

US: Returning veterans face mounting joblessness and low wages

Alex Lantier
29 March 2008

On March 25, the *Wall Street Journal* published a brief summary of a US Veterans Affairs Department study on discharged veterans' employment and wage prospects. The report, not yet publicly released and largely blacked out in the broader US media, paints a devastating picture of surging unemployment and low wages for returning veterans.

It found that the percentage of veterans not in the labor force—due to unemployment, having returned to school for further training, or having given up looking for work—had more than doubled between 2000 and 2005, jumping from 10 to 23 percent. Veterans aged 20-24 had an unemployment rate of 12 percent, 50 percent larger than the overall US unemployment rate for adults aged 20-24, which stands at 8 percent. On March 27, the military newspaper *Stars and Stripes*, writing on the same report, noted that 18 percent of veterans reported being unemployed.

Many employed veterans earn salaries leaving them at constant risk of financial hardship. Twenty-five percent reported earning less than \$21,840 a year. Half of those aged 20-24 earned less than \$25,000 a year.

The report also exposed one of most commonly promoted claims of military recruiters: that recruits will gain valuable gain job skills for future civilian life. The *Journal* wrote: "The report found that most of the returning veterans were unable to find civilian jobs that matched their previous military occupations. The only exceptions were the veterans working for private security firms such as Blackwater or in the maintenance and repair fields."

The *Journal* added: "The Veterans Affairs Department offers educational-assistance programs for young veterans, but the report said the initiatives had little impact on the employment status or salaries of the former military personnel."

Several other sources noted difficulties facing veterans

in looking for civilian jobs. Military.com, the veterans' section of the online recruitment web site Monster.com, released a survey of veteran jobseekers and civilian employers in November 2007. The survey found that 81 percent of discharged veterans did not "feel fully prepared for the process of entering the job market," with 71 percent unsure of how to negotiate salary and benefits and 76 percent reporting "an inability to effectively translate their military skills into civilian terms."

The way these facts came to public attention—through the leaking of an internal report, which then went broadly ignored in the mainstream press—speaks volumes about the state of American political life and class relations.

As US fatalities reached 4,000 this past week, the death toll in the war and occupation of Iraq received a certain amount of coverage in the print and broadcast media. The number of wounded soldiers, however, is controversial and rarely discussed. And the difficulties facing returning veterans—the lack of jobs, financial insecurity, denial of health care, and homelessness—also receive little press coverage.

The problems of returning veterans are closely tied to the deteriorating situation of the broader American working class. They follow inevitably from the US military's thrusting often traumatized veterans into a society marked by rising unemployment, deindustrialization, the destruction of high-paying jobs, and increasingly difficult access to health care, education, and housing.

As Ricky Singh of Black Veterans for Social Justice told OneWorld news service in November 2007, "What typically happens to young adults who go into the military at 17 or 18, when they return home, the same kind of economic conditions that forced them towards the military still exist or have gotten worse."

The career advice offered to veterans in a February 24, 2008, posting on VeteransToday.com provides a revealing

picture of the US job market. It notes that in “farming, production, and transportation—you’re looking at slow or negative growth and poor job availability.” Another major sector that VeteransToday.com encourages veterans to consider—construction—is entering recession due to the bursting of the mortgage and real estate bubbles and the crisis on Wall Street.

Observing that the US economy is “becoming more technology-oriented and less dependent on agriculture and manufacturing,” VeteransToday.com recommends the following jobs as “the place to start”: software engineer, veterinarian, financial analyst, dental hygienist, nurse, college professor, doctor, and lawyer. However, the extensive training required for these jobs makes them difficult options for returning veterans, many of whom joined the armed forces upon graduating from high school. The drying up of student loans, amid the general tightening of US credit markets, aggravates the problem.

Among service jobs, VeteransToday.com noted, “Retail sales, wait staff, and cashier jobs are numerous, but each carries a wince-inducing median salary of between \$14,000 and \$20,000 per year. Customer service offers the fourth most job openings for new workers, with a substantially better median salary of just over \$28,000.”

The crisis of veterans’ health care has surfaced several times to the media’s attention, especially after the March 2007 revelation of gross neglect of wounded veterans at Walter Reed Army Medical Center. In November 2007, the *Boston Globe* reported that, according to estimates by Physicians for Social Responsibility and staff physicians at the Veterans Affairs Department, the total cost of treating veterans would top \$650 billion.

Several factors account for this figure. The development of body armor and rapid battlefield medical evacuation has greatly increased the number of severely wounded soldiers who survive their injuries, pushing the wounded-to-killed ratio to over 8 to 1, from 2 to 1 during World War II. The *Globe* noted that the percentage of amputees was the highest since the US Civil War. Moreover, the percentage of veterans afflicted by post-traumatic stress disorder (shell shock) is currently expected to reach between 30 and 36 percent of a total population of 1.5 million veterans of the current wars—an astounding half a million patients.

Though many wounded and disabled veterans are being denied treatment, the resulting flood of patients is overwhelming the Veterans Affairs Department. According to a January 2008 study by the Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America association, the number

of outstanding claims by veterans for treatment rose from 254,000 to 378,000 between 2003 and 2006, with the average waiting time before a veteran receives treatment rising to 183 days.

This situation has provoked massive resentment among veterans. It forced the February 28 resignation of Veterans Affairs Undersecretary for Benefits Daniel Cooper, after a video surfaced in which Cooper, a member of the Christian Embassy missionary group, stated that Bible study was more important than his professional duties. In the video, Cooper said: “It’s not really about carving out time, it really is a matter of saying what is important. And since that’s more important than doing the job—the job’s going to be there, whether I’m there or not.”

CBS News reported on the epidemic of veteran suicides on March 20. Citing internal Veterans Affairs reports, CBS found that the number of suicide attempts by recently treated VA patients almost doubled, from 462 in 2000 to 790 in 2007. The total number of VA patients who succeeded in committing suicide was 1,403 in 2001 and 1,784 in 2005.

Large numbers of veterans are homeless. The Department of Veterans Affairs web page states, in its Overview of Homeless: “About 154,000 veterans (male and female) are homeless on any given night and perhaps twice as many experience homelessness at some point during the course of a year. Many other veterans are considered near homeless or at risk because of their poverty, lack of support from family and friends, and dismal living conditions in cheap hotels or in overcrowded or substandard housing.”

The Alliance to End Homelessness, a nonprofit organization quoted by the *Boston Globe*, gave higher estimates: “194,254 out of 744,313 homeless people on any given night [nationwide] are veterans.” The group had based its calculations on information from the Department of Veterans Affairs and the US Census Bureau.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact