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Making It on Civvy Street: An Online Survey of Canadian Veterans in Transition
Réussir sa transition vers la vie civile : sondage en ligne des ex-membres des Forces canadiennes en situation de transition

Timothy G. Black
University of Victoria
Chiara Papile
University of Alberta

ABSTRACT

The authors present the results of a non-governmental study focusing on the transition experiences of Canadian Forces personnel who had served in a full-time capacity for a period of at least 6 months. The survey generated basic demographic data as well as veterans' subjective experiences of their transition from the Canadian military into civilian life. Results show that 37.6% of veterans surveyed felt they did not make a successful transition to civilian life. Results of the study will aid counsellors, veterans' groups, and federal government agencies in developing a broader understanding of the issues that Canadian veterans in transition currently face.

RÉSUMÉ

Les auteurs présentent les résultats d'une étude non gouvernementale portant sur les expériences de transition vécues par des membres des Forces canadiennes qui ont été en service à plein temps pendant au moins 6 mois. Le sondage a permis de recueillir des données démographiques de base, ainsi que les expériences subjectives lors de la transition du statut de militaire canadien vers la vie civile. Les résultats indiquent que 37,6 % des ex-militaires sondés considèrent ne pas avoir réussi la transition vers la vie civile. Les résultats de l'étude aideront les conseillers, les regroupements d'anciens militaires, et les organismes du gouvernement fédéral à mieux comprendre des enjeux auxquels doivent actuellement faire face les ex-membres des Forces canadiennes en situation de transition.

After the guns have stopped and the explosions have died down, what happens back home? Transition has been examined from many different viewpoints, for example, (a) school-to-work transition (Finnie, 2004), (b) cross-cultural transition (Arthur, 2001; Chen, 2004), (c) re-entry transition (Arthur, 2003; Walling, Eriksson, Meese, Ciovica, & Gorton, 2006), (d) multiple reacculturation (Onwumechili, Nwosu, Jackson, & James-Hughes, 2003), (e) prison to community re-entry (Visher & Travis, 2003), (f) retirement transition (Marshall, Clarke, & Ballantyne, 2001), and (g) work transition (Borgen, 1997).

Transitioning from military to civilian life is a topic that has received much attention in recent years. The transition process for military members into civilian society can be seen as a cross-cultural transition (Black, Westwood, & Sorsdahl, 2007) and may represent a retirement transition, a work transition (Borgen, 1997), or both. A retirement transition occurs when military members withdraw from military service and make the decision to not pursue further work in a similar or new sector; in contrast, a work transition occurs when former military personnel continue employment with a different sector. Both types of transition can be extremely impactful and, depending on a variety of factors, can cause difficulties for veterans and their families. This is due in large part to the influence that a military career can have on individuals, as working in the military and in war zones can be profoundly stressful (Rosebush, 1998).

The military presents an example of a distinct role-based subculture that differs markedly from civilian life; as such, its members undergo experiences with unique impacts. Structure forms the core of military life, and clear, absolute, and rigid rules dominate day-to-day existence. The issues of power, rank, responsibility, compliance, and camaraderie are central to the military organization, and strong feelings of discipline and loyalty are instilled. New recruits are quickly trained to lose their sense of autonomous individuality, a view that is in sharp contrast to the typical North American mindset where uniqueness is valued and often leads to success (Armstrong, 2008). Additionally, soldiers are taught how to react quickly and often violently to danger (Bradley, 2007), and, as a result, responding with violence can become almost automatic for some soldiers (Matsakis, 2007). Responsibility and loyalty to comrades are crucial components of military life, and members are acculturated to believe that they are responsible for the lives of those around them (Westwood, Black, Kammhuber, & McFarlane, 2008).

Much of the research tends to focus on the role of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in military members (Asmundson, 2002; Kent, 2000; Marin, 2002; Rosebush, 1998). However, Black et al. (2007) state that a myriad of other issues may arise as military members make the transition into civilian life. Both as a result of military service and as a result of leaving the military, possible issues that might arise include (a) physical and psychological injuries resulting from combat and non-combat situations, (b) health issues, (c) substance abuse issues, (d) learning how to function in a non-structured environment, (e) friendship difficulties, (f) family discord, (g) difficulties with authority, (h) issues of perceived support, and (i) identity issues.

As Westwood et al. (2008) describe, after discharge many military personnel experience isolation and aloneness as civilians, "often feeling misunderstood or simply out of place in the civilian world" (pp. 297–298). The experience of having a loyal group of buddies abruptly comes to an end, and as the separation from this primary community that has lent meaning to their lives continues, no substitute is found (Sweet, Stoler, Kelter, & Thurrell, 1989). The lack of connection with others can exacerbate veterans' transitional process, increasing their susceptibility

to other problems, including family difficulties and the excessive use of alcohol and/or other substances. Veteran couples have a greater propensity for marital break-up (Riggs, Byrne, Weathers, & Litz, 1998; Shehan, 1987), as well as an increased susceptibility to a myriad of relationship problems, such as decreases in communication (Galovski & Lyons, 2004; Lyons, 2001; Riggs et al., 1998) and intimacy (Matsakis, 2007; Riggs et al., 1998) and increases in emotional numbing (Cook, Riggs, Thompson, Coyne, & Sheikh, 2004; Galovski & Lyons, 2004), anger, and hostility (Calhoun et al., 2002; Carrol, Rueger, Foy, & Donahoe, 1985; Matsakis, 2007).

Current research examining the broader issue of transition for former members of the Canadian Forces (CF) entering the civilian world is severely lacking. Although programs have been designed to help Canadian veterans undergo successful transitions into civilian life (Westwood, Black, & McLean, 2002), they have often not been informed by systematic research. Rather, these supports and services have relied heavily on anecdotal feedback from interested individuals and post-hoc non-systematic discussions with group members. These include services offered through veterans' organizations as well as independent support groups run by a variety of individuals geared specifically toward former military members.

Veterans' associations tend to provide an open and flexible environment where veterans can meet on their own time for social interactions. More formal groups tend to have a set weekly or biweekly meeting time as well as one or more leaders, and may focus specifically on certain topics. Both types of support can have beneficial effects depending on the needs of the individual. Sweet et al. (1989), in their evaluation of a support group for veterans forced into early retirement, found that groups can "rekindle strong feelings of comradeship and trust experienced in the military" (p. 175), and the comfort of having a loyal group of buddies and a sense of solidarity against the outside world can have great therapeutic effects.

Hunt and Robbins (2001), in their study of social support for World War II veterans, note that it is in these environments that "veterans can discuss their memories, their narratives of war, and perhaps develop narratives for memories that are still traumatic" (p. 180). In Canada, researchers at the University of British Columbia have developed a group program specifically for former military members struggling with their transition into civilian life (Westwood et al., 2002). These groups provide a safe environment where individuals can receive support and understanding from others who have similar backgrounds and struggles, as well as learn skills to better adapt to employment outside of the military. Having their social and emotional needs met, those graduating from these groups are better equipped to return to the civilian world. Other benefits include increased mental health, more significant interpersonal relationships, higher activity levels, and increased retirement or workplace satisfaction (Hunt & Robbins, 2001; Sweet et al., 1989; Westwood et al., 2002).

It is necessary to conduct research specifically targeting veterans to better understand and conceptualize their transitional experiences. Results of these studies can serve to establish appropriate services and inform counsellors of how best to work with this population. The authors hope that the current study, based on the subjectively reported experiences of transition for Canadian Forces veterans living on "civvy" street, will assist counsellors in achieving these goals.

METHOD

General Survey Design Features

In general, the first author created the Canadian Veterans in Transition Survey (CVITS) following recommendations by Creswell (2005) for constructing effective surveys. The survey incorporated non-ambiguous language and questions that primarily required single answers as opposed to multiple answers (e.g., How would you characterize your transition?). The questions were kept short and were worded in the affirmative; they provided discrete answers for respondents (e.g., the response options were balanced and scaled using the same adjectives, as in the question on perceived appreciation by civilians: "very much appreciated by civilians—not at all appreciated by civilians"). Finally, the survey was pilot tested with three Canadian Forces veterans described in more detail in the following section.

Survey Content

Some of the content of the survey was based on the current literature, as cited in the introduction to this article (e.g., PTSD diagnosis in Part 1 of the survey; struggles upon leaving the military in Part 2 of the survey). As well, the first author drew upon approximately 10 years of clinical experience in working with Canadian veterans in transition in both group and individual counselling settings (e.g., feeling appreciated by civilians in Part 2 of the survey). Finally, the survey included feedback from veterans' organizations in Canada such as the Royal Canadian Legion (RCL) (e.g., 9 of the questions in Part 1 of the survey). General demographic information was collected based on commonly collected information in survey research (e.g., age, gender, ethnicity, marital status, province of residence), while the more specific demographic questions related to the Canadian military were generated with the help of three Canadian Forces veteran reviewers (e.g., Operational Stress Injury diagnosis, dates of service, PTSD diagnosis).

Pilot Testing

The survey was pilot tested (Creswell, 2005) with two Canadian Forces veterans for clarity, readability, and terminology. It was then further reviewed by the Director of Service Bureau of the Dominion Command of the RCL, the largest veterans' organization in Canada and a co-sponsor of the study. All three reviewers of the initial versions of the survey were Caucasian males; two had 30 years or more in the Canadian Forces, and one served for 6 years; one reviewer was French-Canadian; and one had experience in combat situations. Survey responses

from the reviewers were not collected and analyzed, as the first author did not seek ethical approval for this. However, feedback from the pilot testing was incorporated into the final version of the survey in both of Canada's official languages, to which the RCL posted a link on their website homepage (http://www.legion.ca/Home/SiteHome_e.cfm). The survey was hosted on a secure server at the Survey Research Centre housed in the first author's home university.

Canadian Veterans in Transition Survey (CVITS)

The survey consisted of 28 questions divided into two parts: demographic information and transition experiences. Part 1 included demographic questions on age, gender, family ancestry, nature and duration of military service, combat experience, PTSD diagnosis, Operational Stress Injuries, time out of the military, circumstances of release from the military, geographical location, and status as a client of Veterans Affairs Canada (VAC).

Part 2 included questions on the veterans' transition experiences, including the nature of the transition process, struggles upon immediate release and in the months/years following release, help-seeking behaviours, perceptions of help received, barriers to seeking help, perceived appreciation by civilians, and respondents' recommendations for a successful transition. The CVITS was designed for any member of the Canadian Forces who had served in a full-time capacity at some point in their military career. This would include anyone who served in the regular forces in one or more of the four branches of the Canadian military, as well as Reservists who had served in a Special Duty Area (SDA; e.g., Yugoslavia, East Timor) or a foreign operation, as these postings are normally full-time for a period of 6 months.

Sample and Recruitment

Online surveys that involve open-access websites, e-mail recruitment strategies, and snowball sampling methods face challenges with respect to sampling issues such as representativeness, sampling bias, and response rates (Evans & Mathur, 2005; Tingling, Parent, & Wade, 2003). The main issues with online surveys centre on response rates and sample bias, or the "digital divide."

Tingling et al. (2003) report that research on response rates for online surveys is somewhat equivocal. Some studies report higher response rates, some studies report initially higher response rates which decline once the "novelty factor" has worn off, and some research reports significantly lower response rates for online surveys. Sample bias or the "digital divide" has also been identified as a disadvantage of web-based surveys (Tingling et al., 2003), whereby there is an overrepresentation of computer-literate respondents and an underrepresentation of those with less computer skill and/or interest. The authors acknowledge that both issues represent limitations in the current study and that, in all likelihood, sample bias of the "digital divide" sort occurred.

The principal recruitment strategy for the CVITS involved posting the online survey on the RCL's main webpage and internally advertising the survey to RCL

members through posters and e-mail. In addition, information e-mails with a live link to the survey were sent to other veterans' organizations, inviting them to send the e-mail and/or the link to their members to post a link on their website. The veterans' organizations contacted by the first author are found in the Appendix.

The first author requested that the link be forwarded to any interested members and/or be posted on the organization's website. A formal response to the e-mail recruitment letter was not requested. Representatives from the Army, Navy, Air Force Veterans of Canada, Veteran Voice (http://www.veteranvoice.info/) and the Hong Kong Veterans Commemorative Association responded directly, indicating that they would either post a link to the survey on their website or forward the link to their members. Given that all of the recruitment occurred through veterans' organizations, it is possible that veterans who join veterans' organizations are overrepresented in the survey. However, because data regarding the proportion of Canadian veterans who are also members of veterans' organizations do not exist, comparison with the total population of veterans is problematic.

Participants

Participants included self-identified Canadian Forces veterans. In the current study, a "veteran" was defined as any former member of the CF who had served in a full-time capacity with the CF for a minimum period of six months. This would include reservists (normally serving in a part-time capacity) who had served in an SDA or those who served in overseas missions, such as United Nations Peacekeeping operations.

RESULTS

Representativeness of Sample

Table 1 presents the relative numbers of the of the estimated total veteran population in Canada by war zone or service type, compared to the numbers of veterans who completed the CVITS.

It is unclear when examining the figures in Table 1 what the percentages of veterans in the general population are, given that one individual may be a veteran of one or more eras (e.g., an individual may have served in Korea and subsequently served in a peacekeeping mission at a later time). Likewise, in the current study, while veterans were asked to identify which war zones they served in while active in the CF, they were not limited to endorsing one category. In terms of representativeness, then, it is difficult to determine how representative the participants of the current survey are in comparison to the "general" veteran population. As such, generalizations of the results of this study to the greater Canadian veteran population are not possible.

Descriptive Statistics

RESPONSE RATE

Descriptive statistics for Part 1 of the survey (Demographics) appear in Table 2. Given the recruitment strategies, the response rate of this survey is difficult to approximate. First, there is no way of knowing how many veterans visit an open-access website such as the one maintained by the RCL. While one can track website "hits" during the study's sampling timeframe, there is no way of knowing who those "hits" represent (e.g., veterans, family members, military enthusiasts, researchers). Similarly, tracking the number of e-mails sent out by the various veterans' organizations to their members does not provide information on who those members are or whether or not they are exclusively members of that organization. For example, the first author is acquainted with a number of veterans who are members of three or four different veterans' organizations simultaneously. Unfortunately, even an educated guess about the response rate cannot be generated, representing a limitation of online surveys (Evans & Mathur, 2005; Tingling et al., 2003) and e-mail recruitment strategies such as the one employed in this study.

Table 1
Representativeness of Survey Sample Compared to Total Veteran Population

Total Population Frequency[a]		CVITS Frequencies
World War I	1	0
World War II	205,533	5
Korea	13,943	3
Vietnam	n/a[b]	4[b]
Peacekeeping/foreign operations as of March 2006)	150,000	120
In-Canada operations (since October 1947)	> 1,000,000	70
Declined to answer	n/a	14
Total responses	n/a	216

Note. Total veteran numbers were obtained from Veterans Affairs Canada, http://www.vac-acc.gc.ca/remembers/sub.cfm?source=feature/week2007/vw07_media/general_stat

[a]Total numbers of Canadian veterans are difficult to tabulate due to the fact that one individual may be a "veteran" of several different operations. [b]Although Canada never officially joined the Vietnam War, some Canadian Forces members chose to serve in Vietnam under other military forces such as the United States.

Table 2
CVITS Descriptive Statistics: Demographics

Survey item	% response
Age (yrs.) (*n* = 216)	
20-30	2.3
31-40	10.2
41-50	31.0
51-60	30.6
61-70	15.7
> 70	10.2
Gender (*n* = 216)	
Male	93.1
Female	6.9
Marital status (*n* = 216)	
Single	10.2
Married/common-law	79.6
Divorced	6.9
Separated	2.8
Widowed	0.5
Family ancestry (*n* = 208)	
First Nations	4.3
British-Canadian	51.4
French-Canadian	16.3
European-Canadian	18.3
Middle-Eastern Canadian	1.0
Other	8.7
Area of military served (*n* = 207)	
Army	60.4
Navy	15.0
Air Force	19.3
Reserves	2.4
Other	2.9
Served in a war zone (*n* = 200)	
Yes	61.1
No	32.4
Declined to answer	6.5
War zone served (*n* = 132)	
WW2	3.8
Korea	2.3
Vietnam	3.0
UN Peacekeeping	70.5
Afghanistan	8.3
Other	12.1
Duration of service (*n* = 194)	
< 5 yrs	8.2
5-10 yrs	10.3
10-15 yrs	9.3
Duration of service (*n* = 194) – *continued*	
15-20 yrs	12.4
> 20 yrs	59.8
Rank upon release (*n* = 177)	
Non-commissioned officers (enlisted ranks)	84.2
Commissioned officers (officer ranks)	15.8
Length of time out of service (*n* = 190)	
< 5 yrs	35.1
5-10 yrs	12.2
10-15 yrs	22.3
15-20 yrs	11.7
> 20 yrs	18.6
Reason for leaving (*n* = 192)	
Medical release	34.4
Voluntary prior to contract ending	18.2
Release at end of contract	24.0
Other	23.4
Current member of a veterans organization (*n* = 194)	
Yes	62.4
No	37.6
Client of Veterans Affairs Canada (VAC) (*n* = 186)	
Yes	64.0
No	36.0
Operational stress injury (*n* = 158)	
Yes	55.1
No	44.9
PTSD diagnosis (*n* = 179)	
Yes	30.7
No	69.3
Province of residence (*n* =190)	
Newfoundland	2.1
Nova Scotia	9.5
PEI	0.5
New Brunswick	5.3
Quebec	10.5
Ontario	30.5
Manitoba	1.6
Saskatchewan	1.1
Alberta	12.6
British Columbia	26.3

GENERAL RESPONDENT PROFILE

The vast majority of survey respondents were male (93.1%, *n* = 216) and the majority of survey respondents were between 41 and 60 years old (61.6%, *n* = 216). Four fifths (79.6%, *n* = 216) were married or living common-law; 51.4% (*n* = 208) identified their family ancestry as British-Canadian, 18.3% (*n* = 208) as European-Canadian, and 16.3% (*n* = 208) as French-Canadian. Respondents resided largely in Ontario and British Columbia (30.5% and 26.3%, respectively, *n* = 190). The majority of survey respondents (60.4%, *n* = 207) served in the Army, and 61.1% (*n* = 216) reported having served in a war zone or SDA. Of those who reported serving in a war zone or SDA (*n* = 130), 70.5% reported having served in a UN peacekeeping mission. In terms of duration of service and time elapsed since leaving the military, 59.8% (*n* = 194) had served for more than 20 years; 35.1% (*n* = 190) reported being out of the military less than 5 years; and 22.3% (*n* = 190) reported being out 10–15 years. Of those respondents who disclosed their rank upon release (*n* = 177), the vast majority (84.2%) were non-commissioned officers (NCO's or enlisted ranks).

More than one third (34.4%) of respondents (*n* = 192) reported leaving the military on a medical release, 24.0% were released at the end of their contract, and 18.2% were voluntarily released prior to the end of their contract. The majority of respondents (62.4%, *n* = 194) reported being a current member of a veterans' organization. About two-thirds of the survey participants (64.0%, *n* = 186) were current clients of VAC at the time of responding, while 36.0% reported no affiliation with VAC. When asked about Operational Stress Injuries (OSIs), 55.1% of those who replied to this question (*n* = 158) reported that they were suffering from an OSI. On the topic of PTSD, 30.7% of those who replied to this question (*n* = 179) reported having received a PTSD diagnosis; 69.3% reported no PTSD diagnosis.

TRANSITION EXPERIENCES

Descriptive statistics for Part 2 of the survey (Transition Experiences) are shown in Table 3. When the veterans were asked how they would characterize their transition, 191 respondents replied: *Very easy* = 7.9%, *Easy* = 11.5%, *Fairly easy* = 23.6%, *Fairly difficult* = 13.1%, *Difficult* = 20.9%, and *Very difficult* = 23.0%. When the data were grouped into only two categories (*Easy* and *Difficult*), 57.1% described their transition experience as difficult and 42.9% described their experience as easy.

When asked whether they believed they had made a successful transition from the military to civilian life, the majority of the 173 respondents (62.4%) felt that they had made a successful transition, while 37.6% felt that they had not made a successful transition to civilian life. When asked to choose what constituted the most important aspect of a successful transition for Canadian veterans, 26.8% of 190 reported that finding satisfying work was most important; 20.0% indicated that mental health was most important; 18.9% indicated that family was most

important; and 16.8% indicated that their relationship with their spouse was most important. When asked to name one thing that would have made their own transition easier, equal numbers of those who chose to respond (n = 169) felt that their transition would have been easier *if Canadians understood more about the military way of life* (28.4%) and *if I had more money* (28.4%).

Table 3
Respondent Descriptive Statistics: Transition Experiences

Survey Item	% response
Characterization of transition (n = 191)	
Very easy	7.9
Easy	11.5
Fairly easy	23.6
Fairly difficult	13.1
Difficult	20.9
Very difficult	23.0
Did you make a successful transition? (n = 173)	
Yes	62.4
No	37.6
Factors important to transition (n = 190)	
Friendships	2.6
Family	18.9
Finding satisfying work	26.8
Military buddies	3.2
Relationship with spouse	16.8
Mental health	20.0
Physical health	5.8
Other	5.8
Factors leading to easier transition (n = 169)	
I had more money	28.4
I had more friends	1.8
I had more support from family	2.4
Canadians understood more about the military way of life	28.4
I had someone to talk to	11.8
Other	27.2
Feel appreciated by civilians (n = 187)	
Very much appreciated	7.5
Appreciated	16.0
Somewhat appreciated	28.3
Somewhat under-appreciated	12.8
Under-appreciated	16.6
Not appreciated at all	18.7
Had immediate struggles (n = 195)	
Yes	76.7
Did not struggle	23.3
Had at least 1 immediate struggle (n = 148)	
My friendships	43.2
Family	21.6
Alcohol	9.5
My health	8.1
My employer	3.4
Had at least 1 immediate struggle (n = 148) – *continued*	
My spouse	2.0
Unemployment	6.8
My military memories	3.4
Other	2.0
Struggled in the months and years following release (n = 189)	
Yes	79.4
Did not struggle	20.6
Had at least 1 struggle in the months and years following release (n = 150)	
My friendships	38.7
Family	12.7
Alcohol	11.3
Violence or fighting	0.7
My health	20.0
My employer	2.0
My spouse	2.7
Unemployment	4.0
Drugs	0.7
My military memories	6.0
Other	2.0
Sought help for issues (n = 151)	
Yes	68.2
Did not seek help for any issue	31.8

(continued next page)

Table 3
Respondent Descriptive Statistics: Transition Experiences (continued)

Survey Item	% response	Survey Item	% response
Sought help for at least 1 reported issue (n = 104)		Sought help from (n = 106) – *continued*	
My friendships	6.7	Other	10.4
Family	18.3		
Alcohol	13.5	Characterization of help (n = 108)	
Violence or fighting	2.9	Very helpful	17.6
My health	43.3	Helpful	23.1
Unemployment	6.7	Somewhat helpful	31.5
My military memories	5.8	Somewhat unhelpful	7.4
Other	3.8	Unhelpful	7.4
		Very unhelpful	13.0
Sought help from (n = 106)		Barrier to seeking help (n = 41)	
Family members	1.9	My pride	22.0
Military buddies	5.7	Thought I could do it on my own	29.3
Veterans Affairs Canada	18.9	I was embarrassed	4.9
A professional counsellor	29.2	I couldn't afford it	2.4
My family doctor	21.7	I didn't know help was available	4.9
OSSIS peer support	6.6	There was no help available	24.4
My spouse/partner	5.7	Other	12.2

When asked whether or not Canadian veterans felt appreciated by civilians there were mixed responses. Nearly a third (28.3%) of those who replied to this question (n = 187) felt *somewhat appreciated by civilians*, while 18.7% felt *not at all appreciated by civilians*. One sixth of the respondents (16.6%) indicated that they felt *under-appreciated by civilians*, and 16% felt *appreciated by civilians*.

In order to get a clearer picture of respondents' feelings of being appreciated by civilians, we reduced the categories of responses into two binary categories of *feeling appreciated* or *feeling underappreciated*. In doing this, we see that the majority of those who responded to this question (51.9%) felt appreciated by civilians, while 48.1% felt under-appreciated by civilians.

Struggles upon release

Respondents were asked what issues they struggled with immediately following their release from the Canadian Forces. Of the sample (n = 195), 23.3% reported not having immediately struggled with any issues. However, for respondents reporting at least one immediate struggle (n = 148), 43.2% reported that they struggled with friendships, while 21.6% struggled with family. When asked about struggles appearing in the months and years following their release, 20.6% of the 189 respondents reported not struggling with any issues. However, for respondents who reported struggling with at least one issue in the months and years following their release (n = 150), 38.7% reported struggling with friendships, while only 12.7% reported struggling with family. Interestingly, 20.0% (n = 148) reported

struggling with their health in the months and years following their release from the Canadian Forces, while only 8.1% struggled with their health immediately following their release from the Canadian Forces.

help-seeking behaviour

Respondents were asked to report which issues they sought help for in their transition. Of those who responded (n = 151), 31.8% did not seek help for any issues. For those who sought help for at least one issue (n = 104), 43.3% sought help for their health and 18.3% sought help for issues with family. The survey then asked where or from whom they sought help, and 106 veterans responded. A fairly large percentage (29.2%) sought help from a professional counsellor, 21.7% sought help from their family doctor, and 18.9% sought help from VAC. When asked to characterize the help that they received, 31.5% characterized the help they received as *somewhat helpful,* followed by 23.1% who characterized the help as *helpful*. At the extreme ends of the scale, 17.6% characterized the help they received as *very helpful* and 13.0% characterized the help as *very unhelpful*. When the data were separated into binary categories of *helpful* and *unhelpful*, 27.8% of respondents characterized the help they received as *unhelpful* while 72.2% characterized the help they received as *helpful*.

Respondents were also asked what they perceived to be the barriers to seeking help. Although the number of responses was quite low (n = 41), it is interesting to note that 29.3% reported that they felt they could do it on their own, 24.4% reported that no help was available, and 22.0% stated that their pride was a barrier to them seeking help.

discussion

This article presents the results of a non-governmental study of Canadian veterans in transition, delivered via a web-based survey in both English and French. The survey collected descriptive information regarding the transition from military to civilian life, including problems experienced both immediately after the transition and in later years. The results offer interesting information regarding the difficulties this select group undergoes after ending their employment with the military. Findings highlight that although the majority of veterans feel they have made a successful transition, a large number of Canadian Forces veterans do not believe this to be the case. Additionally, the number of challenges facing Canadian Forces veterans over time remains fairly constant, as indicated by the 75.8% (n = 195) who reported struggling with at least one issue immediately upon release and the 79.4% (n = 189) who reported struggling with at least one issue in the months and years following release. Problems disclosed were related to friendships, health, family, and alcohol, and all were reported to have occurred more heavily in the months and years following release. Thus, the results of this survey lend support to the generally accepted understanding that the transition from the military to civilian life is a unique one that can be characterized by a number of challenges.

The concept of a successful versus an unsuccessful transition is the first that warrants merit. Overall, it is interesting to note that more than one third (37.6%) of those who responded to this question (n = 173) indicated they did not feel they had successfully transitioned into civilian life, and the majority of respondents who rated their transition (n = 191) said it was at least "fairly difficult" (57.1%). Although it is encouraging that the majority of veterans in the survey felt they had made a successful transition, almost 38% felt that they had not—a substantial number and worthy of consideration. The main contributors to a successful transition were reported to be finding satisfying work, stable mental health, family, and relationship with spouse. These four factors should thus be considered as a focus for individuals exiting the military and for counsellors who work toward providing assistance to these individuals.

The first contributing factor—satisfying employment—can be and has been addressed through the implementation of services geared specifically toward teaching military veterans job-ready skills, assisting them in finding civilian employment that matches the skill set they already possess, and providing career counselling, among other things. These services are largely provided through veterans' organizations but can also be accessed through independent channels. Ending military employment does not necessarily imply complete retirement from work; thus, it is important to determine whether veterans wish to seek further work and, if so, to assist them in doing so. Research has even linked stable and satisfying employment to increased health (e.g., Rosen, Ickovics, & Moghadam, 1990).

The second factor identified as a contributor to a successful transition is mental health. There continues to be a stigma attached to mental health problems in the military, and this stigma can stand in the way of veterans seeking help, thus potentially exacerbating their struggles. They may believe that their mental health symptoms reflect a weakness in their character for which they must assume responsibility (Britt & Pury, 2008). It is essential that assistance for mental health issues be available and that the stigma surrounding mental health concerns be addressed by the Canadian military.

The third and fourth factors attributed to successful transitions are relationships with family and with significant others. Whenever possible, family members should be given information concerning the transition from military to civilian life so that they may be better equipped to support their veteran. They should be made aware of potential struggles and should be informed about what to expect and how best to understand the transition their family member is undergoing.

Counsellors working with family members can also contribute to the transition by supporting spouses and other family members in understanding the nature of transition and helping family members find resources for themselves and for their veteran spouses, parents, or children. Veteran couples tend to be at high risk and are likely to struggle with a number of unique problems. Helping former military members ease their struggles with their families can be achieved in a variety of ways, including couples' counselling and therapy or skill-based groups. An option that has recently been implemented in transition groups in Vancouver, British

Columbia, has been to run an adjacent group for the spouses of the veterans taking part in the transition program. This enables the spouses to acquire skills to better communicate with their veteran partner, as well as provide an environment where often-neglected topics are brought forth and discussed.

Results of the survey also show that, for those veterans reporting at least one struggle at the time of transition, problems with friendship were the most highly reported. This is an interesting finding and one that is best understood within the context of military training and military culture. Responsibility and loyalty to comrades are crucial components of military life, and members are acculturated to believe and behave as though they are responsible for the lives of those around them (Westwood et al., 2008). Comradeship is promoted through basic training emphasizing cohesiveness and equality, and grows quickly in combat by the desperate need to work together in order to survive (Sweet et al., 1989). Given this strong identification with the group, it is not surprising that those in the military develop strong connections with one another, connections that are unlike those created in civilian life. Thus, when individuals exit the military, they are likely to find themselves torn away from their "buddies" and to have subsequent difficulties developing friendships with civilians who have not undergone similar military experiences.

To counteract this, it can be helpful for veterans to take part in any type and number of social support groups geared specifically to them. Some of these groups were reviewed in the introduction, and although research on these types of services is not plentiful, studies that have been conducted indicate that the social support provided through these groups is helpful and necessary (Hunt & Robbins, 2001; Sweet et al., 1989; Westwood et al., 2002).

Further challenges brought forth by the respondents of our survey were struggles with health and alcohol use. The heavy use of alcohol within the military world has received attention in previous literature, with findings indicating that employment factors specific to the military culture are significantly related to alcohol consumption (Ames, Cunradi, Moore, & Stern, 2007). After the completion of military service, the use of alcohol may continue as a way to cope with the difficulties of the transition, including traumatic memories, isolation, anger, and a host of psychological problems and physical problems. Thus, ameliorating substance-use problems is usually best accomplished by a focus on mental health, physical health, and family relationships. Substance-use counselling, couples counselling, and/or social support groups can target these challenges and exhibit noteworthy benefits.

Appreciation by society is a further interesting finding reported in our survey. Of those who replied to this question (n = 187), approximately half (47.9%) indicated they felt underappreciated by Canadian civilians upon being released from the military, and 28.4% of 169 respondents indicated their transition would have been easier if Canadians understood more about the military way of life. These numbers speak to the very real importance of social support for veterans in transition. These findings highlight the significance that public opinion and understanding can have on the well-being and re-integration of veterans into

civilian society. Perhaps most crucial, these responses highlight the need for those working with this population to be well acquainted with military life. Supports and services implemented for this population (including individual, couples, and group counselling) must be developed and directed by individuals who are familiar with the challenges associated with military life. This is a unique population with unique needs. It is essential that those choosing to work with this population be familiar with their struggles so as to provide the most supportive and beneficial assistance possible.

The fact that this study was conducted independently of the Canadian government is significant for a number of reasons. First, anecdotal evidence from almost 10 years of clinical practice with Canadian veterans in group and individual counselling has provided the first author with a unique understanding of the relationship between many veterans and the federal government. In the first author's clinical work, veterans often report a sense of ambivalence, anger, frustration, mistrust of government and, at times, a sense of appreciation for the work of VAC in assisting them with their medical, psychological, or financial needs.

Although the sample from which the author draws this anecdotal evidence is in no way representative of all veterans, it is possible that it may be more representative of those veterans who seek help for their transition issues. Due to the sometimes strained relationship between veterans and VAC, a non-governmental study of veteran transition issues fills a gap in the literature currently available on the subject, as currently the only available literature comes from government-conducted or government-sponsored studies. Furthermore, this study included a small subsample of respondents (n = 64) who, reportedly, have never been clients of VAC. Given that the majority of information has come from research conducted on VAC clients, this study may offer some future research directions regarding veteran transitions for those veterans who fall outside the purview of governmental departments.

Limitations

The first limitation of the current study is representativeness of the sample. Given the challenges inherent in determining exact numbers of veterans categorized by service abroad and type of military campaign, generalizations to the general veteran population cannot be made.

A second minor limitation is attrition. The total sample ranged from 216 at the beginning of the survey to 169 in the last questions of the survey, indicating that a substantial majority of veterans who logged onto the site (78.2%) completed the survey. Respondent attrition could be due to several different factors. Respondents may have experienced fatigue or lack of interest that led to a premature exit from the survey. There is a chance that as the questions began to focus on veteran struggles, respondents experienced some discomfort in reporting on their struggles and chose not to complete the survey. Due to the lack of representativeness of the survey respondents and the challenges in estimating response rates, the results of the survey must be interpreted with a degree of caution. However, even with

these limitations the current study provides interesting information regarding the experiences and issues facing Canadian veterans in transition.

A third limitation is the wording of several of the survey questions, which provide interesting data that are, unfortunately, somewhat difficult to interpret due to the terminology used. For example, respondents indicated that they sought help from professional counsellors. Given that the term "professional counsellor" was not defined in the study, participants may have actually sought help from a variety of mental health professionals (e.g., psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers) including but not limited to professional counsellors. Likewise, participants reported struggling with "health issues," but we do not know which particular health issues veterans struggled with during their transitions. Future iterations of this survey would benefit from operationalizing the term "professional counsellors" for participants in order to obtain more specific data and, perhaps, providing a fillable form so that participants can report specific health issues with which they struggled.

It is important to remember that the current sample consisted of former military personnel who, for the most part, had served in the army, had served in a war zone, had served more than 20 years, and were between the ages of 41 and 60 years old. Our results reflect the experience of these individuals through their transition to civilian life, and future survey results may provide a very different picture of veteran transition with a more diverse sample. Additionally, the survey was only accessible online and, as such, may have excluded many veterans who did not have access to a computer or for some reason were unable to complete an online survey.

Finally, there is no way of knowing whether respondents received input from others while completing this survey, although it is unlikely that this would have skewed the results. As data regarding pre-existing mental health issues or risk variables were not collected, it is possible, even likely, that these issues, if present, will have had an impact on the respondents' transitions to civilian life.

Due to the lack of a comparison group, an inability to determine representativeness of the sample, and the nature of survey research, it is important to recognize that the current study offers no conclusions regarding predictive factors related to veteran transition. The authors hope that the results of the current study will form a foundation of knowledge that leads to future research in this important area.

Future Research

Future research should include larger and more representative samples to determine whether the findings highlighted in this survey hold true for a larger population of more diverse veterans. Additionally, studies that employ a longitudinal design following groups of veterans over time would allow for a greater understanding of the challenges experienced in the years following release from the military. Future surveys conducted via online and paper-and-pencil methods are likely to allow a greater number of veterans to participate than in the current study; outcome studies investigating the effects of group interventions for veterans

in transition would also be beneficial. Additionally, collecting information about veterans both before and after military service could aid in determining how trauma or other psychological disorders, present prior to military service, impact the nature and quality of the transition to civilian life for Canadian veterans.

This study provides information on the subjectively reported experiences of former Canadian Forces members transitioning from the military into civilian life. Given the struggles reported by the participants in this study, it is crucial that research continue to explore this select population in order to provide them with the most effective supports and services as they leave the military and try to "make it on civvy street."

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Appendix
Veterans Organizations Contacted for Recruitment

Organization	Method of Contact
8 RECCE (8 Canadian Reconnaissance Regiment)	Email
#422 Squadron Association	Email
Air Force Association of Canada (Quebec Group)	Email
Air Force Association of Canada	Email
ANAVETS (Army, Navy, Air Force Veterans of Canada)	Email
Black Watch of Canada	Email
CAVUNP (Canadian Association of Veterans in UN Peacekeeping)	Email
Canadian Guards Regimental Association	Email
CPVA (Canadian Peacekeeping Veterans Association)	Email
Canadian Veterans Help (Website)	Email
Hong Kong Veterans Commemorative Association	Email
Jewish War Veterans of Canada Association	Email
Korea Veterans Association	Email
NCVA (National Council of Veterans Associations of Canada)	Email
National Aboriginal Veterans Association	Email
Royal Canadian Army Service Corps	Email
Veterans Affairs Canada	Phone
Veteran Voice (Website)	Email
VVIC (Vietnam Veterans in Canada)	Email
Western Front Association	Email

About the Authors

Timothy G. Black is an associate professor of counselling psychology in the Department of Educational Psychology and Leadership Studies at the University of Victoria. His main interests are in the area of military to civilian transitions for Canadian Forces Veterans.

Chiara Papile, MA, is a doctoral student in counselling psychology student at the University of Alberta.

Address correspondence to Dr. Tim Black, University of Victoria, Department of Educational Psychology and Leadership Studies, Faculty of Education, University of Victoria, Victoria, BC, Canada, V8W 3N4; e-mail <tblack@uvic.ca>