Veterans with Service Connected Conditions: Demographic, Military Service Characteristics, Health Care Utilization, Survival, and Cause of Death

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Poll Question # 1

What is your role in VA?

1. Student, trainee, fellow
2. Researcher
3. Clinician
4. Policy maker
5. Other
Poll Question # 2

How would you rate your knowledge of Veterans with service connected conditions?

1. (No knowledge)
2.
3.
4.
5. (Expert)
Session Roadmap

• To briefly describe VA benefits, with attention given to compensation and health care.
• To describe demographic, military service, and disability characteristics of Veterans with service connected conditions.
• To examine health care utilization by Veterans with service connected conditions.
• To examine one-year mortality and cause of death in Veterans with service connected conditions.
Types of Benefits

• VA offers an integrated array of benefits for individuals who have served in the Armed Forces of the United States.

• These benefits include income support, education, vocational training, home loan assistance, employment assistance, and other services designed to sustain Veterans and their families.

• Burial benefits are provided by the National Cemetery Administration.

• Two important benefits include compensation for service connected conditions and health care.
Compensation for Service Connected Conditions

• The Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) is charged with determining eligibility for monetary compensation for service connected conditions.

• Service connected conditions are illnesses or injuries incurred or aggravated during military service.

• In FY 16, 4.4 million Veterans received $65 billion in compensation.
Compensation for Service Connected Conditions

- Veterans can apply for compensation right before or anytime after discharge from military service.
- Eligibility for compensation is determined by exam.
- Each service connected condition is rated on a scale from 0% to 100%.
- A 0% rating means it was not severe enough to warrant compensation.
- A combined disability rating is determined for those with multiple conditions (on average each Veteran has 5 service connected conditions).
Service Connected Conditions

• Ability to work is not a criterion for compensation as it is for Social Security Disability Insurance Benefits.

• Rather eligibility and the combined rating are based on the average impairment in earning capacity that the condition typically causes.

• Veterans can continue to work without losing benefits.
Compensation for Service Connected Conditions

• Veterans with 100% combined rating comprise about 13% of those with service connected conditions.

• According to VA regulations, total or 100% disability exists “when there is present any impairment of mind or body which is sufficient to render it impossible for the average person to follow a substantially gainful occupation.”
• VA health care is provided by the Veterans Health Administration and is available to eligible Veterans.
• Eligibility for care is determined by the VA Health Eligibility Center
• In general, 2 years of continuous military service are required to qualify for care, although there are exceptions to this rule.
• Priority for care is determined with select groups eligible for care at little or no cost.
• Veterans with a 50% or greater combined disability rating are entitled to VA health care at little or no cost.
Department of Veterans Affairs Health Care

• In FY 16, VA health care in the amount of $63.5 billion was provided to over 6 million Veterans.
Information Sources

• Information for this presentation comes from the VETSNET, which is a snapshot of VBA’s corporate database.

• Other sources include the VHA vital status file and VHA workload files including out-patient and in-patient utilization.

• The study population includes 4,029,672 million Veterans who received compensation as of October 30, 2016.

• An additional 605,493 deceased Veterans who received compensation and had cause of death (Veteran National Death Index) information and died between the years of 2004 and 2014 were also included.
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Numbers of Women and Men with Service Connected Conditions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Men</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt;= 50</td>
<td>1,800,000</td>
<td>1,600,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51-64</td>
<td>1,400,000</td>
<td>1,200,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65+</td>
<td>1,000,000</td>
<td>800,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Demographic and Military Service Characteristics

![Bar chart showing demographics and military service characteristics.](chart.png)
Combined Disability Rating
Common Service Connected Conditions

- Tinnitus
- Hearing loss
- PTSD
- Diabetes
- Migraine
- Sleep apnea
- Ischemic heart disease
- Major depression
- Anxiety
- Traumatic brain disease
- Asthma
Percent with ≥ 50% Combined Rating by Demographic Characteristics

- **All**: 56%
- **< =50**: 58%
- **51-64**: 54%
- **65+**: 52%
- **Women**: 50%
- **Men**: 48%
Percent with > 50% Combined Rating by Service Connected Conditions

[Bar chart showing the percent of individuals with > 50% combined rating for various conditions. The conditions listed from left to right are: Auditory, Anxiety, Diabetes, Migraine, Ischemic heart disease, Traumatic brain disease, Major depression, and PTSD.]
Combined Rating and Service Connected Conditions for Women and Men ≤ 50 Years of Age
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Percent Using VA Health Care by Demographic Characteristics

- All
- <= 50
- 51-64
- 65+
- Women
- Men

Age
Percent Using VA Health Care by Combined Rating

- 0%
- 10%-40%
- 50%-90%
- 100%
Percent Hospitalized in 2015-2016

- 100% rating: 11%
- Anxiety: 7%
- PTSD: 7%
- Major depression: 8%
- Ischemic heart disease: 8%
- Diabetes: 7%
- All: 6%
Percent with Mental Health Visit in 2015

- Anxiety
- PTSD
- Major depression
Mean Number of Out-patient Visits in 2015: Demographic and Military Service Characteristics

![Bar chart showing mean number of out-patient visits by age, gender, and military service role.](chart)

- Age < 65
- Age => 65
- Women
- Men
- Enlisted
- Officer
Mean Number of Out-patient Visits in 2015: Disability Characteristics

Combined rating
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One Year Mortality

• Vital status was assessed by linking VHA vital status file with VBA VETSNET file for Veterans who were alive and receiving benefits in October 2016.

• Special attention was given to 1 year mortality in Veterans with a combined 100% rating.
Cause of Death

- Underlying cause of death was assessed by linking the VA National Death Index (NDI) with the VETSNET file for Veterans who were deceased in October 2016.
- There were 758,324 Veterans with service connected conditions who according to VETSNET were deceased in October 2016.
- There were 605,493 (80%) Veterans who appeared in both VETSNET and the VA NDI and died between 2004 and 2014.
One-year Mortality by Combined Rating

All: 2
0%-40%: 2
50%-90%: 2
100%: 4.5
One-Year Mortality by Age and Sex
Average Age at Death by Year of Birth and Sex for Deaths from 2004-2014
Distribution of Deaths by Year of Birth and Sex for Deaths from 2004-2014
Leading Causes of Death 2004-2014: Men
Association between Service Connected Conditions and Cause of Death 2004-2014: Women

- Anxiety
- PTSD
- Major depression
- Heart disease
- Cancer
- Accidents
- Suicide
- Assault
Association between Service Connected Conditions and Cause of Death 2004-2014: Men
Key Findings: Characteristics of Veterans with Service Connected Conditions

• As of October 2016, there were over 4 million Veterans receiving compensation for service connected conditions.
• Women comprised only a small proportion of Veterans with service connected conditions, but there were more than 200,000 women 50 years of age or younger.
• Nearly 60% of those ≤ 50 years old had a combined rating of 50% or more.
Key Findings: Characteristics of Veterans with Service Connected Conditions

- A higher proportion of women had a higher combined rating of $\geq 50\%$ than men.
- Over 1 million have service connected PTSD and over 80% have a combined rating $\geq 50\%$.
- Veterans with service connected PTSD comprised almost half of those with a 100% combined rating.
Key Findings: Health Care Utilization

• Overall, slightly over half of Veterans with service connected conditions used VA health care.

• Health care utilization varied by many factors including age, sex, rank, and service connected condition.
Key Findings: Health Care Utilization

• Utilization was particularly high among those with service connected PTSD, anxiety, major depression, or a 100% combined rating.

• Mental health services were used by many Veterans with service connected conditions. As expected utilization was highest for those with PTSD or major depression.
Key Findings: Mortality and Cause of Death

• One-year mortality was highest for those with a combined 100% rating.

• Leading causes of death (e.g. heart disease and cancer) for Veterans with service connected conditions were similar to those in the general population.
Key Findings: Mortality and Cause of Death

• In the general population, younger individuals are more likely due to die from external causes defined as accidents, suicide, or assault.
• For Veterans born after 1958, alarmingly high proportions of deaths were due to external causes.
• This was particularly true for young women and those with PTSD or major depression.
Implications for VBA and VHA

• VBA and VHA will be providing compensation and health care to young Veterans for many years to come.
• Benefits and health care will need to be tailored to the increasing numbers of young women with service connected conditions.
• VBA and VHA assume a great responsibility for mental health care.
• Veterans who receive compensation, but do not use VA health care.
• Veterans with a combined 100% rating comprise a select group.
• Are premature deaths of Veterans due to external causes preventable?
Implications

• VBA and VHA will be providing compensation and health care to young Veterans for many years to come.
  • Almost 60% of those < 50 years of age have a combined rating of at least 50%.
  • Assuming that most will live a normal life span means that there will be many years of benefits and health care provided to these individuals.
  • The extent to which the United States Armed Forces are involved in future wars also needs to be considered.
Implications

• **Benefits and health care will need to be tailored to the increasing numbers of young women with service connected conditions.**
  • In the last 25 to 30 years, there has been a dramatic increase in the numbers of women serving in the military.
  • Consequently, the number of women with service connected conditions has also increased.
  • VHA is and will be providing more obstetrical care as these young women leave the military and become mothers.
  • Women as opposed to men have more depression and migraine headache.
Implications

• **VBA and VHA assume a great responsibility for mental health care.**
  • There are over 1 million Veterans with serviced connected PTSD and nearly 80% have at least a 50% combined rating.
  • VHA provides a vast array of mental health services to these and other Veterans with service connected conditions and not just those related to mental health.
  • The need and demand for these services have no end.
  • The provision of these benefits and services is a critical mission for VA and would be difficult to accomplish in the civilian sector.
Implications

- Veterans who receive compensation, but do not use VA health care.
  - Who uses VA health care varies by numerous factors, including rank and type of service connected condition.
  - Even among those with service connected PTSD, roughly 30% don’t use VA health care, even though they are entitled to care at little or no cost.
  - Should VHA reach out to those who have a combined rating > 50% and do not use VA health care?
Implications

• **Veterans with a combined 100% rating comprise a select group.**
  • Veterans with a 100% rating use more VA health care and have a higher 1 year mortality rate.
  • Significantly, almost half of Veterans with a 100% rating have service connected PTSD.
  • Veterans with a 100% rating are eligible for certain benefits not available to others with service connected conditions.
  • These include increased compensation, certain types of health care, and increased income and educational support for spouses and children.
Implications

• Are premature deaths of Veterans due to external causes preventable?
  • Individuals who die prematurely are more likely to die of external as opposed to natural causes.
  • This phenomenon seems to be more pronounced for Veterans with service connected conditions.
  • VA provides extensive suicide prevention services, but preventing so called accidental deaths is particularly challenging.
Conclusion

The Department of Veterans Affairs provides an integrated package of benefits to ease the transition from military to civilian life. For those who have suffered or aggravated injuries or medical conditions due to their military service, compensation and health care are critical to achieving this transition and to sustaining health and well being in the years after military service.
References

• Meshberg-Cohen S, DeViva JC, Rosen MI. Counseling Veterans applying for service connection status for mental health conditions. *Psychiatric Services* 2017;68:396-399


References


References


References


• Sripada RK, Hannemann CM, Schnurr PP, et al. Mental health service utilization before and after receipt of a service connected disability award for PTSD. *Health Services Research* 2018

QUESTIONS/COMMENTS?

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