
THE STATE OF THE AMERICAN VETERAN: THE SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA VETERANS STUDY

KEY FINDINGS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Sara Kintzle and Carl Castro

USC Suzanne Dworak-Peck

School of Social Work
Military and Veterans Programs

RAND-USC Epstein Family Foundation Center
for Veterans Policy Research

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STUDY OVERVIEW

The Southern California Veterans study comprises the fifth study in the State of the American Veteran series. Our nation’s veterans make extraordinary contributions to society. While it is true that most veterans are doing well, it is also true that serving in the military, as well as the transition from service to civilian life, can create unique life stressors and challenges. The purpose of this study was to continue to examine how and where challenges occur and provide communities with the information needed to develop and expand support where needed.

The sample comprised veterans living in Southern California, specifically veterans living in Los Angeles County, Orange County and San Diego County. An online survey approach was utilized for data collection. Data was collected between July 2022 and June 2023. A targeted recruitment strategy was used to achieve maximum representativeness of the veteran population in Southern California. In total, 3,188 Southern California veterans completed the survey. The following represents the study key findings and policy recommendations. For complete and detailed discussion of the study results, please visit socialvetstudy.org to view the full report.

KEY FINDING 1

MILITARY TRANSITION

There are still too many veterans unprepared for their transition from the military to civilian community. Four key aspects of the veteran transition require immediate attention:

- 1a.** A majority of veterans continue to leave active duty without a job.
- 1b.** Three out of four veterans had careers that were different than their military occupation.
- 1c.** A significant number of veterans leave the military with inadequate or unstable housing plans.
- 1d.** Veterans reported many emotional challenges associated with transition that they were unprepared to handle. Veterans struggled with feelings of having to start over and difficulty of no longer being in the military. Most didn't anticipate how hard the transition was going to be.

POLICY RECOMMENDATION

- 1a.** A key outcome of transition assistance programs should be leaving the military with a job offer.
- 1b.** Move away from programing that looks to translate skills for similar jobs for veterans. Instead, support programs that help veterans comprehend what opportunities are available to them for their next career and figure out what kind of career could provide the financial support and meaning needed for a successful post military career.
- 1c.** Housing preparation in transition assistance should move away from a general "check the box" format where service members indicate they have a place to live. Instead move towards a model that includes a more nuanced discussion of the safety and long-term viability of housing plans and realistic cost and expectations of housing.
- 1d.** Transition assistance programs should focus on the emotional preparedness of transition experiences such as loss of identity and community, frustrations with starting over, and identifying coping mechanisms for dealing with transition challenges.

KEY FINDING 2

PAIN SLEEP ISSUES AND CANNABIS USE

Over two-thirds of veterans in the study reported experiencing moderate to severe physical pain, especially pain associated with musculoskeletal problems. Additionally, a significant number of veterans reported experiencing major sleep problems. Approximately 20 percent of veterans used cannabis. While misuse was low, the most frequent reasons for cannabis use in the sample was to help with pain and sleep.

POLICY RECOMMENDATION

Invest in efforts to increase assessment of pain and sleep in veterans and resources that utilize multidimensional, biopsychosocial treatments that reduce over-reliance on passive therapies, such as opioids and procedures.

KEY FINDING 3

CONNECTEDNESS

A significant number of veterans in the study indicated experiencing loneliness and a lack of social support.

POLICY RECOMMENDATION

Mandate programs that assess for isolation and loneliness, particularly in relation to transition preparedness and suicide prevention. Building new communities is one of the most challenging aspects of military transition and is associated with significant negative outcomes. These challenges are currently severely unaddressed.

KEY FINDING 4

SUICIDE

Far too many veterans continue to remain at risk of dying by suicide. Nearly a quarter of the veterans in the current study were at risk of dying by suicide, with recently transitioning veterans being at the highest risk. Almost two thirds of veterans in the study knew someone who had died by suicide.

POLICY RECOMMENDATION

Expand suicide prevention beyond crisis and mental health care. Suicide risk is incredibly complex and is driven by many factors. Most current suicide prevention programs focus on crisis care and access/treatment of mental health issues.

Both are essential elements of reducing suicides. They are also the most challenging to get veterans to engage in. Veterans often have strong cultural and stigma-related barriers that reduce willingness to access and accept mental health care.

Consider opportunities to think about how suicide prevention programs might build trusting relationships with veterans while addressing other well-being factors that increase risk for suicide, such as pain, sleep, food insecurity and loneliness. Findings suggest improving connectedness may be a vital element of suicide prevention that is currently missing in most programs. As needs are met, and service providers build trust with their veteran clients, referrals to mental health care might be met with less resistance. Encourage policy makers to look at the Los Angeles Veteran Peer Access Network as a model of such work.

Food insecurity among veterans is high, with almost a third of veterans meeting the criteria for being food insecure.

POLICY RECOMMENDATION

Review current SNAP policies to explore what barriers exist, such as VA disability compensation, that impact support for food-insecure veterans. Ensure community-based food programs receiving funding are targeting support for veterans, particularly those who do not receive VA care.

KEY FINDING 5

FOOD INSECURITY

KEY FINDING 6

MILITARY SEXUAL TRAUMA

Military sexual trauma remains a major concern, particularly for women veterans.

POLICY RECOMMENDATION

Ensure careful monitoring and oversight of newly implemented sexual assault programs within DoD. Continued focus on VA care for women and men who experience sexual trauma.

Veterans believe that their exposure to airborne toxins, such as burn pits, has caused them physical harm.

POLICY RECOMMENDATION

Continue the work of the PACT Act while also evaluating its effectiveness and potential barriers to receiving benefits.

KEY FINDING 7

AIRBORNE TOXINS

KEY FINDING 8

BARRIERS TO MENTAL HEALTH CARE

Many veterans do not seek care for mental health issues, despite the health benefits of doing so and the numerous resources available to them. A majority of veterans believe they possess the necessary skills to manage their behavioral health problems on their own, a consistent and pervasive barrier for veterans getting the mental health care they need.

POLICY RECOMMENDATION

Consider funding innovative solutions to overcome treatment barriers that focus less on stigma and more on cultural identity and self-reliance.

While the VA health care system is viewed very positively by most veterans, there are still far too many veterans who report negative perceptions about the VA, as well as logistical barriers to receiving VA care.

POLICY RECOMMENDATION

Consider campaigns that better highlight the positive care provided and experiences at the VA. More is needed to overcome the historical negative perceptions.

KEY FINDING 9

PERCEPTION OF VA

KEY FINDING 10

VETERANS ARE THRIVING

Despite challenges veterans may be experiencing, most reported living purposeful, fulfilled, and meaningful lives. Many veterans are doing very well in their careers, financially, physically and mentally, and have the strength, skills and resources for challenges they may encounter.

POLICY RECOMMENDATION

Find ways to spotlight the successes and contributions of our military veterans.

Design

Eva Alday, ealday@usc.edu

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