Incarcerated Veterans and their Adaptation to Prison

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Abstract

In 2016, an estimated 107,400 veterans were incarcerated in the U.S. (Maruschak et al., 2021), comprising part of the population known as "justice-involved veterans," veterans involved in the criminal justice system. The current study explores the influence military training had on the way justice-involved veterans "do time" in prison. In sharp contrast to the misconduct literature, which utilizes quantitative data and links variables statistically to some measurement of prison misconduct, the current study is one of the first to qualitatively explore how incarcerated veterans connect their military experiences to their adjustment to prison life by giving voice to the veterans themselves. Forty-three currently incarcerated veterans in a Midwestern state were interviewed. They described how they acclimatized to the correctional environment utilizing the discipline and adherence to structure learned during their military service. If justice-involved veterans adapt to the prison environment by relying on their military training, then it may be possible to help them further utilize that training to succeed in rehabilitation and reentry.

Keywords Veterans · Military · Incarceration · Adaptation · Prison · Adjustment

Introduction

The dual mission of the American correctional system is to correct individuals who failed to comply with the law and provide rehabilitative measures to reform those deemed unfit for society (Lynch, 2000). The success of the rehabilitation provided behind bars may depend on the individual's ability to adapt to the prison environment. Previous studies have illustrated that prison climate and culture (Auty & Liebling, 2020; Clemmer, 1940; Wooldredge, 2020), pre-prison experiences (Irwin & Cressey, 1962; Solinas-Saunders & Stacer, 2012), the deprivations of

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incarceration (Sykes, 1958), prison socialization and social support (Giallombardo, 1966; Kruttschnitt et al., 2000; Ward & Kassebaum, 1965), isolation and separation from the outside world (Crewe, 2007, 2012), connection to a support system outside the prison (Zamble, 1992), and involvement with prison programs (Solinas-Saunders & Stacer, 2012; Zamble, 1992; Zamble & Porporino, 2013) are significantly associated with individuals' adjustment to prison life.

Additionally, scholars have raised questions about the influence of earlier institutionalization experiences, such as military experiences, on one's ability to adapt to the regimented life of the prison (Logan et al., 2021; Logan & Pare, 2017; May et al., 2017; Stacer & Solinas-Saunders, 2015). Increasingly, criminologists have shown interest in examining the unique characteristics of justice-involved veterans, including their shared military culture (Ahlin & Douds, 2016; Douds et al., 2017), the impact of substance abuse, mental health concerns, and traumatic brain injuries (Baldwin, 2017; Barton, 2014; Black et al., 2005; Cavanaugh, 2011; Douds et al., 2017; Hawkins, 2010; Weaver et al., 2013), and increased risk of homelessness and suicide (Barton, 2014; Douds et al., 2017).

Recent quantitative scholarship on veteran incarceration experiences has prioritized the roles of mental health, substance abuse, and personal characteristics on adaptation to prison, such as violation of prison norms (Bennett, 1954; Goetting & Howsen, 1986; Logan & Pare, 2017; Stacer & Solinas-Saunders, 2015) and violence against officers or other incarcerated individuals (Logan & Pare, 2017). But qualitative studies are needed to give voice to those veterans experiencing incarceration.

Using a qualitative framework that employed semi-structured interviews, this study is one of the first to explore incarcerated veterans' views of the prison experience in conjunction with their assessment of the influence that military experiences have on their adaptation to the prison environment by examining these individuals' own reflections. Three previous studies have provided incarcerated veterans' perspectives on the incarceration experience (Goggin et al., 2018; May et al., 2017; Unwin & Winder, 2021). May et al. (2017) conducted a survey of incarcerated individuals and compared veterans and non-veterans regarding how willing they would be to serve a different type of sentence instead of incarceration. While this study provided pertinent quantitative information on incarcerated veterans' perceptions of disciplinary sanctions as compared to those of incarcerated individuals without military experience, it did not involve participants' personal reflections. Goggin et al. (2018) conducted a quality improvement study of veterans incarcerated in a veteran's service unit within a prison using a survey instrument comprised of both quantitative and qualitative items; however, the study focused entirely on the veterans' experiences within the special unit with the goal of identifying programming and reentry needs. While these studies provided contextual information about incarcerated veterans, neither study utilized an in-depth interview methodology, nor did they focus on the impact that military experience may have on incarcerated veterans' adjustment to prison life. More recently, Unwin and Winder (2021) interviewed six former military veterans in the United Kingdom about their experiences of offending and incarceration. They reported three themes that resulted from their interpretative phenomenological analysis: "You're baptized into the army"; us versus them; and operational mind-set (Unwin & Winder, 2021). Although this

study has some similarities to ours, they provide a different perspective, advocating for a hyper focus on similarities with other incarcerated individuals rather than on unique experiences. Further, our study was conducted in the United States and included a larger number of participants.

Two main objectives guided our study: 1) to examine patterns of adaptation to prison among incarcerated veterans; and 2) to describe the ways in which past institutionalization (specifically military experiences) influences current institutionalization experiences (specifically incarceration).

By giving voice to incarcerated veterans, the study adds a new perspective to the extant evidence that the military and the prison are in many ways comparable institutions in that they coerce individuals into a regimented routine and structure but fail to effectively train individuals to maintain control of their lives once the support of the institution wanes. Studying adaptation to prison is relevant for identifying programs that facilitate the reentry process by providing resources and allowing individuals to develop the resilience necessary to live on their own and make law-abiding choices.

The Prison and the Military

In *Asylums*, Goffman (1961) referred to prisons and military installations as total institutions. Defined as structured environments in which arrangements are characterized by complete loss of agency, physical confinement, and the imposition of routines, schedules, and regimens that do not "support the self as constitute it" (Goffman, 1961, p. 154), total institutions impose uniformity across groups of individuals for the primary purpose of correcting or re-socializing (Goffman, 1961).

The definition of total institutions has been challenged in the past decade. Scott (2010) argued that total institutions are unlikely to be static entities. Within total institutions, agents continuously engage in a process of renegotiation of terms. While constrained, individuals can reshape interactions and make meanings of their own experiences. Crewe (2007, p. 5) defined male penitentiaries in the United Kingdom as "porous permeable", as incarcerated individuals bring their own subculture to the prison. Prisons are not insulated; their structure allows external forces to "permeate from the outside in and from the inside out" (Ellis, 2021, p. 176). Every day, staff enter the prison to work their shifts and visitors come in, bringing their own attitudes, perspectives, and experiences to the prison. New prisoners are admitted, while others are transferred or released, causing a continuous turnover within the prison population (Ellis, 2021). Inside the prison, radio and television are widely available and allow those incarcerated to catch a glimpse of the outside world. While these exchanges occur within a very structured and controlled manner, they are an expression of an imperfect separation between the world outside and life on the inside (Farrington, 1992).

Unlike the prison, the military is still considered a total institution (Brown, 2008; Treadwell, 2010). In 1973, the United States government moved away from conscription to an all-volunteer force (Rostker, 2006). Some experts argue that the rigid and structured environment of the military still reflects the total institution

(Brown, 2008; Treadwell, 2010). Military training is meant to reshape individuals to mold them into soldiers to fulfill the mission of the organization. As Brown put it, the military environment "undercuts the person's individuality, disregards the individual's dignity, and results in a regimentation of life that typically disregards his or her desires or inclinations" (2008, pp. 18–19). The main issue is that military training is not suitable for civilian life, and many veterans struggle to adjust to mainstream society after discharge from the military (Brooke & Peck, 2019; Brown, 2008; Treadwell, 2010). While joining the military is likely to contribute to one's life trajectories (Sampson & Laub, 1996), little is known about the influence that military service may have on one's pathways to crime (Culp et al., 2013) or experiences within the criminal justice system (Stacer & Solinas-Saunders, 2015; Unwin & Winder, 2021).

Theories of Prison Adaptation and Incarcerated Veterans

Several theoretical models have been proposed for the study of prison adaptation. In extant prison literature (DeLisi et al., 2004; Irwin & Cressey, 1962; Kruttschnitt et al., 2000; Solinas-Saunders & Stacer, 2012; Thomas, 1977), the *importation model* explains the process through which incarcerated individuals adapt to the rigidity of prison conditions. In this model, how incarcerated individuals adapt to the prison environment depends largely upon their pre-prison experiences and their demographics (Irwin & Cressey, 1962). Incarcerated individuals utilize previous experiences to cope with the prison environment, and thus the social organization of incarcerated individuals is like the social organization they experienced in society before their incarceration (Giallombardo, 1966; Heffernan, 1972; Owen, 1998; Ward & Kassebaum, 1965). This model suggests that individuals who were heavily involved in violent behaviors and held violent attitudes are likely to import these tendencies into the prison and are also more likely to engage in misconduct while incarcerated (DeLisi et al., 2004; Harer & Steffensmeier, 1996). Military experiences are another example of life experiences that may impact adaptation to prison. Using the importation model, Stacer and Solinas-Saunders (2015) found that military experience had no significant influence on individuals' likelihood of prison misconduct. In another study that employed the importation model to examine the influence of pre-prison experiences on prison adaptation among incarcerated veterans, Morgan et al. (2023) found that a PTSD diagnosis, poverty and homelessness prior to incarceration, physical disabilities, and alcohol or drug use prior to incarceration all contributed to incarcerated veterans' negative affect in prison. Further, Morgan et al. (2023) found that veterans convicted of violent offenses were more likely than veterans convicted of other offenses to manifest negative affect while incarcerated. Considering that veterans are more likely than non-veterans to be incarcerated for violent and sex offenses (Culp et al., 2013; Maruschak et al., 2021), diagnosed with mental health and addiction disorders (Schaffer, 2016), and receive longer sentences (Bronson et al., 2015), it is important to ascertain what aspects of military life may contribute to such dispositions. Some point to the possibility that the military may have indoctrinated soldiers to a culture of violence (Archer & Gartner, 1976) and

toxic masculinity (Enloe, 2000, 2015). In addition, violent behaviors may stem from soldiers' exposure to traumatic events (Greenberg et al., 2007; Lunasco et al., 2010).

Some differences between incarcerated veterans and other justice-involved veterans, as well as between veterans and non-veterans in the criminal justice system, may be the result of the availability of programs such as veterans' treatment courts, which provide an alternative to incarceration for veterans charged with crimes that are the result of exposure to trauma (Douds et al., 2017; Stacer & Solinas-Saunders, 2020). Diverting these offenders leaves only the more serious veteran offenders to be incarcerated. Since research has not yet examined these possibilities in detail, questions remain about veterans' pathways to incarceration.

In addition to emphasizing the role of pre-prison experiences in the analysis of adjustment to prison life (DeLisi et al., 2004; Solinas-Saunders & Stacer, 2012; Stacer & Solinas-Saunders, 2015; Thomas, 1977), scholars have also made the case that the conditions of incarceration, paired with the characteristics of the institution, contribute to the deprivation individuals experience behind the carceral walls—known as the *deprivation model* (Kruttschnitt et al., 2000; Solinas-Saunders & Stacer, 2012; Sykes, 1958; Thomas, 1977). The deprivation model posits that the prison's coercive environment impacts incarcerated individuals negatively and similarly due to the pains of imprisonment (Sykes, 1958). Stacer and Solinas-Saunders (2015) applied the deprivation framework to examine the influence of military experience among incarcerated men in U.S. correctional facilities and found no differences between veterans and civilians in terms of misconduct, similar to what Logan et al. (2021) confirmed several years later. Conversely, some studies have found that veterans have significantly different incarceration experiences than non-veterans (Brooke, 2020; Logan & Pare, 2017; Morgan et al., 2019). Two competing hypotheses are present in research on the institutional adaptation of incarcerated veterans. One hypothesis points to the positive effect that a regimented military life may provide to incarcerated veterans adjusting to prison life (Cullen et al., 2005; Logan & Pare, 2017; May et al., 2017; Morgan et al., 2019). Another hypothesis focuses on the negative impact of military stressors—stressors that are direct consequences of deployment, frequent relocation, exposure to trauma during warfare operations—which may contribute to the strains of prison life (Lunasco et al., 2010; Vogt, 2011).

Scholars have also focused on the idea of importation and deprivation as strain and examined adaptation to prison using Agnew's General Strain Theory (GST) (Blevins et al., 2010; Foster, 2012; Leban et al., 2016; Morris et al., 2012). Experts have pointed out that GST provides a coherent and comprehensive paradigm to ascertain the role of antisocial experiences that pre-existed incarceration and association with deviant peers within disorganized environments (Blevins et al., 2010). In a systematic review of the literature and a meta-analysis on justice-involved veterans, Taylor et al. (2020) found that the strain of mental health disorders and traumatic experiences associated with military life may significantly contribute to the challenges military veterans face in prison, confirming that GST offers a solid theoretical background to assess the impact of strain associated with stressors that characterize the prison environment (Blevins et al., 2010).

Contemporary interpretations of prison life (Crewe, 2007; Ellis, 2021; Farrington, 1992; Scott, 2010) add to the deprivation thesis the influence of external forces which shape institutional characteristics and interactions. Depth of imprisonment is a relevant theoretical approach that focuses on the connection between the outside world and the prison and is measured by the limited opportunities prisoners have to interact with the community (Downes, 1988, 1992). King and McDermott (1995) applied depth of imprisonment to the study of adaptation by focusing on the security level and restrictions of the prison as measures of deprivation.

In a study that involved prisoners in England, Wales, and Norway, Crewe (2021) focused on depth of imprisonment as measured by feelings of isolation, lack of personal/bodily autonomy, lack of social activity, disconnection from innovations occurring in society, and confinement in unfamiliar landscapes. Crewe asserted that depth of imprisonment is defined by what the prisoners are missing about their lives outside. In Crewe's (2021, p. 338) words:

> (…) the degree to which being separated from free society and confined to a penal institution feels painful, oppressive and destructive is determined in part by what it is that the individual is being separated from – whether, in the life outside, they felt stable and autonomous (…) and their familiarity and comfort with the environment that has become their temporary home.

For Crewe (2015, 2021, p. 336), depth of imprisonment can be examined by focusing on "shared qualities between domains of experiences." Within this conceptual framework, depth of imprisonment entwines the elements of importation and deprivation, providing a solid paradigm to examine the lived experiences of military veterans.

The growing body of research on incarcerated veterans is useful for creating a framework of analysis that allows for them to have a voice that details their experiences from within; however, extant studies have, for the most part, failed to identify specific elements of military life that are associated with veteran responses to incarceration (for an exception, see Unwin & Winder, 2021). Using qualitative methods, this study gives voice to incarcerated veterans to fill the current gap in the literature. Qualitative research is research in its natural setting that attempts to interpret the meaning individuals give to their own experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). We focused on participant experiences and the meanings they attached to them (Kalof & Dan, 2008). While the study does not test any theory, a focus on participants' lived experiences was emphasized in the study's design. As Crewe (2015) asserted, incarcerated individuals define the incarceration experience using metaphors that describe the distance between the prison environment and other realities with which they are most familiar.

The Study

Participants were currently incarcerated men with previous military experiences as identified by the Department of Correction of a Midwestern state. The U.S. Federal Government (2013) defines a veteran as "a person who served in the active military, naval, or air service, and who was discharged or released therefrom under conditions other than dishonorable" (U.S. Code, Title 38, Section 101(2)). Following the Bureau

of Justice Statistics (Mumola, 2000, p. 2), the present study uses a more general definition of veteran: "any person who has reported prior service in the United States Armed Forces, regardless of the type of military discharge." Participants were identified in one of two ways: (1) they self-reported as military veterans or (2) the Department of Correction had identified them as verified by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) as veterans. Identified participants were then invited for an interview. If an individual agreed, a time was scheduled with the researcher to explain the project and conduct the interview. Interviews were conducted in empty classrooms or offices. The researcher and the participant were alone and out of earshot of facility employees. Interviews were audiotaped and transcribed. Anyone identified and any locations and place names were redacted during the transcription process. Forty-three male participants were interviewed during August and September 2018, representing a moderately large sample (Morse, 1992; Morse & Niehaus, 2009). Twenty-four were housed at a maximum-security prison, 18 were housed at a medium-security prison, and one was housed within a minimum-security unit outside the maximum-security prison.

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant. Through interview questions and probes, the interviewer guided participants to compare the two environments—the military and the prison—but allowed for freedom in the interpretation of their own experiences. Goffman (1989) asserted that qualitative work requires closeness. One needs to get close to the phenomenon investigated to develop a better understanding of the experience of others. Semi-structured interview methodology provides framework and flexibility to accomplish this (McIntosh & Morse, 2015). The semi-structured interview protocol prioritized an epistemological framework grounded in extant knowledge and the knowledge participants were willing to share. The findings provided the opportunity to address existing theories and to enhance knowledge using a deductive-inductive approach (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). The deductive approach provided the background knowledge necessary to identify interview questions (Crabtree & Miller, 1999), while the inductive approach supported the creation of new knowledge through a data-driven process (Boyzatis, 1998).

Interview questions were open-ended, allowing participants to generate discussion topics within a general framework. Questions were consistently asked in the same manner to all participants. The semi-structured interview framework afforded the interviewer the flexibility to adjust the question by using probes whenever participants deflected or did not provide many details. Interviews were between 21 and 107 minutes long, with some interviews cut short due to the restrictions on movement for incarcerated individuals, both participants and non-participants. Theoretical saturation occurred about half-way through the interviews, but since most participants in the maximum-security facility were interviewed first, interviewing continued at the medium-security facility. While offense types varied, many similarities were noted in terms of the main responses. All participants were given pseudonyms. Participant characteristics can be seen in Appendix Table 1.

Coding Procedures

Interviews were transcribed verbatim. Interviews were conducted by the first author, and both authors analyzed the data. The analytical approach utilized qualitative data analysis to identify themes within the transcripts using thematic content analysis (Boyzatis, 1998). Thematic analysis is beneficial for identifying, organizing, and providing meaning to themes (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Codes were created by identifying the main themes. Both direct and latent codes were considered. We coded each interview independently and met to discuss the method we each employed for coding. Further, we randomly selected 10 interviews using random digits and compared the codes created applying inter-rater reliability methodologies for qualitative interviews (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020). No inconsistencies were found in the codes.

Participants' Themes

The interview questions spanned the whole of the participant's life. Towards the end of the interview, participants were asked: "Has your military experience impacted how you do time here [in prison]?" This manuscript elaborates on the participants' responses and examines the adaptation themes contained in their narratives: (1) discipline and respect; (2) structure and routine; and (3) similarity of prison and military environments. Because previous studies have not identified specific elements of military life that contribute to institutional adaptation in prison, the narratives provided by the participants add to extant knowledge on the issue, going more in depth and providing details that are unique.

Discipline and Respect

While prisons are no longer considered total institutions (Crewe, 2007; Ellis, 2021; Scott, 2010), like in the military, discipline is used to instill law-abiding principles (May et al., 2017), and military discipline is a major cultural aspect of military organizations (Soeters, 2018). Soeters (2018) identified functional discipline as involving the "acquisition of standardized drills and skills" and the pursuit of "formal rules, regulations, and procedures" (p. 255), while ceremonial discipline is related to "group-wise appearance and etiquette" (p. 255), which can create a common identity. Additionally, respect is a traditional military value that is beneficial to the military organization, especially to those within one's unit (Soeters, 2018). Participants pointed to the discipline and respect they learned during their military service as crucial for how they were able to successfully adapt to prison life. Drew said, "It may sound strange, but I think it [military service] really prepared me for prison—it prepared me for prison because it gave me a sense of discipline."

This discipline impacted a variety of behaviors, including interpersonal interactions with other incarcerated individuals and staff, and how one conducted himself in a shared cell or dormitory environment. The military teaches how to internalize

one's emotions, to "bite your tongue," and do what one is supposed to do without complaining; or as a participant put it, "keep your head down and your mouth shut" (Dennis). There was a sense of pride among participants about the influence of the military on their manners, and how the military taught them to respect others, "keeping boundaries, knowing what I can get into and what I can't get into" (Louis).

Living in close quarters, the military was considered a positive training experience, teaching incarcerated individuals how to share space with others, respecting other people's space, and "giv[ing] other people respect" (Louis). One participant also mentioned how the military taught him how to make his bed, showing pride in how this made him stand out when compared to other incarcerated men, and remarking that some would ask him, "Why do you fold your bed like that?" (Roger).

This idea of discipline was expanded by other participants to include the ideas of endurance, inner strength, and confidence.

> We [members of the military] try to hold ourselves to a higher standard. From what I've seen, a lot of the veterans stay out of—they get in less trouble in their prison systems (…) It's just we're not gonna hold ourselves to act like a fool like a lot of these kids do. (Henry)

One participant linked the discipline he learned in the military to his ability to endure in life.

> It [the military] has taught me endurance (…) It has toughened me up emotionally for this [being in prison], I guess. Had I not had that earlier experience in life [in the military], this would've been a lot harder for me. It's given me some kind of an inner strength that I can dig deep into and endure some of the crap that I've had to put up with here. (Seth)

Confidence was another personal characteristic a participant attributed to the military, pointing out that he did not worry about anything that "transpires here [in prison] because of being in the military" (James).

The idea of following rules and obeying orders emerged as a related idea. Following a hierarchical structure and obeying rules are both considered characteristics of military organizations that impact behavior (Soeters, 2018), and the "functional discipline" mentioned earlier involves the importance of rules and following those rules as a part of military discipline (Soeters, 2018). Several participants voiced how following rules and obeying orders characterized the way they "do time." Because of their familiarity in the military with following rules and obeying orders, most believed being able to do these things in prison allowed them an easier transition. Some participants articulated how serving in the military taught them the discipline necessary to control their behavior in an institutional environment, such as not talking back and respecting the boundaries of others. This sense of discipline and respect learned in the military was particularly salient to them as it was mentioned by almost all interviewees.

Participants discussed the chain of command and following rules and how being exposed to this in the military made it easier to follow the directions of correctional officers and other staff in prison, similar to what the participants in Unwin and Winder's

(2021) study indicated. As one participant said, "I think as far as discipline and listening, when a CO [correctional officer] tells me to do something, I'm gonna have no problem doing it. I'm not gonna give him no backtalk" (Kent). Another participant focused on the way incarcerated people ought to adapt when on the receiving hand of searches.

> I think it [military service] helps because you got to understand regimen. You got to understand how to take orders and things like that. It's just very similar here (…) they do expect you to stand up when they do inspections like the military. You got to stand at attention in the morning, things like that, and they expect a lot out of you. The military, you know, taught me all that. (Edward)

Several participants specifically mentioned the "chain of command" of the prison and the idea of rank.

> [In] the military you obey rules. When they told you to do something, you understand the line of rank. You understand the officers in the dorm and then they got their sergeants, and they have lieutenants that they have to listen to, and they have captains, and the captains goes to the major and the major goes to [the warden]. You know, you understand the chain of command and how things have to work. (Eric)

Another participant asserted,

> You have to always listen to someone, or somebody above you. There's a chain of command to go through. Whether it's in a job at McDonalds, or in a company of thousands of men being in the Army. You've got somebody you've got to answer to…It helps you cope a little bit. It definitely maybe give me the skills to be able to fall in line and hold your tongue. Because that's definitely of importance in here [prison]. (Dennis)

These men illustrated how they learned to value the chain of command and the importance of obeying orders in the military, which allowed them to understand the chain of command within the prison. Learning to "hold their tongue" in the military carried over to the prison, as they were able to then "hold their tongue" when being told to do something by correctional staff. Whether they agreed with the orders or not, in both environments following orders is important and the ability to do so allowed these men to better conform to the prison and stay out of trouble.

Structure and Routine

A main concern in research on reentry is lack of structure upon release (Western, 2018). Individuals are likely to return to communities marked by social disorganization, which often leads to recidivism (Kubrin & Stewart, 2006). Recognizing the similarity between military and prison structure was common across interviews. Many participants pointed to the structure, daily routine, and the repetitive practices of military life as being important when they entered the prison setting, as a predictable aspect of their existence within the prison like what they had previously experienced in the military, similar to the findings by Unwin and Winder (2021).

> Well, in the military, you have—when you wake up in the morning, you have PT [physical training] time from this time to this time. You go through this, and then this is what your day— 'cause your day is broken down into-– where as far as here is, you move by the counts. If it's count time, you're not moving. If you're not on this count, buddy, you're not going to this place or you're not doing this or you're not doing that. (Drew)

The structured environment of the military taught participants how to follow rules, making it easier for them to follow rules in prison, which helped them "stay out of trouble." As a participant reflected, "I've done a lot of time, and I don't get write-ups (…) I don't get in trouble" (Michael).

This similarity in structure and routine resulted in some participants indicating the prison was very similar to the military, citing the "schedule, doing the same thing every day" (Kyle).

> If we had different uniforms on and you went into these dorms, you would've thought you were in a barracks. The way this camp is ran, I myself think that this camp is a social experiment put on by the military (…) everything else is the exact same, which is precisely what I went through in boot camp. (John)

Structure and routine were viewed positively by several participants, helping them cope with the difficulties associated with incarceration. One participant mentioned he was "treating this [prison experience] like I was in the Navy" (Larry). Structure can also provide a solid support to combat stress.

> I try to keep everything structured. I try to have a time for everything. I try to be on time for everything. With being in the military, you're under a lot of stress. Being in here [prison], you're under a heck of a lot of stress, so I try to incorporate a lot of things I learned in the military in here as well. (Russell)

Having a set schedule in prison allowed some participants to harken back to the routines they followed while in the military, particularly basic training. Although in both environments the schedule was largely out of their control, adhering to the schedule in prison was easier for these participants because they had prior experience following a schedule in the military. Once again, they did not need to make decisions for themselves; following instructions and having structured routines kept them compliant and out of trouble.

Overall, pre-prison experiences in the military allowed participants to adjust to the harsh reality of incarceration. Incarcerated veterans bring well-defined sets of experiences to the prison that shape their responses to incarceration. One question that remains open is how incarcerated veterans can learn to create such structure and routine in their own lives once they return to their communities.

Similarity of Environments

Although participants compared the military and prison environments in specific ways related to "discipline and respect" and "structure and routine," as noted above, the creation of a distinct third theme related to the physical environments of the military and the prison was necessary given the emphasis on the physical space and

its relation to the social space that many respondents noted. Comparing the prison environment with other environments participants were most familiar led them to create metaphors that helped them explain their feelings (Crewe, 2015). The austerity of military installations and prisons is meant to recall the reforming mission of these institutions, guiding individuals to follow rules and bend to institutional authority (Bourdieu & Farage, 1994). Additionally, Soeters (2018) discussed communal life as a dominating element of the military, pointing to physical and social environmental conditions such as living and working together, wearing uniforms, training together, and the formation of personal relationships. Participants provided comparisons between the military environment and the prison environment in detail, including sharing space in open barracks "with a bunch of people," sleeping quarters, public showers, and standing in line for chow, illustrating the similarities in communal life between the military and the prison. As a participant put it, in both environments he "live[d] out of a box" (Bryan). One of the participants referred to a conversation he had with his mother. He had mentioned to her that it was "like going to the Marine Corps boot camp" and that arriving at the maximum-security prison was "just like a tour in the Marine Corps (…) just a little bit extended" (Barry). While serving prison time was obviously not desirable, it was not viewed as the hardship it could have been, because these men had previously been in a similar environment, somewhat confirming findings by May et al. (2017) that incarcerated veterans perceive prison as less punitive than their non-veteran counterparts. The prison environment, with its deprivations and austere living conditions, was not unfamiliar to them, and thus they felt they were able to adapt to this environment because they had already adapted to a very similar environment earlier in their lives.

Two related ideas of privacy and possessions were mentioned in terms of their similarities in both the prison and military environments. Privacy, and the lack thereof, was not specifically mentioned very often, perhaps because other, more important similarities between military and prison experiences took precedence. However, as one participant put it, "I'm not bothered by it [living in prison] either 'cause it's not the first time I've had to live without privacy. That's probably one of the biggest adjustments for people is the privacy thing. You don't have any here" (Alex).

Possessions were seen as volatile in the prison system. Several participants internalized the idea that in prison, just like in the military, there are items one is not supposed to have.

> (…) in the service, if it wasn't supposed to be in your wall locker, he's probably gonna get a hit for it (…) same as here, if it's not supposed to be in your area, you're probably gonna get a hit for it (Jeremy).

In a similar vein, another participant explained how anything one has in prison can be confiscated with no explanation, stating "I realized that none of this stuff belonged to me; they can take it away [*snapping fingers*] just like that" (Drew).

Several participants discussed issues related to space and being in close quarters with other people, though these individuals did not specifically indicate this was related to privacy. One participant responded to the question regarding whether his military service impacted how he did prison time by saying, "I would say it would

because in the military, you get used to being around groups of people" (Maxwell). He discussed the living conditions, stating, "You've got the community area for showers. You've got the single dorms, or if we're in an open cell area. Yeah, and you've gotta learn to interact with other people. It's not just you (…) it's the same living conditions" (Maxwell). Another participant initially said his military service did not impact how he was doing time in prison but then said, "I mean, other than the fact that we're all closed in, you know, at night (…) like being in the barracks or whatever at night" (Curtis), indicating there were similarities even if he did not recognize them as such. Across facilities, participants experienced different living conditions, but even for those housed in cells, space was very limited. As one participant put it,

> [In the military] I lived in a four-man room just a little bit bigger than our cells, but I have another man that lives in my cell [in this prison]. How to conduct your area and how to conduct your business in the cell with other men that's in here. (Jeremy)

One participant had a slightly different perspective about the comparison between the military and the prison.

> Prison life feels like the downtime during a deployment where you get everything except for family. You get all the amenities of games and activities, TV. You get to go to chow. You get to go to recreation. Those are all the things you do during downtime in a deployment (…) It's actually blown my mind, over the years, how similar they [military and prison environments] really are. Almost the same. Different mission, that's it. (Louis)

When discussing the miliary environment, some participants also discussed how serving in the military taught useful skills related to being aware of and alert to one's environment. As one participant explained,

> I think the best thing is stay aware of your surroundings. It [being in the military] helped me to stay—by me being there and especially in combat arm wise, staying familiar with your surroundings, because you never know what's gonna happen around you. (Peter)

A participant specifically pointed to the military helping him develop "observational skills" (Kent), and another went into great detail, stating:

> Because in the military (…) I've learned to be like a mouse looking out its mouse hole. You just sit and observe what's out there and see how people react and everything, so you know how to talk to this person because you see how they react to other people. You know how to talk to this one, who you can kid with, who you might wanna not kid with. Therefore (…) you've mentally adapted to how to behave around these people. (Richard)

Several participants mentioned they had developed skills in the military that were helpful to them while incarcerated. They were more aware of their environment, both the physical environment and the people within it, which helped them learn more quickly how to get along.

Dissenting Voices

While no participants indicated negative influences or similarities between their military and prison lives, four participants stated they did not think their military experiences had impacted how they were serving time. Despite their initial answer of "no" to the question "Has your military experience impacted how you do time here [in prison]?", two participants, Curtis and Timothy, mentioned specific things that were related. Curtis was discussed earlier as comparing the barracks to his living environment in the prison, while Timothy discussed gaining "some moral and other stuff" as well as his attitudes about cleanliness from his Navy experiences. Roy said that he was not in the military long enough for those experiences to have any impact, while Andrew said he did not see any impact.

Summary

Overall, participants indicated that since the prison environment was "just like" the military environment, it was not difficult for them to adapt since they had prior experience with institutional environments. They were familiar with institutional living and could fall back on those prior experiences to help them with their current living situation within the prison. While participants described being accustomed to the deprivations of prison, they clearly recognized the limitations of the environment, describing the unpleasant features of both the military and prison, including confined space and the restrictions imposed by the administration. Although incarcerated veterans found an advantage in the deprivations they learned to deal with in the military when comparing themselves to "the other guys coming from the streets" (Robert) or "raised on the streets" (Drew), it is unclear how prison deprivations shaped their experiences overall. Reference to others in the prison as individuals who did not know the rules or struggled to adapt to a structured environment was mentioned by some of the participants as a matter of pride or an identity marker (Scott, 2010) and illustrated "a different mind-set" that distinguished them as different from those who had not served in the military (Unwin & Winder, 2021).

Military Experience, Prison Adaptation, and Reentry

Military veterans represent a special correctional population, and as such we should look to the unique strengths individuals in this population may have for coping with incarceration. Identifying groups of individuals who share similar experiences can help us address issues of prison adaptation, which may also help define the specific needs incarcerated individuals have during reentry. By going to the source, the incarcerated veterans themselves, we can best identify if and how their military experiences impacted their incarceration experiences.

In the study, participants overwhelmingly pointed to the ways the military positively impacted their ability to "do time" in prison and made adapting to prison easier, confirming the relevance of including depth of imprisonment in research that seeks to identify the influence of pre-prison experiences in the process of prison adaptation. Participants specifically mentioned the discipline they learned

in basic training and attributed their ability to adapt well in prison to the structure they learned while serving in the military. In contrast to previous studies that examined negative pre-prison experiences, such as exposure to violence and abuse (DeLisi et al., 2004; Harer & Steffensmeier, 1996), and drug addiction and mental health problems (Byrne & Hummer, 2007; McCorkle, 1995; Thomas, 1977), in this study, pre-prison experiences, specifically military service, were viewed by the participants as largely positive and having pro-social impacts on them when they went to prison. While these incarcerated veterans did not enjoy being in prison, they recognized their pre-prison military experiences helped them cope with being in prison and the deprivations associated with prison life. Prison, while still a hardship, was more manageable since they had military experiences that approximated the deprivations and living conditions they were experiencing in prison, an argument also raised by May et al. (2017) in explaining why incarcerated veterans found prison less punitive than non-veterans. The ability of this group to adapt to the prison because of their military experiences could be recognized and utilized within rehabilitation programs, both within and outside the prison system, by expanding on the structure that is familiar to them and that could assist them maintaining a law-abiding status. It should be noted, however, that participants were asked generally about any impact being in the military had on their incarceration experiences. They were not asked specifically about the impact of any particular aspect of their military experiences, such as deployment, combat, or their physical and mental health conditions as a result of their military experiences, on their prison adaptation. Given the many stressors that have been identified among veterans, especially those who are justice-involved (Schaffer, 2016), future research should consider examining what impact, if any, these may have on the incarceration experiences of veterans.

This research suggests it is important to consider the positive pre-prison experiences that incarcerated individuals import into the prison and how some of these experiences may have given them strengths that could be utilized within correctional programming to improve their odds in rehabilitation and reentry. A strengths-based perspective may be useful for justice-involved veterans and other groups. This perspective emphasizes identifying the strengths and assets justice-involved individuals bring to the rehabilitation process (Hanser, 2019), essentially a positive or prosocial version of importation theory expanded to focus on rehabilitation. It also emphasizes how these strengths can positively influence desistence, in contrast to the deficit-focused approach commonly taken by criminal justice professionals (Kewley, 2017). The ways incarcerated individuals react to the prison environment is largely determined by their pre-prison experiences and demographics (Irwin & Cressey, 1962), but it is also the result of prisoners' ability to find "shared qualities" between the prison and their most familiar environments (Crewe, 2021, p. 336).

For the most part, participants referred to their military experience as a positive one. Some participants stated they wished they had stayed in the military, with several younger participants wishing they could go back to the military after release. Most looked back on their service positively and with pride. Perhaps the emphasis on the positive aspects of the military experience—and the pride that comes with it—did not allow for a narrative on prison deprivation (Sykes, 1958; Thomas, 1977). As this research illustrated, many

utilized the knowledge they gained from their military experiences to better adjust to the prison environment. If these strengths can be harnessed into programming that is positive and that addresses the needs justice-involved veterans have, perhaps we can do more to promote prosocial behavior and reduce recidivism among this population.

Some states have already implemented a veteran treatment model in which there is more support and treatment for incarcerated veterans. Some correctional systems offer special programming, housing units, or organizations for incarcerated veterans. Pennsylvania prisons in the 1970s provided special educational and training opportunities that involved cooperation with VA counselors and counselors from the Pennsylvania Department of Military Affairs and included explanations of educational and training benefits available to incarcerated veterans (Kehrer & Mittra, 1978). May (1979) also discussed several states that had special programs for this population during the 1970s, including efforts in Arizona to inform incarcerated veterans about the military benefits they were eligible for and to assist in enrolling them in educational and vocational programming, VA counselors in Idaho prisons working to identify veterans among the incarcerated population and assist them, and programming in Pennsylvania as also discussed by Kehrer and Mittra (1978). Linkages between veterans in the L.A. County Jail and Veterans Health Administration health care services were noted by McGuire et al. (2003), and Frisman and Griffin-Fennell (2009) discussed the funding six states received from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration to support jail diversion for individuals impacted by trauma, specifically focusing on veterans. Additionally, special housing units for incarcerated veterans allow them to live together in a unit that has supervision and/or mentorship by other veterans. Florida has a special housing unit for incarcerated veterans to better connect them to VA resources (Prison Legal News, 2012), while Indiana has a special unit in its reentry facility for veterans to help connect them to resources outside of the prison setting, such as employment and housing assistance from the VA, so they can achieve better reentry outcomes (Estle-Cronau, 2014). This unit also emphasizes comradery and support among the incarcerated veterans, with daily meetings that include a "thought of the day" and time for reflection (Estle-Cronau, 2014). Some prisons systems also support veteran organizations within their facilities, specifically American Legion posts—now present in correctional facilities in Indiana (Estle-Cronau, 2014; Ryckaert, 2019), Idaho (American Legion, 2020), and Pennsylvania (Sharon Herald, 2022). These American Legion posts allow incarcerated veterans to support one another and to serve their communities.

Research on reentry (Western, 2018) points to the lack of structure upon release from prison as difficult for individuals returning to their communities after a period of incarceration. Similarly, soldiers leaving military service may also experience difficulties in adjusting back to civilian life due to the lack of structure they may experience during this transition period, due to difficulties such as being unable to transfer job skills leading to unstable or lack of employment, the breakup of personal relationships, the impact of mental health issues and substance abuse, and the risk of homelessness (Metraux et al., 2017), which may contribute to a veteran becoming justice-involved. It is precisely this idea of structure that participants in this study discussed as making their transition to prison easier. Reentry programs need to work on how to utilize this idea of structure to better assist those released from prison – as well as to assist those transitioning from military life to civilian life. A combination of

the veterans' treatment court model within the framework of a reentry court could be useful, providing the structure and support most incarcerated individuals need when they leave prison while also tapping into the unique experiences of military veterans.

Conclusion

Although the number of incarcerated veterans has decreased, a substantial number continue to be behind bars (Maruschak et al., 2021), and many more are justice-involved. Research on incarcerated veterans is relevant in that military service and participation in warfare operations may represent unique challenges in the process of adaptation to prison. In addition, information about incarcerated veterans is necessary for the design and implementation of policies that guide the work of the Veterans Health Administration, which has an obligation to care for all veterans, including justice-involved veterans (Finlay et al., 2019). Designing programs for the reintegration of veterans upon completion of a prison sentence can be beneficial for the communities where justice-involved veterans will be released, making communities safer. This research examined the ways in which incarcerated veterans utilized their military experiences to help them positively adapt to the prison environment. Framed using depth of imprisonment (Crewe, 2015, 2021; Downes, 1992; King & McDermott, 1995), this research examined whether the pre-prison military experiences of incarcerated veterans impacted how they served time in prison by providing an outlet for the veterans themselves to discuss their experiences. Further, the study examined how participants created metaphors that compared the military environment with the prison to describe the pains of incarceration. Many incarcerated veterans utilized the discipline and structure they learned during their military service to adjust to prison life, making a clear connection between the austerity of the military and the deprivations of the prison environment.

In contrast to much of the adaptation research that focuses on negative pre-prison experiences, this research illustrated how a positive pre-prison experience, military service, helped incarcerated veterans more pro-socially adapt to the prison environment. If military experience is largely viewed as a positive experience, as it was for these participants, more focus should be paid to the unique strengths that justice-involved veterans may possess and how rehabilitation and reentry programs can be tailored to utilize these strengths. Future research should utilize rigorous methodologies to evaluate existing programs and units specifically serving incarcerated veterans. Additionally, practitioners and those designing rehabilitation programs and interventions should consider the ways in which elements of military life could be incorporated to better target the strengths incarcerated veterans have that could be useful in promoting rehabilitation and reentry. Like the model utilized within veterans' treatment courts in the United States, including treatment personnel and mentors with military background into such programming may be beneficial. Although researchers should continue examining incarcerated veterans, they should also continue looking at other specialized groups who have unique experiences or needs to identify the types of treatment, rehabilitation, and support they may need in the correctional setting.

Appendix

Table 1 Participant characteristics

Pseudonym	Age	Race / Ethnicity	Offense	Current sentence length	Military Branch	Years in Military
Larry	59	White	Rape / Criminal Deviate Conduct	50 years	Army, Navy, Navy Reserves	3 years Army, 3 years Navy, 2 years Navy Reserves
Drew	29	Black	Murder	60 years	Army	1.5 years
Wade	57	Hispanic	Murder / Prisoner possession of dangerous weapon	60 years	Navy	3 years
Robert	46	White	Child molesting	29 years	Army	8 years
Steven	49	White	Child molesting / attempted child molesting	40 years	Army	3.5 years
Peter	56	White	Murder	55 years	Army, Army Reserves	3 years active, 18 years reserve
Alan	43	White	Attempted rape / Robbery / Burglary	50 years	National Guard	2 years
Maxwell	63	White	Murder / Battery	55 years	Marines	3 years and 9 months
Jerry	67	Black	Child molesting	35 years	Navy	4 years
Carl	54	Black	Child molesting	45 years	Navy	10 years
Curtis	65	White	Child molesting	30 years	Army, Army Reserves	7 years active; 2 reserves
Kent	32	Hispanic	Burglary / stalking	45 years	Army	3.5 years
Michael	47	White	Dealing methamphetamines	9 years	Army	3 years
Jeremy	39	White	Child molesting	40 years	Army	4 years
Richard	53	White	Child molesting	20 years	Army, Army Reserves	8.5 years active, 15.5 reserves
Trevor	32	White	Aiding child molesting / child pornography	45 years	Navy	2 years
Zach	41	White	Murder	42 years	Army	10.5 months
Seth	48	White	Voluntary manslaughter / attempted voluntary manslaughter	30 years	Army, Army Reserves	3 years active, 4 years reserves
Paul	56	White	Attempted murder / criminal confinement	50 years	Army	2 years
Kyle	36	White	Murder	55 years	Marine Corps Reserves	2 years
Roy	52	White	Murder	57 years	Air Force Reserves	6 years

Table 1 (continued)

Pseudonym	Age	Race / Ethnicity	Offense	Current sentence length	Military Branch	Years in Military
James	31	White	Dealing cocaine or narcotic	6 years	National Guard	4 years
John	36	White	OWI Habitual / Non-support of child	3 years	National Guard	3 years
William	40	White	Possession of methamphetamine / possession of syringes	7 years	Navy	3.5 years
Daniel	33	White	Dealing methamphetamines	8 years	Marines	5 years
Edward	64	White	Armed robbery	25 years	Army	3 years
Andrew	40	Black	Dealing cocaine or narcotic	3 years	Army	4 years
Timothy	35	Black	Dealing cocaine or narcotic	5 years	Navy	4 years
Eric	48	White	Operating vehicle after license suspended	4 years	National Guard	4 years
Ben	54	Black	Dealing cocaine or narcotic	15 years	National Guard, Army Reserves	5 years
Henry	47	White	Possession of marijuana / possession of syringes / battery	3 years	Army	4 years
Arthur	43	White	Robbery	8 years	Marines	4 years
Roger	68	Black	Dealing controlled substance	13 years	Army (drafted)	3 years
Dennis	56	White	Dealing controlled substance	12 years	National Guard	10 years
Louis	31	White	Burglary / Theft	6 years	Army	7 years
Russell	25	White	Battery	7 years	Army Reserves	1 year, 10 months
Craig	47	White	Murder / criminal confinement	60 years	National Guard	4 years
Bryan	46	White	Voluntary manslaughter	25 years	National Guard	12 years
Alex	23	White	Burglary / theft	2 years	Army Reserves	2 years
Lewis	68	Black	Murder / burglary	60 years	Marines, National Guard	6 years active, 9 years in the Guard
Devon	47	Black	Murder	60 years	Army, National Guard	4 years active, 3 years in the Guard
Barry	57	White	Child molesting	28 years	Marines	4 years
Walter	62	Hispanic	Attempted rape / criminal confinement	20 years	Marines	4 years

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