



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

# **VETERANS**

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# VETERANS

**This brief explores veteran demographics and the issues veterans face as they transition from active-duty service. With a greater understanding comes deeper appreciation for the issues and challenges faced by military personnel and their families, veterans, and the agencies that support them.**

## FACTS TO KNOW

- Restrictions on women serving in active duty roles have been gradually dismantled in the 1980's, with the ban on women in combat lifted in 2015.
- Women make up 17% of the veterans of America's post-9/11 conflicts. Several female veterans like Tammy Duckworth and Tulsi Gabbard have been elected to the U.S. Congress.
- A 2021 study by the Bush Center foundation found that 53% of post-9/11 veterans report physical health conditions.
- Since 2012, suicide rates have outpaced combat deaths among veterans of America's post-9/11 conflicts. The suicide rate of veterans is almost DOUBLE that of the general population. In 2021, the Department of Veterans Affairs dedicated \$10.2 billion dollars to veteran suicide prevention programs.
- In 2021, the Department of Housing and Urban Development estimated that there are 37,000 homeless veterans across America. Financial management is as big of a predictor for veteran homelessness as income. Many veterans enter civilian life with very little prior experience having to manage money, but the Department of Defense's newly created financial readiness office aims to address this issue.

## ROLE OF THE GOVERNMENT

- In the Executive Branch, the Secretary of Veterans Affairs is a member of the President's Cabinet who heads the Department of Veterans Affairs. This department provides healthcare, educational benefits, and low-interest loans for veterans starting a business or buying a home.
- TRICARE, the Department of Defense's Healthcare program for active duty members of the military and their families, runs several joint programs with the Veterans Affairs Administration.
- The House and Senate Committees on Veterans' Affairs are responsible for overseeing agencies within the Department of Veterans Affairs, with influence on veteran hospitals, pensions, life insurance, and the level of financial and educational support veterans receive for transitioning into civilian life.
- At the state level, each state and territory has its own Department of Veterans Affairs. These various agencies coordinate with their federal counterparts and oversee veterans' healthcare facilities in their area.

# FRAMING THE ISSUE

- Some of the issues veterans face related to PTSD and burnout are a result of the all-volunteer nature of America's military and the shrinking number of active-duty troops. Shorter deployment times could reduce issues with PTSD, but are difficult to implement because of the demands of America's various conflicts and commitments relative to the current number of troops.
- The increasing role of technology compared to previous conflicts requires fewer "boots on the ground" in post-9/11 conflicts than in Korea or Vietnam, but this creates new challenges. Drone pilots who are able to take out targets at work and then go home for dinner the same day lack the psychological separation between combat and civilian life, with the potential for unique types of psychological and emotional harm related to PTSD.
- Veterans face major challenges related to homelessness, mental health, and adapting to civilian life. Suicide rates for active duty service members and veterans have been higher than the rate of deaths in combat since 2012.
- In early 2022, a new Executive Order explicitly made sexual harassment within the military a crime and streamlined the reporting process for sexual assaults within the military. The previous reporting process that protects the identity of the victim did not automatically trigger an official investigation or allow for rapid transfer to a different base or unit.

## REFORM THE VA

Veterans face major challenges related to healthcare and mental health resources. Reports of veterans waiting weeks or months to see a doctor have been major issues for the Veterans Health Administration, and transparency around wait times remains a major goal of VA reforms. Veterans also face significant mental health challenges. One in every six veterans faces mental health challenges like depression and PTSD, and the suicide rates of veterans are twice that of the general population.

## HOMELESSNESS

There are around 37,000 homeless veterans across America. Solving the crisis of homelessness is a complicated problem related to financial management skills, access to education, and career training, among other challenges. To find out more about homelessness, see The Policy Circle's Housing Brief.

# WHAT YOU CAN DO

**01. MEASURE** Is there a military base in your community, or nearby in your state? Do you know how large the population of veterans is in your community? Is there a VA location in your community?

**02. IDENTIFY** Are there any veterans-serving organizations in your community? What steps have your state and local officials taken?

**03. REACH OUT** All it takes is a small team of two or three people to set a path for real improvement. Is there a local branch or chapter of a veteran-serving organization like the Wounded Warrior Project or Student Veterans of America in your community?

**04. PLAN** Set milestones based on your state's legislative calendar or local community calendar.

**05. EXECUTE** Consider volunteering with a veteran-serving organization in your community. Talk to local business owners or reach out to your local Chamber of Commerce to find out about veteran employment opportunities. Acknowledge military families in the schools and businesses that you are part of.