

ABSTRACT

Military Services, Career Paths, and Life Course Outcomes: Implications for Social Mobility

Movement up the socioeconomic ladder is generally best achieved through higher education, but it is the least accessible to those most in need of the benefits. Entering the military is a less understood pathway to socioeconomic attainment. Service members obtain transferable skills through military training or enjoy educational benefits after temporary service. With accumulated human capital, they develop a lifetime military career or receive competitive wages in the civilian labor market after discharge. Drawing on data from 26 rounds of the 1979 National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, this project examines how military service shapes, reshapes, and moderates the patterns of income mobility over the life course and across three generations. Based on nested logit random utility models, this work explicates the ordering, timing, and contexts of educational attainment, military service, and labor market participation that constitute unique career pathways and analyzes the differences in mechanisms of intra - and inter-generational transmission of income among military personnel and their civilian counterparts. Preliminary results reveal that military serves as an engine for upward social movement for selected groups of Americans , and social mobility is a fluid concept that different pathways to social attainment lead to differential mobility patterns . Analyzing the dynamic processes within and across generations will shed new light on the causes of diverging life course outcomes, better explaining how major life events and socioeconomic factors enable or constrain upward social mobility. More broadly, this project serves as an outreach to excite the general interest of serving and developing a military career as a viable alternative. The statistics and findings will assist the Department of Veterans Affairs, VA regional offices, and other relevant NGOs to evaluate social services and economic development programs catered to service members and veterans in the United States.