



## Editors' Introduction

Amy Kate Bailey<sup>1</sup> · Meredith Kleykamp<sup>2</sup>

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The United States military is a key state institution and the nation's largest employer, providing competitive wages and comprehensive family benefits packages for workers who typically enter with only a high school diploma. Today's 1.3 million active duty personnel and 800,000 reservists outnumber the domestic employees of the largest civilian employer, Walmart (Walmart 2018). They are disproportionately male, African American (Kelty et al. 2010), rural, Southern, and from lower middle- or working-class backgrounds (Bozick and DeLuca 2011; Office of the Under Secretary of Defense, Personnel and Readiness 2018). These populations are of key interest to demographic and policy scholars, and those for whom questions of inequality loom large. Yet the relationship between the military and processes affecting stratification and social mobility remains under-studied by many social scientists. The papers in this special issue highlight demographic processes and mechanisms associated with inequality among military populations. Our goal is to encourage greater attention to military status among social researchers, and perhaps to spark an interest in scholarship focusing directly on military and veteran families.

In 2018, the United States observes two milestones: the 45th anniversary of the 1973 transition to the All-Volunteer Force, and the 15th year since the 2003 armed invasion of Iraq. These commemorations provide an opportunity to reflect on the role of the U.S. military, and especially how its relationship to dimensions of social inequality may have changed over time. This special issue focuses on the links between military status and a number of key social and economic metrics, particularly whether and how contemporary patterns conform to or diverge from those observed in earlier years and among various cohorts. Scholarship of this kind is important as we continue military engagement in the Middle East and parts of

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The guest editors' names are presented in alphabetical order, and not reflective of relative contributions. This was a collaborative effort, and the guest editors should receive equal attribution.

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✉ Amy Kate Bailey  
akbailey@uic.edu

Meredith Kleykamp  
kleykamp@umd.edu

<sup>1</sup> University of Illinois at Chicago, Chicago, IL, USA

<sup>2</sup> University of Maryland, College Park, MD, USA

Africa with an ever-shrinking, and increasingly non-representative, military population. This special issue of *Population Research and Policy Review* highlights scholarship by several leading demographic researchers illustrating the far-reaching implications of military service on demographic processes that are linked to social inequality, with racial inequality as a common thread through most papers.

The papers included in this collection highlight important demographic areas with direct overlay onto racial inequality, including family formation, health care utilization, mortality, and home ownership. They include a cluster of papers focused on connections between the armed forces, the labor market, the welfare state, and economic inequality. This body of work addresses the unequal paths into military service, other post-secondary institutions, and the carceral state, as well as the consequences of military employment for labor market outcomes and social mobility across the life-course. Together, these papers convey insights into how and under what circumstances military service ameliorates or exacerbates economic disadvantage and racial inequality.

The first paper tackles the issue of veteran status differences in mortality, with a focus on the role of the VA and military health care coverage in veterans' mortality. One of the major benefits available to most veterans (and some of their family members) is free or reduced cost health care coverage through the VA or the Department of Defense. Landes, London, and Wilmoth examine mortality differentials between veterans and non-veterans, paying particular attention to variation among veterans based on the source of their health care. Veterans experience higher rates of mortality compared to non-veterans, particularly those veterans who rely exclusively on VA care services. This disadvantage persists even once socioeconomic, demographic, and prior health status has been taken into account. Because eligibility for VA services and veterans' health care coverage is partially determined by having a service-connected disability or meeting means-tested standards for indigence, however, this suggests that issues of selection partially govern the observed disparities in health outcomes. These findings also signal an important insight into policy-linked questions about both military enlistment and public provision of health care, and contribute to an active debate on how pre-selection characteristics, cohort of service, and experiences while in uniform might drive observed differences in health outcomes (see, e.g., Conley and Heerwig 2012; MacLean and Edwards 2010; Mohamed et al. 2009; Rackin 2017; Sheehan et al. 2015; Teachman 2010).

Bailey and Sykes<sup>1</sup> also interrogate how pre-enlistment characteristics and cohort of service might shape the longer-term consequences of being a veteran. Their paper focuses on the role that having been in the armed forces might play in facilitating or hampering intergenerational mobility for men from the World War II, Vietnam, and early Volunteer era among black and white men. They find that, in general, once family background characteristics are controlled, there are few consistent benefits associated with veteran status. If anything, it appears that white men from more

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<sup>1</sup> We are indebted to Jay Teachman, who served as editor for the co-authored manuscripts submitted by the guest editors. He oversaw the peer review process, and made editorial decisions regarding the inclusion of these papers.

advantaged backgrounds are able to parlay their veteran status into greater occupational mobility, and some disadvantaged men fare worse when they are veterans. These results challenge the popular notion that the military is a reliable mechanism facilitating upward mobility for the disadvantaged. While prior scholarship is equivocal on the benefits accruing to veterans in the civilian labor market, much of it finds that disadvantaged men and black men enjoy the greatest benefit (Angrist 1998; Teachman 2004; Teachman and Tedrow 2007). This may be due, in part, to a general focus on income and occupational status, without accounting for family background characteristics. The work by Bailey and Sykes suggests again that selection processes, and era of service to a lesser degree, are linked to observed outcomes for veterans.

Two papers center attention on how the military can operate as a force for racial integration. A key feature of having experience in the armed forces has historically been—and continues to be—exposure to other Americans from a diversity of social, geographic, and racial, or ethnic backgrounds. Indeed, the rates of racial intermarriage are higher among military populations than the civilian population across multiple cohorts of veterans. Shattuck and Kleykamp (2018)<sup>2</sup> use data on seven cohorts of married men across six decades to evaluate whether the veteran intermarriage difference results from compositional differences in the veteran population, or from exposure to a more racially integrated social environment in the military. Decomposition analyses that account for the characteristics of veterans that are conducive to interracial marriage—race-ethnic composition, educational attainment, employment, and incomes—reveal a substantial difference between veterans and non-veterans in interracial marriage net of these characteristics. This pattern also held true over the course of the transition from earlier to later cohorts, in which the composition of intermarried men changed from having overall lower to overall higher SES relative to monoracially married men, and the composition of veterans changed from having overall higher to somewhat lower SES relative to non-veterans. They conclude that (unobserved) features of the military context and experience shape the likelihood of intermarriage.

Fischer and Rugh investigate one of the core benefit programs available to military veterans—the VA home loan program—and how it shapes socioeconomic mobility and racial residential integration among veterans. They find that VA lending offers a key means to home ownership for blacks, comprising 25% of all home loans to black men today. It also fosters racial residential integration, with both black and white VA loan users residing in more racially integrated neighborhoods than those using conventional mortgage products. And by facilitating home ownership in more integrated neighborhoods, VA loans may indirectly build greater wealth for black veterans through greater home equity and appreciation. This insight offers a counterpoint to the detrimental consequences of state housing policy, through

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<sup>2</sup> Through an error in the journal production process, this article was mistakenly published in the volume 37(2), ahead of the production of this special volume. Although it could not be re-printed, it should be considered as part of the collection of papers for this thematic edition.

redlining and discriminatory access to VA home loans (Bradford 1977; Katznelson 2006), on wealth accumulation among black Americans.

A final set of two papers build on the questions of who chooses to serve in a volunteer military and what characteristics are associated with joining the military. Given the changing consequences of military service across generations, and the implications of military service for racial integration, the findings of these papers challenge whether the military of the next generation will continue these trends, by showing possible changes to who enlists and why.

MacLean asks how the social background characteristics of enlistees may have shifted as the U.S. military engaged in Iraq and Afghanistan during the middle 2000s. She finds that contrary to periods of relative peace during the AVF, as well as to popular predictions of a “poverty draft,” the young people who joined the armed forces during this time period appeared to be from working- and lower middle-class backgrounds, but were not particularly disadvantaged. She identifies key gender differences in the role of race in military enlistment: Among women, blacks were significantly more likely to enlist, net of other socioeconomic and demographic factors, while among men, she does not observe a higher level of enlistment among blacks. Her findings augment growing evidence that once social class background is controlled, black men are no longer joining the armed forces in disproportionate numbers (Kleykamp 2006; Lutz 2008).

Han draws on NLSY97 data to compare a variety of first transitions that young people make as they leave high school, classifying them into “positive” transitions—college and the military—and “negative” transitions—long-term unemployment and incarceration, as compared to entering the labor market directly. The inclusion of incarceration and long-term unemployment distinguish key transitions that have become features of modern life for the less-advantaged, and offer new insights into possible reasons for the declining enlistment of black men. He finds that white men are more likely to experience a positive transition when they leave school, as compared to black men, and that these positive transition states last longer for whites than they do for blacks.

It is worthy to note, as does Han, that shifts in military policy, themselves, may have shaped the increase in negative transitions among young black men. In 1979, just a few years into the All-Volunteer Force, a quarter of employed young black men were on active duty in the military (Grissmer 1992, p. 37). As enlistment criteria were tightened and largely excluded those lacking a high school diploma, greater proportions of black men were squeezed out, increasing competition for low-wage jobs (Angrist 1993; Boesel 1992) and undoubtedly expanding the pool of men at risk of incarceration (Pettit 2012; Western 2006; Pettit and Western 2004). More highly qualified black men were likely drawn to college enrollment (Kleykamp 2010), but the less-qualified now appear, as Han identifies, to be in the pool of long-term unemployed.

Taken as a whole, this collection of papers engages with extant bodies of literature, challenging some notions and helping to build evidence for ongoing debates. In toto, they suggest that the relationship between military status and metrics of inequality varies by race and over time, and that the processes governing social mobility among those with military experience are complex and dynamic. These

works also place in harsh relief the need for scholars to more fully incorporate these individuals, and their families, into “mainstream” inquiry, and to identify military populations and military experiences as playing important and distinctive roles in processes of social equality and inequality.

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