

Understanding the Factors; Contributing to Exservicemen's Involvement in Organized Crime

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ABSTRACT

This paper critically analyses the psychological, sociological and skill-based reasons that lead ex-servicemen to take part in an organized crime. Psychologically, this causes post-service adjustment difficulties, including PTSD, depression, hypervigilance, and emotional regulation problems, whereas the Violent Veteran Model postulates that combat trauma leads to aggression, impulsivity, and risk-taking. Self-Medication Hypothesis also describes the way in which certain veterans resort to drugs to overcome trauma, becoming involved in criminal drug networks as a result of it. Isolation and disenfranchisement are aggravated by sociologically by unemployment, weaker family ties, and the disappearance of military comradeship. Social reintegration studies indicate that lack of stable jobs or adjusting to civilian life may force veterans into deviant subcultures which provide identity and economic gain. Being attractive, organized crime groups tend to reflect military hierarchy, discipline, and loyalty. The reasons involve skill-based factors as military training provides veterans with tactical, strategic, and weapon-related skills which can be abused. The findings highlight the importance of interdisciplinary assistance in dealing with both mental health and economic security in addition to identity rebuilding to provide safer reintegration.

Key Words: Veteran Criminality, Organized Crime Recruitment., Military-to-Civilian Transition, Psychological Trauma (PTSD)

INTRODUCTION

Background And Problem Statement

The vision of the unbending, service-oriented military veteran is in constant conflict with the facts on the ground of the victimizations in the criminal justice system. Even though studies have shown that a veteran is not disproportionately in the criminal life than the general population, the nature of their military experiences brings its own risk factors to a particular group, specifically those who turn to organized crime. Organized crime syndicates often need people who have a high level of ability to plan, spy, logistics, fighting ability, technology and discipline in the operations. Such abilities are highly compatible with the capabilities developed during military training and service, which poses a serious concern that former servicemen might become the source of a good hiring option. It has been described in academic literature how combat exposure and systematic training to be a warrior could lead to behavioural predispositions, including hypervigilance, high-order tactical awareness, and risk-taking behaviour, which can then be utilized by criminal groups (Davies and Horgan, 2012). The studies concerning the Violent Veteran Model are also accentuated to the fact that some types of military socialization and exposure to trauma can increase aggressive and impulsive tendencies, which, in the absence of effective reintegration support, can lead to the pathways of serious criminality (Booth et al., 2018).

The factors of psychological vulnerabilities also contribute significantly to the formation of such trajectories. The shift between a military system characterized by strong organization to a civilian one that is unstructured can be characterized by an extreme amount of challenges such as disruption of identity, lack of purpose, and mental health issues. Based on systematic reviews, it has been revealed that post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and other trauma disorders are highly related to the criminal justice involvement of veterans (Tsai and Pietrzak, 2018). The PTSD symptoms, e.g., emotional numbing, irritability, and high arousal, can

affect judgment and predispose to coercion or high-risk behaviour. Moreover, the physiological stress processes, which induced trauma responses, may contribute to the susceptibility to substance use disorders since people need to self-medicate intrusive memories or emotional pain (Koob and Le Moal, 2008). Use of substances, in its turn, can establish indirect access to organized crime by means of drug markets, debts, or belonging to criminal subcultures. Although such conditions are common, most veterans are not able to access adequate mental health care during and after deployment, which leads to unmet clinical needs during reintegration (Hoge et al., 2006).

These are psychological weaknesses that are compounded by sociological factors. Reentry into civilian living is commonly accompanied by a lack of social control, social bond looseness, and a great deal of identity change, all of which can elevate criminogenic factors. Conventional criminology theories indicate that probability of crime increases in the case where people are weakening their ties to pro-social institutions like employment, family, and community (Sampson and Laub, 1990). A lot of ex-servicemen also find it difficult to re-connect with these ties, particularly when they are unemployed or experiencing marital difficulties or lack of social backup. Systematic reviews underline that the process of military to civilian life is often marked by uncertainty and loneliness, as well as a sense of loss of organization, and thus, certain people are more vulnerable to the new network that provides a sense of belonging and identity (MacLean, 2017). Organized crime syndicates tend to follow the patterns of military hierarchy with the strict discipline, hierarchical power, group loyalty, and codes of operation, which provide the feeling of belonging, which can especially attract the veterans who need purpose and unity (Calderoni et al., 2022). Furthermore, as noted in the research, economic instability, social marginalization, and exposure to criminal peers can also be considered as the risk factors of being recruited to the ranks of organized crime—they could be disproportionately applicable to veterans who have not accessed timely and sufficient reintegration support (Comunale et al., 2020).

The attraction of ex-servicemen as attractive recruits can also be explained by skill factors. Criminal groups are in need of people who could perform multi-faceted tasks, control firearms and arrange safe messages and the confidentiality of operations. Training in the military offers knowledge in these fields and those offenders who have mastered these fields are capable of drastically increasing the operating capacity of the organized crime networks (Liddick, 2011). These skills, when monitored by the lack of psychological needs, substance use vulnerability, or disrupted social networks, may, unintentionally, push some of the veterans in to high-level criminal activities. Thus, these overlapping psychological, sociological, and skill-based risk factors need to be comprehended to help in formulating specific intervention and prevention programmes to protect vulnerable veterans and reduce their attractiveness to organized criminal cells.

Research Objectives

This paper aims to:

- Review and synthesize the key individual-level and sociological risk factors associated with veteran criminality.
- Analyze how specialized military skills and organizational esprit de corps can be criminogenically adapted for use by organized crime groups.
- Propose a unified framework for understanding the transition from military service to involvement in organized crime.

Theoretical Frameworks of Veteran Criminality

To answer the question of why a small part of the military veterans enter the criminal justice system, especially into the world of organized crime, it is necessary to analyze theoretical frameworks that discuss the way in which military service combines with psychological, behavioral, and environmental impacts to define the course of crime. Though the majority of veterans successfully reintegrate, some of them have special vulnerabilities associated with trauma, identity disturbance, and transferability of skills. The Violent Veteran Model and the Self-Medication Hypothesis are two of the most well-known criminological theories that can be utilized to explain the reasoning behind veteran criminals, but they have commonly been used to explain general crime.

When used on the topic of organized crime, these frameworks demonstrate channels through which military-learned proficiencies, mental illnesses, and re-integration challenges overlap with the recruitment requirements of organized criminal gangs (OCGs).

The Violent Veteran Model

The Violent Veteran Model is based on the premise that military training, exposure to combat, and conditioning to accept violence, makes soldiers more likely to have violent behavior in the after-service. The authors suggest that the military climate encourages aggression, stifles emotional indecisiveness, and socialises people to utilize violence as an effective instrument (Booth, Segal, and Leard, 2018). The survival of an individual in the battlefield is often based on the ability to act more quickly and decisively with force and to break the moral and psychological boundaries in relation to the possibility of harming others.

Such acquired behaviors include aggression, tactical violence, hyper vigilance and quick threat assessment and they may continue even after service. However, upon coming home, where a structured environment is not present and the previously acquired responses reappear (e.g., unemployment, family conflict), the former can evoke the maladaptive manifestation of the former (Bonta and Andrews, 2017). These instilled fighting patterns in a civilian environment whereby restraint and emotional control are treasured can cause interpersonal friction, impulsiveness, or violent offending.

This model is especially relevant in the environment of organized crime. OCGs are known to demand people who can involve action in enforcement, protection, intimidation, or violence at will. According to Davies and Horgan (2012), the warrior mentality that is developed within a military training fits very well within the operational requirements of criminal groups. Veterans who are used to the systems of hierarchies, where individuals have to obey the authorities and operate in groups may feel comfortable in OCGs and their transfer to them is easier.

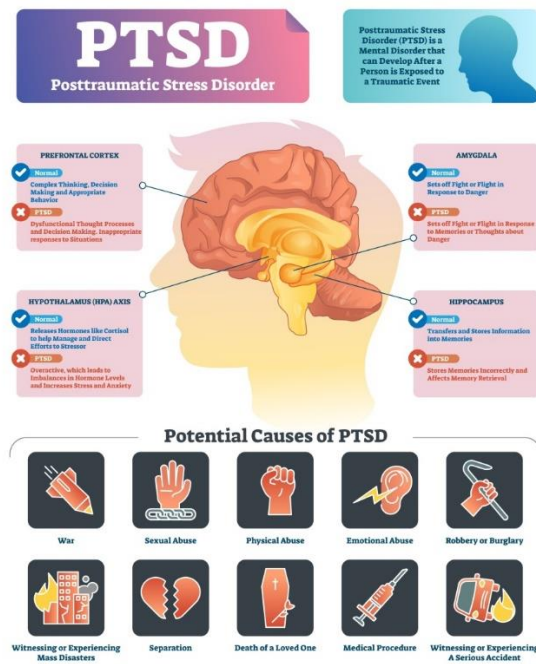
Therefore, although Violent Veteran Model does not profess that veterans are violent in nature, it emphasizes the way behaviors that are conditioned through combat can be channeled into crime-related situations—particularly where they are not able to find satisfaction in their psychological needs or where they are actually in a situation where criminal groups are actively targeting the application of such skills to their benefit.

The Self-Medication Hypothesis

The Self-Medication Hypothesis offers a psychological mechanism that connects military-related trauma and substance use (and then, involvement in crime). Veterans are at high risk of debilitating mental conditions, including PTSD and depression, due to combat exposure, moral injury, Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), and chronic hyperarousal (Hoge et al., 2006; Sloan and Marx, 2018). The signs of these disorders include nightmares, intrusive memories, irritability, emotional detachment, and impulsivity, which may render normal functioning very challenging.

The systematic review by Tsai and Pietrzak (2018) showed a strong correlation between PTSD and criminal justice participation among the veterans of the United States. Most of the veterans resort to alcohol, illegal drugs, or abuse of prescription medications to numb emotional pain or control hyperarousal. According to Koob and Le Moal (2008), addiction and the stress system of the brain interact in such a way that the desire to use substances is fueled by continuous stress of the traumatized veteran on his/her psyche.

Substance use disorders (SUDs) predispose people to engage in criminal activity not only due to criminal possession or consumption but also due to financial imbalance, drug-related debts, and affiliation with criminal distributors. Self-medication becomes an extremely dangerous response to the lack of proper mental health care among veterans or the stigmatization of seeking it, winding up squarely into organized crime circles. The OCGs engaged in the drug trafficking can capitalize on these weaknesses and trade veterans as courier, enforcers or distributors locally in exchange of drugs or income. Hence, the Self-Medication Hypothesis shows the interaction between psychological trauma and addiction and structural weakness in supporting criminal paths in ex-servicemen.



The military discharge into the organized crime is rarely a straight line. Rather, it is a mixture of pre-service adversity, service experiences and post-service challenges that build off each other. Calderoni et al. (2022) and Comunale et al. (2020) stress that the process of OCG recruitment includes the personal vulnerability factors and the environmental ones, most of which are disproportionately felt by vulnerable veterans.

Contributing Factors To Organized Crime Involvement

The pathway to organized crime for ex-servicemen is a confluence of pre-service adversity, service experiences, and post-service challenges.

Sociological And Economic Factors

• Civilian Reintegration problem

It is difficult to manage the transition between the highly rigid structure of the military institution to the comparative lack of control in civilian life. In the military, there is a sense of consistency, brotherhood, hierarchy, and routine, which vanish immediately after leaving the military (MacLean, 2017). According to the theory of social control and social bonds by Sampson and Laub (1990), people develop the tendency to become deviant as they engage in deviance when they develop a lack of meaningful relationships with organized institutions. The change of the disillusionment of the military bubble has been reported by many veterans to be the most destabilizing situation that leads to social isolation and disorientation of identity.

OCGs tend to exploit such weaknesses by means of providing an organized hierarchy, sense of group loyalty, discipline in operations, and economic prospect- circumstance that replicate the military lifestyle. These organizations can offer psychological relief and new sense of meaning to the veterans who are seeking a feeling of belonging or a new family.

• Economic Stress and joblessness

One of the themes in the research on reintegration is the inability to transfer military adaptation to civilian jobs (MacLean, 2017). Veterans are likely to encounter credential mismatch, absence of civilian work experience, or are discriminated against in the labour market. Poor economic conditions, homelessness and debt are highly disincentivizing forces that drive one to engage in risk and reward criminal behavior. According to Bonta and Andrews (2017), finances and unemployment are considered strong criminogenic needs that can provoke

offending. The veterans who belong to disadvantaged socioeconomic groups, most of whom joined the military as an escape out of the poverty, could have those vulnerabilities resurfacing after service.

• Lack of Social Capital

The lack of family support, poor community connections, or stigmatized bad papers discharges mean that veterans have significant obstacles to accessing a home, employment, or benefits. These loopholes provide room to criminal networks to come in and provide revenue and community where legal systems have failed.

Psychological And Behavioral Factors

• Incorrectly Treated Mental Health Problems

Criminal behavior is highly predicted by PTSD, depression, anger dysregulation, and impulsivity (Tsai and Pietrzak, 2018). These symptoms disrupt decision making and make one susceptible to manipulation by OCGs. These risks are further intensified by the Self-Medication pathway since substance abuse only heightens psychological instability and engages more and more with criminal markets.

• Risk-taking and sensation-seeking

It is frequently the case that combat service makes one more tolerant of danger, and predisposed to a craving of intensity, adrenaline, and expedient decisions. Davies and Horgan (2012) note that not all veterans can adjust to the lumbering and monotony of civilian lives, and thus they may require an environment with high-stimulation levels as an alternative. The excitement and mission-focus, which OCG activities bring (armed protection, smuggling, or high stakes trafficking) evoke a feeling of deployment.

The Criminal Utility of Military Skills and Characters

The most notable aspect in the involvement of organized crime is the interchangeability of military resources to crime.

Military / Skill/Ethos	Application of Organized Crime
Tactical Training and Weapons Training	Violent execution, extortion, elaborate security or illegal trafficking of arms
Logistics and Resource Management	Organization and logistics of smuggling (drug, people, goods), distribution
Counter-Surveillance/Intelligence	Avoidance of police, domestic security, espionage of competitors
Cohesion and Hierarchy of the Group	Management positions in the OCG, imposing discipline, group loyalty and security of operations
Cyber Warfare (Specialized) Explosives	Special purpose violence, computer-related crimes, and advanced technological fraud

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Synthesis Of Findings

The interrelationship between the military service and the participation in the organized crime is complex and highly contextual and much more complicated than naive beliefs about the military training giving birth to criminals. As has been shown in the evidence examined in the course of this paper, criminality is never the most commonly used way to explain the involvement of military service; on the contrary, it is many times a protective

element as it introduces a sense of discipline, the feeling of responsibility, a strong social structure, and a pro-social identity. Those few ex-servicemen who do actually get involved in organized crime are usually a result of a combination of vulnerabilities that existed before the service, psychological injuries to be gained during the service, and systemic failures afterwards.

One of the key themes that come out of the analysis is that ex-servicemen face push factors leading away to a stable life in civilian life and at the same time pull factors that lead to criminal networks. Push factors consist of untreated mental anguish i.e., PTSD, depression, hypervigilance and unresolved moral injury; these factors reduce the ability to regulate emotions and make decisions. This is compounded by financial instability, unemployment, lack of homes, and the abrupt deprivation of the organized structure of the military a phenomenon that has been extensively recorded in veteran transition studies.

Conversely, the pull factors entail the criminal utility nature of the military-learned competencies. Veterans can have tactical knowledge, gun handling skills, high level of logistics and ability to work in a high risk and high pressure situation. Organized crime syndicates are in active search of people who can offer operational security, spying, or violence in general. Several criminological studies have observed this skilling attraction effect when seeking to understand the similarity between militaristic identity and the structured hierarchy of organized crime organizations.

The loss of belonging is also a crucial factor since many veterans lose it upon discharge. The military offers a sense of identity, one of a small and close community, strong roles and purpose. Some people go seeking alternative structures when this is abruptly taken away. Organized crime syndicates tend to imitate the structure of the military, its spirit of camaraderie and military culture of weapons and mission, and, either consciously or subconsciously, they generate a setting that is familiar. In the case of vulnerable veterans, the joining of such groups might not be that much of a criminal activity as compared to entering a new unit especially in the absence of legitimate social support systems.

The contribution of addiction, as proposed by the Self-Medication Hypothesis, is also mentioned in this paper. Veterans who cannot cope with psychological pain and lack sufficient therapeutic support can resort to drugs, which will create a dependence cycle and result in financial limitations and involvement into criminal organizations that provide access to drugs or provide employment opportunities. Such circumstances provide an excellent platform upon which organized criminal groups feed off of, often choosing those who are desperate as well as those with specialized talents.

Combined, the results highlight that the participation of ex-servicemen in organized crime is not a by-product of the military culture, but it is a tragic event that comes out of the combination of personal vulnerabilities, structural collapses, and criminal opportunities. This makes it essential to have more interdisciplinary intervention plans which consider mental health, identity reconstruction, economic empowerment as well as social reintegration. Otherwise, the same strengths that have been formed in military service discipline, loyalty, and operational competence may be channeled into criminal activities not because of some inherent deviance but because of unmet needs and neglect of the system.

Recommendations For Intervention And Future Research

Considering the intricacy of the interventions that make veterans vulnerable to organized crime, interventions need to be comprehensive, prescriptive, and targeted at the particularities of post-service populations. There is no one-size-fits-all solution to the problem as it needs to be an integrated model that would consider psychologically, socially, and economically at the same time.

To ensure that ex-servicemen are not involved in organized crime a broad approach to reducing their participation in it would involve mental health assistance, reintegration efforts, enhanced social network, and active preventive action. First, the common, secret, and embarrassment-free mental health screening must commence at the time of service and proceed during the transition stage, with a powerful focus on diagnosing and treating PTSD, TBI, depression, moral injury, and drug use disorders using evidence-based therapies, peer support, and combined addiction-mental health care. To avoid the development of the trauma into self-

medication and exposure to criminal exploitation, early intervention is necessary. Also vital are specific reintegration and job programs reducing military skills into civilian skill levels by credential recognition, connecting military and civilian employers, training pipelines, entrepreneurial support, and transitional jobs to high-risk veterans. Majority of stable and meaningful work decreases financial strain, improves social attachments, and decreases vulnerability to incarceration into offenses. In line with this, reinforcing the social support networks by veteran-to-veteran mentoring, peer-deliberated groups, family counseling and community engagement programs aid in creating a sense of belonging and identity, waning the temptation of organized crime groups, which imitate military camaraderie and order. The criminal exploitation prevention mechanisms should also be adopted by governments to detect veterans at increased risk especially those who are homeless, those with an addiction, or social isolation and intervene before the criminal networks become influential. Lastly, longitudinal research should be given priority in the future in order to understand cause and effect relationships involving deployment experiences, discharge types, mental health struggles, and involvement in crime among the veterans. The researchers will also need to analyze the particular roles played by veterans in organized crime (enforcement, logistics or cyber activity) and make cross-national comparisons on how varying support systems provided to veterans affect vulnerability. All these actions together give an integrated roadmap on how to lessen the risk, aiding in needy veterans, and reducing the structural and psychological means through which organized crime is recruited.

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