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# Hunger and Poverty in the Military Community

The military community includes both people on active duty (more than 1.3 million<sup>1</sup>) and veterans (20 million<sup>2</sup>). There are also 800,000 reserve forces.<sup>3</sup> The five branches of the U.S. military are the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force, and Coast Guard. U.S. military personnel come from the 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, Guam, and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

About 23,000 active duty personnel received benefits from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, previously food stamps) in 2013, the latest year for which statistics are available.<sup>4</sup> This is a lower percentage than hunger rates for the average U.S. household (2 percent versus 12.3 percent). However, no one helping to defend our country should struggle to put food on the table.

Similarly, veterans experience hunger at just over half the national rate (7 percent v. 12.3 percent). Nearly 1.4 million veterans face food insecurity.<sup>5</sup> Veterans are at higher risk of food insecurity if any of the following apply to them: they are younger, they left the military at a lower pay grade than is typical, they earn less at their post-military jobs, they are unmarried, or they live in households with more children than the typical veteran.<sup>6</sup>

More than 1.25 million veterans live below the poverty line. Young veterans, veterans of color, and female veterans are the most vulnerable.<sup>7</sup> 10 percent of young veterans are poor.<sup>8</sup> Veterans of color are twice as likely to live in poverty as the overall veteran population (14 percent compared to 7 percent<sup>9</sup>). Female veterans are much more likely to be poor than male veterans (10.3 percent compared to 6.5 percent).<sup>10</sup> Veterans who fit into two or more of these groups are even more likely to live below the poverty line. For instance, young female veterans have a higher poverty rate than either female or young veterans as a whole—almost 14 percent. These disparities are primarily due to varying forms of racial and gender discrimination and inequities.

## Food Insecurity<sup>11</sup>

- Households with female veterans are twice as likely as households with male veterans to be eligible for SNAP. One in four veterans of the U.S. wars in Iraq and Afghanistan report being food insecure.<sup>12</sup>



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## VETERAN HUNGER BY GENDER (INDIVIDUALS)

	Men	Women
Veterans (Individuals)	6.3%	13%

## VETERAN HUNGER BY RACE (HOUSEHOLDS)

	General Veteran	African American	Indigenous	Latino
Veteran-Headed Household	7%	14%	14.5%	9.5%

## Median Income<sup>13</sup>

Although female veterans as a group have a higher educational level than their male counterparts, women are nonetheless paid less. In a majority of the age brackets shown on the next page, the pay gap is more than \$10,000 a year. Not surprisingly, this increases women's likelihood of facing hunger.



Approximately 20 percent of food insecure households include someone with either past or present military service.\*

\*<http://help.feedingamerica.org/HungerInAmerica/hunger-in-america-2014-full-report.pdf>

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## MEDIAN INCOME

	Male Veteran	Female Veteran
Median Income for Veterans of All Ages	\$58,995	\$54,962
Age 17-24	\$37,929	\$34,999
Age 25-34	\$57,990	\$49,925
Age 35-44	\$78,958	\$67,905
Age 45-54	\$81,743	\$69,974
Age 55-64	\$63,990	\$56,231
Age 65-74	\$58,491	\$44,241
Age 75 and older	\$45,785	\$32,936

Note: Data disaggregated by race was not included in this source.

## Barriers to employment<sup>14</sup>

Although veteran unemployment and underemployment is half that of the general U.S. population, there are barriers to work for some veterans. It may be difficult to secure employment for many reasons, including mental and physical disabilities.

- 20 percent of all employed veterans only work part time.
- 4 million veterans report becoming disabled while on duty.<sup>15</sup> Women are more likely to suffer from a service-related disability.

## Untreated or poorly treated mental and emotional conditions

Mental health services help veterans reintegrate into civilian life. Many return from active duty suffering from major

depression, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), or traumatic brain injuries (TBI).<sup>16</sup>

- Only 50 percent of veterans who need mental health support receive treatment.<sup>17</sup>
- Untreated PTSD or depression increases the risk of substance abuse,<sup>18</sup> and in turn the risk of unemployment and food insecurity.

## Homelessness<sup>19</sup>

Between 2010 and 2017, veteran homelessness declined by almost 50 percent.<sup>20</sup> National declines in homelessness, as well as the 50 percent reduction among veterans, are primarily due to the work of “Open Doors,”<sup>21</sup> which was presented to Congress on June 22, 2010, by the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness, as the first comprehensive federal plan aimed at preventing and ending homelessness.<sup>22</sup> This is a great example of how federal policy and practices can be used to address issues that impact food security.

- Still, on any given night, 40,000 veterans are homeless.<sup>23</sup>
- Veterans of color represent more than 50 percent of the veteran homeless population.<sup>24</sup>

## Proposed cuts to critical programs

Congress should preserve funding for food, housing, heat, and health programs that help food insecure military members avoid hunger and poverty. In addition, Congress should ensure that all policies and programs produce equitable outcomes for veterans of color, female veterans, and younger veterans—the veterans with the highest levels of food insecurity.

We should continue to invest in proven initiatives with the goal of fully eliminating hunger and poverty among both active duty military and veterans.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> “About the Department of Defense.” U.S. Department of Defense. <https://www.defense.gov/About/>

<sup>2</sup> Source: 2011-2015 American Community Survey 5-Year Profiles. United States Census Bureau. <https://www.census.gov/search-results.html?q=veterans&page=1&state-Geo=none&searchtype=web&ccsp=SERP>

<sup>3</sup> Info Memo. Office of the Secretary of Defense. Department of Defense. November 2016. [http://rfpb.defense.gov/Portals/67/Documents/Improving%20the%20Total%20Force%20using%20the%20National%20Guard%20and%20Reserves\\_1%20November%202016.pdf?ver=2016-11-17-142718-243](http://rfpb.defense.gov/Portals/67/Documents/Improving%20the%20Total%20Force%20using%20the%20National%20Guard%20and%20Reserves_1%20November%202016.pdf?ver=2016-11-17-142718-243)

<sup>4</sup> “DOD Needs More Complete Data on Active-Duty Servicemembers’ Use of Food Assistance Programs.” Report to Congressional Committees. U.S. Government Accountability Office. July 15, 2016. <https://www.gao.gov/assets/680/678474.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Bread analysis multiplying the number of veterans (20 million) by food insecurity rates by gender. Sources: [https://www.va.gov/vetdata/docs/SpecialReports/Profile\\_of\\_Veterans\\_2015.pdf](https://www.va.gov/vetdata/docs/SpecialReports/Profile_of_Veterans_2015.pdf) and [https://www.va.gov/vetdata/docs/SpecialReports/Women\\_Veterans\\_2015\\_Final.pdf](https://www.va.gov/vetdata/docs/SpecialReports/Women_Veterans_2015_Final.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Profile of Veterans 2015. US Department of Veterans Affairs. March 2017. [https://www.va.gov/vetdata/docs/SpecialReports/Profile\\_of\\_Veterans\\_2015.pdf](https://www.va.gov/vetdata/docs/SpecialReports/Profile_of_Veterans_2015.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Table B21007. AGE BY VETERAN STATUS BY POVERTY STATUS. 2016 American Community Survey.

[https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=ACS\\_16\\_1YR\\_B21007&prodType=table](https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=ACS_16_1YR_B21007&prodType=table)

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Profile of Veterans 2015. US Department of Veterans Affairs. March 2017. [https://www.va.gov/vetdata/docs/SpecialReports/Profile\\_of\\_Veterans\\_2015.pdf](https://www.va.gov/vetdata/docs/SpecialReports/Profile_of_Veterans_2015.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Food insecurity among veterans of the US wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Cambridge University Press. Public Health Nutrition: 18(5), 844–849. May 2014.

[https://www.cambridge.org/core/services/aop-cambridge-core/content/view/F03B64DD63287F2BE5F2067F3E5AC5FB/S136898001400072Xa.pdf/food\\_insecurity\\_among\\_veterans\\_of\\_the\\_us\\_wars\\_in\\_iraq\\_and\\_afghanistan.pdf](https://www.cambridge.org/core/services/aop-cambridge-core/content/view/F03B64DD63287F2BE5F2067F3E5AC5FB/S136898001400072Xa.pdf/food_insecurity_among_veterans_of_the_us_wars_in_iraq_and_afghanistan.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> “Veterans in Rural America: 2011-2015.” American Community Survey Reports. January 2017. <https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2017/acs/acs-36.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> “Veterans Day 2017.” US Census Bureau. October 2017. <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/facts-for-features/2017/veterans-day.html>

<sup>16</sup> “Mental Health and Cognitive Care Needs of America’s Returning Veterans.” RAND Corporation. [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research\\_briefs/2008/RAND\\_RB9336.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_briefs/2008/RAND_RB9336.pdf)

<sup>17</sup> “Veterans and Military Families.” Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. <https://www.samhsa.gov/veterans-military-families>

<sup>18</sup> PTSD and Substance Abuse in Veterans. U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. [https://www.ptsd.va.gov/public/problems/ptsd\\_substance\\_abuse\\_veterans.asp](https://www.ptsd.va.gov/public/problems/ptsd_substance_abuse_veterans.asp)

<sup>19</sup> Homeless Veterans. U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

<https://www.va.gov/HOMELESS/accomplishments/2016-by-the-numbers.asp>

<sup>20</sup> “Opening Doors.” United States Interagency Council on Homelessness. May 2018. <https://www.usich.gov/opening-doors>

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> “Opening Doors: Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness.” United States Interagency Council on Homelessness. Amended in 2015. [https://www.usich.gov/resources/uploads/asset\\_library/USICH\\_OpeningDoors\\_Amendment2015\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.usich.gov/resources/uploads/asset_library/USICH_OpeningDoors_Amendment2015_FINAL.pdf)

<sup>23</sup> “Homeless Veterans.” U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

<https://www.va.gov/HOMELESS/accomplishments/2016-by-the-numbers.asp>

<sup>24</sup> Veterans in Rural America: 2011-2015.” American Community Survey Reports. January 2017. <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/security/news/2012/03/06/11201/veteran-poverty-by-the-numbers/>