A comparison between the divorce rates of UK Military Personnel and civilians

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1. Purpose of the present report

There has been a lot of speculation about the increase in divorce rates among the UK military; however there is limited research to support the claims that they are rising ‘dramatically’ (1). The gap in knowledge around this topic is specific to the UK, as sufficient research has been carried out on US divorce rates in the military. Until Keeling, Wessely and Fear (2), only a few research studies have looked at how divorce distribution among UK military Personnel compared to civilians. This mini report aims to investigate the latter by pulling information from a variety of sources.

2. Factors to consider

Divorce affects a significant percentage of the population, and consequently it is important to investigate divorce rates. A greater understanding of divorce rates enables resources to be aimed at, and tailored for, families in need. Relationship problems can occur regardless of whether one party is in the military or not, and include: childhood adversity, financial difficulties (3) and a lack of support. However, in addition to these, military marriages can also experience strain when one member is deployed for more than 13 months in a 3 year period (4). Furthermore, negative relationships with a spouse can lead to mental health disorders which can affect the individual’s ability to work, and in the case of military personnel it can discourage them from reenlisting (5). These factors need to be considered while analysing divorce rates statistics.

3. Divorce rates – Comparisons between military personnel and civilians

   a. Academic research

There is only a handful of academic studies on the topic that make use of UK data. One example is a recent military cohort study (2), where the divorce rates of 9,934 serving UK Personnel and 33,981,858 civilians were compared. The military sample included both regular forces and reservists who were deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan in the period between November 2007 and September 2009. The civilian sample consisted of 33,981,858 (50.1% female) respondents over the age of 16 who lived in England and Wales in mid-2008. Data in both groups was based on self-report. Importantly, responses were weighted\(^1\) to account for the sample size differences between the two groups. A discussion of the results of this study follows below. Please note that statistical

\(^1\) Weighting is a statistical technique which allows adjusting the data when a sample is not representative of the population at interest.
analysis of the difference in prevalence between the two samples is not meaningful due to the type of data used for the civilian group, which was provided by the Office of National Statistics.

The results showed that in general, military personnel were more likely to marry (59.4% vs 49.3%, respectively) and less likely to divorce (3.7% vs 10%, respectively) than civilians. Still, different trends in the results emerged depending on respondents’ age. For example, in the younger group (18-29 years of age) divorce was more prevalent among the military (1.3%) than the civilian population (0.8%). At the same time, the opposite trend was observed in the older respondents (above 30 years of age) – only 11% of the military sample were divorced compared to 25.8% in the civilian group. Finally, it was reported that civilian females were more likely to have been married (50.6%) as compared to female Service Personnel (41.8%) (2) – with the exception of respondents younger than 30 years of age (military: 29.5% - civilian: 14.2%).

Table 1. A comparison of the marital status of civilian and military personnel by age groups.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age group (years)</th>
<th>Total % (N)</th>
<th>Married % (N)</th>
<th>Divorced % (N)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Civilian</td>
<td>Military</td>
<td>Civilian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100 (33,981,858)</td>
<td>100 (9934)</td>
<td>49.3 (16,755,966)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18-29</td>
<td>25.9 (8,801,767)</td>
<td>36.6 (3636)</td>
<td>11.4 (1,001,539)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-44</td>
<td>34.0 (11,542,299)</td>
<td>48.6 (4826)</td>
<td>54.4 (6,277,970)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45-64</td>
<td>40.1 (13,637,792)</td>
<td>14.8 (1472)</td>
<td>69.5 (9,476,457)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: From ‘Marital Status Distribution of the U.K. Military: Does It Differ From the General Population?’ (2).

On another note, Combat Stress² compiled a review examining the changing nature of their referrals over the last two decades (6). The sample consisted of 13,746 veterans who became actively engaged in clinical services with Combat Stress after being referred, from other charities, via the NHS or self-referral. Results revealed that 53% reported their marital status as ‘single’ in 2004 (this category included widowed

² Combat Stress is a mental health charity for UK veterans focusing on treatment for conditions including PTSD, anxiety and depression.
respondents), which was an increase from 41% in 1994. It could therefore be assumed that there was a decrease of veterans who were ‘in a relationship’ from 59% in 1994 to 47% in 2004. However, it is unclear if those ‘in a relationship’ are married or not, as this distinction is not clarified in the report; still it is interesting to note the decrease in those who are not in a relationship over the last two decades.

b. The Annual Population Survey

Divorce rates expressed by Keeling et al. (2) coincide with the results of the Annual Population Survey (APS³). The APS identified approximately 2.56 million (5.2% of the population) UK Armed Forces veterans⁴ residing in households in Great Britain, of which 1,573,000 (61.5%) were married and 251,000 (9.8%) divorced. These results are similar to those outlined the previous year; of the 2,625,000 (5.2% of the population) veterans, residing in the UK 1,632,000 (62.1%) were married and 253,000 (9.6%) divorced (9). Importantly, when these marriage and divorce rates are compared to the rates of the civilian population, marriage rates are higher among military personnel (61.5-62.1% vs 43% respectively), while divorce rates are lower for military personnel compared to civilians (9.6-9.8% vs 20% respectively) (10).

Finally, the HVRT obtained exclusive data with permission from the Ministry of Defence about divorce rates amongst war veterans who were deployed to Operations in Iraq or Afghanistan from April 2007 (Ref: FOI 2016 12100)(11). Of those who reported being married on their first deployment from April 2007, 6983 were recorded as still married and 980 recorded as separated or divorced on 1st November 2016 (11). This information had been recorded on the JPA⁵ system and includes all personnel deployed during these years and therefore is a representative sample. However, it should be noted that declaring one’s marital status is not currently a compulsory requirement while completing JPA. Thus, the figures above most likely do not include everyone who was deployed at this time.

³ The APS is conducted annually by the Office of National Statistics (ONS) in partnership with the Ministry of Defence (MoD) (7). According to the MoD, the results obtained from the APS provide the most reliable estimates of the UK veteran population, due to the size of the sample which takes part in the survey (APS sample for 2015, N = 309,890).

⁴ Veteran = defined in UK as an individual who served at least one day in the UK Armed Forces (8).

⁵ JPA = Joint Personnel Administration is an intranet-based system used by the British Armed Forces for personnel administration since April 2006.
c. Mind-set
The UK Household Survey of the Ex-Service Community (12) conducted by the Royal British Legion provides insights into the ‘mind-set’ of Service Personnel around the time of divorce. The survey identified 2,835,000 veterans in the UK, of which an estimated 183,000 were divorced (6.46%). The results showed that relationship break-ups among the veteran community are likely to be a trigger of psychological difficulties, in particular, depression. Divorced or separated veterans were significantly more likely to report at least one problem with ‘depression or bad nerves’ (21.8%) and other mental health conditions (10.4%) compared to single, married or widowed veterans (10.3% and 4.7% respectively); these findings were also seen in the APS (7,9). A similar trend has been identified among non-veterans, however it is unclear whether the mental health condition is a result of, or a contributing factor towards, the divorce.

d. US research
Research into military divorce in the United States supports Keeling et al.’s (2) findings that military personnel are more likely to marry than the general population (13,14). A Millennium Cohort Study conducted in the US on 29,314 married Service Personnel in 2001-2003 found that by 2004-2006 1545 (5.3%) had divorced (15). Moreover, a significant association emerged between divorce and new-onset PTSD, depression, smoking, alcohol-related problems, binge drinking, and moderate weight gain which coincides with the findings from the UK Household Survey of the Ex-Service Community (12).
Research has also suggested that military personnel are more likely to marry at a younger age (16–19) when compared to age-matched civilians. One possible reason for this is that military service offers a job and financial security with benefits such as subsidized housing and being part of a supportive community.

4. Concluding remarks
This paper indicates that divorce rates range from 3.7 - 12.6% in the military compared to 10 - 20% in civilians, illustrating that divorce rates are generally higher for civilians than the military. A large amount of the research conducted into divorce is based on surveys, and therefore the results can be biased as only select individuals will respond. Self-selection can also provide an explanation as to why divorce statistics are varied and why it is difficult to provide an exact statistic for comparison. Another reason for the findings varying is that they have been compiled by several different sources using
different populations at different times. In order for a direct comparison to be made into
UK military and civilian divorce rates, an investigation would need to be conducted
analysing a representative sample of civilians and military personnel with similar
respondent numbers for each group.
Additionally, factors such as financial aid for married couples should be taken into
account when analysing divorce rates, as this could encourage couples to stay together
and potentially result in lower divorce rates in the military. The Service Families
Accommodation (SFA), the Armed Forces Pension Scheme (AFPS) and other schemes
provide financial support for travel, childcare, school fees, council tax, food and
accommodation; these schemes promote marriage by relieving some potential
relationship ‘problems’ such as financial difficulties.

5. Future Direction
In order for a direct comparison to be made into UK military and civilian divorce rates,
an investigation would need to be conducted analysing a representative sample of
civilians and military personnel. Factors such as mental health and financial aid should
be considered in this investigation to ensure a complete comparison.
References


