

Veterans and Homelessness

NOVEMBER 2006

Counting the number of homeless veterans is a difficult task. Convergent sources estimate that between 23 and 40 percent of homeless adults are veterans.¹ A recent estimate calculated by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs found that on any given night in 2005 about 194,000 veterans were homeless; this estimate is lower than numbers reported in early 2000 (see Exhibit 1) (GAO 2006). However, it is unclear if recent estimates represent real declines in homelessness among veterans or if the data were not as reliable in early 2000 (cited as the reason by the VA).² In 2004, the VA improved data collection, using point-in-time data exclusively, relying on more standardized methods, and increasingly using data from HUD's Continuum of Care (GAO 2006).

Although homeless veterans have served in different wars, including World War II, Korean War, Cold War, Vietnam War, Grenada, Panama, and Lebanon, earlier research indicated that those serving in the late Vietnam and post-Vietnam era had the highest representation in the homeless population (Burt 1999). Recent media accounts highlight a small but growing number of veterans from the Iraq wars showing up in shelters.³

Causes of Homelessness Among Veterans

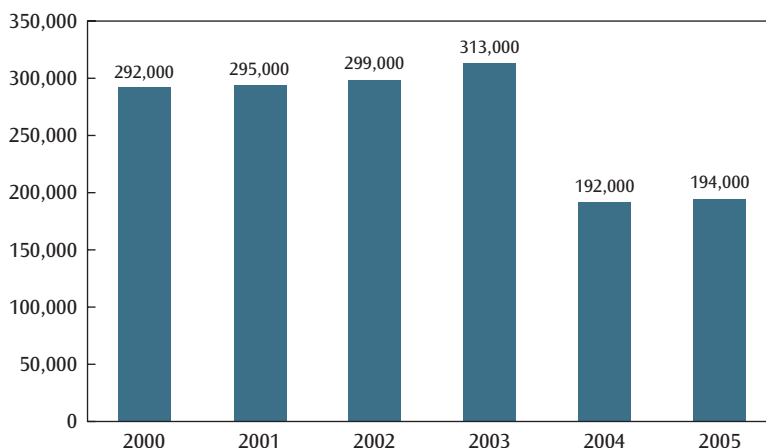
The causes of homelessness among veterans are difficult to untangle. Despite common perceptions that homeless veterans are more likely to be mentally ill or suffer from high rates of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), the characteristics of homeless veterans actually look similar to other homeless adults. Rosenheck (1996) writes that "...homelessness among veterans is not clearly related to military experience. Rather, it is the result of the same interrelated economic and per-

sonal factors that cause homelessness in the civilian population." In other words, the same things that predict homelessness among the general population—poverty, lack of affordable housing, poor access to support networks, and personal characteristics—also predict homelessness among veterans.

Characteristics of Homeless Veterans

Most homeless veterans are male; the VA estimates that as few as three percent of homeless veterans are female. However, this number has the potential to increase over time as the number of women veterans increases. The National Survey of Homeless Assistance Providers and Clients (NSHAPC), conducted in 1996, found that almost 46 percent of homeless veterans are white males and 46 percent are 45 or older; more than half (56 percent) have completed high school or a GED program. The number of veterans reporting problems with drugs (40 percent) and alcohol (58 percent) does not differ significantly from non-veteran homeless males. Similarly, the reported rates of mental health problems are the same for veterans and non-veteran

Exhibit 1 VA Estimates of Homeless Veterans Nationwide 2000 to 2005



Source: GAO (2006) analysis of VA data from CHALENG reports.

homeless males (about 10 percent of each group report having a mental health problem in the past year). Homeless veterans report needing help finding a job (45 percent) and finding housing (37 percent) (Burt 1999).

Programs and Policy

In addition to overseeing the distribution of veteran's benefits and healthcare services, the Department of Veterans Affairs has primary responsibility for overseeing programs targeted to homeless veterans.⁴ The VA operates several programs; the largest is the Homeless Providers Grant and Per Diem (GPD) program.⁵ The program provides transitional housing (available for three to 24 months with an average stay of four months) to veterans who need the most assistance, including those that have problems with mental illness and substance abuse. The GPD program is operated by local non-profit and public agencies, which compete for grants—capital cost grants, which can pay for a percentage of housing acquisition, and Per Diem grants, a fixed reimbursement rate to cover the cost of beds. A recent GAO report (2006) found that the program spent about \$67 million in fiscal year 2005 and has the capacity to house 8,000 veterans on any given night. In 2005, the program served 16,000 veterans. Although data is limited, the VA reports that 81 percent of veterans had housing when they left the GPD program (GAO 2006). Some veterans, those who experience chronic homelessness (that is, are homeless for long periods, have repeated episodes of homelessness or have a disability) may need additional housing and services. Approximately 63,000 veterans were chronically homeless in 2005 (GAO 2006). Peter Dougherty, Director of Homeless Programs at the Department of Veterans Affairs, estimates that “veterans are twice as likely as other Americans to become chronically homeless.”⁶ The VA has a small support-

ive housing program that provides ongoing case management services and clinical support to help homeless veterans remain stably housed.⁷

References

- Burt, M.R., Aron, L.Y., Douglas, T., Valente, J., Lee, E., and Iwen, B. 1999. *Homelessness: Programs and the People They Serve, Findings of the National Survey of Homeless Assistance Providers and Clients Technical Report*. Washington, DC: Interagency Council on the Homeless.
- Nakashima, J. Burnette, C., McGuire, J. and Edwards, A. 2006. *Community Homelessness Assessment Local Education and Networking Group (CHALENG) for Veterans*. Washington, DC: Department of Veterans.
- Rosenheck, R.A., Lea, C., Frisman, L.K., Lam, J. and Chung, A. 1996. *Homeless Veterans. Homelessness in America* (Jim Baumohl, ed.), Phoenix, AZ: Oryx Press.
- U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs downloaded from <http://www1.va.gov/homeless/> on September 13, 2006
- U.S. General Accounting Office. 2006. *Homeless Veterans Programs*. Washington, DC.

Endnotes

- ¹ See Rosenheck (1996) for an overview of homeless veterans estimates.
- ² The estimate of homeless veterans was recorded in a study by GAO (September 2006) that reported the “estimate of homeless veterans is derived from the CHALENG survey of designated local VA officials who are asked to provide the highest number of homeless veterans estimated in their service area on one day of the official’s choosing in fiscal year 2005.” For more on how the estimate was collected, please see (Nakashima et al. 2006)
- ³ See for example, “*Homeless Bound?*” Time Magazine, January 10, 2005; “*When I came Home: Fighting for Homeless Vets*” NPR, May 29, 2006; “*About New York; War Veteran’s Homecoming is Spent In Homeless Shelters*” the New York Times, April 24, 2004.
- ⁴ For a complete list of programs that target homeless veterans, visit <http://www1.va.gov/homeless/>
- ⁵ The GPD program is scheduled for reauthorization in 2007.
- ⁶ See “Homelessness Plagues Many U.S. Veterans” March 31, 2005 Associated Press
- ⁷ For more information on the development of supportive housing for homeless veterans see CSH’s Guide (2006).

The National Alliance to End Homelessness’ **Fact Checker Series** provides accurate statistics on homelessness. This series draws on the best expertise, data, and research available. For more information about homelessness, please visit www.endhomelessness.org.