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Veterans – evidence summary

Contents

Overview 2

Challenges faced by veterans 3

Challenges faced by specific groups of veterans 4

LGBTQ+ 4

Ethnic minorities 4

Disability 5

Female veterans 5

Older veterans 5

Search strategy 6

References 6

Disclaimer: This evidence summary includes relevant literature identified from searches on the above topic. It is not an exhaustive list, it presents key finding and not recommendations for practice.

Overview

For the purpose of this report, veterans will be determined according to the UK Government definition.

> “Veterans are defined as anyone who has served for at least 1 day in His Majesty’s Armed Forces (Regular or Reserve) or Merchant Mariners who have seen duty on legally defined military operations.”

This report looks at the issues that are faced by veterans. It then looks at additional issues that specific groups of veterans may experience. These include veterans who are LGBTQ+, ethnic minorities, disabled, female, and older people.

The report focusses on research and reports based mainly on Wales or the UK. Research from elsewhere is only included when relevant.

Challenges faced by veterans

Although many veterans have positive experiences during and after their time in service, some do not, and some may face challenges when returning to civilian life or post-service. These might include:

- Not being identified as a veteran by services [1]
- Struggling to adapt to civilian life, including a lack of support to transition [1–3]
- Not being used to the slower pace and lack of structure of civilian life [3,4]
- Undervaluing or struggling to see the transferability of their skills [1–4]
- Issues finding work, and a lack of support to transition to civilian work [1,4]
- Not knowing about or understanding the support available [2,4]
- Needing support to understand finances [1]
- Difficulties knowing how to access services previously provided by the military, like health and pastoral support [4]
- Difficulty accessing dental care [4–6]
- Feeling lonely / isolated and difficulties making social connections [1,3,5]
- Mental health disorders [7]
- Reluctance to seek mental health support due to perceived stigma [7]
- Increased risk of post-traumatic stress disorder for those with high combat experience, pre-military vulnerabilities, and adverse childhood experiences [7]
- Lack of provision for complex mental health issues [6]
- Those who experienced bullying, discrimination or harassment while in service are more likely to need support as a veteran [8]
- Needing tailored treatment for substance misuse [1]
- Needing support to find suitable affordable housing [1,4]

It is important to note that while there can be preconceived ideas that post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is common in veterans, prevalence of the disorder may actually be similar to the general population.[7]

The families of veterans can face challenges themselves. These might include:

- Lack of recognition of the difficulties families of veterans face [1]
- Needing support finding employment [2]
- Needing support to find a school place [1,2,4]
- Needing support to access healthcare [1,2]
- Moving house and losing connections [1]

Challenges faced by specific groups of veterans

LGBTQ+

Prior to 2000 there was a ban on LGBTQ+ individuals in the British Armed Forces, which may impact how they experienced their time in service. Veterans who are LGBTQ+ and served during the ban may face additional challenges. These might include:

- Finding it difficult to engage with services / seek support [2,9,10]
- Having been criminalised for being LGBTQ+ while in service [9,11,12]
- Having had to conceal their identity / conform to heterosexual norms [9–13]
- Having experienced bullying, coercion and sexual abuse [10,11,13,14]
- People questioning their LGBTQ+ identity [9,13]
- Having been subjected to intrusive, brutal and abusive investigations [9,12,14]
- Having been discharged and stripped of medals for being LGBTQ+ [9,12–14]
- A lack of support for transition to civilian life, particularly if discharged (health, welfare support, money, housing, employment) [9,12,14]
- Mental health issues including suicide [9,12,14]
- Feelings of shame, fear, and low self-esteem [9,10,12,14]
- Social isolation and loneliness [9,12,13]
- Relationship difficulties [14]
- Homophobia and prejudice [9,10,12,14]
- Homelessness, unemployment and financial difficulties [9,12,14]

Ethnic minorities

Veterans who are from ethnic minorities may face additional challenges. These might include:

- Greater risk of maladaptive behaviours, such as gambling [10]
- Being more likely to use veteran specific health services, highlighting that there may be barriers to them accessing standard healthcare [10]
- Language barriers or cultural attitudes to mental health acting as additional barriers for some groups [10]

Disability

Disabled veterans may face additional challenges. These might include:

- Being more likely to feel lonely [5]
- Being more likely to access services from veteran or service charity [8]
- Being more likely to experience mental health difficulties [10]

Female veterans

Female veterans may face additional challenges. These might include:

- Higher rates of mental health issues and formal mental health support [7,15]
- Higher risk of specific military experiences, such as unwanted sexual behaviour, harassment, violence, assault or military sexual trauma [3,7,10,15,16]
- Being afraid to voice concerns resulting in their needs not being met [15]
- Being in a male dominated environment, focussed on the needs of men [15,16]
- Lack of specialist women-specific care [10]
- Lack of consideration of needs of women in veteran support services [16]
- Being less likely to be satisfied with their time in service [15]
- Feminine norms being in conflict with masculine military norms [3]
- Finding it hard to identify as a veteran [10,16,17]

Older veterans

Older veterans may have some additional needs. These might include:

- Some veterans living in care homes wanting connections to the wider veteran community [18]
- Having different care preferences from non-veterans [18]
- Distress due to the loss of a physically active life in care homes [18]
- Institutional setting of care homes may trigger past traumas [18]
- The co-occurrence of post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and dementia posing additional challenges [18]

Search strategy

Basic searches of Senedd Research, Gov.wales, and Google were completed. A detailed search of Scopus was also completed.

Scopus

veteran* OR ex-serviceman OR ex-servicewoman OR ex-serviceperson* OR ex-servicemen OR ex-servicewomen (abstract)
AND
need* OR requirement* OR demand* OR support* OR assistance OR help OR barrier* OR challenge* OR obstacle* OR issue* OR problem* OR difficult* OR concern* OR risk* (abstract)
AND
england OR scotland OR wales OR "united kingdom" OR UK OR Britain (affiliation country)
Limit: 2021-2026

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