

Highlights of [GAO-12-12](#), a report to the Ranking Member, Committee on Veterans' Affairs, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

In fiscal year 2010, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) provided health care to about 5.2 million veterans. Recent legislation has increased many Operations Enduring Freedom (OEF) and Iraqi Freedom (OIF) veterans' priority for accessing VA's health care, and concerns have been raised about the extent to which VA is providing mental health care to eligible veterans of all eras. There also are concerns that barriers may hinder some veterans from accessing needed mental health care.

GAO was asked to provide information on veterans who receive mental health care from VA. In this report, GAO provides information on (1) how many veterans received mental health care from VA from fiscal years 2006 through 2010, (2) key barriers that may hinder veterans from accessing mental health care from VA, and (3) VA efforts to increase veterans' access to VA mental health care. GAO obtained data from VA's Northeast Program Evaluation Center (NEPEC) on the number of veterans who received mental health care from VA. The number of veterans represents a unique count of veterans; veterans were counted only once, even if they received care multiple times during a fiscal year or across the 5-year period. GAO also reviewed literature published from 2006 to 2011, reviewed VA documents, and interviewed officials from VA and veterans service organizations (VSO).

View [GAO-12-12](#) or key components. For more information, contact Debra A. Draper at (202) 512-7114 or draperd@gao.gov.

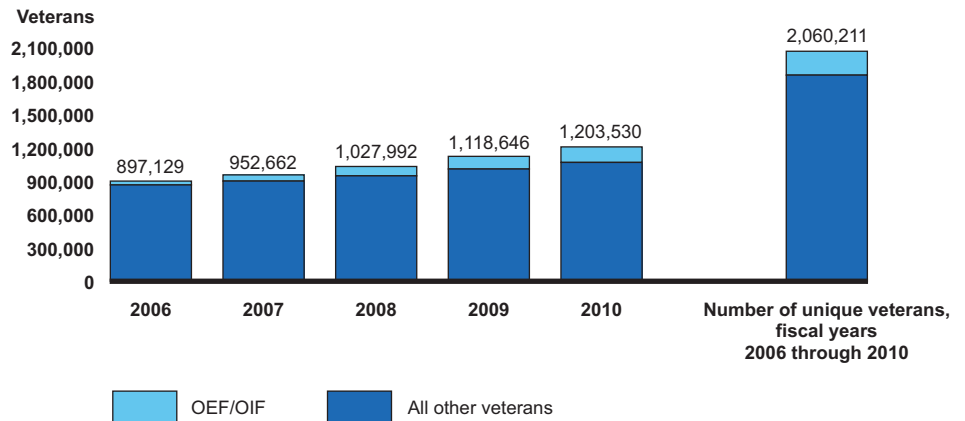
VA MENTAL HEALTH

Number of Veterans Receiving Care, Barriers Faced, and Efforts to Increase Access

What GAO Found

Over the 5-year period from fiscal years 2006 through 2010, about 2.1 million unique veterans received mental health care from VA. (See figure.) Each year the number of veterans receiving mental health care increased, from about 900,000 in fiscal year 2006 to about 1.2 million in fiscal year 2010. OEF/OIF veterans accounted for an increasing proportion of veterans receiving care during this period.

Number of Veterans Who Received Mental Health Care from VA, Fiscal Years 2006 through 2010



Source: GAO analysis of NEPEC data.

The key barriers identified from the literature that may hinder veterans from accessing mental health care from VA, which were corroborated through interviews, are stigma, lack of understanding or awareness of mental health care, logistical challenges to accessing mental health care, and concerns about VA's care, such as concerns that VA's services are primarily for older veterans. Many of these barriers are not necessarily unique to veterans accessing mental health care from VA, but may affect anyone accessing mental health care from any provider. Veterans may be affected by barriers differently based on demographic factors, such as age and gender. For example, younger OEF/OIF veterans and female veterans may perceive that VA's services are primarily for someone else, such as older veterans or male veterans.

VA has implemented several efforts to increase veterans' access to mental health care, including integrating mental health care into primary care. VA also has implemented efforts to educate veterans, their families, health care providers, and other community stakeholders about mental health conditions and VA's mental health care. According to VA officials, these efforts help get veterans into care by reducing, and in some cases eliminating, the barriers that may hinder them from accessing care.

GAO provided a draft of this report to VA for comment. In its response, VA provided technical comments, which were incorporated as appropriate.