



A research agenda for criminal justice involvement among Veterans

Veterans Health Administration Homeless Programs Office

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Background

Criminal justice involvement (CJI) among Veterans is an important social, health and legal issue that has not been adequately researched. As a result, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) along with various federal and non-federal entities have developed a range of programs and services to serve the continuum of CJI among Veterans. However, there is a need for a research agenda to guide and encourage the field on areas and priorities that deserve particular study and attention.

The VA National Center on Homelessness among Veterans in partnership with the VA Veterans Justice Programs Office conducted three invite-only “listening” sessions from July to August 2022 to formulate a research agenda for CJI among Veterans. A total of 149 individuals were invited. Invited individuals were selected if they were representatives of federal and state agencies that work on CJI issues among Veterans; researchers who had received federal grants and/or published peer-reviewed research on the topic; or were other known subject matter experts in the field.

The first session was conducted on July 12th and was focused on jail diversion and treatment courts for Veterans (63 attendees); the second session was conducted on July 22nd and was focused on post-incarceration and community re-entry for Veterans (45 attendees); and the third session was conducted August 4th and was focused on special topics and subgroups (40 attendees).

Each listening session was conducted virtually by videoconference and lasted approximately 90 minutes. For each listening session, the hosts introduced themselves and a subject matter expert presented a brief 10-minute overview of the state of research for that listening session’s focus topic. The remainder of the session was open for participants to make comments, pose questions and share information. Facilitators from National Center on Homelessness among Veterans (NCHAV) called on participants who indicated they wanted to make comments and read messages that attendees typed in the chat box. All three listening sessions were recorded and transcribed.

This process aligned with both NCHAV’s mission to foster research on topics related to homelessness among Veterans, and a Veterans Justice Outreach Program strategic objective focused on research related to justice-involved Veterans. Although representatives from other Federal agencies attended the listening sessions, the resulting agenda does not necessarily reflect the operational or funding priorities of those agencies.

Methods

Transcribed notes from all three listening sessions were carefully reviewed. Content from all three listening sessions was synthesized to generate a preliminary list of agenda items mentioned by attendees. Because many items overlapped across the sessions, the items were not organized by the order of the listening sessions. Rather, during the process of synthesizing the content, major domains emerged that provided structure for the items to be organized under. After a preliminary list of agenda items was developed, the Delphi method was used to develop consensus on the key items to be included in a final research agenda. Following the iterative process of the Delphi method, two rounds of ratings were conducted. Participants received an online assessment 12 days after the third listening session. They were asked to rate the priority of each agenda item on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (Not at all important) to 5 (Most Important). Participants were informed that all the responses will be kept strictly confidential.

A preliminary list of 41 agenda items were distributed to all 149 of the original invitees. In Round 1, a total of 32 individuals participated in rating the agenda items and consensus was reached for nearly all agenda items except for 7 items. A second round of ratings to resolve these remaining items was performed. In Round 2, a total of 27 individuals participated in rating the remaining items and consensus was reached. For each item, consensus was defined when $\geq 70\%$ of participants chose the same rating or the rating one point below or above the same rating (i.e., mode ± 1). In Round 1, the preliminary list of 41 agenda items was reduced to 28 items and then reduced to a final 22 items after Round 2. Only items that reached a consensus rating of 4 (Important) or 5 (Most important) were retained in the final research agenda.

Recommended Research Agenda

The final research agenda is shown in Table 1 and contains 22 items covering Epidemiology and Knowledge of the Population (5 items), Treatment and Services (8 items), Systems and Systems Interface (3 items), Methodology and Research Resources (4 items) and Policies (2 items).

Items that were not retained in the final research agenda may still be important and deserve consideration in the field. These items for further consideration are shown in Table 2 for reference.

Table 1. Research agenda for Justice-Involved Veterans (JIV)

Epidemiology and Knowledge of the Population	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Determine the prevalence of psychiatric disorders, addictive disorders, personality disorders and social problems of JIV.• Understand the medical care and medication needs of JIV.• Evaluate specific needs of JIV subgroups (e.g., older Veterans, rural Veterans, Veterans with opioid use disorder).• Examine racism, discrimination and disparities among JIV in correctional settings, access to care and treatment in the community.• Examine types of criminal offenses of JIV and their impact on outcomes.
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<p>Treatment and Services</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Test peer-support models of care for JIV. • Identify barriers and facilitators for participation in VA justice-programs. • Evaluate tailored interventions, services and other specialized programs for JIV subgroups. • Evaluate the effectiveness of Veterans treatment courts on clinical and legal outcomes. • Understand Veteran engagement in mental and substance use disorder treatment before and after incarceration. • Understand differences between JIV engaged and not engaged in VA services. • Study effective strategies and frameworks to help Veterans re-enter communities from prisons and jails. • Identify evidence-based treatment and services for JIV during incarceration.
<p>Systems and Systems Interface</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Examine strategies for continuity of care for Veterans across a continuum of justice and community settings. • Understand barriers and facilitators to partnerships between criminal justice system, healthcare/social service providers and other entities. • Understand barriers and facilitators to housing, employment and other social functioning domains for JIV.
<p>Methodology and Research Resources</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop systems to obtain accurate and timely counts of Veterans in various criminal justice settings (from prison/jail to probation/parole). • Identify systematic methods to accurately identify Veteran status in the justice-involved population. • Identify mechanisms for sharing of data, information, funding and other resources between federal, state and local criminal justice entities. • Establish community boards of Veterans with lived experiences to shape research on JIV.
<p>Policies</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Examine policies and strategies to serve JIV with other-than-honorable discharges and other discharge types. • Conduct research on policies related to treatment of Veterans while they are incarcerated and their community re-entry.

Table 2. Other important topics that are not part of the formal agenda for Justice Involved Veterans (JIV)

<p>Epidemiology and Knowledge of the Population</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Differences in characteristics, needs and services between JIV and other justice-involved adults. • Understand the needs and outcomes of Veterans with histories of sexual offenses. • Assess the impact of Coronavirus Disease-2019 (COVID-19) pandemic on Veteran treatment courts. • Identify geographic factors related to Veteran engagement in healthcare and social services.
<p>Treatment and Services</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Define models for success and standardize best practices in Veterans treatment courts. • Examine technology-based solutions and services to provide care to JIV. • Evaluate the effectiveness of Veteran prison units/pods on clinical and legal outcomes. • Understand the needs of providers (e.g., social workers, probation officers, judges) in serving JIV. • Develop specialized treatment for JIV with specific disorders (e.g., personality disorders, paraphilic disorders).
<p>Systems and Systems Interface</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Study how best to educate and train law enforcement/correctional staff about Veterans. • Understand eligibility, referrals and treatment processes in Veterans treatment courts.
<p>Methodology and Research Resources</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop consortia of researchers, policymakers, clinicians who are interested in serving JIV.
<p>Policies</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assess the impact of cash bail systems on JIV. • Understand research ethics and privacy issues in conducting research on vulnerable Veterans. • Evaluate feasibility and effectiveness of prevention interventions for active duty Servicemembers and reserve Veterans.