More than just casualties of war: ex-military 'veterans' in prison in England and Wales

Dr James Treadwell
Lecturer in Criminology
University of Leicester
Context

- Since 2009 there has been a growth of interest amongst politicians, policymakers, practitioners and academics in the prevalence with which ex-military personnel offend and find themselves subject to criminal justice sanctions (cf. Napo 2009, Treadwell, 2010, Howard League, 2011)
- It has been variously speculated that the number of former armed forces in custody is between 2.5 and 16.75 % of the total adult male prison population (NAPO, 2008, 2009, Howard League, 2011)
- The most reliable figures put the estimate at about 3.5% of adult male, prison population
- Been argued that ex-forces is ‘highest occupational group’ in UK prisons
- If some 3-3.5 % of male prisoners having a forces service background around 2,500 ex-military personnel currently in custody in England and Wales
Debate framed around PTSD

‘Perhaps the most dominant representation of harm suffered to British soldiers serving in Afghanistan and Iraq is impairments to their mental health. Since 2004, there has been a groundswell of research investigating a range of psychological impacts on British soldiers resulting from conflict. These include PTSD... alcohol misuse and anxiety disorder... and incidents of suicide. In criminology, the psychological impact of their experiences in conflict, particularly the ‘hidden wound’ of PTSD... is seen as the key push factor leading male British veterans into the criminal justice system’ (McGarry and Walklate, 2011)
PTSD: The Hidden Wound?

- In 2008 Napo, undertook a survey of members in order to attempt to develop a first picture of the problems of criminal justice involved former armed forces personnel:

- Most of the soldiers... ‘had served in either the Gulf or Afghanistan were suffering from post-traumatic stress, that little support or counselling was available on discharge from the forces, that virtually all became involved in heavy drinking or drug taking and in consequence involvement in violent offences, sometimes domestically related, happened routinely’ (NAPO, 2008: 3).
• Despite a growing popular and media anxiety concerning the ex-services personnel who end up in the criminal justice system, to date little empirical research
• ‘it would also be short-sighted to simply reduce the issue of ex-forces personnel in custody to a statistical counting exercise’ (Treadwell, 2010: 74).
• Worryingly some 25 per cent of ex-servicemen are in prison for sexual offences, compared to 11 per cent of the civilian prison population,
• They are also over-represented in offences categorised under the heading ‘violence against the person’, with some 32.9 per cent being in prison for such offences, compared to 28.6 per cent of the non-veteran prison population (DASA, 2010b).
• DASA show 57.9% in for ‘violence’. We interviewed 29 randomly selected – 27 for violence (as broadly defined, murder, robbery, sexual offences).
• large numbers ‘are being convicted for a range of offences, primarily involving violence, within a short period following discharge from the forces’ (Napo, 2008: 1).
Methods

• 29 interviews in 3 prisons, (two local, one high security).

• Randomly selected but ‘verified’ ex-servicemen.

• Interviews between one hour and half a day, semi structured, tape recorded and transcribed.

• Chronological life history style, early life to present.
What was found

• Almost all had served in army, infantry regiments, for on average six years. A third had seen highly stressful situations and extreme violence up close, only one had ever had any form of mental health assessment in custody.

• Almost all had committed violent offences, including 8 convicted murders. Of the rest, almost exclusively sexual offences, violence and robbery (all but 2 interviewees)

• Described leaving the forces as the ‘slippery slope’, had performed well in the forces, on leaving, factors related to offending common to all offences – alcohol and drug problems, social isolation, unemployment, relationship breakdown. Some factors did not feature, e.g. homelessness was little mentioned

• Offended several years after service, on average 12-14 years for most serious offence.
what the soldiers say

• ‘After I left the army, I will be honest with you if fucked my head up. I was bored most of the time, and I missed the lads, that bond you have with people. It’s hard to explain if you haven’t been there, but it was like one day you have a family around you, you feel properly part of something, the next you are in a flat with the telly on smoking roll ups and drinking brews all day thinking, what the fuck has happened to me. It did screw me up for a while’ (George, Former soldier).

• ‘After I left the Army I felt lost, empty, and I tried to fill that emptiness with drink, but I had nothing. I missed me mates, and I would drive out of the way down the M42 and find excuses to drop in, even if I was driving about 300 miles out of the way. I would do anything at all just to be back near the lads’. (Steve, Former soldier)

All names are pseudonyms used to protect the anonymity of interviewees.
Research showed...

• Complexity of the picture – no standard model of the ‘veteran’. Partly this reflects the problem of how we use the term veteran.

• It connotes an experience of combat, but this may not be the case, however, mental health problems are wider than ‘combat stress’ or PTSD

• A group not entirely dissimilar to other prisoners
Findings

• Little diagnosed PTSD (but there are problems accessing mental health assessments)
• high levels of alcohol problems, very often not dealt with (and some disclosed drug use, but said they wouldn’t often do this!)
• General coping problems – institutional life ‘preferable’, prison was ‘easy’
The Future

- At some point the soldiers of today will no longer be, most are coming back from war, changed though not always for the worse
- The majority will adjust and make a successful transition, need to consider those who will not
- Plethora of supports for ex-military – but seen as separate to ‘Criminal justice’. Better working in the CJS, increased awareness is key.
- PTSD is not the only issue, complex needs, but we do not recognise the complexity, anxiety, depression and alcohol abuse are the most common diagnoses amongst UK armed forces personnel following deployment (Iverson et al, 2007)
Best practice

• “Ask the question”, identify – verify – use SPVA (the problem of WALTS) or encourage individual to do this

• Use veteran supports – priority access NHS, veterans charities – 2,100+ offering a plethora of supports

• Use VICs and probation schemes, but as support – developing ‘individual knowledge’.

• Do not assume combat trauma (but think more broadly)

• DASA (2010a) Estimating the proportion of prisoners in England and Wales who are ex- Armed Forces, MOD: London

• DASA (2010b) Estimating the proportion of prisoners in England and Wales who are ex- Armed Forces - further analysis, MOD: London


• Howard League for Penal Reform (2011) *Inquiry into former armed service personnel in prison*, London: Howard League for Penal Reform


