

California's Women Veterans and Mental Health

Women veterans report more mental health problems than either the general public or male veterans.⁴ However, most data available about women veterans' mental health is based on women who access healthcare through the Veterans Administration (VA). To reach a broader sample of women veterans, the [California Commission on the Status of Women](#) and [CalVet](#) requested CRB survey women veterans in California about their needs, sociodemographics and health.

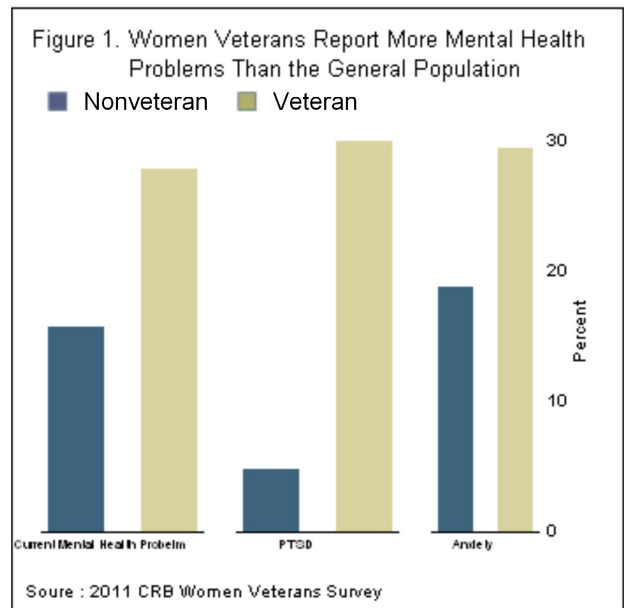
Almost half of CRB survey respondents reported having a current mental health problem. The CRB survey limited mental health disorders to anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and sleep disorders.* Therefore the 46 percent of respondents who reported current mental health problems may underrepresent the number of women veterans with diagnosable mental illnesses.

Of all veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan and who use the VA, 37 percent are diagnosed with a mental health problem.⁸ The VA does not provide a specific break-out of information of women veterans with mental health diagnoses. Both estimates (46.3 percent versus 37 percent) point to the need for a systematic look at in order to better understand mental health issues of women veterans.

WOMEN VETERANS REPORT MORE MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS THAN THE GENERAL POPULATION

The National Institute of Mental Health reports that, over a lifetime, 46 percent of all adults will experience a mental illness of some kind. In any 12-month period (this measure is comparable to the survey period), approximately 26 percent of adults will have a diagnosed mental illness. In the general population, the 12-month prevalence rate is 3.5 percent for PTSD and 18.8 percent for all anxiety disorders.^{7,8}

In the CRB survey, women self-reported mental illnesses. In some instances this may lead to over-reporting with a woman identifying a mental illness/condition with which she has not officially been diagnosed. However, it may also lead to under-reporting because people without a mental illness diagnosis may not know they are suffering from a specific disease but actively have symptoms of that disease. Of the 843 women in the CRB Survey, 46.3 percent reported a current mental health problem (80 percent higher than the general population) 22.0 percent reported current PTSD (630 percent higher than the general population) and 29.4 percent reported current anxiety (60 percent higher than the general population).^{7,8} See Figure 1.



PROFILE OF CA WOMEN'S VETERANS AND THEIR MENTAL HEALTH

Women serving during more recent conflicts were more likely to report current mental health problems than women serving during the Vietnam, Korea or WWII eras. Women serving most recently during a peacetime deployment were most likely to report a mental health condition (57.7 percent) followed by women serving most recently in the Global War on

*For the full report, please visit <http://www.library.ca.gov/crb/12/12-004.pdf>.

Terror (51.6 percent) or in Desert Storm (46.6 percent). The sample size of these three eras is robust and consistent enough to consider the comparisons credible. Women in other service eras report fewer current mental health conditions. However, inconsistent sample sizes make reliable comparisons tenuous. See Table 1.

Table 1. Presence of Mental Health Condition by Last Era Served.

Last Era Served	No Mental Health Condition	Mental Health Condition Present	Total
OND*	22	10	32
GWOT**	121	129	250
Desert Storm	110	96	206
Vietnam	94	59	153
Korea	18	4	22
WWII	24	10	34
Peacetime	56	75	131
Total	445	383	828

*OND: Operation New Dawn

**GWOT: Global War on Terror

Rank at discharge is also associated with the presence of a mental health condition. Women veterans discharged as officers were least likely to report a current mental health condition (35.9 percent) while almost half of non-commissioned officers and 53 percent of women discharged as lower-enlisted reported current mental health problems.

USE OF PRIVATE INSURANCE, VHA AND MEDICARE COVERAGE

In the CRB survey, three-quarters of respondents had used VA healthcare services. Forty percent of women veterans without mental health conditions were currently enrolled in the VA and 68 percent of those with mental health conditions were enrolled. Women veterans without mental health issues were twice as likely to have private health insurance as those with mental health conditions (44.0 and 21.2 percent, respectively).

According to the VA, 37 percent of all women veteran outpatient visits in 2009 were for mental healthcare services. Of this 37 percent, one third required seven or more mental health visits per year. This suggests that mental healthcare for women veterans may require significant VA resources.⁶

COSTS OF MENTAL HEALTH CARE

The VA spent \$43 billion on healthcare, including \$3.983 billion on mental healthcare in 2011.¹ Budget estimates for the next three years increase mental healthcare expenditures for the VHA by almost \$1 billion by 2014.²

According to the CRB survey, about a third of all women veterans with mental healthcare needs seek treatment outside the VA. Currently, we do not have a good estimate of what private costs are for treating women veterans' mental health needs outside the VA or an estimate of lost wages and productivity due to poor mental health.

CITATIONS

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This brief was requested by the [California Commission on the Status of Women and Girls](#).

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