

# Office of Health Equity

## Veterans Health Administration

### Department of Veterans Affairs



## TRAUMATIC BRAIN INJURY DISPARITIES INFORMATION BRIEF

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### INTRODUCTION

The Veterans Health Administration (VHA) serves a Veteran population that is increasingly racially and ethnically diverse. Equitable access to high-quality care for all Veterans is a major tenet of the VA healthcare mission. The Office of Health Equity (OHE) champions the elimination of health disparities and achieving health equity for all Veterans.

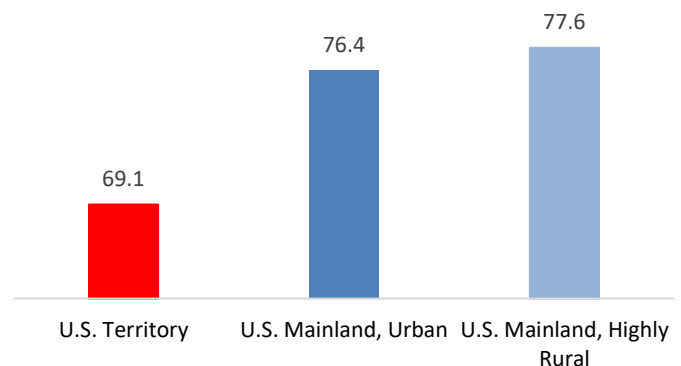
### HEALTH DISPARITIES

Traumatic brain injury (TBI) is considered the signature injury of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Many Veterans experience long-term complications and disability from TBI, in addition to comorbid mental health challenges, including post-traumatic stress disorder. Veterans are 1.5 times more likely than their civilian counterparts to die from TBI complications.

VA researchers sought to determine if where Veterans lived impacted their risk of dying from complications from TBI. Using VA's electronic medical record system, they identified 114,593 Veterans receiving care through VA who were diagnosed with a TBI between January 1, 2000 and December 31, 2010. They then determined how many of these Veterans died between the date they were diagnosed and December 31, 2014.

These researchers found that Veterans who lived in U.S. territories were more likely to die sooner than Veterans residing in the U.S. mainland even after accounting for Veterans' race and ethnicity, severity of their TBI, sociodemographic variables – age, marital status, whether or not Veterans had a service-connected disability, military history, and comorbid conditions. However, there was little difference between how long Veterans with TBI living in rural and urban areas of the U.S. mainland lived.

### Median Survival of Veterans with TBI in Months, by Location of Residence



Veterans residing in the U.S. territories tended to be 62 years or older, Hispanic, have moderate TBI, and have a higher number of comorbid conditions compared with their mainland peers. The reasons for higher mortality rates in Veterans with TBI living in U.S. territories remain unclear.



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## REDUCING DISPARITIES

The Office of Health Equity supports VA researchers and clinicians who work to reduce health disparities by targeting interventions aimed at Veteran groups at higher risk for poor health outcomes, including those Veterans living in U.S. Territories.

The VA Caribbean Healthcare System is leading initiatives to address the increased mortality rates in Veterans with TBI living in Puerto Rico, US Virgin Islands, Guam, Commonwealth of Northern Mariana Islands, and American Samoa by identifying sociodemographic and health characteristics profile of Veterans with TBI, residing in rural areas of U.S territories, and evaluate the association of the variables collected with mortality rates. There is also work ongoing to enhance and expand access to TBI assessment of Veterans residing in rural areas of the U.S territories using appropriate English and Spanish instruments via Telehealth and Veterans Video Connect (VVC) interventions.

## CULTURALLY ADAPTING VA TBI ASSESSMENT INSTRUMENTS

The VA Caribbean Healthcare System also is working to ensure that VA providers use linguistically and culturally appropriate instruments when evaluating Veterans who might have a TBI. Therefore, researchers at the Puerto Rico VA Medical Center translated into Spanish, culturally adapted, and validated VHA TBI screening and evaluation instruments that VA uses to assess if a Veteran might need additional evaluation for a TBI. The researchers found that using language appropriate and culturally equivalent materials in evaluating Hispanic Veterans with a possible mild TBI is important in providing high quality, equitable care to Veterans living in U.S. Territories.



**For more information about VA's TBI and Polytrauma care, visit:**

<https://www.polytrauma.va.gov/system-of-care/index.asp>

**For more information about the Office of Health Equity visit:** <https://www.va.gov/healthequity/>

### Reference

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