



NAMI

National Alliance on Mental Illness

Multicultural Issues in Veterans Mental Health

The U.S. veteran population is comprised of 85.5% white (non-Hispanic), 9.7% black (non-Hispanic), 4.3% Hispanic/Latino, 1.2% Asian American or Pacific Islander, and 0.7% American Indian or Alaska Native persons.¹

Rates and experience of mental illness

- Culture or ethnic group affiliation may affect how one reacts to post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). African American and Latino individuals may be more likely than whites to develop PTSD.²
- Hispanic Vietnam veterans, especially Puerto Rican Vietnam veterans, have a higher risk for PTSD and experience more severe PTSD symptoms than non-Hispanic white Vietnam veterans. A high level of symptoms among this population was not accompanied by substantial reduction in functioning, suggesting that the observed differences in symptom reporting may reflect features of expressive style rather than different levels of illness.³
- A study comparing Hispanic veterans with schizophrenia to a similar group of non-Hispanic white veterans found that while primary symptoms of schizophrenia were very similar for both groups, Hispanic veterans reported a later age of onset, exhibited higher somatization, and spent less time in the hospital than their white counterparts.⁴
- One study found that Native American veterans were more likely to have been treated for alcohol-related disorders than other veterans, but they were no more likely than other veterans to have been treated for drug or psychiatric problems.⁵

Treatment issues

- A 2002 national study assessing intensive PTSD treatment programs found that black patients showed greater improvement than white patients on one measure of PTSD symptoms and Hispanic patients were more satisfied with their treatment than white patients, although they showed smaller gains in employment income.⁶
- After examining pharmacy records, one study found that the use of atypical antipsychotics among African American and Hispanic veterans was less than that of white patients for the treatment of schizophrenia. For example, the number of prescriptions for clozapine – uniquely effective for patients with comorbid substance abuse – varied greatly by race.⁷

¹ *Veterans Census 2000*, U.S. Census Bureau.

² *How Common is PTSD?* National Center for PTSD, June 2007.

www.ncptsd.va.gov/ncmain/ncdocs/fact_shts/fs_how_common_is_ptsd.htm

³ Alexander N. Ortega and Robert Rosenheck, "Posttraumatic Stress Disorder Among Hispanic Vietnam Veterans," *American Journal of Psychiatry* 157 (April 2000): 615-619.

⁴ Javier I. Escobar, Eugenia T. Randolph, and Maryann Hill, "Symptoms of Schizophrenia in Hispanic and Anglo Veterans," *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry* 10.3 (1986): 259-276.

⁵ M.O. Howard, R.D. Walker, R.T. Suchinsky, and B. Anderson, "Substance-use and Psychiatric Disorders among American Indian Veterans," *Substance Use and Misuse* 31 (1996): 581-598.

⁶ Robert Rosenheck and Alan Fontana, "Black and Hispanic Veterans in Intensive VA Treatment Programs for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder," *Medical Care* 40.1 (January 2002): 1-52-1-61.

⁷ J. Zeber, C. Laurel, J. Zeber, M. Valenstein, and F.C. Blow, "Ethnic Disparity in the Use of Atypical Antipsychotic Medications among Veterans," *Academy Health Meeting Abstracts* 20 (2003): abstract no. 155.

- Northern Plains American Indian veterans expressed a high degree of satisfaction and comfort with a weekly telepsychiatric treatment program for rural, isolated, American Indians with post traumatic stress disorder.⁸

Other considerations

- Of all homeless veterans, 57% are African American or Hispanic. Approximately 40% of homeless veterans have some form of mental illness.⁹
- Native Americans are overrepresented in the homeless-veteran population¹⁰, while Asian-American veterans appear to experience a lower risk of homelessness than veterans from other racial or ethnic groups.¹¹
- Asian American veterans were less likely than other groups to report alcohol abuse or related problems and less likely to be given a diagnosis of such disorders by VA clinicians. They were less likely than blacks or Hispanics to report drug abuse problems or to be given a diagnosis of such problems, but they were not significantly different from whites in reporting or being given a diagnosis of such problems.¹²

Videos

- [Combat on Many Fronts: Latino Veterans and Family](http://www.ncptsd.va.gov/ncmain/ncdocs/videos/emv_cmflatvets_mhcp.html)
(www.ncptsd.va.gov/ncmain/ncdocs/videos/emv_cmflatvets_mhcp.html)
- [War on Many Fronts: African American Veterans with PTSD](http://www.ncptsd.va.gov/ncmain/ncdocs/videos/emv_wmf_afamvet_mhcp.html)
(www.ncptsd.va.gov/ncmain/ncdocs/videos/emv_wmf_afamvet_mhcp.html)

The above titles are videos for providers, veterans, and their families available through the National Center for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (www.ncptsd.va.gov). The purpose of the video series is to increase awareness of the cultural aspects of PTSD care for Latino and African American U.S. veterans.

Websites

- U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Center for Minority Veterans: www.va.gov/centerforminorityveterans
- U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Mental Health Home: www.mentalhealth.va.gov
- Hispanic War Veterans of America: www.hwva.org
- National Native American Veterans Association: www.nnava.org
- SAMHSA Veteran Resources: www.samhsa.gov/vets

⁸ Jay H. Shore, Spero M. Manson, "Telepsychiatric Care of American Indian Veterans with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder: Bridging Gaps in Geography, Organizations, and Culture," *Telemedicine Journal and e-Health* 10 (2004): S-64.

⁹ U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

¹⁰ Wesley J. Kaspro and Robert Rosenheck, "Substance Use and Psychiatric Problems of Homeless Native American Veterans," *Psychiatric Services* 49 (March 1998): 345-350.

¹¹ Sabina Lim, Wesley J. Kaspro, and Robert A. Rosenheck, Brief Reports: "Psychiatric Illness and Substance Abuse among Homeless Asian-American Veterans," *Psychiatric Services* 57.5 (May 2006): 704-707.

¹² Ibid.