



Addressing Veteran Underemployment: A Case Study

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Addressing Veteran Underemployment: A Case Study

By Thomas G. Mahnken*

The United States military has been engaged continually over the nearly two decades since the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. American soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines have not only fought in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria, but have also conducted campaigns to counter Al Qaeda and other violent extremist organizations in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia, and to bolster the security and stability of allies and partners across the globe.¹ Yet when these servicemembers return home, many face challenges, including the pervasive problem of underemployment. The social and economic dislocation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has only magnified this challenge, which will likely endure in coming months and years. Indeed, the challenge of veteran underemployment is likely to become one of large-scale veteran unemployment. Particularly vulnerable will be those enlisted members who lack a college degree as well as skills that translate into private sector careers.

This study explores the challenge of veteran underemployment and efforts to deal with it. It does so primarily through a case study of one particular organization, American Corporate Partners (ACP), a 12-year-old non-profit organization based in New York City. The study begins by discussing the population of post-9/11 veterans and the magnitude of the challenge of veteran underemployment. It goes on to examine the value of mentorship programs in meeting the needs of veterans through the experience of ACP. It concludes by evaluating the effectiveness of ACP's mentorship approach in meeting these challenges.

Post-9/11 Veterans: Who They Are

The 2018 U.S. Census reports that there are nearly 4 million post-9/11 veterans who have transitioned from military to civilian life.² In years to come, this population will grow as

1 For a discussion of these operations, see Thomas G. Mahnken, editor, *Learning the Lessons of Modern War* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020).

2 The United States Census, 2018, "2018: ACS 1-Year Estimates Subject Tables," available at: <https://data.census.gov/cedsci/table?q=S21&d=ACS%2B1-Year%2BEstimates%2BSubject%2BTables&g=&table=S2101&tid=ACSST1>

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nearly 200,000 servicemen and women are expected to leave military service each year.³ Although the overall veteran population is expected to decrease by 1.8% each year as World War II, Korean War, and Vietnam War veterans pass away, the Department of Veterans Affairs predicts that the population of post-9/11 veterans living in the United States will reach nearly 5.1 million by 2021.⁴

This newest cohort of veterans is notably diverse in age, race, ethnicity, and educational background (see Figure 1). As of 2016, the median age of the post-9/11 veteran was 34 for women and 35 for men. Nearly half of male veterans (46.7%) are younger than 34, while a similar portion (44.5%) are between 35 and 54. Women typically separate from the military at an earlier age than men, as more than half of post-9/11 female veterans are younger than 34.⁵ Unlike prior generations of veterans, the majority of the post-9/11 veteran population comes from urban environments, with rural veterans making up just 400,000 (10%) of the total post-9/11

population.⁶ In terms of race and ethnicity, the post-9/11 population of veterans has more Hispanic and fewer white non-Hispanic and Black/African American veterans than previous generations. As of 2016, the share of white non-Hispanic veterans among the total post-9/11 veteran pool was just 64.9%, markedly less than the 81.1% of all other living veterans.⁷ Of the post-9/11 veteran population, nearly 14.6% are Black/African American, a slight decrease from the 15.8% who served before 9/11, but still a sizable increase from the 9.1% who served during the Vietnam era. The share of Hispanic veterans during the post-9/11 era reached 13.5%, a significant increase from the 9.3% and 5.0% who fought in the pre-9/11 and Vietnam eras, respectively.⁸

Although still a predominantly male group, the post-9/11 veteran population contains a higher percentage of women than prior veteran cohorts. Until the mid-1970s, women made up just 8% of the officer population and 2% of the overall military population.⁹ Since the advent of the All-Volunteer Force in 1973,

[Y2018.S2101&lastDisplayedRow=48&hidePreview=true](#).

3 United States Department of Veterans Affairs: Transition and Economic Development, “Your VA Transition Assistance Program (TAP),” available at: <https://www.benefits.va.gov/transition/tap.asp>.

4 United States Department of Veterans Affairs, National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, “Profile of Post-9/11 Veterans: 2016,” available at: https://www.va.gov/vetdata/docs/SpecialReports/Post_911_Veterans_Profile_2016.pdf.

5 United States Department of Veterans Affairs, National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, “Profile of Post-9/11 Veterans: 2016,” available at: https://www.va.gov/vetdata/docs/SpecialReports/Post_911_Veterans_Profile_2016.pdf.

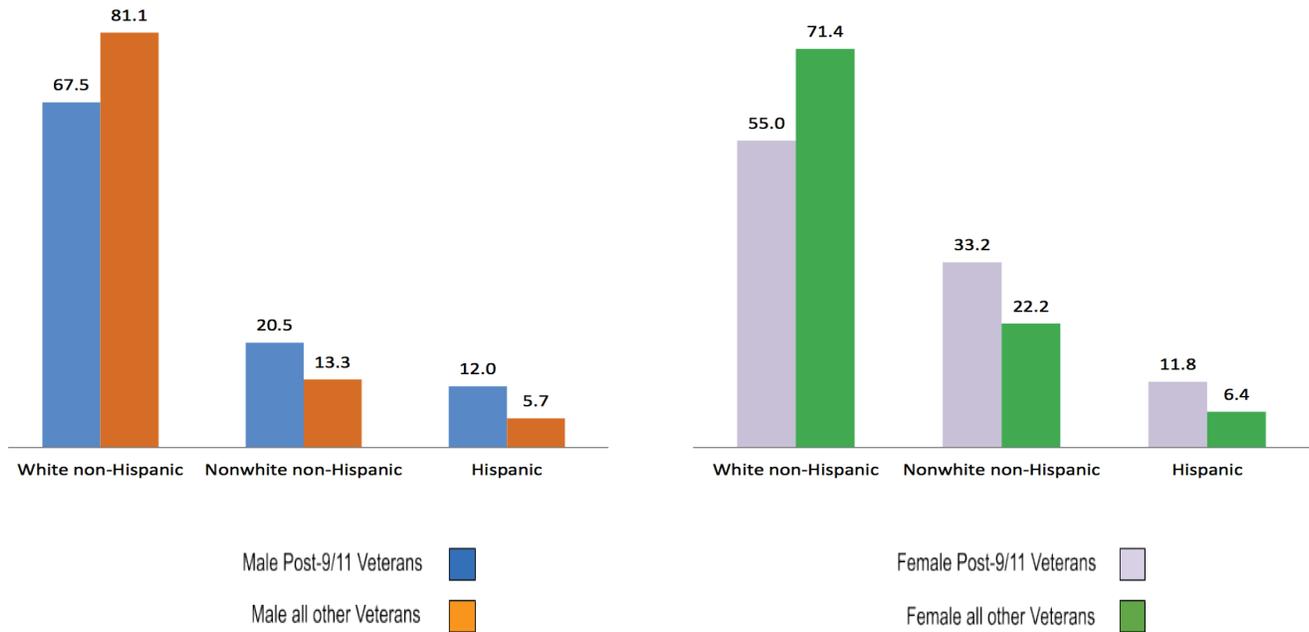
6 United States Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, “Rural veteran population continues to decline despite rise in post-9/11 veterans,” available at: <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/chart-gallery/gallery/chart-detail/?chartId=85618>.

7 United States Department of Veterans Affairs, National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, “Profile of Post-9/11 Veterans: 2016,” available at: https://www.va.gov/vetdata/docs/SpecialReports/Post_911_Veterans_Profile_2016.pdf.

8 United States Department of Veterans Affairs, National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, “Profile of Veterans: 2017,” available at: https://www.va.gov/vetdata/docs/SpecialReports/Profile_of_Veterans_2017.pdf.

9 George M. Reynolds and Amanda Shendruk, “Demographics of the U.S. Military,” (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, April 24, 2018), available at:

Figure 1: Profile of the Veteran Population



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey PUMS, 2016 Prepared by the National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics

however, women have assumed an increasing share of the active-duty population. Today, they represent 16% of all enlisted members and 18% of the officer corps.¹⁰ It is thus unsurprising that nearly 18% of the post-9/11 veteran pool is female, an increase from the 15.2% share of Gulf War-era veterans, and from the 3.6% share of veterans of other twentieth-century conflicts.¹¹ Data reported by the 2018 Census states that more than 23% of

post-9/11 female veterans are Black/African American, whereas 12% are Hispanic.¹²

The populations of servicemembers and veterans can usefully be divided into three distinct categories: enlisted members, commissioned officers, and warrant officers. Representing more than 80% of the armed forces, enlisted personnel perform a wide array of functions. Each enlisted soldier, sailor, airman, or Marine specializes in a particular field throughout their military career. This can involve combat skills, operating or

<https://www.cfr.org/article/demographics-us-military>.

10 Ibid.

11 Emily Rolen, “A closer look at veterans in the labor force,” (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, November 2017), available at: <https://www.bls.gov/careeroutlook/2017/article/veterans.htm>.

12 Daphne Lofquist, “Three-Quarters of Female Veterans Served During Wartime,” (United States Census Bureau, March 13, 2018), available at: <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2018/03/female-veterans.html>.

maintaining equipment, or providing technical support. Commissioned officers, by contrast, serve primarily in leadership roles throughout their careers. Warrant officers are a relatively small group of long-serving technical specialists. Overall, commissioned and warrant officers tend to have higher levels of education, serve longer military careers, and receive higher salaries than enlisted personnel. Nearly all commissioned officers hold a bachelor's degree, and many hold advanced degrees. By contrast, although nearly all active-duty enlisted soldiers have completed high school, only a small fraction have earned a bachelor's degree prior to their enlistment.¹³

Population studies indicate that these trends will continue. The Department of Veterans Affairs' Population Projection Model, which projects the demographic composition of the U.S. veteran population until FY2045, predicts that the male veteran population will decrease steadily and the female and minority veteran populations will increase slightly as a proportion of the overall veteran population.¹⁴ Specifically, the model predicts an increase in the proportion of Hispanic and Asian veterans and a decline in the share of White and Black/African American veter-

ans.¹⁵ Other studies project that the share of rural veterans among the total veteran population will continue its long-term decline.¹⁶

The Challenges Post-9/11 Veterans Face

Many servicemembers face similar challenges as they leave military service and transition to civilian life. A 2019 Military Families Lifestyle survey conducted by Blue Star Families (BSF) reports that two-thirds of female veteran respondents and more than half of male veteran respondents described the transition experience as either "difficult" or "very difficult."¹⁷ The challenges of reintegration into civilian life seem to affect post-9/11 veterans more than earlier generations of veterans. A 2019 study by the Pew Research Center reinforced the BSF's findings, noting that about half of the post-9/11 veteran pool reported difficulties transitioning into civilian life, compared to just one-in-five pre-9/11 veterans.¹⁸ Similarly, a report by the Center for a

13 Kim Parker, Anthony Cilluffo, and Renee Stepler, "6 facts about the U.S. military and its changing demographics," (Pew Research Center, April 13, 2017), available at: <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/04/13/6-facts-about-the-u-s-military-and-its-changing-demographics/>.

14 United States Department of Veterans Affairs, Office of Enterprise Integration, "Veteran Population Projection Model 2016: Executive Summary," (June 2017), available at: https://www.va.gov/vetdata/docs/Demographics/New_Vetpop_Model/Vetpop16_Executive_Summary.pdf.

15 United States Department of Veterans Affairs, National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, "Veteran Population," available at: https://www.va.gov/vetdata/veteran_population.asp.

16 United States Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, "Rural veteran population continues to decline despite rise in post-9/11 veterans," available at: <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/chart-gallery/gallery/chart-detail/?chartId=85618>.

17 Blue Star Families, *2019 Military Family Lifestyle Survey*, (February 2020), available at: <https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/BSF-2019-Survey-Comprehensive-Report-Digital-V2.pdf>.

18 Kim Parker et al., "The American Veteran Experience and the Post-9/11 Generation," Pew Social Trends (Pew Research Center, September 10, 2019), available at: <https://www.pewsocialtrends>.

New American Security concluded that 44% of post-9/11 veterans have experienced some difficulty transitioning back to civilian life, compared to just 25% of pre-9/11 veterans.¹⁹

This increased difficulty in transitioning to civilian life is one manifestation of a large and growing civil-military gap.²⁰ This gap has grown since the advent of the All-Volunteer Force in the 1970s, as fewer civilians now have direct ties to members of the military. On one hand, a large percentage of servicemembers have relatives – their father, mother, sibling, or extended family member – who have served in the military, and a family history of military service frequently influences the decision to join the armed forces.²¹ On the other hand, fewer members of the U.S. population overall are familiar with military members. Although nearly 60% of adults age 40

or over reported having an immediate family member in the military, just 40% of those under 40 and 33% of those under 30 have an immediate tie to the military.²²

The growing familiarity gap between veterans and civilians can also be seen in Congress and in the private sector. Although a growing number of post-9/11 veterans have been elected to Congress in recent years, veteran representation in Congress has declined considerably as World War II, Korea, and Vietnam veterans have left office. For example, in 1967-69, more than three-quarters of Senators were military veterans, and in 1975-77 four out of five Representatives were military veterans. Similarly, in the private sector, veteran representation among high-level executives fell from 60% in 1984 to just 6.2% in 2014.²³ Although a 2016 Chamber of Commerce survey found that human resources professionals, business executives, and hiring managers all have an overwhelmingly positive view of veterans, more than half of those surveyed stated that, on a scale of one to ten, their familiarity with military service was a five or below. Moreover, more than 80% of hiring managers admitted that their companies did not have specialized training systems to help civilian employees and staff relate to their veteran counterparts.²⁴ As a result, hiring managers and employers are often unaware of the skills that former servicemem-

[org/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2019/09/PS-DT.10.09.19_veteranexperiences_full.report.pdf](https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/lost-in-translation).

19 Phillip Carter et al., “Lost in Translation: The Civil-Military Divide and Veteran Employment,” (Center for a New American Security, June 15, 2017), available at: <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/lost-in-translation>.

20 The literature on the civil-military gap is voluminous. Key works include Peter D. Feaver and Richard H. Kohn, eds., *Soldiers and Civilians: The Civil-Military Gap and American National Security* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001), Mackubin Thomas Owens, *U.S. Civil-Military Relations After 9/11: Renegotiating the Civil-Military Bargain* (New York: Continuum, 2011); Suzanne C. Nielsen and Don M. Snider, eds., *American Civil-Military Relations: The Soldier and the State in a New Era* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009); and James Mattis and Kori N. Schake, eds., *Warriors and Citizens: American Views of Our Military* (Palo Alto: Hoover Institution Press, 2016).

21 Todd C. Helmus et al., *Life as a Private: A Study of the Motivations and Experiences of Junior Enlisted Personnel in the U.S. Army* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2018).

22 Carter, “Lost in Translation.”

23 Ibid.

24 U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation, “Veterans in the Workplace: Understanding the Challenges and Creating Long-Term Opportunities for Veteran Employees,” (U.S. Chamber of Commerce, November 2016), available at: https://www.uschamberfoundation.org/sites/default/files/Veterans%20in%20the%20Workplace_0.pdf.

bers have cultivated while on duty, and how these skills could translate into positions at their particular corporations. Although Department of Defense-sponsored military transition programs seek to help servicemembers translate their military careers into civilian terms, doing so remains challenging in practice, particularly regarding the development of soft skills that are necessary to thrive in the civilian workplace.

Surveys show that today's transitioning veterans face common financial, social, and personal challenges. In the 2019 BSF survey, veteran respondents listed financial issues, separation from family, deployments, relocation stress, and job stress as the top five issues they faced following their separation from the military.²⁵ Other surveys highlight the difficulty of navigating Department of Veterans Affairs programs, benefits, and services, applying military-learned skills to civilian life, and adjusting to civilian culture as other significant challenges facing transitioning veterans.²⁶

The government has attempted to do its part to ease the transition for separating servicemembers. In 2011, Congress passed the VOW (Veterans Opportunity to Work) to Hire Heroes Act. The law made participation in the Transitional Assistance Program (TAP) mandatory for all servicemembers with at

25 Blue Star Families, "2019 Military Family Lifestyle Survey" (February 2020), available at: <https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/BSF-2019-Survey-Comprehensive-Report-Digital-V2.pdf>.

26 United States Department of Veterans Affairs: Transition and Economic Development, "Your VA Transition Assistance Program (TAP)," available at: <https://www.benefits.va.gov/transition/tap.asp>.

least 180 continuous days of active-duty service.²⁷ TAP includes one-on-one initial counseling, in most cases at least a year before a servicemember's separation date; a pre-separation briefing held at roughly the same time; the Department of Defense (DoD) Transition Day; a series of two-day individual TAP career track events; and the TAP Capstone. TAP's mandatory core curriculum, conducted in a classroom-based setting over the span of five days, "provides the skill building, resources and tools that Servicemembers need to meet career readiness standards."²⁸ There is considerable anecdotal evidence that TAP's content varies widely in execution. Although the DoD has reported compliance rates with mandatory TAP programs from 92% to 97%, a 2017 U.S. Government Accountability Office report stated that "due to the high percentage of missing TAP data," the information provided by the DoD was "not sufficiently reliable" to analyze participation rates in TAP classes and attainment of Career Readiness Standards.²⁹ The report stated that had the DoD figures accounted for all the missing data, especially among those TAP-eligible members of the National Guard and Reserve

27 Congressional Research Service, "Military Transition Assistance Program (TAP): An Overview," (July 12, 2018), available at: <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/IF10347.pdf>.

28 Congressional Research Service, "Military Transition Assistance Program (TAP): An Overview," (July 12, 2018), available at: <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/IF10347.pdf>; United States Department of Veterans Affairs: Transition and Economic Development, "Your VA Transition Assistance Program (TAP)," available at: <https://www.benefits.va.gov/transition/tap.asp>.

29 Congressional Research Service, "Military Transition Assistance Program (TAP): An Overview," (July 12, 2018), available at: <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/IF10347.pdf>.

component, the completion percentage of the mandatory components could have been as low as 47%.³⁰ Opinions on TAP are mixed, and the efficacy of the program is “hindered by the varied military experiences of the members in each branch.”³¹ Servicemembers complete the TAP while performing their full-time military jobs, which can pose a challenge. Class times and locations are often not conducive to servicemembers who are still playing a vital role in their organization. As a result of overly full schedules and divided attention, servicemembers may not be able to apply what they learn to their transition.³²

Other government initiatives such as the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill provide educational benefits to post-9/11 veterans and their families after separating from the military. The Post-9/11 G.I. Bill provides up to 36 months of tuition, fees, and housing support to post-9/11 veterans and their families. The program also offers educational assistance for vocational training, entrepreneurship courses, and on-the-job training. In the IAVA member survey, over 80% of veteran respondents said they were either extremely satisfied (44%) or somewhat satisfied (41%) with the G.I. Bill’s educational benefits; 62% of respondents said the Post-9/11 GI Bill proved to be extremely

important in their reintegration into civilian life.³³ Largely due to the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill, today nearly 46% of post-9/11 veterans have received some college education, and around 32% hold at least a bachelor’s degree or higher.³⁴ Moreover, a number of universities participate in the Department of Veterans Affairs Yellow Ribbon program, which augments the benefits provided by the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill. However, even though the G.I. Bill provides post-9/11 veterans with resources to access opportunities in the civilian world, it does not directly address the challenges associated with transitioning to civilian life and culture.

The Problem of Underemployment

Judging solely on the veteran unemployment rate, post-9/11 veterans seem to have thrived after separating from the military. From December 2011 to December 2019, the unemployment rate for post-9/11 veterans declined from 12.1% to just 3.5%, which roughly tracks with the civilian unemployment rate over that same period.³⁵ The challenge facing veterans in the near full-employment econ-

30 United States Government Accountability Office, *Transitioning Veterans: DOD Needs to Improve Performance Reporting and Monitoring for the Transition Assistance Program* (November 2017) available at: <https://www.gao.gov/assets/690/688203.pdf>.

31 Judson Faurer, Apryl Rogers-Broderson, and Paul Bailie, “Managing The Re-Employment Of Military Veterans Through The Transition Assistance Program (TAP),” *Journal of Business & Economics Research* 12, no. 1 (January 2014).

32 I am grateful to LTC Angelique Pifer for this insight.

33 Stephanie Mullen, “2019 Member Survey,” (Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, January 30, 2019), available at: <https://iava.org/survey2019/IAVA-2019-Member-Survey.pdf>.

34 Kelly Ann Holder, “Veterans Who Have Served Since 9/11 Are More Diverse,” (United States Census Bureau, April 11, 2018), available at: <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2018/04/post-9-11-veterans.html>.

35 U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, “Employment Situation of Veterans—2020.” (March 19, 2020), available at: <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/vet.nr0.htm>. Since the 2008 financial crisis, the national unemployment rate has experienced a similar decline, from 9.9% in 2009 to 3.5% in 2019.

omy that existed before the COVID-19 pandemic was not that of securing employment, but rather underemployment, defined as full-time work that is, either objectively or subjectively, below a given employee/veteran's education, experience, or comparable compensation level.³⁶

Studies reveal that underemployment remains pervasive in the post-9/11 veteran community. A 2017 study conducted by ZipRecruiter and the Call of Duty Endowment sought to quantify the prevalence of veteran underemployment. Comparing the individual's skill level, as indicated by their highest level of educational achievement, and the required skill level of their current job, the study discovered that about one-third of employed veteran job seekers on the job site were underemployed, 15.6% higher than non-veteran job seekers.³⁷ The experiences of active and former servicemembers reflect this finding. The 2018 BSF survey found that more than two-thirds of all veteran employees reported having a job unequal to the level of skills and qualifications that they had gained in the military.³⁸ The Pew Research Center came to a similar conclusion just a year later, finding that 42% of post-9/11 veterans in the civilian workforce believe that they are overqualified for their first post-military job, based on their

military experience, skills, and training.³⁹ Such surveys are, of course, subjective. It is not clear, for example, that veterans have a good sense of just how their skills and qualifications translate into the civilian sector and thus whether they are, in fact, overqualified for the jobs they hold.

Veteran underemployment can be attributed to a variety of factors. One of the most prominent reasons for underemployment is that veterans frequently separate from the military without a clear vision of a future career. In the 2016 Chamber of Commerce study discussed above, 86% of veteran respondents said that "deciding what career path to choose" was a challenging hurdle in their transition, the highest of any issue mentioned.⁴⁰ The 2019 IAVA member survey supported the Chamber's findings, reporting that the second greatest challenge among respondents transitioning from military to civilian life is the "loss of identity and purpose" that comes with leaving the military and finding a new career. That same report discovered that nearly 40% of active members surveyed had not planned for their transition out of the military.⁴¹

36 Cathy Barrera and Phillip Carter, "Challenges on the Homefront: Underemployment Hits Veterans Hard," (Call of Duty Endowment and ZipRecruiter, 2017), pp. 1-15, available at: https://www.callofdutyendowment.org/content/dam/atvi/callofduty/code/pdf/ZipCODE_Vet_Report_FINAL.pdf.

37 Ibid.

38 Blue Star Families, "2018 Military Family Lifestyle Survey," available at: <https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/2018MFLS-ComprehensiveReport-DIGITAL-FINAL.pdf>.

39 Kim Parker et al., "The American Veteran Experience and the Post-9/11 Generation," Pew Social Trends, (Pew Research Center, September 10, 2019), available at: <https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2019/09/10/the-american-veteran-experience-and-the-post-9-11-generation/>.

40 U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation, "Veterans in the Workplace: Understanding the Challenges and Creating Long-Term Opportunities for Veteran Employees," (U.S. Chamber of Commerce, November 2016), available at: https://www.uschamberfoundation.org/sites/default/files/Veterans%20in%20the%20Workplace_0.pdf.

41 Stephanie Mullen, "2019 Member Survey," (Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, January 30,

Veterans are likely to experience a period of unemployment following separation as well as to leave their first post-military job sooner than their civilian counterparts. Only 57% of job-seeking veterans found a civilian job in less than six months.⁴² Moreover, the fact that those veterans were able to find employment did not guarantee that they were able to hold the position for long. Veteran turnover is significantly higher than civilian turnover from their first civilian jobs. According to ZipRecruiter resume data, only 44.9% of veterans remained at their first job for more than two years.⁴³ Although the high level of veteran turnover cannot measure underemployment itself, it does suggest that veterans are less likely than their civilian counterparts to land a first job that aligns with their skills and interests.

Another factor contributing to veteran underemployment is that former servicemembers often experience difficulty translating their military experience into marketable workplace skills. Some skills gained during a military career translate in a straightforward way to civilian skills. For example, doctors and medical technicians, lawyers and paralegals, pilots, aircraft and vehicle mechanics,

cooks, and cyber and information technology specialists can apply the skills they obtained in uniform in a straightforward way to careers after they leave the military. However, many other skill sets, such as those in the ground combat arms (e.g., infantry, armor, artillery) often do not translate so directly to post-military careers. Moreover, those jobs that are the closest analogs, such as law enforcement, are relatively few in number and age caps in certain civilian professions limit a veteran's opportunities in fields that more directly parallel their military talents. Entering the civilian workforce years later than their contemporaries, former servicemembers frequently lack the experience or education to compete with civilians in the labor market. In the IAVA survey, the top three challenges facing veterans looking to enter the workforce are "competing with candidates in the workforce longer," "lacking required education/certification," and "explaining how military skills translate" to civilian positions.⁴⁴ Although numerous Military Occupational Specialty (MOS) translators exist to connect veterans to job opportunities that most closely relate to their specific military occupation, MOS translators neglect a servicemember's soft skills and post-military career goals. Whereas commissioned officers are likely to say that military service was useful in providing civilian skills and training, 46% of enlisted members and 42% of all veterans stated that their military skills and experiences were "not too

2019), available at: <https://iava.org/survey2019/IAVA-2019-Member-Survey.pdf>.

42 Kim Parker et al., "The American Veteran Experience and the Post-9/11 Generation," Pew Social Trends, (Pew Research Center, September 10, 2019), available at: <https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2019/09/10/the-american-veteran-experience-and-the-post-9-11-generation/>.

43 Cathy Barrera and Phillip Carter, "Challenges on the Homefront: Underemployment Hits Veterans Hard," (Call of Duty Endowment and ZipRecruiter, 2017), pp. 1-15, available at: https://www.callofdutyendowment.org/content/dam/atvi/callofduty/code/pdf/ZipCODE_Vet_Report_FINAL.pdf.

44 Stephanie Mullen, "2019 Member Survey," (Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, January 30, 2019), available at: <https://iava.org/survey2019/IAVA-2019-Member-Survey.pdf>.

useful” or “not at all useful” in entering the post-military labor market.⁴⁵

Another pernicious effect of the civil-military divide is the fact that many veterans lack access to personal and professional networks outside of the military. Military veterans, many of whom come from military families, may lack family networks that can connect them with employers. Moreover, many veterans are used to living in or near cloistered military bases where they have limited contact with the broader economy. The 2016 Chamber of Commerce study found that the third and fourth most pressing transition challenges facing veterans were “not having the necessary resources and contacts to find employers in your chosen field,” and “connecting and networking with hiring managers and employers.”⁴⁶ When asked in the 2018 BSF survey to name a change that would most improve the transition from civilian to military life, veteran respondents frequently cited the creation of “a strong support network” to assist servicemen and women in the process of separation. In fact, one of the top requested resources among veteran respondents was a “network of those who success-

fully transitioned from the military into the civilian workplace.”⁴⁷

Whether it is due to an unclear vision of the future, an inability to leverage military skills into workplace attributes, or simply due to a lack of personal and professional networks, post-9/11 veterans enter the workforce a step behind their civilian counterparts.

In the current economic climate, the challenge of veteran underemployment is rapidly becoming one of widespread veteran unemployment, a problem that is likely to persist for years.⁴⁸ The COVID-19 pandemic has seen a spike in unemployment that is likely to continue to rise in coming months as major corporations lay off large numbers of workers. As hiring picks back up, the first to be re-hired will be those who were laid off or furloughed. Those with directly translatable skills will follow. Third in line will be young, energetic college and high school graduates. In this environment, the more than 150,000 military members who are expected to separate from military service over the next 12 months will face a difficult time finding employment. Veterans who lack relatable experience and who are older than their civilian counterparts will be at a disadvantage to find jobs. Particularly vulnerable will be former enlisted servicemembers, such as Army and

45 Kim Parker et al., “The American Veteran Experience and the Post-9/11 Generation,” Pew Social Trends, (Pew Research Center, September 10, 2019), available at: <https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2019/09/10/the-american-veteran-experience-and-the-post-9-11-generation/>.

46 U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation, “Veterans in the Workplace: Understanding the Challenges and Creating Long-Term Opportunities for Veteran Employees,” (U.S. Chamber of Commerce, November 2016), available at: https://www.uschamberfoundation.org/sites/default/files/Veterans%20in%20the%20Workplace_0.pdf.

47 Blue Star Families, “2018 Military Family Lifestyle Survey,” available at: <https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/2018MFLS-ComprehensiveReport-DIGITAL-FINAL.pdf>.

48 Paul Hannon and Paul Kiernan, “U.S. Economy Faces Long Recovery From Coronavirus Effects, Experts Say,” (The Wall Street Journal, June 1, 2020), available at: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/decline-in-factory-output-eased-in-may-but-recovery-set-to-be-slow-11591006623>.

Marine infantrymen, many of whom are over-qualified for entry-level positions but lack a bachelor's degree and job skills that translate into private sector careers.

Addressing Veteran Underemployment

There are a large number of non-profit organizations that seek to serve the veteran community. Indeed, as of 2015 there were 45,000 U.S. nonprofit Veteran Services Organizations (VSOs) listed by the non-profit research service Guidestar. These organizations range widely in their stated mission. Some help veterans file claims and navigate the Department of Veterans Affairs system, while others help wounded veterans heal from and cope with physical and mental injuries. Still others provide financial assistance to veterans' families and those wounded in battle.⁴⁹ Few, however, deal with the problem of veteran underemployment.

One approach to combating veteran underemployment is through the mentorship of transitioning veterans. Mentorship has long been seen as critical to career success. Mentorship is also a key feature of military careers. Soldiers, sailors, airmen, and Marines are encouraged to seek mentors to help them develop leadership skills and advance throughout their careers. However, those military mentors can provide only limited help navigating their post-military careers.

One organization that has adopted the mentorship approach to meet the challenge of veteran underemployment is American Corporate Partners (ACP).⁵⁰ ACP's mentorship model calls on corporate executives to provide one year of monthly mentoring to transitioning servicemembers to assist them in the transition to civilian careers and achieving their post-military professional goals. To date, ACP has provided mentors to more than 17,000 servicemembers, and it is not unusual for the organization to receive 800 applications per month. Nearly half of all protégés served in the Army, 22% in the Navy, 17% in the Air Force, 15% in the Marine Corps, and 1% in the Coast Guard. ACP's protégé pool reflects the overall veteran population with a median age of 36 and is dominated by formerly enlisted personnel (68%).

ACP has launched additional programs aimed at assisting female veterans, veterans affected with such challenges as post-traumatic stress and traumatic brain injury, and active-duty spouses. For example, ACP's Women's Veteran Mentoring Program provides additional support to female veterans, who currently make up 19% of ACP's veteran applicant pool. Beyond connecting female veterans with female entrepreneurs and business leaders for a yearlong mentorship, the program provides its participants with expanded support, personalized resources, and access to exclusive networking events and monthly career development workshops. Over the past four years, the program's virtual workshops have centered on a range of topics, from "Maximizing LinkedIn for Female Veterans" to "Making Work Life Balance Work" to "Pre-

49 "U.S. Veterans Organizations by the Numbers" (GuideStar, November 2015), available at: <https://learn.guidestar.org/hubfs/Docs/us-veterans-orgs-by-the-numbers.pdf>.

50 Data on ACP's activities were provided to the author by ACP.

paring for Your Year End Review.” ACP also coordinates with its corporate partners and a number of leading women-focused organizations such as “100 Women in Finance,” the Elevate Network, and Lean In to recruit female mentors. Since it was launched in 2016, more than 1,343 female veterans have participated in the Women’s Veteran Mentoring Program.

ACP’s mentorship program is not designed to help veterans find immediate employment; it is not a job placement program. Rather, ACP strives to give participating veteran protégés opportunities for personal growth and long-term professional development. Entering the program at varying stages in their career development, every protégé applies to the program with a different set of objectives. Whereas some protégés are searching for a new career, others already have experience in a given field and aspire to assume new responsibilities in a more senior role. Most are recently separated or are in the process of actively separating from the military. Although ACP requests that both parties commit to at least one hour per month for a year, many mentors and protégés connect more frequently and continue even after the end of the formal program.

Although each mentor focuses on their protégé’s individual needs, the program generally focuses on four key areas. The first is the development of “hard skills,” including discussions about how to translate military skills into workplace attributes, interview training, resume reviews, and cover letter advice. The second is the development of “soft skills,” such as navigating interpersonal work relationships and learning the differences in work culture, to include how to engage with colleagues, build relationships with super-

visors, and advocate on one’s own behalf. The third focus area, tailored to post-9/11 veteran applicants who lack a clear vision of their next occupation, is career exploration. Because the program includes partner companies from a diverse group of industries, mentors have been able to help protégés explore a wide range of career paths, such as engineering, finance, human resources, and real estate. The final focus of a mentorship is to learn networking practices that will allow veterans to navigate better the civilian world and achieve their career objectives outside the military. In addition, over the past decade, mentors have worked with their veteran counterparts on improving professional communications methods, finding a work-life balance, learning civilian language, culture, and norms, in some cases starting and building a small business, and deciding whether to further their education or technical expertise by pursuing further degrees or professional certifications.

The program is open to potential protégés who have served on active-duty orders for more than 180 days following September 11, 2001. Veterans who were injured while serving less than 180 days, as well as their spouses, are also eligible for the mentoring program, regardless of the length of their service. Those who meet those conditions but received a dishonorable discharge or have a criminal record are considered on a case-by-case basis.

ACP finds participants through three primary channels. First, the organization has a number of long-standing mutually beneficial dialogues with other VSOs, as well as with scores of colleges and universities that welcome veterans who are returning to school

through the G.I. Bill. Second, the organization has developed relationships with each of the armed services. The organization's advisory council includes a former Deputy Secretary of Defense, former Chairmen of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and a number of other high-ranking former servicemen and women who have successfully transitioned into the civilian workforce.⁵¹ Finally, word of mouth, especially by veterans who have participated in the program, has proven particularly valuable to the growth of the program.

Eligibility requirements for mentors have evolved over the past decade. Initially, each prospective mentor was required to be employed by, or retired from, one of ACP's participating institutions, which span a wide array of industries, including consulting, healthcare, finance, media, manufacturing, and real estate.⁵² ACP also requires each prospective mentor to receive confirmation from their employer that they are in good standing with the company. In large part due to ACP's growth in veteran applicants, ACP subsequently adjusted its eligibility requirements to include professionals and firms outside of ACP's partners, including small business owners, federal and local government employees, and retirees. With the advent of ACP's Citizens Program, the non-profit now considers highly-qualified individuals and former protégés as possible mentors, regardless of whether or not they work at one of the participating institutions.

51 "Advisory Council," American Corporate Partners, available at: <https://www.acp-usa.org/about-us/advisory-council>.

52 "ACP Corporate Partners," American Corporate Partners, available at: <https://www.acp-usa.org/about-us/partners>.

To gauge the mentor's experience, strengths, and interests, and the protégé's preferences and objectives, ACP requires both parties to complete an online application through the organization's website. For mentors, this includes questions about their background and skills, their highest level of education, and three fields in which they are the most comfortable mentoring. Other questions are designed to identify the prospective mentor's preferences, such as their willingness to work with injured or ill veterans. The protégé application features many of the same questions, but also asks applicants to describe their career in the armed forces and to include service and branch affiliation, years of service, deployments, awards and recognition, and discharge status. It further asks protégés to list their career aspirations, identify specific characteristics they might value in a mentor, and write a brief introductory paragraph that will be shared with their mentor.

After the applications have been received, each prospective protégé and mentor is also required to participate in an intake call with an ACP staff member, which usually lasts around 15 minutes. The purpose of the intake call is two-fold. It provides participants with a brief introduction to the mentoring program's guidelines, expectations, and best practices. It also offers an opportunity to gather more information on the protégé's goals, interests, and desires along with the mentor's background and fields of expertise.⁵³ For the staff, intake calls reveal more about the protégé's goals and interests and the mentor's experi-

53 "Career Assessment Questionnaire," American Corporate Partners, available at: <https://www.acp-usa.org/mentoring-program/resources/career-assessment-questionnaire>.

ence level and skillset, as well as personality types and mentoring preferences. Furthermore, the intake is an important opportunity to ensure the protégé has a clear understanding of what the program offers, the pool of mentors available, and to clarify parameters for engagement with their mentors.

After completing intake calls with both parties, ACP matches protégés and mentors to begin the mentorship. ACP staff uses custom-built search and pairing tools to sort through and select a mentor or protégé from the 300 to 500 that are available at any given time. Although ACP aspires to find the best possible match, it has also found that it is more important to provide a good mentor quickly for the protégé. By far the most important component that ACP staff considers in pairing a protégé with a mentor is career fit, both generally and within specific fields. For returning veterans without specific interests or who have yet to find a field that suits them, ACP staff select mentors with broad or diverse experience to provide insight on different career paths, or mentors who explicitly note they are comfortable working with those who seek clarity and general guidance. For protégés with a distinct interest in a specific field, ACP staff identify mentors with relevant experience to assist protégés in translating their experience, discovering job opportunities and networking with civilians in the industry.

ACP staff also consider other factors, such as gender and location, in the pairing process. Given that there are more female mentors than participating female servicemembers, ACP staff are generally able to pair female protégés with a female mentor upon request. A number of male protégés also express a

specific gender preference for their mentor, whether it be a woman in order to gain the female perspective, or a male because they are unfamiliar with proper corporate dress-code.

ACP credits most of the program's long-term success to the active roles ACP staff play in monitoring and facilitating each mentorship. ACP staff contact each mentor and protégé every four to six weeks, and more frequently during the first three months, to monitor each pair's progress, provide tailored support with relevant resources, and ensure that both parties are satisfied with the program and are meeting their commitments. For internal purposes of understanding which pairs are succeeding and which are struggling, after the first two months, the ACP staff assigns letter grades to each pair based on the staff member's engagement with each participant, feedback regarding progress, level of engagement, and enthusiasm in the mentorship. Pairs receiving grades of C or D receive heightened attention from ACP staff, who create action plans to improve the likelihood that they will come to a satisfactory conclusion. After the fifth month, ACP staff survey both protégés and mentors on their experience in the program. Featuring questions such as, "Would you recommend ACP to others?" or "Which of the following objectives have you and your mentor/protégé worked on together?" the insights taken from the surveys gauge both parties' progress and satisfaction nearly half-way through the program.

The frequency of contact varies based on the perceived health of each relationship. If ACP staff internally classify a mentorship as "good" or "strong" based upon their follow-ups and experience surveys, communication between

ACP staff and the pair may be less frequent than prescribed, but is never less than every other month. Alternatively, if a mentorship is deemed “fair” or “problematic,” ACP staff will contact the participants more frequently and create tailored action plans to facilitate the mentorship. Through constant communication, ACP staff seek to build rapport and trust with protégés, allowing them to support the mentorship and the pair’s progress towards the protégés’ initial objectives, which often evolve during the course of the mentorship.

Beyond the constant interaction with their protégés and mentors, ACP staff also provide a host of useful resources to supplement and support mentorships. The resources that ACP staff share with protégés range from mentorship best practices, such as a one-year action plan template and a list of useful questions to ask their mentors, to specific career development and job search resources. These include networking tips, resume and cover letter suggestions, graduate school test preparation, and advice on crafting the perfect elevator pitch. Mentors receive many of the same resources as protégés, and get additional support if their protégés are deployed, enrolled in school, searching for a job, or starting new employment. The organization also provides resources for mentors who may find military acronyms, rankings, and culture difficult to understand.

ACP uses several indicators to identify successful completion of the program. If the veteran has expanded his or her professional network, determined a specific career path, advanced in a current position, or gained new employment altogether, it is likely that the protégé and mentor will be listed as alumni of the ACP program. ACP defines alumni as

those protégés who have completed the program and have concluded that the program was of significant value to them. Given the diversity of the outcomes that protégés seek (e.g., completing their college or graduate degree, starting a business, obtaining a promotion), ACP has determined that success should be defined by the veteran, not by the organization’s staff.

Evaluating the Success of the Mentorship Approach

Servicemembers are returning home in waves, and the problem of veteran underemployment among the post-9/11 population is expected to worsen. Although the 45,000 VSOs provide a range of services to help veterans and their families, the mentoring approach provides particular value to reduce underemployment among veterans. The one-on-one mentorship model helps veterans translate their military skills into workplace attributes, acclimate to civilian work culture, expand their professional networks, develop long-term career plans, and accomplish short-term objectives.

Over the past decade, ACP has provided guidance to thousands of veterans entering the civilian workforce. In 2019, 2,861 transitioning veterans completed an ACP mentorship, which set a new record. Overall, more than 17,000 veterans spanning across 5,300 towns and cities nationwide have successfully completed an ACP mentorship, with more than half of its alumni completing their mentorships within the past three years.

It is worth noting that unlike government-mandated programs such as TAP, par-

ticipation in ACP's mentorship program is strictly voluntary. As a result, ACP's key performance indicators benefit from the fact that the program's participants actively chose to participate in the year-long program. Although ACP does not disclose the number of incomplete mentorships each year, it does track the reasons why mentorships are not completed. These include cases where mentors are unable to fulfill their function because of extenuating personal circumstances or loss of employment, as well as cases where protégés decide to terminate the mentorship early due to redeployment, modified career goals, or job securement. Although nearly 50% of incomplete mentorships over the past two years have been due to "protégé personal reasons" and "protégé unresponsiveness," only 4% of incomplete mentorships were a result of protégé dissatisfaction with the program.⁵⁴

The results of protégé and mentor experience surveys indicate that both protégés and mentors found participation in the program worthwhile. Of the 13,800 alumni protégés surveyed, a majority of alumni protégés found that the mentorship program provided a valuable opportunity for them to improve their resume and interview skills (68%), translate military experience into civilian terms (61%), build a professional network (59%), and refine civilian career goals and professional ambitions (58%). Overall, 98% of completed protégés said they would recommend the program to a fellow veteran. This high satisfaction rate applies to mentors as well. In 2019, 99% of more than 2,000 active mentors surveyed stated they were glad "their

company participates" and "would recommend" the program to another colleague. Moreover, 98% of mentors said they would consider being a mentor again.⁵⁵

Although ACP specifies that neither the mentor nor the program is designed to supply veterans with jobs, the program has nonetheless helped address the problem of veteran underemployment. In 2019, 1,932 protégés obtained what they characterized as "meaningful" employment during their mentorship period at more than 800 companies nationwide. Moreover, 86% of protégés who obtained employment in 2018 remained at the same company for at least one year, substantially higher than the 56% retention rate for all post-9/11 veterans reported by the Chamber of Commerce Foundation in 2016.

Those alumni who found employment during the program typically received higher salaries than the overall pool of post-9/11 veterans. Compared with the median salaries of \$50,000 for post-9/11 male veterans and \$42,494 for post-9/11 female veterans, the average salary for protégés who found employment in 2018 was more than \$82,000. This is not surprising, given that the veterans in ACP's program possess more formal education than the overall post-9/11 veteran population. Of ACP applicants, 30% have a bachelor's degree, 30% a graduate degree, and 40% percent did not possess a four year degree, markedly less than the 68% of the entire post-9/11 veteran pool.⁵⁶

54 Data on ACP's activities were provided to the author by ACP.

55 "Metrics," American Corporate Partners, 2019, available at: <https://www.acp-usa.org/impact/metrics>.

56 Data on ACP's activities were provided to the author by ACP.

Data from ACP's protégé surveys provides further evidence that mentorship is an effective method of promoting other positive life developments. A substantial portion of the more than 13,800 protégés surveyed responded that mentorship had been useful to them in overcoming social challenges: 44% of protégés claimed that their mentor helped them overcome work-life balance issues, while 24% said that the program was instructive in how to improve interpersonal relationships. Moreover, a considerable number of participants claimed that the mentorship provided more than just assistance in the veteran's search for employment: 28% stated that the program was a valuable resource in determining whether to go back to school, while 10% claimed that it was useful in either starting or building a personal business.

Conclusion

The population of veterans entering the civilian work force is growing at the very time that the U.S. economy is facing high unemployment. Veterans have experienced difficulty applying their military skills into those valued within the civilian work force in a low-unemployment economy. These challenges will only grow in a high-unemployment economy that will see veterans competing with younger workers who possess greater work experience. The mentorship approach, which has demonstrated its ability to help veterans meet the challenge of underemployment, is likely to be all the more important in battling the looming challenge of veteran unemployment that the nation will face in the months and years to come.