

Minnesota's homeless veterans

Homeless in Minnesota 2003: A closer look

Military veterans are no more likely than other men their age to be homeless, but they have higher rates of mental illness and chemical dependency than other homeless men their age.

Despite that fact, and despite the recent recession, homeless veterans have higher employment rates than other homeless men their age.

How many homeless veterans?

On any given night, homeless military veterans in Minnesota include about 650 men and 50 women. They make up about one-quarter of the homeless men and 2 percent of the homeless women in the state. These results are similar to the findings of Wilder's 2000 study.

On a single night in October 2003, Wilder Research found:

- 702 homeless military veterans in Minnesota
- 652 men and 50 women
- 88 on the streets and in other unsheltered locations
- 423 in the Twin Cities area and 191 in greater Minnesota
- 117 children accompanying homeless veterans

Most of Minnesota's homeless veterans (60%) served in the military for more than two years, and 76 percent received an honorable discharge. Vietnam-era veterans are the largest group (41%), including both men and women. The average age of homeless veterans is 48, about six years older than the average for homeless men in Minnesota.

The percentage of homeless veterans who ...

- Are employed: 36%
- Are working full-time: 20%
- If working, earn less than \$10 per hour: 67%
- Have income of \$300 or less for the past month: 43%
- Have chronic medical problems: 50%

Homeless male veterans are more likely than other homeless men their age to have grown up in Minnesota, been married at some point, have more education, be White, and be somewhat better able to find and keep a job even while homeless.

Employment held steady

More than one-third of homeless veterans are employed and 20 percent work full-time, which is similar to the situation in 2000. In contrast, other homeless adults lost considerable ground on jobs since 2000. Overall employment rates among homeless adults dropped from 41 percent to 30 percent for any type of employment, and from 26 percent to 13 percent for full-time work.

More mental and chemical problems, and also more treatment

The Wilder report finds that nearly half of homeless male veterans (47%) have serious mental illness (primarily depression and post-traumatic stress disorder), much higher than in the age-matched comparison group of homeless men who did not serve in the military (33%).

Similarly, 54 percent of homeless veterans have alcoholism or other chemical dependency problems, compared to 38 percent of the other homeless men.

However, many homeless veterans received treatment for their chemical dependency problems in the past two years: 74 percent of homeless veterans with chemical problems received inpatient or outpatient treatment in the past two years, compared to only 61 percent of other homeless men of their age.

More veterans also received mental health treatment: 69 percent of veterans with mental health problems got help in the past two years, compared to only 62 percent of other homeless men their age with mental health problems.

Veterans with combat experience

About one-third of the homeless veterans in Minnesota served in a combat zone: 24 percent in Vietnam, 6 percent in the first Gulf War, 1 percent each in Korea and Lebanon, and 2 percent on other conflicts, including two men from the current war in Iraq.

The Wilder study finds that these combat veterans were even more likely to have serious mental illness than homeless veterans who did not have combat experience (55 percent of combat veterans compared to 46 percent of other veterans).

Another difference was that more of the combat veterans (63%) had been married at some point, compared to other homeless veterans (52%).

Issues to consider

- Since homeless veterans do not fit as closely with some of the common themes among other homeless adults – having a very rough start in life, spending time in foster care or some other placement as children, and entering adulthood without much stability or preparation to become self-sufficient – is there something about their military service background that has contributed to their homelessness?
- What are the reasons for the higher employment rates among homeless veterans than among other homeless adults in Minnesota? Do the available services for veterans play a role, and if so, would similar services hold promise for helping other homeless adults to maintain employment?
- What can Minnesota learn from homeless veterans, and especially combat veterans, about the difficulties those returning from current combat duty might face and the kinds of support they will need?

About this report

This special report on homeless veterans is drawn from the 2003 statewide survey of homelessness, conducted by Wilder Research every three years since 1991.

For more information

The full Wilder report, "Homeless veterans in Minnesota," is available at no cost at www.wilderresearch.org.

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