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RESEARCH REVIEW | ISSUE 250

■ Military Sexual Assault, Post-Service Employment, and Transition Preparation among U.S. Military Veterans: New Directions for Research

AUTHOR: Adam J. Pritchard, PhD**SOURCE:** Victims & Offenders | An International Journal of Evidence-based Research, Policy, and Practice**DATE:** June 12, 2023**LINK:** doi.org/10.1080/15564886.2023.2196662**KEYWORDS:** veterans; military sexual assault; military sexual trauma; veteran employment; military separation

ABSTRACT:

Unlike studies of military sexual trauma (MST) among active-duty service members, most studies of veterans with MST have been clinical in nature, focused on estimating population prevalence rates, improving clinical responses or treatments, or have associated MST with subsequent health-related risk behaviors such as alcohol or drug abuse. The present study seeks to broaden our understanding of the corollaries of military sexual assault by considering the relationship between being a survivor of military sexual assault and post-service employment and transition experiences. Using secondary data from a survey of the members of a national organization for post-9/11 veterans, this exploratory study examines bivariate and multivariate relationships between self-reported experiences of military sexual assault and specific post-transition outcomes commonly used as indicators of a successful career transition from military to civilian life including employment status, time from transition to employment, and veterans' perceptions of being prepared for their transition out of the military. Analysis from this study suggests that military sexual assault is impactful in the domains of employment and transition readiness. This paper's findings point to a need to consider a range of inter-related social determinants of health and well-being when providing post-service career support for veterans.

RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS:

- Unlike studies of military sexual trauma (MST) that are clinical in nature, this study explores the relationship between being a survivor of veteran military sexual assault and post-service employment and transition experiences.
- Overall, 526 respondents or 12% of the sample self-identified as a survivor of military sexual assault (4% of male and 59% of female veterans), defined in the question as "having experienced sexual assault or things like unwanted touching, someone exposing themselves, or unwanted sexual contact."
- Among the survivors who chose not to report the incident, 56% cited "fear of retaliation by peers or chain of command" as the primary reason, accounting for 66% of all survivors who did not report. Veterans who said they experienced military sexual assault had a lower rate of securing a job before leaving the military compared to those who said they did not experience sexual assault. Specifically, 24.1% of sexual assault survivors had a job secured, compared to 33.5% of other veterans.
- Additionally, the study found that veterans without military sexual assault experiences were more likely to secure employment within three months after transitioning, almost twice as the proportion of those who experienced sexual assault (28.8% vs. 15.2%).
- These findings highlight the impact of military sexual assault on veterans' employment outcomes, with survivors facing greater challenges and delays in finding employment compared to other veterans.

Implications

FOR PRACTICE

This study emphasizes the need to consider the wider impacts of military sexual assault on veterans, going beyond their physical and mental health. Military sexual assault can significantly affect veterans' employment and transition experiences, as well as other areas of their lives. Therefore, efforts to support veterans who have experienced military sexual assault should consider these broader impacts and recognize how various social determinants of health and well-being are interconnected. The study also suggests that inadequate transition preparation may be a negative consequence of military sexual assault on veterans. Therefore, initiatives aimed at improving transition preparation should address the unique needs of survivors of military sexual assault and acknowledge the institutional mistrust they may feel due to the military's response to their assault experiences. Furthermore, reducing unemployment among veterans who have experienced military sexual assault may require targeted interventions that specifically address the challenges these veterans face in finding and securing employment.

FOR POLICY

The policy implications of this study include the need for more comprehensive support and services for survivors of military sexual assault, including those who may not seek clinical care. A policy agenda around military sexual assault should address the effects on both active-duty service members and the ongoing effects of past sexual victimization on veterans after their separation from the military. This study also highlights the need to address institutional mistrust and barriers to support for sexual assault and harassment within the military, including the related effects this institutional mistrust may have on seeking VA healthcare and other formal support services. This study also offers insights to policymakers in areas of veteran employment and disability; for example, findings from this paper suggest there could be a pathway from military sexual assault, through inadequate transition preparation, to post-service unemployment. Policy formation around transition should seek to account for these types of adverse experiences, especially for women veterans.

FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

he findings point to a need for more research to address the gap in understanding how military sexual assault impacts outcomes for veterans beyond physical and mental health. This exploratory study calls for more research examining the broader impacts of military sexual assault on veterans beyond clinical health and mental health outcomes, including how military sexual assault experiences impact transition, employment, higher education, and disability. This paper demonstrates and calls for a more comprehensive, integrated research approach to issues faced by veterans. Research considering together the many social determinants of health and well-being could improve interventions for specific challenges (e.g., trauma response or employment support) by recognizing and addressing any interrelated barriers to more positive outcomes. Finally, the study highlights the urgent need to develop better population-based studies to estimate the scope of military sexual assault within veteran and active-duty populations, given the high prevalence rates reported.

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