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Research Brief

Veteran Status, Race-Ethnicity, and Marriage Among Fragile Families

Publication: *Journal of Marriage and Family* (2009), 71, pp. 768-786

Keywords: Culture, Ethnicity, Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing, Marriage, Military, Race

Research Highlights:

- Men's past military service increased marriage odds by 54% for couples with Black fathers even after controlling for potential mediators.
- Veteran status had no effect on couples with White or Hispanic fathers.
- The large Black-White gap in post-birth marriage evident among couples with civilian fathers did not exist among couples with veteran fathers
- Military service exerts lasting and unique pro-marriage effects on Blacks

Authors: Margaret L. Usdansky, Ph.D. Janet M. Wilmoth, Ph.D., Andrew S. London, Ph.D.

Abstract:

“We used data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (N = 2,679) to examine the impact of men's past military service on the likelihood that a couple will marry within 5 years of a nonmarital birth. Logistic regression analyses showed that men's past military service increased marriage odds by 54% for couples with Black fathers even after controlling for potential mediators. But veteran status had no effect on couples with White or Hispanic fathers. As a result, the large Black-White gap in postbirth marriage evident among couples with civilian fathers did not exist among couples with veteran fathers. Our findings bolster other evidence that military service exerts lasting and unique pro-marriage effects on Blacks. ”

Implications

For Practice

Previous researches on “retreat from marriage” have paid special attention to African American in that they are the population with the greatest percentage of retreat from marriage within urban, low-income and minority populations. However, this study’s major finding suggests that the past military service could increase the marriage possibility of African American by providing them with equal opportunity, erasing discrimination, and enhancing their economic gains. This veteran effect is not evident on couples with White and Hispanic father. Therefore, the authors conclude that the ethnic gap in post-birth marriage has been eliminated among couples with Black military fathers compared to couples with White civilian fathers. Military as a highly regulated organization encourages marriage and childbearing, particularly for African American. Several possible explanations related to this conclusion are provided by the author: first, African Americans can gain greater lasting benefits from military services compared to other ethnic groups because the social-economic discrimination has been substantially decreased after they enter the military. In other word, their social-economic status has been improved to a large extent compared to other ethnic groups. Another explanation is that veteran status/military experience matters more to Blacks because military service provides a more normative orientation towards marriage and family life compared to their civilian environment. If this study is robust, one practical implication of this finding may be that for those disadvantaged African Americans, seeking for institutional help (e.g. enlistment in military) might be a turning point of their life. Also, it is suggested that Blacks share similar desire to marry with other ethnic populations but with weaker economic self-sufficiency. Therefore, it is crucial for their family members and close friends to realize this problem and provide necessary understanding and support to them.

For Policy

The finding that men’s military service experience impacts on the odds of getting married in Blacks has important policy implications for policy makers who are concerned about the problem “retreat from marriage”. First of all, policy makers should consider the association between social-economic status and men’s marriageability. Based on the discussion in this study, it is evident that African Americans usually come from a disadvantaged situation so that they don’t meet their expected social-economic requirement to get married. Therefore, ameliorating the social-economic condition of the disadvantaged should be considered as an important policy goal to stabilize and advocate marriage among this population. Also, military institution as a highly regulated organization has been proven effective in reducing the discrimination, advancing economic opportunities, and providing normative support for marriage. As a result, military enlistment policy could be designed to be more favorable to the disadvantaged group which is in special need of this opportunity. Further, providing economic support and counseling service in marriage and family to this group should be also taken into account to promote the marriage in the United States.

For Future Research

This research contributes to a variety of research topics including retreat from marriage, marriage among fragile families, and military service and marriage, yet it is subject to several limitations which require future research endeavor. First, future researcher could seek for more representative samples since the number of Whites in this study sample is small, which might have impacted the statistical significance test. In addition, several variables could be included in the future research, such as military service period, age at enlistment, duration of service, combat exposure, rank, training experiences, reserve participation, and benefit take-up after existing active duty. Also, this study only focused on the urban population, and therefore including rural and suburban population could strengthen the research. Moreover, it is crucial to investigate reasons why military service only matters for African Americans, but not for Whites and Hispanics. Research that explicitly distinguishes the two selections between the material benefits of military service, or the perceived marriageability of Black men is necessary to clarify the relationship between military service and marriage. Finally, future research should also include women since women are indispensable part of a marriage, and therefore the effect of military service on women’s marriage propensities should be considered in the future.

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