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The Evolution of the Veteran Employment Landscape

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RESEARCH BRIEF | DECEMBER 2021

The Evolution of the Veteran Employment Landscape

FIVE KEY HIGHLIGHTS

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Employing Veteran and Military Family Talent: Thought Leadership Series

The Institute for Veterans and Military Families (IVMF), as part of its broader employment research series, and with the generous financial support and collaboration of USAA, is exploring various topics as it relates to workforce readiness. This paper marks the first in a series of thought leadership briefs related to employing veterans and military families. These briefs are intended to inform employers on several related employment discussions such as: the evolution of the employment landscape, the impacts of higher education, and the military spouse employment landscape. In addition, as part of this effort a curated collection has been developed to empower our nation's employers with the insights, tools, and resources to adopt a collaborative and strategic approach to military connected (e.g., veteran, transitioning service member, guard/reservist, military spouse) employment. This workforce readiness resource serves as a repository of the latest insights, research, and data and is curated by a team of experts. Please visit ivmf.syracuse.edu/employment-research-hub/ for more information

About Institute for Veterans and Military Families (IVMF)

Syracuse University's Institute for Veterans and Military Families (IVMF) is the first national institute in higher education singularly focused on advancing the lives of the nation's military, veterans, and their families. Through its professional staff and experts, and with the support of founding partner JPMorgan Chase Co., the IVMF delivers leading programs in career and entrepreneurship education and training, while also conducting actionable research, policy analysis, and program evaluations. The IVMF also supports veterans and their families, once they transition back into civilian life, as they navigate the maze of social services in their communities, enhancing access to this care working side-by-side with local providers across the country. The Institute is committed to advancing the post-service lives of those who have served in America's armed forces and their families.

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KEY HIGHLIGHTS

In the two decades since the extraordinary events of September 11, 2001 (9/11) took place, there has been a steady focus on ensuring that service members, veterans, and their families have access to meaningful employment opportunities once their military services ends. Proactive and sustained efforts have resulted in notable improvements in veterans’ employment services and programs particularly as they relate to the military transition of post-9/11 veterans. In this brief, we discuss five key highlights related to post-9/11 veteran employment.

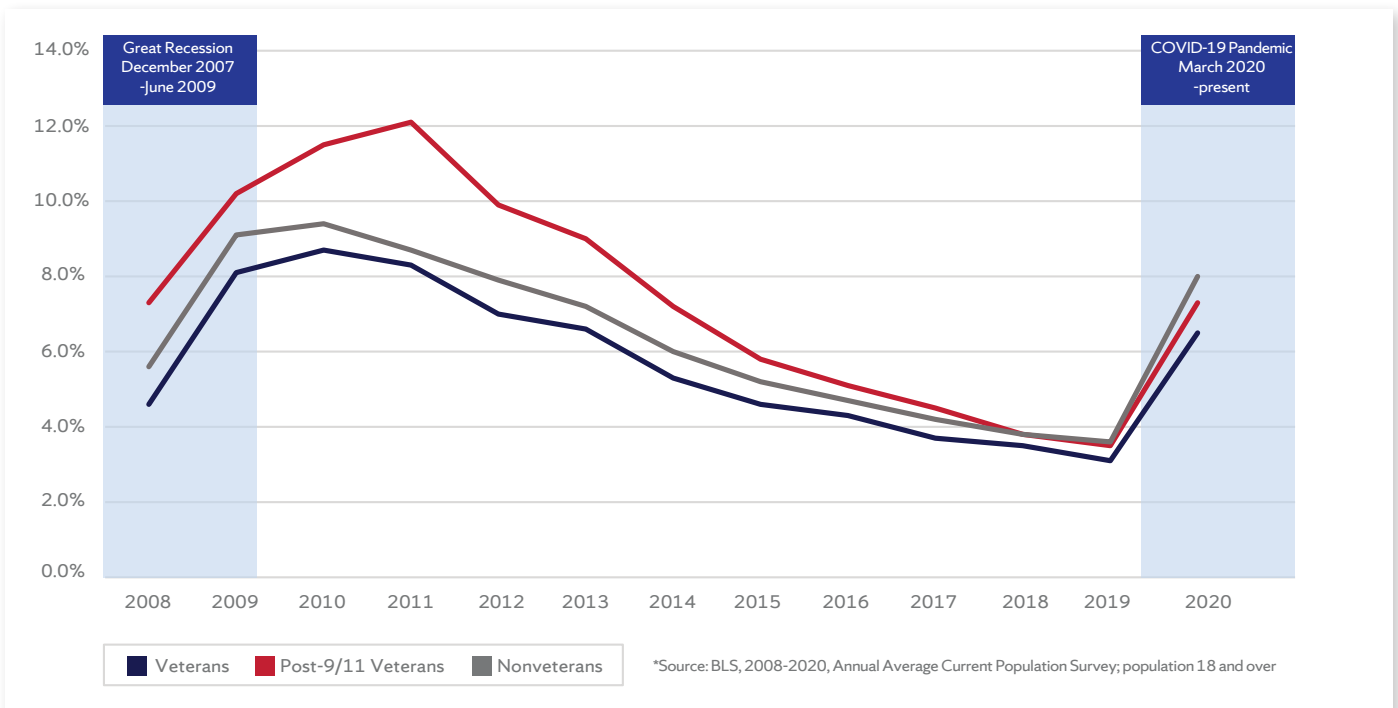
Key Highlight #1: Combined private and public sector investments and interventions mattered—and still do today.

The Great Recession

The high rate of unemployment that occurred from 2007 to 2009 as a result of the “Great Recession,” was significant for post 9/11 veterans’ employment because not only was the U.S. actively engaged in long-term military conflicts overseas, but unemployment rates for post 9/11 veterans also reached a high of 12.1% (compared to 8.3% for all veterans in 2011).¹ Active-duty service members also were transitioned from military service at an estimated rate of 200,000 per year—a rate that continues until this day. These combined factors provided the impetus for widespread, robust, and sustained support focused on veterans’ employment.²

While some of the impacts of those efforts are difficult to quantify, the aforementioned factors and an overall increased focus on veteran economic opportunity, which has spanned four presidential administrations, has included access to both education and employment and built a foundation for proactive, coordinated efforts across employers from public, private, and nonprofit sectors on behalf of veterans.

Figure 1: Unemployment Rates for 2008-2020*





While the recent events that ended America’s military presence in Afghanistan may shift public attention away from the military, the all-volunteer force will remain, and so will their post-transition employment needs.

Public and Private Sector Initiatives

Overall, the literature contends that the declining levels of veteran unemployment seen in recent years can be, at least in part, attributed to public and private sector initiatives, namely through their hiring programs. The public sector, specifically the federal government, has enacted hiring rules under the guidance of the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) through new programs in the Feds Hire Vets initiative, as well as the Veterans’ Recruitment Appointment. Furthermore, the VA and DoL have programs that incentivize hiring veterans. For example, programs such as the Special Employer Incentives, the Veteran Employment Services Office at the VA, the DoL’s America’s Heroes at Work, and the Work Opportunity Tax Credit, (WOTC) have contributed to increasing the employment levels for post-9/11 veterans.³

The private sector has pursued similar strategies to the federal government, working to hire veterans through public-private partnerships, as well as private sector initiatives. Programs such as the Veteran Jobs Mission (formerly the 100,000 Jobs Mission), The Chamber of Commerce Foundation’s Hiring Our Heroes initiative, and The White House’s Joining Forces efforts have also shown to decrease the levels of unemployment among veterans.⁴ These several initiatives listed are only the tip of the iceberg; employment efforts have proliferated in recent years. Paradoxically, the number of employment service providers, across the federal government, state governments, and private sector can be confusing, overwhelming, and difficult to navigate. For example, a recent Center for a New American Security (CNAS) report found that there are more than 1,800 state-level benefits for veterans, many of which are related to education and employment.⁵

Joining Forces Initiative

Of note is the “Joining Forces” initiative that began in 2011 under the Obama Administration. The Biden Administration recently revived this White House initiative in 2021. Because of its high visibility and capability to convene key stakeholders, this effort became a galvanizing force within the veteran community, providing a national platform to establish shared goals, encourage regional, state, and community-based efforts, and build enthusiasm and momentum for military and veteran-focused employment efforts.

All these factors contributed to a growing interest in public and private sector employment programs focused on veteran hiring. Over time, these efforts, combined with an improvement in the economy overall, provided the impetus and momentum for private sector hiring of veterans across the past decade. Cohesive, coordinated, and targeted messaging from numerous high-profile companies and executives have highlighted the unique value veterans bring to the workplace.

While the recent events that ended America’s military presence in Afghanistan may shift public attention away from the military, the all-volunteer force will remain, and so will their post-transition employment needs. That said, ongoing support from employers is still necessary and will continue to provide a critical link to economic empowerment and social opportunity for service members and their families after they transition.

Key Highlight #2: Transition should be treated as an extended process rather than an event.

Many resources are devoted to helping veterans during the time-period immediately surrounding their departure from the military. But many veterans find that their need for supportive services doesn't conveniently coincide with the end of their military service. Instead, the need for supportive services may unfold unpredictably over a longer period when access to helpful resources becomes more difficult.

The Transition Challenge

For some, the transition to civilian life is challenging. In a recent survey, 44% of veteran respondents who had separated in the last three years still reported feeling unprepared, noting difficulty in their transition (66% reported their transition was "difficult" or "very difficult").⁶ This number is not surprising given that transitioning service members must navigate a myriad of resources and needs including health and well-being, new systems of medical care, translating their job-related skills into a competitive resume, securing employment, and making decisions about how and when to fill gaps in training or education as they enter the civilian world. In addition, while our nation has placed an importance on the health and well-being of veterans, the past two decades have shown that while their needs differ, they are too often related to transition-related challenges such as simultaneously finding meaning in their post-military life while finding opportunities to thrive economically. Navigating those challenges and addressing them successfully may help to mitigate the negative impacts of trauma experienced while in the military.⁷

Department of Defense (DoD) Transition Assistance Program (TAP)

One positive outcome of the more recent approaches to veterans' transition is that while military transition was once treated as a discrete and time-bound event punctuating the end of a service members' time in the military. It is now, with changes to the Department of Defense' (DoD) Transition Assistance Program (TAP), treated as an extended, multi-faceted process. Military transition has been a priority for the DoD given that post-9/11 veterans who had transitioned in the last three years report it is more difficult than their pre-9/11 predecessors. For example, 62% of post-9/11 veterans describing their transition as "very difficult" or "difficult" whereas 50% of pre-9/11 veterans describe their transition as "easy."⁸ In comparison, another study found that most pre-9/11 veterans (78%) said their transition was "easy."⁹

Recognizing the difficulties transitioning service-members face, starting in 2019 the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), mandated that the TAP start no later than 365 days prior to transition. It is now recommended that participants start the program at least two years in advance. For those whose separation is unanticipated or for service members who are part of a reserve component that is demobilized with less than 365 days, TAP must begin as soon as possible within the remaining period of service.¹⁰ When veterans who had completed the TAP were asked about their transition experience in a 2019 survey, many stressed the importance of attending TAP courses early, with some indicating they would have liked to attend the course more than once.¹¹ Given recent changes to the TAP will be important to continue to reassess the impacts of this and other transition-focused programs on transitioning veterans' post-service adjustment.

Figure 2: Transition Difficulty



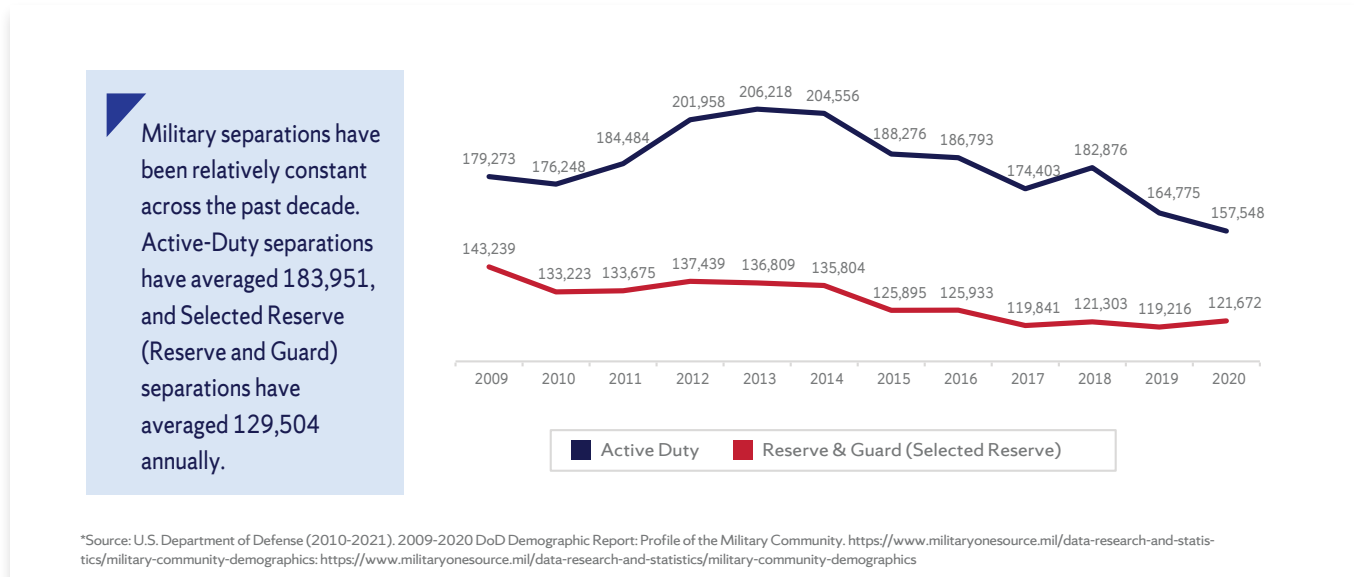


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Key Highlight #3: The rate of veterans transitioning to civilian life remains steady making the veteran population (and in particular the post 9/11 era) increasingly diverse.

Given that post-9/11 veterans are quite young, the majority are also working age (i.e., age 18-64).¹² This means that this generation of veterans is often in need of economic opportunities—access to education, training, or employment—over an extended period of time. Recognizing this, federal resources, legislation, as well as community-based support over the past two decades has, in large part, been devoted to helping post 9/11 veterans succeed in civilian life after their military service has ended.¹³

Figure 3: Number of Military Separations for 2009-2020*



Data from the VA indicates that the population of post-9/11 veterans increased 46% between 2014 and 2019. The post-9/11 cohort is predicted to grow at a steady rate for the next several years, and the VA projects a post-9/11 veteran population of just under 5.1 million by 2021.¹⁴ This continued growth, combined with public awareness about their post-service readjustment needs will continue to influence how resources related to research, services, and programs, are allocated toward serving transitioning post-9/11 veterans.¹⁵

Currently, 4.5 million post-9/11 veterans live in the United States, 2.8 million of which have served exclusively after 9/11; they represent just about one in four (24%) of all U.S. veterans.¹⁶ Because the veteran population overall is aging, the average age of all other veteran eras—World War II, Vietnam and Korea—is 81, and half of all veterans are 65 year or older. In contrast, most post-9/11 veterans (74%) are under the age of 45.¹⁷ The total veteran population is projected to decrease from 20.0 million in 2017 to 13.6 million by 2037,¹⁸ and as a result, post-9/11 veterans will eventually comprise a growing segment within a decreasing overall veteran population.*

* Estimates on the number of veterans differ widely depending on the data source that is used. The Current Population Survey (CPS) conducted in conjunction with the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), The American Community Survey (ACS), and U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) are common data sources. For example, the total population of veterans differs by 1,403,649 between ACS and CPS data (18,822,000 - 17,418,351).



Post-9/11 veterans now represent 23% of all veterans, but as post-9/11 veterans become a predominant subset of the veteran population it is important to note that not only do they have varied and unique service experiences, they are also demographically the most diverse generation of veterans.

Post-9/11 veterans now represent 23% of all veterans, but as post-9/11 veterans become a predominant subset of the veteran population it is important to note that not only do they have varied and unique service experiences, they are also demographically the most diverse generation of veterans to date;¹⁹ about 17% are women, 16% are black, 12% are Hispanic, and 2% are Asian.²⁰

This diversity is expected to increase over time. According to the VA, the total population of women veterans, for example, is expected to increase at an average rate of about 18,000 women per year for the next 10 years.²¹ According to 2018 data, post-9/11 veterans are more likely to be non-White, single, younger, uninsured, and have no income compared with veterans of prior service eras.²² Given this diversity, moving forward, it is important to better understand how the transition and employments needs vary across specific veteran populations.

Key Highlight #4: Transition experiences have been mixed, but navigation challenges persist for some.

Veterans report having difficulty determining which programs are relevant, which they qualify to use, and how to complete the paperwork needed to enroll. Because of this, veterans experience challenges during their military transition when they try to access services. While they serve in the military, their healthcare, mental health care, and other supportive services can be accessed directly from their military installation. But once they are veterans, they often navigate complicated, eligibility requirements and complex benefits that while financially beneficial and valuable, are also cumbersome to understand and access, especially if one is unfamiliar with them to begin with.²³

Regarding employment resources, veterans often find they must navigate a nebulous, and confusing system with overlaps across federal, state, and local resources in addition to those from both the nonprofit and private sectors. This confusing landscape is likely why 60% of veterans reported that navigating benefits at the VA is one of their top transition challenges.²⁴ This is relevant because factors such as socioeconomic status, education, employment, availability of social support, and access to health care are considered social determinants of health.

Incidentally, parallel concerns have arisen for stakeholders such as funders who are sometimes equally confused by the multitude of services and programs. For example, duplication of services and lack of program evaluation or identified outcome measures can diminish the ability of veterans, legislators, and private-sector funders to determine which services are effective or worthy of support.

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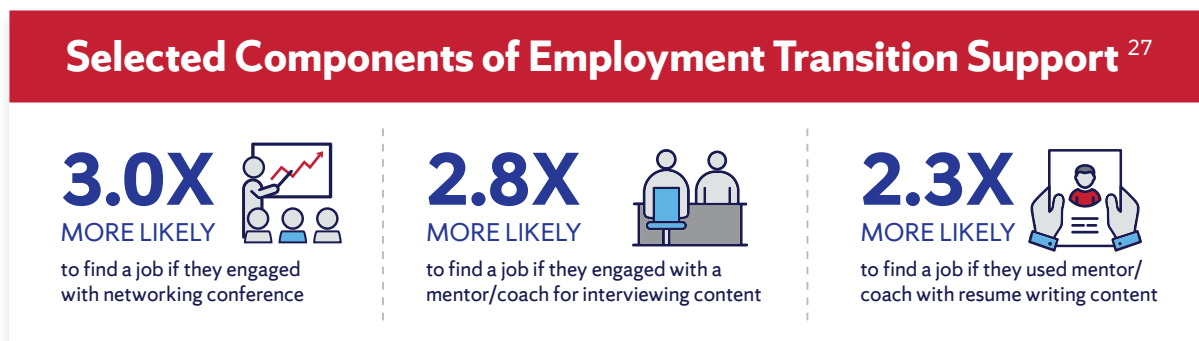
Key Highlight #5: New research identifies key components of employment services.

Recent research stemming from The Veteran Metrics Initiative (TVMI) has examined the “common components” among employment programs for veterans to identify some of the key program components that contribute to successful veteran transitions.^{*,**}

Researchers examined various characteristics such as military rank, gender, race/ethnicity, service-related occupation, and physical and mental health conditions. The research found several job predictors related to employment program use. Employment program components included career fairs, resume writing, job placement, career counseling, job training, and networking. Findings included:

- Veterans from the middle-enlisted paygrades (E5-E6), senior enlisted (E7-E9), and junior officer (O1-O3) paygrades were significantly more likely to use job placement programs than junior enlisted paygrades (E1-E4).
- Veterans exposed to warfare were 68% more likely to use a job placement program than those who had not been exposed.²⁵

This study provides only a snapshot of the predictors of employment program use among a specific group of veterans. Future research should examine program types to determine which are associated with employment, access to improved employment opportunities, and how those programs are used over time by transitioning veteran.²⁶



CONCLUSION

America’s global military footprint is changing and realigning, moving away from the conflict zones of the past two decades. But many of the employment concerns that veterans and transitioning members have always faced—translating their military conferred skills to the civilian workforce and finding meaningful employment, will certainly continue. Simultaneously, service members are becoming increasingly diverse, and tailored approaches will be needed to effectively target their specific or unique employment challenges. The last two decades has demonstrated how engagement of the public, private and nonprofit sectors can impact veterans’ employment outcomes. However, that engagement will need to continue to address these ongoing challenges and continue to build on and capitalize the past two decades of progress.

* For more information and specific findings of this TVMI research study see <https://journal-veterans-studies.org/articles/10.21061/jvs.v5i1.127/>. Their analysis included a sample of 9,566 post-9/11 veterans and their perceptions and utilization of specific employment programs. Specifically, these researchers used the Veterans Affairs/Department of Defense Identity Repository (VADIR) to identify all post-9/11 veterans who had separated from the military within the prior 90 days before August 9, 2016 and September 20, 2016.

** To be eligible, veterans must have been recently separating from the active component (Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps), deactivating from active status in the National Guard or Reserve, and have a US address. Data was collected via a web-based survey that remained open from September 2016 to November 2016. Following that, five additional surveys were administered at 6-month intervals.



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