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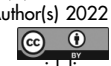

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Hero to zero? Navigating and negotiating the harms of criminalisation as a 'veteran offender'

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Abstract
This article offers an original insight into the experiences of former military personnel navigating life after criminalisation in a time of austerity. Drawing on case studies of in-depth narrative and visual interview data with two 'veteran offenders', the article draws attention to a complex 'dance of disclosure' around military service and criminal records. The article demonstrates how the complexity of the pains of criminalisation can make (re-)finding a sense of purpose and self-worth difficult for former military personnel who must continually decide whether to disclose or obscure their military past, depending on the criminal punishment context. This critical analysis makes visible a potential continuum of state harm for those criminalised and managed as 'veteran offenders'.

Keywords
veteran offenders, criminal records, social harm, stigma, resettlement, military to civilian transitions, identity

Introduction

It has been fourteen years since the National Association of Probation Officers (NAPO, 2008) identified 'alarming levels' of over 20,000 former military personnel imprisoned or under community supervision in England and Wales. This led to the national approach of asking all those who encounter criminal punishment systems if

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they have ever served in the military (Phillips, 2014; MoJ, 2019). Despite initial interest in how best to support ex-forces personnel, criminal justice responses are still limited to localised, ad-hoc examples of good practice (Murray, 2014; Moorhead, 2021). Strategic focus within policy, practice and research remains focused on ways of identifying and calculating numbers of 'veteran offenders', rather than understanding the complexity of their lived experiences (Ford et al., 2016; Albertson et al., 2017). In response, this article offers an original insight into the lives of two criminalised veterans to reveal how the incoherent categorisation and governance of 'veteran offenders' fails to capture the nuances of navigating criminalised identities. Whilst based in a UK context, this article has implications which transcend human-made borders – with military to civilian transitions being an area of international political concern (McGarry and Walklate, 2016; Cooper et al., 2018).

The words of 'David' and 'Oliver' presented here reveal how the homogenous casting of 'veteran offenders' – however well-meaning in terms of identifying and supporting them – is fraught with exclusion and misrecognition. This article draws attention to the lived experiences of navigating a complex 'dance of disclosure' during post-imprisonment transitions to civilian life ('civvy street'). This involves people having to risk the potential stigma of revealing their military past in addition to their criminal records. Whilst disclosing one's 'veteran' status may potentially facilitate access to resettlement support, it may also prompt potentially stigmatising assessments of 'risk' and 'vulnerability' by criminal justice practitioners. In what follows, I argue that the presence or absence of war experiences can further compound this dance of disclosure. I also highlight some of the unwitting consequences and harms of current criminal punishment approaches in terms of the re-criminalisation, re-stigmatisation, and excessive punishment that may flow from being identified and managed as a 'veteran offender'.

After a brief overview of how 'veteran offenders' and their needs have been discussed in the literature, I outline the case study methodology used in the research. My analysis then falls into three main sections. First, I detail what is meant by the 'hero to zero' fall, showing that in different ways, both David and Oliver experienced the traces of heightened risk management and shame due to their military past, while also having their everyday suffering individualised and medicalised through notions of 'militarised vulnerability'. Second, I extend this analysis to the socio-economic and political contexts surrounding their experiences of (re-)criminalisation. Here I argue that the narratives of David and Oliver offer a significant insight into how the excessive punishment faced by 'veteran offenders' is rooted in a wider continuum of social harm which spans the life course (Pemberton, 2016) and is compounded by the violence of austerity (McGarry and Walklate, 2016; Cooper and Whyte, 2017). Third, I consider how this cumulative build-up of stigma and social harm resulted in the participants facing difficulties when imagining and (re-) finding a sense of purpose and belonging.

'Veteran Offenders' in the Criminal Punishment System

The seemingly reactionary construction of the 'veteran offender' as a political category of risk management has rightly been problematised on the basis that it

involves a collision of subjectivities, where notions of 'national defender' meet 'threat to the public' (Murray, 2016). The 'veteran offender' can therefore be seen to symbolically embody a tension. On the one hand, they may be 'more violent' due to the drilled resource of being able to kill (Hockey, 2013). On the other hand, 'veteran offenders' may be in greater need of support, precisely due to their militarisation and potential exposure to the harms of war (McGarry and Walklate, 2011; Walklate et al., 2014).

The Howard League (2011) reported that 'veteran offenders', like the vast majority of those imprisoned, often have backgrounds anchored in socio-economic disadvantage. Indeed, the British Armed Forces have long recruited people from areas of poverty and restricted life chances, especially to fill front-line, violent-facing roles (Morris, 2017). It is therefore unsurprising that the support needs of 'veteran offenders' have also been found to reflect the wider imprisoned population (MacManus et al., 2013; Ashcroft, 2014). These support needs include recovery from substance dependence (Albertson et al., 2017; Moorhead, 2021); difficulties surrounding housing and homelessness (Johnson et al., 2008); struggles with mental health and help-seeking (Caddick et al., 2015); identity transitions (Higate, 2001); and finding employment (Gee, 2017).

The limited criminological attention placed on the lived experiences of ex-forces personnel has mostly focused on how the 'violent veteran' comes to be, seeking to trace whether violence in domestic (non-military) settings can be attributed to the military institution. Such research explores masculinised cultures of trained violence (Cooper et al., 2018); PTSD and experiences of war (MacManus et al., 2013); and whether there is a continuum of violence extending *before* military service (Howard League, 2011; Murray, 2014). The ways in which people experience criminalisation and practices of criminal record disclosure as a 'veteran offender' in 'civvy street' have yet to be explored.

Method

This article uses a case study approach to offer original insights into the lived experiences of two criminalised former British military personnel - 'David' and 'Oliver'. David is a former Army infantry soldier and Oliver was a chef in the Royal Air Force (RAF). Their words were shared during a broader research project exploring experiences of 21st century theatres of war and military to civilian transitions (Wilkinson, 2017, 2019). The interviews with David and Oliver have been selected for this article, as both were adjusting to life with unspent convictions after long periods of imprisonment. Noting the limited inclusion of lived experience within understandings of 'veteran offenders' (Albertson et al., 2017), large sections of interview data have been included to give the reader a sense of how complex 'resettlement' can be for this group – even at the micro-level of two people's stories. Consequently, the article begins to address shortcomings in literature concerning the apparent silencing, however (un)intentional, of those navigating the 'pains of criminalisation' (Henley, 2018).

Data Collection

The research used a flexible approach to data collection incorporating free-association narrative interview (FANI) techniques (Holloway and Jefferson, 2012), with photo and object elicitation (Jenkings et al., 2008). Participants were invited to bring around ten 'meaningful' photos and/or objects with them to the interview. This voluntary aspect of the methodology aimed to anchor life histories in time, place, and space (West, 2014), by disrupting time-linear frameworks in which narratives are often recounted. David explained there were many photos and objects that he would have liked to have brought and discussed, but that he had lost possession of these items when moving in and out of imprisonment, as well as during long periods of homelessness and sleeping rough. Oliver brought approximately fifteen photos to the interview, some in frames, some faded and creased - spanning childhood up to the present day. Oliver also wanted to show me several military objects, such as pieces of equipment and uniform. Yet, like David, Oliver took time to explain how he had lost possession of these sentimental objects during imprisonment and subsequent moves between temporary accommodation.

Ethical Considerations

Anonymity, informed consent, and signposting to further support were core concerns of the research design.[1] As military service can instil a cultural reluctance to discuss painful experiences, often masked by dark humour or 'squaddie banter' (Caddick et al., 2015), it was important to create spaces where participants could talk freely about difficult topics. Becker-Blease and Freyd (2006) argue that harm can result from 'not asking' or steering conversation away from uncomfortable conversations, thus denying or silencing significant traumatic experiences. Both interviews were grounded in difficult discussions which exposed significant pain, discussed within and through a wealth of everyday struggle and 'ordinary suffering' (Bourdieu 1990). Much of this pain had never been spoken out loud. The length of interviews was guided by participants. Despite raw emotions, David's interview lasted over two-and-a-half hours, whilst Oliver's lasted almost four hours.

'David' and 'Oliver'

At the time of interviews in 2016, both David and Oliver were living in temporary supported housing for 'veteran-offenders' provided by a housing trust in the West Midlands. They 'opted-in' to the research by responding to a letter of invitation left at the housing trust, following several knowledge-exchange visits to inform staff practice. After noticing positive changes in how staff communicated with veteran residents, Oliver emailed to say he wanted to talk to me. David got in touch a month later and explained that although he was 'in a dark place', he wanted to contribute to the research after Oliver had mentioned that the interview had been a positive experience, albeit a difficult one. This snowball-type recruitment method was a feature of the larger project and appeared to be driven by what has

been recognised elsewhere as 'militarised trust' (Gee, 2017; Ward, 2017). Although this article places an exploratory focus on two human stories, the rigour of data collection and depth of analysis within the underpinning research provides significant insights into the life-worlds of an under-researched group. The interviews with David and Oliver have been selected and analysed here with the aim of mobilising further reflection and action around how we can collectively support 'veteran offenders'.

'More risky' yet 'more vulnerable': the lived tensions of 'veteran offenders'

Language is also a place of struggle. (bell hooks, 1989: 15)

As with 'risk' and 'resilience' (Walklate et al., 2014; McGarry et al., 2015), 'vulnerability' is a concept that has received increasing policy and practice attention. However, its application regularly fails to capture the structural marginalisation of those in need of social support. 'Vulnerable' has therefore been used tentatively here, to draw attention to how the identification and governance of 'veteran offenders' can (re-)produce individualised attempts to explain 'criminality'. The narratives included below demonstrate the shame and stigma that can be generated when the 'veteran offender' category obscures the complexity of militarised experiences, identities, and life histories co-existing under such a label.

'Doubly Bad'

Like many ex-forces personnel who are imprisoned, David was convicted for violent offences, along with being criminalised for addiction. At the time of the interview, he had recently been released from prison for the eleventh time. David expressed frustration at being governed and medicalised as 'more risky' due to an assumed capacity for violence connected to being a former infantry soldier:

> David: Couple of them [prison officers] knocked me around. I hit one back and, do you know what I mean, ended up going straight to the segregation unit. I was on three man unlock, because I was seen as high risk [sniffs]. Um, I had to lie on the floor with my hands behind my back every time they come into my cell, put my keys in. Put my food on the floor. And they had to step back.

Oliver served in the RAF as a chef yet was still deemed 'high risk' in terms of potential militarised violence. The increased risk associated with his 'veteran offender' categorisation was seemingly compounded by the 'additional' risk attached to his conviction for a child sexual offence. He had recently been released on parole from an Imprisonment for Public Protection (IPP) sentence (see Beard, 2017) and was being supervised in the community. After a support worker checked in to see if I was okay during our interview, Oliver reflected on how he

embodied a collision of these categories – meaning he was now managed as 'doubly bad' due to being a 'veteran sex offender':

> Oliver: See, it's things like that. The question is, are you comfortable with me being in here on your own? (Hannah: Yeah) But I've got to accept that people are always going to ask that question. […] That's a frustration in life for me. That I've got to learn to live with […]
>
> Classic one. I got a new probation officer when I moved to here … And he said, "did you know that there's a school nearby?". I said, "yes, it was all mentioned to the police, and all the rest of it" (Hannah: yes) I made sure they knew. Even though it was fucking obvious. They should know. He says, "well, do you walk past it?". I goes, "yes, sometimes". He said, "do you look in there?". I said, "no". Then it was, "Can you walk another way around?". I said, "yes, no problem. I don't have to go left down past the school. I can go right, past the nursery, round the corner, past the next nursery, up the road round the next schoo-" I said, "what do you want me to do? Walk around with a blindfold?". I get that they're concerned for the public. It's their job. I'm a veteran sex offender now. Doubly bad! But you've got to be reasonable. I'm not going to reoffend or risk even being close to such a situation.

Regardless of whether Oliver reoffends or not, a culture of risk management meant his daily interactions with criminal justice practitioners were grounded in mistrust and a presumption of devious intent to cause future harm. The increased risk management of Oliver as a 'veteran sex offender' likely reflects how practitioners are held personally accountable for the actions of those they work with. Mawby and Worrall (2013: 4) argue that the level of risk has become 'the single most important criterion in determining the amount and type of subsequent intervention'. Thus, extreme caution, daily life restrictions and excessive surveillance had become the 'norm' for how Oliver experienced interactions with criminal justice workers.

Further, as a former IPP prisoner with a sexual offence conviction, Oliver had to justify the most basic aspects of his daily life, such as taking a walk. This is not to deny that such risks to the public may be prevented through positive probation-offender relationships and communication (Mawby and Worrall, 2013). Instead, the intent is to capture the intensity of restrictions placed upon 'veteran offenders' like Oliver, which limit opportunities to achieve meaningful citizenship and participation in the social world.

'Doubly Sad'

Alongside being governed as 'more violent', veterans in the criminal punishment system are frequently medicalised through the lens of 'vulnerability' associated with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (McGarry and Walklate, 2011; Moorhead, 2021). David was not deployed to an area of active conflict. Nonetheless, as a trained front-line infantry soldier, his mental health struggles with anxiety, depression, and obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) regularly prompted practitioner-based *assumptions* of PTSD:

> David: I hate it. I don't suffer with PTSD, but I suffer with real bad depression [tuts] And um, I don't know if it was. I don't know. I don't know [sniffs] I was suffering. I was suffering with things anyway from care, but it didn't help how I was treated in [army] training and in prison.

Those managing David during imprisonment and community supervision were likely well-meaning in their assumptions of PTSD, motivated by trying to understand how best to support a 'vulnerable veteran offender'. Yet linking 'veteran offending' to the mental traumas of war compounded a deeper level of lived tension and symbolic pain caused by a *lack* of combat experience – an issue rarely discussed in literature.

It is widely acknowledged among military personnel that the highest 'proof' of '*becoming* a soldier' is to survive war (Hockey, 2013; Wilkinson, 2019). In the shadow of this hegemonic understanding of a finely tuned 'warrior masculinity' (Woodward and Winter, 2007), lies the construction of all other 'non-war' military experiences as being somewhat subordinate to the ultimate display of militarised strength. David discussed the shame and sadness of having to continually disclose that he *did not* 'serve' by delivering and experiencing violence as a soldier in a theatre of war:

> David: It's kind of like civilians or whatever and you say you've depression and stuff like that and you was in the army and it was, "oh, you served then?". It's kind of like, "no, I didn't serve". But, well, I do suffer with depression. And it's, like, they, kind of, tie depression, do you know what I mean, automatically to PTSD [sniffs] Um, so you have to keep telling people, do you know what I mean?

> [Sucks in air] No. No, I didn't, I didn't see conflict. Um [tuts] Obviously the Twin Towers and all that kicked off there and, war. Went into war. But we was on standby, in our battalion. We never, we never got called up. I was disappointed when we didn't go to be honest […] I have a friend in the Paras. He's done two stints in Afghanistan. He talks about it and I'm like "oh yeah". But I'm really, like, I'm really jealous, do you know what I mean? I wish I could - because then I could be on that level.

David explained how being asked to disclose details about his military service to criminal punishment, third sector, and healthcare practitioners led to feelings of guilt about receiving veteran-specific support. He felt unworthy. Walklate (2011) has argued that 'vulnerability' renders certain forms of suffering as 'legitimate' and others as 'illegitimate' within the context of a 'politics of pity' (Aradau 2004).

On finding out that David had not 'seen war', his mental suffering was often deprioritised or diminished by practitioners. Reflecting O'Neill's (2002) warnings about how easily trust can be broken between those in power and those being governed, the increased risk management flowing from being labelled as a 'veteran offender', combined with a lack of support after disclosing mental health needs, led David to hide many of his OCD symptoms from practitioners:

David: It made me, like, err, quite generally, um, [tuts] not scared of people. Just, um, wary of people, like, do you know what I mean? Trust I don't trust them now.

Militarised Trust

David and Oliver described being shaped by a military culture in which help-seeking behaviour was strongly discouraged and constructed as 'negative', through notions of 'weakness' posing a threat to the success of military practices (MacLeish, 2015). Ultimately, this cultural barrier prevented Oliver from accessing support:

Oliver: In the forces, I was frightened to ask for help. Because you're thought of as a weak piece of shit. And that's not what they want. They wanted strong, stability, reliable people who wouldn't ask questions, would do as their told, and that's that. So, anything other than that, you were below standard.

Further, Oliver captured a significant problem with support services requiring ex-forces personnel to 'opt-in' and ask for help. Although he was staying in a veteran-specific housing programme, the absence of 'veteran staff' created a trust-related barrier to discussing his support needs:

Oliver: Help comes with confidence. (Hannah: Yes) Or confidence with the person that you're asking help from. Unfortunately, with [Housing Trust], this being for ex-servicemen, who would ex-servicemen ask help from? Another ex-serviceman. They don't have any on staff […] And would I go into there and spill all this lot out to a key worker who's less than half my age? No. (Hannah: mhmm) Not at all. Yet I'm speaking to you. But that's a different kettle of fish, you know? This is for a specific reason.

Participants' narratives therefore echo the 'inside/outside' dichotomy of the military institution (Gee, 2017) – where non-military people on the 'outside' can never experience the full complexity of militarisation on the 'inside'. As David said:

Civvies Don't Understand. They Can't Understand

It has been recognised that the social capital available within veteran peer-mentor programmes can offer unique levels of militarised trust, support, and increased help-seeking behaviours (Albertson et al., 2015). While experiencing feelings of guilt due to not being a 'proper soldier', David discussed how being transferred to a 'veteran offender wing' during his eleventh period of imprisonment led to a friendship with another former infantry soldier with whom he shared a cell:

David: He helped me a lot in prison and just looked after me when I was having bad days and stuff, like, and vice versa, like a buddy, buddy system. I could talk to him … He got me on it [the veteran wing]. And he was getting all the veterans because

> every veteran that came into prison he'd know about it because he was the Orderly. So, he filled up the wing, I think there was about 12 veterans on there [sniffs] Mainly drugs. Lots of them had served in Afghan. He was well trusted in there [pause] And I really miss him.

Although Oliver had been deployed as a field chef with the RAF, he echoed David's sentiment about the perceived stigma and embodied shame about being placed on a 'veteran offender wing' while others with war experience may be 'more in need':

> Oliver: I don't class myself as a veteran. I'm ex-forces. [laughs] (Hannah: yeah) Weird. It's only a play on words. To me, a veteran is somebody who's served in a war, served the country that way. I'm not a veteran. […] I admire, especially the lads, what they're having to go through now with dirty warfare. They're the ones that really need help [sighs]

While possessing military experience, David and Oliver reflect the majority of veterans who have not been deployed to an area of active conflict (MoD, 2021). As described above, this lack of 'combat capital' – the fluctuating 'worth' of military and war experiences (Wilkinson, 2016, 2017) – created barriers to help-seeking behaviours and permeated experiences of accessing veteran-specific services with guilt. Peering through the lens of social harm (Canning and Tombs, 2021), the following section explores how this micro-level of shame reflects the macro-level violence of austerity (Cooper and Whyte, 2017) – where individuals are pitted against each other in a degrading competition for underfunded resources.

Restrictions on human flourishing: social harm and stigma

> *'Deprivation accumulates in bodies over lifetimes'*. (Tyler, 2020: 168)

Pemberton (2016: 106) asserts that relative poverty created by capitalism should be considered 'autonomy harm'. This impacts individuals' abilities to achieve self-actualisation through restricted life choices and opportunities to flourish. Responding to the call for action to qualitatively document 'the collateral injuries and human misery of these [austerity] policies' (ibid. p. 154), the following interview extracts have been selected after a social harm analysis of the data. Broadly speaking, social harm is a lens to make visible the vast range of suffering connected to state policies and decisions of those holding power. It is a way to extend our thinking to pinpoint the harms that lie beyond current legal definitions of 'crime', and to think more critically about how violence flows from the choices made by governments (Cooper and Whyte, 2017).

David and Oliver joined the Armed Forces through a desire to escape poverty. This echoes what is known more widely about enlistment in the lower ranks of the British military (Gee, 2017). However, the connection to pre-military experiences

of inequality is not intended to obscure the roles of the masculinised military institution, trained violence, and combat experience that may connect with subsequent criminalisation (Higate, 2001; Murray, 2014). Drawing on the narratives of David and Oliver below, I frame criminalisation in relation to 'life before' militarisation to firmly trace a continuum of harm throughout the life course, deeply connected to state institutions (Wilkinson, 2019).

"[F]rom One Institution to Another, to Another"

David and Oliver had a long history of moving in and out of state institutions. Both participants talked at length about how the turbulence of poverty shaped their lives, and promoted a search for stability, structure, and discipline. David explained how he found these desired conditions during imprisonment:

> The worst thing that ever happened to me is I went to prison the first time, because that was it then. It was just like, "ahh", I got that environment back [pause] You get institutionalised in that sort of environment. And because I've been [sniffs] I've been in that kind of environment pretty much half my life, you know, with care homes. And having that, sort of, routine all the time and having someone tell me what to do. Then it's hard when you've got to think for yourself. I kind of just tried to do things to stay in […] But I just need that structure now you know? That I originally had in the army. Kind of got that from care a little bit. So, I've moved, well really from one institution to another, to another.

In contrast, Oliver was craving for the freedom of autonomy. Below, he discusses what it feels like to exist at the mercy of charity-provided housing and probation supervision:

> I'll be using this facility for the least amount of time as I have to. I want my individual life back. To make decisions for myself, completely by myself when I want, and what I want. If I fuck up on them decisions, that's down to me. I don't intend to. But that's the next step for me, is finding accommodation […] Even though in my head I know that I could do with being employed. Because that would help me. Occupy time, give me money, give me more self-worth. Erm, but I'm trying to do as much courses as possible, just to try and fill that side of life and get out of here.

As with people leaving institutions more generally, those leaving the Armed Forces must learn to 'reshape' their skills, values, and understandings of how to navigate a different social world (Jolly, 1996). Bourdieu (1990) argued that such a shift will likely prompt a period of painful struggle ('hysteresis') both internally - as one breaks down and rebuilds their identity - and externally - as socio-economic opportunities may be missed while learning how to 'play the game' of capitalism. Akin to notions of 'resilience', Cooper et al. (2018) outline how military to civilian transitions demand that veterans hold or develop 'cultural competence'. Alternatively, people may find new 'fields' in which their existing militarised or institutionalised self 'fits'

without a painful shift (Wilkinson, 2017: 288). Oliver temporarily achieved such a cultural 'fit' when working for the prison service after leaving the RAF:

> Oliver: I started working for the prison service and I was still working in that environment then. (Hannah: Okay) Erm, and [laughs], out of the five other chefs that worked in that environment, four were ex-RAF [laughs] So, it was like going from home to home. […] Once I actually finished there, come out of prison, and I came back … to start again, I started working at hotels and all of it, then I found a difference. So, I class coming back [to the West Midlands] as my 'coming out'. I had to start again.

A consistent theme within the data was that a major source of struggle upon leaving imprisonment stemmed from a 'reverse culture shock', whereby 'a sense of disorientation can occur when personnel transition … [as] both the individual's frame of reference and the civilian culture itself may have changed, leading to difficulties in navigating this previously familiar environment' (Cooper et al., 2018: 158). However, the 'civilian' environment was not always 'familiar' to participants. David and Oliver had never experienced adult life in 'civvy street' before entering the military institution, mirroring how the majority of military personnel enlist before they have entered adulthood (Gee, 2017). David was 16 years old when the British Army employed him straight from the care system, and the RAF employed Oliver when he was 17. This has implications for notions of 're-habilitation' and 'resettlement', which assumes a return to a prior state of 'habilitation' that may not exist for many 'veteran offenders'.

The Violent Stigma of Austerity

A cumulative build-up of restricted life chances throughout the life course experienced by criminalised veterans requires navigation through a 'continuum of conflict', embedded in structures of state harm (Wilkinson, 2019: 335, 388). The words of David and Oliver included below respond to Tyler's (2020: 167) recent call for qualitative data to make visible the austerity-driven hunger and mental distress caused by 'levels of precarity and vulnerability so dire that some poorer communities face circumstances of deprivation that resemble those found in the aftermath of wars and natural disasters' (ibid. p 166).

The systemic conditions of poverty that drove David and Oliver to escape civilian society by enlisting in the military had worsened due to austerity. Below, David and Oliver share the realities of life on 'Universal Credit':

> David: It's hard being up here because obviously I'm on job seekers; I'm on a little bit of money. Um, and £25 on a train at a time, you know, I'm fortunate, my mum pays my travel [to see his daughter]. And if she couldn't do that, if I didn't have that I wouldn't be able to come down and see her, because I just [pause] I can barely. You know, you're living from day to day.

> Oliver: Money, there's not a lot I can do on that. Just [air quotes] "live within your means" … Erm, which I'm just about coping […] I've got to the stage now that I've

> got money left in the bank at the end of the fortnight. Which is not bad going [laughs] Erm, it's not a lot, but I've got money in, and I'm not down to my last pennies now. So, I'm slowly but surely getting used to that amount. I eat every day now.

At the time of interview, David had recently been 'sanctioned' after a train delay caused him to miss a Jobseeker's Allowance meeting, following a visit to see his daughter. As Dwyer and Wright (2014: 33) document, the punitive design of universal credit, with its sanctions and inherent conditionality, effectively offload welfare responsibilities of the state onto individuals – violently restricting the scope of their citizenship to a narrative of personal failure.

Amidst deep cuts to community-based support for addiction recovery, David was driven to extreme lengths to find conditions where he could stop using drugs:

> David: When I go to prison, I keep away from all the drugs and use that as my, like rehabilitation. So, I've never used in prison. I've always used that as my get healthy, get my mind straight. Because you can't do that in civvy street. There's no support or help, or space away from all the crap you know? […] This last time I had about six or seven months left on my sentence and I [sucks in air]. I took a screw hostage to put myself in the segregation unit, 'cos I was just I was panicking about getting out. I just wanted to be away from everyone, my head was just like, um. So, I stayed down there for, for six and a half months in this cell, locked up for 23 hours, window, toilet, sink and that was it, bed, a mattress [sniffs].

The context of this narrative must be framed in relation to the traces of harm left by the British state. David had moved from the care system to the military, to military prison, to civilian prison(s), and had endured several years of homelessness and rough sleeping. Since birth, he has been continually failed by a lack of social support.

I have shown earlier that David was often governed as 'doubly bad' and 'doubly sad' due to a perception of increased risk. Yet, within the austerity-driven housing crisis in Britain, he was constructed and managed as 'low priority', due to being a 'single male':

> David: The main thing is to keep out of trouble, keep out of prison, be there for my daughter [sucks in air]. Move on from this place and have my own place. Next year hopefully. But I know it's unlikely. Erm, there's no spaces in [area name] and parents with kids and stuff get priority.

However, through disclosing his veteran status, he was able to access a positive source of support and stability within a veteran-specific housing programme, allowing him to begin to rebuild the relationship with his daughter, which had become his key driver and purpose for staying sober.

The 'Veteran Offender' Status Offering Access to Resources

David and Oliver were forced to carefully consider whether to disclose their military service due to the stigma, shame, and pain of being managed as a 'veteran offender'. On the other side of this 'dance of disclosure', it appeared that a military

past and veteran status might provide increased access to restricted support services. This chimes with Sim's (2017: 197) argument that '[i]n an age of austerity, establishing "vulnerable identities" is likely to generate competition for scarce resources'. Oliver explained how after being released from prison he had to continually move between hostels. However, disclosing his military background to a member of staff from a local Housing Trust created a unique opportunity to enter more secure housing:

> Oliver: She gets you to fill in every housing project around [the West Midlands], in the off chance that somebody will offer you a place. […] we were talking, and it come out that I was ex-forces and, "oh, I've got just the place for you", she said. (HW: Yeah) So, she give me the application form for here, I came over for the interview, and here I am. Erm, and this is really good. (Hannah: Yeah) I've been able to talk about things, erm, openly with other residents here that I wouldn't have done in any other hostel. (Hannah: right?) Yes. Without a doubt. Erm, I feel a bit alien, oh saying "yes, they're of my kind" (Hannah: [Laughs]) They're all Army, so they're not my kind, if you know what I mean?

(Re-)finding Purpose and Trying to 'Make Good' with a Criminal Record

As explained above, the stigma of having to continually disclose details of a military past brought shame around a lack of war experience. For those with military families, this shame may also extend to bringing the respect of others' military service into disrepute:

> Oliver: [discussing a photo of his six siblings and parents sat round a table smiling at the camera, to show me which family members had served in the RAF]
>
> But that's typical family get togethers, what we used to have. Now my family get together and go away on holiday once a year. Me not invited. Still hurts.

For Oliver, the label of 'sex offender' tarnished his military service and destroyed his relationship with his family, resulting in a loss of purpose in life and painful loss of belonging. While the Armed Forces covenant may intend for the disclosure of a military past to assist with targeted support (MoD, 2016, 2021), it may be forcing thousands of people into the difficult space of bringing the shame of a conviction to their military service.

The 'Pains of Criminalisation' for Veteran Offenders

Another striking theme in the data surrounded participants' quest for 'purpose', as well as how their daily practices are now generated within a framework geared towards wanting to 'give something back' to their communities. Critical attention is now being paid to the harms associated with criminal records, along with the painful consequences of criminalisation. David and Oliver were both driven by a desire to 'make good' (Maruna, 2001), albeit with an acute awareness of the

limitations that 'civil and social death' (Henley, 2018) placed upon them through practices of criminal record disclosure and resultant exclusion from full citizenship:

> David: Trying to get work with my convictions and stuff like that. It's going to be near impossible unless you've got friends or you can find, sort of, an agency who'll take you with all your convictions. Do you what I mean? 'Cos if they took a look at my rap sheet it's just, like, you wouldn't even get a step in the door.

> Oliver: I pay my bills on time. I haven't got many bills, but they've still got to be paid. (Hannah: yeah) Erm. But it's, the next step is moving on from here, getting work (Hannah: mmhmm) Erm [pause] That'll be the hard job. I know that

Trying to Imagine a Future

Due to living in precarious and uncertain socio-economic conditions with a criminal record, David and Oliver found it difficult to imagine positive futures:

> David: I've got a lot of depression now from, from being in that state, you know, clucking every day for drugs. You know, it doesn't go away easy. So just taking each day. Every day, every day the main thing is to stay clean, keep out of trouble, and try and see my daughter and be there for her best I can. I don't want to put too much on myself because it can be overwhelming, and I could end up relapsing do you know what I mean. So yeah, just each day at a time.

> Oliver: What I'm hopeful for is a relationship with my daughter. Whether I get that, makes no difference. I want to be there if she ever needs me. (Hannah: yes) That's why I'm still alive. Erm, and to be alive is not enough. I've got to be happy. [laughs] [pause] Which is easier said than done. Erm, especially with so much behind you, above you, and all the rest of it. So many restrictions in life. I'm 50-years-old now. I've got to start again, a career, from scratch. Hard.

Oliver discussed getting in touch with various organisations and charities to volunteer his time, yet framed this through the knowledge that due to his sex offence conviction and the various restrictions placed upon his community supervision, that it was unlikely anyone would 'want him':

> Oliver: I've volunteered for three jobs already. (Hannah: Okay) I haven't heard anything back from them, but I've volunteered. (Hannah: yes) I've done that step a bit. Erm, that'd be quite strange if I did. Who'd want me? [Laughs]. But I want to do something, and if volunteering helps whoever I'm volunteering for, it'll also help me.

Oliver also discussed feeling the need to 'give back' and described finding purpose after what was an incredibly dark time in prison serving an IPP sentence:

> Oliver: I stood up to a few bullies […] And that started my change. That was the first step that I took to looking after myself as well as others, and it was the first time in a long time

> that I'd felt really good about myself […] Yeah you can give money to charity, but it's just money to charity. It's not physically doing something. And I think to make yourself feel good about yourself you have to go that step further. And that's what I did then, in that incident. In that moment. I gave something back.

Conclusion

This article has revealed the complexities and lasting traces of state harm and stigma for two criminalised military veterans – 'David' and 'Oliver'. Peering through the micro lens of experience brings into sharp focus the need for those working with 'veteran offenders' to understand the collision of social worlds embodied within this group - spanning childhood poverty, militarisation, warfare, military to civilian transitions, criminalisation, imprisonment and subsequent 'resettlement' and 're-habilitation' - amid 21st century contexts of violent austerity. The 'social death' and grief resulting from having one's sense of self destroyed by criminal record disclosures (Henley, 2018), appeared to further collide with the symbolic 'hero to zero fall' of becoming a 'veteran offender' and the shame and stigma attached to 'tarnishing' military service. Through the narratives of David and Oliver, I have drawn attention to the need for collective, urgent thought and action around how we can better understand and support those labelled and managed as 'veteran offenders'. This provides further evidence of how criminal punishment systems continue to push marginalised communities deeper into situations of harm and human suffering.

I have argued that the national, yet uncoordinated policy of asking all those criminalised to disclose whether they have served in the Armed Forces, can force people into a complex *dance of disclosure* – where 'veteran offenders' must carefully read the social context and intent of criminal punishment practitioners, before revealing a military past In doing so, this category obscures and silences a wealth of nuance within military careers – for instance, David's shame around accessing 'veteran support' as a front-line army infantry solider, without the 'combat capital' of war experience. Further, as a 'veteran sex offender', Oliver's narratives have shown how he was managed as 'doubly bad'. Despite being employed as a chef, the assumed 'dangerousness' of Oliver's military service was entangled with his assumed risk to the community. Taken together, this article has made visible a continuum of social harm, where the pains of criminalisation collide with the potential stigma of being governed as a 'veteran offender'.

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Note

1. Informed consent was achieved by sending potential participants an information sheet about the research by email, along with copies of the consent form to look at in advance. Issues of confidentiality and data storage were explained before people agreed to take part, verbally and/or in writing. At the start of each interview, the information sheet was summarised and any questions about the research were discussed, followed by the signing of consent forms before audio recording began. During transcription, I was very careful to remove and/or replace any identifying data, such as names, places, dates of military service and specific details about postings to areas of conflict. Interview recordings were destroyed following transcription and all written communication with those who took part was deleted. Every participant was given a further support sheet containing local and national contact details, including both general and veteran-specific organisations and support services.

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