

CLEARINGHOUSE FOR MILITARY FAMILY READINESS

Why Service Members Separate from Service: Rapid Literature Review

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Executive Summary

There are approximately 2.4 million Active Duty and Ready Reserve personnel currently serving in the U.S. Armed Services (U.S. Department of Defense, 2015) and 20 million veterans (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2016) living in the United States. In 2015, over 180,000 Active Duty service members and over 125,000 reserve members left the service. About 45% of the Active Duty service members and 30% of Reserve members left voluntarily (U.S. Department of Defense, 2015). Although we know the number of service members who left active duty and the reserves, we do not know why these service members left service.

During a public search, we only identified one peer reviewed article with a sample size of 35 women that discusses specific reasons why service members separate (Dichter & True, 2014). We also searched data repositories, such as the Defense Technical Information Center (www.dtic.mil/dtic/) and the Homeland Security Digital Library (<https://www.hsdl.org/c/>) using various search criteria such as “military retention” and “reasons service members separate” to locate information on the topic. We identified a number of studies and some reports that highlight when service members separate. However, we only identified two studies that focus on why service members separate. One study was published in the 1980’s (Boesel & Johnson, 1984) and one in the 1990’s (Klein, Hawes-Dawson, & Martin, 1991). The lack of current data and research makes it difficult to definitively answer the question of why service members leave service. Below we have highlighted some areas identified through our review of literature around why service member’s separate.

Introduction

No formal exit survey exists that captures why a service member chooses to leave the service. The Department of Defense Form (DD Form) 214 captures separation type (e.g., release, discharged, retirement) and character of service (e.g., honorable, other than honorable) but this form does not ask for a specific reason on why the service member is leaving the service. The only exit surveys that occur are non-mandatory informal unit level counseling sessions with the service member, their commander, and senior non-commissioned officer (NCO) such as a first sergeant, senior chief petty officer, sergeant major, or other unit leadership.

Phillip Ealy, a Clearinghouse employee, has provided some information below with regards to separation from service based on his experience as a company commander for the Army.

As a company commander, every soldier that was in their expiration of term of service (ETS) window had to talk with me. The goal of these counseling sessions were to find out if a service member was staying or leaving (and why for either) and ensure they had a plan. The data from those counseling sessions were never

reported to the Department of the Army (DA) or to the Department of Defense (DoD).

However, there are DA and DoD surveys we received that would ask about continuation of service and separation. These usually occur when the service is attempting to accomplish a goal such as growing the service during Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) in Iraq and Afghanistan. Though these surveys were targeted at keeping enlisted and officers in service as opposed to why would or did you leave service. This is a very important distinction. Asking someone what would make them stay is not the same as asking why they are or planning on leaving. While they could be the same or similar, they could be drastically different. For example, one of my soldiers was going to leave service because of time separated from his family, however he eventually re-enlisted because of the medical benefits. His son had just been diagnosed with cancer and his immediate civilian job opportunities could not compete with the medical benefits. His reason for leaving was to spend more time with the family while his reason for staying was medical benefits, though, you could argue family is the underlying reason for both.

Since there is a limited amount of peer reviewed and published literature on why service members separate from service, we expanded our search to include military magazines, papers, and editorials to attempt to identify some reasons why service members separate.

Why Service Members Separate

When looking at why someone would separate from service, we identified three major categories from the literature (1) someone chooses to separate, (2) someone is forced to separate for adverse reasons; and (3) someone is forced to separate for administrative reasons. Some examples of separating for adverse reasons include separations for not meeting service standards, courts martial, and service members who were separated through adverse chapters under the Uniformed Code of Military Justice (UCMJ). We do not explore separation for adverse reasons in this rapid literature review. However, under the talent management section, we do discuss those who were forced to separate for administrative reason. For example, service members who did not make promotion, did not meet a mandatory separation date, or were medically separated.

In this section, we focus on service members who voluntarily chose to leave the service. Some reasons service members choose to separate include:

- Poor or toxic leadership
- Financial incentives in the civilian sector
- More time with the family

- Impact of deployments on children
- Bad fit (e.g., feel like the military is not what they signed up for)
- Family hardships (e.g., single parent, sick parent, divorce)
- Traumatic experience (e.g., sexual assault, hazing, combat experience)
- Other life plans and/or goals (e.g., politics, business, or other career path)
- Quality of life (e.g., barracks, meals, children schooling)
- Avoid adverse separation from service
- Poor promotion/advancement opportunities
- Desire to continue education
- Not obtaining key or desirable assignments or duty locations

Certain reasons garner more attention. There are plenty of reports on sexual assaults with in the military, such as an article by Kimerling et al. (2010) that discusses the number of sexual assaults in the military. However, most if not all of these reports do not breakdown how many service members left because of the sexual assault that took place. There is also not enough data to determine how many careers ended prematurely indirectly due to the sexual assault. Poor leadership is another reason for service members separation that has received a lot of attention. Articles like one by Reed and Olsen (2010) discuss and highlight the effects of toxic leadership, but once again no definitive numbers are provided on how many service members separated because of it. One could also surmise that the reason these topics get attention is not because of separations, but rather because they do not align with the values of the services.

The studies that do capture data on reasons why service members separate typically have relatively small sample sizes. Dichter & True (2014) had a sample size of 35 women veterans in the Philadelphia area. The Blue Star Families survey had an 7,800-sample size of current service members, veterans, and spouses and although this sample seems rather large it is less than 1 percent of the 2.4 million current service members (Shiffer et al., 2017). In addition to the small sample sizes, these studies did not have a singular focus of why people separated from service.

The two studies that specifically examined why service members separated are outdated (Boesel & Johnson, 1984; Klein, Hawes-Dawson, & Martin, 1991) and many changes have happened with in the military over the past 26 years such as new leadership, equipment, and personnel.

Retention

Outside of looking at specific categories such as race or gender when considering retention statistics, there should be four major groups to consider including (1) officer, (2) enlisted, (3) over 10 years of service, and (4) under 10 years of service. The Military Leadership Diversity Commission (2011) compiled a very thorough report about retention statistics across the services. In their report, they also captured data on why individuals left service. The top factors for leaving service are listed below.

Enlisted:

- Low pay and allowances
- Poor promotion/advancement opportunities
- Low job satisfaction
- Desire to continue education
- Desire to settle in a particular location

Officer

- Poor promotion/advancement opportunities
- Low job satisfaction
- Desire to settle in a particular location
- Desire to start a second career before becoming too old
- Not getting desirable or appropriate assignments
- Failed to be promoted

Their sample size of 1054 (i.e., 894 enlisted members and 160 officers) is less than 1 percent of the over 100,000 service members who separate every year. However, one conclusion of the Military Leadership Diversity Commission (2011) was that women had lower retention rates than their male counterparts on both the enlisted and officer ranks.

Talent Management

As mentioned before, if the reason for obtaining data on why service members separate is to retain quality talent, then we also have to examine the talent management of the services. The military has a very comprehensive talent management system. There are evaluation reports for its members, training, mentorship programs, and established standards for promotion. One could argue it is one of the better talent management systems around. That being said, there are administrative policies that may hinder retention and promotion of talent, such as low promotion rates for minorities and women, the requirement to leave the service if you are not promoted to the next level, and a service members promotion status depending on the mentorship received and status of their performance reviews. Streeter (2014) highlights the Air Force's lack of retention rates for women officers compared to male officers and suggests that minorities and women are not getting promoted at the same rates as their white male counterparts, which shows that the senior officer level has a lower percentage of minorities and women compared to the junior officer levels.

Another area to look at when considering retention of talented officers includes, allowing injured and recovering service members to not count against personnel authorizations set forth by the National Defense Authorization Act. This would alleviate the pressure from the services to medically separate talented individuals who face long term medical care and recovery.

There are a few efforts in place that strive to improve administrative policies that may hinder retention and promotion of talent. Baldor (2016) reported that Defense Secretary Ash Carter unveiled a new proposal that would help retain talent that is not selected for promotion. The proposal would allow the services to grant waivers for individuals who were not selected for promotion but whose service was still needed. Also, the Military Leadership Diversity Commission is working to strengthen continuation rates for ethnic and gender specific armed forces members using current activities (Military Leadership Diversity Commission, 2011).

Recommendations

There needs to be a concerted effort to evaluate reasons why service members separate from service using a larger sample size than those currently available. While the overall reasons may not change much, if at all, it would provide more concrete evidence. After identifying the reasons why service members separate, more work can be done on how to retain service members.

There also needs to be more studies on the effects of administrative policies that effect retention of talented service members. If the search for why service members separate is in part to retain quality talent, especially minority (i.e., women, African American, Latino) then another factor that needs to be addressed is administrative policies. These policies could lead to premature departures of quality talent. In this effort, one should also look at how much talent was lost prematurely due to different administrative policies.

Recommended Citation

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