

CORRECTIONAL SERVICE CANADA

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Mental Health Needs of Veterans in the Canadian Correctional System: A Brief Review

Veteran offenders have complex mental health needs that are impacted by a variety of factors such as homelessness and prior trauma exposure. Additional research concerning federal Canadian veteran offenders is needed.

Why we did this study

In 2012, the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) and Veterans Affairs Canada (VAC) established a memorandum of understanding to support and provide services for veterans incarcerated in the federal correctional system. As part of this agreement, a VAC-CSC working group was formed to annually identify action items for the working group and to establish priority areas that enable both organizations to support offenders throughout incarceration and upon release and reintegration into the community. The current research initiative was mutually agreed upon and is a component of this agreement.

What we did

In support of improving current efforts to rehabilitate and reintegrate veteran offenders, a literature review on the mental health needs of veteran offenders was undertaken. Reviewing academic literature as well as governmental and non-governmental organizational publications and websites, this review examined information concerning the specific mental health needs of veterans as well as other factors that indirectly impact on mental health, such as homelessness and antisocial behaviors.

What we found

Veteran offenders are more likely to be convicted of violent offences than non-veteran offenders, suggesting a link with antisocial behaviour. Research indicated that incarcerated veterans were more likely to display physical manifestations of antisocial tendencies (e.g., smashing things, being manipulative, or seeking revenge) and traits (e.g., verbal aggression, sensation seeking, and disinhibition). The association between mental health concerns, antisocial behaviour, and the incidence of intimate partner violence and the role of prior trauma (combat history or military sexual trauma) was also explored. Veteran offenders often have complex mental health needs that may impede their ability to reintegrate into the community following incarceration.

Mental health research for veteran offenders identified the impact of post-traumatic stress disorder and the struggle associated with transitioning to civilian life as factors that may increase the risk of incarceration. Coping strategies used by veterans (e.g. substance misuse) may further contribute to criminal offending and incarceration.

Homelessness among veterans is associated with mental health concerns and the potential for increased risk of criminal offending behaviour. Research has shown that addressing the need for housing better supports veterans in addressing their mental health issues and may divert veterans from criminal behaviour or criminal justice system involvement.

An overview of assessment tools and community based interventions for veterans was provided. Veteran courts, in particular, have been identified as a strategy to minimize the potential for re-offending of veteran offenders and allow for a holistic examination of the veteran's offending, mental health issues, and prior military experience.

What it means

The literature review highlights the importance of mental health services and supports for veteran offenders. Homelessness, antisocial behaviours, and specific mental health diagnoses present additional challenges for the support and rehabilitation of these offenders, particularly due to the association of these factors with criminal offending in general. Future research initiatives concerning veteran offenders will be identified based on consultation with the VAC-CSC working group and the corporate needs of CSC.

For more information

Agterberg, S., Beauchamp, T., & Farrell MacDonald, S. (2018). *Mental health needs of veterans in the Canadian correctional system: A brief review* (Research Report R-409). Ottawa, Ontario: Correctional Service of Canada.

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