

Striking jump in mental illness found in Iraq, Afghanistan veterans

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About two in five Iraq or Afghanistan veterans have post-traumatic stress disorder or depression, abuse alcohol or have other serious problems, such as homelessness, researchers reported Thursday.

A new study showed a striking jump in mental illness from findings reported two years ago and indicates that veterans' problems continue to emerge years after they return home.

The study was also the first to suggest that National Guardsmen and reservists suffer these wars differently than active-duty soldiers. Army soldiers and Marines younger than 25 had the highest rates of PTSD and drinking. That wasn't surprising, given that they're more likely to see combat and deploy multiple times.

But among National Guardsmen and reservists, it's the soldiers older than 30 who suffer, regardless of the combat they saw. Researchers suggested that being called up from established careers, families and communities make older citizen-soldiers less prepared for combat and less able to move between the two worlds.

"These are not people who live on a base, have a strong affiliation with a unit or maybe ever saw themselves going overseas, at all," said Dr. Karen Seal, the chief author of the study and an assistant professor of medicine at the University of California at San Francisco. "The disparity between their expectations and what they were actually exposed to over there may create a lot of vulnerability to PTSD."

That spells long-term consequences for Oregon, which has sent its National Guard troops on 7,000 individual deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan since 2002. Nearly 2,700 Oregon Army National Guard soldiers in the 41st Infantry Combat Brigade are pouring into Iraq this month.

"When you look at the number of people who've deployed and that 37 percent of them are affected, it's staggering. That's a sobering number of men and women who will need mental health care," said Jim Sardo, a psychologist who directs the PTSD and substance abuse clinics for the Department of Veterans Affairs in Portland. Researchers found that when other serious behavioral problems were included that the number rose to 43 percent.

The analysis of 290,000 soldiers who received VA health care between 2002 and 2008 was reported Thursday in the American Journal of Public Health.

About 1.6 million people have served with the U.S. military in Iraq and Afghanistan. Previous VA studies have shown one in four veterans seeking VA health care was diagnosed with a mental illness. Seal said that seeing more than one in three veterans with a mental health diagnosis -- a sixfold increase since 2002 -- and two in five with a serious personal problem -- was an "aha moment."

"On a human level, it's striking when you see the high proportion of vets coming back that do have mental health, behavior and psychosocial problems as a result of their military service," Seal said.

The PTSD levels nearly matched those seen during the National Vietnam Veterans Readjustment study and a 2007 Rand study of Afghan and Iraq veterans. But they appeared higher than other recent wars and other kinds of trauma, and have occurred despite widespread awareness and intervention.

For active-duty military, the risk of being diagnosed with PTSD increased four times after the invasion of Iraq, while for National Guard and Reserve members, the risk increased sevenfold.

Researchers said several factors are to blame: Roadside bombs are an unexpected and continual threat that can make everyone who serves feel they're on the front line.

Sardo, who did not work on the study but who treats veterans in Oregon and southwest Washington and who deployed twice to Iraq as a psychologist, said that feeling of being "always cranked up," is similar to that of World War II veterans in the Pacific who awoke to find one member of the unit with his throat cut. The survivors, who saw or heard nothing, would be unable to relax in their foxholes again. Vietnam veterans who encountered similar tactics by the Viet



Randy L. Rasmussen / The Oregonian
Soldiers of the 2nd Battalion, 162nd Infantry of the Oregon Army National Guard salute during a May mobilization ceremony at the Lane County Fairgrounds.

Cong reported similar terror.

Researchers said other drivers included:

Surviving injuries in Iraq and Afghanistan that would have killed soldiers in earlier conflicts;

Waning public support for the war in Iraq and lower morale among troops might also be affecting some, as it did the Vietnam vets;

Widening media coverage of PTSD has also lowered the threshold for soldiers to talk about their problems;

Getting more help. Ironically, the numbers may be going up because soldiers are being approached as they return by the departments of Defense and Veterans Affairs. And they are eligible for free health care for a longer period than ever before.

Researchers said the longer veterans are in care, the more problems emerge. It often takes up to five years for a clear picture.

"The desire to move on with your life and turn your back on that experience is incredibly strong," Sardo said. "It usually isn't until they lose the second job, get the second divorce or the third DUI that they begin to come in." A third of those with mental health issues had three or more different diagnoses. For example, depression is nearly as prevalent a response to combat as PTSD. Women are also more likely to suffer depression and men to abuse alcohol and drugs. And being divorced, widowed or separated makes a veteran more vulnerable.

Seal and her team recommended targeted screening and early intervention tailored to those subgroups of women, men younger than 25, and Guard and Reserve members older than 40 before some behaviors, such as staying indoors or hypervigilance, become a way of life.

Sardo said their findings show that more study is needed, "particularly for those soldiers now on their fourth or fifth deployment. What's going to happen five years from now if you've had five deployments?" he asked. "We don't know."

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