People in prison:
Ex-service personnel

A findings paper

by HM Inspectorate of Prisons

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Glossary of terms

We try to make our reports as clear as possible, but if you find terms that you do not know, please see the Glossary of terms on our website at:
http://www.justice.gov.uk/downloads/about/hmipris/Glossary-for-web-rps_.pdf

Introduction

1.1 This findings paper is part of a series which focuses on people in prisons and other types of custody. The series explores the differing needs and experiences of different sub-groups within the prison and custody population. We hope these findings papers will build into a useful resource on the backgrounds and experiences of groups within the prison population who might otherwise be overlooked, and encourage further research and the development of services to meet their needs.

1.2 This findings paper summarises the literature concerning ex-Service personnel[1] and draws on evidence from prisoner surveys[2] and inspections[3] undertaken by HM Inspectorate of Prisons. It aims to provide an overview of the potential issues faced by ex-Service personnel in prison and whether these differ from those faced by the general prisoner population, and to review the resources available to ex-Service personnel in prison and the outcomes for this group.

Background

1.3 Following more than a decade of conflict in Iraq and Afghanistan, it is unsurprising that recent years have seen a spike in both public and political interest in what happens to members of the Armed Forces once they leave the Services. Discussions surrounding the number of ex-Service personnel in the criminal justice system have been prevalent in academic research[4], media coverage and in the agendas of political parties, with the discrete needs of this group often coming under examination.

1.4 Research makes clear that the majority of those who have served in the Armed Forces do not become involved with the criminal justice system after leaving the Services and for many, having served in the Armed Forces significantly improves life opportunities[5]; indeed, findings have suggested that regular ex-Servicemen were less likely to be incarcerated than the general population.[6, 7] However, further research[8] has also identified that in the male prisoner population, ex-Service personnel may now comprise the largest occupational subset.

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[1] Although the term 'veteran' was formally defined by the Ministry of Defence (MoD) in 2001, as anyone who has served more than one day in any of the three branches of the Armed Forces, 'ex-Service personnel' often emerges as a preferred term for those who have served in, and subsequently left the Armed Forces, as it removes ambiguity around the various political, social and military interpretations of the term 'veteran'. For the purpose of this findings paper the term 'ex-Service personnel' will be used throughout in accordance with the MoD definition of a 'veteran'.

[2] Surveys undertaken between 1 April 2012 and 31 March 2013. Please note that we only refer to comparisons with non-ex-Service personnel when these are statistically significant. The significance level is set at 0.05, which means that there is only a 5% chance that the difference in results is due to chance.

[3] Inspections reports published between 1 April 2011 and 30 April 2013.

[4] See for example: MacManus D, Dean K, Jones M, Rona RJ, Greenberg N, Hull L, Fahy T, Wessely S, Fear NT (2013) *Violent offending by UK military personnel deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan: a data linkage cohort study.* The Lancet (381:9870); MacManus, D., Wessely, S. (2011) *Why do some ex-armed forces personnel end up in prison?* BMJ, 342; Treadwell, J. (2010) *Counterblast: More than casualties of war?: Ex-military personnel in the Criminal Justice System.* The Howard Journal, 49 (1).

[5] Howard League (2011), *Report of the inquiry into former Armed Service personnel in prison.* London: Howard League for Penal Reform.

[6] DASA (2010b), *Estimating the proportion of prisoners in England and Wales who are ex-Armed Forces – further analysis.* London: MOD.

[7] For all males aged 18–54, the proportion of prisoners from the general population was 43% greater than the proportion of prisoners from the ex-Service community (DASA, 2010b).

[8] The Howard League (2011), *Report of the inquiry into former Armed Service personnel in prison.* London: Howard League for Penal Reform.

1.5   Research has suggested that ex-Service personnel suffer more problems surrounding finance, benefit and debt[9], a lack of employment opportunities and higher rates of homelessness[10, 11, 12]. Service in the Armed Forces may, in some cases, also lead to an increased risk of alcohol misuse and mental health difficulties, including anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)[13]. Therefore, it is likely that those ex-Service personnel who do come into contact with the criminal justice system may be affected by one or more of these vulnerabilities.

Our expectations

1.6   We inspect against criteria known as Expectations[14]. These are the expected standards by which we assess treatment and conditions for prisoners, and each inspection assesses the outcomes for the prisoners held in that establishment against them. Each expectation is underpinned by 'indicators' which set out what inspectors would normally expect to find if the expectation is met. This paper reviews the evidence of outcomes for ex-Service personnel in prison against these expectations.

Demographics

1.7   The Office for National Statistics (ONS) estimated that in 2007 there were approximately 3.8 million ex-Service personnel in England, equating to 9.1% of the population at that time[15, 16].

1.8   The number of ex-Service personnel in prison is a contentious issue; accurate figures have proven notoriously difficult to ascertain and the exact number of ex-Service personnel in custody is currently unknown. Previous research has placed the proportion of ex-Service personnel in prison anywhere between 4% and 16.75%[17] but the reliability of these estimates is of variable quality.

1.9   To date, however, the most accurate and reliable estimate of the number of ex-Service personnel in prison was derived from a data matching exercise jointly undertaken by the Ministry of Defence's Defence Analytical Services and Advice (DASA) and the Ministry of Justice in 2009[18].

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[9] Royal British Legion (2006) Greatest Welfare Needs of the Ex-Service Community

[10] Johnsen, J., Jones, A. and Rugg, J. (2009) *The Experiences of Homeless ex-service personnel in London.* Centre for Housing Policy: University of York.

[11] Broadway Homelessness and Support (2011), *Street to Home Annual Report 2010/11*

[12] In light of the latter, revised statutory guidance was issued in 2012 to prioritise former and serving armed Service personnel and their families within housing allocations. Department for Communities and Local Government (2012) *Allocation of accommodation: guidance for local housing authorities in England and Wales.*

[13] MacManus, D., Dean, K., Jones, M., Rona, R.J., Greenberg, N., Hull, L., Fahy, T., Wessely, S., Jones, N.T. (2013) '*Violent offending by UK military personnel deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan: a data linkage cohort study',* The Lancet, 381.

[14] HM Inspectorate of Prisons (2012) *Expectations: Criteria for assessing the treatment of prisoners and conditions in prisons.* London: HMI Prisons.

[15] Office for National Statistics (2009) *Population Trends: Winter 2009*

[16] This estimate did not take into account ex-Service personnel in Wales or those who were members of Reserve forces so does not provide a complete picture.

[17] Treadwell, J. (2010) *'Counterblast: More than casualties of war?: Ex-military personnel in the criminal justice system',* The Howard Journal of Criminal Justice, 49(1).

[18] The DASA report does not include Reservists or those who have completed National Service, so still does not provide a wholly accurate picture.

1.10 The initial report[19] identified 2,207 ex-Service members in prison[20] (2.7% of the total prisoner population at that time). A more detailed breakdown of this figure was provided in a later report from DASA[21]. Of the 2,207 ex-Service personnel in prison:

- 2,198 (99.6%) were male
- 2,135 (96.7%) were British nationals
- 1,957 (88.7%) were sentenced.

1.11 A revised figure was also published in this later report by DASA[22] to incorporate older ex-Service personnel and the estimate of the total number of ex-Service personnel in prison was amended to 2,820 (3.5% of the total prisoner population at that time)[23], of which it was estimated:

- 77% were ex-Army
- 15% were ex-Naval Service
- 8% were ex-RAF.

1.12 Our survey data[24] from 4,731 adult male prisoners in 2012–13 showed that the average proportion of prisoners identifying themselves as ex-Service personnel was 7% (n=318). Although there may be a number of reasons for the discrepancy, it is possible the number of ex-Service personnel in prison has increased since the DASA data was published.

1.13 Analysis of the DASA data[25] showed that older ex-Service personnel were also overrepresented in the prisoner population: 29% of ex-Service personnel in prison were over-55 compared to 9% of the general prisoner population[26]. Our survey responses echo this, showing a larger proportion of prisoners aged over-50 in the ex-Service personnel population, compared with the general prisoner population (46% compared with 14%).

Ex-service personnel and the wider prison population

1.14 From our survey findings, we found that:

- the highest proportions of ex-Service personnel were located in high security prisons and category B training prisons (each 13%)
- ex-Service personnel were more likely to be in prison for the first time (54% compared with 34% of the general prisoner population)
- ex-Service personnel were more likely to be serving longer sentences:
  - 63% reported that their sentence was over four years (compared with 53% of the general prisoner population)
  - 39% reported that their sentence was over 10 years (compared with 26% of the general prisoner population).

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[19] DASA (2010a) *Estimating the proportion of prisoners in England and Wales who are ex-Armed Forces.* London: MOD.

[20] Personal details for all prisoners in England and Wales, such as full names and dates of birth, were cross referenced and matched against the DASA Service leavers databases on a single day in November 2009.

[21] DASA (2010b), *Estimating the proportion of prisoners in England and Wales who are ex-Armed Forces – further analysis.* London: MOD.

[22] Ibid.

[23] A parliamentary response in March 2012 stated there were no plans to conduct another similar exercise or routinely monitor the number of ex-Service personnel in prison (HC Col 552W, 12 March 2012).

[24] Survey findings use self-reported data and service histories are not verified; the survey responses from foreign national prisoners (n=32) who reported that they were ex-Service personnel were included in the analysis on the basis that some foreign nationals may have been eligible to serve in the British Armed Forces.

[25] Howard League (2011), *Report of the inquiry into former Armed Service personnel in prison*. London: Howard League for Penal Reform.

[26] Ibid.

1.15 These survey findings, with regards to sentence length, may well support the DASA evidence that suggests ex-Service personnel are convicted of more serious crimes, such as violence against the person (32.9% of the ex-Service prisoner population compared with 28.6% of the general prisoner population) and sexual offences (24.7% compared with 10.9% of the general prisoner population)[27].

The needs of ex-Service personnel in prison

1.16 Research by the Howard League documented the fact that ex-Service personnel in prison share many commonalities with the general prisoner population, such as disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds, drug and alcohol abuse, poor health and homelessness[28].

1.17 An analysis of our survey data supports this and shows that ex-Service personnel who enter prison are likely to have high levels of need in common with the wider prisoner population.

1.18 On arrival into prison, ex-Service personnel were as likely as the general prisoner population to report problems around issues such as alcohol (17%) and mental health (15%). Around a quarter (26%) of ex-Service personnel reported having a current mental health or emotional wellbeing problem at the time of the survey and this was similar to the incidence reported by the general prisoner population.

1.19 In some key areas, ex-Service personnel were actually less likely than the general prisoner population to report problems.

- Fewer ex-Service personnel reported problems with housing on arrival into prison (11% compared with 14%) and fewer said they had issues with finances (13% compared with 15%).
- Ex-Service personnel were less likely to report having a problem with drugs on arrival into prison (11% compared with 24%).

1.20 However, there were some notable areas in which the proportion of ex-Service personnel reporting problems was higher than that of the general prisoner population.

- Ex-Service personnel were more likely to report feeling depressed or suicidal on arrival into prison (18% compared with 14%).
- The incidence of physical health problems on arrival into prison was higher among ex-Service personnel than the general prisoner population (24% compared with 13%).
- A higher proportion of prisoners identifying as ex-Service personnel stated they had a disability (34% compared with 19% of the general prisoner population).

Prison experience

1.21 Of the 194 survey questions we provide comparator data for, those who identified themselves as ex-Service personnel were significantly more positive than the general prisoner population in 66 questions and more negative in 56 questions.

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[27] Ibid.

[28] Howard League (2011), *Report of the inquiry into former Armed Service personnel in prison*. London: Howard League for Penal Reform.

1.22 Negative responses were mainly concentrated in two distinct areas: reception and the first night in prison (specifically access to services and information), and safety. A higher proportion of ex-Service personnel said that they had felt unsafe at some point compared with the general prisoner population (37% and 32% respectively) and were more likely to say they had been victimised by another prisoner (31% compared with 24%).

1.23 However, compared with the general prisoner population, ex-Service personnel reported better relationships with prison staff, with a higher proportion saying that they felt most staff treated them with respect (88% compared with 79%) and that there was a member of staff in the prison they could turn to with a problem (86% compared with 77%). Ex-Service personnel were also more positive about daily living, and were more likely to say that they could shower daily, had access to clean clothes and bedding and that the food in their establishment was 'good' or 'very good'. A higher proportion of ex-Service personnel gave positive responses about the applications and complaints procedures and the incentives and earned privileges scheme, compared with the general prisoner population, and a lower proportion reported having been held in the segregation unit.

1.24 However, ex-Service personnel were less likely than the general prisoner population to say that they knew who to contact for help on release in relation to employment, accommodation, benefits and drugs and alcohol.

Outcomes

1.25 In accordance with an individual's status as a former member of the Armed Forces, additional support and provision is available to ex-Service personnel in prison and links with external voluntary organisations and charities were the most commonly reported source of support in our inspections.

1.26 Despite the publication of guidance[29] on how to identify and work with ex-Service personnel in custody, inspection reports show that there is no consistent approach adopted by establishments and provision varies across the estate.

1.27 A number of our inspection reports found that prisoners with a service history were identified during reception screening or while on induction (HMP Doncaster 2010, HMP Standford Hill 2011, HMP Winchester 2012) and this often allowed them to be signposted to the various support services available. However, we have also reported that routine identification does not take place in all establishments. Identification of prisoners with a service history can be hindered as some individuals who have served in the Armed Forces do not identify themselves as 'veterans'[30, 31], which is the more commonly used term in a custodial setting. As is also reflected in one of our inspection reports, as well as in other research[32], some individuals can be reluctant to identify themselves as former members of the Armed Forces.

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[29] Veterans in Custody Support (2010) *A guide to working with veterans in custody.* Commissioned by the National Offender Management Service.

[30] Burdett, H., Woodhead, C., Iversen, A.C., Wessely, S., Dandeker, C. and Fear, N.T. (2012) *'"Are you a Veteran?" Understanding of the term "Veteran" among UK ex-Service personnel: a research note',* Armed Forces and Society, July 11, 2012.

[31] The Howard League (2011) *Report of the inquiry into former Armed Service personnel in prison.* London: Howard League for Penal Reform.

[32] The Association of Members of Independent Monitoring Boards (2010*) Evidence to the inquiry into former Armed Service personnel in prison.*

1.28 The Veterans in Custody Support (VICS) scheme is a dedicated initiative designed to support former members of the Armed Forces while in prison. The Howard League has recommended that the VICS scheme be replicated in every prison in the country[33] but there is no definitive figure for the number of prisons currently running it; there is no formal list held by the National Offender Management Service and the scheme is not centrally commissioned. There is no obligation for establishments to have a VICS scheme in place and no designated funding for this scheme.

1.29 Our inspection reports suggest that there is some variation in the form the VICS scheme takes. In some establishments, for example HMP Littlehey (2011), we reported that the VICS scheme lead worked with four prisoner orderlies who supported work with ex-Service personnel. However, at one establishment (HMP Moorland, 2012) although the VICS scheme was well developed, the designated support officer was not given any profiled time to spend on the scheme.

1.30 We regularly found that prisons had links to the Royal British Legion, SSAFA (a charity supporting the Armed Forces and their families) and Combat Stress, a mental health welfare organisation for ex-Service personnel. During our inspection of HMP Stafford (2011) we found that work with Combat Stress was particularly well developed: the nurse worked closely with the charity to facilitate groups designed specifically for ex-Service personnel to assist with anxiety and stress management. This was highlighted as good practice in our report. In addition, some prisons (HMP Dovegate 2011, HMP Stafford 2011, HMP Stocken 2012) had arranged for prisoners to access the Combat Stress helpline free of charge.

1.31 Some establishments held regular meetings and support forums attended by these external organisations and some forums included guest speakers. In one inspection (Channings Wood, 2012), meetings were attended by the Equalities and Diversity Officer (EDO). Indeed, in one prison we found that ex-Service personnel had been included in the equality and diversity policy (Northumberland, 2012).

1.32 Our inspection reports note that Service charities working in several prisons offered ex-Service personnel help in various resettlement areas, including finding accommodation and financial support. This included assistance to clear housing arrears, or help with rental payments, clothing grants and business loans, or support in finding work on release. Despite these examples across the estate, in our survey ex-Service personnel were still less likely than the general prisoner population to say that they knew who to contact for help on release in relation to employment, accommodation, benefits and drugs and alcohol – some of the key areas where those leaving the Armed Forces may have an increased level of need[9–13].

Conclusions

1.33 While estimates of the number of ex-Service personnel in prison vary, there is no doubt that they form a significant minority. They have similar high levels of need arising from mental health and alcohol misuse problems to the prison population as a whole, but are more likely to feel depressed or suicidal on arrival into prison, to have physical health problems or to have a disability compared with other prisoners. Not surprisingly, they appear to manage some aspects of institutional prison life, such as relationships with staff, better than other prisoners but greater concerns about their safety underline their vulnerabilities.

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[33] The Howard League (2011) *Report of the inquiry into former Armed Service personnel in prison.* London: Howard League for Penal Reform.

1.34 However, there is a range of specific assistance available to ex-Service personnel from service charities but much of this assistance is ad hoc, inconsistent and dependent on the goodwill of individuals to deliver it. In our view there is a continuing obligation to support ex-Service personnel, even if they have offended, and the time is now right for the National Offender Management Service to work with Service charities and develop a national strategy that ensures ex-Service personnel in prison are identified, their needs assessed and effective support provided, both in custody and on release, to help them resettle in the community and reduce the risk of reoffending.

Recommendation to the National Offender Management Service

A national strategy should be developed in conjunction with service charities to identify and meet the needs of ex-Service personnel in prison and on release.

Acknowledgements