



IRAQ *and* AFGHANISTAN VETERANS *of* AMERICA

Careers After Combat

Employment and Education Challenges for Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans

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Between the often-difficult transition to civilian life and the struggling American economy, hundreds of thousands of new veterans are facing an uncertain economic future. Already, among Iraq and Afghanistan-era veterans of the active-duty military, the unemployment rate was over 8 percent in 2007, which may be as much as 2 percent higher than their civilian peers.¹

- **Many Iraq and Afghanistan veterans leave the active-duty military only to find that their skills are not understood by civilian employers or face employment discrimination because of the stigma associated with psychological injuries.**
 - 61 percent of employers do not believe they have “a complete understanding of the qualifications ex-service members offer,” and more than three-quarters of veterans entering the civilian workforce reported “an inability to effectively translate their military skills to civilian terms.”²
 - Almost one in three troops who test positive for a mental health problem worry about the effect it will have on their career.³
 - According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness, “One in three individuals with severe mental illness has been turned down for a job for which he or she was qualified because of a psychiatric label.”⁴
- **Veterans recently separated from military service earn lower wages and have lower incomes than their nonmilitary peers. Based on the experiences of previous generations of veterans, this trend may continue for years to come.**
 - The wage gap is especially significant for those with college degrees; these recently separated servicemembers earn on average almost \$10,000 less per year than their nonveteran counterparts.⁵
 - Female veterans earn almost \$10,000 less a year than male veterans,⁶ and they often struggle to find jobs that pay what their military career did.⁷
 - Caucasian veterans of Vietnam War experienced “substantial” earnings losses compared to their nonveteran peers, “losses equivalent to roughly two years of lost experience.”⁸ The Vietnam veteran income gap did not completely disappear until these veterans reached their fifties.
- **Although their civilian jobs are legally protected by USERRA,⁹ National Guardsmen and reservists returning from combat in Iraq and Afghanistan are not being promptly reemployed, or are not receiving the pay, pensions, health care coverage, and other benefits that they are**

entitled to. Reserve component small-business owners are especially challenged by frequent and lengthy deployments.

- According to the Department of Defense, “Over 10 percent of guardsmen and reservists report having problems when they return to work.”¹⁰ In FY2006, there were more than 1,300 formal USERRA complaints.¹¹ Additionally, there were more than 10,000 informal complaints reported to the DOD during fiscal years 2004 and 2005.¹²
 - But many more troops are not reporting violations, perhaps discouraged by the difficulties with filing a complaint or they are unaware of USERRA protections altogether. Of the tens of thousands of reserve component troops who have suffered this discrimination, approximately three-quarters of them did not seek assistance.¹³
 - It also can take months or years to have their complaints investigated. On average, troops are forced to wait 619 days, or nearly two years, to have their USERRA complaints fully addressed.¹⁴
 - More than 40 percent of Guardsmen and Reservists lose income when they are mobilized.¹⁵ The situation is even worse for self-employment reservists: 55 percent of lose income when they mobilize, with an average income loss of \$6,500.¹⁶
- **The federal government currently offers a patchwork of programs to help veterans secure civilian employment after their military service. In addition, the landmark “Post-9/11” GI Bill became law in June 2008, promising to make college affordable for Iraq and Afghanistan veterans and dramatically improve their future economic opportunities. But for the hundreds of thousands of new veterans seeking employment or struggling to reintegrate into their civilian jobs, more must be done.**

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¹ The unemployment rate of Iraq and Afghanistan-era veterans as a whole is 6.1 percent, a rate that is not statistically different from their civilian peers (that is to say, civilians with the same demographic traits as the military population, who are younger and more male than the American population as a whole). Those leaving the *active duty* have a 2% higher rate of unemployment – about 8%. But it is important to note that this is not a perfect comparison. The demographics of the active-duty military are somewhat different from the National Guard and Reserves, and therefore will not match perfectly with the demographic Department of Labor used to compare the military as a whole to the civilian population. For more information, visit: Department of Labor, “Employment Situation of Veterans: 2007,” April 10, 2008, p. 1: <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/vet.pdf>.

² Military.com, “Military.com Study Reveals Profound Disconnect between Employers and Transitioning Military Personnel,” November 5, 2007: <http://www.military.com/aboutus/twocolumn/0,15929,PRarticle110507,00.html>.

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- ³ Mental Health Advisory Team (MHAT) IV Final Report,” November 17, 2006.
- ⁴ “Stigma creates employment barriers,” *USA Today* (Society for the Advancement of Education), February 1998: http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1272/is_n2633_v126/ai_20305748.
- ⁵ Abt. Associates, Inc. “Employment Histories Report, Final Compilation Report,” March 24, 2008: http://www1.va.gov/vetdata/docs/Employment_History_080324.pdf.
- ⁶ United States Census Bureau, “Census Study Shows Women Veterans Earn More and Work Longer Hours,” June 17, 2008: <http://www.census.gov/Press-Release/www/releases/archives/women/012062.html>.
- ⁷ American Legion, “Women Veterans: Identifying Risks, Services and Prevention,” p. 3: <http://www.legion.org/documents/pdf/womensguide.pdf>.
- ⁸ Angrist and Chen, “Long Term Consequences of Vietnam-Era Conscriptio: Schooling, Experience and Earnings,” National Bureau of Economic Research working paper, September 2007.
- ⁹ “USERRA protects the public and private sector civilian job rights and benefits of veterans and members of the armed forces, including National Guard and Reserve members. The law prohibits employer discrimination due to military obligations and provides reemployment rights to returning servicemembers.” McWilliam, p. 2. For more information about the Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act, visit <http://www.esgr.org/userrathelaw.asp?p=43>.
- ¹⁰ “Reservists’ Rocky Return to Job Market,” CBS News, November 2, 2008: http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2008/10/30/60minutes/main4558315.shtml?source=RSSattr=HOME_4558315.
- ¹¹ Office of the Assistant Secretary for Veterans’ Employment and Training, U.S. Department of Labor, “USERRA Fiscal Year 2006 Annual Report to Congress,” February 2008, p. 4: http://www.dol.gov/vets/regs/fedreg/final/Final-OMB_Approved-USERRA-06_Annual%20Report.pdf.
- ¹² GAO-07-259, “Military Personnel: Additional Actions Needed to Improve Oversight of Reserve Employment Issues,” February 2007: <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d07259.pdf>.
- ¹³ United States Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee, “Kennedy Holds Hearing on Veterans’ Employment Issues,” November 8, 2007: http://help.senate.gov/Maj_press/2007_11_08_b.pdf. See also: GAO-06-60, “Military Personnel: Federal Management of Servicemember Employment Rights Can Be Further Improved,” October 2005, p. 5: <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d0660.pdf>.
- ¹⁴ GAO-06-60, “Military Personnel: Federal Management of Servicemember Employment Rights Can Be Further Improved,” October 2005, p. 6: <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d0660.pdf>.
- ¹⁵ “41 percent of drilling unit members reported income loss [when mobilized for a contingency operation].” GAO-03-573T, “Military Personnel: Preliminary Observations Related to Income, Benefits, and Employer Support for Reservists During Mobilization.” March 19, 2003: <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d03549t.pdf>.
- ¹⁶ U.S. Senate Committee on Small Business and Entrepreneurship, “The State of Veteran and Reservist Entrepreneurship,” March 28, 2007, p. 4. GAO-03-573T, “Military Personnel: Preliminary Observations Related to Income, Benefits and Employer Support for Reservists During Mobilization,” March 19, 2003, p. 7: <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d03573t.pdf>.