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Soldiers to Citizens: The Link between Military Service and Volunteering

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PUBLICATION TYPE: Peer-Reviewed Journal Article

KEYWORDS: Military, veterans, volunteering, transitioning, civic engagement

RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS:

- Military service may create more active citizens; previous research shows links between military service and political behaviors, including voting, which appears to support this notion.
- Researchers investigated the link between military service and volunteer work, finding that African American and Hispanic veterans, married veterans, and veterans who served during periods of war were more likely to engage in volunteer work upon leaving military service than other veterans.
- The positive effect of being married on veterans' volunteer work may be indicative of the positive effect a strong and supportive network can have on veterans transitioning from military to civilian life. Further research is needed, however, to clarify the link between social factors and engagement in volunteer work.

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ABSTRACT:

“Research shows that military service is linked with political engagement, such as voting. This connection is strongest for minorities. The authors explore the relationship between military service and volunteering. They conclude that military service helps overcome barriers to volunteering by socializing people with civic responsibility norms, by providing social resources and skills that compensate for the lack of personal resources, and by making veterans aware of opportunities to volunteer as well as asking them to do so. Military service is positively related to volunteering among blacks and Hispanics. Married veterans are more likely to volunteer than nonveterans. Veterans who served during wartime are more likely to volunteer than those who served in peacetime.”

Implications

FOR PRACTICE

While veterans are more likely to be civically engaged than non-veterans, some veterans are even more likely to be engaged in volunteer work. For example, older veterans and married veterans are more likely to volunteer than their younger and unmarried counterparts. This may be evidence of greater social stability. However, given the physical and mental health benefits of volunteering, veterans who have recently separated from service and are suffering from depression or loss of purpose might benefit from being encouraged to volunteer by veterans' and veterans support organizations. Through volunteering, recently returned veterans can recover their sense of purpose and develop stronger support systems by establishing new and diverse relationships. This might help increase the volunteering rate among single veterans. African American and Hispanic veterans were also found to be more likely to volunteer than their non-veteran counterparts, and this can be a boon for local organizations that struggle to recruit adult minority volunteers. Volunteer organizations looking to recruit veterans for help should focus on connecting veterans with work that is meaningful to them and will allow them to feel a sense of purpose. Community organizations would benefit from establishing relationships with veterans' organizations, so that they can learn more about the special skills and knowledge that veterans can offer them and the special challenges that veterans potentially face when trying to volunteer in the community.

FOR POLICY

Because service members have already volunteered to serve their country, many veterans are likely willing to continue this service through engaging in volunteer work upon their return. Volunteering can improve mental and physical health, increase sense of purpose, and provide additional social support through providing meaningful work and allowing veterans to establish larger and more diverse social networks. Recently returned veterans might benefit from being encouraged to volunteer. Policy makers may wish to consider expanding funding for community service programs, or working with colleges and universities to establish grants and scholarships for veterans, based on engagement in community service work. In addition, policy makers may wish to work with existing volunteer matching websites to highlight volunteer opportunities that might be particularly beneficial for veterans or that would allow veterans to use their special skill sets to serve community organizations. Public policy makers might also help local community organizations to establish relationships with veterans' organizations from which they can recruit volunteers. In addition, minority veterans may help to increase the low volunteer rates among young minorities. Minority veterans could be encouraged to volunteer to mentor young minority children who might benefit from their knowledge and experience.

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FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Although this study confirms that military service and civic engagement are linked, the strength and nature of this relationship should be explored further in future studies. The relationship between military service, race, marital status and gender is complex. Additionally, other characteristics of military service might affect civic engagement upon reintegration into civilian communities, such as branch of service, length of military service, strength of identity with their military service, views of the military and how recently they served. Similarly, researchers should further investigate the links between individual socioeconomic characteristics, family, social support and engagement in volunteer work. As with all research studies, the scope of this study is limited because of the nature of the data. Future researchers can further illuminate these findings by looking at longitudinal or qualitative data. For example, it would be interesting to understand why only a subset of veterans volunteer upon completion of their military service.