



From Deployment to Unemployment: Why Are So Many Veterans Homeless?

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In 1863, Abraham Lincoln proclaimed: “Honor to the Soldier, and Sailor everywhere, who bravely bears his country's cause. Honor also to the citizen who cares for his brother in the field, and serves, as he best can, the same cause...” More than 150 years later, we as a country have seemingly lost respect for our veterans. According to the National Coalition for Homeless, almost one quarter, or 23%, of the US homeless population are veterans (2012). In addition, approximately 1.4 million veterans today are at risk of becoming homeless because of poverty, a lack of support networks, and overcrowding in substandard housing (National Coalition for Homeless Veterans, 2016). The heroes who once fought for our lives overseas are now struggling to survive on the streets.

The National Alliance to End Homelessness reports that a homeless veteran is statistically likely to be: “male (91%), single (98%), live in a city (76%), and have a mental and/or physical disability (54%)” (2014). The combination of these traits can set up a person for homelessness. A mentally ill person who lives alone lacks both a social support network and the means to maintain steady employment. Even if a veteran were to find a job, many are not paid a livable wage, and thus, cannot afford housing or healthcare.

Mental illness is one of the biggest risk factors that leads to homeless veterans. PTSD is growing at an alarming rate for recently deployed troops. The American Psychological Association found symptoms of PTSD in two thirds of homeless veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan (DeAngelis, 2013). This is up from just 8% of older homeless veterans who had PTSD (DeAngelis, 2013). PTSD is a type of trauma and stressor related disorder. For diagnosis of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, the DSM-5 requires direct or indirect exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Obviously, being on the frontlines can be intensely traumatic, and soldiers frequently witness death and violence. A person with PTSD constantly relives their trauma through flashbacks and nightmares which can be triggered by seemingly unrelated stimuli like fireworks. You never know what could possibly set off a patient’s startle reaction, and this hypervigilance makes PTSD sufferers unpredictable and difficult to understand. Finding employment is near impossible for people with PTSD because they have trouble concentrating and suffer from functional impairment. Sometimes the symptoms are so severe the patient gets the

feeling of being detached from themselves, or depersonalization. They can also experience derealization, where they believe that the world, and everything in it, is not real. The homeless veterans who are unable to receive help because they lack healthcare typically resort to self-medication through drugs and alcohol. This can lead them to develop another dangerous mental illness, substance abuse.

Not all hope is lost for homeless veterans. The VA offers specialized health care programs for 150,000 veterans, other services to an additional 112,000, and compensation and pension benefits to 40,000 other homeless veterans (National Coalition for Homeless Veterans, 2016). The VA also has several rehabilitative and transitional homes located throughout the country. These programs have been extremely successful, as they have reduced the number of veterans on the streets by 70% since 2006 (National Coalition for Homeless Veterans, 2016). If we can find a way to expand and grow these services, then maybe one day every veteran will have a safe place to come home to after deployment. For more information on how to help out veterans in your community, you can visit: <https://www.va.gov/homeless/>

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