

## **Ethical Analysis: Mortality Rates of Life Expectancy of Veterans**

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Date

In any report dealing with fatalities or human life, it is important to ensure that the information is represented accurately and fairly. It is especially important for veteran populations, as it informs major policy and funding decisions. This document assesses the ethical use of writing and visuals for a 2017 report published by the Department of Veterans' Affairs (VA). The report outlines the mortality rates and life expectancy of veterans from 1980 to 2014, organizing findings by education and income. I will further describe the report, how I analyzed its ethics, and then evaluate the report for ethical reporting based on visuals and writing.

### **Analysis**

The report, "Mortality Rates and Life Expectancy of Veterans," (2017) is publicly hosted on the VA's website, along with several other reports dealing with public health. It estimates mortality and life expectancy for veterans ages 20-85, looking at data collected from a fifteen-year period. Published by the VA, the purpose of the report is to inform other government agencies and veterans about this information. The style of the report implies that this is more for government viewers, due to its heavy reliance on statistical information.

### **Evaluation: Visuals**

The report uses several visuals: photographs, graphs, and tables.

#### Ethical factors

Throughout the report, it was made clear where all the data for graphs and tables were coming from. Under every table, the report listed the source, and they were all from government research studies. Additionally, all the sources were relatively recent, published in 2015. All tables were clearly labeled, so it was easy to refer to them while reading the text of the report. The tables also had easily understood column and row names, so anyone could locate appropriate data. On all tables, numbers were right-aligned and had the same amount of decimal spaces.

For graphs, the increments of measure on both the x- and y-axis were consistent. Such as on Table 7, where ages were listed by units of 15, and the rate on the y-axis consistently listed by .02 increments. All of the graphs started at 0, so it's likely there wasn't any intentional framing for more persuasive visual arguments.

#### Unethical factors

The order of the columns on tables made it harder to determine how the statistics and totals related to one another. On all tables, totals were given on the far left side, instead of the typical far right. As a reader, this made me want to ignore the rest of the columns since the end result was before them. All the tables also used zebra striping, which made some rows stand out more than others. The size of the

font also changed between tables, the tables depicting mortality statistics having much smaller type than tables with education and income levels. In later tables, the titles of columns also became hard to determine, such as in Table 4 where it states “Male Analysis” then “Male Analysis 2” without explaining the difference in either the table or in the text.

The graphs were unethical in that the colors used made it hard to separate the mortality rates for different demographics. Male mortality was measured by blue, a light blue, and a dashed blue—likewise, female mortality was measured by the same in red. These lines overlapped with each other, increasing the difficulty of following information for one type of demographic.

The cover sheet of the report is in white and blue, and has a large picture of the United States’ flag. While the flag makes sense for a government publication, it reminds me of “Cruel Pies” since the report is about human life, and there are no pictures of people found anywhere in the report.

#### Evaluation: Writing

For the most part, the report is easy to understand and doesn’t rely on jargon or heavy-governmental language. That said, there are a few places where the meaning is ambiguous, or terms aren’t clearly defined.

In terms of language, the measurements of “healthy” and “fit” are never explained in the body of the report, but are used as comparisons throughout it. The report does do a good job, however, with explaining what “mortality” and “life expectancy” both mean, in example: “Life expectancy, a measure summarizing the mortality experience over a lifetime, is an estimate of expected life-years at a specific age” (VA).

In terms of structure, the report does well in clearly outlining its findings in a numbered list, a format that helps information be understood quickly and easily. That said, most of the paragraphs are long, going over the five lines for easy readability, which compromises the accessibility of the reading. In some places, primarily the introduction, many of the sentences start with numbers, which makes the arguments harder to understand than a summary or paraphrase of the findings.

## Conclusions

The main areas of improvement for this report are in their visuals, as well as further defining terms and creating shorter paragraphs. The following are the main suggestions from my analysis:

*Arranging tables.* Totals should be located on the far right-hand side so readers are able to review all of the data before drawing conclusions.

*Graphs.* Should not rely only on color or broken lines to differentiate when the lines overlap. This makes it difficult to understand trends.

*Photographs.* For reports involving human lives, photographs or other images of people should be used. Having only the American flag de-humanizes the data.

These factors are important to consider since they might be the parts a reviewer focuses on—graphs in particular. While some of the information from the visuals might be included in-text, full understandings can be lost in similar colors, strangely organized columns, and long paragraphs.

Thank you for reviewing my document. I can be reached at [email] for further questions or information.

**References**

Dragga, S., & Voss, D. (2001). Cruel pies: The inhumanity of technical illustrations. *Technical communication*, 48(3), 265-274.

“Life Mortality Rates of Veterans from 1980 to 2014.” (2017). Department of Veterans’ Affairs. Retrieved November 20 2018 at [https://www.va.gov/vetdata/docs/SpecialReports/Mortality\\_study\\_USVETS\\_2015\\_1980\\_2014.pdf](https://www.va.gov/vetdata/docs/SpecialReports/Mortality_study_USVETS_2015_1980_2014.pdf)