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Desperate Choices: Why Black Women Join the U.S. Military at Higher Rates than Men and All Other Racial and Ethnic Groups

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The enlistment of black women in the U.S. military has been a persistent and growing demographic trend over the past three decades. Black women now constitute nearly one-third of all women in the U.S. military. At around 30 percent, this number is twice their representation in the civilian population and higher than that of men or women of any other racial or ethnic group. This article analyzes the changing economic, social, and political landscape in the United States to identify what has motivated this cohort to enlist at such high rates. Based on this analysis, a case can be made that welfare reform, compounded by the already dramatic rise in female-headed households and the financial crisis of 2008, have perpetuated high enlistment for black women as their reliance on the military for support has increased. This article identifies the special needs of this group and suggests policy initiatives that take full advantage of the social engineering opportunities in the military. Recommendations are made about ways to help these women reach their full potential during their service and as they transition back into civilian life.

Despite the long list of military contributions by black women, their participation in the U.S. military has received limited attention.¹ Black women now constitute nearly one-third of all women in the U.S. armed forces. This figure represents a higher enlistment rate than that of men or women of any other racial or ethnic background.² Demographic data collected by the U.S. Department of Defense in a 2010 summary report reveal that while black women represented 31 percent of the 167,000 enlisted military women, this number was twice their percentage in the U.S. civilian population. Although white women made up 53 percent of women in the military at the time, this representation is considerably low given their civilian composition of 78 percent (Figure 1). Furthermore, the enlistment rate of black women is even higher than that of black men, whose military representation is roughly equal to their proportion in the civilian population.³

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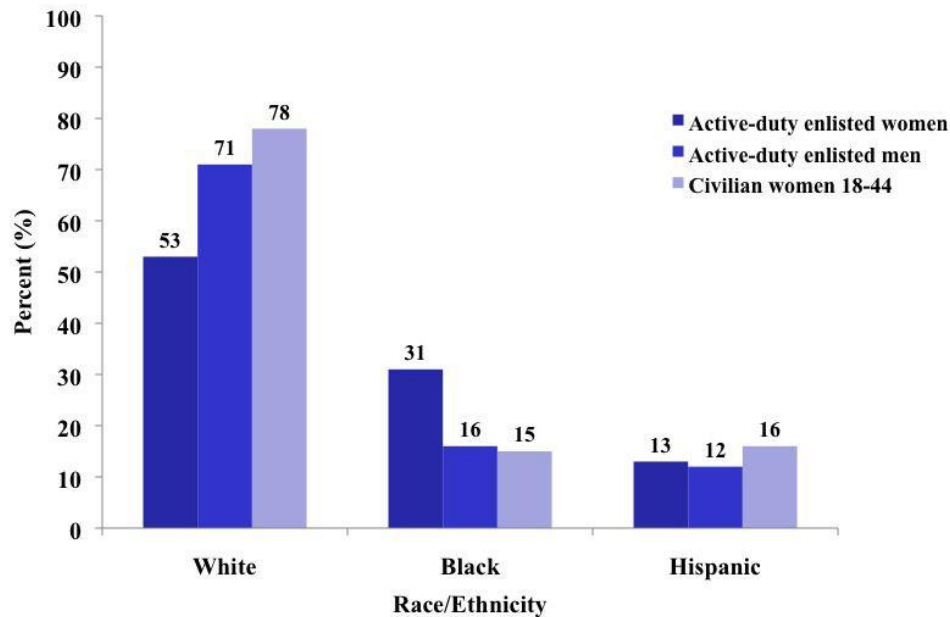


Figure 1. Percentage of active-duty men and women in the U.S. military by race and ethnicity (Department of Defense, *Population Representation in the Military FY2010*)

The enlistment rate of black women began to accelerate in the early 1980s. By 1988 the rate of enlistment by black women was more than triple that of white or Hispanic women, and by the late 1980s and into the early 2000s, black women's enlistment rates significantly outpaced even those of black men.⁴ The impressive enlistment rates of black women in the military did not receive significant mainstream attention, however, until almost twenty years later, when in 2011 a Pew Research report followed by a breaking story in the *New York Times* highlighted the fact that black women were enlisting at remarkably higher rates in the U.S. military.⁵

There has long been speculation that the military actively targets and recruits black women, who are drawn by the prospects of job training, excellent benefits, and financial support to pay college tuition.⁶ Since these perks should be attractive to men and women of all ethnic and racial groups, why are black women so disproportionately represented above all others? This question has received limited academic and political attention.

Joining the military is one of the toughest decisions for a citizen to make because of the extensive self-sacrifice and personal risk involved. Many blacks come from families with a long tradition of service and choose to enlist because of a sense of honor and duty.⁷ But unless one can make the claim that black women tend to be braver and more patriotic than men or any other racial and ethnic group, one must look at other social and economic factors that contribute to the higher representation of black women in the military and drive the decision for many in this cohort to enlist.

Eligibility Factors

The combination of high dropout and high incarceration rates for black males could mean they provide a lower eligibility pool for enlistment, contributing to the skewed population toward black female recruits. Black women are much more likely to graduate from high school than black men. In 2001, the national graduation rate of black females was 56.2 percent compared with 42.8 percent for black males. Although the graduation rate of black females was below the national average (by 11.8 percent), black females were still out graduating black males by an alarming 13.4 percent.⁸ More recent data shows an improvement in the national high school graduation rates for black males to 59 percent in 2012–13, though they still lag behind black females.⁹ The achievement gap between black men and black women extends into higher education as well. A Pew Research analysis of U.S. Census Bureau data shows that women, especially black and Hispanic women, continue to outpace men in college enrollment.¹⁰

High school dropouts are almost always ineligible for military service and therefore recruited only when the enlistment quota cannot be reached without lowering standards.¹¹ Furthermore, since the eligibility for blacks is determined largely at the level of high school graduation, a greater percentage of black female applicants may stand a better chance of accession because of the increased likelihood they will have a high school diploma.¹²

A correlation has been made between the disproportionate failure of black men in the country's educational system and their overrepresentation in the criminal justice system.¹³ Since black women are much less likely to have criminal records than black men, they face fewer hurdles to enlist. Recruits with criminal records and past bad behavior must always obtain a waiver to join the armed services. The waiver requirement also includes those arrested as juveniles for minor fights or theft, even if they were never convicted of a crime. According to a 2008 article in *Navy Times*, the process of obtaining a waiver can be quite lengthy, requiring health screenings and physician referrals, testimonials from neighbors and relatives about past behavior, and other documentation.¹⁴ Since black men are more likely to have criminal records than black women, the waiver process may be a further barrier for black men to enlist, particularly in a bad economy, when the military can be more selective.¹⁵

The Wealth Gap

Attitudinal findings by Pew Research suggest socioeconomics play a significant role in black women's decisions to enlist. Their survey of 1,853 military veterans from 2011, including 712 post 9/11 veterans (135 of whom were women and 562 of whom were men), asked the veterans why they had decided to enlist. Post 9/11 male and female veterans gave remarkably similar reasons in similar proportions, including service to their country, educational benefits, and learning skills for civilian jobs. The key difference between male and female responses was that 42 percent of the women gave the reason that jobs are hard to find compared with only 25 percent of the men.¹⁶

Today's gender-wealth gap is alarmingly high for women of all races. But factors of race compound the issues of gender, and black women experience far greater wealth disadvantages than do men of color or white women. A 2010 report released by the Insight Center for Community and Economic Development found that nearly half of all

single black and Hispanic women have zero or negative wealth—double the percentage of their white counterparts (Figure 2) and that black mothers with children of any age have less than 1 percent of the wealth of white mothers. Black fathers, in contrast, still fare considerably better than black mothers, possessing 33 percent as much wealth as white fathers (Table 1). Furthermore, black women on average inherit less wealth than white women, which means they have fewer opportunities to use that wealth for themselves and their children to access education, capital for entrepreneurship, and opportunities to build more wealth.¹⁷

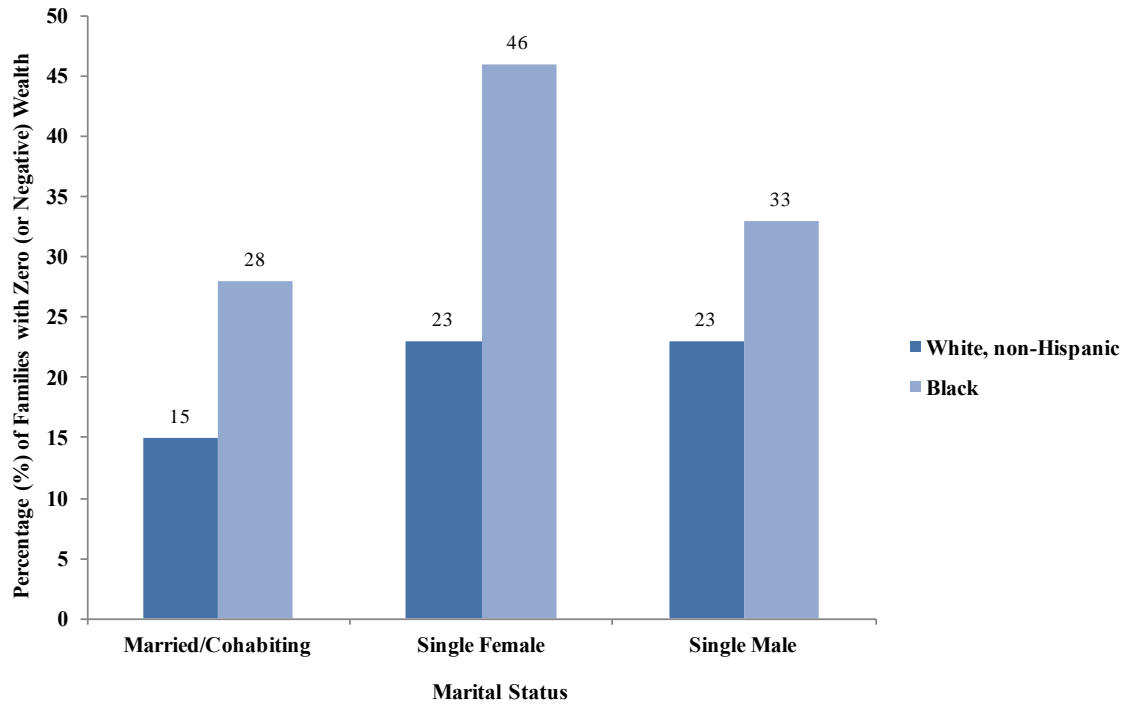


Figure 2. Percentage of households with zero (or negative) wealth, ages 18–64 (2007) (based on data from the 2007 Survey of Consumer Finances as reported in Mariko Lin Chang and Lui Meizhu, *Lifting as We Climb: Women of Color, Wealth, and America's Future* [Oakland, CA: Insight Center for Community Economic Development, 2010])

Table 1. Differences in Median Wealth for Black and White Single Men and Women with Children (2007).

	Have children of any age	Have children under age 18
Black men	\$26,000	\$10,960
Black women	\$100	\$0
Gender gap	\$25,900	\$10,960
Gender ratio	0.4%	0
White men	\$79,940	\$56,100
White women	\$45,400	\$7,970

Gender gap	\$34,540	\$48,130
Gender ratio	57%	14%

Source: 2007 Survey of Consumer Finances as reported in Chang and Meizhu, *Lifting as We Climb*.

Income disparities are often ameliorated in a two-income household because couples have the ability to pool resources. Because black women are less likely to marry or remain married than white women, many are left dealing with severe economic hardship alone.¹⁸ A dramatic rise in female-headed households occurred between 1960 and 1985, with black women heading more than half of all black families by the late 1980s.¹⁹ In 2002, black military women were more than twice as likely to be single parents than were white military women (24 percent versus 10 percent) (Figure 3). Over the past two decades, the military has grown to reflect a family makeup similar to that of black civilian families. A contributing factor to the greater dependency of black women on the military for employment may be their higher likelihood of being single parents.²⁰

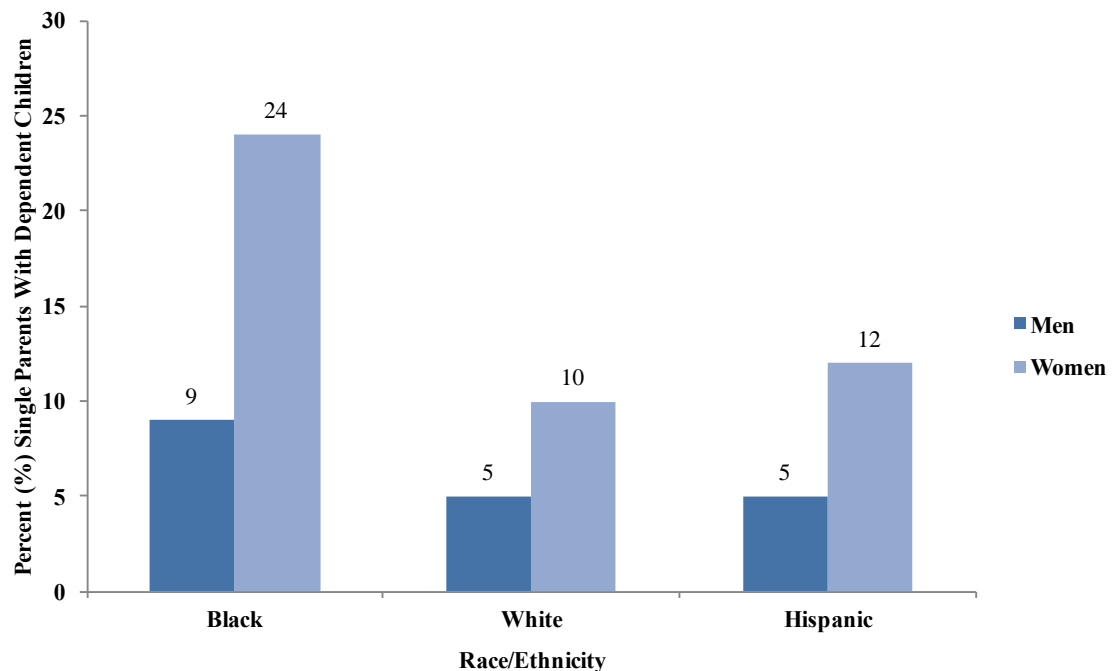


Figure 3. Percentage of unmarried military personnel with dependent children by gender and race and ethnicity (2002) (data from Defense Manpower Data Center, December 2002, and David R. Segal, and Mady Wechsler Segal, “America’s Military Population,” *Population Bulletin* 59, no. 4 [2004])

The 2008 Financial Crisis

Following the September 11 terrorist attacks and the start of the Iraq war, enlistment rates declined from 20 percent to about 15 percent among black recruits—a record drop to the same level that blacks were enlisting in the military during the first year of the

all-volunteer force.²¹ Military analysts, Pentagon surveys, and interviews with young black Americans all pointed to the unpopular Iraq war as the primary explanation for the sharp decline. A CBS news poll conducted in 2005 showed that 83 percent of black American respondents felt the Iraq invasion was a mistake.²² But just two years after the 2008 financial crisis, military enlistment for blacks spiked again.

Pew Research Center analyzed U.S. Census data from 2009 and noted that the bursting of the housing market bubble in 2006 compounded by the recession from late 2007 to mid-2009 took a far greater toll on the wealth of minorities than that of whites. Between 2005 and 2009, inflation-adjusted median wealth dropped by 53 percent among black households and 66 percent among Hispanic households, compared with just 16 percent among white families.²³

During this time the military had begun an aggressive marketing campaign targeting blacks following a congressional mandate in 2007 to increase the army's forces by about 65,000 troops within five years.²⁴ Because blacks historically have viewed military pay as more attractive than have other racial groups, the increased benefits and cash incentives helped to draw in new recruits among blacks.²⁵ The army also highlighted its access to college tuition money and loosened age and physical fitness standards.

It is significant to note that while non-prior service (NPS) accessions spiked 1.9 percent for black men, it rose almost twice as much for black women (3.06 percent) (Figures 4 and 5). At first it does not make sense that enlistment trends would pick up at a much faster pace for black women than for black men as a result of the recession (December 2007 to June 2009), since black men lost more jobs than black women. Unemployment reached a staggering 17.3 percent for black men in 2010—compared with “only” 12.8 percent for black women.²⁶

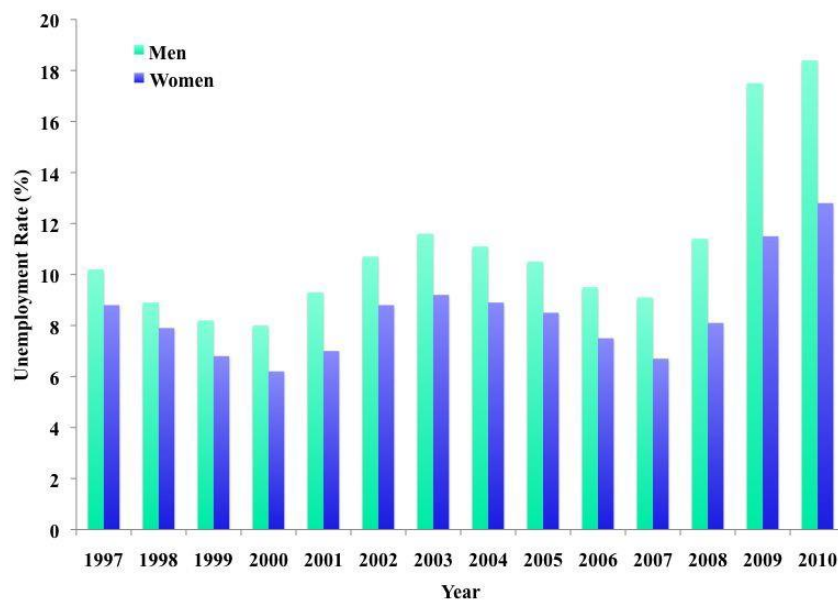


Figure 4. Unemployment rates of black men and women, ages 20+ (1997–2010)
(U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics)

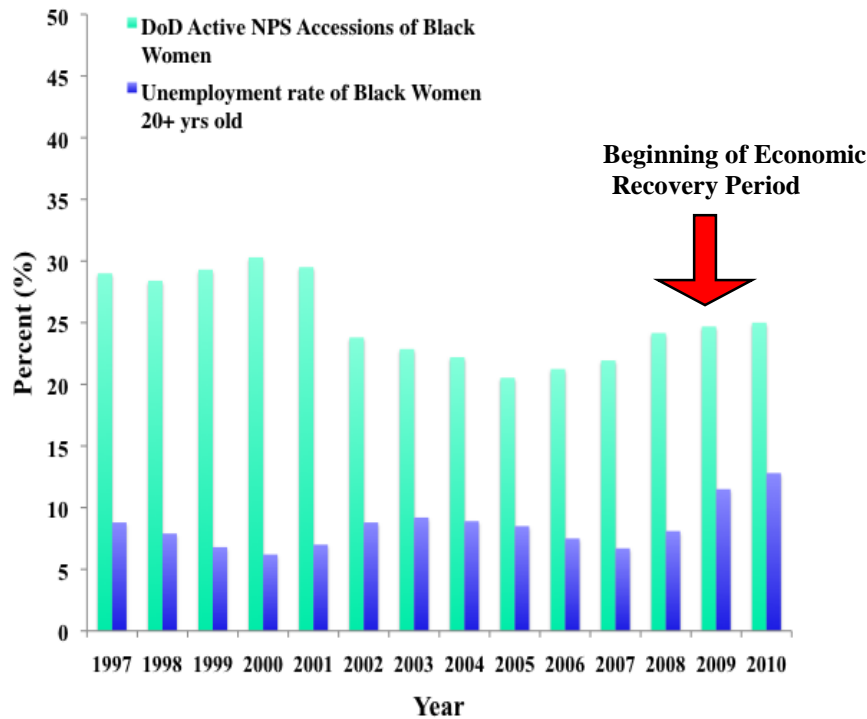


Figure 5. Unemployment rates and U.S. Department of Defense Active NPS accessions of black women, age 20+ (1997–2010) (U.S. Department of Defense, *Population Representation in the Military Forces, FY1997–20FY2010*; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics)

Since black women, however, continued to lose jobs after the recession officially ended, by June 2011 they ultimately lost more jobs (491,000) than black men (477,000).²⁷ In 2013, several years after the recession, black female enlistment dropped to 27.3 percent, presumably because of a recovering economy.²⁸ Just as Moore suggested in 1991, black women still seem more likely than any other comparison group to depend on the military for employment. For decades black women have seen the military as providing greater opportunities and benefits than the civilian labor market, consequently enlisting at higher rates during times of financial difficulty.²⁹

Welfare Reform

It is important to look beyond just eligibility differences and the wealth gap to fully understand why black women are overrepresented in the armed forces and more likely than other groups to rely on the military for employment. It seems counterintuitive that black women, who are more than twice as likely as white women and two-and-a-half times as likely as black men to be single parents with dependent children, would find the military a more attractive option than the civilian job market.

A relatively unrecognized factor is the highly controversial Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PWORA). In 1996 this law eliminated Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC)—an entitlement for eligible families—and replaced it with Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF). Under TANF, states were allocated block-grant funding to oversee the program. Most recipients were limited to five years of assistance over a lifetime and required to work “as a condition of benefits.” Under the new program, mothers with children as young as three months could be denied cash aid if they did not work. States could deny aid to families and children for a variety of reasons.³⁰

According to calculations by the Children’s Defense Fund, the number of black children living in extreme poverty shot up from 729,000 to nearly 1 million between 1996 and 2001. When low-income women did find employment, jobs tended to be low wage in industries with high turnover rates. Few of these women had access to the maternity and other health benefits that were becoming increasingly available to white non-Hispanic women (mostly college educated) with flexible employer programs.³¹

Education and training were now being discouraged for those on welfare. Under the former AFDC, welfare recipients were able to participate in education, training, and work activities but were not necessarily required to do so in exchange for their cash grant. TANF, in contrast, required that clients work in exchange for time-limited assistance. When TANF was first implemented, many women who were in school full-time and receiving support under the old system were forced to give up school in order to work and meet the expectations of the new welfare system.³² A report produced from the proceedings of the National Urban League estimated that state policies accounted for a 13 percent drop on average in the probability that welfare recipients would enroll in college relative to other poor women who were not on welfare after the implementation of TANF.³³ This decline particularly affected black welfare recipients who resided in states with strict “work first” TANF programs. In addition to being ill prepared for the job market, black women on welfare further struggle to support their families on the current minimum wage. Nearly 15 percent of all women who earned minimum wage in 2011 were black.³⁴

Congressmen and analysts have failed to draw connections between welfare reform and the overrepresentation of black women in the military. By 2003, as Congress continued to reduce welfare entitlements even after the economic setbacks following 9/11, black women—who were only 13 percent of the total female population at that time—constituted 35 percent of all women in the armed services. White women, who constituted 71 percent of the total female population, made up less than half of the military’s women by comparison.³⁵

Another indication that black women enlist when they lack safety nets is the number of black children left in the custody of their grandmothers as jobs, childcare assistance, and educational opportunities dwindle in the civilian sector. Over half of grandmother-led families are black and the majority live in poverty.³⁶ The exorbitantly high number of young black single women and mothers unable to achieve self-sufficiency or educational training through welfare and the low-wage labor market indicates that the civilian sector is not offering disadvantaged women what they need to meet their goals and financial responsibilities. High military enlistment appears to be just one of the many byproducts of this unfortunate reality.

Meeting Expectations

For many years, national recruitment trends have shown that the military is often an attractive option for those who are underprivileged.³⁷ The U.S. Armed Forces have taken advantage of this perception and have pitched their mass media marketing to the economically disadvantaged. The question remains, to what extent does the U.S. military fulfill their promises of greater opportunity and long-term economic security for enlisted black women? The answer is mixed.

The majority of post 9/11 female veterans report feeling that their military experience benefited them in job preparedness as well as in self-development and building self-confidence.³⁸ A study conducted by Jennifer Hickey Lundquist on ethnic and gender satisfaction in the military using data from the Pentagon's 1999 Survey of Active Duty Personnel (SADP) found that black women received more equal pay and job benefits in the military than in the civilian labor market and reported higher satisfaction levels than other groups. Black women, who are more likely to be single parents, also reported greater satisfaction with family benefits. All women and minorities reported having used tuition assistance at higher levels than white men. Blacks were also more likely than white men to give a high rating to the benefits of neighborhood safety and housing higher, suggesting that military relocation at the time of enlistment can provide refuge from racially segregated inner-city neighborhoods and school districts.³⁹

Black women, however, are more heavily concentrated in administrative and support areas of the military rather than technical areas, raising concerns about their preparedness for occupations following military service.⁴⁰ Although black women are now better represented among those holding officer positions than both white women and black men, there are still barriers to crucial combat experience for those officers seeking top leadership positions in the military.⁴¹

Even more troubling is the increasing number of reported sexual assaults affecting both white and nonwhite female service members since the Department of Defense began tracking these statistics in 2006. In 2009, the Pentagon reported that over 2,900 sexual assaults occurred in 2008, a 9 percent increase from the previous year. Sexual assaults rose to 3,230 the following year, representing an additional 11 percent rise overall that included a 33 percent increase in war zones. The numbers continue to rise each year, and in 2014, there were 4,768 reports made by service member victims, representing a 16 percent increase since 2013.⁴²

The number of reported sexual assaults does not include those women too frightened to come forward and report them.⁴³ There have also been a number of noncombat-related deaths and alleged suicides of female soldiers, raising suspicions that the Department of Defense has in the past covered up military sexual trauma (MST). Many families of victims question whether their daughters' suicides and accidental deaths were actually rapes and murders.⁴⁴ It is important to note that as the military and the general public develop a greater awareness of this problem, the increasing number of reported sexual assaults may represent a reporting bias rather than an actual increase in assaults.

Once they have left the military, female veterans have not only the same stresses as male veterans but also gender-specific stresses that make them more susceptible to homelessness.⁴⁵ Pew Research found that 42 percent of post 9/11 veterans have had difficulty readjusting to civilian life or have felt they have suffered from post-traumatic

stress.⁴⁶ According to the U.S. Government Accountability Office, the population of homeless female veterans more than doubled, from 1,380 to 3,328, between fiscal years 2006 and 2010. Many of these women were victims of MST while serving and now suffer from post-traumatic stress and often substance abuse, as well. The unemployment rate among post 9/11 female veterans was 12.4 percent in 2011, slightly higher than that of male veterans.⁴⁷

Neither the Department of Veterans Affairs nor the Department of Housing and Urban Development collects enough detailed information about these women to know whether black women are disproportionately represented among homeless female veterans.⁴⁸ The data collected thus far, however, seems to fit the demographic of many black female veterans, with nearly two-thirds between the ages of forty and fifty-nine, and many being single mothers with young children who are struggling to find housing.⁴⁹ Shelters often lack safety standards and put these women at risk of sexual assault. Some shelters even discriminate against homeless mothers by limiting the age or number of children they can live with. Female veterans still lack the social services they need despite an ambitious five-year plan that was initiated to end homelessness among veterans by 2015.⁵⁰

Implications for Military Policy

Incubator Programs

This analysis suggests a need for new and innovative military policies and programs that will keep the military an employer of choice for black women even as the economy improves. Although some may feel the military's role is only to protect our citizens and not to be an instrument of social change, the overconcentration of black women in lower-skilled support positions is a major disservice to these women and the entire military community. Assigning black women disproportionately to these areas prevents them from reaching their full potential and deprives the military of talent. Since black women now represent nearly one-third of all women in the armed forces, there should be a higher percentage of black female officers in top leadership positions across the armed services. A system must be implemented that prioritizes the promotion of black female officers to top leadership positions to align with the Department of Defense's Military Equal Opportunity policy.

Since changes to the current Welfare Reform Act seem politically unlikely, Congress should at least redirect some of the money saved to fund an incubator program in the military that would integrate black women into more challenging and influential positions. Special training and orientation programs to work on personal and professional development to boost motivation, self-esteem, and confidence should be offered to women of color before and during their military service. Workshops on preparing resumes, networking, and other skills related to career success beyond the military should be offered to those transitioning back into civilian life. Such a program could become a larger support and alumnae network for black military women to encourage networking throughout their military service and later on in their civilian careers. One would hope that this type of program that supports the military and promises to increase the supply of better skilled workers to the business community would receive bipartisan approval and funding.

A highly successful prototype for this program is already being offered to Ethiopian Israelis in the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF). Although Ethiopian Israelis have served in the IDF for decades, many were not reaching their full potential outside the military, working mainly in support positions, for example, as cooks or drivers. The Amir mentoring program was set up to boost motivation and help Ethiopian Israelis move into high-quality positions, such as elite units or the officer corps. The program is also considered an investment in the future quality of life of its participants by providing these soldiers with the personal and professional skills to pursue a university degree, build careers, and integrate into civilian institutions. Studies have shown Amir to be a great success, with over 40 percent of the soldiers who complete Amir continuing to serve in high-quality roles compared with 23.3 percent of the soldiers in the control group. The soldiers that took part in Amir also reported higher levels of confidence, self-esteem, and ability to withstand greater pressure.⁵¹

Sexual Assault

Because of increased negative media publicity and social awareness that MST is a significant issue, politicians and government officials are making greater efforts to address and prevent sexual assault. There has been an increase in funding and resources for training and counseling services. The reporting for cases of sexual assault has gone up as military commanders are being given the tools to fight these crimes and the victims are being given adequate legal representation. But MST is still underreported and more can be done to help eliminate MST entirely from the armed forces.⁵² The Pentagon needs to ensure that the military justice system protects women and men who come forward as victims of sexual assault and takes action to prosecute their attackers. A zero-tolerance policy should be instituted throughout the military, meaning that if a service member is found guilty of rape, sexual assault, or even certain forms of sexual harassment, he or she will be issued a dishonorable discharge. The pressure and awareness on this issue must be maintained. Not only should there be mandatory annual training for staff officers and counselors who deal with sexual assault and rape victims, but also every single service member should be required to take a full course on sexual assault prevention and be educated on the repercussions for violating a fellow soldier.

Counseling and Life Coaching

Black military women returning home from service are frequently single parents with few resources. It is likely that many of these women will face difficult transitions back into civilian life and will grapple with such issues as homelessness, post-traumatic stress, substance abuse, and unemployment. To ensure that these women receive the necessary support required to take care of themselves and their children, the government should offer programs or collaborate with community nonprofits to help female veterans stay in their homes or find alternate forms of housing that are safe, comfortable, and convenient. Congress should invest in these women and approve funding for unlimited counseling services for military women suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder and for continuation of education, training programs, and career and life coaching for a minimum of five years following military service.

Conclusion

The data suggests that many black women are attracted to the military because they have few economic opportunities in the civilian labor market and lack an adequate social safety net. It is not clear whether the military effectively helps disadvantaged black women reach social and economic mobility. Black women in the military often report higher levels of satisfaction than their peers in the civilian labor force. But the absence of financial and psychological support and limited employment options when they return home from active duty are major causes for concern. The U.S. military has an opportunity to be a truly “antipoverty” and “equal opportunity” program for women from disadvantaged backgrounds. Through adequate congressional funding and smart policy changes, the military is in a unique position to protect our citizens and be a force for positive social change.

Acknowledgments

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