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Exclusive: Virginia veteran report shows high depression rate

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By [Nick Carey](#) and Murray Waas

CHICAGO/WASHINGTON (Reuters) - More than one in four U.S. veterans of the Iraq and Afghan wars in the state of Virginia say they have suffered a service-related head injury and two thirds reported depression, according to a report by Virginia Tech to be released on Tuesday.

The real numbers may be much higher, according to Mary Beth Dunkenberger, senior program director at the Institute for Policy and Governance at Virginia Tech and author of the report.

In focus groups many veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan said they were afraid to admit to suffering from post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) during demobilization because it would keep them from their families and hurt their careers, she told Reuters.

"During demobilization troops are kind of on a high and just want to see their families," she said. "If they admit to having PTSD, they know it could be weeks until they see their families so there is a tendency to minimize their symptoms."

"Also career soldiers are reluctant to speak up because they're afraid it could hurt their future prospects in the military," she added, "while those returning to civilian life are afraid that no one will employ them if they're known to suffer from PTSD."

The report was compiled for the Virginia Wounded Warrior Program, which is operated by the Virginia Department of Veterans Services, and was provided in advance to Reuters. It found that 66 percent of veterans of these two wars reported suffering from some form of depression, second only to Vietnam veterans. Ten percent cited a high level of depression.

Thirteen percent said they had suffered from post traumatic stress disorder and 26 percent said they had sustained a service-related head injury.

After nine years of war, about 1.9 million U.S. service men and women have been deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan. Many have undergone multiple deployments.

Thanks in large part to body armor, a larger proportion of troops have survived explosions and attacks in these conflicts than would have in earlier wars, but they have often suffered from traumatic brain injuries (TBI).

According to a 2008 report by the RAND Corporation, nearly a third of service members returning from Iraq and Afghanistan are affected by PTSD, TBI or major depression.

There has also been a high number of suicides among U.S. veterans. Representatives of Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington said at a conference last week that efforts to prevent suicides were failing.

The Virginia Tech study interviewed just over 2,000 veterans across the state, including those from the wars in Vietnam and Korea. Some 260,000 of Virginia's 800,000 veterans have served in Iraq and Afghanistan, which the report said is the highest proportion in all 50 U.S. states.

The report found that one of veterans' chief concerns was lack of access to medical services and treatment, in particular in more remote rural areas. Veterans also expressed fear over job security, with the U.S. unemployment rate at nearly 10 percent. "The state of the economy was one of their main concerns," Dunkenberger said.

Among respondents, nearly 40 percent of the career military veterans who had served in Iraq and Afghanistan had been deployed there more than once (just over 31 percent had been deployed twice), while nearly 20 percent of National Guard and Reservists had seen more than one deployment.

Dunkenberger said the great unknown at this point is how multiple deployments will affect veterans in the long term.

"The great concern is that all the problems we have seen so far with head injuries, PTSD and depression could just be the tip of the iceberg."

(Additional reporting by [Maggie Fox](#); Editing by [Claudia Parsons](#) and Jim Impoco)

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