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## **How many prison officers are ex-military personnel? Estimating the proportion of Armed Forces leavers within the prison workforce of England and Wales.**

Forthcoming in *The Howard Journal of Crime and Justice*

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### **Abstract**

The prior employment history of prison officers has been overlooked within academic literatures and, in contrast with the prior military service of Veterans-in-Custody, the significance of their military experience has been almost completely disregarded. Since military service is known to be predictive of subsequent professional performance, this oversight, due in part to the lack of data, is potentially very significant in understanding the contribution made by ex-military personnel as prison staff. This paper presents novel empirical evidence from an online survey of UK prison officers suggesting that at least a quarter have military experience – a proportion which has fallen over time but still far exceeds the proportion of Veterans in the prisoner population. Based on these novel data, the paper suggests future avenues of research to address the many unanswered questions about whether and how military experience influences prison work.

**Keywords:** prison officers, military, ex-military personnel, prior employment

### **Introduction**

We know a great deal about the challenges faced by incarcerated ex-military personnel – frequently termed ‘Veterans in Custody’ (VICs), and this is largely due to a widespread awareness of just how many such individuals are incarcerated. In England and Wales, a key report published in 2014 found that VICs constituted around 7% of the prisoner population (HMIP, 2014), making them the single largest occupational group (Wainwright et al., 2017: 741). This much-cited statistic justifiably underpinned extensive subsequent research which found that the nature of their offences, the circumstances of their incarceration, the challenges they face in prison, and their likelihood of reoffending all seem to be defined to a greater or lesser extent by this prior military experience (e.g. Albertson et al., 2015, 2017; Fossey et al., 2017; McManus and Wood, 2017; Phillips, 2020). By comparison, and despite a now extensive body of research into prison staff and prison management, we know very little about how many prison *staff* are ex-military. Without a comparable percentage figure for occupational groups,

there has as yet been no comparable impetus for dedicated research into the potential significance of prior military service for *their* experiences or performance – despite the fact that research into post-military careers in general (e.g. Gordon and Newby Parham, 2019; Robertson and Brott, 2013, 2014) suggests that military experience is highly predictive of subsequent professional performance. The performance of prison staff is widely acknowledged to be a very significant factor in the operation and management of prisons, their ‘moral performance’ (Liebling with Arnold, 2004), and their legitimacy (Liebling, 2011), so it follows that understanding the ways in which previous military experience may influence how prison staff discharge their role is also key to these concerns. And as Crewe et al. (2008: 2) argue ‘the study of prison staff can tell us about conceptual issues beyond the realm of criminal justice, such as the nature of power, punishment, order, inequality, care, discretion and resistance’.

Accordingly, this paper presents the first exploratory empirical data indicating the proportion of the prison workforce of England and Wales who have had military experience, and how this has changed over time. We present these findings as a first step towards addressing the broader challenge of exploring the significance of prior military experience for prison officers’ professional performance. In so doing, we also directly contribute to understandings of what Moran et al. (2019: 222) called the ‘prison-military complex’: a term describing ‘the multifaceted, multiscalar, entrenched and polyvalent interrelationships between prison and the military’. Arguing that scholars must pay attention to *how* and *with what implications* prison and the military are associated with each other’ (Moran et al., 2019: 222), they identify ex-military prison staff as a particularly under-researched population exemplifying this ‘complex’.

In the paper we first briefly summarise prior scholarship about prison officers, including the dearth of research into their prior employment, and the limited prior research into those with military experience, before describing the methodology deployed in the study, and discussing our empirical data. We conclude by setting out an agenda for future research based upon our findings; research which could enhance understandings of the significance both of prison officers’ prior employment in general, and of prior military service in particular.

### **Prior employment of prison officers**

Although by no means the only occupational types employed within prisons, prison officers are usually by far the largest category of staff, and those who (distinct from prison educators, psychologists, clinicians and drugs workers, for instance) spend the majority of their time transforming prison policy and regulations into everyday practice in interaction with incarcerated persons (Bruhn et al., 2017). As such, this occupational group – usually comprising uniformed staff – plays a very significant role in prison organization, the generation of the

atmosphere and 'feel' of the institution, and in its 'moral performance' – or in other words its sense of legitimacy and authority (Liebling, 2011).

Reflecting the key role of prison officers in enacting and embodying the moral quality of prison life (Liebling, 2011: 484), over recent decades a diverse and extensive body of work has developed to enhance understandings of a wide range of elements important in their conduct, attitudes and experiences, and other key aspects of their lives. Within this writing, we learn much about the experience of prison officers in terms of their gender (Boyd and Grant, 2005; Tait, 2008; Vartia and Hyyti, 2002), ethnicity and attitudes to diversity (Bosworth, 2018; Bygnes, 2014; Singh Bhui and Fossi, 2008), work in the public and private sectors (McLean and Liebling, 2008), their recruitment and assessment (McHugh et al., 2008), training and development (Arnold, 2008; Bolger and Bennett, 2008), job satisfaction (Boateng and Heish, 2019), unionisation (Page, 2011), and their social world (Crewe, 2008). Dedicated and detailed studies also cover their concerns about infection at work (Dillon and Allwright, 2005), emotion and emotional labour (Crawley, 2004; Humblet, 2020; Nylander et al., 2011; Walby and Cole, 2019), experience of deaths in custody (Barry, 2017), work-life balance (Kinman et al., 2017), sickness absence and 'presenteeism' (Kinman et al., 2019) and other sources of work-related stress (e.g. Steiner and Wooldredge, 2015).

This growing body of scholarship has tended to focus on prison officers' experiences *whilst already in the role*. Very little attention is paid to their *prior* activity – to what they did *before* becoming prison officers. In studies of recruitment, the focus is on diversification, (e.g. from minority ethnic communities from McHugh et al. [2008]), or changes to requirements for recruits' qualifications (Bennett et al., 2008), rather than on other characteristics. Some studies consider the ideal or necessary attitudes held by potential prison officer recruits – such as supportive attitudes towards drug users, or those with personality disorders, for prison officers recruited to work on specialist drug treatment units or on units for the dangerous and severely personality disordered (Carr-Walker et al., 2004; Kolind et al., 2010). Very little is said, however, about what kinds of prior experience – i.e. activity which has taken place *before* they are recruited and undergo training for the role – might best prepare prison officers for the job.

This neglect of the significance of prior experience seems curious, given the likelihood that most prison officers will have worked before in some capacity. In our study context of the UK, the minimum age for prison officers is 18, meaning they *can* be recruited direct from education, presumably with very little prior professional experience, but there are no published data indicating how common this is. Available data disaggregate by age, but since the youngest age bracket reported is 'under 30' (comprising 20% of all officers, and 52% of new joiners) (HMPPS, 2019), it is not possible to determine how many actually join at age 18. It is *possible* that recruits aged under 30 may have had no prior employment, but it is more likely that most

of these new prison officers (and the 48% joining aged 30+) *will* have had some prior professional experience. However, consideration of the nature of this prior employment in general, and its potential influence on subsequent performance in prison work in particular, is overlooked in the literature.

Just as studies of prison officers have not considered the significance of prior employment, extensive research into post-military careers has also overlooked the prison as a workplace. Ex-military personnel have, however, been tracked into teaching (Gordon and Newby Parham, 2019; Robertson and Brott, 2013, 2014); police work (Ivie and Garland, 2011; Johnson, 2013; Olson and Gabriel-Olson, 2012; Patterson, 2002 ); the fire service (Bartlett et al., 2018, 2020); corporate careers (Benmelech and Frydman, 2015; Gagliardo, 2020; Kaur and Singh, 2018; Koch-Bayram and Wernicke, 2018); and entrepreneurship (Heinz et al., 2017; Kerrick et al., 2014), finding that military experience is predicative of professional performance. It is associated with more conservative and ethical behaviour in business, better management of occupational stress, high levels of resilience and, in teaching, a greater likelihood than that of conventionally-trained teachers to remain in the profession. Given these findings, it seems likely that military experience is also predictive of performance in the role of prison officer – in ways which are yet to be explored.

Accordingly, to overlook the prior employment – military or otherwise – of prison officers is to neglect a potentially very significant factor influencing the prison system. We cannot, in this paper, address all the potential impacts of prior military service. Instead, our purpose, through establishing for the first time a sense of the proportion of (past and present) prison officers who have previously served in the Armed Forces, is to provide an evidential basis for future research in which these questions can be effectively pursued. Before discussing our methodology, we first summarise the limited mentions of ex-military prison officers in extant literatures.

### **Ex-military prison officers**

Ex-military prison officers make up an unknown proportion of the estimated 3.8 million Armed Forces leavers in England (HMIP, 2014: 4), with the 20,000 (Ministry of Defence, 2014: 10) personnel leaving the Forces (the British Army, Royal Navy and Royal Air Force) each year now actively targeted as potential recruits by the prison service. Although the post-military period, termed ‘military-civilian transition’, can be challenging, by taking up a new career in the prison service ex-military prison personnel would be counted amongst those ‘successfully’ transitioning, i.e. requiring no assistance with employment, debt, homelessness, relationship breakdown or poor health (Ashcroft, 2014: 125; Herman and Yarwood, 2014: 41-2; Walker, 2013). But even these ‘successful’ individuals face ‘significant cultural, social and spatial

changes', and liminal identities as the 'legacies' of military service (Herman and Yarwood, 2014: 41-2, 49), and 'tensions between tenacious military identity and post discharge "resettlement" with the civilian environment' (Higate 2001: 443).

As Moran et al. (2019) identified, there is a significant knowledge gap in relation to ex-military personnel and their role within the prison service as prison staff. Much of what we know comes from anecdotal or observational data which lacks a firm evidential base. Summarising these sources, they note that in 1914, A.J. Todd was 'struck by the large proportion of ex-soldiers' employed as prison staff; that in the 1960s ex-military personnel were 'preferred' recruits (King, 2013); and that by the 1980s they made up 'the vast majority' of prison officers (Crawley and Crawley, 2008: 14). These 'best-guesses' are partially corroborated by research into post-military second careers in which the prison service is mentioned alongside other civilian uniformed services as a potential work destination (Jolly, 1996; Spilsbury, 1994).

A House of Commons Justice Select Committee report in 2009 noted that

Until the 1950s prison officers were primarily recruited from amongst former armed services personnel. Over the following decades the diversity of recruits increased mirroring wider changes in British society. Between 1993 and 1998, the Prison Service introduced local, rather than national, recruitment exercises. The aim was to end the need for officers to live in prison accommodation without links to the local community and thereby encourage people with families, particularly women, to join the Service. This further contributed to the decline in the recruitment of ex-servicemen, as well as increasing the numbers of women applying to join the Prison Service. (House of Commons Justice Committee, 2009: 17-18)

Although giving a useful overview of the strategy behind recruitment policies, this extract provides neither quantitative data about the proportion of prison officers who were ex-military personnel, or whether it was felt necessary to reduce the ex-military proportion *specifically* – rather than this happening simply as a result of increasing the gender diversity of staff and their attachment to prisons' local communities. In other words, it tells us little either about their number, or about how ex-military personnel function(ed) as prison officers.

Regarding the performance of ex-military personnel when employed in the prison service, Tait claimed that, those 'with military experience... sought similar camaraderie, discipline and job security' in the prison system (2011: 448), and Crawley and Crawley (2008) noted that from the 1980s the prison service valued ex-military personnel's discipline, punctuality, obedience and smart appearance (see also Matthews and Pitts, 1998). In Higate's

work on post-military careers, he argued that the 'obvious next-step' after military service is driven by *more* than accustomed workplace regime and preference for uniform. Ex-military personnel, he contended, tend to move into professions which, like the prison service, are 'characterized by high degrees of continuity with the Armed Forces not only in terms of the transferability of skill capital, but crucially as masculinized institutions' (Higate, 2001: 455).

Although the prison service may appear a natural fit for ex-military personnel, some commentators have argued that there is a mismatch between appeal of the prison as a potential post-military workplace, and the actual requirements of prison work. In the 1960s, Morris and Morris described ex-military personnel as 'authoritarian', and as 'martinets who have merely exchanged a khaki uniform for a blue one' (1963: 76, 77). They claimed that ex-service personnel had, in the nineteenth century 'provided ideal material out of which to make a warder' (1963: 76), but by the 1960s, although the military experience of 'handling men' was 'a considerable advantage in a prison where so much of the activity consists of locking and unlocking, counting and recounting, and telling prisoners what to do next', but questioned whether the ex-military were equipped to 'carry out the aims of rehabilitation and reform' or to 'deal with complex human relationships in which the crude exercise of coercion is not enough' (Morris and Morris, 1963: 76). Although Soutar and Williams concluded that, in Australia, 'prison officers with military or para military backgrounds were not, *ceteris paribus*, significantly more custodially-oriented than officers without such experiences' (Soutar and Williams, 1985: 22), Crawley and Crawley claimed that former soldiers are 'often too inflexible and discipline-oriented to rise to the challenges of the 'modern' prison officer role' (2008: 14).

Beyond these glimpses, very little research attention has been paid to the role of ex-military prison officers. There are passing mentions of their presence, sometimes with generalisations about their conduct, but as Moran et al. (2019) note, purposefully generated empirical data – either quantitative or qualitative – are completely absent. As they argue, these knowledge gaps are significant for two reasons. Firstly, this data lack means that we have a relatively poor understanding of former military personnel's past and present influence on the prison service. There are important questions to answer about the difference a military background makes. Secondly, this knowledge gap becomes all the more important when we consider that, at present, concerted efforts have been made in the UK to both recruit more ex-military personnel to the prison service (Travis, 2016) and to introduce military-style leadership training for prison governors (McCulloch, 2018) alongside active policy discourse about the need for 'military discipline' in prisons. Without a good understanding of the role of ex-military personnel in prisons, we are poorly placed to judge the likely implications of these policies.

There are, as Moran et al. (2019) point out, many pertinent questions to ask about the

role and contribution of ex-military personnel within the prison service. However, as they also identify, the lack of data pertaining to their number remains a fundamental challenge. Research into the experience of ex-military personnel within the prison workforce is therefore hampered by the lack of data pertaining to the proportion of the workforce who share this characteristic. It is our understanding that there are no consolidated data providing information about HMPPS employees' previous military experience and no data of this kind has been published. HMPPS' human resources management systems *may* contain anonymised information about employees' previous Armed Forces experience. However, these tend to be live, dynamic systems not designed for use in presenting consistent statistical figures or for generating historical data and, as far as we are aware, HMPPS' human resources data have never been analysed to locate this information. For very recent years, the Ministry of Defence's 'Career Transition Partnership', an optional service which assists Forces leavers to find new careers, has published the small numbers of CTP users who, six months after leaving the Forces, reported being employed as prison officers (78 in 2017-18, 59 in 2018-19 and 46 in 2019-20 [Ministry of Defence 2019, 2020, 2021], which, drawing on Ministry of Justice workforce data [2021], equates, respectively, to 0.36%, 0.25% and 0.20% of the prison officer population in the corresponding year). Despite a seeming downward trend in the employment of ex-military personnel, we use these three data points with caution in our present analysis. HMPPS notes that the average prison officer application takes 6-8 months (HMPPS, 2021) and, since we note elsewhere (Authors) that Forces leavers spend on average four years out of the military before joining the Prison Service, it is likely that these data do not capture the total number who eventually find their way into prison work.

There is, therefore, no publicly available data relating to the previous employment of prison officers and, as far as we know, this information may not even be systematically captured in the way that it is for incarcerated persons. As White's (2017) study recognises, the elusiveness of cohort-dedicated data means that work of charting post-military career trajectories relies on a 'methodological puzzle' of managing available data and recognising sample limitations. Although the survey-based data we present here has its limitations, it does provide some insights into the nature of the workforce over time.. By determining as accurately as possible, given available data, the proportion of ex-military personnel within the prison workforce (hereafter the 'military percentage'), we therefore not only contribute new and unique data, but also enable future analysis of the experience and contribution of ex-military prison officers to be appropriately contextualised.

## **Methodology**

We utilise data generated via two self-completion, anonymous online surveys: one for current



prison officers employed at six participating establishments, and another for former prison officers. The surveys targeted individuals who (had) worked in (usually uniformed), prisoner-facing roles, rather than in an administrative capacity, and were open to (current or former) uniformed prison officers of all ranks, members of senior management teams, and prison governors. For brevity, we refer to all respondents as 'prison officers', unless referring to their employment status, in which case we call them current/former 'staff'. Designed for completion by respondents both with and without a history of military service, the two surveys were identical, and participation was voluntary and anonymous.

Former-staff were recruited to the survey via links to a hosting website posted on social media using a dedicated twitter account. Respondents self-identified as having previously worked in the prison service in the UK, either in the public or private sectors. As with all non-password-controlled online surveys, it was not possible to verify that all respondents were genuinely former UK prison employees. Current-staff employed at six participating prisons within the public sector were recruited via emails to their work email addresses sent from the senior management team of their employing prison, inviting them to complete the survey and sharing the url. This arrangement was specified by the National Research Council (NRC) for Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) which gave permission for the current-staff survey. Although the limited number of participating prisons unavoidably limited the number of potential respondents, the six prisons selected together represented a variety of establishments within the male estate – Cat A/B, Cat B 'local', Cat C 'training' and adult/Young Offender Institute (YOI)<sup>1</sup>. They also covered a range of geographical regions, and represented prisons governed by individuals both with and without experience in the Armed Forces. Omitted from the study were therefore women's, open/Cat D and privately-run establishments – although this did not necessarily mean that respondents lacked prior experience of such establishments.

Survey questions covered basic demographic data including gender; questions about route into prison work; training; level of entry; career path; duration of employment; non/operational status; banding; expectations and experiences of prison work; and future plans. 'Question logic', routed respondents depending on their answers, ensuring that those with military experience were asked about it, and those without were not.

The current-staff survey ran for 6 months in 2019, and the former-staff survey for 12 months across 2019-2020. For current-staff, N = 83. Since the six establishments together employ about 1700 eligible staff, this gives a response rate of 4.82%, which although low, is in line with expectations for an untargeted (i.e. not personally-addressed) online survey

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<sup>1</sup> In England and Wales there are four categories of prisoner, with designation depending on severity of crime committed and level of security deemed necessary in the penal system. Category A refers to the highest level of security.

distributed by an employer on behalf of an external organisation. For former-staff, N = 145. as (Since the number of potential participants for this survey is unknown, no response rate can be calculated). In both surveys, some unanswered questions generate n values lower than 83 and 145. Results were analysed using SPSS tools including cluster analysis and non-parametric tests.

Considering first the differences between the two cohorts, as might be expected, former-staff had on average joined the prison service earlier (1962-2017, mean joining year 1995) than current-staff (1979-2019, mean 2006). Former staff had left the prison service between 1989 and 2019, with a mean of 2011; current staff were of course still employed. In both groups, the majority (69.6%) had worked only in male public sector prisons, which make up the majority of the prison estate.

In both surveys, the majority of respondents (57.7%) had had military experience (defined for the purpose of the study as a period of full-time employment in any capacity within the UK Army, Royal Air Force (RAF) or Royal Navy, prior to joining the prison service; i.e. excluding reservists unless a full-time role had *also* been served). 69.1% of current-staff, and 51.1% of former-staff disclosed military experience. Of these, a higher proportion of former than current-staff had served in the Army than in the other services (see Table 1). Ex-military current-staff had on average served in the Armed Forces for two years longer than had their former-staff counterparts. The majority within both cohorts had seen combat (current staff 59.3%, former staff 65.2%).

**Table 1:** Particular Force experience of prison staff with prior experience in the military

	Former staff (%)	Current Staff (%)	All staff (%)
Army	31.0	34.5	32.5
RAF	15.5	11.1	21.6
Navy	15.5	29.6	13.6

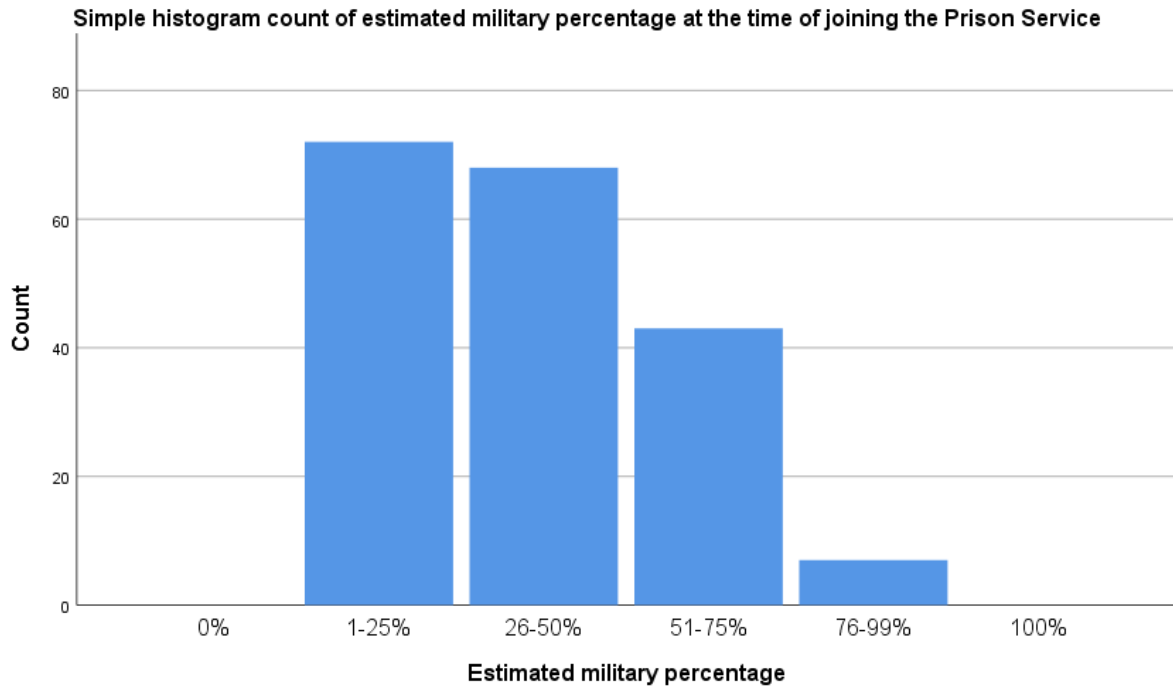
However, we do not extrapolate directly from these data that the majority of the prison workforce, either past or present, has served in the Armed Forces, due to the low (or incalculable) response rate. Additionally, the surveys were described in recruitment information as exploring the contribution of ex-military personnel to the prison service, which probably appealed most to those *with* military experience, perhaps generating a skewed sample. Instead, participants were asked to estimate the military percentage (the percentage of their immediate colleagues who had served in the Armed Forces) both at their earliest experience of the prison service (the time of joining) and at their most recent experience (when leaving the prison service, for former staff; or at survey completion, for current staff) according to percentage bands. For the purposes of analysis, the bands correspond to ordinal data in the

following way: 1 corresponding to an estimate of 0%, 2 to 1-25%, 3 to 26-50%, 4 to 51-75%, 5 to 76-99% and 6 to 100%. In the remainder of the paper we analyse the resulting data which enable us to derive conclusions about the changing percentage of the prison workforce with a military background – which we term hereafter the ‘military percentage’. As indicated, the data used to produce these estimations are drawn from best-guess percentages that rely on retrospective recall. Naturally, this limits the scope of the findings. However, in the absence of data pertaining to the actual percentage of prison officers who have served in the military, our data represent the only available source. Fully acknowledging these limitations, we next move on to consider the results of the surveys.

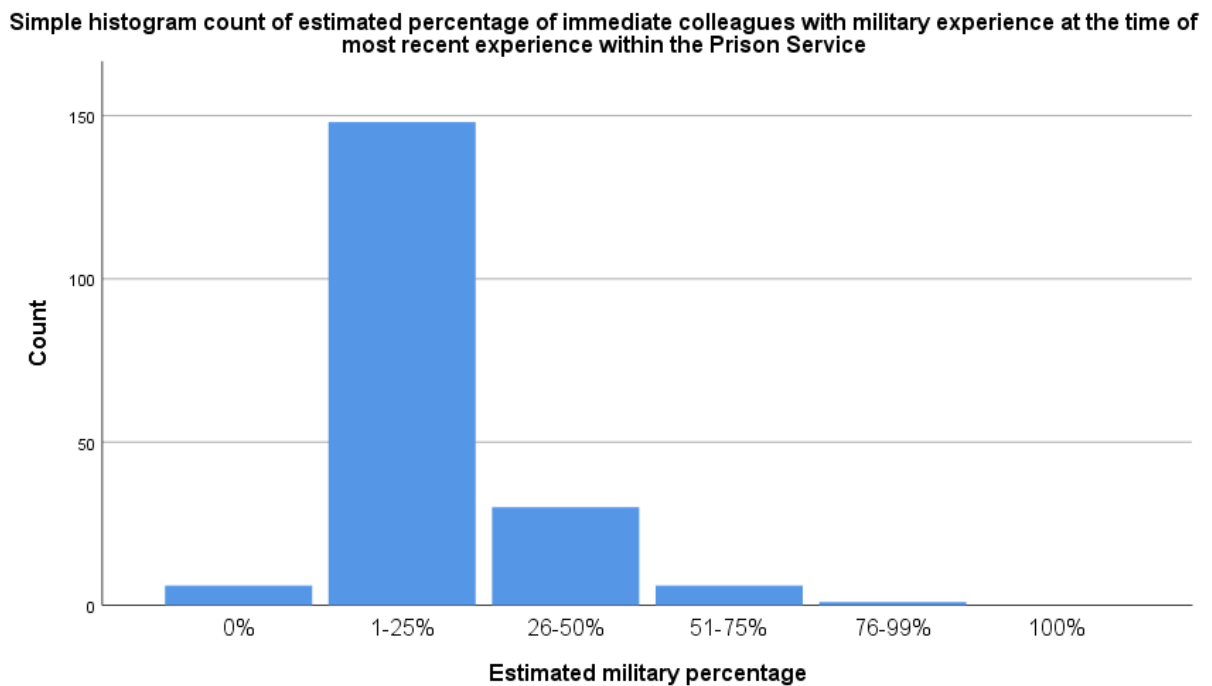
### **Results: The Military Percentage**

Combining both surveys, an exact sign test found a statistically significant difference between the two sets of estimates, showing that the average estimate of military percentage was higher at the time of joining ( $M = 2.92, SD = .87$ ) than at the most recent experience ( $M = 2.20, SD = .57$ ),  $p = <001$ . If these estimates are broadly accurate, this result is indicative of a fall in military percentage over time (see Figures 1 and 2).

Considering the magnitude of the decrease, the median response fell from 3 to 2, indicating that military percentage fell from the corresponding percentage bands of 26-50% to 1-25% across the careers of surveyed prison officers.



**Figure 1:** Simple histogram count of estimated military percentage at the time of joining the Prison Service



**Figure 2:** Simple histogram count of estimated military percentage at the time of most recent employment in the Prison Service

Whilst useful, these average figures provide little detailed insight into variance in military percentage, or the different perceptions of current- and former-staff, and those with and

without military experience. In the following sections of the paper, we therefore explore these facets of the data.

### Differences by employment status

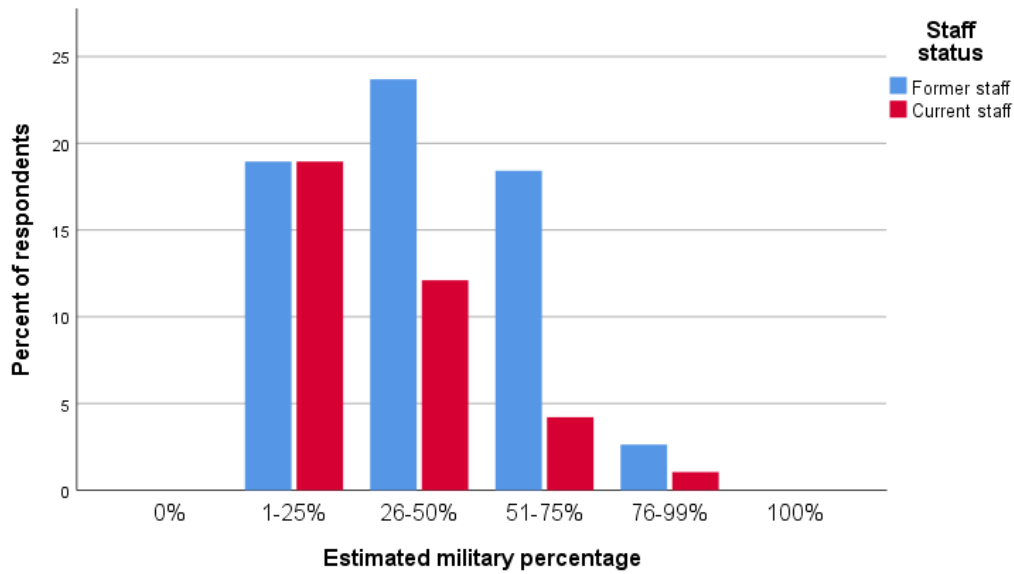
Further analysis disaggregated estimates of military percentage for current and former staff, again comparing their estimates at joining and their most recent (leaving/survey completion) experience of the prison service. An exact sign test compared the differences in means at these two moments for the two cohorts. Both reported a higher military percentage on joining compared with their most recent experience ( $p < .001$ ) (see Table 2).

**Table 2:** Estimated military percentage according to employment status

	Former staff			Current staff		
	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD
Estimate upon joining	121	3.07	.87	69	2.65	.80
Most recent estimate	121	2.22	.63	70	2.17	.45

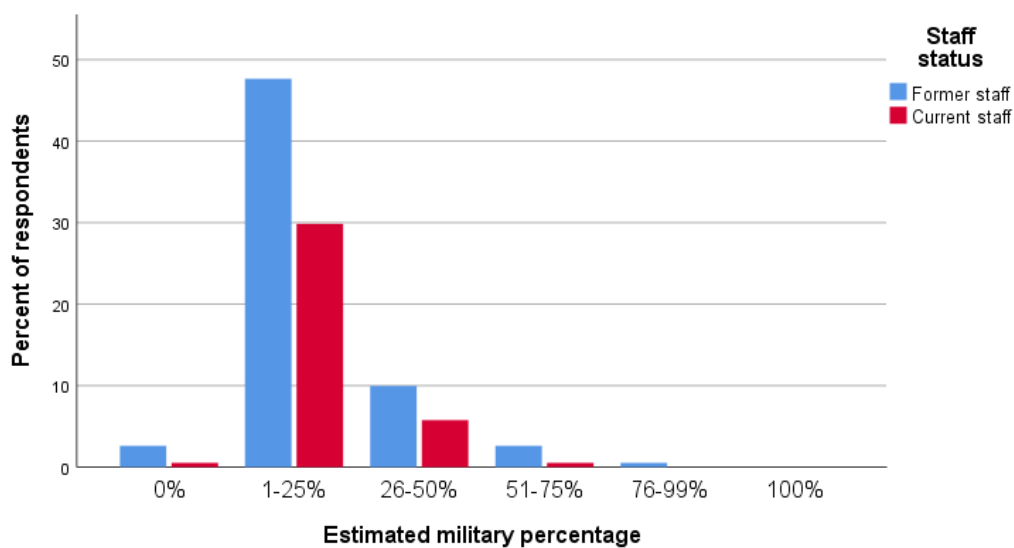
Looking more closely at these data, former staff reported a higher military percentage when joining the prison service ( $Mdn = 3$ ) than did current staff ( $Mdn = 2$ ) (see Figure 3). Although a Mann Whitney  $U$  Test indicated that this difference was statistically significant,  $U(N_{\text{former}} = 121, N_{\text{current}} = 69) = 3018.50, z = -3.365, p = 0.01$ , there was no statistically significant difference in the percentages reported by the two groups at their most recent experience of the prison service ( $p < 0.77$ ) (see Figure 4).

**Clustered Bar Percent of estimates of military percentage from former and current prison staff at the time of joining the Prison Service.**



**Figure 3:** Clustered bar comparing estimates of military percentage from former and current prison staff at the time of joining the Prison Service.

**Clustered Bar Percent of estimates of military percentage from former and current prison staff at the time of most recent experience within the Prison Service according to staff status**



**Figure 4:** Clustered bar comparing estimates of military percentage from former and current prison staff at the time of their most recent experience of the Prison Service.

Having explored differences in military percentages estimated by current and former staff, we next considered their own status in relation to the military.

### Differences by prior military experience

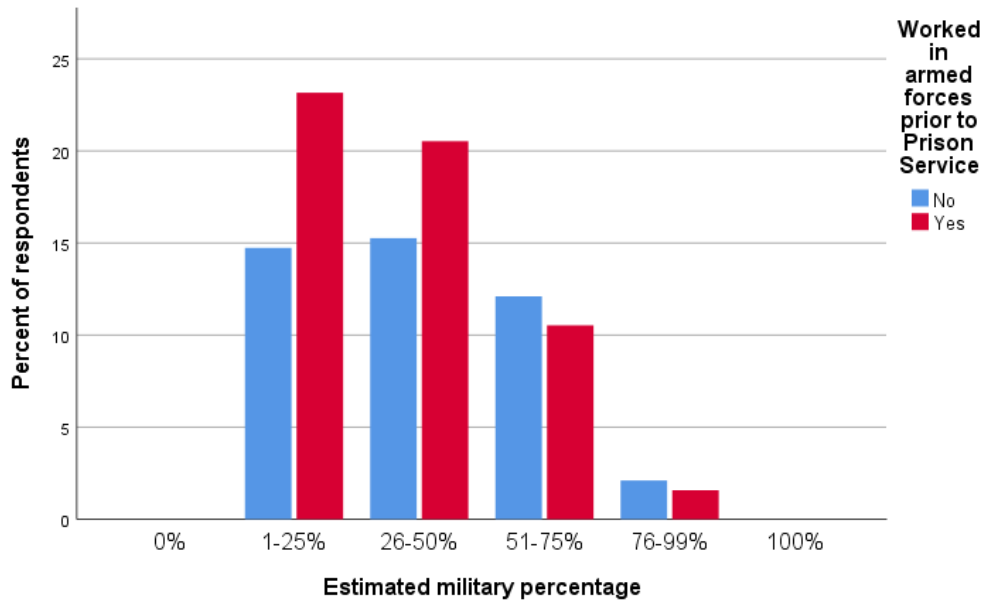
We compared military percentages estimated by respondents disaggregated by their own military experience, using an exact sign test to compare estimates at earliest/most recent experiences, for prison officers with military experience (hereafter, 'ex-AF'). Results indicate that both sets of staff reported a higher military percentage on joining than at their most recent experience ( $p < .001$ ) (see Table 3).

**Table 3:** Best guesses of military percentage (percentage of immediate colleagues with military experience) according to prior military experience

	Ex-AF staff			Non-ex-AF staff		
	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD
Estimate upon joining	106	2.83	.83	84	3.04	.90
Most recent estimate	107	2.13	.46	84	2.30	.67

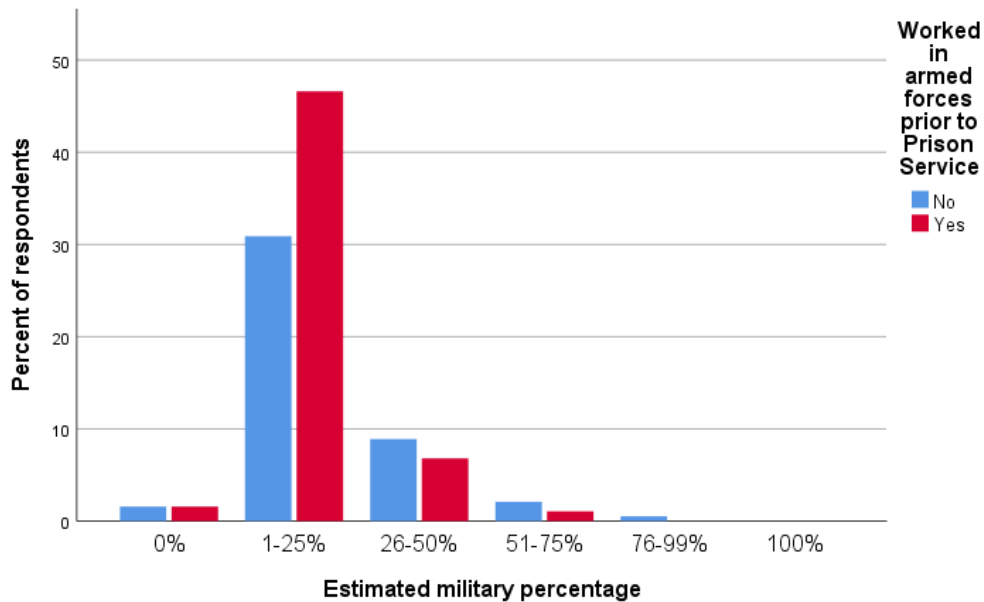
A Mann Whitney  $U$  Test indicated that there was no statistically significant difference in the military percentages reported by ex-AF and non-ex-AF staff, either at the time of joining the prison service  $U(N_{\text{ex-AF}} = 106, N_{\text{non-ex-AF}} = 84)$  ( $p < 0.11$ ) or at their most recent experience of the prison service  $U(N_{\text{ex-AF}} = 107, N_{\text{non-ex-AF}} = 84)$  ( $p < 0.06$ ) (see Figures 5 and 6).

**Clustered Bar Percent of estimates of military percentage at the time of joining the Prison Service by prior military experience**



**Figure 5:** Clustered bar comparing estimates of military percentage from staff with and without prior military experience at the time of joining the Prison Service.

**Clustered Bar Percent of estimates of military percentage at the time of most recent experience within the Prison Service by prior military experience**



**Figure 6:** Clustered bar comparing estimates of military percentage from staff with and without prior military experience at the time of their most recent experience of the Prison Service.



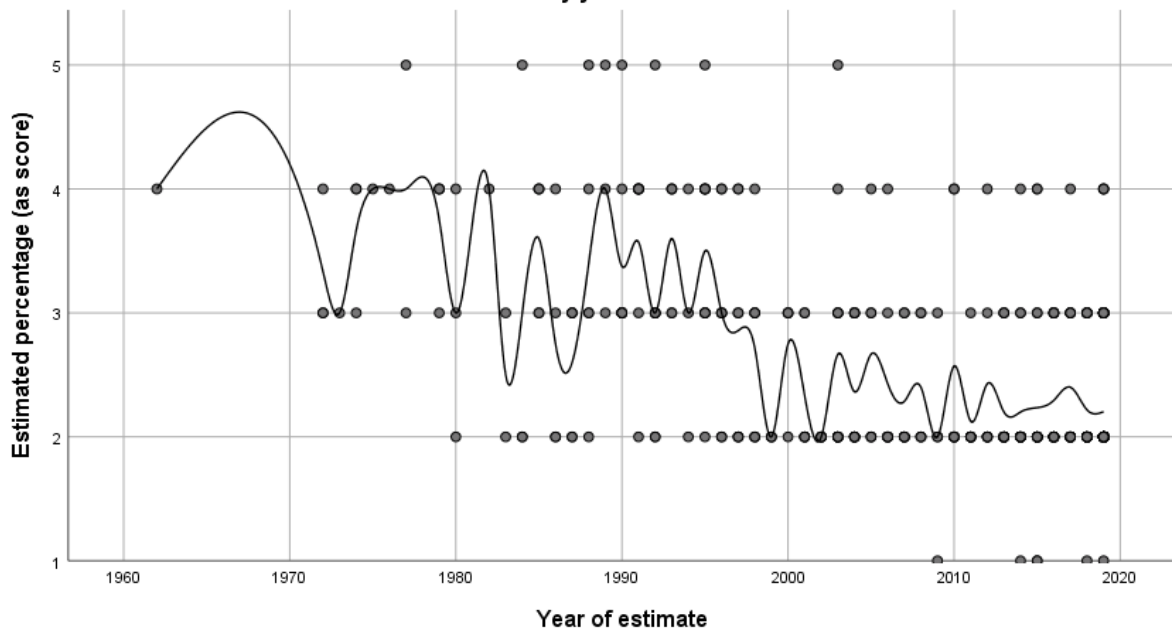
Thus far, analysis has shown that the estimated military percentage has fallen across the prison service careers of surveyed individuals. The only statistically significant difference identified was that former-staff estimates of military percentage when joining were higher than those for current staff, indicating that since former staff had on average joined the prison service earlier than current staff, the military percentage has fallen over time. Otherwise there were no differences in the perceptions of respondents according to their employment status at the time of survey completion (i.e. current or former staff) or to their own history of military service or lack thereof.

Survey respondents will of course have joined the prison service at different times, and in the case of former staff, will have had their most recent experience of (i.e. will have left) the prison service at different times. Therefore, the next step in our analysis is to consider the changes in estimated military percentage across specified timespans, rather than across individuals' careers. Since our foregoing analysis shows a high degree of similarity between the military percentages estimated by current- and former staff, and those with and without military experience, in subsequent analysis we cease to disaggregate the data in this way.

### **Variance by Year**

Our survey asked all respondents to report their year of joining the prison service and asked former staff to report the year when they left. Since all current staff completed the survey in 2019, it was therefore possible to analyse estimates of military percentage at two specific timepoints for all respondents. By combining these variables, it was possible to employ a Spearman's rank-order correlation to determine the relationship between year and estimate of military percentage. Results indicated moderate negative association ( $r_s(379) = -.48, p = <.001$ ). This suggests that best guesses of the military percentage have decreased over time, which is consistent with other tests. A simple scatter with interpolation line illustrates findings thus far, which indicate a general downward trend in military percentage over time (see Figure 7). There are some minor variations – most notably the 1980s saw a fall, followed by a recovery to previous levels. Our dataset does not enable us to further analyse these patterns, but we provide possible explanations based on wider literature in the discussion.

Simple Scatter with interpolation line of estimated percentage of immediate colleagues with military experience by year



**Figure 7:** A simple scatter to illustrate estimated percentage of immediate colleagues with military experience by year.

## Discussion

Bearing in mind the limitations of the dataset, these results indicate that there has been a downward trend in military percentage within the Prison Service of England and Wales. Tests to compare means between first and most recent experiences of respondents demonstrate statistical significance for this decline. Such findings correspond to the decline in employment of former-military users of the 'Career Transition Partnership' as prison officers, consistent across the last three years.

There is some variance in the military percentages reported by former- and current staff. Former prison officers were more likely than current to report a higher percentage of colleagues with a military background at the time of joining. This further supports the notion that the military percentage was higher in the past, but could also be indicative of the effect of retrospective recall. Accordingly, the nature of these data must be kept in mind – they are based on individuals' best guesses and in the case of the comparisons over time, their recollection of situations which could be several decades ago, and this may be compounded for former staff. Nevertheless, the findings indicate some variance, which was explored by further statistical tests and is discussed below.

Consistent with the general findings, when comparing means between participants who did or did not themselves have a military background, results indicated a fall in military

percentage between the two reported timepoints. Prior military experience made no significant difference to the military percentages reported, perhaps suggesting that there is no specific advantage or ‘insider knowledge’ gained from having a military background that enables individuals to identify ex-AF within their immediate colleagues; or that ex-military personnel are likely to tell others about their military background.

Our data enable us to ‘test’ the accuracy of the various unsupported statements already made in published literature about the proportion of the prison workforce that has in the past been drawn from the Armed Forces. Summarising these, we recall the Home Office’s assertion that ‘until the 1950s prison officers were primarily recruited from amongst former armed services personnel’, King’s claim that in the 1960s ex-military personnel were ‘preferred’ recruits (presumably also placing them in the majority) (2013), and that, by the 1980s, they made up ‘the vast majority’ of prison officers (Crawley and Crawley, 2008: 14).

We find that the percentage of prison officers with military experience was at its highest in the 1970s and 1990s (well over 50%), lower in the 1980s and 2000s (26-50%), and had fallen to its lowest level by the 2010s (around 25%). Accordingly, King (2013) was correct in his suggestion that, in the 1960s, the prison workforce was dominated by ex-military personnel – our data suggest that the military percentage at that time was at least 50%. If we assume that those recruited in the 1950s remained in the service into the 1960s, then our data also bear out the Home Office’s statement. Our data is less clear in its alignment to Crawley and Crawley’s (2008) claim that a ‘vast majority’ of prison officers were (still) ex-military in the 1980s; we find that the military percentage dipped below 50% in the 1980s.

Although we cannot determine with any certainty the reasons for these fluctuations, it seems likely that they track the UK’s military history and in particular, patterns of demobilisation of the armed forces. For example, in the UK compulsory National Service only ended in 1960, meaning that most adult men within the workforce at that time would have had military experience. A significant post-World War II military downsizing also saw the UK Armed Forces workforce fall from nearly five million in 1945 (under conscription) to 696,400 by 1950. These facts alone probably explain the predominance of ex-military staff in the 1950s and 1960s.

The fluctuation in military percentage across the 1970s-1990s is also perhaps partially explained by demobilisation. The UK Armed Forces declined from 373,000 in 1970 to 315,000 in 1979 – while our data indicate a peak in military percentage in this decade. The Armed Forces grew to 333,800 on the eve of the 1982 Falklands War – and our data show a corresponding military percentage drop in the 1980s. At the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the Armed Forces numbered 311,600, and the subsequent end of the Cold War and withdrawal of troops from Northern Ireland saw numbers again fall steeply through the 1990s, down by a third to 207,600

by 2000. During the 1990s we accordingly see the military percentage in prisons recover. The Armed Forces have continued gradually downsize in the decades since, reaching 144,430 by 2019. However, perhaps the slower rate of outflow over these twenty years has not resulted in the apparent influxes of ex-military personnel into the prison workforce seen in previous decades. Further and more detailed research into military outflow and destinations of service leavers would be necessary to fully understand these potential parallels.

Defence policy is not, of course, the only explanation for military percentage fluctuation. There was a steep increase in prison population between 1993 and 1998, driven by an increased number of custodial sentences (Ministry of Justice, 2013), which in turn saw increases in prison service spending (Chancellor of the Exchequer, 1998: 68). This, coupled with concurrent military outflow, is likely to have enabled the prison service to provide employment for large numbers of military-leavers in the 1990s. In the 2010s, cuts in prison spending and prison workforces, closure of establishments, and changes to prison officers' pay and pensions (Atkins et al., 2019) probably meant that military-leavers had to look elsewhere for work. It is also possible that shifts in prison policy over these decades, in relation to the relative weight placed upon 'security' and 'order' versus 'rehabilitation' under governments of different political stripes (English and Baxter, 2010; Genders, 2002), *may* have rendered the prison a more- or less- attractive workplace for ex-military personnel, *if* we assume that they might more naturally align with one or other of these imperatives. This assumption *may* bear out the anecdotal claims made in extant literature about the aptitude of ex-military personnel for enforcing 'order' and 'discipline', but these assumed proclivities are as yet unsupported by any empirical data. It is also possible that the appeal for services leavers of joining another uniformed service has simply declined over time. Again, further research would be necessary to explore these issues.

## **Conclusion**

Our analysis indicates that prior claims made about the proportion of the prison workforce that had a military background (the 'military percentage') are only partially accurate. Ex-military personnel seem to have been recruited in large numbers and do appear, as claimed, to have dominated the workforce in the past. However, there is much more nuance and variation in the military percentage over time than these claims suggest. Our data suggest that the military percentage now stands at around 25%. Although its lowest level for some time, this still means that around one in four prison staff may be ex-military – a proportion significant enough to merit further research attention – attention which arguably could not have been attracted before these data were generated. Veterans-in-Custody constitute 7% of the prison population (HMIP, 2014), and whilst we in no way suggest that VICs are not fully deserving of the

considerable research attention they have attracted, this percentage is self-evidently only a fraction of that potentially constituted by ex-military prison officers with their own workforce.

Further research could undoubtedly improve on the dataset presented here. Assuming that the prison service itself does not capture military experience via staff induction questionnaires, and/or make such data available, then wider distribution of the current staff survey would increase proportional representation. Best-guess percentages could also be reported on a sliding scale, rather than in percentage brackets to enable parametric analysis.

In the light of the questionable accuracy of prior assumptions about the military percentage, and the dearth of research into previous employment in general and past military service in particular, we suggest that the prior claims made about the performance of ex-military personnel as prison officers would also bear further scrutiny. Knowing – as far as the limitations of our dataset permit – how many prison officers have are ex-military personnel enables us to pose further, pertinent questions about the significance of military experience for this quarter of the prison workforce (and indeed the three quarters who work alongside them). Were these individuals really unable to ‘carry out the aims of rehabilitation and reform’ or to ‘deal with complex human relationships in which the crude exercise of coercion is not enough’ (Morris and Morris, 1963: 76) in the past; and are they still ‘too inflexible and discipline-oriented to rise to the challenges of the ‘modern’ prison officer role’ (Crawley and Crawley, 2008: 14)? If so, why is this the case, and with what implications for the prison service?

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