

Research Brief

Transitioning To the Civilian Workforce: Issues Impacting the Reentry of Rural Women Veterans

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Research Highlights:

- Historically, women veterans have had higher unemployment rates than male veterans and non-veteran men and women. From 1990 to 2010, women veterans had higher unemployment rates than non-veteran women in all years, except 1994 and 1995. In 2010, women veterans had higher rates of unemployment than non-veteran women in all but three age groups, with the 20-24 year-old age group having the highest unemployment rates.
- Rural women veterans face challenges in accessing employment, education/training, and health care services. These challenges stem from: 1) the unique experiences and health issues they face as women; 2) the issues of access to, and knowledge of, employment services and misperceptions of employers regarding their contributions, particularly if they are disabled or serve in the National Guard and Reserves; and 3) the geographical and economic challenges specific to rural areas, often hit hardest by recessions.
- Although federal and state programs supporting veterans in their employment transition exist, these programs often do not track rural veteran outcomes and do not have gender-specific outreach and communications strategies targeted to women veterans, many of which may not self-identify as veterans.

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Abstract:

“Women veterans seeking employment in rural areas often face several challenges, such as geographical barriers, limited employment opportunities, and a lack of childcare resources within their respective communities. This exploratory study builds on the 2001 report by the Women’s Research & Education Institute (WREI), which outlined the effects of military service on women veterans’ civilian employment prospects. In addition, it explores the specific challenges through a review of current literature, assessment of Bureau of Labor Statistics datasets, and the conduct and analysis of qualitative interviews. Addressing the needs of women veterans returning to rural environments for employment requires a three-pronged approach that includes measuring the effectiveness of current programs utilizing metrics specific to rural women veterans, revising programs to fit the needs of rural areas, and forming new partnerships to engage and educate rural employers on the value that women veterans bring to the workplace.”

Implications

For Practice

Women veterans are one of the fastest growing veteran populations second only to aging veterans. Given the challenges faced by rural women veterans in transitioning to civilian employment, several recommendations for closing employment gaps are proposed: 1) consider redesigning jobs and expanding telecommuting opportunities to employ highly-skilled rural women veterans; 2) establish and track rural employment metrics; 3) update current outreach, education, and communications to meet gender-specific needs recognizing that many women do not self-identify as veterans; and 4) reevaluate and re-communicate the responsibilities of the state Department of Veterans Affairs offices, particularly the role of Women Veteran Coordinators (WVC).

For Policy

Although only 19 percent of Americans live in rural areas, more than 44 percent of military recruits come from rural areas in contrast with 14 percent from major cities. Many of these veterans will return to their families in rural areas after transitioning from the military. Given that rural areas are often affected disproportionately during economic recessions and ensuing budget cuts, federal and state agencies should re-evaluate existing veteran employment programs to ensure they are adequately accessed and used by rural veterans and result in positive employment outcomes for rural veterans and their families. In addition, employment and training programs allocating funds on the basis of local unemployment estimates should ensure that state unemployment estimates accurately account for rural areas, particularly America's Native American reservations where poverty rates and unemployment are high, and in some cases unemployed veterans may not have qualified for unemployment benefits, which are essential in computing the unemployment estimates for funding allocations.

For Future Research

From the foundation laid by this study, future research should focus on the following areas: 1) a larger qualitative study of rural women veterans and their employment transition needs, as well as rural employer perceptions regarding the value of women veterans; 2) self-employment trends for rural women veterans, their utilization of small business programs sponsored through the VA and SBA, and impacts of these programs on their success; 3) differences in access to, and use of, the GI Bill between rural female and male veterans and outcomes; 4) impacts of underemployment on rural women veterans, their families, and their communities; 5) differential impacts of job training, job placement, and job protection programs for veterans in rural vs. urban areas; and 6) the effectiveness of veteran employment policy formulation and funding for rural vs. urban areas. Studying any of these issues would contribute substantially to the literature on rural women veterans and possibly contribute to improving the quality of employment transitions for rural veterans as a whole.

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