

Posttraumatic Stress Disorder in Hispanic Vietnam Veterans

The National Vietnam Veterans Readjustment Survey (NVVRS) made news in 1990 by showing that exposure to combat in Vietnam resulted in higher rates of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in Hispanic veterans when compared with White and Black veterans. MIRECC health services investigators Drs. Alexander Ortega and Robert Rosenheck revisited this provocative topic in an attempt to account for this difference. They looked for clues in the pre-military and military record, the symptom patterns across ethnic groups, the degree of acculturation within Hispanic veterans and the impairment associated with PTSD. Results showed that neither premilitary experiences, military period experiences nor acculturation account for the greater risk for PTSD among Hispanic veterans who served in Vietnam. Despite more severe PTSD symptoms, Hispanic veterans had surprisingly less impaired adjustment than non-Hispanic white veterans. The symptom pattern across ethnic groups differed as Hispanic veterans reported more reliving and hyperarousal symptoms. Given the similarities in long term outcome across groups, the researchers attribute differences in symptom levels to cultural differences in the way Hispanic veterans answer mental health survey questions and not to disabling mental illness.