Post-9/11 Veterans' Reasons for Early Military Separation

Takeaway: A significantly higher proportion of female veterans from every paygrade left the military before they wanted to. This finding was largely driven by medical and family circumstances, although leaving early because of a lack of career development and a hostile workplace also contributed to their leaving.

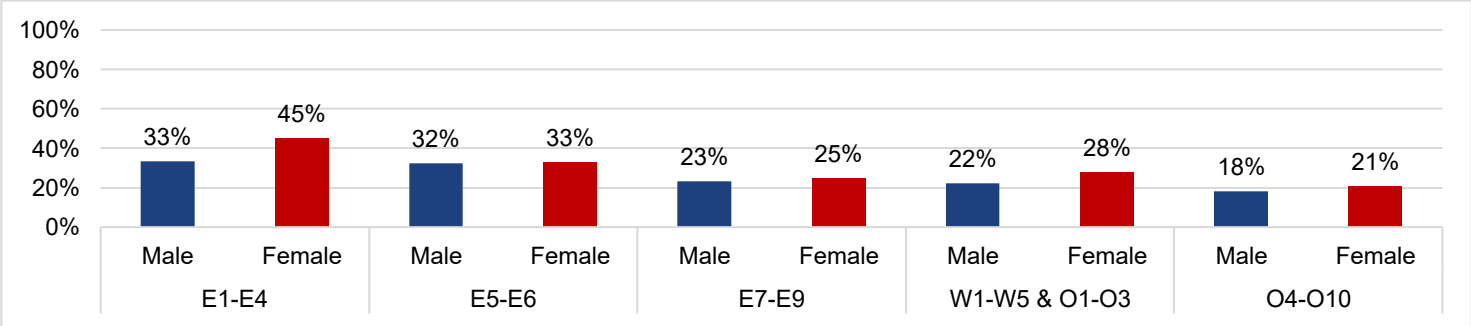
Medical problems were a substantial driver of leaving the military early. This finding was not surprising given that, compared to veterans from prior wars, post-9/11 veterans have the highest average disability ratings, and severely injured post-9/11 veterans are much more likely to survive.

Family circumstances were also an important factor in leaving early. The military lifestyle comes with unique family challenges such as frequent relocations and long separations, along with changes that happen in many families – marriage, birth of a child, divorce, and taking care of aging parents, to name a few. Some of these challenges are more difficult to accommodate within the military family system.

Experiencing a hostile work environment and limited opportunities for career advancement were also pertinent for some of those leaving the military early. Some women in the military feel underappreciated in the military due to a hypermasculine culture, restrictions in some jobs, experiencing abuse/maltreatment, and a lack of female role models in higher paygrades. Military leadership should strive to ensure that all in the military are treated with respect, have equal opportunities for career advancement, and are protected by the military justice system. For example, the DoD has changed how allegations of military sexual trauma and other assaults are handled, resulting in a significantly higher number of prosecutions and convictions for offenders.

Finally, a relatively small proportion of service members leave the military due to a lack of career advancement opportunities. Enlisted service members in particular report a ceiling on promotion opportunities. The military should provide a wide range of training and educational opportunities to increase the capacity of service members to obtain job advancement.

Early Military Separation by Gender and Paygrade



A sample of post-9/11 veterans was asked, "Did you leave the military before you wanted to?". 1,742 (29%) indicated that they separated from the military before they wanted to. Of the 4,895 male veterans, 1,376 (28%) separated before they wanted to. Of the 1,070 female veterans, 366 (34%) separated before they wanted to.

The proportion of service members who left the military before they wanted to varied by gender and paygrade. As shown above, more women left the military early compared to their male peers. For example, nearly 45% of women from the most junior enlisted paygrades (E1-E4), 33% from the middle enlisted paygrades, and 25% from the senior enlisted paygrades left the military earlier than they preferred. A higher proportion of those from the enlisted paygrades left the military early, with one exception, females from the warrant and junior officer paygrades (W1 - W5 & O1 - O3; 28%). A lower proportion of senior officers (O4 - O10) left the military before they wanted to.

The sample was also asked to indicate the reasons why they left from a list of seven options (i.e., medical, family circumstances, limited career opportunities, hostile working environment, lack of social support, economic/financial challenges, and misconduct/bad behavior), which are examined next.

Reasons for Early Military Separation by Gender and Paygrade

Other Reasons	E1 - E4		E5 - E6		E7 - E9		W1 - W5 & O1 - O3		O4 - O10	
	Male	**Female**	**Male**	**Female**	**Male**	**Female**	**Male**	**Female**	**Male**	**Female**
Medical	33%	45%	32%	33%	23%	25%	22%	28%	18%	21%
Family circumstances	48%	54%	49%	57%	43%	38%	32%	44%	20%	12%
Limited career opportunities	15%	7%	15%	12%	15%	6%	18%	18%	29%	16%
Hostile work environment	8%	11%	6%	11%	8%	12%	10%	18%	3%	12%
Lack of social support	12%	11%	9%	9%	6%	9%	9%	15%	5%	8%
Economic/financial challenges	4%	1%	2%	0%	2%	3%	3%	0%	2%	0%
Misconduct/bad behavior	11%	5%	3%	0%	3%	0%	6%	0%	2%	0%

Medical problems were the primary reason for leaving early among all veterans except for the senior officer (O4-O10) paygrades. Medical problems included being diagnosed with a physical or mental problem, medical retirement or discharge, and pregnancy, among others. Between 38% and 57% of female and 32% and 49% of male veterans left for medical reasons. Family circumstances, such as taking care of family members, frequent disruptions to the home environment, and conflicts between caregiving and military demands, were the primary reason for leaving early for both female (48%) and male (31%) senior officers to leave the military early.

For all other paygrades, the second most common reason for leaving the military early among both female and male veterans was family circumstances. Family circumstances were endorsed by more than one-third of females from the warrant and junior officer (O1-O3) paygrades and 28% of males from the same paygrades, while only 14% and 17% of males from the junior enlisted (E1-E4) paygrades and middle enlisted paygrades (E5-E6) endorsed family circumstances.

There was one exception to the finding described above. Among male veterans from the junior enlisted paygrades (E1-E4), the second most common reason for them leaving the military early was a lack of career opportunities.

Among females from the junior and senior enlisted paygrades, the third most common reason for leaving the military early was experiencing a hostile work environment (e.g., experiencing harassment, assault, or discrimination). The highest proportion of female veterans to report leaving early due to a hostile work environment was among warrant and junior officers (17%) and senior officers (12%).

Limited career opportunities were also the third most common reason for leaving early among males from the E1-E4 (15%), E5-E6 (15%), E7-E9 (15%), and O4-O10 (29%) paygrades and for females from the E5-E6 (12%) and O4-010 (16%) paygrades.

Study Summary

The Veterans Metrics Initiative: Linking Program Components to Post-Military Well-Being (TVMI) collected six waves (i.e., 3, 9, 15, 21, 27, and 33 months) of well-being and program utilization data from almost 10,000 post-9/11 veterans who had separated from military service in 2016. Additional waves (i.e., 51 and 78 months) of data were collected independently by the Clearinghouse for Military Family Readiness at Penn State through the Veterans Engaging in Transition Studies (VETS), which is part of the VETERANetwork. 3,514 veterans from TVMI voluntarily chose to participate in VETS.

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