

# **Comparing Rates of Marriage and Divorce in Civilian, Military, and Veteran Populations**

## **Extended Abstract**

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People are concerned about divorce rates in military families. News reports are full of concern. Spouses themselves are full of concern. The specific concern seems to be that members of the military are more vulnerable than comparable civilians. Yet, at the same time, the military has been called family friendly, and indeed lots of people in the military are married.

How concerned should we be? Just how marriage and divorce prone is the military? Answering this question would appear to require comparisons with a civilian baseline. Yet data comparing divorce rates across civilian and military populations is not simple. The military is a highly select population – there are constantly changing eligibility requirements, as well as known self-selection effects. To the extent that these differences are themselves associated with divorce rates, direct comparison between divorce rates in the two populations would be misleading. A more trustworthy comparison would be between service members and comparable civilians.

To more accurately evaluate the effects of military service on transitions into and out of marriage, the goal of these analyses is to compare rates of marriage and divorce among service members and among comparable civilians. Prior work suggests that servicemembers are more likely to be married and less likely to be divorced than comparable civilians (see Karney & Crown 2007). An outstanding question is whether their higher marriage and lower divorce rates reflect unobserved differences between servicemembers and comparable civilians (perhaps servicemembers make more attractive marital partners or perhaps they are reared in families with more “traditional” values) or whether they reflect something about military service itself. For example, the military may offer a relatively supportive environment (both emotionally and financially) for newly married individuals. Teasing apart these competing hypotheses is difficult with purely cross-sectional data. Further, and perhaps most importantly, what happens to the marriages formed while serving in the military once the couple leaves the military and returns to civilian life?

The analysis proceeds in three stages. The first stage involves a comparison of marriage among military servicemembers and comparable civilians. The second stage examines divorce among military and comparable civilians. The third stage examines divorce among servicemembers after leaving the military, and whether it differs from comparable civilians.

The first two stages examine the period 1995-2002, utilizing longitudinal military service personnel records from the same period from every service of the military, in

conjunction with civilian data from the National Survey of Family Growth-2002 (including retrospective marriage and divorce histories for both men and women). For the military data, each service maintains personnel records in an idiosyncratic way, although a new system will soon be online that tracks these data in a common database with common descriptors. In the absence of that centralized database, the services now send monthly data extracts of their service records to DMDC, where the data are assembled into forms that can be analyzed.

For this project, the Defense Manpower Data Center generated summaries of the monthly extracts, including data on every person who has served in the Armed Forces during that period. The period was chosen to overlap with the civilian data contained in the 2002 NSFG. Using this combination of military and civilian data, we are able to make comparisons between individuals that are both more current and can include more controls (to enhance “comparability” of individuals) than any prior studies been able.

With panel data we can examine how marriage and divorce decisions change when individuals enter and – crucial for the third research question – exit the military. Such panel data analyses are feasible employing the 1979 National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY79). The NLSY79 first surveyed 12,686 men and women ages 14-22 in 1979. These men and women were surveyed every year between 1979 and 1988 and biannually thereafter. By 2004, the surveyed sample was between 39 and 48 years old. A special feature of the NLSY79 is an oversample of veterans which makes it possible to examine the marital histories of these individuals as they join and separate from the military. With respect to divorce, if we find that the likelihood of divorce increases when veterans separate from active-duty service, then we might conclude that something about military service is protective of marriage. On the other hand, if we find that the likelihood of divorce does not change when veterans separate from active-duty service, then we might conclude that the lower divorce rates of military members reflects unobserved characteristics of these individuals rather than something about military service itself.

### Incentives to marry in the military

The military attracts young people, and then provides a number of incentives for them to marry. Those incentives also appear to positively affect decisions to marry (Zax & Flueck, 2003; Cadigan, 2000). Also see work by Lundquist (Lundquist, 2004, 2006a; Lundquist & Smith, 2005).

But these analyses are limited in several ways – the actual comparability of civilians to the military in the analyses are questionable, and the 1980s time period included by these studies represents a substantially different one from the current period in terms of general marriage trends. Do these incentives encourage marriages to form that would generally not endure, or form at all, among similar civilian couples?

### Divorce in the military: Higher or Lower than civilians?

The presence of incentives to marry would suggest that divorce rates should be lower for service members, who must remain married to preserve their benefits, than for comparable civilians, who have fewer barriers to divorcing. Moreover, the presence of benefits may also make marriages easier for the military.

On the other hand, military selects vulnerable people, who would be at elevated risk for divorce if they were civilians. Also, the military makes enormous demands on families, and these might stress people out.

Karney & Crown (2007) question the stress hypothesis, but offers no direct military-civilian comparisons. The Lundquist analyses (Lundquist, 2006b) are suggestive, but limited in a variety of ways (comparability and time frame among others)

There are also studies from prior eras and prior conflicts, but these may not generalize.

### Preliminary Results

Preliminary analyses for all three stages of the project have been completed. Linear probability analyses of the entire military population 1995-2002 indicates that compared to comparable civilians, military men and women are more likely to get married, and that military men are less likely to get divorced while serving in the military. Relative to comparable civilians, military women are more likely to get divorced. However, upon exiting the military, both veteran men and women have higher rates of divorce than comparable civilians, as indicated in the NLSY-79 using fixed effects models. Taken together, these findings suggest that the military provides incentives to marry (for men and women) and remain married (for men), but that once the servicemembers return to civilian life and these incentives are absent, they suffer higher rates of marital dissolution than comparable civilians. This suggests that the military may encourage unions that would not normally be formalized into marriage in a civilian context, and are consequently more fragile upon exit from the military.

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