



## **Military Sexual Trauma as a Risk Factor for Homelessness in Women Veterans**

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According to the US Department of Housing and Urban Development, veterans account for a disproportional percentage of the homeless population compared to their civilian counterparts (US Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2013). However, while the rate of homelessness has recently been decreasing among the general population of veterans, homelessness has been increasing for women veterans (Hamilton et al., 93). Furthermore, women veterans face a risk of homelessness that is four times greater than nonveteran women (Hamilton et al., 203). Women veterans not only face the risks that all veterans do, but they also often have to deal with specific trauma that comes with being a woman in the military.

One of the most prominent risk factors for homelessness in women is sexual assault, which for women in the military may occur before, during, or after their service. Women who experience sexual assault prior to serving in the military are also at increased risk for experiencing it later in their lives, including during their service. Sexual assault is a risk factor for homelessness in all women, however, women in the military report rates of sexual assault that surpass the rates reported among civilian women (Hamilton et al. 93). Experiencing

sexual assault while serving in the military is referred to as military sexual trauma (MST). Women who experience MST are also more likely to be diagnosed with PTSD, which in turn increases their risk for experiencing mental illnesses, such as depression and anxiety (Hamilton et al. 93). Suffering from PTSD also increases the risk that people will turn to substance abuse in order to cope with their trauma, which also increases their risk for experiencing homelessness.

Experiencing MST puts a woman veteran at an even greater risk of homelessness. Women who experience sexual assault of any kind are more likely to suffer from low self-esteem, and mental illness, which are both risk factors for homelessness (Hamilton et al. 103). Additionally, many women in the military don't report their experiences of MST, for fear of retribution from the perpetrators, or fear of not being believed by their fellow soldiers. Furthermore, some women who did come forward and report their sexual assault stated that it was swept under the rug and the perpetrator never saw any consequences (Hamilton et al. 99). All of these experiences contribute to the feeling of isolation many survivors of sexual assault feel, and separation from the major relationships in one's life also increases the risk for homelessness.

The high prevalence of MST among women in the military is in part due to the highly masculine environment in which they work (Hamilton et al., 95). For centuries, the military was reserved for men only, and it is only in recent decades that women have become a prominent part of the armed forces. This tradition of masculinity, however, has lingered; and even today women who enter the military are going into a male dominated field. The masculine ideology is pervasive within the military and is largely expressed in terms of traditional masculinity. This ideology often manifests itself through what has been referred to as toxic masculinity, which in its most dangerous form can result in sexual assault and/or violence against women. The women who enter this environment, then, are at an increased risk for being the victim in these situations.

### **Helpful Services**

**SafeHelpline.org** which provides services for veterans who experience sexual assault.

They also have a **24-hour hotline**, the number is **877-995-5247**.

**National Sexual Assault Hotline**, the number is **1-800-656-4673**.

## Works Cited

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