



**GRADUATE SCHOOL OF BIOMEDICAL SCIENCES
CLINICAL & POPULATION HEALTH RESEARCH PROGRAM**

Ph.D. THESIS DEFENSE

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**Understanding the Experience and Evaluating the Occurrence of Depression
in a Sample of Pregnant Veterans**

The Veterans Health Administration (VHA) encourages depression screening and treatment for pregnant veterans; however, rates of depression symptoms and treatment utilization during pregnancy have not been well-studied. In this dissertation we examined rates and correlates of depression symptoms in a sample of pregnant veterans, explored mental health care treatment utilization and the experiences of veterans accessing mental health care at the VHA during pregnancy, and interviewed VHA mental health providers for their perspectives on depression screening and treatment in the perinatal period. We found that depression symptoms were present in nearly one in every three pregnant veterans in our sample. Nearly 70% of these women veterans with prenatal depression symptoms received at least one mental health visit or antidepressant prescription during pregnancy. However, symptomatic pregnant women without a history of depression were less likely to receive care. Mental health providers identified absence of screening protocols and referral procedures and variability in risk/benefit conversations surrounding antidepressant use as areas of weakness for VHA mental health care during the perinatal period. Depression treatment during pregnancy is complex, requiring individualized care. Policies for depression screening, referrals to providers, and medication review could be better encouraged to improve standardized care across the VHA.

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