

The Director, Transition to Veterans Program Office has asked CNA to conduct a study that establishes the intersections between civilian and military life courses, identifies servicemembers' needs at different points in their life courses, and characterizes what makes for a successfully reintegrated veteran. As part of this ongoing study, "Assessing TAP's Success for Different Cohorts," the CNA research team is investigating how servicemembers connect with and find a meaningful place within their communities as they transition from military to civilian life. Our aim is to uncover potential barriers to reintegration they may face using complementary research approaches. The first is to examine information from existing surveys; the second is to conduct focused discussion groups with transitioning or recently transitioned Service Members. Findings from both these research approaches will inform recommendations regarding any changes to the current Transition Assistance Programs.

Purpose of the focus groups:

There is no single, existing dataset that captures veterans' community reintegration, beyond measuring employment or education. Community integration is commonly referred to as social capital in the academic literature. The concept of social capital suggests that the level of community involvement can reveal how integrated a person is within his or her community. We would like to know how community involvement affects veterans' reintegration. Therefore, we want to conduct focus groups with recently transitioned servicemembers to discuss their ability to reintegrate and develop social capital in the first few years after separating from active duty. The main groups of questions for the groups will be:

1. What were the veterans' initial post-service plans?
2. How did veterans choose the communities to which they relocated after service?
3. What community organizations helped them to reintegrate?
4. What challenges did veterans encounter as they (re)integrated with these communities?
5. How did the Transition Assistance Program affect their reintegration experiences?
6. How did their community involvement affect their employment opportunities and overall well-being?

Our focus group protocol lists the specific questions within each of these six categories. This memo explains how we will find focus group participants and describe the data that we will collect from them.

How we plan on finding and gathering the participants for the focus groups:

Finding a large population of recently transitioned servicemembers is difficult, because the population of interest has already separated from the military and is dispersed across the country. To address this challenge, we will contact veterans to participate in focus groups through three avenues. Each avenue will capture a different stage of the reintegration process. First, we will contact active-duty servicemembers while they are out-processing at "transition points." This group has the benefit of still being in the military, so we should be able to identify them relatively easily and meet with a large population of soon-to-be-separated servicemembers. We will gather information about their post-separation plans.

Second, we will contact veterans who have transitioned from active duty to the reserve component and are still in either the Selected Reserve (SelRes) or the Individual Ready Reserve (IRR). The Marine Corps and Air Force convene large-scale, in-person musters of IRR members roughly once a month. We have engaged with the appropriate Marine Corps and Air Force POCs about the feasibility of conducting focus groups at their musters, and they were receptive. These musters would provide our focus groups with a large population of servicemembers who have transitioned from active duty. In addition, the Navy requires “virtual” musters that include an on-line questionnaire. We will work with the Navy to include reintegration questions for recently separated veterans in this questionnaire. The Army is not currently conducting musters of its IRR population; we will therefore not be able to collect information from this group. In addition to engaging with the IRR population, we will also attend SelRes drill weekends to conduct focus groups, since the SelRes and IRR reserve populations likely have very different transition experiences; it is important that we capture both perspectives.

Finally, we will work with veteran organizations, such as the Veterans of Foreign Wars, American Legion, and Student Veterans of America, to find participants for our groups. We will ask the organizations to help us gather groups of veterans who are less than two years removed from active duty and who volunteer to participate.

Data collected from the participants:

Within each focus group, we will ask for demographic information. Specifically, we will ask the participants to fill out a voluntary intake form that asks for their age at separation, gender, race, education level at separation, marital status at separation, number of children at separation, service affiliation, officer vs. enlisted, rank at separation, and length of time since last active duty service. At no point will participants be asked to provide their names or any other individual-level information other than what is listed here. The demographic information will be used to show how our focus group samples compare to the overall demographics of recently transitioned veterans. These forms will be distributed at the end of the focus groups, after the facilitator has left the room, so there is no concern regarding the facilitator’s ability to match intake forms with individuals. They will be hand-carried back to CNA headquarters where they will be locked in safes until the facilitators are able to enter the data on our secure server. Once this data entry is complete, the forms will be shredded.

We will record these discussions so that transcription can occur after the discussions have been conducted. We will be certain that any introductions are made prior to the recorder being turned on, should the group members want to introduce themselves.