

LGBTQ Military Service Members *Exclusion, Discrimination, and Health Considerations*



SNAPSHOT

- Approximately 71,000 active duty military personnel identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB), and an estimated 15,000 identify as transgender.
- In the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey, 23% of active transgender service members whose commanding officers knew about or suspected their transgender status reported that actions were taken to discharge them due to their status.
- LGB veterans are more likely to suffer from posttraumatic stress disorder, depression, and alcohol misuse than non-LGB veterans, and transgender veterans are more likely than cisgender veterans to suffer from the same conditions.

In 1993, President Clinton announced the [Don't Ask, Don't Tell \(DADT\)](#) policy. Although the policy claimed to protect LGB service members' right to serve, they still faced discharge if they [disclosed their sexual orientation or were outed](#) by other service members. Between 1994 and 2009, more than 13,000 service members were discharged under DADT. President Obama [repealed DADT in 2011](#), allowing LGB people to serve openly for the first time. The repeal did not address the rights of transgender service members, however, and [many](#) continued to be regularly barred or discharged from service based on medical or psychological rationales. In the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey, 23% of active transgender service members whose commanding officers knew about or suspected their transgender status reported that actions were taken to discharge them due to their status.

A [2016 Rand study](#) sponsored by the U.S. Department of Defense on the implications of allowing transgender service members to serve openly found that any increase in health care costs would be negligible, and there would be minimal, if any, effect on military readiness or ability to deploy. Following this report, Secretary of Defense Ash Carter [announced](#) that, as of June 2016, all transgender service members would have the right to serve openly and have their medical needs covered. The policy also allowed for transgender civilians to openly enlist in the military [starting in January 2018](#).

One year later, President Trump [announced via Twitter](#) that his administration would reverse Carter's policy. He argued that banning transgender service members was necessary due to their "tremendous medical costs and disruption," despite the fact that the [2016 Rand study](#) found that these costs were inconsequential. Trump issued a [formal memorandum](#) enacting his ban in September 2017. A legal battle halted the ban in late 2017, and Carter's initial policy [went into effect](#) as planned on January 2018. In February 2018, the U.S. Department of Defense [released a proposed plan](#)

THE LGBTQ POPULATION IN THE MILITARY

Among active duty military personnel, around 71,000 (2.8%) identify as LGB. An estimated 15,000 are transgender, and the [estimated rate of service](#) among transgender adults in the United States is higher than that of the general population (21.4%, compared to 10.4%). According to the [2015 U.S. Transgender Survey](#), transgender women are more likely to serve than transgender men (22%, compared to 8%). An estimated 1 million LGB Americans and 134,000 transgender Americans are veterans.

EXCLUSION AND DISCRIMINATION

[LGB](#) and [transgender people](#) have always served in the military, though homosexual or bisexual identities or behaviors [were banned from the military](#) from World War II until 2011. The first [official military directive](#) regarding a ban on homosexuality was issued in 1982, which stated that homosexuality was incompatible with military service. This policy resulted in the [discharge of about 17,000 service members](#).

for Trump's transgender ban, and Trump [approved the plan](#) in March 2018. However, a federal court in Seattle [blocked the ban again](#) on June 15, 2018, and transgender people currently are still able to enlist in the military and serve openly. In addition to being blatantly discriminatory, the ban and its legal battles have [created ambiguity and confusion](#) surrounding transgender people's right to serve.

Although all lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) service members maintain the right to serve openly in the military, they still experience [discrimination, sexual harassment, and assault](#) at a rate higher than among the general active duty population, and [LGBTQ veterans](#) continue to battle discrimination, harassment, and assault after returning to civilian life.

DISPARITIES AND DISCRIMINATION IN HEALTH

The Trump administration's attempts to ban transgender people from the military have brought gender transition-related health costs to the fore, but little is known about the physical and mental health of LGBTQ service members more broadly. The historic exclusion of LGBTQ people from openly serving means that LGBTQ military [health research](#) has primarily relied on veteran data. This research has found that [LGB veterans](#) are more likely to suffer from posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and alcohol misuse, with rates of PTSD and depression even higher for those who were not able to serve openly. [Transgender veterans](#) also face a higher likelihood of experiencing these mental health conditions, as well as higher rates of physical health conditions such as heart disease, hypertension, and diabetes. The health disparities experienced by LGBTQ veterans have been partially attributed to the [stresses](#) of bullying, physical assault, homophobia and transphobia, and internalized stigma experienced during and outside of military service.

In addition to disparities in health outcomes, LGBTQ military personnel face barriers in accessing health care. There can be [high levels of distrust](#) between LGBTQ service members and their health care providers, largely due to fear of discrimination and fear of having their sexual orientation or gender status disclosed. [Research](#) has also shown that many military health care providers lack knowledge about LGB [health care topics](#), including the increased risk

of physical and mental health conditions outlined above. Negative experiences with health care providers among the general LGBTQ population often leads to a [decrease in continuity of care and preventative services](#).

Barriers to health care also exist for LGBTQ veterans. Before the repeal of DADT, many LGBTQ service members were "[dishonorably discharged](#)" due to their sexual orientation or gender identity, which has [prevented many veterans from accessing health care coverage](#) and other benefits that come with [honorable or general discharge](#). The repeal of DADT has allowed LGB veterans to apply for [discharge upgrades](#), but the process is lengthy and cumbersome, and [reliving past trauma](#) is too painful for some. As of 2017, only 8% of LGB veterans discharged during DADT had applied for upgrades. Even when LGBTQ veterans are covered by insurance and seek services through the Veterans' Health Administration (VHA), VHA health providers are [not always well equipped](#) to care for this population. The military has taken steps to address this issue, including the 2012 creation of the [LGBT Health Program](#) by the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs.

DATA GAPS

Our understanding of LGBTQ experiences with discrimination, harassment, and assault in the military are hampered by a lack of data: Fears of discrimination, stigma, and retaliation often lead to [underreporting of incidents](#), and those studies that do exist tend to be [methodologically heterogeneous](#), which makes it difficult to know the prevalence of such incidents.

Beyond the military context, there is a lack of data on LGBTQ experiences more broadly. The U.S. Census Bureau has recently come under [scrutiny](#) for its insistence on leaving questions regarding sexual orientation and gender identity out of its annual American Community Survey. However, a question regarding same-sex marriage [is planned](#) for the Census Bureau's decennial and annual surveys starting in 2020. LGBTQ people comprise roughly [3.5%](#) of adults in the United States, and collecting more data about their experiences would significantly strengthen research about this population and better inform public policy.