OUT OF THE SHADOWS
What we know about the well-being and experiences of private contractors working in conflict environments

For the past decade, private contractors have been deployed extensively in conflict zones throughout the world, supporting U.S. and allied forces in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as foreign governments, nongovernmental organizations, and private businesses. These contractors experience many of the same traumas of war faced by military forces—combat stressors known to have negative physical and mental health implications for armed forces personnel. Unlike military service members, however, many contractors don’t have access to mental health resources before, during, and after deployment. So how are they coping with the after-effects of working in a war zone?

RAND’s survey of more than 650 contractors gives us a glimpse into how this “shadow force” is faring.

CONTRACTORS REPORTING COMBAT EXPOSURE

- 36% of contractors said members of their team encountered land or water mines and/or booby traps.
- 47% of contractors said their teams were attacked by terrorists or civilians.
- 73% of contractors said their teams received hostile incoming fire from small arms, artillery, rockets, mortars, or shells.
- 36% of contractors said they personally witnessed someone from their team or an ally unit being seriously wounded or killed.
- 39% of contractors said they were in a vehicle (e.g., truck, tank, armored personal carrier, helicopter, plane, or boat) that was shot at.
- 34% of contractors said they had suffered casualties.

CONTRACTORS WITH PROBABLE MENTAL HEALTH OR SUBSTANCE USE PROBLEMS

- 25% of contractors reported probable PTSD.
- 18% of contractors reported probable depression.
- 47% of contractors reported alcohol misuse.
- 10% of contractors reported high-risk drinking.

CONTRACTORS WITH PROBABLE PTSD OR DEPRESSION, BY LENGTH OF MOST RECENT DEPLOYMENT

- 32% of contractors who deployed for 2 months or less had probable PTSD.
- 23% of contractors who deployed for 3–6 months had probable PTSD.
- 9% of contractors who deployed for 7 months or more had probable PTSD.
- 17% of contractors who deployed for 2 months or less had probable depression.
- 14% of contractors who deployed for 3–6 months had probable depression.
- 9% of contractors who deployed for 7 months or more had probable depression.

CONTRACTORS WITH PROBABLE PTSD OR DEPRESSION, BY CITIZENSHIP

- 32% of contractors in the United States had probable PTSD.
- 23% of contractors in the United Kingdom had probable PTSD.
- 13% of contractors in other countries had probable PTSD.
- 9% of contractors in the United States had probable depression.
- 17% of contractors in the United Kingdom had probable depression.
- 14% of contractors in other countries had probable depression.

For more information, see Molly Dunigan, Carrie M. Farmer, Rachel M. Burns, Alison Hawks, and Claude Messan Setodji, Out of the Shadows: The Health and Well-Being of Private Contractors Working in Conflict Environments, RAND Corporation, 98-400-RC (available at www.rand.org/RAND/2013. This research was conducted as part of our RAND-Initiated Research program and was funded in part by the generosity of RAND’s donors and by fees earned on client-funded research.

Infographic by Erin-Elizabeth Johnson and Dori Gordon Walker. The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit institution that helps improve policy and decisionmaking through research and analysis.

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