

# Journeys to Harmful Behaviour

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The Probation Institute and John Moores University commenced the research project [‘Journeys to Harmful Behaviour’](#) in September 2018. This work was prompted by our, and others, earlier work looking at the factors contributing to the numbers of ex-service personnel in the justice system. We were concerned by the small but significant group of individuals who committed offences of serious harm to others, some during but more often following armed service. We wanted to understand with a view to reducing the incidence of such harms in the future.

Like many research projects the active part of the work was severely disrupted by Covid-19 Pandemic. Four years later, the completion of this research is a tribute to the highly professional research team, at Liverpool John Moores University who completed a very sensitive programme of interviews and analysis through the constraints of Covid 19. We are grateful to individuals in the Prison Service and the Probation Service for facilitating research interviews both virtual and actual, always within the rules, but nonetheless at some very challenging times. The Forces in Mind Trust, our funders, have been immensely patient and supportive throughout. Our Advisory Board have consistently helped and encouraged us. It was clear from the first interviews that this research was long overdue, necessary, and



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potentially an important contribution to the future health of our armed services. In the years since we began, attention has been drawn by others to victims and survivors of domestic abuse within armed services communities, shining a light on gender, and on the potential for violent behaviour among veterans and those still serving. This should not wholly surprise us, but it should always concern us.

The research sought to understand the life histories of those interviewed in ways which can inform our understanding of the risks presented by these individuals and others into the future. The findings of the research are that each of the fourteen subjects describes adverse childhood experiences - violent behaviour, sexual abuse, neglect, poverty. There is a strong pattern of seeking escape through recruitment into the armed services. Alongside sometimes traumatic active service and rigorous military training, the routines, camaraderie, welfare and discipline of service life mainly provided security for the individuals, albeit alongside cultures of alcohol use. A small number of early discharges occurred in the research and length of service is very mixed. The predominant pattern however is that on leaving service our research subjects found themselves bereft of all supporting systems and confronted by the emotional impact of their own earlier experiences. Through this we can see that there were points in the stories at which a more focussed intervention might have prevented the offences that followed.

We acknowledge that the majority of the subjects of this research, most of whom are still serving prison sentences have been out of military service for some years during which progress has been made in some areas to attend to the emotional welfare of serving and discharged armed forces personnel. We note particularly the establishment of the Government Office for Veteran Affairs (OVA) - able to work across government. We are very pleased that the OVA Strategy Action Plan 2022 to 2024 specifically refers to implementation of the findings of our report and we are pleased to be invited to present the research to the OVA. The recent Inspection Report from the Military Corrections Training Centre (MCTC) notes that monitoring of sex offenders on release remains insufficient. The incidence of adverse experiences in our society shows little sign of reducing and it is inevitable

that military service will remain an attractive option for some young people who have experienced damaging childhoods.

We hope that the research report published in July 2022 will be a flag - a sign post - not only for the justice services, but critically for caring services in the public sector and for charitable organisations working with the veteran community. The justice agencies normally engage with high risk individuals after serious harm to others has occurred. Important as this is, we can see that in some critical respects, it is too late. In communicating our research findings we try to identify points at which appropriate interventions might in the future prevent harm to others.

There are messages in the research for government departments, justice and caring agencies, and for armed services charities. These messages are about:

- More strenuous efforts across national and local government to reduce the incidence of adverse childhood experiences
- Better understanding of the risks presented by some individuals
- Sharper focus on the information available at recruitment to armed services
- A more keen awareness of the circumstances of early discharged individuals
- Greater attention to fostering caring relationships throughout military service, and active support for individuals
- Confidence in holding difficult conversations

We publish the *research* in what we hope is a compelling, but accessible form. We hope that it will generate discussions and action in the agencies mentioned above. The Probation Institute, Liverpool John Moores University and the Forces in Mind Trust are together keen to facilitate and inform such discussions