



## NATIONAL COALITION *for* HOMELESS VETERANS



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#### FAQ about Homeless Veterans

##### Who are homeless veterans?

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

America's homeless veterans have served in World War II, the Korean War, Cold War, Vietnam War, Grenada, Panama, Lebanon, 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.

Roughly **56 percent** of all homeless veterans are African American or Hispanic, despite only accounting for 12.8 percent and 15.4 percent of the U.S. population respectively.

About 1.5 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 – VA estimates that **107,000** veterans are homeless on any given night. Over the course of a year, approximately twice that many experience homelessness. Only eight percent of the general population can claim veteran status, but nearly one-fifth of the homeless population are veterans.

##### 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

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family and social support networks.

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

Although "most homeless people are single, unaffiliated men... most housing money in existing federal homelessness programs, in contrast, is devoted to helping homeless families or homeless women with dependant children," as is stated in the study "Is Homelessness a Housing Problem?" (*Understanding Homelessness: New Policy and Research Perspectives*, Fannie Mae Foundation, 1997).

#### **Doesn't VA take care of homeless veterans?**

To a certain extent, yes. VA's specialized homeless programs served more than 92,000 veterans in 2009, which is highly commendable. This still leaves well over 100,000 more veterans, however, who experience homelessness annually and must seek assistance from local government agencies and community- and faith-based service organizations. In its November 2007 "Vital Mission" report, the National Alliance to End Homelessness estimated that up to about half a million veterans have characteristics that put them in danger of homelessness. These veterans may require supportive services outside the scope of most VA homeless programs.

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. These partnerships are credited with reducing the number of homeless veterans *by more than half* over the past six years. More information about VA homeless programs and initiatives can be found [here](#).

#### **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 currently 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 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 providers. Contact your mayor's office for a list of providers, or search the [NCHV database](#).
- **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 provider.
- **Contact your elected officials.** Discuss what is being done in your community for homeless veterans.

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## Homeless Veterans Facts

### DEFINITIONS, DEMOGRAPHICS AND ESTIMATED NUMBERS

#### What is the definition of homeless?

[The United States Code](#) 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:

*§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 the 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](#).

#### Demographics of homeless veterans

"The Forgotten Americans-Homelessness: Programs and the People They Serve" – released Dec. 8, 1999, by the U.S. Interagency Council on the Homeless (USICH) – is the National Survey of Homeless Assistance Providers and Clients (NSHAPC), which was completed in 1996 and updated three years later. You can download the NSHAPC reports at [www.huduser.org](http://www.huduser.org).

**Veteran-specific highlights from the USICH report include:**

23% of the homeless population are veterans  
33% of the male homeless population are veterans  
47% served Vietnam-era  
17% served post-Vietnam  
15% served pre-Vietnam  
67% served three or more years  
33% were stationed in war zone  
25% have used VA homeless services  
85% completed high school/GED, compared to 56% of non-veterans  
89% received an honorable discharge  
79% reside in central cities  
16% reside in suburban areas  
5% reside in rural areas  
76% experience alcohol, drug or mental health problems  
46% are white males, compared to 34% of non-veterans  
46% are age 45 or older, compared to 20% non-veterans

Service needs cited include:

45% need help finding a job  
37% need help finding housing

**How many homeless veterans are there?**

Accurate numbers community-by-community are not available. Some communities do annual counts; others do an estimate based on a variety of factors. Contact the closest VA medical center's homeless coordinator, the office of your mayor, or another presiding official to get local information.

A regional breakdown of numbers of homeless veterans, using data from VA's 2009 CHALENG (Community Homelessness Assessment, Local Education and Networking Groups) report – which contains the most widely cited estimate of the number of homeless veterans – can be found [here](#).

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**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 percent) were nearly four times more likely than veterans (14 percent) to be under the age of 35.
- Veterans were much better educated than other prisoners. Nearly all veterans

in state prison (91 percent) reported at least a high school diploma or GED, while an estimated 40 percent of non-veterans lacked either.

#### *Military backgrounds*

- The U.S. Army accounted for 46 percent of veterans living in the United States but 56 percent of veterans in state prison.
- In 2004, the percentage of state prisoners who reported prior military service in the U.S. Armed Forces (10 percent) was half of the level reported in 1986 (20 percent).
- Most state prison veterans (54 percent) reported service during a wartime era, while 20 percent saw combat duty. In federal prison two-thirds of veterans had served during wartime, and a 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 percent 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 percent) were serving time for violent offenses, compared to 47 percent 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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