

# The Next Post

## Young people transitioning from military service and their mental health

Transition from military service to civilian life can be difficult; particularly for young ex-serving Australian Defence Force (ADF) personnel whom experience a higher prevalence of mental ill-health and suicidality than their older peers.

### KEY ISSUES

While suicide is the leading cause of death among young men (aged 15-24 years) in Australia, the rate is almost twice as high among young ex-serving male personnel (aged 18-24 years).

Personnel who leave with less than four years have been found to be at an increased risk of depression, panic attacks, suicidality, and alcohol disorder following transition.

### Risk factors

Risk factors for young ex-serving personnel include:

- shorter periods of service
- barriers to services (including culture, stigma and awareness)
- non-voluntary separation
- a loss of protective factors:
  - social support, belonging and identity
  - adapting to civilian life and learning new 'life skills'.

### Being prepared

Service personnel need to be prepared for their eventual transition from the point of recruitment and throughout their service. The Department of Veteran's Affairs (DVA) is able to connect with serving ADF personnel in preparation for future separation. The largest resistance to this engagement, however, has been among personnel with less than one year of service. This disengagement needs to be overcome through novel initiatives that reach this group.

Interviews with key stakeholders from within Defence, DVA and Ex-service Organisations raised a number of issues including:

- the need to identify those at higher risk of poor mental health outcomes
- gaps in existing services and supports for young transitioning and ex-serving personnel
- ideas for new services or initiatives to meet their needs.

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### Gaps in knowledge

There are gaps in knowledge about the experience of young ex-serving personnel in Australia and their access to specialist mental health services. Evidence from overseas suggests that service access among younger ex-serving personnel with diagnosable mental disorders is low. There is a need for further research into the mental health of young ex-serving personnel.

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### Their experience

Ex-serving personnel who transitioned out of the ADF before turning 25 were engaged in this policy project to better understand their experience of transition and support services. They identified:

- a need for more structured transition and post-transition support services
- that not all young personnel will necessarily be in the right 'headspace' to enable them to engage with, or benefit from these services during or immediately following transition
- the potential mental health consequences of military culture and initial training on the development of young personnel's self-identity.

## KEY POLICY OPPORTUNITIES

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Policy opportunities for supporting young ex-serving personnel developed by Orygen and Phoenix Australia complements existing initiatives to better understand the experiences and needs of all serving and ex-serving personnel.

### Comprehensive psychosocial health assessment

Mandatory and comprehensive psychosocial health assessments by a military and youth aware mental health professional prior to transition to guide the selection of suitable services, and where required, facilitate referrals to appropriate mental health services.

### Targeted support hubs

Targeted and uniquely branded support 'hubs' for transitioning and young ex-serving personnel (with scope to extend into the 25-29 age range) are required. Three levels of service would be provided based on the risk of mental health or psychosocial adjustment problems.

### Improving engagement

New initiatives to develop accessible service pathways for young serving and ex-serving personnel. A 'reach-in' trial be undertaken with a specific focus on engaging young service personnel during the recruitment process, initial training and within their first year of service.



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To read the full paper, visit [orygen.org.au](http://orygen.org.au)