

PUBLIC AWARENESS OF UK VETERANS' CHARITIES

RACHAEL GRIBBLE, SIMON WESSELY, SUSAN KLEIN, DAVID A ALEXANDER, CHRISTOPHER DANDEKER AND NICOLA T FEAR

Since the First World War, veterans' charities have played an important role in the provision of health and welfare services for, and in advocating on behalf of, former military personnel and their families. With the recent Iraq and Afghanistan campaigns, the numbers of charities for veterans in the UK have grown rapidly, leading to concerns about quality, co-ordination of services and potential competition for public recognition and voluntary financial donations. This article uses data from the 2011 British Social Attitudes survey to measure levels of familiarity with veterans' charities amongst the British public; knowledge of individual veterans' charities; and purchases of poppies for the annual Poppy Appeal. On this basis, it suggests areas where veterans' charities may wish to improve public engagement and knowledge

Charitable organisations have become increasingly important in providing health and welfare services for military veterans, as well as advocating on behalf of both current and former armed forces personnel and their families on pertinent policy issues.¹ Veterans' charities rely heavily on voluntary donations from the public in order to provide such amenities, making public awareness of them and their work a major issue given its potential impact on the provision of veteran support and care.

Veterans' organisations are amongst the most successful in the charitable sector, raising approximately £800 million per year; the largest two organisations, the Royal British Legion (RBL) and Help for Heroes, each raised more than £30 million in their last annual campaigns.² The most recent figures from the Charity Commission estimate there to be at least 2,000 registered charities in this sector, with several thousand more unregistered.³ While this clearly demonstrates a great deal of public goodwill towards helping members of

the armed forces, the increasing array of veterans' charities may have implications for donations to smaller organisations,⁴ especially during times of economic austerity. In addition, the visibility of the armed forces to the public may lessen following the withdrawal of British troops from Afghanistan by the end of 2014, and the reduction in the size of the British armed forces, and that of the army in particular. Further cuts may also be announced as part of the next Strategic Defence and Security Review in 2015.

While the increase in the number of dedicated organisations may have improved visibility for veterans' charities overall, it has also led to concerns about poor co-ordination and replication of services, most notably expressed by the former Chief of the Defence Staff, General Lord Richard Dannatt.⁵ The quality of services provided by some of these charities to those in need has been questioned and there have been some instances of fraud, although rare.⁶ Another issue is the uncertainty over the true extent of public awareness. Historically, there has always been a

debate on the extent to which armed forces personnel are valued and praised in times of war, but looked at with indifference if not hostility in times of peace.⁷ Not for nothing has Kipling's 'Tommy' echoed down the ages.⁸

This article explores knowledge of veterans' charities amongst the British public and establishes which organisations are the most well-known in this sector. It also identifies what sort of people were more likely to have purchased a poppy during the annual Poppy Appeal campaign – an annual campaign that was started after the end of the First World War to raise funds for veterans of that conflict.⁹ Because of the longstanding nature of this campaign in the UK and its association with charitable support for ex-service personnel, purchase of a poppy was used to measure explicit awareness of, and support for, military charities by members of the public. Differences in public awareness and voluntary contributions by certain socio-demographic groups and connection to the military were also examined.



Money is counted in the Clarence House Poppy Day counting room at St James's Palace, London. *Courtesy of Anthony Devlin/AP Photo.*

How the Research was Carried Out

Methods

This study uses data from the general British public gathered via the British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey undertaken in 2011, the results of which were published in 2012. The BSA uses a multi-stage design to select a representative sample of adults aged 18 years and over living in England, Scotland and Wales.¹⁰ For the 2011 BSA questionnaire, the King's Centre for Military Health Research (KCMHR), in conjunction with colleagues at the Aberdeen Centre for Trauma Research, Robert Gordon University, and NatCen Social Research, developed a module on British public attitudes towards the UK armed forces and the missions in Iraq and Afghanistan. Fieldworkers collected data from June to September 2011 via face-to-face, computer-assisted interviews and self-completion questionnaires. Overall, a total of 3,311 British adults took part, representing a response rate of 54 per cent.

Outcome Measures

To measure public perceptions of veterans' charities, the BSA survey included a range of questions concerning awareness of such organisations. To measure knowledge of veterans' organisations, respondents were asked if they knew of any charities or organisations supporting former members of the UK armed forces. To determine awareness of individual charities, respondents were asked to name, unprompted, up to three veterans' charities. Participants were also asked whether they had bought a poppy for the annual Poppy Appeal prior to the survey period, in November 2010.

Analysis

Overall awareness of veterans' charities amongst the public was examined using weighted percentages. Those answering 'Don't Know' for the subsequent questions on individual charities were excluded (n=76). As respondents could give up to three answers regarding the names of veterans' charities, the multiple response function of IBM SPSS Statistics

20 (statistical analysis software) was used to analyse familiarity with individual veterans' charities and to obtain weighted percentage values based on total responses. Information on whether the respondents had purchased a poppy during the 2010 Poppy Appeal was collected as part of the self-completion section. Self-completion questionnaires containing this question were distributed to all 3,311 participants, with an 85 per cent (n=2,845) response rate.

Differences in respondents' awareness of charities and contributions to the annual Poppy Appeal were examined overall, as well as by different social characteristics which have been found to be important predictors of support for the military, such as gender, age (in years), education,¹¹ and level of connection to the military (whether through family, or a friend, neighbour or colleague who is a current or former member of the UK armed forces).

Analyses were conducted using STATA version 11.2 (data analysis and statistical software), using logistic regression techniques, and took account

of the differences in response by certain groups and of how participants were selected. Those who answered either 'Don't Know' or 'Refusal' were excluded from analyses, but comprised less than 5 per cent of responses for each question. Statistical significance was defined as $p < 0.05$. Non-statistically significant relationships are not reported (the data can be obtained from the authors).¹²

Limitations and Caveats

This study used robust methods to examine the British public's perceptions of charities for ex-service personnel, achieving a response rate typical of the BSA survey (54 per cent).¹³ However, there were some limitations and caveats.

While the age distribution may seem weighted towards those aged 35–54 years, the higher proportion of respondents in this age group contains people born as part of the 'baby boom' in the 1960s, and reflects the broader structure of the population in England and Wales.¹⁴

Secondly, survey questions referred to knowledge of organisations and charities for *former* service members of the UK armed forces only. Some respondents may have been aware of some of the organisations but only associated them with serving members of the UK armed forces rather than with veterans. As a result, public awareness of charities in this sector may be higher than reported.

Similarly, the survey only measured financial support for one veterans' organisation – RBL and associated poppy charities, via their annual Poppy Appeal. The true proportion of the public contributing financially to supporting UK military veterans through donations to other veterans' charities is therefore likely to be higher than presented here, especially amongst groups that did not report purchasing poppies.

Results

Table 1 describes the socio-demographic profile of BSA survey respondents. While there were no major differences in gender or educational attainment, there were a higher proportion of participants in the 35–54-year age group. Approximately two-thirds of the

Table 1: Socio-Demographic Profile of Respondents.

Characteristics	% (n)*
Gender	49
Male	(1,450)
Female	(1,861)
Age (yrs), last birthday	29
18–34	(752)
35–54	(1,159)
55–64	(541)
65+	(856)
Educational	26
No qualifications	(928)
O-level or equivalent	(774)
A-level or equivalent	(798)
Higher education	(610)
Military connection	37
No	(1,232)
Yes	(2,079)

*Note: * May not total to n=3,311 as responses for 'Don't Know'/'Refusal'/'non-responses not included (n=3-201).*

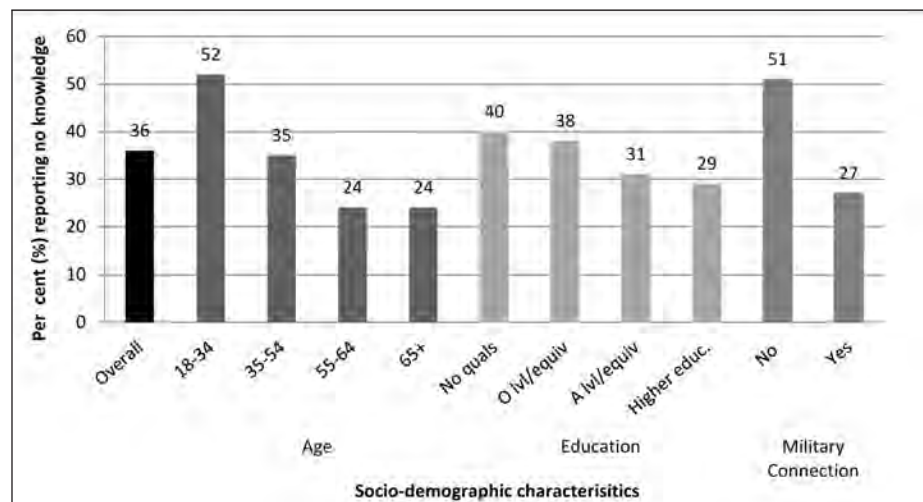
population reported a relationship with someone – a family member, friend, colleague, neighbour or other – currently serving, or having previously served, in the UK armed forces.

More than a third (36 per cent) of the British public did not know of any organisations or charities supporting ex-service personnel (see Figure 1). People aged under 55 years were significantly more likely to report no knowledge of veterans' charities than those aged 65+ years ($p < 0.01$). Respondents with any educational qualification and those connected to the military were significantly more likely to know of veterans' charities than those without qualifications or military connections, respectively (both $p < 0.001$). There were no significant differences by gender (data not shown).

The most well-known individual organisations and charities for ex-service personnel were RBL and other charities associated with Remembrance Day Poppies (including the Poppy Day Appeal, Poppy Scotland and the Earl Haig Fund, which this article refers to as 'poppy charities'), followed by Help for Heroes (see Figure 2).

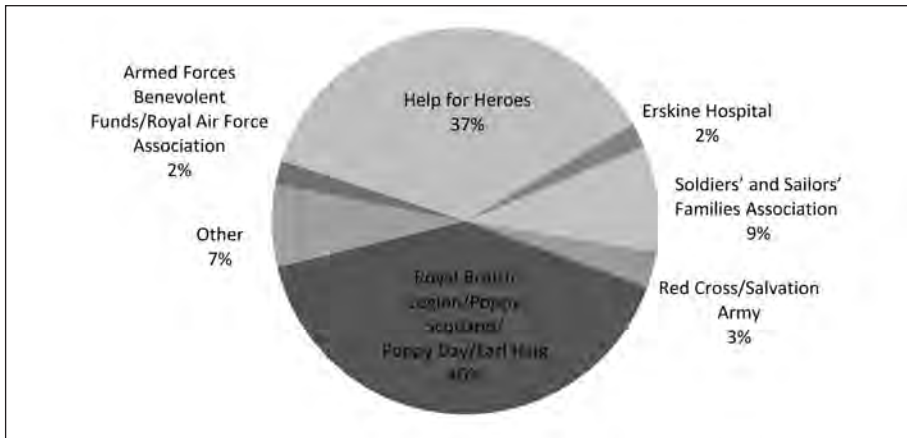
Knowledge of the two most well-known veterans' charities, RBL/poppy charities and Help for Heroes, differed by socio-demographics (see Figure 3). Women were less likely to know of RBL/

Figure 1: Lack of Awareness of Any Organisations/Charities for Ex-Service Personnel.



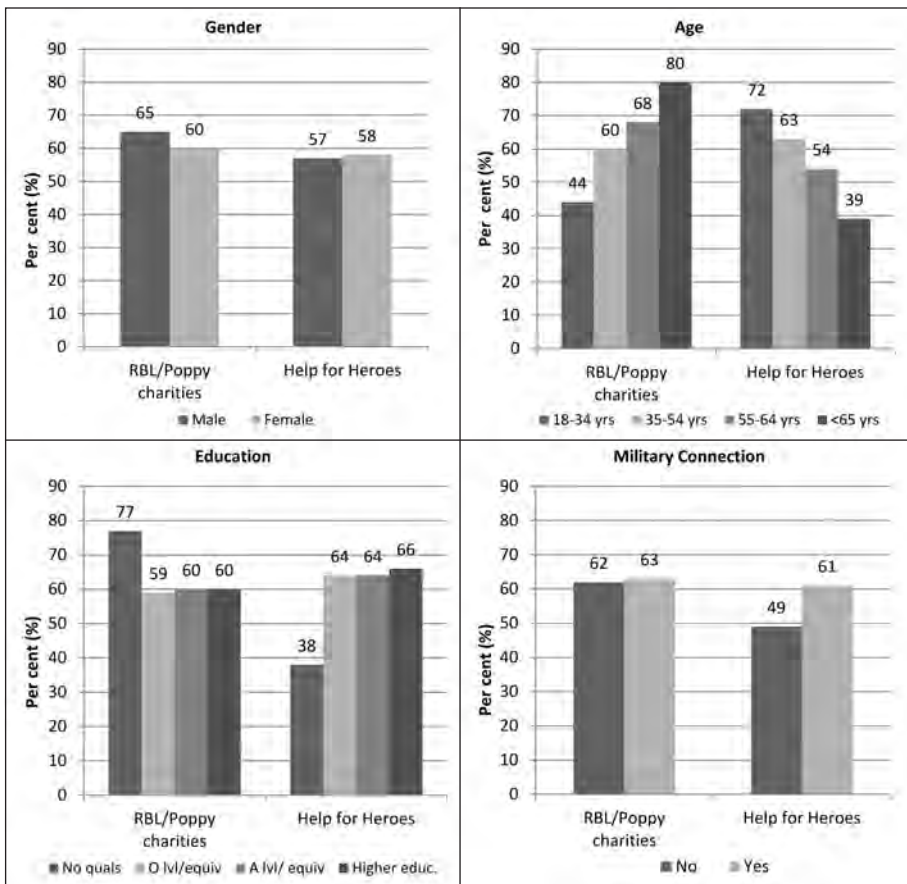
Note: 'Don't Know'/'Other'/'Refusal'/'non-responses not included (n=22-201).

Figure 2: Public Knowledge of Individual Organisations and Charities for Ex-Service Personnel.



Note: 'Don't Know'/'Refusal'/non-responses at subsequent questions/'No knowledge of veterans' charities' not included (n=1,158-2,994).

Figure 3: Public Knowledge of Individual Organisations and Charities for Ex-Service Personnel by Socio-Demographics.



Note: 'Don't Know'/'Other'/'Refusal'/non-responses/'No knowledge of veterans' charities' not included (n=3-1,234).

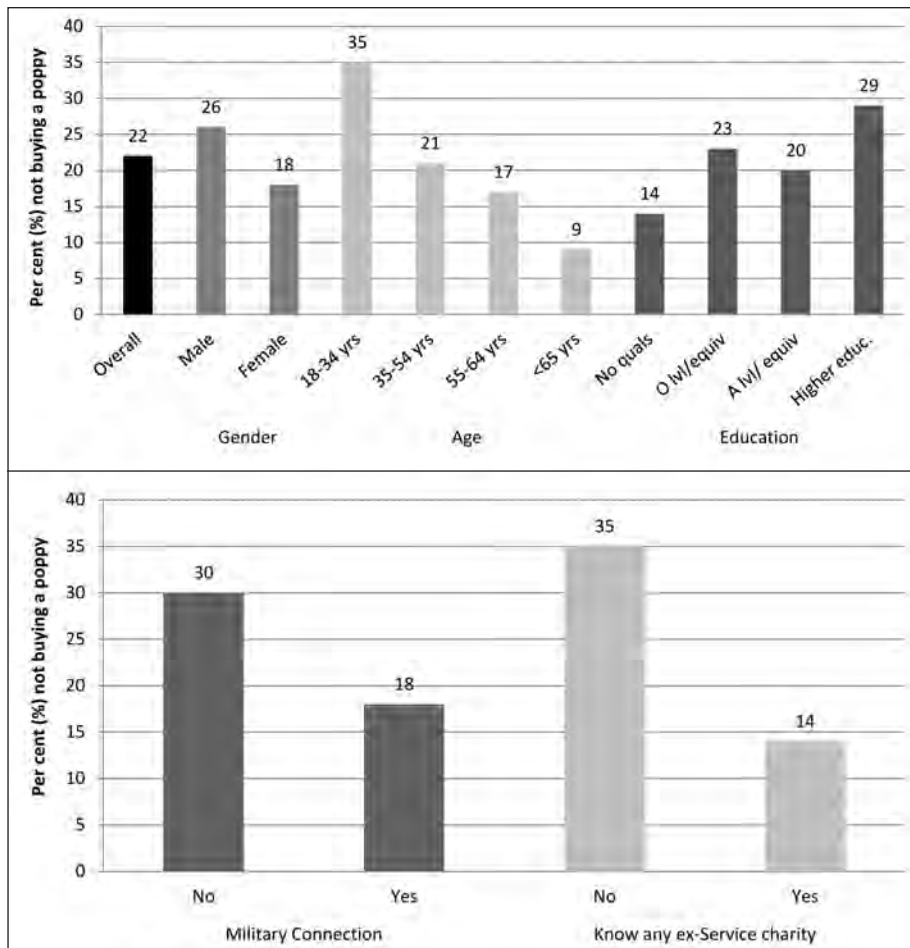
poppy charities than men ($p < 0.01$), although this difference was small. Compared to those aged 65 years and over, younger people were significantly more aware of Help for Heroes, but less knowledgeable about RBL/poppy charities ($p < 0.001$). Those with any level of educational attainment or reporting a military connection were significantly more aware of Help for Heroes than people without formal qualifications or no such relationships (both $p < 0.001$). 58 per cent of people who knew of RBL/poppy charities were also aware of Help for Heroes (data not shown).

Overall, less than a quarter of respondents had not purchased a poppy during the 2010 Poppy Appeal (Figure 4). Women were more likely than men to have purchased a poppy, as were those with military connections compared to those without such relationships (both $p < 0.001$). The proportion of respondents who did not buy a poppy was significantly higher amongst people aged 64 years or less than in the oldest age group ($p < 0.001$); graduates were also less likely to have bought a poppy than people with no formal qualifications ($p < 0.01$). People who reported not knowing any veterans' organisation or charity were less likely to have bought a poppy compared to those who knew of a charity ($p < 0.001$). 89 per cent of respondents who reported knowing RBL/poppy charities and 87 per cent of those who knew of Help for Heroes had purchased a poppy (data not shown). Non-purchase of a poppy was not associated with respondents' political views on whether the UK was right to become involved in the recent Iraq or Afghanistan missions (data not shown).

The Implications for Veterans' Charities

Almost two-thirds of respondents were able to name at least one charity for ex-service personnel, and the majority had purchased a poppy during the 2010 Poppy Appeal. Awareness of veterans' charities was highest amongst older age groups, people with educational qualifications and those with military connections. Women, older age groups, those with no qualifications and those with military connections were the most likely to donate to the annual Poppy

Figure 4: Non-Purchase of a Poppy during the 2010 Poppy Appeal by Socio-Demographics.



Note: Question asked as part of self-completion questionnaire; N=2,845. 'Don't Know'/'Other'/'Refusal'/non-responses not included (n=3-493).

Appeal. These variations in awareness and donations suggest areas where such charities may wish to improve engagement and knowledge.

Public Awareness of Charities for Ex-Service Personnel

While nearly two-thirds of those surveyed were aware of a veterans' charity or organisation, there were clear differences by socio-demographic group. More than half of those under 35 years of age were not aware of any charitable organisations for ex-service personnel, although this is unlikely to be due to a lack of respect or support for the UK armed forces or veterans and may be related to a lack of concern with general military matters.¹⁵ Whether this reflects a wider generational shift

is not clear. However, as the older generation fades, it will be important to monitor levels of awareness among younger people; if they remain low then the environment for service charities may become much more competitive unless opportunities are taken to raise awareness of this subject amongst these age groups. The greater level of knowledge of such charities among those with any form of educational qualification may be mediated by their greater interest in media or current affairs,¹⁶ and the increased media coverage that veterans' organisations have received over recent years. Meanwhile, it is unsurprising that those with military connections were more likely to know of veterans' charities, given their proximity to the service community.

However, there is room for improvement as nearly 30 per cent of those with such connections reported no knowledge of any veterans' charities. Increasing the awareness of these organisations amongst these groups may enable friends and relatives to more effectively direct veterans to possible services for any issues they may face.

These differences in familiarity with veterans' charities across society suggest that more could be done to improve knowledge and awareness of their existence and work amongst certain groups. Considering the potential to increase voluntary donations to this sector, this variation should be reflected on by veterans' charities when developing future funding strategies.

The largest veterans' charities, Help for Heroes and RBL and associated poppy charities, were the most familiar to the public, possibly reflecting the impact of larger budgets for donation and media campaigns compared with smaller charities. While it is hardly surprising that the largest charities are the most well-known, the large gap in terms of popular awareness between them and smaller charities may have serious implications for the latter. Although co-ordination and sharing of donations does occur,¹⁷ increased collaboration between organisations should be undertaken to ensure that donations reach those organisations that require such support, especially where they are providing specialised services. One such example might be charities providing mental health services targeting the ex-service community.

The specific strategies used by individual organisations to increase donations and engagement are likely to explain some of the differences in awareness of particular charities among different sectors of society. Although Help for Heroes is a relatively new charity, its high-profile social media campaigns and endorsements by celebrities and royalty may explain the greater recognition of this charity amongst younger age groups, as well as amongst the friends and family of current and former military personnel. This approach has also allowed the charity to develop a large media presence,¹⁸ which may account for the

greater level of brand awareness amongst those with educational qualifications.

Donations to the Annual Poppy Appeal

Most of those surveyed – 78 per cent – reported purchasing a poppy during the 2010 Poppy Appeal. However, as the survey did not ask about donations to other UK armed forces charities or campaigns, the true number of people supporting veterans by such means may in fact be higher. This finding is also higher than more recent estimates of 68 per cent purchasing a poppy in 2013.¹⁹ While at first glance this may seem like a worrying decrease in support for the Poppy campaign, it is important to note that this campaign was not the only service charity the public were donating to and is likely to reflect competition for voluntary donations during a time of economic recession rather than an overall drop in support.

This willingness of the British public to support veterans through voluntary donations may stem from inaccurate public perceptions of available support for returning personnel from government sources as seen amongst a similar proportion of the public and media stories about the poor treatment and care of wounded personnel.²⁰

As in previous research indicating that women tend to be more generous in making voluntary donations than men,²¹ women were also more likely to have bought a poppy, despite being less aware of RBL/poppy charities. Although the difference in awareness of RBL/poppy charities among men and women was small, this discrepancy hints at a possible disconnection between the campaign and the charity it is fundraising among women. This gap may be of concern to veteran organisations and an issue that they might seek to clarify and address by specifically targeting women in order to raise awareness.

With younger people being less likely to know a charity for ex-service personnel, it is not unexpected that they were less likely to report buying a poppy during the 2010 campaign, although this may also be related to the lower levels of voluntary donations amongst younger age groups.²² Given the increased

knowledge of Help for Heroes amongst younger people, it may be that these age groups are choosing to donate to this charity instead, but this possibility was not addressed by the survey.

Dissecting the results by levels of education, graduates were less likely to buy a poppy during the 2010 appeal than people in other educational groups. As those in related managerial and professional occupations are some of the highest contributors to charities in the UK,²³ this hints at a potential tension between financial support for forces personnel and support for the tasks that the military is required to carry out.²⁴ In contrast, the majority of those with no qualifications had purchased a poppy, despite being the educational group with the lowest proportion reporting knowledge of veterans' charities or organisations. That people in this group who did report knowledge of a charity were most likely to be aware of RBL or the associated poppy charities might explain this discrepancy; knowledge of the charities' fundraising efforts is also likely to be high as a result of this increased awareness.

Respondents with military connections were more likely to have bought a poppy than those without, possibly due to a greater understanding of the support needed by military personnel and their families.

It is not surprising that participants who did not know of any veterans' charities or organisations were less likely to have bought a poppy. However, it is interesting that donating to the Poppy Appeal was not only associated with knowledge of the organisations it raises money for – RBL and the poppy charities – but with awareness of Help for Heroes and other service charities and organisations as well. This suggests that knowledge of any veterans' charity may be beneficial for increasing donations in this sector and that competition for voluntary donations may not be as important for larger veterans' charities, given their prominent public profile.

Donations in this sector have been shown to have positive effects on contributions to other ex-service charities, with half of those responding to a recent survey indicating that they would

donate to other charitable organisations after learning of the support that forces charities provide for war veterans and serving troops.²⁵ Smaller charities may therefore also benefit from an increase in public awareness of this sector. The finding that people who did not know of any veterans' charities or organisations were more than twice as unlikely to have bought a poppy suggests that improving overall knowledge may lead to increased financial contributions. If overall awareness of veterans' charities is poor, contributions may be restricted to those larger charities that can afford large-scale campaigns to attract donations, confirming earlier arguments that service charities need to continue to do more to co-ordinate their work in a challenging and competitive environment.²⁶

Attitudes towards the recent missions in Iraq and Afghanistan were not found to influence donations towards the Poppy Appeal, indicating a more nuanced opinion of the armed forces amongst the British public than might previously have been imagined. This clear capability for separating the politics of the campaigns from the politics of support for military veterans is best illustrated by the fact that despite opposition to these missions, more than 90 per cent of those surveyed support veterans of these campaigns.²⁷ While opposition to the missions remains, the level of public endorsement of the armed forces is encouraging. Whether this support remains once the UK armed forces have withdrawn from Afghanistan, and the public eye, remains to be seen. Veterans' charities may find themselves in a much less favourable in five to ten years' time if public opinion of military personnel becomes less positive – and perhaps more indifferent – in light of a reduced public profile of the military post-Afghanistan.

There is also the potential for austerity measures introduced in Britain since 2010 to have a major impact on the amount the public is able and willing to donate to charitable organisations, leading to increased competition not just in this sector but across all charity groups. How this sector responds to this pressure is important: while drawing attention to the needs of this group is important, if too much emphasis is placed on issues

such as mental health, this may result in increased stigmatisation of military veterans.

These findings suggest that a large proportion of the British public is willing to contribute financially to support for military veterans, although the amount donated was not measured. While there continues to be concern about the potential effect of the global recession and the withdrawal from Afghanistan on voluntary financial support for this sector, reports suggest that the current economic crisis has had less of an impact on donations to military charities in comparison to other charity sectors. Contributions to UK armed forces charities increased by 26 per cent in 2008–10, while donations to other large charities fell by 4 per cent.²⁸ Despite the concern about financial support for veterans' charities following the withdrawal from Afghanistan, recent survey results indicate that nearly three-quarters of the public will continue to support events for such charities once British troops return home.²⁹ This is promising news for the veterans' charity sector, although to which charities the public will donate remains unknown.

Another key question is who should assume the responsibility of caring for military veterans with health problems related to their service. Although donations to veterans' charities indicate

that the public sees itself as playing a role in supporting ex-soldiers, how much of this stems from a perceived failure of the government to provide services for this group is not clear.³⁰

Conclusion

Most of the members of the British public surveyed in the 2011 BSA seemed aware of at least one veterans' charity and had made voluntary contributions to the annual Poppy Appeal. However, the variations in awareness and donations across groups within society are suggestive of areas in which charities may wish to increase public engagement and knowledge. While it is not certain how British public opinion will change following the withdrawal of UK combat troops from Afghanistan by the end of 2014, the current high levels of support for and interest in the UK armed forces provide an excellent – although possibly very limited – window of opportunity in which favourable public opinion of the military could be used to build on current public recognition of the veterans' charity sector and increase voluntary contributions. ■

Rachael Gribble is a former Research Assistant and PhD student, King's Centre for Military Health Research, King's College London.

Simon Wessely is Professor of Psychological Medicine, Vice Dean, Chair of Psychological Medicine and Director of the King's Centre for Military Health Research, King's College London.

Susan Klein is Professor of Trauma Research and Director of the Aberdeen Centre for Trauma Research, Institute for Health & Welfare Research, Robert Gordon University.

David A Alexander is Emeritus Professor of Mental Health and was formerly Director of the Aberdeen Centre for Trauma Research, Institute for Health & Welfare Research, Robert Gordon University.

Christopher Dandeker is Professor of Military Sociology, Department of War Studies, and Co-Director of the King's Centre for Military Health Research, King's College London.

Nicola T Fear is Reader in Military Epidemiology and Co-Director of the King's Centre for Military Health Research, King's College London.

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Notes

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- 6 Claire Miller, 'Veterans and Charities Call for Tighter Controls on Mental Health Treatment', *Wales Online*, 28 February 2013; *BBC News*, "'Veteran' in Charity Fraud Arrest', 23 November 2010; *BBC News*, 'Forces for Good Fraud: Veterans' Grants Controls Call', 20 February 2013.
- 7 Helen McCartney, 'Hero, Victim or Villain? The Public Image of the British Soldier and its Implications for Defense Policy', *Defense and Security Analysis* (Vol. 27, No. 1, 2011), pp. 43–54.
- 8 See Rudyard Kipling's poem 'Tommy', first published in 1890 under the title

- 'The Queen's Uniform', available at <http://www.kipling.org.uk/poems_tommy.htm>, accessed 27 January 2014. Of particular note is the last stanza:
 You talk o' better food for us, an' schools, an' fires, an' all:
 We'll wait for extry rations if you treat us rational.
 Don't mess about the cook-room slops, but prove it to our face
 The Widow's Uniform is not the soldier-man's disgrace.
 For it's Tommy this, an' Tommy that, an' Chuck him out, the brute! "
 But it's "Saviour of 'is country " when the guns begin to shoot;
 An' it's Tommy this, an' Tommy that, an' anything you please;
 An' 'Tommy ain't a bloomin' fool – you bet that Tommy sees!
- 9 See The Royal British Legion, 'About the Poppy Appeal', <<http://www.britishlegion.org.uk/get-involved/poppy-appeal/about-the-poppy-appeal>>, accessed 27 January 2014.
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- 11 The educational categories are: Left school with no qualifications; O Level/CSE qualification or equivalent (left school aged 16 years); higher education or A Level qualification or equivalent (left school aged 18 or obtained post-secondary school qualification – for example, a diploma); graduate (first/Bachelor degree or postgraduate qualification).
- 12 ??????? Text missing
- 13 Park et al. (eds), *British Social Attitudes*.
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- 27 Gribble et al., 'The UK Armed Forces'.
- 28 CAF/NCVO, 'UK Giving 2012'.
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