



## RESEARCH BRIEF

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### Homelessness and Criminal Justice Involvement Among Veterans: A Review of the Research

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#### What do we know?

There has been a long-standing connection between incarceration and homelessness, and many people at this intersection are US military Veterans. We conducted a review of studies examining homelessness and criminal justice involvement among Veterans to determine the prevalence of and risk factors for homelessness among criminal justice-involved Veterans and to examine the prevalence of and risk factors for criminal justice involvement among homeless Veterans.

#### Prevalence and Risk Factors for Criminal Justice Involvement Among Homeless Veterans

Most homeless Veterans seeking or receiving mental health or addiction treatment, or Veterans in residential or supported housing programs, had experienced incarceration or had a criminal justice history; the studies we reviewed found rates ranging from 38% to 83% (Douyon et al., 1998; Westermeyer & Lee, 2013). Recent or current criminal justice involvement was also common among homeless Veterans, with rates reported in the literature ranging from 3% to 41% (Benda, Rodell, & Rodell, 2003a, 2003b; Kashner et al., 2002). Dynamic risk factors (i.e., potentially alterable factors) for criminal justice involvement among homeless Veterans include current alcohol or drug use, comorbid conditions, and living with a person who had a substance use disorder. Static risk factors (i.e., unalterable factors) include childhood factors of experiencing abuse (physical or sexual) prior to the age of 18 and conduct disorders in childhood, as well as having prior hospitalization.

#### Prevalence and Risk Factors for Homelessness Among Criminal Justice-Involved Veterans

Homelessness was common among Veterans with criminal justice involvement, with rates ranging from 5% to 80% (Brown & Jones, 2015; Finlay et al., 2017). Prior incarceration was a risk factor for homelessness. Veterans with a history of incarceration in their lifetime had 4 times higher odds of homelessness during their lifetime than those with no history, while those with recent incarceration had 26 times higher odds of recent homelessness than those with no recent incarceration (Copeland et al., 2009).

## Implications for Providers of Housing, Legal, Health and Social Services to Homeless and Criminally Involved Veterans

Current research provides some guidance to providers who work with homeless, criminal justice-involved Veterans. First, connecting Veterans in homeless or mental health programs with legal services may help them to resolve criminal justice charges and focus on treatment. Second, ensuring Veterans exiting incarceration have immediate access to housing may help reduce the risk of mortality and improve treatment entry and retention. Finally, offering employment training in VA supportive housing programs may ensure that the Veterans who most need this training receive it.

### What do we need to know next?

Published research indicates that much is still to be learned about the link between homelessness and criminal justice involvement. For homeless Veterans, identifying and understanding their recent criminal justice involvement and how such involvement shapes their risk for return to or continued homelessness will inform homeless programs. For criminal justice-involved Veterans, delivery of homeless and other support services immediately upon release from incarceration will limit their risk for homelessness. Additional research is needed to inform and guide future efforts to serve homeless and criminal justice-involved Veterans.

As the VA's programs targeted to assist Veterans involved in the criminal justice system continue to grow, research can help inform resource allocation and programming to serve Veterans who are homeless and/or justice-involved. First, more comprehensive data from multiple sources are needed to guide service provision for the justice-involved and homeless population of Veterans. Second, critical research is needed about different demographic groups, such as women, people of color, rural Veterans, Veterans with disabilities, and Veterans from different periods of service. Finally, identifying and understanding the mechanisms that explain the link between homelessness and criminal justice involvement is crucial to intervention program development.

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