

# COVID-19 & Veterans' Mental Health

## Fact Sheet

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented significant challenges for veterans, including exacerbating mental health and substance use issues that too often bring veterans in contact with the criminal justice system.

Before the pandemic, veterans in New York State were 8 times more likely to experience post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and 2–4 times more likely to experience major depression than their civilian counterparts.<sup>1</sup> In a recent national survey, a majority of veterans said their mental health worsened since socially distancing, and more than half reported having a mental health appointment canceled or postponed during the pandemic.

The trauma caused by PTSD, addiction, depression, and substance use can lead to trouble with the law. According to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, more than half of all justice-involved veterans have either mental health or substance use disorders, but the criminal justice system is ill-equipped to meet their needs.<sup>2</sup>

Veterans Treatment Courts (VTCs) serve as an alternative to incarceration, giving justice-involved veterans charged with low-level offenses a second chance by providing access to treatment and mental health services. For many veterans, VTCs are a critical path to receiving the help they need, but one-third of New York State's 700,000 military veterans lack access to a VTC. Ensuring universal access to VTCs is imperative to helping veterans during the pandemic.

*Below is a snapshot of veterans' mental health during the pandemic, based on available national and New York State data.*

### COVID-19 IMPACT ON VETERANS' MENTAL HEALTH

The Wounded Warrior Project (WWP) annually surveys post-9/11 veterans and service members who incurred a physical or mental injury or illness while serving. The 2020 survey, conducted during the pandemic, found that:<sup>3</sup>

- 54%** currently suffer from PTSD
- 34%** currently suffer from severe or moderately severe depression
- 52%** reported that their mental health has worsened since socially distancing themselves
- 30%** reported having suicidal thoughts in the past two weeks

The survey also found that the pandemic has made mental health care less accessible.

- 51%** had a mental health appointment cancelled or postponed
- 48%** with a cancelled mental health appointment did not receive needed information from the VA on how to continue their mental health care

### COVID-19 IMPACT ON VETERANS' RISK FACTORS FOR POOR MENTAL HEALTH

Social isolation, unemployment, food insecurity, and other factors are associated with poor mental health outcomes.<sup>4</sup>

- Nationally, unemployment among veterans increased from **3.4%** in November 2019 to **6.3%** in November 2020.<sup>5</sup>
- Nationally, every 5 percentage point increase in the unemployment rate is associated with more than **550** veteran suicide deaths & more than **20,000** additional veterans having substance use disorders.<sup>6</sup>
- 61%** of respondents to the annual WWP survey conducted during the pandemic reported feeling more disconnected from their family, friends, or community.<sup>7</sup>
- Prior to the pandemic, **59,000** New York veterans relied on Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits.<sup>8</sup>
- Aging veterans are at a particularly high risk of social isolation during the pandemic.<sup>9</sup> More than **70%** of New York's veterans are age 55 or older.<sup>10</sup>

See the full list of references [here](#).

