

Veterans' Unanticipated Medical Retirement and Transition to Civilian Life: A Systematic Review of the Literature

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ABSTRACT: Despite the literature exploring the impact of veterans' unanticipated medical retirement on transition to civilian life, there was a lack of systematic review of this literature among veterans. The present systematic review of literature examined the impact of veterans' UMR on transition to civilian life. Based on the implementation of a search strategy developed on the basis of six criteria for inclusion in alignment with the research phenomenon, the researcher selected 15 studies for the systematic review. Synthesis of the included studies revealed three major themes on the impact of veterans' UMR on transition to civilian life, namely transition challenges (with two sub-themes of female veterans and identity), employment experience, and sources of support. The findings of the review expand the current body of literature in the field of veterans' rehabilitation through a synthesis of the findings from recent literature. Additionally, implications for practice were provided, including included the need to address the discrimination experienced by veterans during their search for work after UMR and the alienation experienced by female veterans due to sexual trauma. Recommendations for future researchers included narrowing the scope of systematic reviews on the transition experiences of veterans after UMR to enable meta-analysis and conducting a systematic review on the transition experiences of only female veterans following UMR to highlight further their unique requirements.

KEYWORDS: Veterans; Systematic Review; Transition; Reintegration; Unanticipated Medical Retirement.

I. INTRODUCTION

Military to civilian transition is an important moment in the lives of veterans (Blackburn, 2016). Research findings suggest that veterans experience significant disruptions to their general well-being during the transition experience (Sahlstein Parcell & Baker, 2018; Williams, Allen-Collinson, Hockey, & Evans, 2018). Simmelink (2004) noted that individuals undergoing occupational transition might mourn not only their previous financial conditions and lifestyle, but also the loss of identity with their work. Reintegration into civilian life can be difficult for veterans because of the need for an overhaul of many aspect of their lives (Flournoy, 2014). Obtaining employment and adequate support have been found to be some of the major challenges experienced by veterans (Flournoy, 2014). Specifically, lack of continuous adequate support from the Department of Veterans Affairs has been found to be a challenge experienced by veterans (Flournoy, 2014). Veterans from Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), and Operation New Dawn (OND) have returned with invisible injuries, such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), mild traumatic brain injury, and depression (Eisen et al., 2012). Among deployed soldiers, those with Combat Arms Military Occupation Specialty (MOS) were substantially and significantly more likely to receive medical disability retirement than were other MOS and were more likely to be assessed for conditions compatible with combat exposures, including PTSD, residuals of traumatic brain injury, and paralysis (Gubata et al., 2013). Transitioning when the veterans are seriously wounded, emotionally distressed, and psychologically exhausted can further complicate the passage of transition to civilian life (Brown, 2008). Individual environments, culture, socioeconomic status, and other factors can differently influence life transitions (Hepworth, Rooney, Rooney, Gottfried, & Larson, 2006). Although researchers have examined the impact of veterans' unanticipated medical retirement (UMR) on transition to civilian life, there is a lack of systematic reviews of this literature.

Research Problem: Despite the literature exploring the impact of veterans' unanticipated medical retirement on transition to civilian life, there is at present a lack of systematic review of this literature among veterans. Conducting a systematic review of the literature on the impact of veterans' UMR on transition to civilian life could help synthesize findings from the existing literature that could be used to inform military communities and public organizations regarding transitional issues experienced by veterans due to UMR.

Purpose of the Systematic Review: The purpose of the current systematic review was to address a gap in the literature on the impact of veterans' unanticipated medical retirement on transition to civilian life through a systematic review of literature that has been published since 2017. Through a synthesis of the recent findings on the impact of veterans' UMR on transition to civilian life, the aim of the current systematic literature review is help inform military communities and public organizations regarding transitional issues experienced by veterans due to UMR. Based on the findings, the following research question was developed to guide the current systematic review of literature: What themes can be recognized from the recent literature on the impact of veterans' unanticipated medical retirement on transition to civilian life?

II. MATERIALS AND METHODS

Search Strategy : In order to conduct search for literature to be included in the current systematic literature, a search was conducted. The search strategy for conducting the search was formed and implemented across databases such as JSTOR, ScienceDirect, ERIC, and PubMed. The search strategy required the studies that would be included to be recent. Thus, the databases were searched for content between January 2017 and March 2019. Additional criteria for inclusion included the studies to be in English and be peer-reviewed. Due to this reason, reports and books were excluded, along with publications not in English. In alignment with the purpose, it was necessary that the sample of the studies included veterans. Studies that failed to satisfy this criterion were also excluded. Additionally, literature reviews were not included, since the current study was a literature review itself. Finally, it was important to ensure the studies explored the phenomenon of interest. In order to identify the relevant literature, a number of key terms were utilized, as follows: veterans OR transition OR medical retirement OR career-ending injuries OR military OR reintegration. The results obtained from these key terms, either alone or in combination with each other, were screened by the researcher manually in three phases. First, through title. Second, through abstract. Third, through a review of the text in full. Through the utilization of this strategy, studies of interest to the review was found, selected, and reviewed with the purpose of exploring the impact of veterans' UMR on transition to civilian life through a systematic review of literature. The researcher also considered references obtained from appropriate studies. The search strategy implementation process is shown in Figure 1.

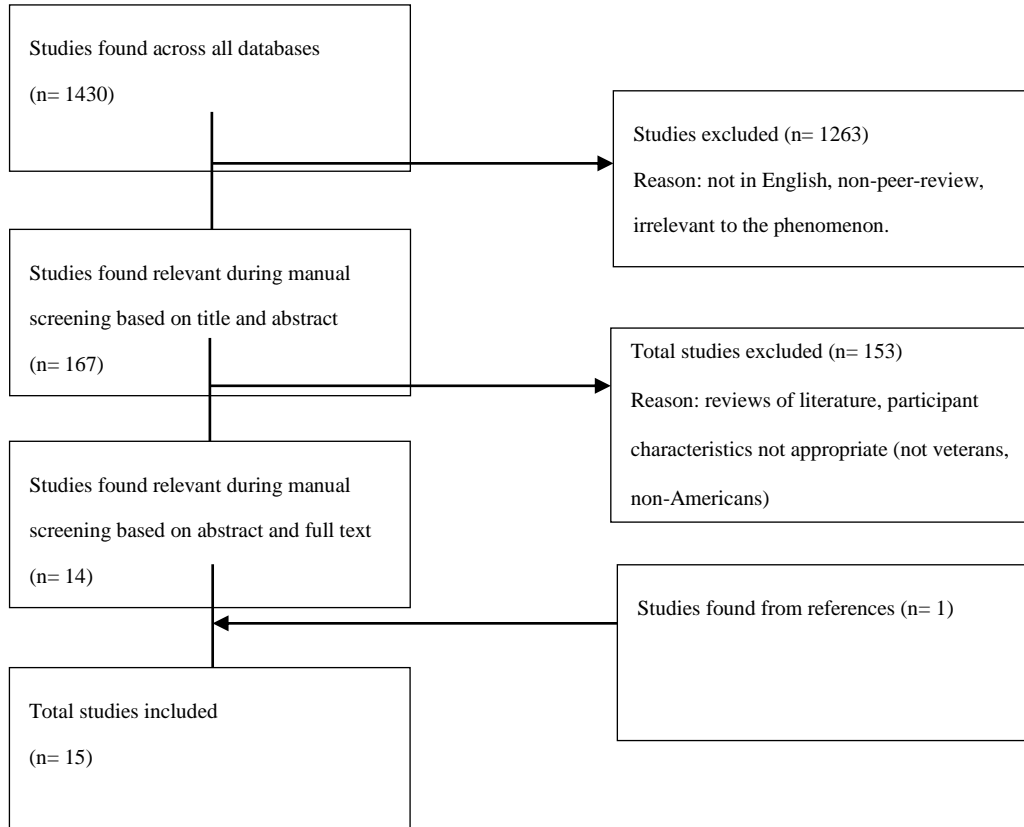


Figure 1. Search strategy implementation process to identify relevant studies.

Data Extraction: As part of the data extraction process, a spreadsheet was developed by the researcher. A qualitative approach for systematic review involving synthesis of the findings and presentation through text was adopted. A quality scale was utilized in order to assess the quality of the studies included. Through this scale, the researcher evaluated eight items, which focused on internal validity, statistical validity, and external validity. Four items were utilized to measure internal validity, which targeted validity and reliability, examination, and correction regarding the phenomenon. Two items were utilized for the purpose of statistical validity, which targeted the availability of sufficient sample size and appropriate statistical tests. Two items were utilized for external validity, targeting the availability of proper data regarding participant demographic characteristics, such as gender.

III. RESULTS

A total of 15 studies were identified that met the inclusion criteria that were developed for the current systematic review. Of these 15 studies, six were focused on the theme of transition challenges (Griffiths, Hawkins & Crowe, 2020; Hawkins & Crowe, 2018; Libin et al., 2017; McCormack & Ell, 2017; McGill, Wilson, Caddick, Forster, & Kiernan, 2020; Smith-MacDonald et al., 2019). Of these, two were specifically focused on the transition challenges of female veterans (Griffiths, Hawkins & Crowe, 2020; Hawkins & Crowe, 2018), while four included the theme of identity in relation to transition challenges (Libin et al., 2017; McCormack & Ell, 2017; McGill et al., 2020; Smith-MacDonald et al., 2019). A total of six out of the 15 studies focused on the theme of employment in relation to the injured veterans' transition to civilian life (Drapela, Lutze, Tollefsbol, & Pimley, 2018; McGarity et al., 2017; McGill et al., 2020; Olsen, Hays, Orff, Jak, & Twamley, 2018; Pugh et al., 2018; Wyse, Pogoda, Mastarone, Gilbert, & Carlson, 2020). Finally, four of the 15 studies focused on different sources of support (Elnitsky, Blevins, Findlow, Alverio, & Wiese, 2018; Freytes, LeLaurin, Zickmund, Resende, & Uphold, 2017; Hawkins & Crowe, 2018; Murray & Cancio, 2019). A majority of the studies (eight of 15) were qualitative and used interview as the source for data collection (Freytes et al., 2017; Hawkins & Crowe, 2018; Hawkins & Crowe, 2018; Libin et al., 2017; McCormack & Ell, 2017; McGill et al., 2020; Smith-MacDonald et al., 2019; Wyse et al., 2020). Quantitative surveys were used in four of the 15 studies (Drapela et al., 2018; Griffiths, Hawkins & Crowe, 2020; McGarity et al., 2017; Pugh et al., 2018), mixed-methods surveys were used in two of the 15 studies (Elnitsky et al., 2018; Murray & Cancio, 2019), and quantitative method with archival data was used in one of the 15 studies (Olsen et al., 2018). With respect to sample, too, there was wide variation. The lowest size of the sample was five (McCormack & Ell, 2017), while the highest size of the sample was 2023 (Pugh et al., 2018). Finally, types of injuries covered in the studies included traumatic brain injury, combat burn injury, limb-loss, and PTSD. These characteristics of the studies are presented in Table 1. Overall, the findings from the systematic review of the studies led to the identification of three major themes: (1) transition challenges, (2) employment experience, and (3) sources of support. Two sub-themes within the first theme were female veterans and identity. In the remainder of this section, this finding are discussed.

Table 1. Studies that were included in the systematic review

Study	Methodology	Sample <i>n</i>	Injury Type	Themes
Griffiths, Hawkins & Crowe (2020)	Quantitative / Surveys	31	Various	Female veterans, transition challenges
Elnitsky et al. (2018)	Mixed-methods / Survey	127	Traumatic injuries and comorbidities	Sources of support, transition challenges
McGarity et al. (2017)	Quantitative / Surveys	154	Moderate/severe traumatic brain injury	Employment, transition challenges
Libin et al. (2017)	Qualitative / Interviews	8	Mild traumatic brain injury	Identity, transition challenges
Hawkins & Crowe (2018)	Qualitative / Interviews	13	Various	Female veterans, transition challenges
McGill et al. (2020)	Qualitative / Interviews	32	Limb-loss	Employment, identity, psychological distress, transition challenges

Olsen et al. (2018)	Quantitative / Archival database	390	Traumatic brain injury	Employment
Wyse et al. (2020)	Qualitative / Interviews and focus groups	37	Polytrauma/traumatic brain injury	Employment
Pugh et al. (2018)	Quantitative / Surveys	2023	Traumatic brain injury	Employment
Drapela et al. (2018)	Quantitative / Surveys	955	Traumatic brain injury	Employment
Smith-MacDonald et al. (2019)	Qualitative / Interviews	18	Various	Identify, psychological distress, transition challenges
Hawkins & Crowe (2018)	Qualitative / Interviews	13	Various	Sources of support, transition challenges
McCormack & Ell (2017)	Qualitative / Interviews	5	Various	Identity, psychological distress, transition challenges
Murray & Cancio (2019)	Mixed-methods / Survey	6	Combat burn injury	Sources of support
Freytes et al. (2017)	Qualitative / Interviews	12	PTSD, traumatic brain injury	Sources of support

Theme 1: Transition Challenges: Multiple studies were found in the existing literature that highlighted transition challenges experienced by injured veterans' transition to civilian life. Separation from military was found to be a challenge in itself in the qualitative study conducted by Libin et al. (2017) to explore the experience of veterans during transition. Participants highlighted the involuntary aspect of UMR that it felt similar to being fired from a job, despite the benefits received. Other responses to the involuntary nature of UMR highlighted by the participants in the study conducted by Libin et al. (2017) included self-esteem loss, sadness, and anger. These aspects highlighted a sub-theme of identity within the literature on transition challenges that was also found in the studies by McGill et al. (2020), Smith-MacDonald et al. (2019), and McCormack and Ell (2017). Specifically, participants reported alienation among civilians due to lack of similarities in values between those of civilians who had never been in the military and the military values that participants associated their identities with (Libin et al., 2017). Participants highlighted a sense of grief associated with the loss of military identity, networks, and career (McGill et al., 2020). In this regard, a challenge to transition was the attachment with previous ambitions that were no longer possible to realize to the injuries and the UMR that the participants were now subjected to (McGill et al., 2020). Given their previous ambitions of a full military career, they had attached their identity to it and had given little consideration to other possibilities (McGill et al., 2020). In this regard, Smith-MacDonald et al. (2019) found that effectiveness of the treatment provided to veterans who experienced UMR due to an injury depended, according to the veterans themselves, on treatments that focused on the lack of identity, in addition to other more common symptoms. Identity also emerged as a significant psychological challenge preventing veterans with UMR from transitioning to civilian life in a study by McCormack and Ell (2017). McCormack and Ell (2017) found that veterans who experienced UMR experienced a sense of destabilization and betrayal. Participants experienced loss of identity and felt alone, lost, and discarded, which prevented them from fully committing to the civilian life. Rage and self-loathing were other challenges to transition.

Another sub-theme that emerged from the literature on transition challenges experienced by veterans who experienced UMR resulted from two studies that focused specifically on female veterans, highlighting gender differences in transition challenges. Griffiths, Hawkins, and Crowe (2020) found that a significant barrier for female veterans who experienced UMR during transition was low self-efficacy. Another major challenge for women during the transition process, as reported by Hawkins and Crowe (2018), was misguided perception among civilian with respect to women who were in the military. Due to the view that women in the military were involved in administrative work, female veterans felt their work was devalued by civilians, which caused discomfort during the transition process. A common element in both Griffiths et al. (2020) and Hawkins and Crowe (2018) was the impact of sexual trauma. Griffiths et al. (2020) found that suicidal ideation was high

among female veterans who had experienced sexual trauma. Hawkins and Crowe (2018) found that a challenge experienced by female veterans during transition to civilian life was the difficulty in telling others about it, who did not receive it well, as a result of which the veterans avoided seeking help and experienced isolation.

Theme 2: Experience With Employment : Another major theme found across multiple studies on veterans' transition to civilian life after UMR was related to employment experience. Veterans consider employment to be a significant part of the transition process after injury in order to avoid feeling dependent and experience psychological well-being (McGill et al., 2020). McGarity et al. (2017), who explored transition problems experienced by veterans who underwent UMR after traumatic brain injury, found that 83% of their participants experienced some kind of restriction in relation to employment. Lower employability potential was found among veterans who reported symptoms of depression and low cognitive functioning due to the injuries they endured (McGarity et al., 2017). Likewise, McGill et al. (2020), who conducted interviews with 32 veterans who underwent UMR due to limb-loss, also found difficulties with employability among veterans. The reason, however, was not merely the injuries they had experienced (McGill et al., 2020). It was also the fact that participants did not find the skills and education they had developed through military to be transferable into the civilian world (McGill et al., 2020), which limited their options for further career. Some participants reported that, in order to avoid discrimination, they did not disclose their disability to the potential employers. Despite the desire to work, veterans found it difficult to find work, an experience they felt was demoralizing (McGill et al., 2020). These findings were in alignment with the findings of Olsen et al. (2018), Pugh et al. (2018), and Drapela et al. (2018) who reported lower likelihood of being employed among veterans who underwent UMR.

Wyse et al. (2020) divided the barriers experienced by veterans who underwent UMR in finding employment after transitioning to civilian life into barriers related to finding employment, barriers related to maintaining employment, and barriers related to taking part in VA programs for vocational rehabilitation. Similar to McGarity et al. (2017) and McGill et al. (2020), Wyse et al. (2020) reported barriers related to finding employment, which included negative employer's perceptions regarding veterans, lack of familiarity with military work which led to the inability to translate military experience into civilian sector and thus the undervaluation of veterans' skills, and the constraints introduced due to injuries. Barriers related to maintaining employment were further divided into individual barriers, such as cognitive difficulties, memory problems, serious headaches, and ongoing sleep problems and interactional barriers, such as difficulties in interacting with coworkers due to their injuries which led to misunderstandings, arguments, and conflicts. Finally, barriers related to taking part in VA programs for vocational rehabilitation included barriers to accessing such programs, barriers resulting from the characteristics of the programs, and barriers in participation due to financial fears.

Theme 3: Sources of Support: A third major theme found across multiple studies on veterans' transition to civilian life after UMR was related to sources of support. The sources of support highlighted in the literature can be categorized into informal and formal. Among the informal sources of support that helped veterans transition to civilian life after UMR were the various social support sources, such as family, peers, colleague at work, and other veterans (Hawkins & Crowe, 2018). Hawkins and Crowe (2018), who explored a phenomenological study based on qualitative interviews with 13 female veterans who underwent UMR, found that social support from these sources resulted in a warm welcome following retirement, help with daily activities, and caring for children (Hawkins & Crowe, 2018). Veterans found these sources of support provided them with patience, perspective, and understanding (Hawkins & Crowe, 2018). In addition, veterans also obtained motivation from these sources of social support to remain positive (Hawkins & Crowe, 2018). Employers who made accommodations and other veterans who provided support through shared experience helped ease the process of transition (Hawkins & Crowe, 2018). Support from peers was also a theme in the findings of Murray and Cancio (2019), who conducted a mixed methods study with six veterans who underwent UMR. Peers who were also veterans provided support through assistance with mental health and through recreational activities. Helping others with similar experience, in turn, helped the veterans feel better. Support from family was found to be associated with better recovery and transition experience in a qualitative study conducted by Freytes et al. (2017) through interviews with 12 couples with one veteran in each. However, Libin et al. (2017) highlighted that obtaining support from family was not easy, since veterans wished to shield their family members from negative experiences. Among the formal sources of support highlighted in the literature were the various professional programs and services available for veterans during their transition following UMR. Programs such as Veterans Affairs, programs for independent living, recreational therapy based in community were some of the formal sources of support mentioned by Hawkins and Crowe (2018).

Hawkins and Crowe (2018) found that participants reported positive experiences with such programs due to their understanding of the veterans' experience. Murray and Cancio (2019) also found formal support reported by veterans in the form of financial assistance available for disabled veterans from the federal government.

IV. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The purpose of the current systematic review was to address a gap in the literature on the impact of veterans' unanticipated medical retirement on transition to civilian life through a systematic review of literature that has been published since 2017. The purpose was informed by the identified research problem, which was that despite the literature exploring the impact of veterans' unanticipated medical retirement on transition to civilian life, there was at present a lack of systematic review of this literature among veterans. In order to identify literature relevant for the research phenomenon, six criteria were developed to form a search strategy, which was implemented across four databases. Following the exclusion of studies that failed to meet the six criteria for inclusion, the researcher selected 15 studies for the systematic review. The findings of the review led to the identification of three major themes on the impact of veterans' UMR on transition to civilian life. These included transition challenges, employment experience, and sources of support. Two sub-themes within the first theme were female veterans and identity. With respect to the first theme, findings showed that the involuntary nature of UMR led to self-esteem loss, sadness, and anger (Libin et al., 2017), which presented challenges during transition. Alienation among civilians due to lack of similarities in values (Libin et al., 2017) and loss of military identity (McCormack & Ell, 2017), networks, and career (McGill et al., 2020) emerged as other challenges to transition. Among female veterans, effects of sexual trauma further enhanced the pain associated with UMR and presented serious challenge in transition to civilian life (Griffiths et al., 2020; Hawkins and Crowe, 2018). With respect to the second theme, it was found that, although veterans viewed employment to be significant during transition (McGill et al., 2020), they experienced numerous barriers in obtaining employment, retaining employment, and participating in vocational VA programs (Drapela et al., 2018; McGarity et al., 2017; McGill et al., 2020; Olsen et al., 2018; Pugh et al., 2018; Wyse et al., 2020). With respect to the third theme, two sources of support were identified, informal and formal. Informal sources of support, such as family, peers, colleague at work, and other veterans (Hawkins & Crowe, 2018), were found to help veterans during transition following UMR and provided patience, perspective, accommodation, motivation, and understanding (Freytes et al., 2017; Libin et al., 2017; Murray & Cancio, 2019). Formal sources of support, which included various professional programs and services available for veterans, were found to be associated with positive experiences due to their understanding of the veterans' experience (Hawkins & Crowe, 2018) and due to the financial assistance they provided (Murray & Cancio, 2019).

The findings of the current systematic review have implications for both the existing body of literature and practice. The findings of the review expand the current body of literature in the field of veterans' rehabilitation through a synthesis of the findings from recent literature which, despite the literature exploring the impact of veterans' unanticipated medical retirement on transition to civilian life, had been lacking. In addition, the review has practical implications. The findings showed that, despite provisions against discrimination, many veterans who experience UMR continue to experience discrimination while searching for employment. While support from formal sources such as the federal government is available, it does not address the many humiliations veterans have to undergo while searching for employment after UMR. Female veterans experience further difficulty during transition due to the impact of sexual trauma on top of military injuries. It is recommended that policymakers consider designing programs that are specifically targeted towards assisting veterans avoid discrimination during their search for work after UMR. Further, it is important that female veterans' unique difficulties are taken into consideration and assistance is provided through formal sources of support that help them seek help and share their experiences. A limitation in the current review was the inability to conduct meta-analysis due to the significant variation in the studies included. Future researchers may consider narrowing the scope of their systematic reviews on the transition experiences of veterans after UMR to enable meta-analysis. The unique difficulties of female veterans provides an opportunity to conduct a systematic review on the transition experiences of only female veterans following UMR to highlight further their unique requirements.

Potential Conflicts of Interest : The author declares no conflict of interest.

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