

LGBTQ+ Veteran Research: Emerging Evidence for Reducing Health Disparities

LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and additional minoritized sexual and gender identities) Veterans are at higher risk for health issues compared to heterosexual, cisgender (i.e., non-transgender) Veterans and the civilian population. Victimization, discrimination, and other stressors related to LGBTQ+ identities negatively impact health and well-being of LGBTQ+ Veterans. Historically, LGBTQ+ Veterans have received little research attention,¹ meaning that ongoing work and new research opportunities are critical to inform programs and policies focused on achieving LGBTQ+ health equity.

Key Findings

LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) Veterans are at increased risk for suicide

- LGB (lesbian, gay, and bisexual) Veterans are more likely than heterosexual Veterans to experience suicidal ideation during their lifetime² and are at greater risk for suicide than both the general Veteran population and the general U.S. population³
- Transgender Veterans die by suicide at two times the rate of cisgender Veterans⁴

LGBT Veterans are disproportionately impacted by mental health issues

- LGB Veterans are about two times more likely to have posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and alcohol use disorder compared to the general Veteran population⁵
- Transgender Veterans have a greater psychiatric burden, including higher likelihood of military sexual trauma, PTSD, and depression, compared to cisgender Veterans⁶

LGBT women Veterans are more likely to experience harassment and feel unwelcome at VA

- Most LGT (lesbian, gay, and transgender) Veteran VA users feel welcome at VA and comfortable disclosing their identity to their provider⁷
- However, LGBT women Veteran VA users are more likely to report harassment and feeling unwelcome at VA, and are more likely to delay or miss needed care than non-LGBT women Veterans⁸

Care that affirms LGBTQ+ identities shows promise for reducing health disparities

- "Pride in All Who Served," a 10-week health education group created to meet LGBTQ+ Veteran needs, improved mental health symptoms and willingness to access VA care⁹
- Gender-affirming medical interventions, including hormone therapy and surgeries, are associated with lower suicidal ideation among transgender Veterans¹⁰

Improving SOGI documentation expands opportunities for LGBTQ+ research

- Historically, VA has not routinely collected or documented Veteran sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) information
- Despite past military policies prohibiting openly LGBTQ+ individuals from serving, Veterans are as likely as non-Veterans to complete SOGI survey items¹¹
- Recent addition of SOGI data fields in VA health records can improve understanding of LGBTQ+ Veteran needs

Funded VA LGBTQ+ Research Projects

- **ONGOING: Understanding hormone therapy care received by transgender Veterans in VHA** (Guneet Jasuja, PhD, Apr 2019- Sep 2022). This project will refine methods for identifying transgender Veterans on hormone therapy and assess the quality of hormone therapy provided to transgender Veterans at VA. *For more information:* guneet.jasuja@va.gov
- **ONGOING: Understanding mental health problems and health risk behaviors among LGBT Veterans** (Keren Lehavot, PhD, Apr 2019- Sep 2023). This project will survey LGBT and heterosexual, cisgender Veterans to identify health disparities, test a model of risk and protective factors, and assess VA utilization, barriers to care, and treatment preferences. *For more information:* tracy.simpson@va.gov
- **ONGOING: Understanding suicide risks among LGBT Veterans in VA care** (Joseph Goulet, PhD, MS, Jun 2019- May 2023). This project will develop informatics tools to identify LGBT Veterans, characterize suicide risk factors, and examine the differential effect of risk factors on suicide by LGBT status. Findings will expand understanding of areas of unmet need and outreach for all Veterans at risk for suicide. *For more information:* joseph.goulet@va.gov
- **NEW: Engaging transgender Veterans with communication technology** (Michael Weiner, MD, MPH, Sep 2021- Feb 2023). This project will characterize mental health utilization patterns and barriers and facilitators for transgender Veterans accessing depression treatment and will design an intervention strategy sensitive to the needs of the population. *For more information:* michael.weiner4@va.gov
- **NEW: Clinical care needs and experiences for patients with spinal cord injury identifying as LGBT** (Jenny Kiratli, PhD, Oct 2021- Mar 2023). This study will fill gaps in knowledge about unmet needs of LGBT Veterans with spinal cord injury by exploring: 1) VA care experiences of LGBT Veterans with spinal cord injury; and 2) provider approaches to caring for LGBT Veterans with spinal cord injury. *For more information:* jenny.kiratli@va.gov
- **NEW: Needs, preferences, and perceived barriers and facilitators for gender-affirming surgeries for transgender and gender diverse Veterans: moving towards a more inclusive VHA** (Alyson Littman, PhD, MPH, Oct 2021- Sep 2023). This project will form a Veteran engagement group and will survey and interview transgender/gender diverse Veterans about needs related to gender-affirming surgeries. *For more information:* alyson.littman@va.gov

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For More Information on:

- **LGBTQ+ research at VA:** Joseph Goulet, joseph.goulet@va.gov & Allison Warren, allison.warren@va.gov
- **LGBTQ+ healthcare at VA:** <https://www.patientcare.va.gov/LGBT/>
- **The VA Women's Health Research Network:** Elizabeth Yano, elizabeth.yano@va.gov

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