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### Policy Brief: Mitigating Underemployment Among Transitioning Post-9/11 Veterans

Institute for Veterans and Military Families at Syracuse University

Penn State Clearinghouse for Military Family Readiness

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PennState

POLICY BRIEF

# Mitigating Underemployment Among Transitioning Post-9/11 Veterans



**CLEARINGHOUSE**  
FOR MILITARY FAMILY READINESS

**VETERAN NETWORK**  
Veteran Evaluation & Research Applications Network

IN PARTNERSHIP  
WITH

**S** Syracuse University  
D'Aniello Institute for  
Veterans & Military Families  
JPMorgan Chase & Co., Founding Partner

## ABOUT THE VETERANS METRICS INITIATIVE (TVMI)

The findings presented in this brief primarily come from The Veterans Metrics Initiative: Linking Program Components to Post-Military Well-Being Study (TVMI). This study was designed to examine well-being during the military-to-civilian transition and to evaluate the effect of program use on well-being outcomes for veterans. TVMI was the first longitudinal investigation of the military-to-civilian transition process with a national sample of post-9/11 United States veterans. A total of six waves of data were collected. Data collection began in early fall 2016 and was completed in late spring 2019.

The study: (1) documents veteran well-being and factors that predict changes in veteran well-being during the military-to-civilian transition and reintegration period; (2) identifies programs that veterans use during civilian reintegration and distilling them into their common components; and (3) examines the links between common program components and veteran well-being to identify effective program components.

**For more information please visit:**

<https://veteranetwork.psu.edu/projects/tvmi-study/>

## VETERAN UNDEREMPLOYMENT

Underemployment arises when veterans' skills, education, and experiences are not fully utilized or maximized in a current job role. Underemployment is often identified through self-report, but it can be inferred through reports of part-time work when full-time work is preferred or a salary or job role that is undesirable and inconsistent with experience or education. Underemployment can prolong the transition process or have long-term economic impacts, but it also can be avoided with timely intervention, referral, and use of evidence-informed programs, benefits, and services.

Veteran underemployment is of interest to policymakers because the goals of many federally-funded programs, benefits, and services for veterans are to reduce the opportunity costs of military service and to ensure a smooth and timely transition to the civilian workforce.

## UNDEREMPLOYMENT RESEARCH

While unemployment among veterans has shown a marked decrease in recent years, underemployment has persisted. TVMI's study conducted three years after separation from service reveals that a staggering 61% of veterans report being underemployed due to a perceived mismatch between their skills, education, or experiences and their post-transition employment in the civilian job market. Even after 6.5 years, 59% of respondents reported being underemployed.

This research examines the impacts of unemployment on veterans, key predictors and outcomes associated with employment programs, and their key components. A key finding is that when certain components are included as part of employment programs, they can lead to positive outcomes such as a higher starting salary or full-time job attainment (see Table 1).

## UNDEREMPLOYMENT IMPACTS

Several consequences arise from underemployment among post-9/11 transitioning veterans. More than a quarter of underemployed veterans were dissatisfied with at least one area of their work experience, including their pay and benefits, ability to advance their vocational goals in their current role, and ability to apply their skills and knowledge to work. These veterans were two times more likely to leave their job. However, when they did, they experienced an improvement in their satisfaction and salary. While often beneficial, job turnover was also associated with difficulty adjusting to civilian life.

## UNDEREMPLOYMENT PREDICTORS

This study's results were consistent with other previous research that identifies certain demographic variables as predictors of underemployment. Factors such as minority race/ethnicity, lower paygrade (E5 and lower), parental status and gender (i.e., women with children), higher disability ratings (20% or higher), low education attainment (e.g., high school degree), and mental health symptoms (e.g., TBI, PTSD).

## CERTAIN PROGRAMMATIC COMPONENTS PREDICTED HIGHER SALARIES AND FULL-TIME EMPLOYMENT

Veterans who engaged with employment programs primarily accessed interviewing, career planning, and resume writing services. The employment interventions shown in Table 1 were associated with positive employment outcomes: namely, achieving full-time employment and higher starting salaries. These employment interventions were most helpful when applied early in the military transition because certain key components increased job attainment and resulted in a higher starting salary in the veterans' first post-military job.

















## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

### Recommendation 1: Outreach and Resource Navigation

Support efforts to provide strategic outreach to all service members and veterans at-risk to improve resource access, awareness, ability to navigate resources, and to ensure timely referral before and after separation.

- Advocate for and prioritize the use of evidence-informed employment programming before, during, and after separation focused on aligning skills, knowledge, and abilities to labor market opportunities.
- Prior to transition, identify and institutionalize opportunities to screen service members for civilian career readiness and foster referral and engagement in early participation in evidence-informed employment benefits and services to help influence early career alignment, minimize disruptive career changes, shorten career gaps, and align realistic career expectations with open job opportunities.

**TABLE 1. EMPLOYMENT OUTCOMES BASED ON CAREER COMPONENTS UTILIZED AND DELIVERY MODE**

EMPLOYMENT PROGRAM TYPE	EMPLOYMENT COMPONENT				
	MENTOR COACH	DIRECT INSTRUCTION	ONLINE TOOLS	CAREER AND NETWORKING EVENTS	PEER LEARNING
INTERVIEWING					
RESUME WRITING					
MILITARY TO CIVILIAN TOOLS TRANSLATION TOOLS					
JOB BOARDS					
CAREER FAIRS AND NETWORKING CONFERENCES					
JOB TRAINING AND CERTIFICATION					
CAREER PLANNING AND EXPLORATION					
ENTREPRENEURSHIP					

 = Full-Time Employment       = Higher Starting Salary

- Customize programming (e.g., TAP) to address the needs of at-risk groups (e.g., cohort programs, targeted outreach, providing awareness of educational benefits, use of navigation services) to reduce disparities.
- Policy should require and incentivize effective collaboration with state-level veteran offices, navigation networks, and community partners to provide more support, outreach, and help all veterans take advantage of the local employment preparation opportunities available after the transition. Community partners can provide outreach to underemployed veterans to help them identify and fill skill gaps, advance in their careers, or retrain for high-demand jobs, sectors, and industries to reduce the likelihood of underemployment (e.g., STEM fields).

**Recommendation 2: Improvement and Support of Government-Funded Programs**

Expand access to evidence-informed transition program components through programs like The Transition Assistance Program (TAP) and DoD Skillbridge.

- Reinvest in the TAP to prioritize evidence-informed components linked to improved employment outcomes for veterans.

- Provide oversight of TAP to ensure compliance with Congressionally mandated timelines and customized career counseling. Performance monitoring could help implement plans to improve TAP 2-day class attendance intended to provide timely customized transition preparation.

**Recommendation 3: Research Support**

Support research that quantifies the economic impact of underemployment, including sources of bias for veterans and their families, employers, and states, and includes analysis of disparities that differentially impact the transition of the identified at-risk groups.

- Fund research that evaluates employment outcomes (including underemployment) and compares military and civilian employees over time, across industries, and within specific demographic groups.
- Support research on veteran underemployment to inform policy by providing data about its impacts, programs that work, where oversight is needed, and how funding can be best prioritized. Research that optimizes the use of current programs, benefits and services (e.g., the Post-9/11 GI Bill, Reserve Educational Assistance Program (REAP), DoD Skill Bridge, and the VA Solid Start program) and explores when services can most benefit transitioning veterans, including how to reduce the time to align career activities with post-transition employment before transition and to assist veterans after transition when they experience post-transition career changes.

## Acknowledgments

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## About the Clearinghouse for Military Family Readiness

The Clearinghouse for Military Family Readiness at Penn State is the result of a partnership funded by the Department of Defense between the Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Military Community and Family Policy and the USDA's National Institute of Food and Agriculture through a cooperative agreement with Penn State. This work leverages funds by the USDA's National Institute of Food and Agriculture and Hatch Appropriations. The Clearinghouse is an interdisciplinary team of research faculty and staff, and creative services professionals committed to providing outstanding support to professionals who provide programs and services to military families. The Clearinghouse is located within the Social Science Research Institute (SSRI) at The Pennsylvania State University. For more information, visit <https://militaryfamilies.psu.edu>.

## About the D'Aniello Institute for Veterans and Military Families

Syracuse University's D'Aniello Institute for Veterans and Military Families (IVMF) was founded in 2011, as a partnership between Syracuse University and JPMorgan Chase & Co. Headquartered on the campus of Syracuse University and located in the Daniel and Gayle D'Aniello Building at the Syracuse University National Veterans Resource Center, the IVMF was founded as higher-education's first interdisciplinary academic institute singularly focused on advancing the lives of the nation's military, veterans, and their families. The IVMF team designs and delivers class-leading training programs and services to the military-connected community, in support of the transition from military to civilian life and beyond. Each year, more than 20,000 service members, veterans, and family members engage IVMF programs and services, which are provided at largely no cost to participants. The IVMF's programs are informed by the Institute's sustained and robust data collection, research, and policy analysis team and infrastructure. The D'Aniello Institute's work on behalf of the military-connected community is made possible by gifts and grants from individuals and corporations committed to those who served in America's armed forces and their families. For more information, visit [ivmf.syracuse.edu](http://ivmf.syracuse.edu).

## PROGRAMMATIC IMPLICATIONS

By strategically targeting and resolving issues such as skill translation, interview preparation, and career exploration using services such as mentoring, career instruction and online tools, employment programs can yield tangible results and translate into higher starting salaries and attainment of full-time employment for veterans post-transition among those who use them. Therefore, it becomes imperative for policymakers, employers, and support organizations to encourage use of the most effective programs and services that facilitate veterans' seamless integration into the civilian labor market, where their skills and experiences can be fully utilized, ultimately enhancing their overall well-being as well as economic opportunity due to timely attainment of full-time employment and higher starting salaries that reduces the negative economic impact of a sub-optimal transition.

Providers can help transitioning service members avoid disruptive and costly career transitions by targeting vulnerable service members and prioritizing evidence-informed and effective, on-time programming before they separate from the military.

### Policy Makers and Employment Service Providers should prioritize:

- (1) Programs and services that help veterans thoughtfully seek their first post-service job, including weighing the cost and benefits of premature acceptance of suboptimal jobs to replace income.
- (2) Services with evidence-based employment components to improve job attainment and satisfaction. Specifically, support the translation and marketing efforts for programs that help transitioning veterans translate their military skills for the civilian labor force using programs and services that work, such as interview mentoring with a coach, interview instruction, and career planning and exploration.
- (3) Resources to specific subgroups at risk for underemployment to address their unique concerns. Access to childcare, educational benefits, supportive, low-cost mental health care, and financial planning are among the services that may be beneficial.
- (4) Continued support of coordinated cross-sector efforts that emphasize the soft skills, knowledge, and abilities veterans bring to the workplace through outreach to employers, HR professionals, and hiring managers to reduce bias.



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