

# Experiences of ex-service personnel before contact with the criminal justice system



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SCAN TO VIEW  
THE MAIN REPORT

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# Executive summary

In August 2021, Forces in Mind Trust (FiMT) commissioned Nacro, in partnership with the University of Northampton, to conduct research into the barriers to identification and uptake of support for ex-service personnel and their families in the criminal justice systems of England, Wales, and Scotland.

During the course of this research, ex-service personnel told us about their lives and experiences before they came into contact with the criminal justice system (CJS). These findings have been analysed and presented in this report. The research team interviewed 104 ex-service personnel in prison (95) as well as in the community (9) in selected sites in England, Scotland, and Wales. In addition to ex-service personnel, 100 stakeholders in key positions within HM Prison Service; the Probation Service; police; NHS England; and third sector organisations were also interviewed. This report is structured in three distinct sections, detailing the experiences of ex-service personnel in early life; in the Armed Forces; and in transition from the Armed Forces to civilian life.

In the early life section, we cover childhood experiences including some that resulted in trauma, such as abuse and being in care. Some interviewees shared their experience of low-level contact with the CJS prior to joining the Armed Forces and their reasons for joining the Armed Forces. These included family legacy; admiration of the values and principles of the Armed Forces; escaping their circumstances; and limited educational and employment opportunities.

Ex-service personnel also shared their experiences during their time in the Armed Forces, which are set out in the next section. While most respondents spoke of their time in the Armed Forces with pride, some experiences were highlighted as having a negative impact on their physical and mental health. These included challenges in maintaining relationships and networks; alcohol and substance misuse; and difficulty in seeking help whilst serving in the Armed Forces. The primary reasons shared as to why interviewees left the Armed Forces related to family, offending behaviour, and health.

The final section of the report sets out the experiences of respondents as they left the Armed Forces, many of whom reflected positively on their overall experience. Some experienced challenges adjusting to civilian life after losing the support network provided by the Armed Forces. Regret about leaving the Armed Forces was a common theme among interviewees. Specific challenges with transition included difficulty in managing finances, social isolation, poor mental health, and reluctance to seek help.

This report provides background and wider context to the experiences of ex-service personnel who have come into contact with the CJS, to complement the main report *Ex-service personnel in the criminal justice system: Barriers to identification and uptake of support* which can be found at [nacro.org.uk/exservicepersonnel](https://nacro.org.uk/exservicepersonnel). We hope that this additional context builds an increased understanding of the life course and experiences of ex-service personnel who come into contact with the CJS and helps in the development of policy at different stages of the Armed Forces journey.

# 1. Introduction

**This report provides further context to the report ‘Ex-service personnel in the criminal justice system: Barriers to identification and uptake of support’ and considers the wider factors that impacted the criminal justice trajectories of ex-service personnel who were interviewed for this project. This information is presented in a separate report as it sits outside the commissioned project’s aims and objectives.**

The research team conducted semi-structured interviews with 104 ex-service personnel, of whom 95 were in prison at the time of interview. Nine ex-service personnel were interviewed in the community and had previously had experience in the CJS or were currently under supervision by the Probation Service. It should be noted that the sample included individuals whose experiences in the Armed Forces were a significant time ago, with nearly 67% of our sample having left the Armed Forces 15 years or more ago.

In addition to ex-service personnel, the team also interviewed 71 stakeholders to shed light on their experiences of working with ex-service personnel who have been in contact with the CJS. This report is organised into three sections: early life; experience in the Armed Forces; and post-forces transitions and experiences. Key themes and issues are presented within each section. Information on the methodological approach for the research can be found in the main report. Figure 1 provides a thematic overview of the report with the key sub-sections outlined.

*Figure 1: Thematic overview of life pre-CJS*



## 1.1 List of abbreviations

CJS	Criminal justice system
DASA	Defence Analytical Services and Advice <sup>1</sup>
FEC	Forces Employment Charity, formerly referred to as RFEA
HMPPS	His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service. At the time of the fieldwork, the service was known as Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service
MoD	Ministry of Defence
MoJ	Ministry of Justice
OVA	Office for Veteran Affairs
RBL	Royal British Legion
SPS	Scottish Prison Service
SSAFA	Soldiers', Sailors' and Airmen's Families Association, the Armed Forces Charity



<sup>1</sup> Defence Analytical Services and Advice was a statistical and economic unit within the MoD, created in 1992 and is now closed.



## 2. Early Life

**Understanding the early life, or life course, of ex-service personnel is valuable in better understanding experiences in the Armed Forces and transition to civilian life (Carr, *et al.*, 2019; Hardy & Reyes, 2016; Kang, *et al.*, 2016). A life course perspective enables a richer understanding of the multiple factors shaping an individual's life (ibid). The research team identified key themes in the early lives of ex-service personnel interviewed for this research that contributed to their life course before they had contact with the justice system. These factors include childhood experience resulting in trauma, criminal activity before joining the Armed Forces, motivation for joining the Armed Forces, including the desire to escape to a better life.**

### 2.1 Childhood experiences resulting in trauma

Childhood experiences relayed by ex-service personnel for this research were commonly associated with adversity and challenge (Figure 2). The effects of adverse experiences in childhood on adult life are well documented in literature, with adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) being highlighted in ex-service personnel who have been involved in the justice system (Murray, *et al.*, 2022).

*Figure 2: Childhood experiences highlighted by ex-service personnel in CJS in this research.*



Research shows that ACEs can have an impact on physical and mental health (Felitti, *et al.*, 1998; Campbell, *et al.*, 2016; Teicher, *et al.*, 2002). Recent research examining the effects of adverse experiences in childhood on service personnel and ex-service personnel have found a higher prevalence of adverse experiences in the Armed Forces population compared to the civilian population (Afifi, *et al.*, 2016; Katon *et al.*, 2015). Research has suggested that some people join the Armed Forces to escape from adversity and/or a challenging environment (Blosnich, *et al.*, 2014). While not all ex-service personnel interviewed experienced childhood abuse and/or adversity, a number of the told us of their adverse experiences in childhood, with seven specifically mentioning trauma.

***“We couldn’t have this conversation back when I was a kid, I would have just closed up. Childhood trauma as well was part of my factors for leading up to my offence.”***

*(Interview No 31, Ex-service personnel, Scotland, Phase 2)*

Childhood trauma was only touched on briefly in interviews as the scope of the interviews was focused on identification within the CJS and access to support. However, when discussing early family life, several ex-service personnel mentioned experiencing parental anger.

***“It seemed like the better choice because the last thing I wanted was a criminal record ... she and my dad split up, apart from anything else he was really abusive to her. I still remember sitting on the stairs, watching those two at each other, really bad.”***

*(Interview No 2, Ex-service personnel, England, Phase 2)*





***“The violence side, I’ve grown up being abused from my family from ... a young age and been around violence all the time, so things like losing my temper quite quickly. Since 2015 I sorted myself and I’ve changed the whole aspect of my life. So, I don’t argue, I don’t fight, I don’t shout.”***

*(Interview No 56, Ex-service personnel, England, Phase 2)*

Nine mentioned care experience.

***“... I had a pretty challenging childhood, being in foster care, not getting to meet my real birth parents and being separated from my siblings, my sisters. ... I never felt really loved growing up though as a child, I never really had that love.”***

*(Interview No 70, Ex-service personnel, Community, Wales, Phase 2)*

Four of the interviewees mentioned sexual or physical abuse.

***“I was sexually abused when I was 14 so I went through a traumatic event anyway. I never, ever spoke about that until finally a year ago, that’s the first time I’ve ever opened up about it. I’ve kept it a secret for all this time...”***

*(Interview No 35, Ex-service personnel, England, Phase 2)*

The long-term impact of childhood physical and/or sexual abuse can include trauma, depression, anxiety, social isolation, and difficulty trusting adults, with an increased likelihood of substance misuse and self-destructive behaviour compared to those who have not experienced childhood physical and sexual abuse (Browne & Finkelhor, 1986; Hailes, *et al.*, 2019). For ex-service personnel involved in this research, issues associated with mental health and trauma were reported.

***“I suffered a lot traumatically. I suffer with PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder] and anxiety but that isn’t the fact of being in the Armed Forces, that’s to do with out of the Armed Forces. My PTSD was probably because of my sexual abuse ...”***

*(Interview No 35, Ex-service personnel, England, Phase 2)*

Iversen, *et al.*, (2007) note that adverse experiences of people serving in the Armed Forces are a significant factor in the likelihood that they will develop physical and mental health problems which may lead to discharge. Joining the Armed Forces with unresolved and/or ongoing trauma has an impact on an individual’s experience in the Armed Forces and beyond. One ex-service person we interviewed stated his belief that his childhood experiences, compounded by his Armed Forces career, contributed to his involvement in criminal activity.

***“I think it was more from childhood, not helped by the build-up of stresses ... and the lack of ability to talk to somebody hid away the issues, the macho bullshit that there was back in the 60s, 70s. Then going through the Army, it just seemed to make it worse. I won’t say it was a factor [that] caused it all, but it was a contributing factor [to my crime].”***

*(Interview No 78, Ex-service personnel, England, Phase 2)*

Stakeholders interviewed for the research noted that joining the Armed Forces may have served as an “escape” from childhood adversity, and that they would have had an increased likelihood of entering the CJS sooner had they not served in the Armed Forces.

***“You have to wonder, would they have been in the criminal justice system if they hadn’t been in the Army anyway because of the type of upbringing they’ve had? They’ve come from broken families, homeless, deprivation, so you wonder sometimes if they might have ended up the same way if they hadn’t been in the Army anyway.”***

*(Interview No 45, Third sector, Scotland, Phase 2)*



## 2.2 Criminal activity before joining the Armed Forces

Involvement in criminal activity that did not disqualify them from joining the Armed Forces was a common theme for the ex-service personnel interviewed as part of this research.

***“[First experience with criminal justice system] When I was a youth, it was a battery. Between 14 and 16, I think I was. We were in [name of City] drinking, underage drinking but we were getting in the pubs because we were skinheads. And there was a lad who was getting cheeky with my mate, so we just whacked him. Came across quite bullying to be honest, I do really regret that. It’s one of the biggest things in my life I do regret is doing that.”***

(Interview No 80, Ex-service personnel, England, Phase 2)

***“I moved back to a place called [name of area], bit of a shit hole, definitely got in with the wrong crowd there. That was from the age of about 11 and then I was just getting in loads and loads of trouble.”***

(Interview No 63, Ex-service personnel, England, Community, Phase 2)

## 2.3 Reasons for joining the Armed Forces

Reasons for joining the Armed Forces were recorded in interviews, with one of the key reasons being other family members having Armed Forces experience.

***“I was in the Army Cadets from an early age, I joined from the age of 12 until the day I went in the Army. When I grew up my grandfather was [a] World War Two veteran and so was my grandmother... So, I kind of grew up with war films, cowboy films. I love guns, as in engineering.”***

(Interview No 23, Ex-service personnel, Wales, Phase 2)

***“My father, God rest him, was ex-Army as well. My father did his national service in the AOC. From 11 years of age, I was in the ACF, the Army Cadet Force, and then progressed from there. At the age of 16 I got passed to serve in the RHF, Royal Highland Fusiliers.”***

(Interview No 24, Ex-service personnel, Scotland, Phase 2)

Previous studies have noted that living in a military family helps individuals understand the culture and values that can influence positive views of military life (Hall, 2008; Wakefield, 2007). Following family legacies and making family members proud was a strong feature for many of the ex-service personnel we interviewed.

***“To let you understand, I really come from a [well-known] military family. I always wanted to make my dad proud ... I wanted to go up in the ranks and see what I could do. But that never happened, and that was a lot to do with the mental illness.”***

(Interview No 81, Ex-service personnel, Scotland, Phase 2)

Other factors that contributed to the decision to join the Armed Forces identified in the analysis of the interviews included a desire to combat terrorism, sense of belonging, espousing values associated with the Armed Forces, connecting with a wider world beyond their locale, and pursuit of a successful life.

***“I’d seen the twin towers get brought down when I was in school, and I thought I could maybe make a difference by joining the Army.”***

(Interview No 82, Ex-service personnel, Wales, Phase 2)

***“It was something I wanted to do from being quite young. I think it might have had to do with how I was bullied at school really but then as well just to help people really...”***

(Interview No 83, Ex-service personnel, England, Phase 2)



***“I enlisted at the beginning of January 2004 once I finished college. At the time being very young and naïve, I wanted a different approach in life. I wanted to basically ground myself. I grew up as a child in the Army Cadets and Air Cadets. I thoroughly enjoyed my time in that, and I thought maybe I could fulfil my potential in the forces.”***

(Interview No 70, Ex-service personnel, Wales, Phase 2)

Strand and Berndtsson (2015) noted that recruitment in the British Armed Forces largely centres around offering opportunities for personal and professional development. Ex-service personnel interviewed for this research reflected that they felt the Armed Forces would offer better and more fulfilling employment opportunities.

***“I had a tough and rough upbringing. I’m sure you will have heard that before for many ex-soldiers or veterans. I had a really terrible upbringing. The UK in 1992 was a different place - unemployment was high and as a young person coming through you had to do a YTS scheme so you’d only get a minimum - you were paid £35 a week, which wasn’t a great wage.”***

(Interview No 60, Ex-service personnel, Scotland, Phase 2)

***“There were no jobs around, the only jobs really that paid any decent wage back then were the military. So, it just seemed logical - get trained, get paid and learn about things you like.”***

(Interview No 2, Ex-service personnel, England, Phase 2)

***“The reason I joined, I was looking for something more exciting because I was an electrician working at the coal mine - I did just over two years there and I couldn’t see it going anywhere. But I’d been in the Sea Cadets when I was a young teenager and I enjoyed that, so I went forward and joined in December 1972.”***

(Interview No 84, Ex-service personnel, England, Phase 2)

Joining the Armed Forces involves shifts in the identities and/or value systems of recruits (Wertsch, 1991; Breede, 2019). We were told that this new military identity can be reassuring for individuals, with structure and boundaries at the heart of the environment.

***“Absolutely, yes, just discipline, respect, just basic morals. My parents were great anyway, I was brought up with respect, principles and morals but the Army does shape you to be very strong minded, reach your goals and just be diligent.”***

(Interview No 85, Ex-service personnel, England, Phase 2)

Some of the ex-service personnel interviewed said challenges experienced in school were another factor that led to them joining the Armed Forces. Research suggests that ex-service personnel who experienced challenges in school are at higher risk of engaging in risky behaviours later in life (Ross, Armour, & Murphy, 2022).

***“I was kicked out of school at a young age, I was a bit of a problem child. It was the only thing I could do really - I had no qualifications.”***

(Interview No 86, Ex-service personnel, Wales, Phase 2)

***“Schooling with me was hard. I left school and I went to work for my stepdad because he was a builder ... then I went back in my last two years of school to do my GCSEs and try and put all the past behind me. Then from there I went to college. I only went to college because I’d been accepted for the Navy, but they said it would be a year wait.”***

(Interview No 5, Ex-service personnel, England, Phase 2)



## 3. Experiences during service in the Armed Forces

**This section provides an overview of issues and themes relating to experiences in the Armed Forces, covering both positive and negative experiences, reasons for leaving, and experiences of transition support provided.**

### 3.1 Experiences in the Armed Forces

Many of the ex-service personnel we interviewed shared positive feedback about their experiences in the Armed Forces. Some ex-service personnel reflected on the positive benefits of structure and routine.

*“I suppose it did straighten me up a little bit because I was a bit of a wild child before joining up - a bit of drugs and that. But then being in the Army and then coming out, it was something I never looked back on, being on drugs. I was always clear since then, so it did help me sort my life out.”*

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(Interview No 87, Ex-service personnel, England, Phase 2)

*“More discipline, whereas I’d chuck things off before, untidy, got the discipline there. Want everything nice and neat and tidy. And it made me grow up, I was a kid when I went in, I came out a man... It made me really stand up for myself. I loved it, except for when I was injured. I’d have stayed in for the 22 if I could have, the guys in there, superb.”*

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(Interview No 22, Ex-service personnel, Wales, Phase 2)

Some participants, especially those who had been in active combat, told us that positive experiences in the Armed Forces were sometimes punctuated by death and feelings of loss. There was reluctance to discuss this with the research team in many cases beyond the provision of basic information. Deaths of service personnel are often sudden and traumatic, leading to significant consequences for colleagues, families and significant others (Barlé, Wortman, & Latack, 2017). Research shows that individuals experiencing traumatic loss may experience more prolonged and intense bereavement than others (ibid.). Some participants spoke of their struggle to come to terms with their loss, and the eventual onset of PTSD and/or other mental health concerns.

*“It made me a lot quieter, I didn’t really talk, all the things I used to see because I was involved in about ten different contact situations... So a lot of the things I saw, people getting blown up and that, I kept to myself for about 30-odd years”*

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(Interview No 88, Ex-service personnel, England, Phase 2)

*“Experiences, some good, some bad. I’ve seen a lot of things that most people don’t see in their lifetimes. And a result of that was I didn’t know for years and years afterwards I suffer from PTSD. But back in the 70s that had never been heard of... I [also] lost a friend in Ireland. We went to school together [but] we lost him ... and some of the things that we’d seen during that tour were bad, quite bad but there was no such thing as counselling or anything like that in those days, it just didn’t exist.”*

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(Interview No 65, Ex-service personnel, Scotland, Phase 2)







The Armed Forces has a unique culture, which is shaped through basic training and socialisation, with participation in the culture described as “nonoptional” (Cooper, *et al.*, 2018, p. 159). There were aspects of this culture that were noted by several ex-service personnel as contributing to negative experiences and behaviours.

***“I think you learn bad behaviours in the military. Like sexism, probably racism, imperialism because the British Army is based on Queen and country and all this ... violence probably, fighting ... I would just say when you are in the Army there’s a lot of punch ups, there’s a lot of alcoholism, there’s a lot of drinking.”***

(Interview No 89, Ex-service personnel, Scotland, Phase 2)

***“Cheating and infidelity is all encouraged in the military, and no-one challenges it. Higher-ups are not challenging it so then they come out, in civvy street, and these behaviours are there.”***

(Interview No 10, Probation, England, Phase 1)

Some ex-service personnel who took part in this research linked their negative behaviours with the culture in the Armed Forces.

### 3.1.1 Maintaining relationships and networks

Other challenges experienced by ex-service personnel were maintaining relationships and networks with friends and family in the community. Families experience frequent separations, regular relocations and detachment from mainstream civilian life which create pressure on family relationships (Hall, 2011).

***“He would go to different areas, different countries but he would then have to rebuild that lifestyle, his social network, with a new group of people rather than having people that he’s been there with the whole time. He explained how that was quite detrimental to his relationships because then the wives would all stay together whereas his wife would have to then move with him and start building new relationships herself.”***

(Interview No 40, Probation, England, Phase 2)

***“My daughters were young, and I was away for periods of time, I was coming back, and it was the reactions for them seeing a stranger ... especially when the youngest one, I had been away for two or three months and then coming back she said, ‘Who are you?’”***

(Interview No 16, Ex-service personnel, Scotland, Phase 2)

### 3.1.2 Alcohol and substance misuse

Cultural expectations in the Armed Forces can create challenges, with alcohol misuse a common experience with ex-service personnel. Research has shown a higher prevalence of alcohol misuse in the British Armed Forces (10% of personnel) than in the general population (3% of general population) (Irizar, *et al.*, 2020).

***“Yes, I got busted from corporal to lance corporal through my drink, for fighting, and I ended up hitting a police officer. The Army dealt with that, not prison ... [I was] demoted. And a big fine.”***

(Interview No 90, Ex-service personnel, England, Phase 2)

***“There are a few [in prison] from the Navy, a few from the Army, not many RAF. You speak to them about their problems or troubles they’ve had. Quite a lot of them are probably drink problems, it’s a massive problem ... I feel they were getting no support when they came out of the forces, and I think they were turning to drink, and they were maybe drinking more, and it didn’t help them at all.”***

(Interview No 76, Ex-service personnel, Scotland, Phase 2)

Alcohol culture in the Armed Forces is well-documented, with research suggesting that alcohol use (and other substances) provides a mechanism for coping with experiences such as social pressure (Irizar, *et al.*, 2020). This was reflected on by ex-service personnel taking part in the research, in addition to substance use, and both alcohol and substance misuse were referred to as a coping mechanism.



***“So, I’d used cannabis to manage my anxieties and stuff like that, hypervigilance.”***

(Interview No 91, Ex-service personnel, Scotland, Phase 2)

***“Then they also self-medicate because alcohol use is quite high in the Armed Forces, and they use that to mask the symptoms. So, they go out with the boys on the weekend or during the week and get drunk, but then they’ll leave the Armed Forces and potentially they are not working, and they’ll drink at home and then it becomes a health issue for them.”***

(Interview No 1, Police, England, Phase 2)

Alcohol is integral to the culture in the military creating bonds (i.e. the social factor of alcohol) and it is used as a mechanism for coping with stress (Irizar, *et al.*, 2020). Experiences of drinking in the Armed Forces referred to by ex-service personnel interviewed were often associated with ‘culture’ but, for some, this eventually led to discharge.

***“I developed the start of a drink problem while I was there ... within a couple of months I’d gone from being a non-drinker to a heavy drinker. ... I’d become a full-blown alcoholic by that point, and I had problems when I came back. I had problems - relationship fell apart, I was drinking incredibly heavily, and I’d also attempted suicide as well.”***

(Interview No 49, Ex-service personnel, Wales, Phase 2)

***“I ended up getting drunk when I was sitting with someone outside, they burgled [a] house. I didn’t know it was happening, I was drunk. So, I got caught, the police took me to court, and they said they’d give me a chance. I went back to the Army camp, but they still kicked me out because I had a criminal record.”***

(Interview No 92, Ex-service personnel, England, Phase 2)

***“I failed the drug test. Cocaine. Just had a partying weekend. It’s a risk you take, if you take it, if you are partying hard. Failed result and then I just went through my discharge process, from failing it. And the day I left I just never spoke to anyone from the Army.”***

(Interview No 93, Ex-service personnel, England, Phase 2)

### 3.1.3 Difficulty in seeking help during service

Taboo and stigma associated with mental health, compounded by a culture of resilience and self-reliance created challenges for some ex-service personnel in seeking support.

***“On the paperwork it was a discharge ‘unsuited’. I had so much going on at once and I had another issue when I first joined the regiment and it just kept rearing its head every so often ... and my head was just not in it. You felt vulnerable if you did speak because obviously the last time, I’d seen a psychologist I ended up out of the Forces a few days later, so there was a lack of trust.”***

(Interview No 31, Ex-service personnel, Scotland, Phase 2)

***“Blokes are terrible, toxic masculinity gets in the way and they don’t want to put their hand in the air and say, ‘I’m suffering; I’m struggling, I don’t know how to manage my days’. So, we end up with this massive problem.”***

(Interview No 63, Ex-service personnel, England, Community, Phase 2)

One ex-service person described specific challenges in the Armed Forces including experiencing sexual abuse, and that his experience was not taken seriously.

***“I was sexually propositioned by a senior rank, well two actually, in a room ... I was sexually assaulted in my sleep a few times by somebody in my room. My troop sergeant laughed at me; the Royal Military Police laughed at me. When I came back to the camp all my troop staff laughed at me in front of my entire troop so by the time I go to my unit I think my head was fried completely.”***

(Interview No 83, Ex-service personnel, England, Phase 2)



### 3.2 Reasons for leaving

Hall (2011) found that the reasons for leaving the Armed Forces are associated with the unique aspects of Armed Forces life, with (a) frequent separations and reunions; (b) regular household relocations; (c) living life under the umbrella of the mission; (d) the need for families to adapt to rigidity, regimentation and conformity; (e) early retirement from a career in comparison to civilian counterparts; (f) rumours of loss during a mission; (g) detachment from the mainstream of non-military life; (h) the security of a system that exists to meet the families' needs; (i) work that usually involves travel and adventure; (j) the social effects of rank on the family; and (k) the lack of control over pay, promotion, and other benefits. The reasons for leaving the Armed Forces, outlined by Hall (2011), are also reflected in this research.

#### 3.2.1 Family

The issues associated with family pressures were a common reason given by individuals in deciding to leave the Armed Forces.

***“Marital problems. It just got too much for me and things were changing in the Army ... everything was the wrong time - I missed home because I’d been away for nine years. I know we got back on leave but a lot of my friends that I knew at school had all gone on and done their things, made a new family, new things.”***

(Interview No 94, Ex-service personnel, England, Phase 2)

***“It was 2005, just come back from Iraq the second time and in the space of two or three years I had deployed to Bosnia, came back from Bosnia, deployed to Iraq, came back from Iraq, back out on another deployment. And my ex-partner was like, ‘You are missing out on the girls growing up’.”***

(Interview No 60, Ex-service personnel, Scotland, Phase 2)

Creating a stable family environment for children was an influencing factor for leaving the Armed Forces for some of the ex-service personnel interviewed.

***“Then I got ready to sign out because the mother of my two children fell pregnant while I was in there and I just felt that it was the best thing for me to do, to get out.”***

(Interview No 95, Ex-service personnel, Wales, Phase 2)

***“One of the reasons I came out was because I’d been married, I got married in 1975 and we’d just had our first child, my son, in 1978. Basically, I got stationed near home and I thought that’s it, I wanted to be out with the family, which I wish now I hadn’t done because 18 months later I was divorced.”***

(Interview No 96, Ex-service personnel, England, Phase 2)

Marriage and children were a common reason for leaving the Armed Forces, but others left to support parents who had health conditions.

***“Because of my dad’s health, dad had a stroke. He was at home with my mum, my two sisters were married, they had their own families, so they weren’t at home. Both my parents were elderly, and mum was struggling to look after dad on her own, so I thought I’d get out and go back home and help mum look after dad with his stroke.”***

(Interview No 87, Ex-service personnel, England, Phase 2)

#### 3.2.2 Offending behaviour within the Armed Forces

Some ex-service personnel described a range of behaviours during their time in the Armed Forces that could have resulted in criminal justice contact, and some left the Forces as a result of specific offences.

***“I haven’t really been a person to get into trouble, but I used to - mainly during my Army days, coming home for weekends, fighting in town centres, so there was a lot of contact from that - getting arrested most weekends.”***

(Interview No 95, Ex-service personnel, Wales, Phase 2)



***“I was asked to leave the Forces, put it that way. That was because of something similar to what I’m in here for [sexual offending].”***

*(Interview No 98, Ex-service personnel, Wales, Phase 2)*

***“I came to prison. I knew I was coming to prison so obviously it wasn’t a big shock to me. I already put my notice to leave at the same time. But I was also discharged three months after I’d been in prison on remand, because I was only on remand at the time. I got discharged from the Navy then.”***

*(Interview No 5, Ex-service personnel, England, Phase 2)*

### 3.2.3 Health

Medical problems were not uncommon for ex-service personnel in the CJS, with some citing medical discharge as the reason for leaving service. Medical problems associated with physical health were mentioned by several ex-service personnel.

***“The military couldn’t keep me there for medical reasons ... I have epilepsy and I had other issues as well which then took over my time and I ended up leaving to pursue things in civilian life but unfortunately that didn’t go too well.”***

*(Interview No 2, Ex-service personnel, England, Phase 2)*

One ex-service person opted to be medically discharged as he did not want to do alternative jobs available to him given his medical condition.

***“Epilepsy, a full medical discharge - well, medical discharge with pension. When I was diagnosed, I was given the option of staying in, but I’d be what is known as a ‘pan diver’ so I’d be working in the kitchens or working in the canteen or just serving people ... so, I decided to take a medical discharge.”***

*(Interview No 37, Ex-service personnel, Scotland, Phase 2)*

Several ex-service personnel discussed mental health challenges in the Armed Forces, including deterioration in mental health following deployment overseas.

***“My mental health started deteriorating.... so when I came back from Iraq I started going downhill and I deliberately went AWOL to get out of the Army. So, I went to Colchester Prison, and they gave me the option when I came out to leave or not ... I’ve been diagnosed with paranoia, schizophrenia and PTSD from when I was in Iraq ... I started being off the rails and didn’t care about anything. Then I didn’t like loud bangs and then I started getting in trouble a lot.”***

*(Interview No 100, Ex-service personnel, England, Phase 2)*

***“I got medical discharge; I had a few mental health problems because of a relationship. I can’t remember now. It’s a tricky one because I had mental health so I didn’t really - I was not in a good way so it wasn’t like I left with resettlement and that, I didn’t leave in a normal way - I left and I didn’t go back again so I can’t really say.”***

*(Interview No 101, Ex-service personnel, England, Phase 2)*

Dealing with mental health problems without support was described by some individuals as leading to substance misuse and alcohol problems. Many ex-service personnel interviewed for this project had been deployed overseas, and while not all had been in combat roles, several participants spoke of mental health struggles that developed or worsened due to their deployments.

***“I started using cocaine to deal with my mental health and I got CDT, compulsory drug tested. They interviewed me, I told them all about my mental health because I’d been hiding it for a while. You don’t want to get that from the Forces, like they did when I had PTSD originally from when I was in the Navy. And I got ‘services no longer required’, or ‘dishonourable, services no longer required’.”***

*(Interview No 102, Ex-service personnel, England, Phase 2)*





## 4. Transition experiences and challenges with integration

This section provides an overview of issues and themes relating to experiences transitioning from the Armed Forces and challenges adjusting to civilian life, including regret at leaving the Armed Forces, issues relating to managing health and financial need, and challenges related to seeking help.

The Armed Forces can help improve life opportunities for individuals when they leave (HMIP, 2014; Macmanus & Wessely, 2013) with most individuals transitioning successfully to civilian life (Iversen, Dyson, & Smith, 2005; Dandeker, *et al.*, 2003). Resettlement support for individuals leaving the Armed Forces is provided by the Career Transition Partnership (CTP), which helps with transition from the Armed Forces to secure employment, further education and/or retirement. In addition to the CTP, other forms of support from voluntary sector organisations are also available. Although most individuals experience a positive transition, there are individuals who have poorer transitions due to mental illness, unemployment, homelessness and involvement in the CJS (Banks & Albertson, 2018).

### 4.1 Transition experiences

#### 4.1.1 Adjusting to civilian life

Ex-service personnel and their families experience radical changes upon leaving the Armed Forces. Research shows that ex-service personnel have a desire for support and guidance on adjusting to civilian life, specifically socialising and integrating into the community (Fulton, *et al.*, 2019). Ex-service personnel taking part in interviews often referred to managing and/or dealing with civilian life. Dealing with the change in identity upon leaving the Armed Forces and entering civilian life creates challenges for ex-service personnel with Brunger, *et al.*, (2013) noting that ex-service personnel need to reconcile civilian life with their old life in the military. This can create alienation and disconnect (Ahern, *et al.*, 2015), with ex-service personnel experiencing a loss of purpose that is difficult to re-establish in civilian life.

*“Civvies don’t know what we have done, and they can’t understand us. I left the bubble and had no idea what I was going to do. I always went on the piss in the Army and my mates would see I was ok. Civvies don’t do that, so I got in trouble. My marriage went bust and it was crap, really.”*

(Interview No 103, Ex-service personnel, Wales, Phase 2)

*“Then just left that job and went to another job and another job and another job. I didn’t really feel like I was contributing to anything at all, it was just existing ... to be honest it was good up until I left, and I think a lot of my issues span from my lack of professional fulfilment.”*

(Interview No 99, Ex-service personnel, England, Phase 2)

Returning to civilian life can be challenging for ex-service personnel for several reasons. Ex-service personnel report that some of the challenges are related to moving away from a disciplined environment. The military has a unique environment in which individuals experience stability, structure and discipline which can make transition to unstructured life challenging (Ahern *et al.*, 2015).

*“It just changes the way you assess situations; it changes the way you look at every aspect of your life in general ... it teaches you order, it teaches you to have a regime, to have structure in your life. I see that and it’s apparent now that I’m away from that that I see actually how many people don’t have that in their life. It’s disconcerting.”*

(Interview No 7, Ex-service personnel, England, Phase 2)

Transition from the Armed Forces to civilian life was discussed by stakeholders who perceived that the culture and expectations in the Forces created problems for ex-service personnel in integrating into civilian life.



***“They come back from a war zone, they come straight out of that war zone and then they go to their families and home. I think they get a couple of days where they just settle down. There’s no therapy, there’s nothing to do.”***

*(Interview No 10, Probation, England, Phase 1)*

Some of the ex-service personnel we interviewed spoke of experiences in the Armed Forces that had an impact on their behaviour, including experiencing anger and/or aggression.

***“The Army used to tell you that being a civilian is bad, or all civilians are morons, it was horrible. You used to come home with that opinion. You’d get into arguments; it’s really insulting for people.”***

*(Interview No 83, Ex-service personnel, England, Phase 2)*

Social isolation was another issue raised in interviews. This aligns with research that suggests leaving the military can create a sense of loss resulting in isolation (Ahern *et al.*, 2015). Participants spoke of their inability to connect with people who had not served in the Armed Forces whilst simultaneously having no access to Armed Forces-specific social networks. Participants told us how they felt misunderstood in their post-Armed Forces lives.

***“I struggle with civilians now. I did keep myself to myself. If I see someone walking towards me down the street I cross the road, I can’t adjust at all. It’s been ten years and I feel I’m getting worse, not better... [people] couldn’t handle my PTSD and when I look back on it, I must have been difficult.”***

*(Interview No 20, Ex-service personnel, Wales, Phase 2)*

#### 4.1.2 Positive and negative experiences

Several ex-service personnel spoke of positive transition from the Armed Forces. This includes obtaining help from family members to secure employment and/or capitalising on opportunities for training in the Forces.

***“I was very fortunate, I walked into a job so I’ve no experience of being an ex-serviceman who’s ever been unemployed. I’ve spoken to a few of my ex-colleagues who have been in the Forces, ‘How did you survive?’ and they say it was hard ... Probably I wouldn’t have left the Army if I didn’t have a job to go into. I was one of these fortunate people that you come out, there’s work here for you.”***

*(Interview No 104, Ex-service personnel, Scotland, Phase 2)*

Some ex-service personnel viewed transitions positively initially, but later experienced challenges adjusting.

***“Workwise it was quite simple. I went from being on £14,000 a year to in excess of £30,000 a year, so in that respect that transition went quite well. The bit that was hard was the fact that I was away from my support network, my Armed Forces family. That’s where the problems started coming.”***

*(Interview No 88, Ex-service personnel, England, Phase 2)*

We were told of limited or inadequate transition support leading to negative transition. Some ex-service personnel spoke of the limited nature of the transition and/or resettlement support they received. Individuals who left the Armed Forces before late 2010s often described receiving limited or no information about support available to them following their service.





***“It’s how it was then. All they gave me when I left was a form saying that I was entitled to £2000 worth of education which was valid for ten years and if I lose the form, you lose the money because that’s the only proof you have for it. And that’s all I had for resettlement, that was it.”***

(Interview No 49, Ex-service personnel, Wales, Phase 2)

***“Nothing. Basically, I got on a plane and came back to the UK, I didn’t have anything. There was no resettlement, there was no interaction between - I remember SSAFA [Soldiers’, Sailors’ and Airmen’s Families Association, the Armed Forces Charity] but nothing gets explained to us about housing resettlement, all that kind of stuff.”***

(Interview No 89, Ex-service personnel, Scotland, Phase 2)

## 4.2 Regret about leaving the Armed Forces

Many ex-service personnel experience pride and belonging in the Armed Forces (HMIP, 2014; MacManus & Wessely, 2011) but regret upon transitioning to civilian life. Regret was a recurrent theme in interviews, with around a third of ex-service personnel citing regret about leaving the Armed Forces.

***“In 2009, I’d applied to go to a different regiment in the military and it was blocked, basically just because I was - I don’t want to sound arrogant but I was quite good at my job where I was, and they didn’t want to let me go. So instead of going along with them I thought, ‘Up yours, I’m going to sign off and get out instead.’ About four months after getting out I realised I’d made an absolutely dreadful mistake.”***

(Interview No 10, Probation, England, Phase 1)

For those that regretted leaving the Armed Forces, the reasons given were varied including challenges settling into civilian life and missing military life. For them, finding employment that was fulfilling was challenging, leading them to re-join, or join the Territorial Army.

***“I went back to my hometown, got a couple of jobs here and there, really didn’t like what I was doing so I went back to college and then I went to Cardiff Uni, that’s why I ended up living in Cardiff. And then when I left uni I had a couple of short-term jobs, really didn’t like it, met somebody who was in the TA, so I joined the TA and then within 18 months I was abroad with the Army, I was gone.”***

(Interview No 49, Ex-service personnel, Wales, Phase 2)

## 4.3 Challenges managing health and financial needs

Ex-service personnel described specific challenges in terms of managing health and financial needs on their return to civilian life.

### 4.3.1 Alcohol and substance misuse

Ex-service personnel who come into contact with the CJS are more likely to be misusing alcohol than people who have not been in the Armed Forces. (Stevenlink, *et al.*, 2018; Macmanus & Wessely, 2013). In addition to alcohol, substance misuse was an issue mentioned by some of the ex-service personnel we interviewed.

***“I was an alcoholic. Before I came to prison, I was an alcoholic, I was taking drugs and then that intensified the paranoia and schizophrenia so I was in a vicious circle, I couldn’t get out of it.”***

(Interview No 100, Ex-service personnel, England, Phase 2)



### 4.3.2 Mental health

Several studies (Iversen, *et al.*, 2011; Murphy *et al.*, 2008) have shown that ex-service personnel have elevated levels of depression and anxiety and, for those entering the CJS, are more likely to suffer from PTSD (Macmanus, *et al.*, 2013). Rates of PTSD are also elevated for those who have experienced active combat (Palmer, *et al.*, 2021). Some stakeholders also reflected that PTSD symptoms and other mental health concerns may be a factor in some forms of offending.

***“A lot of it is based around PTSD in my experience, which has then led on to relationship issues, alcohol related issues... mental health crisis in regard to whether they’ve now got psychosis or personality problems. That then leads on to domestic assaults and that kind of thing.”***

*(Interview No 70, Police, England, Phase 2)*

### 4.3.3 Seeking help

Research on the experiences of individuals leaving the Armed Forces shows that being able to ask for help is determined by multiple factors including adverse experiences in childhood, experiences of conflict, and culture in the military (Grimell & van den Berg, 2019). Asking for help was identified as a specific challenge for ex-service personnel by those involved in the research.

***“But then you can say it wasn’t there, as much as I didn’t ask for it. The problem that I’d got - I don’t like to ask. I kept everything to myself, which caused multiple problems with why I came in anyway, but the point was I didn’t think about going to British Legion, I didn’t think about SSAFA. So, to say there was no help, maybe I didn’t seek it either.”***

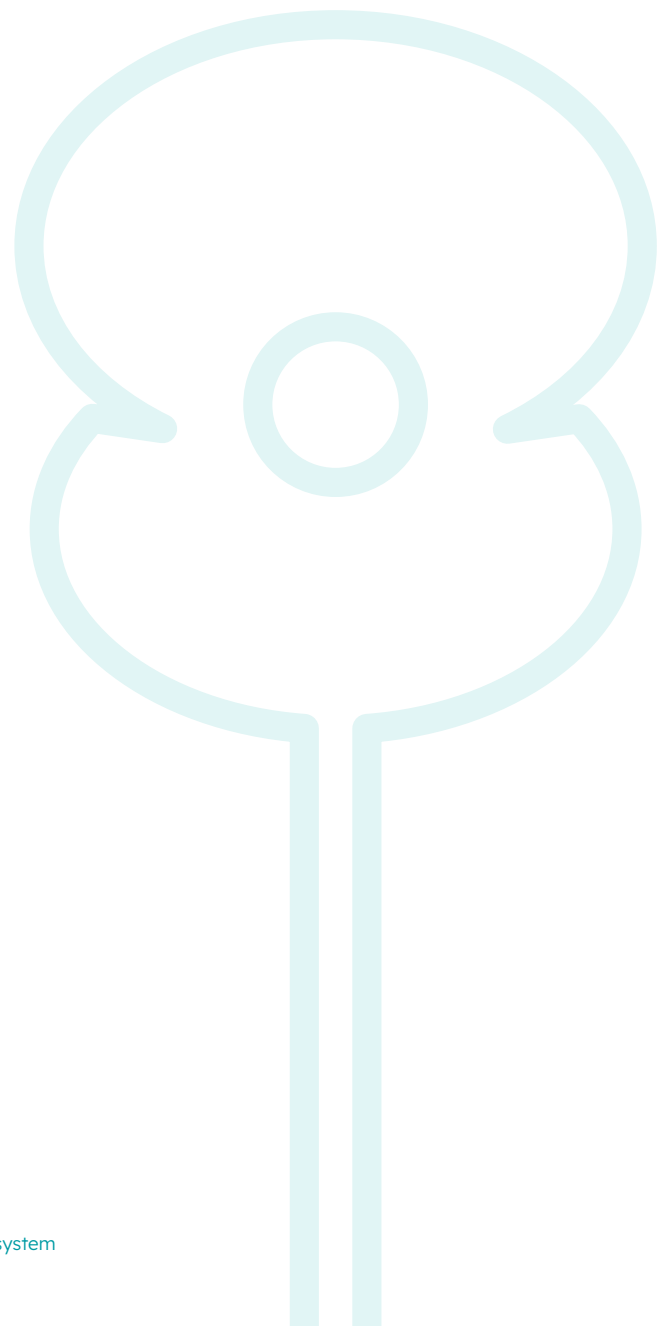
*(Interview No 94, Ex-service personnel, England, Phase 2)*

### 4.3.4 Challenges around personal finances

Individuals leaving the Armed Forces may experience simultaneous loss of employment and housing (Iversen, *et al.*, 2005), and significant challenges in managing their own finances including understanding pensions and other benefits.

***“One of the biggest things with pensions is I don’t think they understand pensions, when they are going to get it. So, you need to explain to them, ‘You get your pension at 55 or 60, you could get a lump sum, you could get a monthly income.’ I don’t think they understand what they’re getting.”***

*(Interview No 76, Ex-service personnel, Scotland, Phase 2)*



## 5. Conclusion

**This report provides background on the experiences of ex-service personnel in early life, in the Armed Forces and on transition to civilian life. Furthermore, it identifies key factors such as regret at leaving the Armed Forces, sense of loss and underlying mental health needs, which could help understand the complex needs of ex-service personnel in the CJS. The report also illustrates the role that alcohol and substance misuse can play in the issues experienced by some ex-service personnel. It seeks to provide a wider context through which we understand the experiences of ex-service personnel. Additionally, it complements the main report from this research which investigated the identification of ex-service personnel within the CJS and the barriers to support they experience. It should be noted that the sample included individuals whose experiences in the Armed Forces were a significant time ago. In adding to the literature about ex-service personnel who come in contact with the CJS, we aim to increase understanding of ex-service personnel's lives. We hope this will aid the overarching aims of improving identification and support pathways for those who are in the CJS and help in the development of policy at different stages of the Armed Forces journey.**



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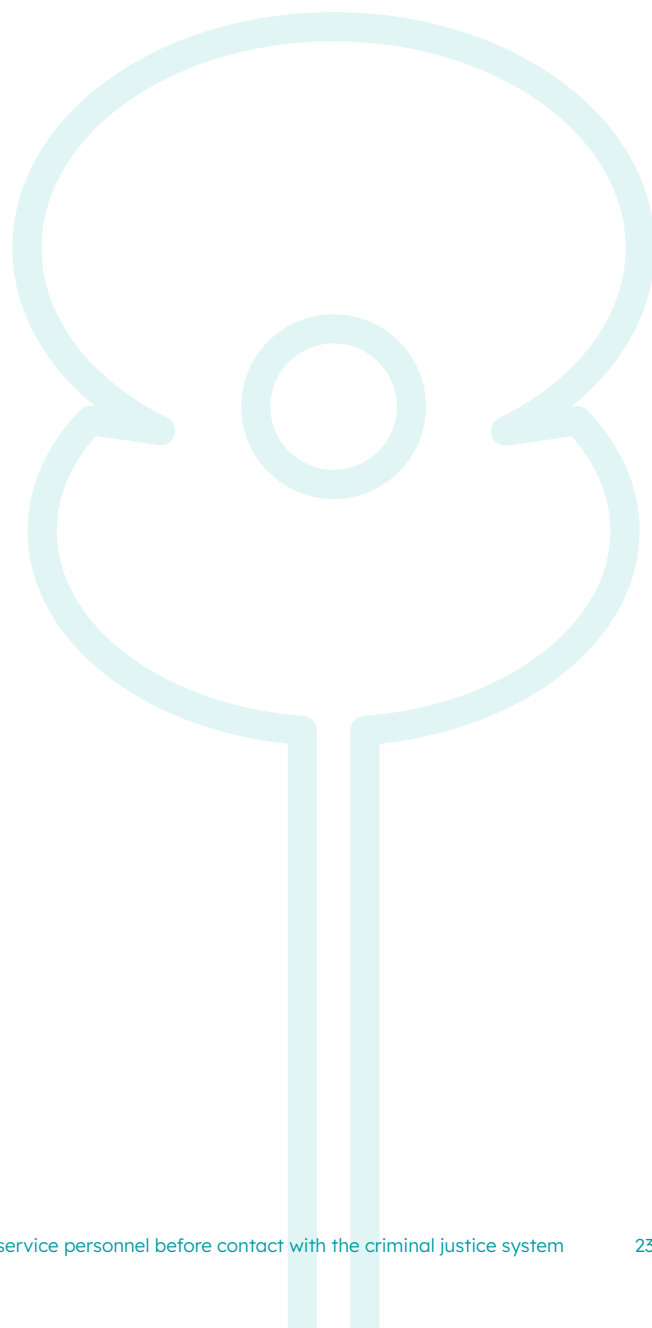
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