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_____ **Research Brief** _____

**Veterans in Canadian Correctional
Systems**

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Veterans in Canadian Correctional Systems

Philippe Bensimon
Correctional Service of Canada

&

Rick Ruddell
Correctional Service of Canada

Correctional Service of Canada

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Executive Summary

Key words: *incarcerated veterans, Canadian Forces.*

We have comparatively little knowledge about the presence of military veterans within the Correctional Service of Canada's (CSC or the Service) offender population. This exploratory study examined the prevalence of veterans in American, British, and Canadian correctional systems. Research findings from other nations suggest that the number of imprisoned veterans closely matches their representation in the general population. As about one in thirty Canadians have served in the armed forces, it was possible that veterans accounted for approximately three percent of CSC offenders.

In order to validate the three percent estimate of incarcerated veterans reported above, information collected during the substance abuse screening process was examined. From February 11, 2009 to May 11, 2010, a total of 2,054 male offenders from the Atlantic, Ontario, and Pacific regions responded to questions about military service, and 2.8% of them reported having served in the Canadian military. Of these veterans 48% reported having served less than one year, 36% between one and five years, and about 14% were in the Canadian Forces for more than five years. Applying this 2.8% estimate to the CSC population of 22,375 offenders in May, 2010 suggests that there may be 626 offenders who served in the Canadian military (383 in institutions and another 243 supervised in the community). Moreover, there may another 633 sentenced or remanded veterans in provincial or territorial corrections.

High numbers of incarcerated veterans present a number of implications for correctional services. Veterans often have treatment needs for psychological injuries such as post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Canadian medical researchers have recently reported that many veterans suffering from these injuries do not seek help for years and it is possible that the presence of PTSD or unresolved issues surrounding trauma may impact the offender's safe transition to the community.

While the validity of the results reported in the current study is limited by the methods of data collection and the sample that was used, the results shed light onto the issue of incarcerated veterans.

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Veterans in Canadian Correctional Systems

The Canadian Forces have a long and distinguished tradition of deploying military personnel within Canada, as well as on peacekeeping or humanitarian missions, and in foreign wars. It is estimated that about 800,000 persons, or one in 30 Canadian adults, are military veterans.¹ Of that number, about one-quarter served in World War II and Korea (Thompson, Chiasson, & Pedlar, 2008) with the remainder serving in peacetime or in other recent conflicts, including the Kosovo war, the First Gulf war, and peacekeeping activities in Afghanistan. However, despite the large number of Canadians who have served in the military, there is a gap in our knowledge about veterans involved with the criminal justice system, including those who are imprisoned. This study reports an estimate of the number of military veterans incarcerated in federal as well as provincial and territorial correctional systems.

This review extends a study undertaken by the Addictions Research Centre on the prevalence of veterans in the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC or the Service), which was requested by the Veterans Ombudsman (Farrell, Gileno, & Grant, 2009). The estimate was requested by the Ombudsman in order to gain a better understanding of the number of incarcerated veterans, which is a starting point in determining whether these offenders receive all of the benefits for which they are entitled. In order to conduct this research, three questions that asked offenders about their prior military service were added to the Computerized Assessment of Substance Abuse (CASA). This screening instrument is used with selected federal offenders after their admission to custody, and by temporarily modifying the instrument to include these additional questions it was thought that an estimate of the number of persons with military service in the CSC could be developed. The CASA was adapted as it was a quick and efficient method of obtaining information on offenders without impacting CSC operations.

From February 11, 2009 to May 11, 2010, a total of 2,054 male offenders from the Atlantic, Ontario, and Pacific regions responded to the questions about military service, and 2.8% of them reported having served in the Canadian military. Of that proportion, 48% served less than one year, 36% between one and five years, and about 14% were in the Canadian Forces

¹See: Thompson, Chiasson, & Pedlar (2008) – for the purposes of this report, a veteran is defined as any person who has reported prior service in the Canadian forces, regardless of the type of military discharge.

for more than five years. Applying this 2.8% estimate to the CSC institutional population of 22,375 offenders supervised in May, 2010 (Correctional Service of Canada, 2010) suggests that there may be 383 offenders who served in the Canadian military residing in institutions and another 243 who are supervised in the community.

Veterans are also incarcerated in provincial and territorial correctional systems, and while we do not have an accurate account of their number, by applying the same 2.8% figure to the average of 9,750 sentenced offenders held in provincial and territorial facilities in fiscal year 2006/2007 (Statistics Canada, 2008), there may be another 273 sentenced and 360 remanded veterans behind bars on any given day. As such, the scope of veterans incarcerated in Canadian correctional systems may be quite large—although we also acknowledge the limitation of applying the self-reported rate at admission of a relatively small group of offenders to the entire sentenced federal as well as provincial and territorial correctional populations.²

With the exception of the Farrell, Gileno and Grant (2009) study, a review of the literature showed that there were no recent scholarly or government sources of information about the prevalence of veterans in the Canadian justice system. In addition to conducting the literature review, officials from Veterans Affairs reported that such information did not exist (Van Til, 2009). Last, the Royal Canadian Legion was also contacted, and they had no specific publications about this topic.

Government agencies in the United Kingdom (U.K.) and United States (U.S.) regularly collect and report information about veterans in corrections. In the pages that follow, the main findings from these studies, including statistics about the prevalence of veterans in civilian corrections and some of their demographic and offence-related characteristics are reported. It is possible that veterans incarcerated in the CSC, as well as those in provincial or territorial corrections, have a similar profile to those imprisoned in America or Britain.

² Offenders supervised on probation by provincial or territorial authorities are not included in these estimates.

Veterans in U.K. Correctional Systems

A number of different organizations in the United Kingdom have reported on the prevalence of incarcerated veterans. First, surveys conducted by the Home Office in 2001, 2003, and 2004, revealed that 6%, 4% and 5% of inmates had a military background. A recent estimate of the veteran prison population was developed by the Defence Analytical Services and Advice (DASA), an agency that provides services to the U. K Ministry of Defence. DASA (2010) reported the prevalence of veterans in prison at 3%, although acknowledged that their estimate likely undercounted the true population of veterans, and that they might represent as much as four percent of the U.K. prison population (p. 1).

The National Association of Probation Officers (NAPO), an advocacy organization for probation and family court officers, recently released a report entitled *Ex-Armed Forces Personnel and the Criminal Justice System*. Using self-report information from offenders in ten prisons, NAPO (2008) estimated that approximately 9.1% of prisoners in England and Wales had a military background in 2007. Thus, the proportion of imprisoned veterans in the United Kingdom most likely falls within a range of four and nine percent.

Some U.K. veterans have psychological injuries that might be associated with their military service, including suffering the effects of post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and depression (Iversen et al., 2009). It is argued that the war in Afghanistan has resulted in higher numbers of military personnel exposed to traumatic situations in recent years. If not resolved, injuries such as PTSD may contribute to substance abuse and inappropriate methods of coping, which in turn, may result in homelessness and/or involvement with justice systems. It has been reported, for example, that the transition from military to civilian life is made more difficult because of a lack of formal support programs and high rates of alcohol abuse by veterans (NAPO, 2009; Treadwell, 2010). Iversen and colleagues (2005) reported that “Veterans with mental health problems during service seem to be at higher risk of social exclusion after leaving and therefore these individuals represent an especially vulnerable group of the veteran population” (p. 175).

In response to the number of incarcerated veterans in prisons, a number of interventions have been developed to provide support for them. One example is the Prison In-Reach Program,

which is sponsored by the Service Personnel & Veterans Agency (SPVA), a U.K. government department. Other services to veterans are offered by non-governmental agencies, such as the Royal British Legion and the Veterans in Prison Association (VIPA). In addition to acting as advocates for veterans, some of these organizations offer counselling and support, as well as providing advice on pensions and compensation.

Veterans in U.S. Correctional Systems

The U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics regularly reports about the prevalence and characteristics of incarcerated veterans. Mumola (2000) reported that there were over 25 million veterans in the United States in 1998 and of this number 225,700 were in prisons or jail. In terms of proportions, however, Mumola (2000) reported that “veterans accounted for 12% of all inmates in 1998, down from 21% in 1985” (p. 1).

In a follow-up study, Noonan and Mumola (2007) estimated that there were 140,000 inmates who were veterans in 2004, representing approximately 10% of state and federal prison populations. These investigators reported that the proportion of veterans in prison has decreased since 1986. The U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs (2009) also indicated that 9.3% of local jail inmates in 2002 were veterans. Among these veterans, 70% were non-violent offenders, 45% had served two or more state prison sentences, and at least 90,000 inmates released from local U.S. jails each year were veterans (p. 1).

Noonan and Mumola (2007) also developed a profile of U.S. state and federal prisoners. They observed that veterans were more likely to be serving a sentence for a violent offence, had shorter but more serious criminal records, served longer sentences, had higher mental health needs, and were older than their non-veteran counterparts. More specifically, Noonan and Mumola (2007) reported that:

- More than half (57%) of veterans in state prison were serving a sentence for a violent offence (compared to 47% for non-veterans). Among those violent offences, 15% were for homicide, and 23% for sexual assault and rape.
- Generally, veterans had shorter criminal records than non-veterans in state prisons, but they are sentenced to longer prison sentences than non-veterans—and they served a greater proportion of their sentence.
- A higher proportion of the veteran population in state prison had a recent history of mental health services (30%) compared to non-veterans (24%).
- Combat service in the veteran prison population was not related to higher levels of mental health histories or receiving services within the year prior to admission.
- The median age of veterans was 46 years, compared to 34 years for non-veterans.

- Veteran inmates were more educated than any other inmates: The rate of college-educated veterans in state prison (1 in 3) was triple that of non-veterans (1 in 10).

The points above suggest that many imprisoned veterans in the U.S. have high risks and needs. Similar to what has been reported in the United Kingdom by NAPO (2008; 2009), McGuire (2009) identified that some U.S. veterans required support in the areas of mental health, substance abuse, employment, and homelessness.

The RAND Corporation (2008) recently reported that almost one-fifth of armed services personnel were suffering from PTSD or depression, or had received a traumatic brain injury (p. 1). Of those soldiers, less than half reported getting treatment for these injuries. Low rates of participation in treatment are especially problematic given that PTSD has long been recognized in veteran populations (see French & Wailer, 1983). A Canadian study by Richardson, Darte, Grenier, English, and Sharpe (2008), reported that “almost 25 percent of soldiers suffering from an Operational Stress Injury (OSI) do not seek professional help, and those that eventually do seek help, due to the stigma associated with OSIs, can delay doing so for up to seven years” (p. 58). Thus, there seems to be a reluctance to participate in treatment. If left untreated, however, veterans with these conditions were thought to be more likely to commit suicide, as well as become homeless, abuse drugs or alcohol, or place a strain on family relationships—all of which are criminogenic factors.

Implications for Correctional Systems

Research suggests that the number of incarcerated veterans in the United Kingdom and United States is closely related to their prevalence in the general population.³ The estimate of 2.8% of the male CSC population also closely approximates the Canadian veteran population of one in 30 adults. Thus, as the number of veterans in the general population grows, their presence in correctional facilities is also likely to increase—and it is possible that those who have been deployed overseas in recent years are at comparatively higher risk of involvement with the justice system.

One factor that is consistent in the research reported from both the United Kingdom and United States is that many incarcerated veterans have unmet needs, especially related to mental health, substance abuse and the difficulty in the transition from military to civilian life. It is likely that some of the psychological injuries that military personnel receive, or trauma that they experienced, may contribute to their involvement in the justice system.

A greater proportion of veterans in incarcerated populations may create challenges for Correctional Services. If the experiences of Canadian veterans are similar to those reported in the U.S. and U.K. research, they may have higher risks and needs than the general offender population. Incarcerated veterans, for instance, are believed to be at higher risk of suicide than non-veterans (Frisman & Griffin-Fennell, 2009; Wortzel, Binswanger, Anderson, & Adler, 2009). There is a growing body of Canadian research that has identified increasing rates of operational stress injuries from members of the Canadian Forces who have served in peacekeeping missions as well as Afghanistan (Richardson, Thompson, Boswall, & Jetly, 2010; Rynor, 2010). While the Canadian Forces have developed programs that have responded to the needs of active duty personnel, veterans with psychological injuries or other unmet needs may be under-served.

³ Approximately 9% of the U.K. population over 16 years of age were estimated to be veterans: NAPO (2008) estimated that 9.1% of the prison population in England and Wales were veterans. The U.S. Census Bureau (2009) reported that 10.1% of the U.S. population 18 years of age and over were veterans and Noonan and Mumola (2007) reported that approximately 10% of the state and federal prison population were veterans.

Next Steps

There is a gap in our knowledge about the prevalence of veterans in federal as well as provincial and territorial corrections. Furthermore, there is no research that profiles this group of Canadian offenders, including their demographic and offence-related characteristics, length of sentence, their risk and needs, institutional conduct, as well as recidivism. In addition, this study examined only male offenders who had served in the Canadian Forces. It is likely that there are women veterans in the CSC population, and they may have unresolved issues regarding trauma and PTSD (Suris & Lind, 2008; Zinzow, Grubaugh, Monnier, Suffoletta-Maierle, & Frueh, 2007). Moreover, persons who have served in the armed forces of other nations fall outside the estimates reported above. These offenders might have risks and needs that are consistent with their Canadian counterparts. It is therefore recommended that researchers conduct follow-up studies to examine these issues.

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