Long-term Consequences of Modern Military Service

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ABSTRACT

What are the long-term consequences of serving in a modern, all-volunteer military? Contemporary research has not had access to sufficiently powerful and timely data to help us analyze the impact of military service on those sent by the United States to conduct our current military campaigns. The armed forces are the largest single employer in the nation, employing nearly 2.5 million people between the active and reserve forces. The social scientific community should support a large-scale longitudinal data collection effort to systematically capture information about a population too often marginalized from national surveys using the civilian population as a sampling frame. Such data would have long-lasting and far-reaching consequences for research in sociology, demography, economics and psychology. We now have a new generation of combat-experienced war veterans and their families re-integrating into a society that has very little data available to study and understand that process.
Unlike the first half of the twentieth century, the armed forces became a major institutional presence in America in the aftermath of World War II, and are now the largest employer in the nation. A major theme of social science research for the last half century has been the impact of military service on the lives of soldiers and of veterans. Much of this research has been carried out from the perspective of life course analysis in sociology and demography, while economics has approached the questions from a standard human capital framework. A second theme, less visible until the advent of the current all-volunteer military force in 1973, has been the impact of military service on the families of those who serve, as we replaced young single conscripts with older married professional soldiers. We are only now beginning to attend to the families of single soldiers—parents and siblings—as well. Much of the research was based on governmental data bases, such as the U.S. Census or Social Security records. These analyses have been limited to the kinds of data that the federal government routinely collects for administrative purposes.

In the last quarter of the twentieth century, more sophisticated statistical analyses were carried out on a series of longitudinal surveys, some national and some local, that were begun between the 1960s and 1980s. This research base has yielded a wealth of knowledge on the choice of post-secondary school trajectories: college, civilian employment, military service, the effect of military service on status attainment, deviant behavior, health, and family well-being. We have also learned a good deal about how these relationships have varied by gender and race (MacLean and Elder 2007).

Many of these advances were possible largely because of the public availability of surveys that collected and disseminated data that no one set of researchers could possibly have collected on their own. Foremost among these was the 1979 National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY79), a nationally representative sample of 12,686 young men and women who were 14 to 22 years of age when first surveyed in 1979. This survey included a military sample of 1,280 youths enlisted in one of the four branches of the active military forces as of September 30, 1978. The sample has been followed continuously since the initial interview; the 2010 wave will add data for over 30 years of this cohort’s life course.

Unfortunately, when this rich data source was renewed with a cohort of youth in 1997 (NLSY97), a military sub-sample was not included in the design. Similarly, the main longitudinal survey of family formation and life course, the National Survey of Families and Households, begun in 1987, included military personnel in their sampling design but had no targeted military subsample and hence the resulting sample raised concerns that “the coverage of this population [youth in institutional quarters such as dorms and barracks] may be very poor”. Other major data sources for social science analysis such as the General Social Survey and even the Bureau of the Census’s Current Population Survey systematically exclude people living in institutional settings (military barracks, dormitories, and prisons)(Booth & Segal, 2005).

As a result of these exclusions at a time when we have been faced with a range of problems related to the consequences of current and recent military service, contemporary research has not had access to sufficiently powerful and timely data to help us analyze the impact of military service on those sent by the United States to conduct our current military campaigns. This is particularly true for data on the health of those who serve and their families, as the number of physical and psychological casualties returning to the United States from our current wars has continued to grow. Military suicide and divorce rates now for the first time exceed those in the civilian population, and events such as the recent killings at Fort Hood, Texas, command national media and policy attention.

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The wars of the twenty-first century are different than the wars of the past in important ways that have consequences for our soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines. Today's soldier does not face a uniformed military opponent across an identifiable front line as did our World War II and Korean War soldiers. Local civilian support is a far more important determinant of success, yet civilians and enemy combatants are difficult to distinguish. The primary battlefield technology used by insurgents, Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) produce casualties—including multiple traumatic amputations and traumatic brain injuries (TBI)—in large numbers, while the advanced technologies of battlefield medical care result in larger percentages of the wounded being successfully evacuated from the battlefield and returned to the United States for treatment, recuperation, rehabilitation, and reintegration.

The soldiers fighting these very different twenty-first century wars are also very different from those who fought in Vietnam. For the first time since World War II and the Korean War, personnel both in the active federal forces and in the reserve components: the Army National Guard, Air National Guard, and the federal reserve forces, have been deployed frequently and in large numbers. To a larger extent than ever before, women as well as men serve in our armed forces in combat theaters. They also involve racial and ethnic minorities in large numbers. Because the volunteer force is composed of personnel who, on average, are older than people who served during periods of military conscription, they extend to the families of those who serve, and to the communities from which our warriors are drawn and those to which they will return after service.

To understand the lives of the new military who must face new situations, we need new data. Researchers across the country studying the effects of military service on the life course of soldiers and veterans have been meeting for the last three years, and have come to recognize that a major new data collection effort is necessary to produce the information needed to understand the impact of military service on a host of individual and community outcomes, including educational attainment, employment, earnings, health and well-being, marriage, childbearing, and geographic mobility among veterans and their families. The consensus within this scientific community is that this effort must be multi-disciplinary, including sociologists, demographers, economists, quantitative and qualitative methodologists, psychologists and others. It must also be multi-institutional, linking universities, independent research centers, and federal agencies. And it must involve a more complex research design than those characterized by even the most sophisticated national longitudinal surveys initiated during the last three decades.

Past research on military and veteran effects, in addition to having to rely on data sets that were not intended for this purpose and therefore limited the nature of the data available, have been constrained by selection effects: the effects of military service not being randomly distributed in the population; the effects of some people dying in the military and not returning to the civilian population, and the effects of variations in the timing and conditions of return to the civilian population for most veterans. Such an ambitious and important data collection effort must attend to nine basic principles that Teachman (forthcoming) offers as a foundation: (1) the research must be longitudinal; (2) the research must contain information on both civilians and members of the military to enable comparisons; (3) the data collection should begin before the age at which military service begins, to better model selectivity processes; (4) the design must recognize that selectivity may be transitory and not fixed at the point of military entry; (5) the data collection must continue to track those sample members who enter the military; (6) the data should be placed in the context of data (both qualitative and quantitative) on the communities from which sample members are drawn, and to which they return after service (this may
be an area in which the Cooperative Extension Service may help); (7) data collection must include the social networks within which the service members, veterans, and civilians are embedded, particularly spouses, partners, friends, and others whose lives are linked to theirs; (8) the longitudinal data need to include reserve as well as active duty service, and movement between the two over time; (9) we need better data on the nature of military service (e.g., deployments; exposure to combat) than we have ever had before.

Guided by these principles, the social scientific community should support a large-scale longitudinal data collection effort to systematically capture information about a population too often marginalized from national surveys. Such data would have long-lasting and far-reaching consequences for research in sociology, demography, economics and psychology. We now have a new generation of combat-experienced war veterans and their families re-integrating into a society that has very little data available to study and understand that process.

REFERENCES:

