

Military-to-Civilian-Transition: Social Well-being of Female Veterans

Takeaway: The social well-being (i.e., social support and social satisfaction) of female post-9/11 veterans was explored as they transitioned to civilian life over 6.5 years. Female veterans struggled in this domain, even among female veterans who report being fully transitioned into civilian life within 3 years of leaving the military. In fact, more than half of female veterans who were not fully transitioned after 6.5 years of leaving the military were classified as having problematic social well-being. The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and non-VA services and supports that specifically address social well-being are vital for female veterans.

Social Well-being and the Military-to-Civilian Transition

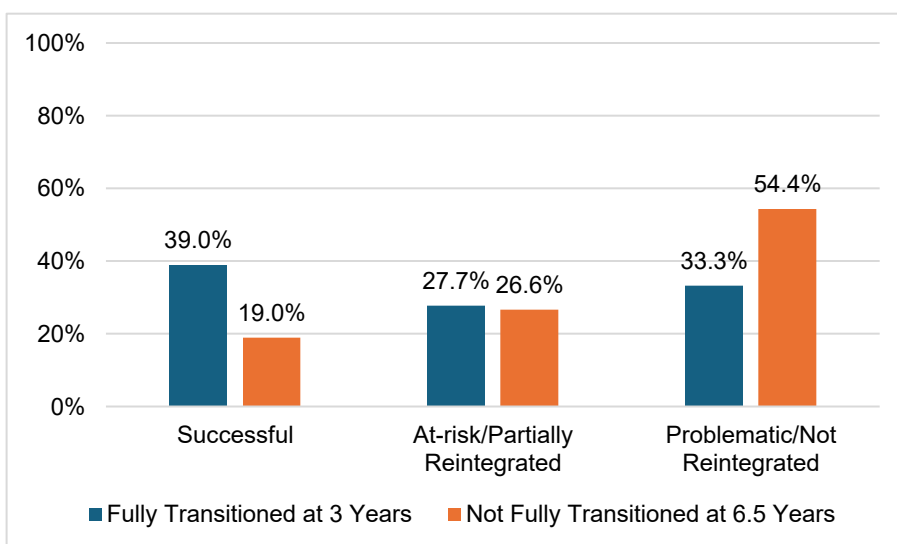
When people serve in the military, they develop strong connections with their fellow Service members, professionally and personally. These bonds are so powerful that individuals willingly risk their lives for their peers' lives. The military also provides a clear, hierarchical social structure, which offers a sense of control and predictability, and clear guidance on roles and responsibilities. However, when Service members leave active duty, many experience a profound loss of their military identity. This loss can make creating meaningful social connections with others, who may not understand a veteran's experiences, difficult for the veteran. Some post-9/11 veterans report feeling isolated, misunderstood, and disconnected from their families, friends, and communities. Research consistently shows that a lack of social support and connection is linked to poorer health and overall well-being outcomes. Conversely, strong social support can lead to positive outcomes, such as the veteran experiencing better mood and general happiness, greater daily functioning, and better employment opportunities.

Females comprise the fastest-growing group of veterans, which makes understanding their military-to-civilian transition experiences vital to enhancing their well-being. Female veterans often report not feeling as socially connected as their male peers within the military or the VA system. In addition, some civilians hold negative or stereotypical views about female veterans, and this can make forming new social ties within communities hard for female veterans. Moreover, female veterans are more likely than their male peers to report experiencing depression and anxiety, which can make it challenging to build and maintain social connections.

This study examined the social well-being of post-9/11 veterans over 6.5 years. Social well-being was categorized into three levels: "successful," "at-risk/partially reintegrated," and "problematic/not reintegrated." These categories were determined by examining the following aspects of social well-being with regard to how often veterans reported having people do the following: be available to share good times with, understand their problems, offer advice, and make them feel wanted. In addition, veterans were asked about their satisfaction with their living area, sense of community belonging, and friendships.

Female Post-9/11 Veterans' Social Well-Being at 3 and 6.5 Years After Military Separation

Across males and females, most post-9/11 veterans reported being fully reintegrated into civilian life 3 years after separating from the military (65%). Approximately 20% of veterans reported not being fully reintegrated 6.5 years after leaving the military. Of female veterans who reported being fully transitioned to civilian life within 3 years of military separation (blue bars), 39% indicated they were successful in the social well-being domain, 27.7% indicated they were at-risk/partially reintegrated in the social well-being domain, and 33.3% indicated they were problematic/not reintegrated in the social well-being domain. Thus, even for those who felt successfully reintegrated into civilian life generally, one-third struggled significantly with their social connections.



Of female veterans who reported not being fully transitioned to civilian life within 6.5 years of military separation (orange bars), 19% indicated they were successful in the social well-being domain, while 26.6% and 54.4% indicated they were at-risk/partially reintegrated and problematic/not reintegrated, respectively. Over half of these female veterans reported experiencing significant difficulties in their social lives 6.5 years after separation.

Social Well-being Implications for Veteran-Serving Providers

These findings suggest that many female post-9/11 veterans, even those who are generally successful in their transition to civilian life, continue to face difficulties with their social well-being. The VA has begun to recognize the specific needs of female veterans and has begun offering more gender-specific care, matching female veterans with female providers, and promoting programs tailored specifically for females. In addition, various community organizations are working to boost social support for female veterans, such as the Foundation for Women Warriors, Women Veterans Alliance, and Women Veterans Interactive. However, the findings of this study illustrate that, even with these efforts, more direct social support is urgently needed for female veterans. Female veterans need continued and enhanced services, within the VA system and in local communities, to help them build fulfilling and connected lives.

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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