

Women veterans face jumps in domestic violence, suicide risk

1 in 5 female veterans reported experiencing intimate partner violence in the last year.

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Women veterans are 1.6 times more likely to experience intimate partner violence compared to civilian women which also increases their risk of suicide, a study from Disabled American Veterans found. Photo by Tech. Sgt. April Wickes.SHARE

Women veterans are 1.6 times more likely to experience intimate partner domestic violence compared to civilian women which also increases their risk of suicide, researchers found.

A [study by Disabled American Veterans](#) describes the unique risk factors that led to an increase in suicide rates among female veterans between 2020 and 2021. Researchers found that between those years, suicides among veteran women jumped by 24%, an increase “vastly higher” than the rise among civilian women, where cases were relatively flat. One of those factors is domestic violence or intimate partner violence, IPV.

The study also said that 1 in 5 female veterans reported experiencing intimate partner violence in the last year to the Department of Veterans Affairs. One of those ‘1 in 5’ is Jennifer Alvarado, a former hospital corpsman in the Navy who served from 2001 to 2006. Alvarado told Task & Purpose that during those years, she felt as though she was living a double life.

“On one hand, I was this amazing hospital corpsman that was serving in the United States Navy and I excelled at my job,” Alvarado said. “On the other hand, I was a battered woman so I had to deal with putting on this mask that everything was ok and it wasn’t okay.”

Alvarado said she tried to tell leadership that she was dealing with issues at home but they didn’t offer her help. At one point, her husband would not come home, leaving her without childcare. When she contacted her chain of command, they wrote her up as an unauthorized absence “because at the end of the day, they don’t care what your problem or situation is – if you’re supposed to report by a certain time, you need to report by a certain time,” she said.

Alvarado said her breaking point came when her spouse had beaten her with objects so badly that she ended up having to go to the same hospital where she worked.

“The very people that I worked with every day, day in, day out,” she said, “they are taking medical measuring tapes and cameras, taking pictures of the physical marks that were left on my body. And not only did this man physically beat me in front of my child and in base housing, base police were involved. It was just completely mortifying.”

Even though Alvarado was the servicemember in the relationship, she didn’t get help from her chain of command or any of the other offices or people within the Department of Defense.

“He stole my car off of base housing and stole some checks and he went to the Navy Federal Credit Union and he left me and my child \$3.93 – a number that I’ve remembered for the last 20 years,” she said, choking back tears.

Alvarado eventually became her own advocate. Yesterday she joined the organization’s report launch on Capitol Hill in Washington D.C. and sat with other women trying to make a change in veteran and military spaces. Now, she advocates for more resources for veterans dealing with domestic violence. She also thinks it’s important for the VA to teach more veterans about self-love.

“One of the hardest things for a veteran to do is to love themselves because we feel that we have done bad things or we have been participants in things that we shouldn’t have. We feel that we are unworthy of love, acceptance and value,” Alvarado said. “The only theme that’s gonna work is if these veterans learn to love themselves and learn to love all versions of themselves, even the versions of themselves that they may not like.”

Solutions

Joy Ilem, the DAV's National Legislative Director said that military service brings unique psychological and social-environmental factors that may contribute to elevated risks for IPV. Multiple deployments can cause long bouts of family separation, traumatic brain injuries, PTSD, and substance abuse – which can escalate partner conflict, she said.

In 2020, the [VA launched its White Ribbon campaign](#) to bring awareness and call for the elimination of sexual harassment, assault, and domestic violence across the department. The department also developed the Intimate Partner Violence Assistance Program which outlines the roles that medical center program coordinators have for educating staff and complying with the VA's strategy for IPV.

The study praised the VA for efforts like its system-wide implementation of routine intimate partner violence screening but also acknowledged barriers to adoption. The study found that providers reportedly feel uncomfortable addressing IPV issues with patients, have inadequate training, lack of resources or time, and compete with other patient care priorities.

The report recommended that the VA integrate suicide and IPV prevention resources. Assessments into veterans with elevated suicide risks. “Suicidal ideation and behaviors should be assessed among women with positive IPV screens, and identification of suicide risk should prompt an IPV assessment,” the report said.

Another recommendation from the DAV includes creating a three-digit number for veterans to report to the National Domestic Violence hotline, similar to the veteran version of the National Suicide hotline.

“One of the key issues, especially with IPV, or domestic violence situations, is that you have more likelihood that you're gonna have a gun involved because again,

veterans own guns, they're high gun owners," Ilem said. Victims might want to turn to a veteran-operated line because of the veteran community's understanding over calling 911 and turning to local law enforcement, she added.

If you're thinking about suicide, are worried about a friend or loved one, or would like emotional support, the Lifeline network is available 24/7 across the United States. Reach the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline by calling or texting 988 and you'll be connected to trained counselors.