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The Number of Veterans That Use VA Health Care Services: A Fact Sheet

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Introduction

It's a simple question—how many veterans use services at the Veterans Health Administration (VHA)? It's a question being asked a lot these days, and it is important, baseline information to know when changes are being contemplated¹ to the way in which VA delivers health care to veterans.

In the course of an investigation into allegations² that veterans seeking health care services from the VHA experienced long delays in treatment, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Office of Inspector General (OIG) released an interim report³ that substantiated the delays. Final determinations by the OIG of the full scope and impact of the problems, including whether delays in treatment resulted in harm to or the death of any veterans, will not be available until the OIG completes its investigation and issues a final report.

The issue of wait times for VA health care is not new (see CRS Insight IN10063, *Wait Times for Veterans Health Not New*). Approaches to providing timely access to care for veterans enrolled in VA health care have included the use of non-VA care reimbursed by the VA (see CRS Insight IN10074, *Getting Health Care Outside the VA*). The need to rely on non-VA care in some cases has raised questions about the VA's capacity to provide services to the veteran population now and in the future. Knowing how many veterans there are is essential to answering those questions.

Number of Veterans and VA Health Care Users

Veterans Total Population: Annual estimates of the total population of living veterans⁴ are based in part on a U.S. Census Bureau definition of veterans as “men and women who have served (even for a short time), but are not currently serving, on active duty in the U.S. Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, or the Coast Guard, or who served in the U.S. Merchant Marine during World War II.”⁵

VA Enrollees: Eligibility for federal veterans' benefits begins with a statutory definition of a veteran as a “person who served in the active military, naval, or air service, and who was discharged or released therefrom under conditions other than dishonorable.”⁶ To receive VA

¹ United States Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs, Press Release, “Chairman Sanders Lays Out Legislative Action Plan for Veterans,” June 1, 2014, <http://www.veterans.senate.gov/newsroom/majority-news/chairman-sanders-lays-out-legislative-action-plan-for-veterans>, website accessed June 2, 2014. Senator McCain has indicated he will present an alternative. See Michael C. Bender, “Reid-Backed Veterans Care Plan Draws Republican Alternate,” *Bloomberg*, June 3, 2014, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2014-06-02/reid-backed-veterans-care-plan-draws-republican-alternate.html>, website accessed June 3, 2014.

² CNN, “Shinseki resigns, but will that improve things at VA hospitals?,” May 31, 2014, http://www.cnn.com/2014/05/30/politics/va-hospitals-shinseki/index.html?hpt=hp_inthenews, website accessed June 2, 2014.

³ Veterans Health Administration, “Interim Report: Review of Patient Wait Times, Scheduling Practices, and Alleged Patient Deaths at the Phoenix Health Care System,” May 28, 2014, <http://www.va.gov/oig/pubs/VAOIG-14-02603-178.pdf>, website accessed June 2, 2014.

⁴ United States Department of Veterans Affairs, National Centers for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, “Veteran Population,” website accessed June 2, 2014, http://www.va.gov/vetdata/Veteran_Population.asp.

⁵ United States Census Bureau, “Definitions and Concepts: Who are veterans?,” <http://www.census.gov/hhes/veterans/about/definitions.html>, website accessed June 2, 2014.

⁶ 38 U.S.C. Section 101(2), [http://uscode.house.gov/view.xhtml?req=\(continued...\)](http://uscode.house.gov/view.xhtml?req=(continued...))

health care, veterans generally must enroll in the system after meeting eligibility requirements (which for most veterans are based on previous military service, presence of service-connected disabilities, and/or other factors).⁷

VA Patients (Veterans): In a given year, not every VA-enrolled veteran receives VA health care services. Some veterans may opt not to seek care during the year, while others may receive care outside the VA system, paying for care using private health insurance, Medicare, Medicaid, the military health system (TRICARE), or other means. Thus not every VA-enrolled veteran is counted as a VA patient during a given year.

VA Patients (Non-veterans): The VA also provides health care services to certain non-veteran patients, including “active duty military and reserve, spousal collateral, consultations and instruction, CHAMPVA workload, reimbursable workload with affiliates, humanitarian care, and employees receiving occupational immunizations such as Hepatitis A&B and flu vaccinations.”⁸

Table 1 provides the total veteran population, VA-enrolled veterans, and VA patients (including both veteran and non-veteran patients) for each year from FY2001 through FY2014. These data allow several observations, including the following:

- The total veteran population has decreased by 17% from FY2001 to FY2014.
- The VA-enrolled veteran population has increased by 78% from FY2001 to FY2014.
- As a proportion of the total veteran population, the VA-enrolled veterans have increased from 20% in FY2001 to 42% in FY2014.
- Since FY2003, 63%–65% of VA enrolled veterans have used VA health care each year. (In FY2001, 76% of enrolled veterans used VA health care, but this is anomalous within the time period. In FY2002 it was 69%.)
- The number of non-veteran VA patients has increased faster than the number of veteran patients; as of FY2014, non-veteran patients represent 11% of all VA patients.

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%28title:38%20section:101%282%29%20edition:prelim, website accessed June 2, 2014.

⁷ CRS Report R42747, *Health Care for Veterans: Answers to Frequently Asked Questions*, by Sidath Viranga Panangala and Erin Bagalman.

⁸ Department of Veterans Affairs, “Volume II, Medical Programs and Information Technology Programs, Congressional Submission, FY 2015 Funding and FY 2016 Advance Appropriations,” p. VHA-32, <http://www.va.gov/budget/docs/summary/Fy2015-VolumeII-MedicalProgramsAndInformationTechnology.pdf#page=34>, website accessed June 2, 2014.

Table I. Veteran Population, VA Enrollees, and VA Patients, FY2001–FY2014

Year	Total Veteran Population	VA-Enrolled Veterans	Patients Using VA Health Care During the Year		
			Veterans	Non-Veterans	Total Patients
FY2001	26,092,046	5,124,168	3,890,871	356,333	4,247,204
FY2002	25,627,596	6,248,949	4,290,717	380,320	4,671,037
FY2003	25,217,342	7,186,643	4,544,430	417,023	4,961,453
FY2004	24,862,857	7,419,851	4,713,583	453,250	5,166,833
FY2005	24,521,247	7,655,562	4,862,992	445,322	5,308,314
FY2006	24,179,183	7,872,438	5,030,582	435,488	5,466,070
FY2007	23,816,018	7,833,445	5,015,689	463,240	5,478,929
FY2008	23,442,489	7,834,763	5,078,269	498,420	5,576,689
FY2009	23,066,965	8,048,560	5,221,583	523,110	5,744,693
FY2010	23,031,892	8,343,117	5,441,059	559,051	6,000,110
FY2011	22,676,149	8,574,198	5,582,171	584,020	6,166,191
FY2012	22,328,279	8,762,548	5,680,374	652,717	6,333,091
FY2013	21,972,964	8,926,546	5,803,890	680,774	6,484,664
FY2014	21,619,731	9,111,955	5,908,042	708,921	6,616,963

Sources: Total Veterans numbers are from VetPop2011 (FY2010–FY2014), available at http://www.va.gov/vetdata/Veteran_Population.asp, and an archived copy of an earlier version no longer available on the website (FY2000–FY2009). VA-Enrolled Veterans numbers and Patients Using VA Health Care During the Year numbers are from VA budget submissions for FY2002–FY2015; the number for each fiscal year is taken from the budget submission two years later (e.g., the FY2000 number is from the FY2002 budget submission).

Notes: FY2014 numbers for VA-Enrolled Veterans and Patients Using VA Health Care during the Year are estimates.

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