

CLASS, RACE/ETHNICITY & MILITARY SERVICE IN THE RECENT WARS

WEST COAST POVERTY CENTER

DIALOGUES ON POVERTY AMONG RESEARCHERS, POLICYMAKERS AND PRACTITIONERS

The West Coast Poverty Center's *DIALOGUES* projects bridge the worlds of academic research and real-world practice by supporting new research on critical poverty issues and bringing together researchers and policy practitioners to consider its implications. This edition of the *DIALOGUES* features work by researcher Alair MacLean exploring racial and socioeconomic equity in military recruiting during the recent conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Alair MacLean is an Associate Professor of Sociology at Washington State University whose research focuses on questions related to inequality, military sociology, and the life course.

ABOUT US

The West Coast Poverty Center (WCPC) at the University of Washington works to bridge the gaps between research, policy, and practice to improve our collective understanding of, and responses to, the causes and consequences of poverty and inequality in the Puget Sound region and beyond.

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Since at least the Civil War, Americans have expressed concern that poor men have been more likely than the rich to fight in wars, facing the risks of death and injury inequitably. These concerns did not abate with the shift to an all-volunteer force in 1973. In the recent conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, some observers suggested that there might be a "poverty draft," in which the poor and minorities were disproportionately likely to enlist and fight because they had fewer options in the civilian labor market.^[1]

With funding from the Marguerite Casey Foundation, Washington State University Associate Professor Alair MacLean produced a report about trends in military service by race/ethnicity and class that sought to determine whether the men who served during the recent wars came disproportionately from minority and low-income families. In brief, Dr. MacLean found no evidence that the poor or minorities had been enlisting disproportionately during the recent wars. However, she did find evidence that individuals from families at the top of the income distribution were less likely than their peers to enlist in the years immediately following high school, suggesting a de facto "wealth exemption."

The West Coast Poverty Center distributed a condensed version of that report to a group of practitioners with expertise in military issues, then hosted a discussion between the practitioners and Professor MacLean about their reactions to the research findings, the questions it raised, and their thoughts about the broader issue of equity and military service. In this report, we present what existing research reveals about equity and military service; new findings from Dr. MacLean's original research; and a summary of the discussion with practitioners.

BACKGROUND ^[2]

While asking whether there is racial or socioeconomic equity in who serves and fights in the military seems like a relatively straightforward question, it can be difficult to answer. Questions about pathways during service, imperfect data, and shifting contexts preclude a simple answer.

1) DIFFERENT MILITARY OUTCOMES MAY BE INEQUITABLY DISTRIBUTED

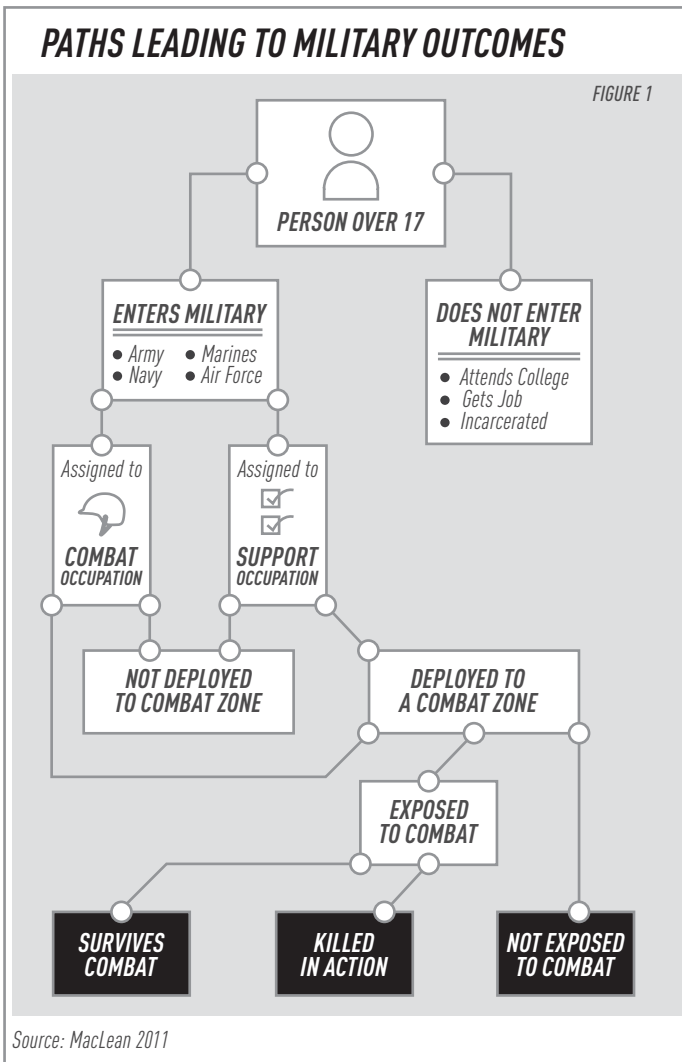
Experiences among those who serve can be radically different. Individuals who choose to enlist first select a branch in which to serve from among the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, and Coast Guard. As Figure 1 shows, within these branches, they may be assigned to combat or support occupations. Only 27 percent of a sample on active duty in 1999, for example, worked in combat positions (Burland and Lundquist 2013). When there is an active conflict, some of each group may be deployed in a combat zone.

These distinctions are important because the military can have either positive or negative effects based largely on when and how troops serve. Veterans and service members have been shown to experience positive effects of service in general, particularly if they are minorities or grew up in disadvantaged families (Browning, Lopreato, and Poston 1973; Teachman and Tedrow 2007). However, any potential positive effects may be outweighed by the risk of injury

^[1] See, for example, Mariscal (2007).

^[2] In this section, we draw from a report by Alair MacLean. The full report is available on our website: <http://depts.washington.edu/wpcp/Dialogues>.

^[3] Combat veterans are also more likely than people who did not see combat to be unemployed and suffer disabilities later in their lives (MacLean 2010). They confront a host of issues with what has been called "readjustment," such as the increased odds of divorce and other negative family outcomes (Institute of Medicine 2013).



or death during wartime.^[3] Most previous researchers have evaluated either entry into the military or death as the outcomes of interest, but one might also care about the other types of experiences that service members have, such as deployment away from combat.

2) FEW SOURCES OF INFORMATION ABOUT THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS OF SERVICE MEMBERS

It is also difficult to assess whether a poverty draft existed during the recent conflicts because the Department of Defense does not routinely collect information about recruits' socioeconomic status. Recruits provide information about their race/ethnicity, geographic origin, and educational attainment, but not about their parents' occupations, income, or levels of education. In the absence of this information about recruits' families, researchers have often relied on information from the Department of Defense about the characteristics of recruits' neighborhoods (e.g. Kane 2006).

Relying on neighborhood rather than family characteristics of recruits is not ideal because individual characteristics may not accurately reflect average neighborhood level characteristics, but this has been the best proxy available at the national level and has been used in many studies attempting to answer questions about class and service.^[4] Researchers have also used a number of civilian surveys to try to assess recruits' socioeconomic characteristics, but these studies mainly examine periods before the beginning of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

3) CHANGES IN RECRUITING STANDARDS AND TARGETS OVER TIME

In addition to challenges in specifying and measuring inequities, changes in military recruitment targets, practices, and standards over time should also be considered as a factor influencing who is eligible to serve. In spite of a much smaller active duty force since the end of the Cold War, the US armed forces fell short of their recruiting goals twice, first in 1998-1999 and again in 2005. Recruiting shortfalls can be due to one or a combination of economic, demographic, and military factors (Rostker 2006), such as a strong civilian economy or ongoing combat conditions.

To meet recruiting goals in recent years, the armed forces have occasionally modified enrollment standards, admitting more high school drop-outs and recruits with lower scores on the military aptitude test and using additional "conduct waivers" to admit individuals with criminal records. These changes in recruiting standards change the pool and profile of eligible recruits. For example, as the armed forces faced recruiting difficulties in the mid-2000s, service members became relatively less likely than civilians to hold a high school degree, dropping below 90 percent for the first time in two decades.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH ON INEQUITIES BY RACE/ETHNICITY AND SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS

Existing research on racial and socioeconomic equity in the military paints a complicated picture that changes over time. Overall, enlistment patterns in the all-volunteer era suggest that the military drew most heavily from the middle class and less from both the higher and lower ends of the socioeconomic distribution.^[5]

Patterns in enlistment by socioeconomic status (SES) varied by race/ethnicity, with whites more likely to enlist if they grew up with fewer resources and blacks more likely to do so if they grew up with greater resources. (e.g., Department of Defense 2000). Blacks have been disproportionately likely to enlist in the service for most of the all-volunteer force era, with the exception of the years 2004 to 2007.

Among those who served, the little available research found that those from the bottom of the socioeconomic and ability distributions were more likely to be assigned to combat occupations or be exposed

[4] In addition, recruits may report not their home neighborhood, but that of the base to which they are assigned, creating additional error in this measurement (Department of Defense 1998).

[5] Lutz 2008; Department of Defense 1989; Department of Defense 1990; Department of Defense 1991; Department of Defense 2000.

to combat. Research examining race/ethnicity and military service found that even when blacks were disproportionately likely to enlist, they were not more likely to serve in combat. By the late-1990s, whites were disproportionately likely to serve in combat positions, while blacks were more likely to serve in support roles (Burland and Lundquist 2013).

Research since the 1950s reveals that men have been more likely to die in combat if they came from poor rather than from wealthy neighborhoods. Service members who died in Iraq disproportionately grew up in neighborhoods with lower median income or in rural areas and were less likely to have grown up in wealthier neighborhoods (Curtis and Payne 2010). In terms of race/ethnicity, white and Hispanic service members were disproportionately likely to die in Iraq. Black service members were not disproportionately likely to die, and may, in fact, have been less likely to be killed.

NEW FINDINGS: SOCIOECONOMIC CHARACTERISTICS OF RECRUITS DURING THE WARS IN IRAQ AND AFGHANISTAN, 2004-2012

The Educational Longitudinal Survey (ELS), a representative sample of high school sophomores in 2002, collected information on individual and family-level characteristics and re-surveyed respondents in 2006 and 2012. Dr. MacLean examined these data to see whether high school sophomores in 2002 had enlisted by 2006 (roughly age 20) and by 2012 (roughly age 26), as well as whether enlistment rates varied by race/ethnicity, family income, or parents' SES.^[6] The study period covers the height of the recruiting difficulties for the armed forces during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.^[7]

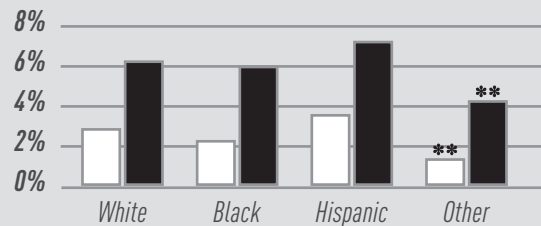
Figure 2 shows enlistment rates by 2006 and 2012 by race/ethnicity. There were no statistically significant differences in enlistment between blacks, whites, and Hispanics in either year. Individuals whose race/ethnicity was categorized as "other" were significantly less likely than whites to have enlisted in these years.^[8]

Consistent with the idea of a middle class draft, people were relatively less likely to have enlisted if their parents had low levels of education (not high school graduates) or higher levels (college graduates) (**Figure 3**). People from the second SES quartile or, lower middle class, were also most likely to enlist, followed by individuals from the third quartile (**Figure 4**). In terms of income, people were least likely to enlist if they grew up in families at the top of the income distribution, though this difference is only statistically significant for 2006, two years after the respondents were high school seniors (**Figure 5**). Individuals were most likely to enlist from the middle two income quartiles.

PERCENT OF 2002 HIGH SCHOOL SOPHOMORES ENLISTED BY 2006 AND 2012

BY RACE

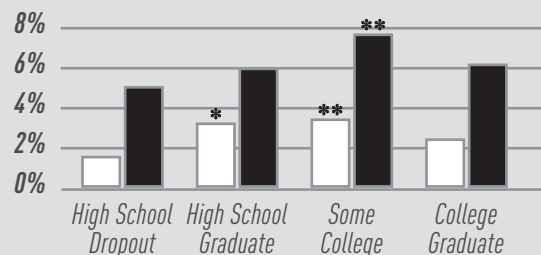
FIGURE 2



Two-tailed test of difference from white

BY MOTHER'S EDUCATION

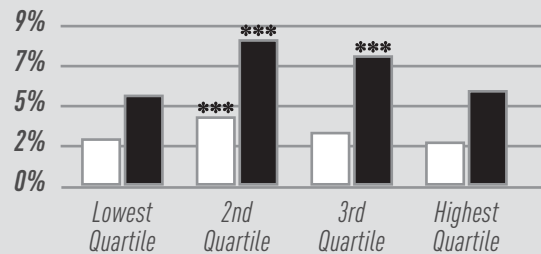
FIGURE 3



Two-tailed test of difference from HS dropout

BY SES

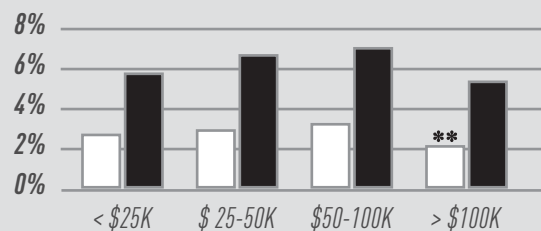
FIGURE 4



Two-tailed test of difference from lowest quartile

BY INCOME

FIGURE 5



Two-tailed test of difference from less than \$25K

Source: MacLean 2011 □ 2006 ■ 2012
 * = $p < .05$ ** = $p < .01$ *** = $p < .001$

[6] This and subsequent analyses are based on data from both the male and female respondents. When the sample is limited to men, the results are similar. The measure of parents' SES combines the occupational status of the parents with their educational attainment and income. The measure is then divided into quartiles, ranging from highest to lowest.

[7] For more information about the sample or analyses, please see the full report, at <http://depts.washington.edu/wcpc/Dialogues>.

[8] The "other" category includes Asians and Native Americans, groups whose sample sizes in the survey are too small for making meaningful comparisons.

Rather than a “poverty draft,” these analyses instead suggest that the armed forces depended on the middle class during the recent wars. In addition, there may have been an informal “wealth exemption,” in which the affluent were less likely to enlist than everyone else (at least in the two years immediately after high school). Furthermore, at least during these wars, minorities were not disproportionately likely to enlist.

While advocates and journalists have tended to combine the poor and minorities when voicing concerns about potential inequities in service, researchers have tended to examine these factors separately. The available evidence suggests that people may enlist according to different, potentially overlapping patterns with respect to poverty and race/ethnicity, and future research should attempt to explore those patterns.

PRACTITIONERS RESPOND

In March 2015 the West Coast Poverty Center invited practitioners and policy experts to discuss Professor MacLean’s research about the socioeconomics of recruitment and service in the military. Five participants joined the conversation with backgrounds in military recruitment; philanthropy; defense; economics; sociological and demographic research; personal experience in the military; and work with veterans (*see the text box below for a list of participants*).

Highlights from the conversation and participants’ suggestions for future research are summarized below.

1) REACTIONS TO FINDINGS ABOUT SOCIOECONOMIC DIFFERENCES IN MILITARY SERVICE

Dr. MacLean’s conclusion, that there is no evidence based on the available data that people from low-income communities disproportionately enter the military, resonated with discussants. A few participants felt that, in spite of its risks, military service is generally a positive experience for young people, with benefits both during and after service.

Some discussants expressed frustration that concern about a “poverty draft” re-emerges periodically even though it is not supported by the data with which participants were already familiar. A few participants also went a bit further to suggest that researchers should stop using the term “poverty draft” altogether because it perpetuates the myth.

While providing evidence to debunk the idea of a poverty draft, Dr. MacLean’s work suggests that a “wealth exemption” might be at play in terms of who has entered the military in recent years. Without dismissing concerns about potential disproportionality, one participant wanted to know more about the robustness of that finding as well as its practical significance: that participant wondered whether the degree of underrepresentation of wealthy enlistees would be noticeable to those who are serving or if it would be something that could only be detected statistically.

DIALOGUE PARTICIPANTS

RESEARCHERS	PRACTITIONERS	WEST COAST POVERTY CENTER
<p>Alair MacLean Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, Washington State University</p>	<p>Catherine N. Barry 2014-2015 Visiting Scholar, Department of Demography, University of California, Berkeley</p> <p>Ernestine Faircloth Retired Army Sergeant and Office Manager, Georgia STAND-UP</p> <p>Curt Gilroy Retired Senior Defense official</p> <p>James Hosek Senior Economist, RAND Corporation</p> <p>Cheryl Milloy Evaluation and Research Officer, Marguerite Casey Foundation</p>	<p>Annette Case Policy Consultant</p> <p>Shannon Harper Research Director</p> <p>Jennifer Romich Faculty Director, Associate Professor, School of Social Work, University of Washington</p>

More broadly, this participant wondered what any wealth disparities might mean “on the ground” for those who are serving in the military.

2) RACE/ETHNICITY AND MILITARY SERVICE

With respect to race/ethnicity, the finding that black, white and Hispanic youth entered the military in roughly equal rates seemed to correspond to participants’ expectations. Discussants were interested in how enlistment patterns have changed over time and in the recent increases in representation of Hispanics and black recruits seen in other data. One noted that although minorities may not be over-represented among recruits, they may appear over-represented in the service at a given point in time because retention rates are higher for these populations.

3) RECRUITMENT ISSUES

Participants spent some time discussing recruitment standards and how those influence who is represented in the military. One participant reiterated that recruitment standards are driven by education and aptitude, with minimum standards for enlistment that set a floor on the “quality” of recruits. Another noted that general eligibility standards have not changed in many years, although there have been minor shifts in specific criteria.

Existing standards and demographic realities limit the pool of potential recruits. The share of 18-24 year-olds who meet existing standards is limited by factors such as performance on qualifying tests, drug use, and obesity. Among those meeting eligibility standards, the pool of likely recruits is further limited by whether or not individuals already have children. To the extent that these conditions are disproportionately common among young people from lower socioeconomic status communities or from racial/ethnic minority groups, barring changes in recruiting standards or external changes in laws or behavior, the share of those who are eligible and likely to serve may decline among those groups.

One participant also noted that the share of individuals of Hispanic origin who are not citizens might affect the pool of eligible recruits and that groups’ representation as that population grows. Changing demographics may warrant attention to eligibility standards regarding citizenship/legal status, especially when education and aptitude requirements are met.

4) THE ROLE OF MILITARY SERVICE IN ADDRESSING INEQUALITY

Participants reflected on the role the military plays in service members’ lives during and after service. A few participants’ discussed their belief that the military can provide good career

pathways within the service as well as opportunities for upward mobility after leaving the service. All agreed that the military plays a major role in our economy and society, and that it functions as one of the largest providers of education and training. Recruits learn physical training, discipline, and team work as well as specific occupational skills that can be valuable in the civilian world. A few participants described the benefits of service that are available to all service members, such as good pay, family support, housing, and no-cost health care.

Some of these benefits continue after service is completed. In addition to opportunities those in the military receive during service, participants noted that service makes individuals eligible for substantial education benefits after leaving and that these benefits were improved in the last decade. One participant pointed out that, including the value of housing and food allowances, pay in the military is higher than median pay for civilian jobs at similar skill levels. As a result, it is not uncommon for service members to experience a drop in earnings after they leave the military. In spite of that possibility, over time, most respondents felt confident that military service could be a vehicle for upward mobility.

While agreeing that the service provides important benefits and opportunities, another participant noted that race, class, and equity issues do still affect military service. Those who enter and serve in the military bring the same biases with them that exist more generally in society. These biases may influence how the service experience differs as recruits enter the military, whether they become enlisted personnel or officers, and the different opportunities afforded to them according to their occupation and rank.

5) DATA ISSUES

The discussion often referenced the limitations on the types of data available to answer questions about who enters the military and what service patterns look like. As noted, demographic data on the race/ethnicity of recruits is available over time, but data on individual recruits’ income was only collected for limited periods of time. Discussants noted that information about recruits’ parents’ income would likely be unreliable because young adults might not have accurate or complete information about their parents’ incomes. More practically, this information might be expensive for the Department of Defense to collect; in a time of tight budgets, one participant suggested that this type of imperfect, unnecessary information was unlikely to be a priority.

In the absence of individual-level data, relying on neighborhood-level data is not ideal, but seemed like a reasonable substitute to most participants. As discussed below, a lack of data also looms over many of the research questions about military service and socioeconomic status that participants would also like to see addressed.

6) REMAINING QUESTIONS

While disparities in enlistment were not a concern for respondents, participants raised a number of additional questions about equity as it relates to entering, serving, and being a veteran of a military service. These included:

- 1 How do service members' experiences vary by race/ethnicity, separate from socioeconomic status?
- 2 What pre-service characteristics help predict how recruits end up being sorted across the different branches of the service and within occupations/positions within branches?
- 3 How does who becomes enlisted personnel compare to who joins the officer corps?
- 4 What could be learned from comparing the experiences of otherwise similar individuals within and across racial groups who enter the military and those who do not?

Without reliable individual-level data on the SES of incoming recruits, many of these questions will be impossible to answer.

A few participants also suggested that they would like to be able to examine civilian employment and earnings data for service members once they have left the military so they could track long-term outcomes. Currently, the military is not allowed to collect data on service members once they leave the service, so the military would need to ask permission to gather data and allowing access to this information would be voluntary. Certain groups do conduct analyses based on data collected from veterans such as their experience of homelessness. These reports depend on private, often non-profit resources. In the current environment, participants did not seem optimistic that additional public funds would be available to address data gaps.

CONCLUSIONS

Participants appreciated additional evidence to help debunk the myth of a "poverty draft" and hoped that policy makers and others would accept this reality. At the same time, Dr. MacLean's findings about a possible wealth exemption; the existing evidence about disparities in deaths in Iraq; and the additional questions participants raised about mobility and long-term outcomes underscored the fact that concerns about equity remain. Not enough data exist to more deeply and precisely answer questions about who enters the military; how one's status might affect one's path during and after service; and to better demonstrate the effects of military service later in life. Collecting more data or creatively leveraging available data could be helpful for understanding these dynamics and informing conversations about equity and service.

“Rather than a “poverty draft,” these analyses instead suggest that the armed forces depended on the middle class during the recent wars.... Furthermore, at least during these wars, minorities were not disproportionately likely to enlist.”

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