



Delinquent behavior, the transition to adulthood, and the likelihood of military enlistment [☆]

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ABSTRACT

Using data taken from the 1997 National Longitudinal Survey of Youth we examine the relationship between delinquency and enlistment in the military. We argue that delinquent behavior is positively related to enlistment because military service is an attractive alternative for delinquents to mark their transition to adulthood and their desistance from delinquent behavior. We also argue, however, that this relationship is not linear, with higher levels of delinquent behavior actually acting to reduce the likelihood of enlistment. We further suggest that the relationship between delinquency and enlistment is similar for men and women. We test and find support for our hypotheses using data taken from the 1997 National Longitudinal Survey of Youth.

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1. Introduction

Over the last 70 years, at least one and a half million military personnel have been on active duty in each year, affecting 10–70% of relevant birth cohorts. Currently, about 200,000 young men and women enter the military (active duty and reserves) each year. Indeed, an often-ignored fact is that the military is the single largest employer of young men in the United States (Angrist, 1998), with about 7–12% of recent cohorts of young men serving a term in the military. Increasingly, young women are becoming a significant component of military service (about 20% of the current military population). Military recruitment is an often hotly debated topic of public policy centering on issues such as access, equality of representation by race, and transferability of training to the civilian labor market (Armor, 1996; Bennett and McDonald, 2013; Brown, 2013; Kleykamp, 2013). In Congress, veterans' rights and benefits are significant budgetary items, and veterans' organizations constitute powerful political-action groups. Moreover, there is growing evidence that military service is linked to a number of subsequent life course outcomes, including education, income, marital status, and health (Angrist, 1990, 1998; Bennett and McDonald, 2013; MacLean and Elder, 2007; Segal and Segal, 2004; Teachman, 2007a,b, 2008, 2010; Whyman et al., 2011; Wilmoth and London, 2013). Yet, our understanding of the factors that lead young men and women to choose military service in the all-volunteer era remains skeletal.

Prior literature dealing with enlistment in the military has focused on economic factors wherein men (and increasingly women) choose the military as a means to maximize their economic well-being (Asch et al., 1999; Bennett and McDonald, 2013; Kilburn and Asch, 2003; Kilburn and Klerman, 1999; Kleykamp, 2006; Seeborg, 1994). Although this model has received empirical support, it fails to recognize many non-economic factors that may spur enlistment. For example, other research has suggested that factors such as patriotism, propinquity to military installations, family history, and desire for travel and

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adventure are related to the decision to join the military (Eighmey, 2006; Elder et al., 2010; Kleykamp, 2006; Woodruff et al., 2006). Indeed, some authors claim that many, if not most, men and women who enlist in the military do not come from disadvantaged backgrounds and make enlistment decisions based largely on non-economic factors (Kane, 2006; Watkins and Sherck, 2008). In this article, we expand the literature on social determinants by investigating the relationship between delinquent or criminal behavior and the likelihood of military enlistment.¹ We argue that the military offers delinquents and criminals a sharp transition to adulthood and desistance from delinquency and crime by providing unique opportunities that are attractive to them and difficult to match in civilian life.

2. Theoretical development

There is no commonly accepted model for military enlistment. As mentioned earlier, economic considerations are often posited as the major mechanism generating desire to enlist in the military. Yet, this theoretical orientation is too limited given the number of additional, non-economic variables that have been linked to enlistment. A more general perspective is one that considers the impact of non-economic considerations that operate to influence the decision to join the military. Research exists to indicate that many enlistees make the decision to enter the military based on their desire to maximize value in some realm of their life other than income. For example, Wang et al. (2012) show that some recruits enter the military in order to gain respect that might not otherwise be available to them. Other researchers argue that military service provides a context that legitimizes the violent tendencies of some individuals (Sampson et al., 1997; Shihadeh, 1996) and a source of adventure that other individuals seek (Eighmey, 2006; Johnson and Kaplan, 1991). Sampson and Laub (1996) argue that the military provides enlistees an opportunity to “knife off” their past and offers a blank slate for future life-course development.

The available research, therefore, suggests that the military is a unique institution in that it provides individuals with a range of opportunities that are not normally available in a civilian environment. Certainly, the military is a known commodity with respect to stable employment and excellent benefits that are difficult to match for young persons of similar qualifications in the civilian labor market. In addition, however, the military provides young recruits with structure via a regimented life style, and a source of self-esteem and pride, particularly following 9/11 (Eighmey, 2006). The military also offers a built-in social group and a sense of belonging that would be difficult to achieve in most civilian occupations (Spence et al., 2012). Another component of military life that is difficult to match in the civilian labor market is the opportunity for travel and adventure (Eighmey, 2006; Woodruff et al., 2006).

As we explain later, the unique set of opportunities provided by military service make it an attractive option for young persons with a history of delinquent or criminal behavior. More specifically, we argue that it is the link between desistance from delinquency and military service that is important to consider. It is well known that delinquency is strongly age graded (Hirschi and Gottfredson, 1993), as is military service. Delinquency increases through the teen years and then declines sharply when individuals reach their twenties. This pattern suggests that as young men and women make the transition to adulthood, they desist from engaging in subsequent delinquent activities. Indeed, a number of researchers argue that desistance from delinquency is a marker of the transition to adulthood, much as marriage, employment, and parenthood are also markers of this transition (Bosick, 2012; Massoglia and Uggen, 2010; Stouthamer-Loeber et al., 2004).

The notion that desistance from delinquency is a marker of the transition to adulthood is consistent with Hagan's (1991) notion of drift where teens move between criminal and conventional behaviors. According to Hagan (p. 569) “...teenage culture emphasizes fun and adventure, disdains scholastic effort and flirts with the boundary areas between propriety and immorality (e.g., staying out late, drinking, sexual exploration, and “conning” parents), nonetheless this culture is more accurately seen as “playing” at deviance.” Thus, although many delinquents drift between conventional and criminal activities, they are not serious about pursuing a career of delinquency, and most of them will successfully make the transition to adulthood by desisting from delinquent activities. Massoglia and Uggen (2010) argue that young people are aware of the normative standards surrounding the transition to adulthood, as well as its age gradation and are prepared to desist from delinquency as they age. Adult status is marked by the absence of delinquency or criminal behavior and the assumption of adult roles such as marriage and full-time employment.

In this context, we suggest that enlistment in the military represents for many teens and young adults an age-appropriate indicator of the transition to adulthood. Most military enlistments occur during the late teens and early twenties, when delinquent behaviors decline sharply. In particular, for delinquents, enlistment may be seen as an indicator of desistance from criminal activities and the assumption of adult roles. Even though other markers of the transition to adulthood are available, such as marriage or employment in the civilian labor force, military service may be more attractive to delinquents. The military is an environment in which aggression and violence often associated with delinquency can be channeled into legitimate forms (Sampson et al., 1997; Shihadeh, 1996). It is also an environment where thrill seeking delinquents can find a work outlet that satisfies their sense of adventure (Eighmey, 2006; Johnson and Kaplan, 1991). It is also an institution that provides regimentation, immediate status, and a sense of camaraderie that is difficult, if not impossible, to match in the

¹ We use the terms delinquency and criminality interchangeably throughout our article. Even though most of the behaviors that constitute our measure of delinquency would be considered criminal behaviors for respondents 18 and older, the term delinquency is consistent with use in the literature, even though respondents are followed into adulthood. As Massoglia and Uggen (2010: 544) note, “[a]lthough our interest extends beyond adolescence, we deliberately use the term delinquency throughout this article to emphasize the historical and cultural link between criminality and youth – and the age-inappropriateness of delinquent behavior in adulthood”.

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