

Number of uninsured vets nears 2M

By Gregg Zoroya, USA TODAY

WASHINGTON – The number of uninsured veterans jumped sharply in the first half of the decade to 1.8 million in 2004, a new study shows.

Conducted by researchers at the Harvard Medical School, the study shows the uninsured veteran population rose twice as fast as the uninsured in the general population.

The increase in veterans lacking insurance coincides with Bush administration policies aimed at limiting the number of veterans eligible for VA coverage, according to the study published online Tuesday in the *American Journal of Public Health*.

In 2002, the administration stopped marketing veterans health care and, in January 2003, cut off access to future veterans earning more than \$30,000 to \$35,000 annually on average. Both times, VA officials cited budgetary constraints and backlogs in untreated patients.

Only a minority of veterans – those disabled by military service – are automatically eligible for VA care, the study says.

Coverage continues for veterans already enrolled, poor veterans, Purple Heart recipients and former prisoners of war.

"Most uninsured veterans are low- to middle-income workers who may be too poor to afford private coverage but are not poor enough to qualify for Medicaid for Medicaid or free VA care," the study says.

VA officials declined to comment on the study, but released a 2004 memo that said "outreach activities" aimed at homeless and Persian Gulf War veterans were not interrupted.

Researchers found that after the Veterans Eligibility Reform Act of 1996 expanded VA health care coverage to veterans, the percentage who were uninsured declined to just less than 10% in 2000 or about 1.5 million veterans.

From 2000 to 2004, the percentage of uninsured veterans increased from about 10% to nearly 13%, says study co-author Steffie Woolhandler.

"This really epitomizes who the uninsured are," she says, "and it's mostly the working poor and middle-income people."

Many deserving are falling through the cracks of the health care system, says Michael O'Rourke, health policy official with the Veterans of Foreign Wars. "These are individuals that served their country."

The administration's 2008 budget proposal for VA health care contains a \$5 billion increase to \$36.6 billion.

Meanwhile, a VA study released Tuesday in the *American Journal of Public Health* showed that veterans suffering depression are seven to eight times more likely to commit suicide than the general population. The study tracked more than 800,000 veterans with depression between 1999 and 2004.

They found that 1,683 had killed themselves, or nearly 90 per 100,000, far greater than the 13.5-per-100,000 national rate. The VA study also found young male veterans at unusually higher risk of suicide.

Contributing: Julie Appleby in McLean, Va.