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More homeless veterans are women

Link to military sex assaults seen.

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By Brian Rademakers | Apr 29, 2006

Army Pfc. Betti Nelson's scars from Vietnam weren't caused by a land mine or sniper's bullet. They came from five American GIs who raped her, stabbed her in the chest, burned her with cigarettes, and left her for dead.

Her attackers were convicted. But for three decades, Nelson, now 51, has struggled to overcome the effects of that attack, turning to drugs and becoming part of a growing trend: homeless female veterans.

In the last 10 years, the percentage of women among homeless veterans has more than tripled from 2 percent in 1996 to 7 percent at the end of 2005, said spokesman John Driscoll of the National Coalition for Homeless Veterans, which compiled the survey.

The exact number of female veterans on the street remains unclear - estimates range from 6,800 to 14,000 - but all agree their ranks are increasing.

Experts say at least two very different factors are causing this. Female soldiers are at an all-time high - 11 percent of troops in Iraq and Afghanistan - and still rising.

Also driving the trend is the continuing prevalence of sexual assault in the military. Research shows that from 20 percent to 40 percent of female veterans said they had been sexually assaulted in the service. These crimes are rarely reported and prosecuted, records show, even as they send female troops on a downward spiral of drug abuse and homelessness.

Susan Avila-Smith, founder of Seattle-based Women Organizing Women, calls sexual assault a form of "friendly fire."

Avila-Smith experienced that in 1992 when, she said, an Army physician raped her while she was under anesthesia.

Many officers, she said, "are not interested in weeding out the perpetrators. They're interested in weeding out the victims."

Defense officials acknowledge errors in handling sexual assaults and say they are making progress. They now require military sexual-trauma coordinators in every Veterans Affairs hospital, and made reporting assaults easier and more confidential.

"The change is happening, but you can't just snap your fingers and say it is fixed," said Roger Kaplan, a spokesman for the Defense Department's Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office.

"We are trying to make sure that our victims are taken care of," said Kaplan, whose office opened in 2004. "The biggest problem is the underreporting."

Three-quarters of female veterans who were raped did not report the incident to an officer, according to VA researchers.

The 30-bed Mary E. Walker House in Coatesville, which opened in January 2005, is the nation's largest shelter for homeless female veterans.

Twenty-three of the 40 women who have lived there said they were sexually assaulted in the service. Only seven had reported it.

That prevalence is not unusual. A recent VA study of more than 600 homeless female veterans found that 40 percent reported being raped in the military.

Nearly one-third of all women who served in Vietnam or later said in phone interviews that they were sexually assaulted in the service, according to a VA study in 2003. That compares to about 17 percent of civilian women who report a sexual assault in their lives, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Researchers say the macho nature of the military plays a large role, fostering aggression and dominance - factors that can accompany sexual assault.

An institution that is dismissive of sexual harassment "sets the tone" for what else might be accepted, said Bradley Doebbeling, a VA researcher in Indiana.

Kaplan said the military's struggle with harassment was no different from other mainly male groups.

In 2001, VA hospitals began asking veterans in health screenings about sexual assault. About 20 percent of female veterans reported they were sexually assaulted, said Carole Turner, national director of the women veterans health program for the VA.

In June 2005, the Department of Defense also started a new reporting option that allows victims to seek care without triggering an official investigation.

That change has led to a 40 percent rise in reported sexual assaults for all military branches, increasing from 1,700 in 2004 to 2,374 last year.

But only 2 percent to 3 percent of sexual assaults end in court-martial, said Anita Sanchez, a spokeswoman for the Miles Foundation, a victims group in Newtown, Conn.

This month retired Army criminal investigator Myla Haider made similar criticisms before Congress.

Haider cited statistics showing that military investigators dropped 641 cases out of 1,386 in 2005 - or 46 percent - because of a lack of evidence or from victims recanting.

Of 20 cases she worked, Haider said, only one led to jail time.

Haider, 30, was raped by a military investigator in 2002 in South Korea. "I knew that nobody would believe me," she said. But four other victims came forward, accusing the same man. He was found not guilty of rape but convicted of lesser charges and was sent for nine months to an Army jail.

Katari Brown, a psychologist at the Coatesville VA Medical Center, said women often joined up to find a surrogate family.

That was true of her client, Betti Nelson. Raised by an abusive aunt and raped by a family member when she was 8, Nelson joined the Army looking for a sense of belonging.

Her Army ordeal left her addicted to drugs and wandering the streets of Philadelphia's Germantown section.

A turning point came in 2004 when her son James, 26, died in a car accident. At the funeral, another son, Drew, now 25, refused to speak to her because of her drinking and drug abuse.

"That's when I turned things around," Nelson said. She soon began therapy.

Now sober for close to two years - her longest yet - she just started job at a food plant in West Chester. Her dream is to live near Drew and her two grandchildren in Massachusetts.

"They are so precious to me now," she said. "If I could go back and start over again, trust me, I would."

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