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Delinquent Behavior, the Transition to Adulthood, and the Likelihood of Military Enlistment

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Abstract

Using data taken from the 1997 National Longitudinal Survey of Youth we examine the relationship between delinquency and enlistment in the military. We argue that delinquent behavior is positively related to enlistment because military service is an attractive alternative for delinquents to mark their transition to adulthood and their desistance from delinquent behavior. We also argue, however, that this relationship is not linear, with higher levels of delinquent behavior actually acting to reduce the likelihood of enlistment. We further suggest that the relationship between delinquency and enlistment is similar for men and women. We test and find support for our hypotheses using data taken from the 1997 National Longitudinal Survey of Youth.

Over the last 70 years, at least one and a half million military personnel have been on active duty in each year, affecting 10 to 70 percent of relevant birth cohorts. Currently, about 200,000 young men and women enter the military (active duty and reserves) each year. Indeed, an often-ignored fact is that the military is the single largest employer of young men in the United States (Angrist, 1998), with about 7–12% of recent cohorts of young men serving a term in the military. Increasingly, young women are becoming a significant component of military service (about 20% of the current military population). Military recruitment is an often hotly debated topic of public policy centering on issues such as access, equality of representation by race, and transferability of training to the civilian labor market (Armor, 1996; Bennett and McDonald, 2013; Brown, 2013; Kleykamp, 2013). In Congress, veterans' rights and benefits are significant budgetary items, and veterans' organizations constitute powerful political-action groups. Moreover, there is growing evidence that military service is linked to a number of subsequent life course outcomes, including education, income, marital status, and health (Angrist, 1990, 1998; Bennett and McDonald, 2013; MacLean and Elder, 2008; Segal and Segal, 2004; Teachman, 2007a, 2007b, 2008b, 2010; Whyman, Lemmon, and Teachman, 2011; Wilmoth and London, 2013). Yet, our understanding of the factors that lead young men and women to choose military service in the all-volunteer era remains skeletal.

Prior literature dealing with enlistment in the military has focused on economic factors wherein men (and increasingly women) choose the military as a means to maximize their economic well-being (Asch, Kilburn, and Klerman, 1999; Bennett and McDonald, 2013;

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Dale and Gilroy, 1984; Kilburn and Asch, 2003; Kilburn and Klerman, 1999; Kleykamp, 2006; Seeborg, 1994). Although this model has received empirical support, it fails to recognize many non-economic factors that may spur enlistment. For example, other research has suggested that factors such as patriotism, propinquity to military installations, family history, and desire for travel and adventure are related to the decision to join the military (Eighmey, 2006; Elder et al., 2010; Kleykamp, 2006; Woodruff, Kelty, and Segal, 2006). Indeed, some authors claim that many, if not most, men and women who enlist in the military do not come from disadvantaged backgrounds and make enlistment decisions based largely on non-economic factors (Kane, 2006; Watkins and Sherk, 2008). In this article, we expand the literature on social determinants by investigating the relationship between delinquent or criminal behavior and the likelihood of military enlistment.¹ We argue that the military offers delinquents and criminals a sharp transition to adulthood and desistance from delinquency and crime by providing unique opportunities that are attractive to them and difficult to match in civilian life.

THEORETICAL DEVELOPMENT

There is no commonly accepted model for military enlistment. As mentioned earlier, economic considerations are often posited as the major mechanism generating desire to enlist in the military. Yet, this theoretical orientation is too limited given the number of additional, non-economic variables that have been linked to enlistment. A more general perspective is one that considers the impact of non-economic considerations that operate to influence the decision to join the military. Research exists to indicate that many enlistees make the decision to enter the military based on their desire to maximize value in some realm of their life other than income. For example, Wang, Elder, and Spence (2012) show that some recruits enter the military in order to gain respect that might not otherwise be available to them. Other researchers argue that military service provides a context that legitimizes the violent tendencies of some individuals (Sampson, Raudenbush, and Earls, 1997; Shihadeh, 1996) and a source of adventure that other individuals seek (Eighmey, 2006; Johnson and Kaplan, 1991). Sampson and Laub (1996) argue that the military provides enlistees an opportunity to “knife off” their past and offers a blank slate for future life-course development.

The available research, therefore, suggests that the military is a unique institution in that it provides individuals with a range of opportunities that are not normally available in a civilian environment. Certainly, the military is a known commodity with respect to stable employment and excellent benefits that are difficult to match for young persons of similar qualifications in the civilian labor market. In addition, however, the military provides young recruits with structure via a regimented life style, and a source of self-esteem and pride, particularly following 9/11 (Eighmey, 2006). The military also offers a built-in social group and a sense of belonging that would be difficult to achieve in most civilian occupations (Spence, Henderson, and Elder, 2012). Another component of military life that is difficult to match in the civilian labor market is the opportunity for travel and adventure (Eighmey, 2006; Woodruff, Kelty, and Segal, 2006).

As we explain later, the unique set of opportunities provided by military service make it an attractive option for young persons with a history of delinquent or criminal behavior. More specifically, we argue that it is the link between desistance from delinquency and military

¹We use the terms delinquency and criminality interchangeably throughout our article. Even though most of the behaviors that constitute our measure of delinquency would be considered criminal behaviors for respondents 18 and older, the term delinquency is consistent with use in the literature, even though respondents are followed into adulthood. As Massoglia and Uggen (2010:544) note, “[a]lthough our interest extends beyond adolescence, we deliberately use the term delinquency throughout this article to emphasize the historical and cultural link between criminality and youth – and the age-inappropriateness of delinquent behavior in adulthood.”

service that is important to consider. It is well known that delinquency is strongly age graded (Hirschi and Gottfredson, 1983), as is military service. Delinquency increases through the teen years and then declines sharply when individuals reach their twenties. This pattern suggests that as young men and women make the transition to adulthood, they desist from engaging in subsequent delinquent activities. Indeed, a number of researchers argue that desistance from delinquency is a marker of the transition to adulthood, much as marriage, employment, and parenthood are also markers of this transition (Bosick, 2012; Massoglia and Uggen, 2010; Stouthamer-Loeber et al., 2004)

The notion that desistance from delinquency is a marker of the transition to adulthood is consistent with Hagan's (1991) notion of drift where teens move between criminal and conventional behaviors. According to Hagan (p. 569) "...teenage culture emphasizes fun and adventure, disdains scholastic effort and flirts with the boundary areas between propriety and immorality (e.g., staying out late, drinking, sexual exploration, and "conning" parents), nonetheless this culture is more accurately seen as "playing" at deviance." Thus, although many delinquents drift between conventional and criminal activities, they are not serious about pursuing a career of delinquency, and most of them will successfully make the transition to adulthood by desisting from delinquent activities. Massoglia and Uggen (2010) argue that young people are aware of the normative standards surrounding the transition to adulthood, as well as its age gradation and are prepared to desist from delinquency as they age. Adult status is marked by the absence of delinquency or criminal behavior and the assumption of adult roles such as marriage and full-time employment.

In this context, we suggest that enlistment in the military represents for many teens and young adults an age-appropriate indicator of the transition to adulthood. Most military enlistments occur during the late teens and early twenties, when delinquent behaviors decline sharply. In particular, for delinquents, enlistment may be seen as an indicator of desistance from criminal activities and the assumption of adult roles. Even though other markers of the transition to adulthood are available, such as marriage or employment in the civilian labor force, military service may be more attractive to delinquents. The military is an environment in which aggression and violence often associated with delinquency can be channeled into legitimate forms (Sampson et al., 1997; Shihadeh, 1996). It is also an environment where thrill seeking delinquents can find a work outlet that satisfies their sense of adventure (Eighmey, 2006; Johnson and Kaplan, 1991). It is also an institution that provides regimentation, immediate status, and a sense of camaraderie that is difficult, if not impossible, to match in the civilian labor market and which individuals with a history of delinquency may be seeking (Elder et al., 2010; Wang et al., 2012). Military service can provide a means to leave neighborhoods where delinquency and crime are major components of everyday life. Moreover, the barriers to entry are not as stiff as those associated with marriage or finding a well-paying job with a similar level of prestige. In addition, the time frame to realize the opportunities provided by military service can be very short. Indeed, a variety of research has shown that the transition to adulthood has become longer, more varied, and complex (Furstenberg, 2010; Settersten and Ray, 2010). For individuals with a history of delinquent or criminal behavior, military service may serve as one of the only options for a relatively smooth transition to adulthood (Kelty, Klaykamp, and Segal, 2010).

Accordingly, we hypothesize:

Young persons with a history of delinquent behavior will be more likely to enlist in the military than young persons without a history of delinquency.

Yet, we also realize that having engaged in substantial delinquent behavior can prove to be an obstacle to enlistment in the military. For one, high levels of delinquency may be

indicative of behaviors (felony charges, heavy drug use) that would disqualify applicants from military service because they could not meet required moral standards. For another, individuals with high levels of delinquency may not be the “drifters” described by Hagan (1991) who move between criminal and conventional behaviors. High levels of delinquency may indicate individuals who will not successfully make the transition to adulthood. Rather, these may be individuals who are on a path to a criminal career for whom life in the military is not an attractive option. As Hagan (1991) found, only the most serious and consistent forms of delinquency have serious negative consequences for the transition to adulthood. Thus, we also hypothesize:

The positive effect of delinquency on enlistment in the military weakens at higher levels of delinquency.

PRIOR RESEARCH

A small body of literature has linked delinquency to military service. Using data taken from the Houston Independent School System between 1971 and 1988, Johnson and Kaplan (1991) find that young men who have an early history of antisocial behavior (an arrest or some other evidence of having trouble with authority) are more likely to enlist in the military. Using more representative data taken from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (AddHealth), Elder et al. (2010) and Wang, Elder and Spence (2012) find that young men with a history of physical aggression are more likely to enter the military.

These studies are limited, however. The Johnson and Kaplan study is not nationally representative. Although the AddHealth data are more representative, it contains a limited measure of delinquency (physical aggression). We use nationally representative data and a more refined measure of delinquency. We also employ a set of control variables that allow us to control for selectivity into the military as applied by both individuals (race, age, parental characteristics, household income) and the military (mental capacity, body weight, and health). And, unlike previous research, we allow the effects of delinquency to be nonlinear.

We also correct what we believe to be a theoretical and methodological flaw often found in prior research on military enlistment. In particular, prior research has tended to view military enlistment as a competing risk where young men and women make a choice between several alternatives, including college, labor force participation, or military service (Elder et al., 2010; Kleykamp, 2006). Theoretically, the imagery is one where young men choose between alternative career paths. Methodologically, the competing risk framework used to analyze the data assumes that once a path has been chosen individuals are no longer at risk of experiencing other paths. We believe that this notion is incorrect. Rather, we suggest that individuals choose between these alternatives more or less continuously over their early life course and that the choice of one alternative does not remove an individual from risk of eventually choosing another alternative. Specifically, we do not believe that choosing labor market participation or college eliminates someone from subsequently choosing military service. These choices undoubtedly influence subsequent risk of military service, but they do not eliminate the risk. Accordingly, in our analysis we model labor market participation and college enrollment as time-varying covariates that alter the likelihood of military enlistment but do not eliminate this likelihood.

Finally, prior research does not consider the enlistment of women. The omission is not likely a substantial oversight for earlier cohorts when women constituted a small minority of enlistments. More recently, though, women have substantially increased their share of enlistments. Currently, about 20% of the active-duty force consists of women, making it important to understand the factors leading women to enlist. Although little is known about

the enlistment decisions of women, it appears from prior research that the enlistment process is similar to that for men with the exception of family status (marriage, children) where sex-role differences are substantial (Bachman et al., 2000; Hosnek and Peterson, 1990). Thus, with respect to delinquency we have no *a priori* reason to believe that women would react differently than men when making enlistment decisions.

Thus, we also hypothesize that:

The effect of delinquency on the likelihood of enlistment in the military is similar for men and women.

DATA

We use data taken from the 1997 National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY-97). Starting in 1997, the NLSY-97 interviewed 8,984 men and women between the ages of 14–16 who were born between 1980 and 1984. The young men and women in our sample were eligible to be observed up to 12 times over the period 1998 to 2009. In our analysis, we only consider men and women age 17 and older and thus eligible to enter the military. A database consisting of person years was created where respondents contribute a person year for each round of the NLSY-97 in which they were interviewed and were eligible to enlist. Respondents contribute person years until they enter the military, are lost to follow-up, or they reach the last wave of the study (2009). Thus, the final sample includes information on men and women between the ages of 17 and 28 who were eligible to enter the military between 1998 (the year the oldest NLSY-97 respondents turned 17) and 2009. The pooled sample includes 34,417 person years for men (4599 unique men) and 31,380 person years for women (4385 unique women). Approximately 7% of men (342 enlistees) enlisted in the military over the time period covered by our study. Only about 2% of women enlisted in the military (95 enlistees) and caution should be taken in interpreting results due to this relatively small sample size.

The NLSY-97, like any other large, longitudinal study is not immune to problems associated with missing data. To deal with this issue we used a chained equation approach to imputing missing data available in STATA (Royston and White, 2011). All results reported in this article are based on five imputed data bases using STATA's MI procedure. The dependent variable (a binary variable indicating military enlistment in a particular interval) was used in the imputation procedure; however, all cases with missing data on military enlistment were dropped from the analysis after missing values were imputed for all other variables.

METHOD AND MEASURES

In the pooled sample, we use a logistic-regression model to analyze the relationship between military enlistment and a series of measured covariates. In essence, we conduct a discrete-time event history analysis where the event in question is enlistment. Thus, we are not modeling the likelihood of ever entering the military but rather the likelihood of entering the military during a given interval of time (here that interval is a year). Because we examine a pooled data base consisting of yearly observations, we can examine the effects of covariates that change values over the life course of respondents (e.g., income, marital status).

Measures of Military Enlistment and Delinquency

Our dependent variable is the log of the odds (or sometimes the odds) of enlisting in the military. Our measure of delinquency consists of a time-varying, cumulative Delinquency Index that ranges from zero to ten, with higher scores indicating a greater degree of delinquency. The score was constructed by summing the responses to a set of questions ascertaining the number of delinquent/criminal acts in which respondents have ever

engaged. A change in a respondent's score indicates that in a particular year a respondent engaged in a delinquent behavior that was not listed in earlier intervals. A value of 0 indicates that the respondent has not yet engaged in any of the activities listed. A value of 10 indicates that the respondent has engaged in each of the ten items listed at least once. Weighted scores were assigned to respondents who answered at least eight or more of the ten delinquency questions listed below.² Note that the index is based on self-reports and does not necessarily reflect official records of delinquent behavior for an individual. The Delinquency Index has been used by other researchers to describe patterns of delinquency across the life course of adolescents (Bolken et al., 2010; Hair et al., 2009; Holmes, Jones-Sanpei and Day, 2009; Vander Ven et al., 2001) and has considerable construct validity.³

The questions used to form the Delinquency Index are as follows:

1. Have you ever run away, that is, left home and stayed away at least overnight without your parent's prior knowledge or permission?
2. Have you ever carried a hand gun? When we say hand gun, we mean any firearm other than a rifle or shotgun.
3. Have you ever belonged to a gang?
4. Have you ever purposely damaged or destroyed property that did not belong to you?
5. Have you ever stolen something from a store or something that did not belong to you worth less than 50 dollars?
6. Have you ever stolen something from a store, person or house, or something that did not belong to you worth 50 dollars or more including stealing a car?
7. Have you ever committed other property crimes such as fencing, receiving, possessing or selling stolen property, or cheated someone by selling them something that was worthless or worth much less than what you said it was?
8. Have you ever attacked someone with the idea of seriously hurting them or have a situation end up in a serious fight or assault of some kind?
9. Have you ever sold or helped sell marijuana (pot, grass), hashish (hash) or other hard drugs such as heroin, cocaine or LSD?
10. Have you ever been arrested by the police or taken into custody for an illegal or delinquent offense (do not include arrests for minor traffic violations)?

Control Variables

We include a number of control variables to reduce the likelihood that any observed relationship between delinquency and military enlistment may be due to spuriousness. Previous research has linked each of these variables to either military enlistment or delinquency, or both. These variables are designed to limit the influences of either self-selection into the military (e.g., according to income or marital status) or selectivity imposed by the military via recruitment standards (e.g., according to cognitive ability or health). The

²That is, respondents who answered at least eight of the ten questions were given a score that was adjusted to a base of ten. For example, if a respondent answered positively to four of eight questions they were assigned a value of 5 for the scale ($4/8 * 10$). Respondents who answered fewer than eight items were assigned a missing value for the scale and received an imputed value using the chained equations approach described above.

³The NLSY-97 also possesses information on less serious forms of delinquent behavior such as smoking cigarettes or marijuana and drinking. In our initial analyses we included these forms of delinquency in a separate index and found they were unrelated to enlistment. Virtually all teens in the sample had experimented with at least one of these forms of delinquency (92% of males and 91% of females), and there was no link between these behaviors and enlistment in the military.

control variables we include are race measured as a series of dummy variables; urban residence (time varying); residence in the south (time varying); number of household moves and the square of the number of household moves (time varying); age and age squared (time varying); highest level of parental education (higher of either mother or father); whether the respondent lived with both parents at age 12; whether the interval in question was situated in time prior to 9/11; number of household members and its square (time varying); a series of dummy variables corresponding to the military's categorization of the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery, which was administered to all NLSY-97 respondents in 1997; a series of dummy variables measuring household income relative to the poverty level (time varying); whether the respondent was married (time varying); body mass index (time varying); a series of dummy variables indicating the number of resident and non-resident children the respondent has (time varying); a series of dummy variables indicating the highest level of education obtained by the respondent (time varying); a set of dummy variables indicating the self-reported health of the respondent (time-varying); number of weeks worked in the prior year (time-varying); and a dummy variable indicating whether the respondent was enrolled in school in the interval (time-varying). The descriptive statistics provide additional information pertaining to the categorization of particular variables.

DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

Descriptive statistics for the pooled sample are shown in Table 1. These descriptive statistics are adjusted for missing data using the chained equation approach discussed earlier. The values in parentheses indicate the standard error of the imputed values (not the standard deviation of the distribution of values). Smaller standard errors indicate more precise estimates of true values. The standard errors in Table 1 show that the imputed values from the missing values procedure are indeed precise. Because the values shown are for the pooled sample, they represent the average value over all intervals. For example, slightly less than 1% of the intervals for men include an enlistment; the value for women is much lower at .2%. Men (3.10) have higher delinquency scores than women (1.71). As might be expected, the distribution of delinquency scores across intervals is skewed to the right; about 18% of the intervals for men correspond to a score of zero on the Delinquency Index, and the corresponding figure for women is 37% (results not shown). However, there are a sufficient number of intervals possessing higher delinquency scores to support the analysis described below. For men, about 20% percent of the 34,417 intervals ($n=6,883$) involve respondents with five or more delinquent behaviors (results not shown), and 50% of the intervals correspond to a delinquency score of three or more. For women, the figure is lower with about seven percent of the 31,380 intervals ($n=2,196$) involving respondents with five or more delinquent behaviors (results not shown), and 50% of the intervals corresponding to at least one delinquent behavior.

Table 1 also indicates how we categorized several important control variables, as well as the omitted categories when a series of dummy variables was used. Most of these variables are self-explanatory, but we provide more discussion for a subset of variables. The ASVAB categories shown correspond to those used by the military in categorizing potential enlistees. Higher categories are given preferential treatment for enlistment. Generally, enlistment is difficult for respondents scoring in categories below 3b. Note, however, that the ASVAB scores shown do not represent the score that a recruiter would consider when a respondent seeks to enlist. A separate ASVAB examination would be given and that score would be used to determine enlistment. It is possible, therefore, that respondents scoring below category 3b would be able to enlist in the military if a subsequent test score was higher.

The BMI values shown correspond to generally recognized categories. A BMI between 19 and 25 is considered to be normal. Values below 19 indicate that someone is underweight;

values between 25 and 30 indicate that someone is overweight; and values greater than 30 indicate obesity. As a general rule, individuals who are underweight or obese will be less likely to be accepted by the military for enlistment.

MULTIVARIATE RESULTS

Multivariate results are shown in Table 2. The coefficients shown represent the effect of a variable on the log of the odds of enlisting in the military in a given interval.⁴ To obtain the effect on the odds of enlistment, the shown coefficient can be exponentiated (i.e. e^{β}). The percent change in the odds of enlistment can be derived from the following equation: $(e^{\beta} - 1) * 100$. There are three models shown for both men and women. Model 1 represents the effects of our indicators of delinquency net of a number of basic demographic control variables. Model 2 adds controls for a much broader set of variables that represent more dynamic components of life course decisions made by young men and women, including weight, family status, education, and health. Finally, Model 3 includes controls for number of weeks worked in the prior interval and an indicator of school enrollment. Thus, Model 3 recognizes the fact that work and schooling may impact the risk of enlistment, but do not serve to end that risk.

Consistent with hypotheses 1 and 2, the Delinquency Index has a statistically significant, non-linear relationship with military enlistment in all three models for men. For women, a similar non-linear relationship appears, providing support for hypothesis 3. These results indicate that there is a relationship between the Delinquency Index and odds of enlistment even after taking into account numerous control variables, including the recent work and school enrollment behaviors of respondents.

The non-linear relationship for men is one where higher levels of delinquency increase the odds of enlistment, but at a declining rate. Using Model 3 to illustrate this point, the coefficient for the Delinquency Index for men is .194, whereas the coefficient for the square of the Delinquency Index is -.026. These values imply that the odds of enlistment will increase until the Delinquency Index reaches a value of about four, after which it will begin to decline. In order to better illustrate this point, the relationship between the Delinquency Index and the odds of enlistment is shown in Figure 1.⁵ Relative odds are shown. That is, the odds plotted are relative to a Delinquency Index value of zero (an odds of 1.0). The odds of enlistment rise until a score of four is reached and then begin to decline. Respondents with a delinquency score of four have an odds of enlistment that are 40% greater than a comparable respondent with no history of delinquent behavior. Note, however, that the odds of enlistment remain higher than for someone with a score of zero until a score of eight is reached; after that point the odds of enlistment are lower than for someone scoring a zero.

Figure 1 also shows the results for women. The coefficients for the Delinquency Index (.400) and its square (-.068) are larger than was the case for men (and the differences between the male and female coefficients are statistically significant). Although the overall pattern is similar, these coefficients suggest that women are more sensitive to delinquency than is the case for men. That is, they are more likely to enlist at lower levels of the Delinquency Index but also less likely to enlist at higher levels of the index. As shown in Figure 1, the odds of enlistment rise until a Delinquency Index score of three is reached, after which the odd of enlistment begin to decline. Respondents with a delinquency score of

⁴Although the correct interpretation is the effect of a variable on the log odds (or odds) of an enlistment in a given interval, we drop the qualifier "in a given interval" for the sake of brevity.

⁵Figure 1 shows the predicted curves given the coefficients in Table 2. Because the number of men and women entering the military in the NLSY-97 is small the precision of the curves is less than that implied in the figure.

three have odds of enlistment that 80% greater than for a respondent with no history of delinquent behavior. After a score of six is reached the odds of enlistment are lower than for someone scoring zero on the Delinquency Index.

The effects of the control variables, although not our focus, are generally what one would expect given past research. Respondents from the South, who have fewer household moves, are slightly older, come from larger households, have slightly more than average ASVAB scores, are not obese, do not have children, have at least a high school degree, and are in excellent health are more likely to enlist. In addition, respondents who work more and are enrolled in school are less likely to join the military. For the most part, the effects of the control variables are similar for men and women. There are gender differences in effects, however, for BMI, marriage, and children. With respect to BMI, the negative effects of low and high body weight are greater for women than for men. In terms of marriage, being married reduces the odds of enlistment for women, but not for men. Finally, with respect to children, having children does more to reduce the odds of enlistment for women than for men. Thus, the enlistment of women appears to be more negatively affected by marriage and children.

Specification Tests

We tested several extensions of the basic models shown in Table 2 (results not shown). First, we sought to determine whether the effects of delinquency varied according to race or ethnicity and found that they did not. Second, we determined that the effects of delinquency do not vary according to age. Third, we ascertained that the effects of delinquency do not vary according to historical period (here whether enlistment occurred prior to or after 9/11). We should note that even though the specification tests did not reveal statistically significant effects, the sample sizes involved in the created interaction terms used to test for the model extensions are relatively small. Thus, the power to determine a statistically significant effect is not great.

DISCUSSION

We found that our measure of delinquency is linked to enlistment in the military. The Delinquency Index possesses a non-linear relationship with enlistment. Results are similar for both men and women, although women appear to be more sensitive to level of delinquency. Overall, these results are consistent with our expectations. We expected that higher levels of delinquency would be related to an increased likelihood of enlistment, at least up to a point. For men, this is about eight on the Delinquency Index. For women, the point of inflection for the Delinquency Index is about four. Even though the effect of delinquency, as measured by the Delinquency Index, tends to decline after a peak has been reached, the odds of enlistment remain high until much higher levels of the index are reached.

The effects of delinquency on enlistment can be substantial. Figure 1 shows that the odds of enlistment for some male delinquents are more than 40% greater than for comparable respondents who have not engaged in delinquent behavior. For women, that figure is even greater at 80%. Moreover, the positive effect of delinquency on enlistment persists until a male respondent has scored eight on the ten point Delinquency Index. For women, the positive effect of delinquency persists until a score of six on the ten point index.

These results suggest that military service is an attractive option to individuals who evidence some degree of delinquency. We argued that this relationship exists because delinquent men and women view military service as an age-appropriate marker of the transition to adulthood and desistance from further delinquent behavior. We suggest that military service provides

immediate adult status, rewarding social bonds in a regimented life style, and a challenging environment for those seeking adventure.

The fact that the relationship between delinquency and enlistment becomes increasingly negative at higher levels of delinquency suggests that some individuals may be too engaged in an alternative lifestyle to see military service as beneficial to them. It may also be the case that individuals with high scores on the Delinquency Index do not meet the moral standards used by the various branches of the military for enlistment, especially if self-reports of delinquency are matched by administrative records available to recruiters.

Our results also indicate that the relationship between delinquency and enlistment cannot be explained by simple economic indicators of work and schooling. Net of work and schooling, delinquency is linked to decisions to enter the military. Moreover, our analysis demonstrates that military, schooling, and work need not be viewed as competing risks. The early life course of young men and women is often a messier set of transitions than often depicted in models that force individuals into one path versus another. Rather, we suggest that the imagery should be one in which individuals continuously reassess their choices as time passes. In this case, the decision to enter the military is influenced by school and work choices instead of these choices eliminating someone's risk of service.

Future research should seek to present more refined measures of delinquency. The measures included in the Delinquency Index used in this article represent somewhat standard indicators of delinquent status. It is possible that more subtle measures of non-normative behavior would yield different results. For example, it has been found that veterans are more likely than non-veterans to engage in extramarital sex (London, Allen, and Wilmoth, 2013). It is also the case that veterans are more likely to abuse alcohol than non-veterans (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2001). A broader definition of delinquency may yield multiple paths of influence on enlistment decisions.

In addition to a more nuanced definition of delinquent behavior, better indicators of the motivations and desires of delinquents are needed. For example, we have argued that many delinquents are thrill seekers. It would be valuable to know explicitly whether these individuals view the military as a place where their sense of adventure can be met. Another example would be indicators to help ascertain whether delinquent individuals may be encouraged to enlist by authority figures (e.g., parents, judges). It would also be advantageous to determine whether delinquents view the military as an indicator of adult status that aids in the desistance from delinquency. Other extensions would encompass a more detailed examination of the type of military service chosen by delinquents (e.g., branch of military service, military occupation chosen). Finally, high quality qualitative research may be useful to better probe the motivations of delinquents who decide to join the military.

CONCLUSION

We have demonstrated that delinquency is linked to the odds of enlistment in the military. Delinquency is linked in a non-linear fashion to enlistment, with relatively strong positive effects at lower levels of delinquency that weaken significantly at higher levels of delinquency. We found that delinquency is a statistically significant factor in enlistment decisions for both men and women. In addition, found that work and schooling act to reduce the odds of enlistment. The results are consistent with the notion that the military is viewed as a safe refuge from the vagaries of civilian life by young men and women who might not otherwise fit into contemporary conceptions of a normative life course pattern.

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Highlights

- Delinquent behavior has a non-linear relationship with military enlistment
- The relationship is positive at lower levels of delinquency, then turns negative
- The relationship is similar for both men and women

Figure 1.
Relative Odds of Enlistment by Delinquency Index: Men and Women

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for Pooled Intervals of Data Taken from the 1997 NLSY

Variable	Mean or Proportion	
	Men	Women
Enlist in the military	.009 (.0004)	.002 (.0002)
Delinquency index	3.10 (.013)	1.71 (.010)
Race:		
Black (omitted)	.26 (.004)	.27 (.004)
Hispanic	.21 (.004)	.21 (.004)
Mixed race	.01 (.002)	.01 (.002)
Non-black, non-Hispanic	.52 (.004)	.50 (.007)
Urban	.78 (.002)	.80 (.002)
South	.38 (.002)	.40 (.002)
Cumulative number of moves	4.40 (.027)	4.99 (.021)
Age in months	267.87 (.197)	269.43 (.195)
Highest level of parents' education	13.10 (.026)	13.00 (.019)
Lived with both parents at age 12	.47 (.003)	.42 (.003)
Pre-9/11	.29 (.002)	.28 (.002)
Number of household members	3.55 (.009)	3.65 (.009)
ASVAB		
Category 1	.23 (.002)	.21 (.002)
Category 2	.19 (.002)	.20 (.002)
Category 3a	.10 (.001)	.12 (.002)
Category 3b (omitted)	.14 (.002)	.16 (.002)
Category 4a	.35 (.002)	.31 (.002)
Category 4b	.05 (.001)	.05 (.001)
Category 4c	.07 (.001)	.06 (.001)
Category 5	.15 (.002)	.12 (.002)
Household income		
HH income < poverty level	.22 (.002)	.26 (.002)
HH income >= poverty level to <= 3x poverty level	.19 (.002)	.19 (.002)
HH income > 3x poverty level	.59 (.002)	.55 (.002)
Married	.10 (.002)	.17 (.002)
Body Mass Index		
BMI < 19	.03 (.001)	.06 (.001)
19 <= BMI < 25 (omitted)	.42 (.002)	.48 (.002)
25 <= BMI < 30	.31 (.002)	.21 (.002)
BMI >= 30	.24 (.002)	.25 (.002)
Number of resident children		
No resident children	.88 (.002)	.66 (.002)
One resident child (omitted)	.08 (.002)	.19 (.002)
Two resident children	.04 (.001)	.15 (.001)

Variable	Mean or Proportion	
	Men	Women
Number of non-resident children		
No non-resident children	.90 (.001)	.98 (.001)
One non-resident child (omitted)	.07 (.001)	.01 (.001)
Two non-resident children	.03 (.001)	.01 (.001)
Education:		
Less than high school	.29 (.002)	.24 (.002)
High school degree or GED (omitted)	.35 (.002)	.26 (.002)
Some college	.35 (.002)	.42 (.002)
College or more	.06 (.001)	.08 (.001)
Self-reported health:		
Excellent	.35 (.002)	.26 (.002)
Very good	.35 (.002)	.36 (.002)
Good (omitted)	.23 (.002)	.29 (.002)
Fair	.06 (.001)	.08 (.001)
Poor	.01 (.001)	.01 (.001)
Number of weeks worked	34.66 (.097)	33.81 (.097)
Enrolled in school	.34 (.002)	.38 (.002)

Table 2
Multivariate Logistic Regression Results for an Event History Analysis of Entry into the Military: 1997 NLSY

Variable	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
Delinquency index	.206**	.351**	.224**	.342**	.194**	.400**
Delinquency index squared	-.021**	-.059**	-.021**	-.052*	-.026**	-.068**
Race:						
Black (omitted)						
Hispanic	.485**	.225	.409**	-.022	.671**	-.063
Mixed race	-.070	-.036	.035	-.463	.342	-.540
Non-black, non-Hispanic	.099	-.639**	.034	-.842**	.437**	-.654**
Urban	-.026	-.422	.018	-.451	-.074	-.365
South	.454**	.328	.422**	.404*	.361**	.384
Cumulative number of moves	.355**	.118	.316**	.146	.317**	.163*
Cumulative number of moves squared	-.023**	-.002	-.019**	-.002	-.021**	-.005
Age in months	.250**	.283**	.067	.172*	.089**	.197*
Age in months squared	-.001**	-.001**	-.001**	-.001**	-.002**	-.005**
Highest level of parents' education	.014	.001	.013	-.004	.013	.027
Lived with both parents at age 12	.136	.141	.115	-.002	.135	.092
Pre-9/11	.493**	-.299	.328**	-.467	.412**	-.328
Number of household members	-.548**	-.633**	-.403**	-.405**	-.403**	-.494**
Number of household members squared	.044**	.050**	.035**	.035**	.030**	.039**
ASVAB						
Category 1	-.533**	-.646*	-.381*	-.551	-.426**	-.848**
Category 2	.024	.262	.072	.227	.170	.244
Category 3a	.379*	.031	.356*	-.048	.401*	-.031
Category 3b (omitted)						
Category 4a	.080	-.841*	.089	-.823	-.039	-1.115**

Variable	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
Category 4b	-.622*	-.895	-.563	-.826	-.542	-.556
Category 4c	-1.039**	-.184	-.854**	-.166	-.814**	-.135
Category 5	-1.902**	--	-1.63**	--	-1.914**	--
Household income						
HH income < poverty level			.227	.127	-.020	-.018
HH income >= poverty level to <= 3x poverty level						
HH income > 3x poverty level			-.195	-.070	-.181	.065
Married			1.14**	-.143	1.575**	-.374
Body mass index						
BMI < 19			-.735	-1.482**	-.696	-1.716**
19 <= BMI < 25 (omitted)						
25 <= BMI < 30			.254**	-.228	.185	-.288
BMI >= 30			-.983**	-2.993**	-1.021**	-3.200**
Number of resident children						
No resident children			.831**	1.296**	.638*	1.777**
One resident child (omitted)						
Two resident children			.873*		.841	--
Number of non-resident children						
No non-resident children			.132	-.139	.332	.406
One non-resident child (omitted)						
Two non-resident children			-.074	1.487	-.226	2.029
Education:						
Less than high school			-2.991**	-2.873**	-2.470**	-1.967**
High school degree or GED (omitted)						
Some college			-1.097**	-1.472**	-.119	-.184
College or more			-.365	-.110	-.238	.017
Self-reported health:						
Excellent			1.266**	.945**	1.261**	1.114**

Variable	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
Very good			.753**	.166	.832**	.274
Good (omitted)						
Fair			-.022	-.587	-.075	-.500
Poor			1.280	1.284	.332	1.010
Number of weeks worked					-.063**	-.066**
Enrolled in school					-2.355**	-2.454**
Constant	-34.900**	-35.991**	-11.049*	-21.401	-12.452**	-25.018*

*
p < .10
**
p < .05

-- indicates that no women with this characteristic enlisted in the military, thus no parameter estimate is possible