/HOMELESS/nchav/docs/Rural\\_HERS\\_proceedings.pdf](https://www.va.gov/HOMELESS/nchav/docs/Rural_HERS_proceedings.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> Metraux, S. & Szymkowiak, D. (October 2017). VA National Center on Homelessness Among Veterans (June 2017). Research Brief: *Rural Homelessness among Veterans – What do we know?*

facilities, hospitals, or treatment facilities for mental health or substance use disorders. Others (6.6%) entered sheltered homelessness after staying in hotels, motels, or other living arrangements.<sup>15</sup>

Similarly, among Veterans who received rapid re-housing assistance through the SSVF program in FY 2016, nearly half (48%) came directly from unsheltered situations (including those who were living outdoors or in vehicles), about 3 in 10 (29%) were staying in emergency shelter, and about 1 in 5 (19%) were staying in transitional housing.<sup>16</sup>

Most Veterans who experienced sheltered homelessness during 2016 were served in emergency shelters. About one third (32.5%) of Veterans in emergency shelter stayed for one week or less, and the median length of stay for Veterans in emergency shelter was 21 nights. About one third (36.6%) of Veterans experiencing sheltered homelessness were served in transitional housing programs during 2016, and more than a quarter of these Veterans stayed for at least half of the reporting year. The median length of stay for Veterans in transitional housing programs was 96 days.

### **What do we know about Veterans' risks for experiencing homelessness?**

Within the VA health system, all Veterans who seek care are screened, using the Homelessness Screening Clinical Reminder, to identify those who are currently experiencing or at risk of homelessness. Nationwide, about 8 out of every 1,000 Veterans (0.8%) screened positive for current homelessness and about 1 out of 100 (1%) were at risk of homelessness.<sup>17</sup>

Among Veterans, a variety of experiences that some people have before, during, and after their military service may increase their risks for experiencing housing instability and homelessness. These may include poverty, unemployment and economic hardships, trauma, mental health conditions (including but not limited to PTSD), substance use disorders, family or relationship conflicts, disruptions in connections to social support networks, social isolation, and incarceration.<sup>18</sup>

**Opioid use disorders:** Among Veterans who were initiating treatment for opioid use disorders, the rate of homelessness (10.2%) was more than 10 times the rate in the general population receiving care at the VA. Compared to Veteran men, Veteran women who were initiating care for opioid use disorders were less likely to be experiencing current homelessness (8.9% vs. 10.3%) but more likely to be at risk of homelessness (11.8% vs. 4.9%).

**Military sexual trauma:** Among Veterans who served in Iraq or Afghanistan, almost 10% of those who reported military sexual trauma (MST) experienced homelessness at some point during the first five years after they separated from military service, more than twice the rate of those who reported no MST.<sup>19</sup> The incidence of

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<sup>15</sup> AHAR 2016 Part 2

<sup>16</sup> VA Supportive Services for Veterans Families (SSVF) FY 2016 Annual Report

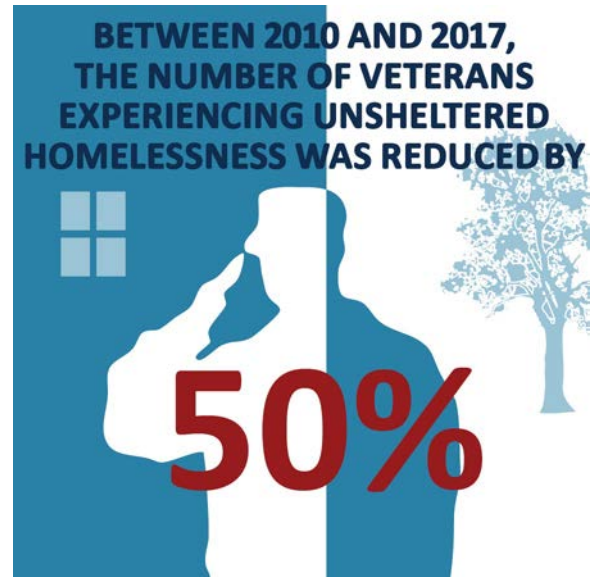
<sup>17</sup> Byrne, T., Fargo, J.D., Montgomery, A.E., Roberts, C.B., Culhane, D.P., Kane, V. (November 2015) Screening for Homelessness in the Veterans Health Administration: Monitoring Housing Stability through Repeat Screening. *Public Health Reports* 130(6): 684-692

<sup>18</sup> Tsai, J. & Rosenheck, R.A. (July 2015) Risk Factors for Homelessness Among US Veterans *Epidemiologic Reviews*. 37(1) 177-195. Accessed at <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4521393/>

<sup>19</sup> Brignone, E., Gundlapalli, A.V., Blaise, R. et al. (June 2016) Differential Risk for Homelessness Among US Male and Female Veterans with a Positive Screen for Military Sexual Trauma. *JAMA Psychiatry*. 73(6):582-589 Accessed at <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamapsychiatry/fullarticle/2515956>

homelessness was slightly higher for men who screened positive for MST (11.8%) compared to women (8.9%). Among those who screened positive for MST, 2.3% of men and 1.3% of women experienced homelessness as early as 30 days after the VHA screening, indicating that MST affects both immediate and long-term reintegration outcomes for Veterans.

**Intimate partner violence:** For Veteran women, and for women in the general population, intimate partner violence (IPV) is also associated with and contributes to homelessness and housing instability. Women Veterans face elevated risk of experiencing IPV, compared to women who have not served in the military, and women patients are screened for recent IPV when they receive outpatient care at VA medical facilities. One study of VA health records found that nearly one in four (24%) women who screened positive for IPV within the past year were also experiencing homelessness or housing instability, compared to one in ten (10%) women who screened negative for IPV. When adjusting for age and race, women who screened positive for past-year IPV were nearly three times as likely to be experiencing homelessness or housing instability, compared to other women Veterans.<sup>20</sup>



**Criminal justice system involvement:** Among Veterans who experience homelessness, and particularly among those who have PTSD or other behavioral health disorders, involvement in the criminal justice system may be both a risk factor for homelessness and/or a consequence of homelessness. About one-half of all Veterans experiencing homelessness who have participated in VA homeless assistance programs are involved in the justice system.<sup>21</sup> In 2015, more than 40% of Veterans served by the Veterans Justice Outreach (VJO) program, which provides direct outreach, assessment, and case management for justice-involved Veterans in local courts and jails, reported that they were experiencing homelessness (22%), at imminent risk of losing their home (6%), or in unstable housing (13%).<sup>22</sup>

### **What are the most significant gaps in available data and our current understanding of Veterans who experience homelessness?**

In recent years, there have been significant federal investments in research and data collection to improve our understanding of Veterans experiencing homelessness and the impact of programs that serve them. These investments have enhanced our understanding of the need for and impacts of interventions that prevent and end homelessness among Veterans. However, data collection is frequently limited to the VA's health care and homeless programs, and often does not integrate data from homelessness assistance programs or health care that is delivered outside of the VA system.

<sup>20</sup> Dichter, M., Montgomery A.E., et al. (January 2018) VA National Center on Homelessness Among Veterans Research Brief: *Examining the Role of Intimate Partner Violence in Housing Instability and Homelessness Among Women Veterans*.

<sup>21</sup> U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness (June 2015) *Breaking the Cycle of Veteran Incarceration and Homelessness: Emerging Community Practices*. Accessed at [https://www.usich.gov/resources/uploads/asset\\_library/Justice\\_Involved\\_Veterans.pdf](https://www.usich.gov/resources/uploads/asset_library/Justice_Involved_Veterans.pdf)

<sup>22</sup> U.S. General Accountability Office (April 2016). *Veterans Justice Outreach Program (GAO-16-193)*

We know that many Veterans receive care outside of the VA, but we do not have a clear understanding of the extent to which Veterans who experience homelessness are receiving services or being identified outside of VA programs. If researchers can integrate data from the VA and other service delivery systems, we can better understand patterns of homelessness and service utilization among Veterans.

Additional areas where further data and research are needed include:

- More information on the characteristics and needs of Veterans who experience unsheltered homelessness in order to better tailor and target strategies and resources.
- More information to help understand which Veterans and their families are most at-risk of experiencing homelessness in order to tailor prevention strategies.
- A greater understanding of the intersection of homelessness and suicide risk in order to help reduce Veteran suicide.
- A greater understanding of the risk factors for returns to homelessness among Veterans being served by the HUD-VASH and SSVF programs.
- More data on the numbers of Veterans experiencing homelessness who have dishonorable discharges or are otherwise not eligible for VHA health care services.
- Better documentation of the patterns and trajectories of homelessness among Veterans living in rural areas.
- Understanding the potential association between multiple deployments and risk for homelessness.