

Deadly New Year's Day incidents cast renewed focus on veterans' mental health, some experts say



Emergency service vehicles form a security barrier to keep other vehicles out of the French Quarter in New Orleans on Jan. 1 after a deadly truck attack. Credit: AP/Gerald Herbert

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Updated January 8, 2025 1:06 pm

A pair of apparently unrelated deadly incidents on New Year's Day involving two men who served in the U.S. military has put a renewed spotlight

on mental health concerns among veterans as they readjust to civilian life after combat duty, according to some advocates.

In New Orleans, Shamsud-Din Jabbar, who spent 13 years in the U.S. Army or U.S. Army Reserve, including a tour in Afghanistan in 2009, rammed his truck through a crowd of early morning revelers on Bourbon Street, killing 14 people and injuring about 30 more, authorities said. Jabbar left the military in 2020 as a staff sergeant.

Jabbar, 42, who died in a shootout with police, posted videos on social media pledging support for the Islamic State militant group and had an ISIS flag in his vehicle, according to the FBI.

Hours later, U.S. Army Special Forces Master Sgt. Matthew Livelsberger shot himself in a Tesla Cybertruck that exploded from an improvised device of gas canisters and large fireworks outside the Trump Hotel in Las Vegas, authorities said. No one else died in the explosion, but law enforcement officials said it left seven people with minor injuries.

WHAT NEWSDAY FOUND

- **A pair of apparently** unrelated deadly incidents on New Year's Day involving two people who served in the U.S. military has shined a renewed spotlight on veterans' mental health issues, according to some advocates.
- **In New Orleans**, an Army vet rammed his truck into a crowd, killing 14 people and injuring about 30 more, while in Las Vegas a Green Beret shot himself inside a Tesla Cybertruck that imploded outside a Trump casino.
- **A University of Pittsburgh** professor who works with veterans suffering from PTSD said the pressures of combat can create stressors that can have tragic consequences if left untreated.

Las Vegas police said they found a note in the 37-year-old Green Beret's phone stating he needed to "cleanse" his mind "of the brothers I've lost and relieve myself of the burden of the lives I took."

An FBI investigator said the incident ultimately appeared to be "a tragic case of suicide" by a decorated combat veteran who was struggling with PTSD and other issues. A former Army nurse who previously had been Livelsberger's girlfriend told The Associated Press he had faced significant pain and exhaustion that she recognized as key symptoms of traumatic brain injury.



A Tesla Cybertruck exploded outside President-elect Donald Trump's Las Vegas hotel on Jan. 1. Authorities said U.S. Army Special Forces Master Sgt. Matthew Livelsberger shot himself inside the vehicle a note in his phone said he needed to "cleanse" his mind "of the brothers I've lost and relieve myself of the burden of the lives I took." Credit: AP/Alcides Antunes

While a high-ranking FBI counterterrorism official said on Jan. 2 that officials found "no known definitive link" between the two incidents, in the view of some experts, the ties of both men to U.S. military service seem to illustrate the difficulties veterans can face once off the battlefield.

Shad Meshad, president and founder of the National Veterans Foundation, which runs street outreach missions for homeless veterans in the Los Angeles area, said it appears both Jabbar and Livelsberger struggled to readjust to society after returning home from combat.

"They come back and they don't fit anywhere," said Meshad, a Vietnam veteran who has advocated for fellow U.S. military service members for the past 50 years. "There's no help to assist them. They go to the VA. It's a huge bureaucracy. They're told to 'Get in line and sit down' ... So it's just the confusion. The trauma. And the ideology in social media where they can get confused and say 'Damn I'm angry.' "

But Jennifer Silva, chief program officer of Wounded Warrior Project, a nonprofit based in Jacksonville, Florida, that serves veterans and active duty service members, warned against drawing too many parallels between the two incidents as the motivations of the men appeared to be different.

"There's no single reason for this type of behavior but people with mental health conditions are no more likely, really, to be violent than anyone else," said Silva, who served in the Army as a logistics officer. "People obviously have questions, and it's a lot to process, but I just hesitate to draw a ton of conclusions from these two events."

Concerns about mental health care for veterans is particularly acute on Long Island, which is home to the largest proportion of veterans in the state, with about 64,000 current or former active military in Suffolk County and roughly 45,000 in Nassau, according to a 2021 report from the nonprofit New York Health Foundation.

Sherri Kaplan, who oversees CN Guidance & Counseling Services' [Bridging the Gap](#) program, which connects Long Island veterans with mental health and substance abuse treatment, said returning service members have a tendency to isolate and often are reluctant to seek help. The program, she said, engages former service members to find veterans in need in the community.

"This has been an underserved population and a population that does not generally willingly reach out for support," Kaplan said. "And so by pushing our veterans out into the community, they're able to make that connection."

A separate [report](#) commissioned by the New York Health Foundation and released in the fall found that more than 60% of veterans in New York State who recently left the military suffered a physical or mental disability while serving, and 1 in 4 were experiencing depression or PTSD, Newsday previously reported.

In addition, rates of suicidal thoughts were twice as high among the 1,122 veterans discharged or separated from the military between January 2018 and January 2023 who were surveyed for the report, as compared with the general population.

Nationwide, about 7,000 veterans [died by suicide](#) in 2021, including about 140 in New York, according to a 2023 report from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, Newsday has reported.

Eric Meyer, a professor and director of the University of Pittsburgh's Clinical Mental Health Counseling program, said the pressures of combat can create stressors on service members that, left untreated, can have tragic consequences. For nearly 20 years, he has worked with veterans suffering from PTSD.

"War zone service is really hard on families," Meyer said. "It's hard on people's stability. It contributes to loss and grief. And creates the potential for disillusionment and a desire to act out."

With AP