How resilience affects the transition experiences of UK Service leavers

Most UK Service leavers succeed in overcoming any challenges they experience in making the transition to civilian life. Some individuals, however, struggle to overcome the challenges of transition. To help those who are particularly vulnerable, we must first understand why some individuals find it more difficult to handle transition. Resilience – the ability to adjust well to life changes – is a factor that featured strongly in the 2016 Forces in Mind Trust (FiMT) Life Transitions consultation in relation to successful transition.[1] However, there is a shortage of robust research on how resilience can shape transition experiences for UK Service leavers.

Our report, commissioned by FiMT, sought to address this gap in order to improve understanding of whether – and how – resilience can affect individual transition pathways and outcomes for UK Service leavers. We looked at the literature on resilience and transition, and at existing categorisations of different 'types' of UK Service leavers. To identify relevant insights from other sectors, we also conducted an analysis of the challenges affecting other groups of people who may experience difficult transitions. These comparator groups include:

- Bereaved individuals
- Former prisoners
- Foster care leavers
- Divorcees
- Individuals experiencing involuntary job loss
- University starters
- Skilled migrants
- Individuals leaving a strong professional culture

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1   Forces in Mind Trust. 2016. *Life Transitions: What can be learnt across sectors to better support individuals when they undergo a life transition.*

Findings

Peer support, fulfilling employment and good mental health can contribute to successful transition experiences for Service leavers

The literature shows that supportive peer networks, satisfying employment, family flexibility, strong mental health and a positive approach can assist a smooth transition to civilian life. However, the specific role of resilience itself in shaping transition experiences is not widely discussed.

Where resilience *is* discussed, the limited evidence suggests that resilience can both support and hinder transition experiences. Some papers suggest that resilience can help Service leavers navigate uncertainty in the civilian world, while others indicate that the 'can-do' attitude championed by the military can, in some cases, inhibit Service leavers in revealing areas of vulnerability and seeking the support they need.

Better data collection practices are needed to enhance understanding of the support needs of different 'types' of Service leavers

There is evidence to suggest that certain groups of Service leavers may be more vulnerable to transition challenges than others. For example, Early Service Leavers – personnel who leave the military before their minimum four years of Service – may be prone to poor mental health, a higher risk of offending, substance abuse and homelessness. Similarly, involuntarily discharged individuals and personnel with experience of deployment on high-intensity operations are said to be particularly vulnerable. Demographic factors such as age and gender can also affect transition experiences.

However, current approaches to categorising Service leavers are too broad, lacking granularity in their discussion of Service leavers' demographic backgrounds and the circumstances under which they leave the Armed Forces. The most common approach to categorising Service leavers draws on the UK Ministry of Defence's (MOD) classification of three groups: Early Service Leavers, 'normal discharge' Service leavers and 'medically discharged' Service leavers. Beyond this categorisation, there is no commonly adopted typology of Service leavers in the literature reviewed.

As part of our research, we created a template that builds on these three categories. This template could be used by the MOD, service providers, and the research community in order to capture data at source on Service leavers' circumstances of leave and wider contextual factors such as age, gender or deployment experience. With the data obtained using this template, researchers would be better equipped to identify areas of vulnerability among specific 'types' of Service leavers through primary research. This would in turn provide policy leads with the data to develop more targeted support for groups of vulnerable Service leavers.

Lessons applicable to Service leavers can be identified from other groups of people experiencing transition

The challenges that affect transitions in other aspects of life beyond the military are often similar to those faced by Service leavers and can offer applicable lessons. These challenges relate to:

- Mental and physical health
- Identity change
- Relationships
- Independent living
- Relocation and rehousing
- Employment

The relevance of these challenges varies from group to group. Mental health challenges, for example, are common across all comparator groups under analysis but feature most strongly in the literature on divorce and bereavement, and less so in the literature on young people starting university.

As with Service leavers, the multiple challenges facing comparator groups can reinforce each other to create a particularly difficult transition experience. For example, former prisoners who experience mental health or substance abuse challenges often find it more difficult to find a stable job and housing.

In our analysis of comparator groups, resilience was found to play a role in helping individuals handle transition challenges more effectively. This body of literature offers a rich source of evidence, building on the more limited understanding of resilience in the Service leaver context.

Recommendations

Our report offers recommendations aimed at improving understanding of the links between resilience and transition for UK Service leavers, and at using this understanding to enhance the support landscape. These recommendations are intended for policymakers and relevant support providers, and for research funders and researchers.

Improvements for policy and support provision

1 Data collection on Service leaver resilience and transition should be systematised, and information-sharing practices improved.

2 Policymakers and service providers should continue to develop support mechanisms designed to prepare personnel for transition *before* as well as *at* and *after* the point of departure.

3 Coordinated support across different areas of transition (e.g. housing, employment, mental health) should be offered to UK Service leavers in recognition of the links between challenges associated with transition.

Areas for further research

1 Primary research should be undertaken to improve understanding of the relationship between Service leaver resilience and transition experiences.

2 Qualitative primary research should be undertaken to enhance understanding of what works, for whom and why in transition to civilian life.

3 'Deeper dive' research into the support provided for comparator groups experiencing transition could offer lessons for the Service leaver context.

4 More funding for longitudinal research should be allocated to support an enhanced understanding of transition experiences over time.

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