

## EDITORIALS

## Why do some ex-armed forces personnel end up in prison?

New report emphasises the role of alcohol, social exclusion, and financial problems

Deirdre MacManus *specialist registrar in forensic psychiatry*<sup>1</sup>, Simon Wessely *director*<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Forensic and Neurodevelopmental Sciences, Institute of Psychiatry, King's College London, London SE5 8AF, UK; <sup>2</sup>King's Centre for Military Health Research, Weston Education Centre, King's College London, UK

On 23 June the well respected Howard League for Penal Reform published their report on ex-serving armed forces personnel in prison.<sup>1</sup> The league's remit was to find out why so many of these people become involved in the criminal justice system, to explore the problems facing them on transition back into civilian life, and to look at the reasons underlying their offending behaviour. It is hoped that the report can provide information on how these individuals' needs can best be met both in prison and in the community.

Concerns about how service personnel will reintegrate into society after war are nothing new. After the second world war, returning veterans were often seen less as heroes and more as potential social problems with violence and offending high on the list of concerns.<sup>2</sup> Since 2001, more than 160 000 UK regular and reserve forces have been deployed in Iraq, Afghanistan, or both countries. There have been many accounts in the media of the challenges these individuals face in their transition back to civilian life, including problems related to housing, mental health, employment, relationship breakdown, and substance misuse,<sup>3</sup> but also aggression, violent offending, and incarceration.<sup>4</sup>

Research examining the effects of war on psychological functioning has focused mainly on clinical outcomes, such as post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, and depression,<sup>5 6</sup> but a growing body of research from the United States shows a link between combat exposure and subsequent increased self reported aggression, antisocial behaviour, and criminal behaviour.<sup>7 8</sup> The National Association of Probation Officers, using unverified self reports of military service by prison inmates, estimated that 9.1% of English and Welsh prisoners have served in the armed forces.<sup>9</sup> The Defence Analytical Services Agency of the Ministry of Defence estimated a figure of 3.5% using a more robust method of record linkage between prison census data and Ministry of Defence personnel records.<sup>10</sup> Their analyses showed that although ex-serving personnel are less likely than the general population to offend, they are more likely to be in prison for violent and sexual offences, and they make up the largest single occupational group in prison.

However, such one dimensional statistics do not explain why these individuals end up in prison. The general acceptance that it is related to their experiences during military service<sup>9</sup> overlooks the fact that the armed forces recruit from areas of social deprivation and higher crime,<sup>11</sup> all of which are associated with subsequent offending, irrespective of any impact of military service. Research also shows that most service leavers do well after discharge.<sup>12</sup>

The report from the Howard League for Penal Reform drew on the opinions of politicians, military leaders, academics, and service charity practitioners. The report also includes interviews with 29 non-randomly selected ex-serving inmates, who were mainly convicted of serious violent offences.<sup>1</sup> Three main, although overlapping, groups of vulnerable people emerged: those from severely disadvantaged backgrounds who were involved in crime before they joined the forces; those who experienced difficulty in the forces, such as mental health problems or physical injury, which led to early discharge; and those who had successful armed forces careers but had difficulty adjusting to civilian life.

Not surprisingly, the report's conclusions emphasise the role of alcohol, social exclusion, and financial problems in offending. Perhaps more surprisingly, given the general themes of media coverage, they found less evidence that homelessness was a major problem, or that post-traumatic stress disorder or other occupational psychiatric injuries that service personnel are exposed to played a major part. This is in keeping with the evidence from the King's Centre for Military Health Research (KCMHR) cohort that although post-traumatic stress disorder is a problem for some people who have served (2-7%, depending on combat role and regular or reserve status), alcohol is a larger problem during and after service.<sup>5</sup> The Howard League also drew attention to the relatively long time periods between leaving the forces and offending in the admittedly small sample, which again raises questions of a causal link between service and serious offending.

Multiple factors therefore contribute to ex-serving personnel ending up in the criminal justice system. But data are needed

on the relative contributions of pre-service adversity, military experiences, and post-service life. Such data are crucial—firstly, because any interventions need to be based on an understanding of the risk factors and critical pathways operating, and secondly, as a matter of policy. The current debate around the Military Covenant, likely to be adopted into law via the latest Armed Forces Bill, is built around two relevant themes. Firstly, that society has a duty to compensate for any injuries or disadvantages that have occurred as a result of military service (but not those that result from factors whose impact began before service), and, secondly, that there should be rewards for the specific nature of military service—that is, that higher duty is owed to those who have been prepared to sacrifice their lives in their country's service.

To this end, a large scale study linking the KCMHR cohort data on more than 13 000 UK military personnel to all conviction records,<sup>5</sup> both before and after military service, is looking at the relative contributions of pre-military factors, deployment and combat, and finally post-deployment mental health and substance misuse to any conviction and self reported violent behaviour. Individuals in prison make up only a small proportion of those who offend, and the issues around offending behaviour in ex-service personnel are not restricted to criminal convictions and incarceration, although that is the focus of the Howard League's report, but also violent and antisocial behaviour that does not result in conviction.

The Howard League's report concludes that "for the majority, service in the forces significantly improves life opportunities." But some veterans do end up in prison, and it is reasonable for us to consider whether our society is doing everything possible to reduce that number.

Competing interests: All authors have completed the ICMJE uniform disclosure form at [www.icmje.org/coi\\_disclosure.pdf](http://www.icmje.org/coi_disclosure.pdf) (available on

request from the corresponding author) and declare: DM is funded by a Medical Research Council doctoral fellowship and works on a project that is funded by the UK Ministry of Defence; SW is honorary consultant adviser in psychiatry to the British Army and is a trustee of Combat Stress a charity that provides support for veterans in prison; the authors' work was independent of the UK Ministry of Defence, which had no role in the analysis, interpretation, or decision to submit this paper; no other relationships or activities that could appear to have influenced the submitted work

Provenance and peer review: Commissioned; not externally peer reviewed.

- 1 Howard League for Penal Reform. Inquiry into former Armed Service personnel in prison. 2011.
- 2 Allport A. Demobbed: coming home after the second world war. Yale University Press, 2009.
- 3 James E. Why are so many former soldiers in prison? *Guardian* 2010; [www.guardian.co.uk/society/2010/feb/09/erwin-james-soldiers-prison](http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2010/feb/09/erwin-james-soldiers-prison).
- 4 Caesar E. From hero to zero. *Sunday Times* 2010. [www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/article7084032.ece](http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/article7084032.ece).
- 5 Fear NT, Jones M, Murphy D, Hull L, Iversen AC, Coker B, et al. What are the consequences of deployment to Iraq and Afghanistan on the mental health of the UK armed forces? A cohort study. *Lancet* 2010;375:1783-97.
- 6 Iversen A, van Staden L, Hughes J, Browne T, Hull L, Hall J, et al. The prevalence of common mental disorders and PTSD in the UK military: using data from a clinical interview-based study. *BMC Psychiatry* 2009;9:68.
- 7 Black DW, Carney CP, Peloso PM, Woolson RF, Letuchy E, Doebbeling BN. Incarceration and veterans of the first gulf war. *Military Med* 2005;170:612-8.
- 8 Booth-Kewley S, Larson GE, Highfill-McRoy RM, Garland CF, Gaskin TA. Factors associated with antisocial behavior in combat veterans. *Aggress Behav* 2010;36:330-7.
- 9 NAPO. Armed forces and the criminal justice system. 2009. [www.lifechangeuk.com/\\_webedit/uploaded-files/All%20Files/Veterans%20Case%20Studies%202009%20\(2\).pdf](http://www.lifechangeuk.com/_webedit/uploaded-files/All%20Files/Veterans%20Case%20Studies%202009%20(2).pdf).
- 10 Ministry of Defence. Estimating the proportion of prisoners in England and Wales who are ex-armed forces—further analysis. 2010. [www.mod.uk/NR/rdonlyres/C7C1ADC2-8509-4D31-94B4-B07453846D2F/0/20100916\\_Veterans\\_in\\_prison.pdf](http://www.mod.uk/NR/rdonlyres/C7C1ADC2-8509-4D31-94B4-B07453846D2F/0/20100916_Veterans_in_prison.pdf).
- 11 Johnstone J. Social class, social areas and delinquency. *Sociol Soc Res* 1978;63:49-72.
- 12 Iversen A, Nikolaou V, Greenberg N, Unwin C, Hull L, Hotopf M, et al. What happens to British veterans when they leave the armed forces? *Eur J Public Health* 2005;15:175-84.

Cite this as: *BMJ* 2011;342:d3898