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## **Veterans Returning from Iraq and Afghanistan**

Are veterans who are returning from Iraq and Afghanistan becoming homeless? The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has reported that hundreds of Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) veterans are homeless. According to a report prepared by the Congressional Research Service, “300 OEF/OIF veterans have used VA services for homeless veterans, and the VA has classified 1,049 as being at risk of homelessness.”<sup>1</sup> Research on Vietnam veterans shows that significant time had passed before they became homeless.<sup>2</sup> It is unclear if the same pattern will hold for OIF/OEF veterans. Some data indicates that OIF and OEF veterans may experience homelessness sooner than their counterparts from Vietnam. Some troubling indicators include a large number of veterans who served after September 11 who are paying too much for rent, and a number of troops returning from Iraq and Afghanistan who have high levels of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI).

### **High Rates of PTSD and TBI**

Recent studies suggest that veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan may face high risks of homelessness because of mental health problems: 19 percent of Iraq veterans reported a mental health problem, compared to 11.3 percent of those returning from Afghanistan.<sup>3</sup> It appears that combat exposure is an important contributing factor, as rates of PTSD for those returning from Iraq were almost twice the PTSD rates before deployment. Concern about the number of returning veterans with Traumatic Brain Injury, which is caused by concussive force, is also an issue. The symptoms of TBI “...are similar to PTSD. Survivors may appear normal but their memory is diminished; they lose their temper, cannot maintain family relationships and get in trouble with the law.”<sup>4</sup> Headaches, dizziness, and trouble concentrating or sleeping are also side effects. The extent of the problem is still unknown. Government reports find that 65 percent of the veterans who served in Iraq and Afghanistan treated at Walter Reed Hospital were diagnosed with TBI.<sup>5</sup>

### **Paying Too Much For Rent**

Estimates from our analysis of the American Community Survey 2005 show that there were 2,176,410 veterans who served after September 11, 2001. Of the one million renters who served during this period, 8 percent (approximately 71,817) were paying more than 50 percent of their income for rent.<sup>6</sup> Severe rent burden is concentrated among the most economically vulnerable with more than 54 percent of those who are paying more than 50 percent for rent falling below the poverty level.<sup>7</sup> These post-September 11 veterans are at-risk for homelessness.

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<sup>1</sup> Perl, L. 2007. CRS Report for Congress: Veterans and Homelessness. Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service.

<sup>2</sup> As cited in Perl, L. 2007. CRS Report for Congress: Veterans and Homelessness. Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service.

<sup>3</sup> Hoge, C., Auchterlonie, J., & Milliken, C. 2006. Mental health problems, use of mental health services, and attrition from military service after returning from deployment to Iraq or Afghanistan. *Journal of the American Medical Association*. 295 (9): 1023-32.

<sup>4</sup> Swords to Plowshares Iraq Veteran Project. Risk and Protective Factors for Homelessness Among OIF/OEF Veterans. Prepared for the National Coalition for Homeless Veterans. June 6, 2006.

<sup>5</sup> U.S. House of Representatives Veterans' Affairs Committee. Press Release issued July 18, 2007.

<sup>6</sup> Author's tabulations of the 2005 American Community Survey.

<sup>7</sup> Author's tabulations of the 2005 American Community Survey.

### **Lack of Housing Subsidies**

Access to permanent housing is consistently the number one service need identified by those concerned with veteran issues (VA staff, community providers, local government agencies, public officials, and former and currently homeless veterans themselves).<sup>8</sup> Further, reports indicate that veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan are seeking help with housing sooner than past cohorts of veterans.<sup>9</sup> Housing programs targeted to veterans are limited in capacity. The General Accounting Office (GAO) found that the Grants and Per Diem Program, the primary housing program for homeless veterans, was not meeting current need.<sup>10</sup> Further, the only program administered by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development that provides targeted supportive housing to veterans with serious mental illness and substance use disorders, HUD-VASH, serves only 1,780 veterans.

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<sup>8</sup> Nakashima, J. C. Burnette, J. McGuire, and A. Shelly. Community Homelessness Assessment, Local Education and Networking Group (CHALENG) for Veterans. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

<sup>9</sup> Swords to Plowshares Iraq Veteran Project. Risk and Protective Factors for Homelessness Among OIF/OEF Veterans. Prepared for the National Coalition for Homeless Veterans. June 6, 2006.

<sup>10</sup> U.S. General Accounting Office. 2006. Homeless Veterans Programs. Washington, DC: Author.