

Sociologist finds combat veterans face more lifelong socioeconomic challenges

August 2 2010

From the many images sent home from foreign battlefields over the last several decades, Americans have viewed the plight of their country's combat-weary veterans as stark and often iconic scenes that seem somehow frozen in time. But recent research at Washington State University (WSU) suggests that, for many U.S. veterans, combat is a defining experience that often sets the trajectory of the balance of their lives.

In research published in the August 2010 issue of the [American Sociological Review](#) (ASR), Alair MacLean, an assistant professor with the Department of Sociology at WSU Vancouver, reports that in comparison to both non-veterans and veterans who never engaged in combat, Americans returning from combat face significant socioeconomic challenges, as evidenced by consistently higher rates of disability and [unemployment](#).

"Veterans who saw combat started their work lives at a relative disadvantage that they were unable to overcome," MacLean said. "Soldiers exposed to combat were more likely than non-combat veterans to be disabled and unemployed in their mid-20s and to remain so throughout their worklife."

Using data taken from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics, a longitudinal survey of families and individuals which has been conducted annually since 1968, MacLean studied the characteristics of both veterans and non-veterans who would have been between the ages

of 25 and 55 in any year between 1968 and 2003. The sample included men who served or otherwise would have become eligible for military service during [World War II](#), as well as during the Korean, post-Korean, Viet Nam, and post-Viet Nam eras.

MacLean said the rate at which both non-veterans and non-combat veterans reported themselves to be disabled remained fairly consistent at roughly 10 percent of the population in each of the years reviewed by the study.

"Compared with these two groups of men, combat veterans were disabled at relatively high rates," she said. "In most survey years, they were more likely than non-veterans to be disabled. In all survey years, they were more likely than non-combat veterans to be disabled."

Additionally, MacLean found that combat veterans were more likely than the other groups to become disabled over time. "In 1968, slightly over 10 percent (of combat veterans) were disabled. This increased to over 20 percent in 2003," she said.

And while combat veterans tended to be employed in the initial years of the surveyed period at higher rates than the other two groups, MacLean said they reported significantly higher levels of unemployment than either non-veterans or non-combat veterans in most years after 1975.

"What the data suggests is that combat may scar veterans who experience it, leading them to be less able to find work between the ages of 25 and 55, the prime working years," she said.

Provided by American Sociological Association

Citation: Sociologist finds combat veterans face more lifelong socioeconomic challenges (2010,

August 2) retrieved 26 June 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2010-08-sociologist-combat-veterans-lifelong-socioeconomic.html>

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