

STUDY NOTES

LIFE AFTER SERVICE: UNDERSTANDING THE ROLE OF TRANSITION IN LONG-TERM MENTAL HEALTH

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HIGHLIGHTS

WHAT ARE STUDY NOTES?

Study Notes provide a plain-language summary of a research project led or supported by the Atlas Institute for Veterans and Families. The aim is to ensure that Veterans and Families can better access and understand emerging research and key findings.

A *single* research study cannot give us all the answers, but every well-conducted study gives us a piece of the puzzle.

- This study explored whether a difficult adjustment to post-military life increases the chances of poor mental health years later.
- Veterans who reported a difficult transition in 2013 were 2.5 times more likely to report poor mental health in 2019.
- Having poor mental health, a diagnosis of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or pain that interfered with daily life strongly predicted poorer outcomes six years later.
- These findings underline the importance of supporting Veterans during their transition to improve long-term well-being.



WHY IS THE STUDY IMPORTANT?

ADJUSTMENT TO POST-MILITARY LIFE

A measure of how Veterans rate the ease or difficulty of their overall transition from military to post-service life, captured on a five-point scale. This can include changes in work, identity, social supports and daily routines.

LONGITUDINAL STUDY

A study that follows the same group of people over time to see how their experiences or health change.

Military culture is very structured and close-knit and for many, it forms a strong part of their identity. Transitioning out of the military can be a major life change. For many Veterans, it means not just leaving a job but also leaving behind a sense of community, routine and purpose. Past research shows that some Veterans struggle with this transition, facing challenges like unemployment, financial stress, loss of social support and health problems^{1,2}.

In 2019, almost 40% of Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) Regular Force Veterans reported having difficulty adjusting to post-military life³. Past studies show that difficult transitions are linked with issues such as depression, suicidal thoughts and alcohol use⁴. However, little was known at the time about how these early challenges during transition might affect Veterans' long-term mental health. This study helps fill that gap.

Using data collected over time (i.e. longitudinal data), this study explored how Veterans' experiences of transition early on can continue to affect their mental health for many years afterward. Understanding this connection can help improve supports for Veterans at the time of release and beyond.



WHAT DID THE STUDY AIM TO FIND OUT?

SELF-RATED MENTAL HEALTH

When Veterans are asked to score their own mental health as poor, fair, good, very good or excellent.

The study asked: **Does struggling with the transition to post-military life increase the risk of poor mental health later on?**

The researchers wanted to know if the way Veterans described their transition at one point in time could predict their self-rated mental health years later. This matters because it shows whether early difficulties with transition can have lasting impacts on well-being.



WHAT DID THE STUDY DISCOVER?

POSTTRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER

A mental health condition that can develop after experiencing or witnessing a potentially traumatic event and is linked to poor mental health outcomes. It is diagnosed by a licensed medical professional based on specific signs, symptoms and behaviours.

NON-COMMISSIONED MEMBERS

Enlisted members of the CAF who are not officers.

The study found that the way Veterans experience transition matters for years afterward. Veterans who said their transition was difficult in 2013 were much more likely to report poor mental health in 2019.

Other factors — such as posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), ongoing pain or not having a partner — also increased the risk. On the other hand, higher rank at release seemed to reduce the risk of worse outcomes, a finding that aligns with other research⁵⁻⁷. Being a senior non-commissioned member (NCM) at release was linked to better long-term self-rated mental health.

Overall, the study shows that transition experiences can have lasting effects on Veterans' well-being, even when other health and social factors are taken into account.

LIFE AFTER SERVICE SURVEY

A national survey run by Statistics Canada from 2010 to 2019 that collected information about the health, well-being and experiences of CAF Regular Force Veterans after leaving the military. The survey followed Veterans over six years.



HOW WAS THIS STUDY CONDUCTED?

The study used existing data from the Life After Service Survey (LASS), a large national survey run by Statistics Canada

The LASS followed 2,015 Regular Force military Veterans who were released between 1998 and 2012. Veterans were surveyed in 2013 and again in 2019. They were asked to rate how difficult their transition to post-military life was and how they viewed their own mental health.

LASS data were analyzed to see if early transition challenges were linked to later mental health outcomes.



WHAT ARE SOME STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY?

The study has a number of strengths:

- It was the first Canadian study to look at the long-term link between adjustment to post-military life and later mental health.
- It used data from a large, national sample of Canadian Veterans.
- It followed Veterans over time, giving insight into long-term patterns.
- It considered several important factors simultaneously (e.g. pain, marital status, rank, PTSD), giving a more complete picture of influences on Veteran well-being.
- Its findings provide evidence that is directly relevant to policy and programs, showing that early transition challenges can have lasting impacts.

There are a couple limitations, including:

- LASS data only included Regular Force Veterans released between 1998 and 2012. This means that the results may not apply to all Veterans, including Reserve Force Veterans, those released under newer transition programs or former members of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police.
- Most participants in the LASS were men, making it harder to understand the unique experiences of women Veterans.
- It relied on data from self-reported surveys, which can be subjective.



WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS OF THIS STUDY?

For Veterans

Veterans who find transition difficult may be at risk of poorer mental health years later. Getting help early may reduce these risks.

For Veteran Families

Families can play a key role in supporting Veterans. This study found that having a partner, while not the only form of Family support, was linked to better outcomes. This suggests the value of strong social support. Families may also need support so they can understand and respond to the unique needs of a Veteran in transition.

For service providers

Service providers should pay attention to how Veterans describe their transition experiences. Those who report struggling may be at greater risk and should be provided with extra support earlier to protect their long-term mental health.

For researchers

More research is needed to understand different aspects of transition, including those that can impact long-term health outcomes. Further research that includes the experiences of women Veterans and newer cohorts who have gone through updated transition programs would also be beneficial for more nuanced findings. Examining the experiences of Reserve Force Veterans, in addition to Regular Force Veterans, would further strengthen the evidence base.

For policy makers

Policies that strengthen transition programs and provide ongoing support for Veterans at the time of release – and beyond – could help prevent or lessen long-term mental health issues. Early identification and support for those struggling could reduce future health care costs and improve quality of life for Veterans.

For the general public

The challenges associated with the shift to post-service life may persist long after the initial period of transition. Greater awareness of the long-term impact of post-military transition may build empathy and support for Veterans in the community.



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Please note the names listed include only those who have explicitly consented to being acknowledged as a contributor.

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