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# Does peacetime military service affect crime? New evidence from Denmark's conscription lotteries

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## ABSTRACT

While military service is thought to promote civic values, evidence on its benefits on criminal behavior is mixed. This paper uses the Danish draft lottery to estimate the causal effect of peacetime military service on post-service criminal convictions. The data includes the entire universe of eligible men born 1976–1983. I find that military service does not affect crime in general or any kind of crime in particular, nor does it reduce crime for juvenile offenders. However, I find a temporary disruption in the educational path at age 25, but no impact on the likelihood of being unemployed.

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## 1. Introduction

Many men and women share the experience of military service, as mandatory military service exists in the majority of the world's countries, most of which are not involved in any armed conflict. The training is often extensive, ranging from a few months to several years.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, military service constitutes an important experience in young people's lives, an experience that may affect their later behavior (Bouffard, 2003; 2005). Questions on whether the military is a school for violence, attracting individuals with violent backgrounds or whether the military turns an individual's life away from delinquency remain both unanswered and complicated by the selection issue.

As criminal activities have high societal costs (Anderson, 1999 and Brand and Price, 2000) answering these questions is critical for public policy. This paper investigates whether military service may have an impact on various categories of crimes (e.g., property, violent crime) or non-crime outcomes (e.g., earnings, education, and unemployment), not only for the general population of conscripts but also for disadvantaged youth such as juvenile offenders. To answer these important questions, I use very detailed data on recent cohorts from Denmark exposed to the draft lottery.

Military service may affect criminal behavior through different mechanisms. The influence may be positive, reducing the individual's

likelihood of committing a crime by providing larger social support—a structured environment with little crime and drug use—forming a possible contrast to previous chaotic social environments or increasing social skills for certain types of military training (Grönqvist and Lindqvist, 2016).<sup>2</sup> Moreover, military service is often advocated as promoting discipline, civic values, and teamwork, all of which may benefit disadvantaged youth in particular (Berger and Hirsch, 1983).<sup>3</sup> For example, in France, although conscription was abolished in 1996, after the 2005 violence in the Paris suburbs the government considered establishing a “civil service” to prevent young people who dropped out of school from the process of marginalization.

The influence of military service may also be negative, increasing the individual's likelihood of committing a crime, e.g., access to weapons could work as the trigger for further violence. At the same time, compulsory military service entails an interruption in an important phase of young men's and women's career paths, a time when they make decisions about human capital investments and labor market entry. These decisions—and military service itself—could also affect criminal behavior, as young adulthood is also the time at which criminal careers usually develop and as military service can delay entry into the labor market

<sup>2</sup> See Poutvaara et al. (2007) for a recent review of the literature on the benefits and costs of the military draft.

<sup>3</sup> For example, Angrist (1990) finds that non-White veterans have no earnings loss, while White veterans earn 15% less than White non-veterans. This finding is also consistent with Angrist (1991), who finds that non-Whites are more likely than Whites to consider enlistment preferable to a civilian career.

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<sup>1</sup> An overview of conscription ages and length of military service across the world appears in the CIA's world fact book (see <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-worldfactbook/fields/2024.html>). Although most countries draft only men, as of 2013 nine countries also draft women.

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and thus reduce future labor market opportunities.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, early adulthood is also a vulnerable period, during which individuals are still malleable, and it is an age at which criminal activities are usually high.<sup>5</sup>

Although a number of studies have exploited draft lotteries to study the effect of wartime military service on different outcomes, few papers have studied this effect on crime.<sup>6</sup> For example, [Lindo and Stoecker \(2014\)](#) find that draft eligibility increases incarceration for violent crimes but decreases it for nonviolent crimes among Whites in the U.S.

Among studies investigating crime as an outcome without using the draft lottery, [MacManus et al. \(2013\)](#) find for UK soldiers that combat increases the likelihood of imprisonment, but [Culp et al. \(2013\)](#) find for the U.S. that military service in general is not predictive of incarceration. [Anderson and Rees \(2015\)](#) use the troop movements of units based at Fort Carson, Colorado, between 2001–2009 (during the Iraq War), to measure the effect on violent crimes in El Paso County, where Fort Carson is located. They conclude that soldiers returning from combat do not present a special threat to public safety. Results of the effect of wartime military service on crime are thus mixed, and these estimates reflect the effect of both career interruptions and the negative impact of going to war.<sup>7</sup>

As to the effects for both war and peacetime, [Galiani et al. \(2011\)](#) find that the draft lottery in Argentina increased the risk of an individual's committing a crime, with the effect being larger in wartime, while in Australia [Siminski et al. \(2016\)](#) find no evidence of long-run effects of service on crime for either deployed or non-deployed cohorts during the Vietnam-era conscription lotteries. However, neither study can distinguish between juvenile offenders and non-offending juveniles or investigate crime before age 40. Few other studies have evaluated the effect of peacetime conscription on crime. During times of peace, lotteries have typically been unavailable, with researchers instead estimating causal effects by exploiting alternative research.<sup>8</sup>

Recently, using the draft lottery in Denmark, [Albæk et al. \(2017\)](#) investigated the consequences of peacetime conscription on crime.<sup>9</sup> They find a decrease in property crime among juvenile offenders, i.e., those committing crime before age 18.<sup>10</sup> Their data encompasses a subset of men born in 1964 and residing in the eastern part of Denmark, with no direct information on whether the individual actually served.<sup>11</sup> In Sweden, using a 70% sample of men born 1968–1983, [Hjalmarsson and Lindquist \(2016\)](#) exploit the variation in the propensity for assigning draftees into service resulting from the random assignment of draft board “officiators.” They find that peacetime service significantly increases post-service crime in general. Their results are driven by individuals with pre-service crime records or from families of low socioeconomic status. As a possible channel in their case is that these disadvantaged youth are delayed in their labor market entry during a period with

high youth unemployment, these effects may be amplified by negative peer group effects.<sup>12</sup>

Thus the literature shows no clear direction of the effect of the potentially life-transforming event of military service on crime. These differences in results may reflect corresponding differences in the nature of the military experience, the design of the conscription procedure, or other country-specific factors. Nonetheless, establishing whether these effects are mainly long-term or short-term is important.

Understanding which factors are at play is also critical, as some European countries (e.g., France and Sweden) are considering reintroducing military service in some form. Moreover, because of previous opposing findings by [Albæk et al. \(2017\)](#) and [Hjalmarsson and Lindquist \(2016\)](#), the group of offending juveniles is of special interest; and, as they are also more at risk for recidivism they constitute a specific target for preventive public policies.

To estimate the effects of military service, the empirical approach must deal with the likelihood that men who self-select into the military are different from other men. To identify a causal link between military service and crime, I need to have a variable (instrument) affecting participation in military service without affecting crime through any other mechanisms. The Danish draft lottery offers excellent insight into the problem through the Danish Armed Forces (DAF) broad recruitment from the Danish population, giving the researcher an instrument for investigating the causal effect of military service on criminal behavior.

The data encompasses eight full birth cohorts of eligible men (1976–1983).<sup>13</sup> Administrative records are available for these cohorts for 1991 through 2013, ranging from ages 15–30 for the eight cohorts and up to 37 years for the oldest cohort. The data from the Danish military includes draft lottery outcome, draft lottery threshold below which individuals are drafted, military service status, and date of service for all Danish men born between 1976 and 1983 and judged fit-for-service on the annual Armed Forces Days—155,570 men in total. In addition, the military data are linked to longitudinal administrative register data on educational qualifications, labor market outcomes, and criminal convictions.

The results show that, on average, military service does not affect crime in general or any kind of crime in particular. The point estimates are close to zero, with reasonably small confidence intervals. A look at possible heterogeneous effects reveals that the results are stable for different sample restrictions and crime history (juvenile offenders and non-offending juveniles). Nevertheless, I find some evidence that different birth cohorts may be affected differently, likely because of changes in the youth unemployment rate during the study. I also find that military service, while reducing the educational level at age 25, has no impact on the likelihood of being unemployed on average. However, military service reduces non-offending juvenile's earnings.

This paper not only combines a peacetime lottery, the entire universe of eight recent birth cohorts of eligible men, and information on pre-service crime to identify juvenile offenders, but also takes advantage of a comprehensive data set including service dates, lottery numbers, and the lottery threshold (indicating whether individuals are drafted or not). By so doing, the paper contributes to both the sparse literature evaluating the effect of peacetime military service on crime and the literature on how important experiences during young adulthood may change an individual's behavior. First, the lack of consensus in the literature evaluating the effect of peacetime military service on crime makes critical the need for checking the validity of policy recommendations for crime and conscription. The large number of cohorts in this paper allows me to shed light on possible cohort and context effects that may reconcile the mixed findings in this literature.

<sup>12</sup> [Gould et al. \(2002\)](#) examine to what degree changes in crime rate can be explained by changes in the labor market opportunity for those likely to commit crime—in their case, unskilled men. They establish a causal relationship and conclude that crime is likely to increase when unemployment is high.

<sup>13</sup> I use the same data as in [Bingley et al. \(2014\)](#).

<sup>4</sup> [Gould et al. \(2002\)](#) establish that both wages and unemployment are significantly related to crime.

<sup>5</sup> Neuroscience has established the malleability of the prefrontal cortex into the early 20s ([Dahl, 2004](#)).

<sup>6</sup> For example, [Hearst et al. \(1986\)](#) use the Vietnam-era U.S. draft to look at mortality, and [Angrist \(1990\)](#) uses it to look at earnings. [Siminski and Ville \(2011\)](#) use the Vietnam-era Australian draft to examine mortality.

<sup>7</sup> For other studies analyzing the relationship between being a war veteran and subsequent criminal behavior, see [Mumola \(2000\)](#), [Rohlf's \(2010\)](#), and [Yager et al. \(1984\)](#).

<sup>8</sup> A related literature estimates the effect of conscription on other outcomes, such as earnings ([Grenet et al., 2011](#); [Bauer et al., 2012](#); [Card and Cardoso, 2012](#); and [Imbens and van der Klaauw, 1995](#)) and education ([Maurin and Xenogiani, 2007](#); [Cipollone and Rosolia, 2007](#); and [Keller et al., 2010](#)).

<sup>9</sup> [Bingley et al. \(2014\)](#) investigate the opportunity cost of the draft across the cognitive ability distribution in Denmark.

<sup>10</sup> Indeed, [Albæk et al. \(2017\)](#) find that property crime is reduced for juvenile offenders from the year in which they begin military service (lasting 3–12 months) and up to four years. While the effect is significant at 5% for the first and second year, it is significant only at the 10% level in the third and fourth years after service.

<sup>11</sup> [Albæk et al. \(2017\)](#) infer from examining military employment records whether the person has served.

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