



Initial Findings – Perceptions on the Invisible Wounds of War

The George W. Bush Institute's Military Service Initiative advocates for awareness, policies, and programs that enable veterans to successfully transition from military service to civilian life.

As part of this initiative, the Bush Institute commissioned SSRS to survey a group of post-9/11 military veterans as well as adults in the general population in Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States to gain a better understanding of how people think about veterans and their perceptions of issues veterans face around the invisible wounds of war – post-traumatic stress (PTS) and traumatic brain injury (TBI).

Data collection for the post-9/11 veteran survey is still in process with a target of 750 total completed interviews by this summer, the data below are drawn from 280 completed surveys. Interviews began in January and are expected to conclude in late July 2016.

For the general population survey, between February and March 2016, SSRS surveyed approximately 1,000 adults, age 18 and older in three countries: Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States. While a fuller comprehensive analysis of both the general population survey and the post-9/11 veteran survey will be released later in 2016, initial analysis provides several key findings.

The civilian-military divide remains.

- 7 out of 10 respondents in the United States think that the general public does not understand the problems faced by the military, with similar responses in Canada and the UK as well.
- Post-9/11 US veteran respondents agree. 8 out of 10 of the early respondents say that the American people do not understand the issues they face.
- These numbers are similar to those from a 2011 Pew Research poll measuring the same topic. The Pew study found that 71 percent of Americans said they do not understand the problems faced by the military and 84 percent of post-9/11 veterans said the general public has little awareness of the challenges they face.

Post-9/11 veterans believe that invisible wounds are legitimate wounds of war, but that stigma is a major barrier to seeking care.

- 8 out of 10 post-9/11 veterans responding so far in the United States think that embarrassment or shame is an extreme or moderate barrier to veterans seeking care for medical conditions such as PTSD or TBI
- The majority of those members of the general public surveyed across all three countries believed that veterans' embarrassment or shame about their condition was a moderate or extreme barrier to them seeking care. A similar percentage also reported that concern over the diagnosis hurting employment opportunities was a moderate or extreme barrier to care for post 9/11 veterans.

Across all three countries surveyed, awareness of PTSD in the general population was more common than awareness of TBI.

Many members of the general public in the United States overestimate the percentage of post-9/11 veterans who suffer from mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, and PTSD.

- Forty percent of respondents in the United States believe that more than 50 percent of post-9/11 veterans suffer from mental health issues and an additional 32 percent believe that at least 26 percent of post-9/11 veterans suffer from mental health issues. In actuality, estimates show that at any given time, approximately 10-20 percent of United States' service members (270,000 – 540,000 individuals) who deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan experience symptoms consistent with a diagnosis of PTSD.

When asked to evaluate a series of challenges that Post-9/11 veterans transitioning into civilian life might face, nearly 60 percent of the post-9/11 veteran respondents rate managing an invisible wound as extremely or very challenging.

- Managing an invisible wound was rated as extremely or very challenging by the post-9/11 service members surveyed to date more often than the other challenges presented (managing visible or physical wounds, finding employment/returning to a job, starting or returning to school, and re-establishing relationships with family and friends), all of which were seen as extremely or very challenging by 30 to 40 percent of the post-9/11 service members.
- The general public seems to agree. About three in four respondents in the US (73 percent) think managing invisible wounds is extremely or very challenging for Post-9/11 veterans.

Finding and affording quality care were identified as challenges by both post-9/11 veterans and the general public, although finding care is perceived to be more difficult than affording care.

Overall, the study's findings imply that challenges and stigma persist regarding veteran mental health and the issues veterans face around the invisible wounds of war – post-traumatic stress (PTS) and traumatic brain injury (TBI).

We have a duty to understand these issues, increase awareness, and build a system of care that empowers warriors to seek, access, and receive high quality care. Through the Bush Institute Military Service Initiative, we aim to:

- Increase awareness, recognition, and understanding of these injuries;
- Empower service members, veterans, and their caregivers to seek, access, and sustain high quality care; and
- Improve outcomes by fostering a comprehensive, integrative, and culturally competent system of high quality care.

By fostering a successful transition we enable a generation of resourceful, determined, and experienced leaders to serve and lead our nation for decades to come.