



WAR VETERANS IN PRISON

Not long ago one out of every five prisoners was a Vietnam vet. Currently more and more veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan war are ending up in prison, many for violent crimes. Experts say the common thread for this is PTSD. It is believed that to date thousands of our veterans are being diagnosed with this condition, however, the numbers continue to rise for soldiers returning home that are either misdiagnoses or receive no mental health evaluation at all. The danger is that these soldiers are trained killers.



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The symptoms of PTSD include blackouts, anger, rage, mistrust, poor judgment, among many other behavioral symptoms that create a potential threat for communities, especially for those closest to the veteran.

Experts say the biggest problem is that no one is tracking how big this problem is. Dr. Bud Brown, a criminologist was asked, on a scale from 1 to 10 how prepared is the justice system to handle this rapidly growing problem.



His answer was minus ten, saying there is, in fact, a direct correlation between

PTSD and crime among soldiers returning home. And this fact he says, is rarely recognized within the US court system.



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With advancement of medical technology a wounded soldiers' survival is much more likely than previous combat injury results. Does this have an effect on the rising number of PTSD veterans? We don't know. Additionally, nine out of ten soldiers returning home are being put on a multitude of anti-psychotic drugs.

What role may this play for the growing number of vets ending up in prison? We don't know. Do all of these factors play a culminating part of the problem of veterans committing violent crimes? We don't know.



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Since the start of the Iraq/Afghanistan conflict, 17 soldiers have been convicted for murder and sentenced to life in prison. Most of these had to fight the death penalty. Without a doubt this number will continue to rise.

Col. Jimmie Keenan (Evans Hospital Commander) believes the duration of deployment plays a huge factor for veterans returning home with some degree of PTSD.

She says this is Americas' longest war and the length of deployment coupled with multiple deployments per soldier has a significant impact for the increased number veterans dealing with PTSD. Col. Keenan also states however, her belief that there is no correlation between PTSD and an alleged criminal knowing right from wrong.



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The military has just recently begun a serviceman discharged screening, called (WarCat) which specifically screens for PTSD. The only problem with that is there is no follow-up monitoring as to whether the soldier was truthfully admitting to any problems or symptoms of PTSD.



Sheilagh Mcateer, a public defender in Colorado Springs says that in one year alone she represents over 100 soldiers accused of violent crimes. All of these were diagnosed with PTSD. Another defense attorney in Oregon states of the case he represented in 2006 which involved in Afghan war veteran that shot a man to death for violating his girlfriend. This veteran was never diagnosed with PTSD and the attorney argues his client clearly had severe symptoms.



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He says his client doesn't remember the shooting at all. But what he does remember is the bomb that killed his best friend in Afghanistan and a week later in the same location another bomb almost killed him. He also notes that this is as a Shakespearean story, one with war, madness, love, and murder. And like all Shakespearean stories everyone loses. His client now sits in a criminally insane hospital for the rest of his life.

Dr. Bud Brown, in a 2008 New York Times study, said that 121 Iraq/ Afghanistan veterans were charged with murder. And sense that report an additional 44 more. The scary thing, he says about that is there are so many more criminals who are veterans that are not included in the study.



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David Phillips of the Colorado Springs Gazette says that if you were to call the Department of Corrections and asked how many Iraq/Afghanistan war veterans are in their prison they would have no idea.



There is no questioning the scars of combat injuries that bleed. But the scars of PTSD are invisible wounds. From 2002 to 2011 the veteran soldier diagnosed with PTSD went from 26 to 11,000 (Vanguard Documentary Press). Because PTSD has posed such a problem for the US court system, America now has 27 veteran courts throughout the US. Here the defendant's military history, his psychological state, and the crime itself are considered.



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The court system also focuses more on treatment rather than sentencing.

For information on how you can get involved in the support of America's war veterans, contact your local Department of Veterans Affairs.



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