

## Military and Mental Health Correlates of Unemployment in a National Sample of Women Veterans

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2015

**DATE:** 2015

**PUBLICATION:** *The Medical Care*, 53(4) Suppl 1,  
S32-8.

**PUBLICATION TYPE:** Peer-Reviewed Journal Article

**PUBLICATION LINK:** <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/25767973>

**KEYWORDS:** Women Veterans, unemployment,  
depression, military experiences

### ABSTRACT

*Background:* The unemployment rate is currently higher among women Veterans than among male Veterans and civilian women. Employment is a key social determinant of health, with unemployment being strongly associated with adverse health. *Objective:* To identify military-related and health-related characteristics associated with unemployment in women Veterans. *Research Design and Subjects:* Secondary analysis of workforce participants (n=1605) in the National Survey of Women Veterans telephone survey. *MEASURES:* Demographics, mental health conditions, health care utilization, and military experiences and effects. Unemployment was defined as being in the labor force but unemployed and looking for work. *Analysis:* The  $\chi^2$  analyses to identify characteristics of unemployed women Veterans; logistic regression to identify independent factors associated with unemployment. *Results:* Ten percent of women Veterans were unemployed. Independent correlates of unemployment were screening positive for depression [oddsratio(OR)=4.7; 95% confidence interval [CI], 1.8-12.4], military service during wartime (OR=2.9; 95%, CI 1.1-7.3), and service in the regular military (vs. in the National Guards/Reserves only) (OR=6.8; 95% CI, 2.2-20.5). Two

postactive duty perceptions related to not being respected and understood as a Veteran were each independently associated with unemployment. *Conclusions:* Whether depression underlies unemployment, is exacerbated by unemployment, or both, it is critical to identify and treat depression among women Veterans, and also to investigate women Veterans' experiences and identities in civilian life. Community-based employers may need education regarding women Veterans' unique histories and strengths. Women who served in the regular military and during wartime may benefit from job assistance before and after they leave the military. Gender-specific adaptation of employment services may be warranted."

### RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

- The unemployment rate for women veterans is currently higher than the unemployment rate among male veterans and civilian women. Since unemployment is often associated with a lower quality of health, this study identifies characteristics specific with unemployment in women veterans. Identification of such characteristics might allow for more targeted services for women veterans seeking employment.
- Unemployed women veterans are more likely to be single, have than a college degree, currently live below the federal poverty line, lack health insurance, and have an annual household income of less than \$20,000. The researchers found that unemployment among women veterans was independently associated with screening positive for depression as well as several factors related to military service and veteran status.
- To increase the employment rate among women veterans, the VA could consider developing gender-specific employment services.

## IMPLICATIONS

### FOR PRACTICE

In this study, women veterans who screened positive for depression were five times more likely to be unemployed compared to their counterparts who screen negative. Given the relationship between unemployment and depression in women veterans, providers should ensure that they inquire about employment when depression is identified. Caring for the mental health of women veterans might improve women veterans' employment prospects. Caregivers, family members, and friends should monitor their veteran loved ones for signs of depression, and encourage them to seek treatment if they are exhibiting depressive symptoms. Many unemployed women veterans expressed that civilian coworkers did not understand their military experience. To improve the work experience of women veterans, workplaces should improve awareness and perceptions of women veterans' histories and strengths. Community-based organizations and workplaces should consider seeking out a veterans' network for suggestions on creating better work environments for women veterans. Some veterans' networks, such as the Greater Philadelphia Veterans Network, are already trying to support businesses and corporations working to create a more friendly work atmosphere for veterans.

### FOR POLICY

Given that women veterans who served in Active Duty are more likely to struggle with gaining employment than women veterans who served in the Reserve and National Guard (R/NG), the DoD and VA might offer more job training and assistance to women veterans who served in Active Duty. The U.S. Department of Labor and the DoD might collaborate to offer women veterans more skills and tools to succeed in the civilian workforce. The VA might expand their employment services to focus more on achieving positive employment outcomes for women veterans, especially those dealing with depression. The VA might develop and expand its programs to address the risk factors for unemployment and provide support for innovative opportunities for employment. The VA and other federal agencies might model programs to support unemployed women veterans after the Institute for Veterans and Military Families' Veteran Women Igniting the Spirit of Entrepreneurship (V-WISE) program. This program shows women veterans how to use their leadership skills and business interests to start their own businesses.

### FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

To better understand if type of employment is associated with depression among women veterans, future research should incorporate different measures of employment. For example, researchers could study whether depression symptoms change with the sector of the job (private vs. public). Future studies should include data on how military and social determinants, such as military branch, rank, occupation, and parenting status, influence employment post-transition and depression symptoms. Including social determinants might extend the current understanding of how military experience, employment, and mental health are linked among women veterans. Researchers should examine what services and strategies best mitigate the stress of unemployment on women veterans and contribute to more employment in this population.

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