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Ex-Armed Forces Personnel and the Criminal Justice System

Emmeline Taylor

There is increasing concern that many ex-services personnel end up in the criminal justice system. Hitherto little research has examined the relationship between military service and criminal behaviour, and what limited research has been conducted primarily focuses on serving military personnel committing crimes in times of conflict. Two pieces are summarised here; Treadwell's (2010) paper on the phenomenon of ex-armed forces personnel as perpetrators of crime, and the findings from a survey conducted by the probation service union, Napo, in 2008 to try to ascertain the prevalence of the problem.

Treadwell and Napo identify a growing body of evidence to suggest that ex-armed forces personnel are disproportionately represented in criminal populations. A pilot study conducted by the Prison In-reach Project (PIR) in HMP Dartmoor concluded that 16.75% of those surveyed had undertaken military service. Similarly, research by Veterans in Prisons in 10 prisons found 118 former Royal navy, RAF or army personnel out of a population of 1,191. Extrapolating the findings from the survey and applying it to the prison population as a whole would suggest that 9.1% (approximately 7,350 individuals) of the prison population in England and Wales would be ex-armed services personnel at any one time.

Napo's survey of its members concluded that the number of ex-services personnel in UK prisons has 'reached alarming levels' (2008: 1). Their study of 74 case histories from 22 Probation Areas suggests that large numbers 'are being convicted for a range of offences, primarily involving violence, within a short period following discharge from the forces' (2008: 1).

The reasons posited are multifarious. Some service personnel come from difficult family backgrounds prior to enlisting, become institutionalised into the services and ill-prepared for life when they leave. Another hypothesis is that ex-services personnel are attracted to the excitement of crime as they quickly become bored of what they perceive to be a relatively mundane civilian life. Others turn to crime because they need money and can see little opportunity to finance themselves through legitimate means. Treadwell asserts that the threat of imprisonment is not considered to be of great consequence given the similarities he affirms can be identified between the military barracks and the prison. Napo's analysis revealed that the majority of offences were drug or alcohol related. This suggests a high level of substance misuse serving to exacerbate the myriad of problems already being experienced by recently discharged personnel.

Furthermore, the case histories examined by Napo show that the majority of the ex-soldiers had suffered from post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and few had received any counselling or support after discharge. It also appears that it is not common for their status to be identified at arrest or the committal to custody stage.

Despite the Centre for Policy Studies suggesting that ex-soldiers could be retrained as teachers upon completion of their service (following a successful initiative in the US), Treadwell asserts that such an opportunity is unlikely for the

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majority of returning personnel. As such, he postulates that many of the soldiers currently on service in Iraq and Afghanistan will end up in the criminal justice system, and a number of them in prison.

Treadwell, J (2010) COUNTERBLAST - More casualties of war? Ex-military personnel in the Criminal Justice System. The Howard Journal Vol 49. No.1. pp73-77

Napo (2008) Ex-Armed Forces Personnel and the Criminal Justice System. The report is available for download from:

<http://www.napo.org.uk/publications/Briefings.cfm>