

Canadian Armed Forces members and Veteran Mental Health Follow-up Survey, 2018

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Better understanding the mental health of its members is an important objective of the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF). In 2018, Statistics Canada, in collaboration with the CAF, Veterans Affairs Canada and the University of Manitoba, conducted a follow-up study of CAF members who were participants in a survey in 2002. This cohort of CAF members was re-contacted to see how they were faring.

More than 4 in 10 members of this cohort (44%) said they had experienced symptoms consistent with depression or an anxiety disorder at some point during the period between 2002 and 2018, and one-quarter (25%) experienced symptoms consistent with both.

Depression is defined as a period of two weeks or more with persistent depressed mood or loss of interest in normal activities, while anxiety disorders include generalized anxiety disorder, panic disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, and social phobia.

Results of the 2018 Canadian Armed Forces Members and Veteran Mental Health Follow-up Survey are now available and provide updated information on the activities and well-being of people who were regular force members of the CAF in 2002.

Table 1
Rates of selected mental disorders

	Past 12 months	Since 2002
	%	
Any selected mental disorder covered by the survey ¹	29.7	44.3
Depression	19.4	32.7
Anxiety ²	25.1	36.6
Both depression and anxiety	14.8	25.0

1. The category "Any selected mental disorder" includes people who reported symptoms consistent with any of the disorders measured by the survey.

2. Anxiety disorders include generalized anxiety disorder, panic disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, and social phobia.

Source(s): Canadian Armed Forces Members and Veterans Mental Health Follow-up Survey (5084).

Veterans are more likely to report a mental disorder than those who are still members of the CAF

The study found that there are differences in the mental health of those who were still members of the CAF in 2018 and those who are now veterans.

CAF members who became veterans since 2002 reported higher rates of mental disorder, as compared with those who were still in the Forces in 2018. Overall, 48% of female veterans and 38% of male veterans reported symptoms consistent with at least one anxiety disorder at some point between 2002 and 2018, compared with 38% of women and 31% of men who were still in the Forces.

Similar results were reported for members who experienced symptoms consistent with depression. For female veterans, 45% reported that they had experienced symptoms consistent with depression, compared with 41% for those who remained in the Forces in 2018. Among men, the rates were lower, at 33% for veterans and 28% for those who were still members of the CAF.

It is important to note that differences in the characteristics of veterans, such as age, could be a factor in these results. Such results do not necessarily imply that veterans left the Forces because of mental disorders and should not be interpreted as pointing to a causal relationship.

Veterans reporting a mental disorder experience difficulties in transition to civilian life

More than one-third (36%) of veterans reported that they had a very or moderately difficult transition to civilian life. These results are similar to those from another survey focusing on veterans in 2016—the Life After Service Survey—which found that one-third of veterans (33%) reported transition difficulties.

Among the 2002 CAF cohort, those who reported having experienced symptoms consistent with a mental disorder between 2002 and 2018 were more likely to experience difficulty transitioning to civilian life. For those who experienced symptoms consistent with both depression and anxiety, more than 6 in 10 said that they had a difficult transition to civilian life.

Veterans who experienced symptoms consistent with a mental disorder were less likely to participate in the labour market (44% for both depression and anxiety disorders, versus 66% for those without a disorder).

Note to readers

The Canadian Armed Forces members and Veteran Mental Health Follow-up Survey 2018 (CAFVMHS) is a follow up survey of the respondents to the 2002 Canadian Community Health Survey – Mental Health and Well-being – Canadian Forces.

The CAFVMHS provides retrospective data on the health and well-being of regular force members of the Canadian Armed Forces that can be used to assess the impact of mental disorders on a range of outcomes among military personnel. Results will be used to develop preventative and early intervention programs to mitigate the negative impact of mental disorders on military personnel. The survey has been developed in collaboration with the Department of National Defence - Canadian Armed Forces, Veterans Affairs Canada and University of Manitoba in partnership with True Patriot Love.

The sample in the CAFVMHS 2018 was approximately 2,900 full time or former members. The majority were interviewed at home. All of the target respondents must have been living within the 10 Canadian provinces.

In 2002, when the first survey was collected, about 88% of this CAF cohort were men, and 12% were women. Due to the low proportion of females in this cohort, some gender based analysis was not feasible.

As of 2018, about one third of respondents were still in the CAF, and were aged 47 years old on average. The remaining two thirds were no longer part of the CAF ("veterans"), and were aged 54 years old on average.

Any selected anxiety disorder includes post-traumatic stress disorder, generalized anxiety disorder, panic disorder, and social phobia. However, these disorders cannot be added to create this rate because the disorders are not mutually exclusive, meaning that people may have a profile consistent with one or more of these disorders.

Depression (major depressive episode) is identified as a period of two weeks or more with persistent depressed mood or loss of interest in normal activities, as well as other symptoms including: decreased energy, changes in sleep and appetite, impaired concentration, feelings of hopelessness, or suicidal thoughts.

Post-traumatic stress disorder can occur after witnessing or experiencing a traumatic event involving actual or threatened death, serious injury or violent personal assault, such as sexual assault. The response to the event is marked by extreme fear and helplessness. Symptoms must persist for a minimum of one month and could include: repeated reliving of the event, disturbance of day-to-day activity, avoidance of stimuli associated with the event, and irritability, outbursts of anger, or sleeping difficulty.

Generalized anxiety disorder is identified by a pattern of frequent, persistent worry and excessive anxiety about several events or activities lasting at least six months along with other symptoms.

Panic disorder is marked by recurrent, unexpected panic attacks, in the absence of real danger. These attacks are followed by at least one month of concern about having additional attacks or a change in behaviour related to the attacks.

A **panic attack** is characterized by an isolated period of intense fear often associated with feelings of imminent doom. During these attacks, physical symptoms, such as heart palpitations, shortness of breath or sweating develop abruptly and reach a peak within 10 minutes of the start of the attack.

Social phobia is marked by a persistent fear of one or more social or performance situations involving exposure to unfamiliar people or to possible scrutiny by others. The feared social or performance situation is avoided and exposure to the social situation provokes anxiety.

Definitions, data sources and methods: survey number [5084](#).

For more information, or to enquire about the concepts, methods or data quality of this release, contact us (toll-free 1-800-263-1136; 514-283-8300; STATCAN.infostats-infostats.STATCAN@canada.ca) or Media Relations (613-951-4636; STATCAN.mediahotline-ligneinfomedias.STATCAN@canada.ca).