Nearly a Fifth of War Veterans Report Mental Disorders, a Private Study Finds

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One in five service members who have returned from Iraq or Afghanistan report symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder or major depression, but little more than half of them have sought mental health treatment, according to an independent study of United States troops.

The service members and veterans who reported these symptoms represented about 19 percent of the 1.6 million service members who have deployed to war in the last five years, a figure consistent with the most recent findings by military researchers. A 2007 survey of combat Army soldiers who had been home for several months found that 17 percent of active-duty troops and 25 percent of reservists had screened positive for symptoms of stress disorder.

The study, released on Thursday by the RAND Corporation, reported that about 19 percent of the troops said they might have experienced a traumatic brain injury, usually the result of powerful roadside bombs, yet a majority of those troops had never been evaluated for such an injury.

The 500-page study is the first exhaustive, private analysis of the psychological and cognitive injuries suffered by service members. The study sought to determine the prevalence of these injuries, gaps in treatment and the costs of treating, or failing to treat, the conditions.

RAND researchers conducted a telephone survey from last August to January 2008 with 1,965 service members, reservists and veterans who had deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan in the last five years. Some respondents had deployed more than once. The researchers also gathered data from focus groups. The survey was conducted in 24 communities with high concentrations of service members, reservists and veterans.

The Defense Department said that it was heartened that the data reflected its own findings on the prevalence of mental injuries, and that the study helped highlight the hurdles the military faces in helping veterans.

"We're on a long journey, and we've come a long way, but we've got a long way to go," said Col. Loree Sutton of the Army, head of the new Defense Center of Excellence for Psychological Health and Traumatic Brain Injury.

Lisa H. Jaycox, a senior behavioral scientist at RAND and a co-author of the new study, "Invisible Wounds of War," said the findings also served to underscore the barriers, some of them self-imposed, that troops face in getting help. War veterans say they are often reluctant to seek treatment, in part out of fear that their medical information will be used to derail their careers. Commanders typically have access to a service member's military medical records.

"There is a perception that the record can be used against them," Ms. Jaycox said. "That is hard to overcome given that the record is not confidential."

Only 53 percent of service members and veterans who reported symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder or depression sought treatment. Of those, about half got "minimally adequate treatment," according to the study.

"Clearly, that's a finding that concerns us," Colonel Sutton said during a meeting with reporters.

Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates is considering removing a question about a service member's health care history from security clearance questionnaires, she said.

"We think that's going to be a big step forward to help our service members understand that seeking care, in fact, is a sign of strength," Colonel Sutton said.

A shortage of well-trained mental health workers in the military and the veterans' health care system compounds the challenge.

The RAND study also estimated the two-year cost of treating service members who return from war with symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder or depression. It put the figure at $6.2 billion, an amount that includes medical care, lost productivity and losses from suicide.

The better the treatment, the more that the nation saves, the study concluded.

> “This is a crisis, and we can’t keep muddling around the edges,” said Paul Rieckhoff, executive director of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, a nonpartisan advocacy group. “We can pay for mental health care now or pay for the jail cells and cemeteries and alcohol and drug treatment programs later. Not to mention the moral obligation we have to these veterans.”