

Economic Opportunity's Role in Preventing Suicide

The VFW's Concerns:

As the VFW has advocated for many years, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) must immediately incorporate Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) data into its annual suicide prevention report, to include disability compensation, education and employment benefit use, home loan use and foreclosure assistance, and participation in housing and food insecurity programs. Currently, VA tracks only how many veterans who die by suicide had interactions with VA through medical or mental health appointments. Short of this incorporation, economic opportunity benefits cannot be fully leveraged to successfully prevent suicide among veterans.

Education - A 2017 study in the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* found individuals with a college degree were half as likely to die by suicide compared to those with a high school education. A 2020 study of recently transitioned service members found those with fewer years of education had a higher hazard of suicide, with lack of education being a likely factor in difficulty finding post-military employment, potentially leading to financial instability.

Employment - Unemployment can be detrimental to mental health. It is even associated with increased risk for suicide. However, the relationship between unemployment and suicide is a complex one. Providing benefits while veterans are unemployed and making sure they are swiftly reemployed can moderate mental health issues and potentially mitigate suicidal ideations.

Compensation – Some veterans may feel hopeless, unheard, or retriggered by their trauma during the benefit claims process. They may also be facing financial hardship to pay medical expenses until they can receive care at VA. A 2021 study in *Military Behavioral Health* showed that veterans with a service-connected disability designation who utilized services were less likely to attempt suicide.

Housing – Data from a study published in a 2021 issue of the *Journal of Epidemiology & Community Health* on veterans who self-reported housing instability between 2012 and 2016 indicated over half of these veterans accessed homeless services and associated this use of services to a significant reduction in suicide risk. This is a positive sign for the ability of these programs to perform upstream intervention.

Note: All of these programs are administered by the Veterans Benefits Administration. However, none of them are incorporated into the VA annual suicide prevention report.

The VFW urges Congress to:

- Direct VA to incorporate veteran benefit usage into its annual suicide prevention report. This would show the correlation between VA benefits and veterans who die by suicide.
- Analyze which benefits have a greater impact on upstream suicide prevention and focus on expanding those benefits in an effort to reduce the overall number of veteran suicides.