



Joint Federal Research Funding for Military Personnel and Veterans

Project Report Summary Template

Funding Opportunity
Echoes of the Purge: Unveiling Survivors' Experiences with Veterans Affairs Canada
Brief Overview
This project looked at the experiences of Canadian Armed Forces Veterans affected by the LGBT Purge (1950s–1990s) and the lasting effects on their health and wellbeing, as well as their experiences with Veterans Affairs Canada (VAC) and other programs and services. Through interviews, Veterans shared what happened to them during their military service and the Purge, the challenges they faced when seeking care, what helped them heal, and their recommendations for improving programs and services for LGBT Purge survivors. The findings also show how past discrimination by military and government institutions continues to affect some Veterans' trust in services and their comfort in asking for support.
What is this Research About?
Between the 1950s and the mid-1990s, 2SLGBTQIA+ members of the Canadian Armed Forces experienced discrimination, surveillance, harassment, and dismissal because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. This period became known as the Purge. Many Veterans affected by the Purge continue to experience long-term impacts that influence how they view government institutions, access healthcare, and navigate support services. While Canada has formally acknowledged these harms, little research has examined either the nature of Veterans' experiences during the Purge itself, or how these experiences continue to affect Veterans' health, wellbeing, and engagement with VAC and other programs and services. This project sought to better understand: • the lasting impacts of the LGBT Purge on Veterans' lives; • Veterans' experiences accessing VAC and community-based supports; • barriers and facilitators to care; and • recommendations for improving services for LGBT Purge survivors.
What did the Research Do?
The research team first reviewed existing programs and services for 2SLGBTQIA+ Veterans. What the team learned from this review helped shape the questions asked during the interviews. The research team then held in-depth online interviews with 10 Canadian Armed Forces Veterans who identified as lesbian, gay, or another sexual minority and who had served during the LGBT Purge. Veterans were invited to share their military experiences, how the Purge affected them, their experiences with VAC and other services, and their ideas for improving care. Researchers looked

across what Veterans shared to identify common experiences, concerns, and suggestions for improving programs and services.

What did the Research Find?

Veterans interviewed for the study described how the LGBT Purge continued to affect their lives decades after leaving the military.

Key findings included:

- Descriptions of military culture at the time of the LGBT Purge, as marked by hypermasculinity, routine homophobia, misogyny and a culture of silence.
- Many Veterans described being placed under surveillance and “called in” for interrogation. During these interrogations, some were pressured to identify other people suspected of being LGBT.
- Veterans described being forcibly released from service, or in some cases, being held in extended states of uncertainty before release; a tactic used to identify other suspected individuals.
- Many Veterans described a lifelong process of navigating secrecy, concealment, and being open about their sexual identity, sometimes sustaining dual-lives to remain safe.
- The impacts of the Purge extend well beyond discharge, affecting physical health, mental health, identity, relationships, trust, and overall wellbeing.
- Many Veterans described losing not only their military careers, but also their sense of identity, belonging, and trust in institutions following the LGBT Purge.
- Many Veterans experienced significant barriers when accessing VAC services, including uncertainty about eligibility, administrative complexity, mistrust of institutions, and interactions that felt retraumatizing.
- Some Veterans chose not to access VAC services because they believed they were ineligible or did not trust government institutions due to their past experiences.
- Participants valued knowledgeable, culturally competent providers, VAC-funded mental health services, trusted case managers, and peer support.
- Community organizations, particularly Rainbow Veterans, played an important role in helping Veterans reconnect with others who shared similar experiences, rebuild a sense of belonging, and reduce feelings of isolation.
- Veterans called for safe and respectful services that recognize the effects of trauma, as well as better training for service providers about the experiences of LGBT Purge survivors.
- Trust was central to Veterans’ healing and recovery. Each interaction with a service provider could help rebuild that trust, or deepen the harm caused by past institutions.

What does this Research Mean?

Improving outcomes for LGBT Purge survivors depends on services that are accessible, easy to navigate, psychologically safe, and inclusive. Veterans’ experiences are also shaped by whether they trust the organizations providing care and whether service providers understand the history and lasting impacts of the LGBT Purge.

The findings also show that the lasting effects of institutional discrimination continue to influence how some Veterans engage with care and support services. Recognizing these experiences and providing

culturally safe, trauma-informed care can help rebuild trust and improve access to the services Veterans need.

Finally, our findings highlight ways that VAC and partner organizations can strengthen policies, improve how services are provided, collaborate with trusted community organizations, and provide trauma-informed supports that better meet the needs of LGBT Purge survivors. These changes could make services more inclusive, accessible, and supportive for LGBT Purge survivors, while also helping to shape future policies and programs for all Veterans.

Sources

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