
Heroin Use on Vietnam War Veterans - The Implications

Originally, this paper was going to be about the extreme use, abuse, and effects of heroin within Vietnam war veterans post war. It was not just going to be about the statistics of the men with this affliction or even their use while in Vietnam but specifically the effects of the usage after war events, and the effects of the addiction on these soldiers' lives and those around them. Upon doing some research, however, it was discovered that heroin addiction among these soldiers post war was actually quite an extremely rare occurrence. Heroin, in fact, ended up not really affecting these veterans lives after the war, just while they were in Vietnam due to the tremendous amount of stress being put on them. I, along with most other people in regard to this subject, was under the impression that heroin addiction for vets was a serious problem among them and that long term, destructive, and intense addiction was inevitable if they had tried it, even just once, like so many troops did while off on duty. So now what I indeed intend to cover in this paper, along with the effects of the rare occurrences where long term addiction existed, is just how uncommon these instances were contrary to popular belief.

Real depth will be gone into on the research found concerning this topic as well as an analysis of the research stated and it's implications toward the topic at hand. The subject of differences between heroin usage while in Vietnam, as well as after Vietnam when the war was over, is very important because not all too many people truly know very much about this topic despite what has been told to them or what they have previously believed due to false information and depictions in T.V and movies. During the time of the Vietnam war, civilians had this predetermined idea of heroin as being an extremely addictive and destructive narcotic drug that also automatically came with a lifetime of struggle to overcome it and the intense cravings therein once one ever tried it. Then they came to find that our United States troops who were sent to Vietnam had gotten addicted to heroin upon arrival to the war. Naturally, with this preconception of what heroin was like as a drug, society was very worried about the situation. However, what seemed to not make such publicized news was that, upon studies and research done with the veterans post war, this was a much smaller problem than had been previously conceived.

More attention needs to be directed toward the fact that hardly any veterans actually stayed addicted to heroin or even went back to it ever again once they were out of Vietnam and back in the United States. So first I will talk about the research I found and what has already been said on the subject and then analyse and sum up my ideas and findings on the subject.

Since my prior knowledge of this topic was scarce and anyway proven wrong by the research I conducted, I delved even deeper into the research itself since there is nothing left to say on my prior knowledge. There were many studies done on this very subject conducted by Lee N Robins and other works related to the use of heroin within Vietnam veterans during and after the war effort. In May of 1971, two congressmen went to Vietnam to see the soldiers and the war itself. They reported an extensive heroin usage among American soldiers who were there. After these shocking findings, all soldiers were then subject to a urine test before being allowed to go back home. Any soldier who showed up positive in the test for drugs were made to completely detox before being able to walk on United States soil once again ("Vietnam Veterans Three Years After Vietnam" 203).

Exactly one year after these troops were allowed to go home and the war was finally over, Robins interviewed a random selection of both soldiers who showed up positive for heroin and any soldiers who came back to the United States that added up to 900 of the 14,000 soldiers who had been enlisted. Then, two years later, Robins conducted yet another interview with 617 of those men who had been previously interviewed along with 284 non-veterans who matched the veterans in age, education, eligibility to be enlisted, and residency during the time of enlistment (“Vietnam Veteran Three Years After Vietnam” 203). The findings from this is that 85 percent of the veterans had admitted to having been offered heroin while in Vietnam, 35 percent had tried it and 19 percent admitted to having tried it and becoming addicted to heroin. However, only seven people in the non-veteran group had ever tried heroin. This is partially due to the scarcity of it here in the United States and the possibility that non-veterans were more ashamed of the usage and didn’t admit it during the interview (“Vietnam Veterans Three Years After Vietnam” 203).

When it comes to heroin, there seems to be a much higher chance of addiction among Vietnam soldiers than there is with other drugs because of availability and lack of alternatives. However, heroin was actually only used regularly (more than once a week for a month or more than four times per month for a year) by three percent of Vietnam soldiers and only eight percent of all Vietnam veterans ever used again after the war was over and they were home (“Vietnam Veterans Three Years After Vietnam” 204). Heroin seems to have only really been primarily abused while in Vietnam for United States troops because of its purity level there as opposed to other places along with the fact that it was easily obtained while they were there (“Vietnam Veteran Three Years After Vietnam” 204).

With most veterans it has also been discovered that prolonged craving of heroin is an incredibly rare occurrence among them (“Vietnam Veterans Three Years After Vietnam” 207). Veterans have reported that although they do not believe that their addiction has interfered with their lives, they think of heroin as still being much worse than other illegal drugs. Also, only one-quarter of these veterans that were heroin users were also arrested for a non-traffic violation. At the time of the first interview conducted by Robins, one third of veterans afflicted with heroin addiction were also unemployed and/or out of school (“Vietnam Veterans Three Years After Vietnam” 208). Vietnam veterans were also much less likely to admit that heroin interfered with their lives than non-veterans were (“Vietnam Veterans Three Years After Vietnam” 209).

In Jerome Jaffe’s work, he states that, in fact, ten to fifteen percent of all United States troops in Vietnam were reported as being addicted with withdrawal symptoms and as much as 25 percent in some other units as well (Jaffe 212). After about a month of the new system for urine testing soldiers before leaving Vietnam being conducted, positive test results for heroin dropped significantly from about eight to nine percent all the way down to four or five percent of troops (Jaffe 213). Then, out of the percentage of addicted soldiers, only five percent of them continued to be addicted or became readdicted to heroin once back in the United States (Jaffe 213).

More of Lee Robins’ works exhibited that more of the American troops in Vietnam were using heroin than the Department of Defence realized or reported on. The amount of soldiers who had used heroin was actually about 45 percent, almost half of the soldiers that were sent over there. Out of these 45 percent, 34 percent used heroin while in Vietnam at least once (“Lessons from the Vietnam Heroin Experience” 1). In the beginning stages, eleven percent of soldiers in Vietnam tested positive for heroin upon departure from the war and 20 percent of veterans in

the first interview Robins conducted openly admitted to using heroin and having felt withdrawal symptoms (“Lessons from the Vietnam Heroin Experience” 1). Only five percent of Vietnam veterans who were addicted to heroin in Vietnam relapsed into addiction once they were home and twelve percent relapsed only briefly within the three years of being home after the war was over (“Lessons from the Vietnam Heroin Experience”1). Although all of the addicts that showed up as positive for heroin on the urine tests then got detoxed before coming back to the United States, a minute amount of these people then went on to receive actual treatment for their addiction upon arrival to the U.S. Then, after a few years of being back home, addiction showed no differences between Vietnam veterans and non-veterans statistically (“Lessons from the Vietnam Heroin Experience” 1). The main reasoning found for the heroin usage of Vietnam soldiers while they were off in the war in Vietnam were those of availability, the stresses and anxiety of war, a lack of alternative stress relievers, and also a lack of disapproval from others for the majority of the time troops were there (“Lessons from the Vietnam Heroin Experience” 1).

Another source used in my research was Tim O'Brien's book, *The Things They Carried*, and from it, I used two people as examples for my work. These two people would be Ted Lavender, because of his extensive drug use up until the moment he died, and Norman Bowker because even though there is no mention in the book of drug use with this character, Bowker exhibits the same behaviors and problems faced that most veterans find they have upon returning to the U.S. that would generally turn some people, inevitably, to drugs in order to ease the pain (O'Brien 11, 93-105). After Ted Lavender took some more tranquilizers to get high, he went off to do his business and ended up getting shot in the head by the enemy due to being too high to notice anyone around (O'Brien 18). With the case of Norman Bowker, he was not addicted to drugs but he had the same afflictions of extreme depression and feelings of not belonging that some veterans feel after their service that would drive some people to taking drugs. It was as if, upon arrival to the United States post war, he was now out of place and that the world around him, where he had grown up, had moved on without him and changed drastically while he was off in hell so to speak and it all left him behind. He was alone in the world and he ended up committing suicide because he could not take it in the end (O'Brien 93-105).

Jonathan Simon wrote an article on heroin usage in the Vietnam war and he focused more on society's perception of it all. There was this idea of “a drug addicted army” that had been depicted at the time of the war effort that, even now, shapes some of our views on crime in relation to drug addicts (Simon 1). The discovery of heroin abuse among our troops over in Vietnam then somehow shifted the blame of the war itself off of the government and “politicians who wanted it” and onto the soldiers themselves even though they had as much to do with the war as the civilians fighting against it (Simon 1).

The news of soldiers using heroin was incredibly widespread and publicized. However, the revelation that later came that this was in fact a very small issue and that only five percent of those who used it stayed addicted over a long period of time out of the 45 percent that had previously used was hardly even noticed, let alone recognized by the majority of people who cared so much about this problem (Simon 1). Upon arrival back home, the need and craving for a heroin fix was practically gone among Vietnam veterans and this is because Vietnam was the cause for usage in the first place and without the cause being present, the effect of heroin usage to ease the stress was gone as well. Addiction is the habitual usage of something triggered by a certain environmental cue that makes one feel like they need whatever thing it is that is triggered by the said environment (Simon 1). If one were to take the soldier out of

Vietnam, essentially taking away the trigger, that takes away the need for heroin thus facilitating the opportunity for change.

Jim Mintz also talks about the differences between non-Vietnam veterans and Vietnam veterans. Specifically, he discusses the differences of addiction between the two, substance of choice, and differences in the reasons for the substance abuse itself for each category or veterans. The differences are greater than one may expect. Non-Vietnam veterans and Vietnam veterans were both surveyed when they went in for heroin treatment and rehabilitation. Vietnam veterans ended up being more likely to have started abusing during the war and because of the war and their service in Vietnam while veterans that never served in Vietnam were more likely to have started using after their service as opposed to during or because of it (Mintz 1). The main reasons given by these non-Vietnam veterans for the substance abuse were out of boredom and a lack of activity or meaningfulness in their lives post service. Both groups of veterans, however, have negative attitudes toward heroin but it is less so in the opinions of the Vietnam veterans (Mintz 1). Non-Vietnam veterans also have a much higher rate of alcohol abuse post war than Vietnam veterans do (Mintz 1).

Daniel Cheng wrote a paper on all of this as well and according to him, the main reasons for heroin use with Vietnam veterans was that it was extremely easy to get out there, it was much more of a pure form of the drug in that country, and soldiers needed some way of coping with the horrific encounters they had experienced. Heroin was also the easiest to obtain while in Vietnam. Another reason for this usage is that, while there, there was little to no consequence for the abuse of heroin, so why not (Cheng 6)?

Therefore, from all of the research conducted, what it shows now from the first source mentioned is that of all of the different heroin addicts, Vietnam veterans who were users were the most stubborn and denying about their problem. Only one in six veterans who were addicted actually sought any extra help for their problem and they were statistically less likely to admit that their addiction interfered in their day to day lives in any way ("Vietnam Veterans Three Years After Vietnam" 208-209). Even though, for some at least, the addiction ruined their lives upon arrival back in the United States and they still rarely sought intervention or even admitted that their dependency was, in fact, an issue. Maybe not very many saw it as such a problem because it started out for them as being a solution or coping mechanism for the problem of war and the atrocities that come with it.

From Jaffes' works, it is surmised that significantly less soldiers showed up positive in urine tests than statistics showed were actually addicted. This brought me to the conclusion that, when soldiers found out about the tests, heroin addicted soldiers would somehow show up clean on the tests without being clean by cheating the system like some do with urine tests for job interviews. This means that these addiction afflicted soldiers went back to the United States with no help initially for their drug abuse and most likely not seeking help in the future, potentially skewing the statistic numbers a bit. This all goes along with my previously said statement that the Vietnam veteran users were quite stubborn about their dependency when it came to help needing being sought or admitting to the problem in the first place.

For Vietnam war veterans, after encountering the horrors and tribulations they had to deal with, heroin was probably the only thing that made them feel the tiniest bit normal, let them sleep, or ever feel the same as before the war or sane. Especially after having used it and gotten used to it in Vietnam, the heroin is something that is and feels familiar and safe for them in a place

where once was home but everything had changed around them. Only a small amount of veterans turned to heroin for this solace or to fix their problems but most veterans did still have these post war problems when they came back to the United States. Once they came back, no one who wasn't in Vietnam with the soldier could really understand all that the veterans had been through or were going through.

Again, my findings were completely different from that which I had previously anticipated. At first it was my assumption that a large number of soldiers not only turned to heroin in a time of need during the war but also became harshly dependant on heroin after the war was over because the addiction was so hard to control. However, research has shown that this is indeed not the case for most and that almost half of the troops did use heroin in Vietnam but the addiction did not carry over for most veterans once they were back in the United States. Soldiers' dependency only really had to do with the war itself at the time of the war. The stress of war is the main reason for addiction and with the absence of war, the reason to use heroin was more or less gone for most troops. Addiction had surprisingly little to do with post war problems for Vietnam veterans even though it had all to do with addiction to other drugs for non-Vietnam veterans.

Even though heroin use for American troops in Vietnam was staggering, there was no further need for it once soldiers were back home. This also could have to do with the fact that the men who tested positive had to then detox before being able to return home because that could have potentially gotten rid of addiction in most soldiers all on it's own. No one could quite wrap their head around the fact that soldiers were not staying addicted and that veterans actually posed no real threat to society. The statistics keep getting smaller and smaller showing how many stayed addicted and of those, the ones that were unemployed/out of school or had ever been committed for a non-traffic violation.

Once veterans were away from the war that caused their addiction in the first place, they were away from any reason to continue using. For most veterans, this was reason enough to stay away from the drug since it also probably reminded them of the times they needed to use heroin during the war and the stress they were trying to get away from. However, the amazing success rate of veterans getting over addiction was not nearly as publicised and blown up in proportion as the very fact that soldiers were using heroin in the first place. Politicians got the blame for the war shifted away from them and I suppose they were not about to have it shifted back to them because of these revelations that no one saw coming. Another reason this information is not common knowledge is probably due to the fact that it goes against what society already believed about heroin addiction and people just couldn't wrap their heads around the idea.

When it comes to Vietnam veterans, the main reason for usage was stress whereas the main reason for use in non-Vietnam veterans were post service problems. The reason this is so different may be because of the fact that non-Vietnam veterans were more than likely much more dedicated to the cause during their service than Vietnam veterans and therefore used drugs post service out of a lack of meaningfulness after their service was over.

I believe that I have gone beyond that which I have researched because I am not just telling how Vietnam veterans used heroin or presenting statistics but I am going into the psychology of non-Vietnam veteran users, Vietnam veteran users, society's views on the Vietnam veteran addicts and telling why these groups may think the way they do as well as why these addicts may become addicted in the first place. I also talked about the urine testing and how some

veterans may have gotten away with avoiding the detoxing process. This may be part of why the image of a drug addicted Vietnam veteran still exists despite the extensive research showing such low statistics for such things. Through my research, I found things out that everyone should know but not many people actually do know much about.

What I found is that, when it comes to heroin usage in Vietnam war veterans, a large amount of soldiers used it during the war in Vietnam for a number of reasons but upon returning to the U.S., those reasons diminished along with their desire to use heroin for all but five percent who, unfortunately, continued to be dependant. To my previous questions on this project, the effects of heroin use on Vietnam veterans, only five percent of the veterans ever continued usage. This five percent, however, did run into problems like employment and going to school. Some even became convicted for non-traffic violations. Only three percent of these people ever sought treatment or help for their addiction. Future research may want to delve deeper in this five percent of people and do a long term study of the course of their lives. Maybe someone could then compare and contrast their tendencies with that of non-veteran addicts and non-Vietnam veteran addicts. More research should also be done on addiction itself and the reasons it exists for some, since previous theories of the drug causing addiction or genetics being the cause have been disproven by the research on this group of people. It may be that the only cause of addiction is one's environment and the quality of their human connections, which would explain the small amount of veterans that stayed addicted. They may have come back to a low quality life style after the war.