

Prevalence of Mental Health Disorders in Elderly U.S. Military Veterans: A Meta-Analysis and Systematic Review

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Objective: Older veterans may be vulnerable to mental health problems. Meta-analytic and systematic review methods sought to determine the prevalence rate of mental health disorders in older military veterans (≥ 65 years). **Methods:** Eleven studies were eligible, and meta-analyses of veteran depression, substance abuse, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, dementia, bipolar disorder, and schizophrenia were conducted. **Results:** Although conducted exclusively with U.S. veterans, high prevalence rates of substance (5.7%) and alcohol use disorders (5.4%) in older veterans were found. However, the prevalence of other mental health disorders, including PTSD and depression, in older veterans was not markedly high. **Conclusion:** The rates of disorder prevalence observed indicates a need for continued awareness of mental health difficulties, particularly substance and alcohol use disorders, in older veterans. In the future studies with non-U.S. military samples using a longitudinal design are required to further understand the prevalence of mental health disorders in geriatric veterans. (Am J Geriatr Psychiatry 2017; ■■■:■■■-■■■)

Key Words: Veteran, geriatric, military, mental health, meta-analysis, systematic review

Highlights

- These results further our understanding of the prevalence of mental health problems in older veterans.
- High prevalence rates of substance and alcohol use disorders in older veterans were found.
- Future studies with non-U.S. military samples using longitudinal design are needed to further understand the prevalence of mental health disorders in geriatric veterans.

INTRODUCTION

As life expectancy grows, the military veteran population is becoming increasingly elderly, with almost

2.2 million veterans in the United States aged 80 and older,¹ with similar numbers of older veterans reported in the United Kingdom.² Older veterans may be at an increased risk of mental health disorders compared with similarly aged nonveterans. First,

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a significant proportion of older veterans will have been exposed to combat and may experience long-term adjustment difficulties as a result, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).³ Second, research has found high levels of social isolation and depression in the elderly because of factors including transport and communication difficulties or poor health,³⁻⁵ and geriatric veterans can be vulnerable to isolation and loneliness.^{4,6} Finally, as the cohort of U.S. veterans who served in Vietnam ages, substance abuse disorders (SUDs) may be a growing concern given the greater lifetime prevalence of SUDs in this group.⁷ Consistent with this, several studies have reported older veterans (≥ 65 years) to experience a variety of mental health problems, including SUDs and depression.⁸⁻¹¹ Taken together, mental health disorders in elderly veterans represent a growing public health problem given the significant impact on veteran quality of life and increased healthcare costs.^{12,13}

Purpose of the Current Review

Older veterans appear to be at risk for several mental health disorders; however, research has yielded mixed findings, and the prevalence rates of mental health problems in older veterans remain unclear. To address this we present a systematic and meta-analytic review of studies examining the prevalence rate of mental health disorders in older veterans (≥ 65 years), including depression, substance abuse, PTSD, anxiety, dementia, bipolar disorder, and schizophrenia, to allow conclusions derived from the evidence base.

METHODS

Search Strategy

A computer-based search of electronic databases, including EMBASE, PubMed, PsycINFO, PILOTS, and Web of Science, was conducted between November and January 2017. The search terms were “mental health,” “geriatric,” and “veteran” ([Supplementary Table S1](#)). We also searched reference lists of included articles and relevant review articles,^{14,15} Google Scholar, issues of journals, and contacted key authors in the field to find additional studies.

Eligibility Criteria

Articles had to meet the following inclusion criteria: study group of veterans, defined as any individual who served in the Armed Forces; a sample ($N \geq 450$) with a mean age of ≥ 65 years; and report of current, period, or lifetime estimates of mental health disorder prevalence. Studies had to have a sample size of 450 or greater to ensure stable prevalence estimates, consistent with previous reviews.¹⁶⁻¹⁸

Articles were excluded if they were single-case studies; if the study sample was selected because participants were a targeted group (e.g., racial group) or had a specific comorbid primary physiologic or psychiatric disorder (e.g., Parkinson disease, dementia, etc.) as this may limit the generalizability of findings; if study participant mental health was assessed by self-report; if the article was a review or only presented qualitative findings; if they were conference abstracts and Ph.D. dissertations where further information or published versions could not be obtained; or if studies were not written in English.

Two authors (VW and SAMS) independently screened articles and extracted data. A flow chart ([Figure 1](#)) shows the number of articles retrieved. The final sample consisted of 11 studies that met the inclusion criteria.

Data Extraction

The following data were extracted from each study: author name, publication year, study location, study design, participant ethnicity, participant socioeconomic status (SES), era of deployment (e.g., Korean war, Vietnam war, etc.), gender distribution, participant age, assessment time points, mental health disorder prevalence rate and type, instruments/diagnostic criteria used, sample size, and any sources of bias or ethical issues. Data were extracted and assessed by two authors (VW and SAMS) with any disagreements resolved after discussion and consensus.

Quality Rating

Two authors (VW and SAMS) independently assessed the methodologic quality of the included studies using a 14-item study design specific checklist.¹⁹ Checklist items were an assessment of whether the study objective was clearly stated; the outcome measures were

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