

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-24-106620](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

Mental health conditions have been a persistent and growing issue for the nation's veterans. Research suggests that student veterans—those pursuing a course of education using VA's educational assistance benefits—are more likely to experience anxiety, stress, depression, and suicidal ideation than their nonveteran peers.

The Support the Resiliency of Our Nation's Great Veterans Act of 2022 includes a provision for GAO to study the mental health needs of student veterans. Among other objectives, this report (1) describes what available VA data show on the use of mental health care by student veterans and (2) examines VA efforts to address the mental health needs of student veterans through its Veterans Integration to Academic Leadership program.

GAO reviewed VA documentation and data for fiscal years 2017-2022 (the most recent available) on mental health care use and diagnoses and conducted a literature search. GAO also interviewed officials from VA and a non-generalizable selection of three veterans service organizations, as well as 12 student veterans identified by one of the veterans service organizations.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making one recommendation to VA to communicate comprehensive information on when and how to implement a Veterans Integration to Academic Leadership program across its health care systems on a regular basis, such as by distributing guidance. VA concurred with GAO's recommendation.

View [GAO-24-106620](#). For more information, contact Alyssa M. Hundrup at (202) 512-7114 or hundrupa@gao.gov.

February 2024

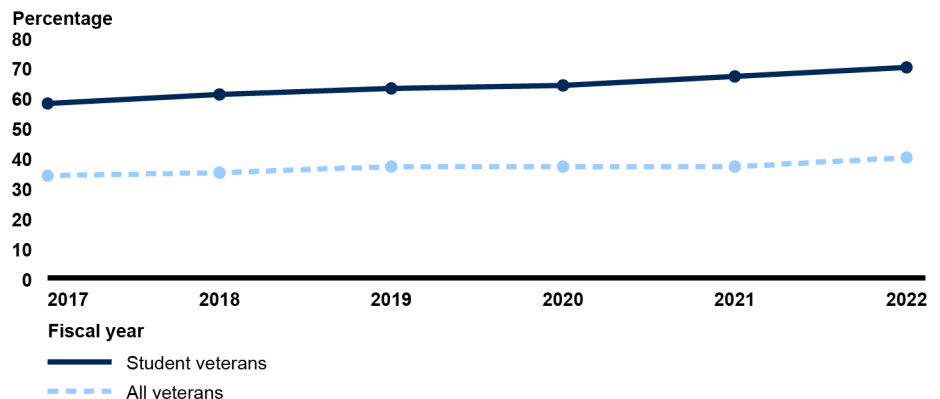
VA HEALTH CARE

Opportunities Exist to Further Meet Student Veterans' Mental Health Needs

What GAO Found

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) provides health care to veterans for mental health conditions, such as depression and substance use disorders. VA data showed that the percentage of student veterans who received mental health care at VA facilities increased from fiscal years 2017 through 2022, and at a higher rate than that of the total veteran population. (See figure.) VA data show student veterans were primarily treated for depression-related disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder, and anxiety-related disorders. VA officials said younger veterans typically seek mental health care more than older veterans, and most student veterans are younger than age 34. Further, the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated mental health conditions for the general population, including for veterans.

Comparison of Student Veterans and All Veterans Receiving Mental Health Care at VA Facilities, Fiscal Years 2017 through 2022



Source: GAO analysis of Veterans Health Administration and Veterans Benefits Administration data. | GAO-24-106620

Note: The percentages reflect student veterans and all veterans receiving mental health care (i.e., at least one visit for any mental health diagnosis), among student veterans and all veterans who received any health care at VA facilities, respectively. In fiscal year 2022, 261,000 student veterans and 5,966,000 veterans in total received health care at VA facilities.

VA administers the Veterans Integration to Academic Leadership program to support the mental health needs of student veterans. Under this voluntary program, VA health care systems—including medical centers and other facilities—can partner with local colleges and universities to provide campus-based mental health support to student veterans. As of October 2023, 32 of 139 health care systems have such programs. However, GAO found VA does not communicate comprehensive information to its health care systems to help them consider when and how to implement programs, such as the types of staffing needed. Instead, VA communicates information about the program upon request. By more regularly communicating comprehensive information across its health care systems, such as through guidance, VA could help ensure its systems all have the information they need to consider participating in the program. This, in turn, would help ensure VA's ability to support the mental health needs of its student veteran population.