



Bureau of Justice Statistics Bulletin

Veterans in Prison

October 1981

In November 1979, about a fourth of all State prisoners were veterans of military service.¹ Among the total of 65,500 veterans in such prisons--

- 19,500 served in the pre-Vietnam era.
- 39,500 served in the Vietnam era (August 1964-July 1975); of this number, only 13,000 had been on duty in Southeast Asia.
- 6,000 served in the post-Vietnam era; of these, 1,200 were serving time for a crime committed while in the service.

Veterans in State prisons at that time were as well educated as veterans in the general population, but they were much more likely to have received a less-than-honorable discharge. Typically, they had been convicted of a violent crime and were serving a lengthy sentence.

At the time of the offense for which they were convicted, more than a fourth were under the influence of drugs, but more than half had been drinking.

Vietnam veterans

There has been a special interest in the number and characteristics of Vietnam veterans who are in prison. Data from the survey can only partially address these topics. The survey was a snapshot at a moment of time, November 1979. At that moment, the median age of Vietnam veterans in prison was 28, and they had been out of the service for an average of 8 years.

It is impossible to know how many Vietnam-era veterans were imprisoned and released before the survey took place. Similarly, some veterans have entered prison since the survey, but

¹In April 1980, Federal prisons housed 4,683 veterans representing 1 of every 5 Federal prisoners, but the era in which they served is not available.

On October 10, 1978, the Bureau of Justice Statistics, then the National Criminal Justice Information and Statistics Service (NCJISS) of the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration, received a Presidential directive to collect information on incarcerated veterans. Nothing was known then about Vietnam veterans in prison. Estimates of their numbers varied widely. Information about the circumstances of their confinement was virtually nonexistent.

The unique nature of the war in Vietnam and the controversy surrounding it produced a very different homecoming for Vietnam veterans than for veterans of earlier conflicts. Many experienced serious adjustment difficulties leading, it was felt, to a greater likelihood of incarceration. Specific information on incarcerated veterans was needed to develop programs and policies shaped to their circumstances.

In response to the Presidential directive, NCJISS included a series of questions on military service and veterans' status in its second quinquennial Survey of Inmates of State Correctional Facilities. This survey

and its companion Census of State Correctional Facilities were conducted in November 1979 for NCJISS by the U.S. Bureau of the Census. The survey, which consisted of personal interviews with a stratified random sample of 12,000 prisoners in State facilities across the country, gathered information on the present offense and length of sentence, criminal history, drug and alcohol history, personal and family characteristics, employment, education, and income. The Census of State Correctional Facilities was conducted through mail questionnaires for all facilities operated by State departments of corrections; it measured inmate population by sex, race and ethnicity, physical conditions of the facility including degree of security, capacity and overcrowding, prison staff, health care and inmate programs.

This bulletin is the first presentation of data from these two sources. Future bulletins will cover other topics from the 1979 prison census and inmate survey.

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their numbers are probably not as large as those who served time prior to the survey, because Vietnam-era veterans are beginning to leave the age groups from which prison populations are primarily drawn.

At the time of the survey, Vietnam-era veterans who served in Southeast Asia made up less than 5 percent of the inmates of State prisons. Only about a third of the prisoners who were veterans of the Vietnam era actually saw duty in Southeast Asia, a smaller proportion than in the general population. This is surprising since it had

been assumed that this group would have felt most acutely the difficulties of transition to civilian life.

Veteran characteristics

On the whole, veterans were less likely than nonveterans to be in prison.² This was true for all pre-Vietnam and Vietnam-era veterans over age 25. Only among inmates under 25 did veterans make up a higher

²Comparative data for veterans in the U.S. population are derived from the U.S. Veterans Administration, *1979 Annual Report*.

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proportion than they did in the same age group in the general population. Even so, veterans made up only 13 percent of these younger prisoners. Five of every nine of the younger veterans in prison served during the Vietnam era; the other four served later. The younger veterans from the Vietnam era were quite young—under 21—during that era.

At the time of the survey, the age ranges of the three imprisoned veteran groups overlapped somewhat, but their average ages were quite different. The median age for--

- Pre-Vietnam veterans was 45, which is close to the median age (48) of all veterans and of all Korean War veterans
- Vietnam-era veterans was 28, closest to that of nonveteran inmates
- Post-Vietnam veterans (all volunteers) was 22.

Compared to other veterans in State prisons, pre-Vietnam veterans were--

- Less likely to have graduated from high school
- More likely to have been incarcerated previously
- Likely to have been serving a longer sentence
- More likely to have been separated or divorced.

Each of these factors is primarily a function of their greater age.

Compared to pre-Vietnam veterans in State prisons, Vietnam and post-Vietnam veterans were--

	Number	Percent
Total	274,564	100.0
Veterans	65,283	23.7
Vietnam-era	39,342	14.3
Served in		
Southeast Asia	12,957	4.7
Elsewhere	26,385	9.6
Pre-Vietnam-era	19,499	7.1
Post-Vietnam-era	6,006	2.2
Nonveterans	208,719	76.0
Not available	562	0.2

- Less likely ever to have married
- More likely to have used drugs.

Education

Regardless of age, as a group veterans in prison share many traits. They also share most of these traits with nonveterans. A striking exception is education.

Veterans in prison are much better educated than nonveteran prisoners. To some extent, this is a function of age, but it also reflects the educational entry requirements of the military services. Among State prisoners, 60 percent of all veterans but less than 40 percent of all nonveterans have completed high school. Among post-Vietnam veterans, who on the average were 4 years younger than the nonveterans, 55 percent had completed high school.

Veterans in prison are as well educated as veterans who are not in

prison. The median educational attainment of veterans in prison was 12.3 years; that of veterans outside prison was 12.6 years.

Minorities

Among nonveterans in prison, minority groups were highly over-represented; veterans in prison were much less so. About 50 percent of the nonveterans but only 33 percent of the veterans were black. About 10 percent of the nonveterans but only 7 percent of the veterans were Hispanic. (Among Vietnam-era veterans, blacks and whites were equally likely to have served in Southeast Asia.)

Type of discharge from service

In the way they left military service, veterans in prison parted dramatically from veterans in the general population. More than 90 percent of all servicemen receive an honorable discharge. This was true for only 50 percent of the veterans in prison.

Roughly 40 percent of veterans in State prisons received less-than-honorable discharges, but for those who served in Southeast Asia the percentage was 30.

The large number of less-than-honorable discharges among veterans in prison was undoubtedly related to their criminal history while in the military. A fourth of the veterans were serving or had previously served time for an offense committed in the military. A fifth of the post-Vietnam veterans were currently serving time for a crime committed in the military. Vietnam-era veterans who were on duty in Southeast Asia were no more likely than other veterans to have been sentenced for a crime committed in the military.

Pre-arrest income

The high rate of less-than-honorable discharges plus the substantial minority to come out of the service with a conviction surely added to the employment difficulties experienced by veterans prior to incarceration. About 14 percent of the veterans reported no income for the year prior to their arrest. Among those who did have an income, it averaged \$7,861, somewhat more than the pre-arrest income of nonveterans but well below the median income of all males (\$10,972).

Job history

A fourth of the veterans in prison

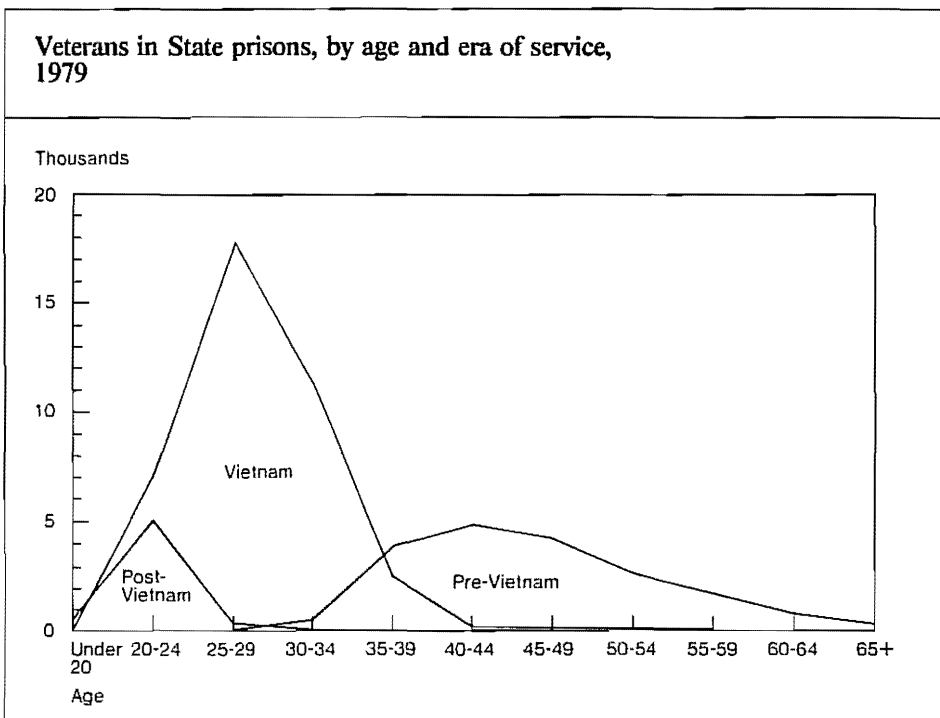


Figure 1

were without a job at the time of arrest. Well over half of this group (but three-fourths of the pre-Vietnam veterans) were not even looking for work. It is not known whether the large number not even looking for work had quit out of discouragement, were unable to work, or were engaged in illegal activities.

The 1979 unemployment rate for veterans in the general population was 3.4 percent, but this comparison is quite rough because joblessness at time of arrest cannot be translated into an unemployment rate in the conventional use of the term; the veterans in prison were arrested at various times over a span of many years. Nevertheless, these veterans had been loosely attached to the job economy.

Crimes

Most veterans in State prisons were convicted of a violent crime. In this, they resembled nonveterans. A violent crime was the principal offense of 60 percent of all inmates regardless of veteran status. A third of both veterans and nonveterans were in prison for a property crime. Drug and public order offenses each were the chief crime of 5 percent of both groups.

Among specific crimes, veterans were more likely than nonveterans to have been convicted of murder, rape, or assault but less likely to have been convicted of robbery or burglary.

Table 2. Veterans and nonveterans in State prisons, by percent in each group with specified characteristic and by age and sentence length, 1979

Characteristic	Pre-Vietnam veterans	Vietnam veterans	Post-Vietnam veterans	Nonveterans
Black	28	35	35	52
Hispanic	7	7	7	10
Not working at time of arrest	24	26	30	31
Convicted of violent crime	61	60	52	57
Regular heroin user	13	26	10	22
Heavy daily drinker	27	33	41	26
Less than honorable discharge	39	46	59	N/A
Disabled	10	10	2	N/A
Age (median years)	45.3	28.5	22.4	26.4
Maximum sentence (median years)	11.5	10.1	7.8	8.4

White veterans were more likely than white nonveterans to be serving time for a violent offense (57 vs. 49 percent). Veteran status made no difference for blacks; two-thirds of both groups had been convicted of a violent crime. White veterans appeared to have been slightly less likely than white nonveterans to have committed a drug offense, but there was no apparent difference among blacks. The same proportions of white and black veterans were serving time for a public order offense.

Era of service played little part in the type of crime for which veterans were serving. In all three groups, the proportion convicted of violent crime was similar. However, post-Vietnam veterans were more likely than other veterans to have committed a property crime and less likely to have committed a drug offense.

Sentences

As a group, veterans were serving longer terms than nonveterans. Once more, the difference is probably due to their relatively older years. Older prisoners tend to be serving longer sentences because those long sentences have held them in prison while persons their age with shorter sentences have done their time and been released. To a limited extent, this same phenomenon shows up in the pattern of life-in-prison sentences. About 12 percent of the Vietnam-era veterans, 17 percent of the pre-Vietnam veterans, but only 2 percent of the post-Vietnam veterans were serving life sentences.

Criminal careers

There were no major differences in the criminal careers of veterans in the three eras:

- A fourth of all veterans had committed a crime while in the service.
- About a fourth of each group had served time before they entered the service, but in some cases the crime was a misdemeanor and the sentence was served in jail rather than prison.
- A third of all imprisoned veterans had been on probation at least once before age 20. The percentages for each group were pre-Vietnam 17, Vietnam 36, and post-Vietnam 45.

Prior incarceration

As another consequence of veterans' age differences, the following had been incarcerated prior to their current sentence:

- 50 percent of the post-Vietnam veterans
- 60 percent of the Vietnam-era veterans
- 75 percent of the pre-Vietnam veterans.

Drugs and alcohol

Compared with nonveteran prisoners, veterans in prison were slightly less

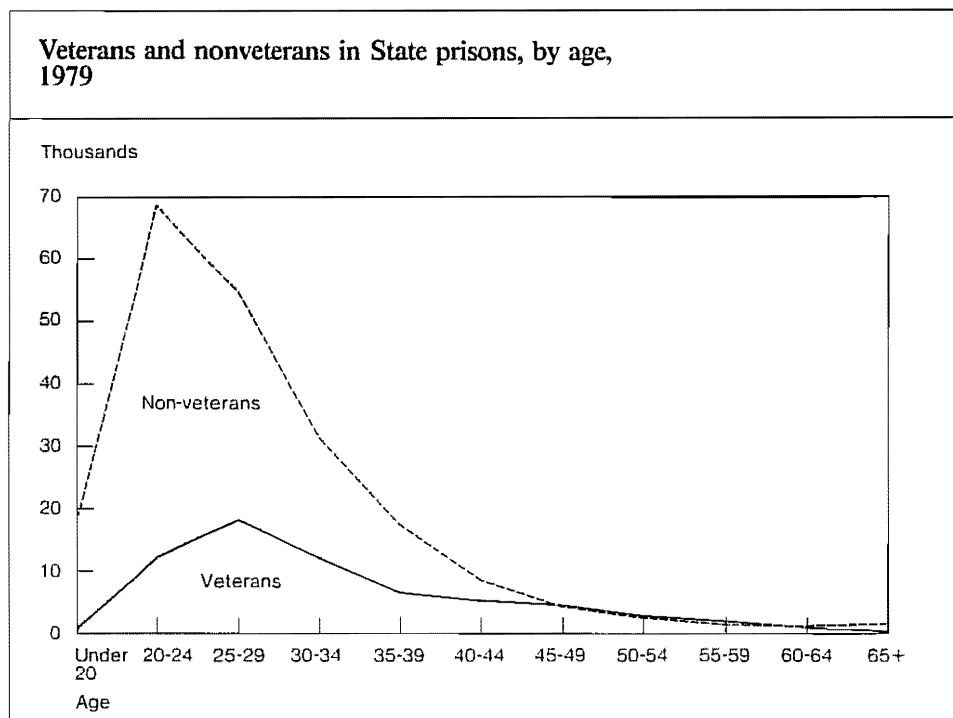


Figure 2

prone to drug abuse and slightly more prone to alcohol abuse:

- About 75 percent of the veterans and 80 percent of the nonveterans had used some drug at least once in their lifetime.
- About half the veterans and somewhat more than half the nonveterans (48 vs. 56 percent) had used drugs regularly (at least once a week).
- A fifth of each group had used heroin regularly.

However, veterans were less likely than nonveterans to have been under the influence of drugs at the time of their offense.

Among State prisoners, Vietnam-era and post-Vietnam veterans were far more likely to have used drugs than pre-Vietnam veterans, who for the most part came of age before the advent of the drug culture. A large majority of the Vietnam-era and post-Vietnam veterans used marijuana, but 25 percent of the Vietnam-era veterans used heroin vs. only 10 percent of the post-Vietnam veterans. Vietnam-era veterans who served in Southeast Asia were only slightly more likely to have used heroin than other Vietnam-era veterans. All in all, a fourth of the Vietnam-era veterans, a fifth of the nonveterans, and a tenth of the veterans of other eras had used heroin regularly at some point in their lives but not necessarily while in the service.

A fourth of all veterans in State prisons, including a third of Vietnam-

era veterans, had developed a drug or alcohol problem while in the service. Most of these had served during or after the Vietnam era. Half developed a drug problem, a third developed an alcohol problem, and a sixth had problems with both drugs and alcohol.

Drugs played a more important role in the lives of nonveterans than of veterans, but the reverse was true for alcohol. This held up even for the post-Vietnam veterans, who on the average are younger than the nonveterans. About 40 percent of the post-Vietnam-era veterans, 33 percent of the Vietnam-era veterans, and 25 percent of the pre-Vietnam-era veterans reported themselves to have been heavy daily drinkers. Nonveterans were no more likely than pre-Vietnam veterans to be heavy drinkers. Vietnam-era veterans stationed in Southeast Asia drank no more heavily than others who served during that era. Fully half

Bureau of Justice Statistics Bulletins are prepared principally by the staff of the Bureau. Carol B. Kalish, chief of policy analysis, edits the bulletins; Marilyn Marbrook, head of the Bureau publications unit, administers their publication, assisted by Julie A. Ferguson. This bulletin is based on material developed by Miini Cantwell and Wilfred Masumura, both of the Bureau of the Census.

October 1981, NCJ-79232

of all veterans had been drinking just prior to their crime. The comparable figure for nonveterans was only slightly less.

Branch of service

Among all veterans in State prisons, 59 percent had been in the Army, 18 percent in the Marine Corps, 14 percent in the Navy, 9 percent in the Air Force, and a small number in the Coast Guard. Former Marines were the most likely to have served during the Vietnam era and to have been in the combat zone.

Service-related disability

About a tenth of all veterans in State prisons had been officially recognized by the Veterans Administration as having a service-related disability. Veterans who had served in Southeast Asia were more likely than the other imprisoned veterans to be disabled.

Other bulletins

Previous Bureau of Justice Statistics bulletins cover the topics of Measuring Crime, February 1981, The Prevalence of Crime, March 1981, Prisoners in 1980, May 1981, Capital Punishment 1980, July 1981, and Prisoners at Midyear 1981, September 1981. To obtain copies of these reports or to be added to the bulletin mailing list, write to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, Washington, D.C. 20531.

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Washington, D.C. 20531

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