

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-17-260](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

The Carl Levin and Howard P. “Buck” McKeon National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2015 contains a provision that GAO examine the effect of PTSD, TBI, and certain other conditions on separations for misconduct. This report examines (1) the number of servicemembers separated for misconduct who were diagnosed with PTSD, TBI, or certain other conditions and were potentially ineligible for VA benefits and services; (2) the extent to which military services’ policies to address the impact of PTSD and TBI on separations for misconduct are consistent with DOD’s policies; (3) the extent to which Army and Marine Corps have adhered to their policies; and (4) the extent to which DOD, Army, and Marine Corps monitor adherence to the policies. GAO analyzed DOD data; reviewed applicable policies; interviewed DOD, Army, Marine Corps, Air Force, and Navy officials; visited two Army and one Marine Corps sites selected on factors such as separation rates; and reviewed a nongeneralizable sample of Army and Marine Corps servicemember misconduct separation documents.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making five recommendations, including that DOD direct the Air Force and Navy to address inconsistencies in their screening and training policies and ensure that the military services monitor adherence to their screening, training, and counseling policies. DOD agreed with four of GAO’s recommendations, but did not agree to address inconsistencies in training policies. GAO maintains inconsistencies should be addressed, as discussed in the report.

View [GAO-17-260](#). For more information, contact Randall B. Williamson at (202) 512-7114 or williamsonr@gao.gov.

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DOD HEALTH

Actions Needed to Ensure Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and Traumatic Brain Injury Are Considered in Misconduct Separations

What GAO Found

GAO’s analysis of Department of Defense (DOD) data show that 62 percent, or 57,141 of the 91,764 servicemembers separated for misconduct from fiscal years 2011 through 2015 had been diagnosed within the 2 years prior to separation with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), traumatic brain injury (TBI), or certain other conditions that could be associated with misconduct. Specifically, 16 percent had been diagnosed with PTSD or TBI, while the other conditions, such as adjustment and alcohol-related disorders, were more common. Of the 57,141 servicemembers, 23 percent, or 13,283, received an “other than honorable” characterization of service, making them potentially ineligible for health benefits from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA).

GAO found that the military services’ policies to address the impact of PTSD and TBI on separations for misconduct are not always consistent with DOD policy. For example, contrary to DOD policy, Navy policy does not require a medical examination—or screening—for certain servicemembers being separated in lieu of trial by court-martial to assess whether a PTSD or TBI diagnosis is a mitigating factor in the misconduct charged. This type of separation occurs when a servicemember facing a trial by court-martial requests, and is approved, to be discharged administratively. In addition, GAO found that two of the four military services have TBI training policies that are inconsistent with DOD policy.

GAO also found that the Army and Marine Corps may not have adhered to their own screening, training, and counseling policies related to PTSD and TBI. For example, GAO found that 18 of the 48 nongeneralizable sample separation packets reviewed for Marine Corps servicemembers administratively separated for misconduct lacked documentation showing that the servicemember had been screened for PTSD and TBI. During interviews with Army officers, GAO found that some officers may not have received training to identify mild TBI symptoms, despite Army policy that all servicemembers should be trained. Further, GAO found instances in which both Army and Marine Corps may not have adhered to their counseling policies, which require that servicemembers, specifically prior to requesting separation in lieu of trial by court-martial, be counseled about their potential ineligibility for VA benefits and services. For 11 of the 48 separation packets included in GAO’s analysis of Army servicemembers who requested separation in lieu of trial by court-martial, there was no documented evidence—or the evidence was unclear—as to whether the servicemembers received counseling.

Finally, while Army and Marine Corps have some available data on servicemembers’ screenings, training, and counseling, the military services do not use these data to routinely monitor whether they are adhering to relevant policies. Federal internal control standards call for agencies to establish monitoring activities to ensure internal control systems and evaluate results. Without monitoring adherence to these policies, the military services cannot provide assurance that servicemembers with PTSD and TBI are receiving adequate consideration of their conditions as well as the services DOD has established for them.