Public Awareness of UK Veterans’ Charities
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Charitable organisations have become increasingly important in providing health and welfare services for military veterans, as well as advocating on behalf of both current and former armed-forces personnel and their families on pertinent policy issues. Veterans’ charities rely heavily on voluntary donations from the public in order to provide such amenities, making public awareness of them and their work a major issue given its potential impact on the provision of veteran support and care.

Veterans’ organisations are amongst the most successful in the charitable sector, raising approximately £800 million per year; the largest two organisations, the Royal British Legion (RBL) and Help for Heroes, each raised more than £30 million in their last annual campaigns. The most recent figures from the Charity Commission estimate there to be at least 2,000 registered charities in this sector, with several thousand more unregistered. While this clearly demonstrates a great deal of public goodwill towards helping members of the armed forces, the increasing array of veterans’ charities may have implications for donations to smaller organisations, especially during times of economic austerity. In addition, the visibility of the armed forces to the public may lessen following the withdrawal of British troops from Afghanistan by the end of 2014, and the reduction in the size of the British armed forces, and of the army in particular. Further cuts may also be announced as part of the next Strategic Defence and Security Review in 2015.

While the increase in the number of dedicated organisations may have improved visibility for veterans’ charities overall, it has also led to concerns about poor co-ordination and replication of services, most notably expressed by former Chief of the Defence Staff General Lord Richard Dannatt. The quality of services provided by some of these charities to those in need has been questioned and there have been some instances of fraud, although rare. Another issue is the uncertainty over the true extent of public awareness. Historically, there has always been a debate over the extent to which armed-forces personnel are valued and praised in times of war, but looked at with indifference if not hostility in times of peace.

Another issue is the uncertainty over the true extent of public awareness.
How the Research was Carried Out

Methods
This study uses data from the general British public gathered via the British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey undertaken in 2011, the results of which were published in 2012. The BSA uses a multi-stage design to select a representative sample of adults aged 18 years and over living in England, Scotland and Wales. For the 2011 BSA questionnaire, the King’s Centre for Military Health Research (KCMHR), in conjunction with colleagues at the Aberdeen Centre for Trauma Research, Robert Gordon University and NatCen Social Research, developed a module on British public attitudes towards the UK armed forces and the missions in Iraq and Afghanistan. Fieldworkers collected data from June to September 2011 via face-to-face, computer-assisted interviews and self-completion questionnaires. Overall, a total of 3,311 British adults took part, representing a response rate of 54 per cent.

Outcome Measures
To measure public perceptions of veterans’ charities, the BSA survey included a range of questions concerning awareness of such organisations. To measure knowledge of veterans’ organisations, respondents were asked if they knew of any charities or organisations supporting former members of the UK armed forces. To determine awareness of individual charities, respondents were asked to name, unprompted, up to three veterans’ charities. Participants were also asked whether they had bought a poppy for the annual Poppy Appeal prior to the survey period, in November 2010.

Analysis
Overall awareness of veterans’ charities amongst the public was examined using weighted percentages. Those answering ‘Don’t Know’ for the subsequent questions on individual charities were excluded (n=76). As respondents could give up to three answers regarding the names of veterans’ charities, the multiple response function of IBM SPSS Statistics 20 (statistical analysis software) was used to analyse familiarity with individual veterans’ charities and to obtain weighted percentage values based on total responses. Information on whether the respondents had purchased a poppy during the 2010 Poppy Appeal was collected as part of the self-completion section. Self-completion questionnaires containing this question were distributed to all 3,311 participants, with an 85 per cent (n=2,845) response rate.

Differences in respondents’ awareness of charities and contributions to the annual Poppy Appeal were examined overall, as well as by different social characteristics which have been found to be important predictors of support for the military, such as gender, age (in years), education, and level of connection to the military (whether through a family member, friend, neighbour or colleague who is a current or former member of the UK armed forces).

Analyses were conducted using STATA version 11.2 (data analysis and statistical software) and logistic
regression techniques, and took account of the differences in response by certain groups and of how participants were selected. Those who answered either ‘Don’t Know’ or ‘Refusal’ were excluded from analyses, but comprised less than 5 per cent of responses for each question. Statistical significance was defined as p<0.05. Non-statistically significant relationships are not reported (the data can be obtained from the authors).

Limitations and Caveats
This study used robust methods to examine the British public’s perceptions of charities for ex-service personnel, achieving a response rate typical of the BSA survey (54 per cent). However, there were some limitations and caveats.

While the age distribution may seem weighted towards those aged 35–54 years, the higher proportion of respondents in this age group contains people born as part of the ‘baby boom’ in the 1960s, and reflects the broader structure of the population in England and Wales.

Secondly, survey questions referred to knowledge of organisations and charities for former service members of the UK armed forces only. Some respondents may have been aware of some of the organisations but only associated them with serving members of the UK armed forces rather than with veterans. As a result, public awareness of charities in this sector may be higher than reported.

Similarly, the survey only measured financial support for one veterans’ organisation – Royal British Legion (RBL) and associated poppy charities, via their annual Poppy Appeal. The true proportion of the public contributing financially to supporting UK military veterans through donations to other veterans’ charities is therefore likely to be higher than presented here, especially amongst groups that did not report purchasing poppies.

Results
Table 1 describes the socio-demographic profile of BSA survey respondents. While there were no major differences in gender or educational attainment, there was a higher proportion of participants in the 35–54-year age group. Approximately two-thirds of the Britons surveyed reported a relationship with someone – a family member, friend, colleague, neighbour or other – currently serving, or having previously served, in the UK armed forces.

More than a third (36 per cent) did not know of any organisations or charities supporting ex-service personnel (see Figure 1). People aged under 55 years were significantly more likely to report no knowledge of veterans’ charities than those aged 65+ years (p<0.01). Respondents with any educational qualification and those connected to the military were significantly more likely to know of veterans’ charities than those without qualifications or military connections, respectively (both p<0.001). There were no significant differences by gender (data not shown).

The most well-known individual organisations and charities for ex-service personnel were the Royal British Legion and other charities associated with Remembrance Day Poppies (including the Poppy Day Appeal, Poppy Scotland and the Earl Haig Fund, which this article refers to collectively as ‘poppy charities’), followed by Help for Heroes (see Figure 2).
Knowledge of the two most well-known veterans’ charities, RBL/poppy charities and Help for Heroes, differed by socio-demographics (see Figure 3). Women were less likely to know of RBL/poppy charities than men (p<0.01), although this difference was small. Compared to those aged 65 years and over, younger people were significantly more aware of Help for Heroes, but less knowledgeable about RBL/poppy charities (p<0.001). Those with any level of educational attainment or reporting a military connection were significantly more aware of Help for Heroes than people without formal qualifications or no such relationships (both p<0.001). Fifty-eight per cent of people who knew of RBL/poppy charities were also aware of Help for Heroes (data not shown).

Overall, less than a quarter of respondents had not purchased a poppy during the 2010 Poppy Appeal (Figure 4). Women were more likely than men to have purchased a poppy, as were those with military connections compared to those without such relationships (both p<0.001). The proportion of respondents who did not buy a poppy was significantly higher amongst people aged 64 years or less than in the oldest age group (p<0.001). Graduates were also less likely to have bought a poppy than people with no formal qualifications (p<0.01). People who reported not knowing any veterans’ organisation or charity were less likely to have bought a poppy compared to those who knew of a charity (p<0.001). Eighty-nine per cent of respondents who reported knowing RBL/poppy charities and 87 per cent of those who knew of Help for Heroes had purchased a poppy (data not shown). Non-purchase of a poppy was not associated with respondents’ political views on whether the UK was right to become involved in the recent Iraq or Afghanistan missions (data not shown).

The Implications for Veterans’ Charities
Almost two-thirds of respondents were able to name at least one charity for ex-service personnel, and the majority had purchased a poppy during the 2010 Poppy Appeal. Awareness of veterans’ charities was highest amongst older...
Public Awareness of Charities for Ex-Service Personnel

While nearly two-thirds of those surveyed were aware of a veterans’ charity or organisation, there were clear differences by socio-demographic group. More than half of those under 35 years of age were not aware of any charitable organisations for ex-service personnel, although this is unlikely to be due to a lack of respect for the UK armed forces or veterans per se and may instead be related to a more general lack of concern with general military matters. Whether this reflects a wider generational shift is not clear. However, as the older generation fades, it will be important to monitor levels of awareness among younger people; if they remain low then the environment for service charities may become much more competitive unless opportunities are taken to raise awareness of this subject amongst these age groups. The greater level of knowledge of such charities among those with any form of educational qualification may be mediated by their greater interest in media or current affairs, and the increased media coverage that veterans’ organisations have received over recent years.

Meanwhile, it is unsurprising that those with military connections were more likely to know of veterans’ charities, given their proximity to the service community. However, there is room for improvement as nearly 30 per cent of those with such connections reported no knowledge of any veterans’ charities. Increasing the awareness of these organisations amongst these groups may enable friends and relatives to direct veterans more effectively to possible services for any issues they may face.

These differences in familiarity with veterans’ charities across society suggest that more could be done to improve knowledge and awareness of their existence and work amongst certain groups. Considering the potential to increase voluntary donations to this sector, this variation should be reflected on by veterans’ charities when developing future funding strategies.

The largest veterans’ charities, Help for Heroes and RBL and associated poppy charities, were the most familiar to the public, possibly reflecting the impact of larger budgets for donation and media campaigns compared with smaller charities. While it is hardly surprising that the largest charities are the most well-known, the large gap in terms of popular awareness between them and smaller charities may have serious implications for the latter. Although co-ordination and sharing of donations does occur, increased collaboration between organisations should be undertaken to ensure that donations reach those organisations that require such support, especially where they are providing specialist services. One such example might be charities providing mental-health services targeting the ex-service community.

The specific strategies used by individual organisations to increase donations and engagement are likely to explain some of the differences in awareness of particular charities among different sectors of society. Although Help for Heroes is a relatively new charity, its high-profile social media campaigns and endorsements by celebrities and royalty may explain the greater recognition of
this charity amongst younger age groups, as well as amongst the friends and family of current and former military personnel. This approach has also allowed the charity to develop a large media presence, which may account for the greater level of brand awareness amongst those with educational qualifications.

**Donations to the Annual Poppy Appeal**

Most of those surveyed – 78 per cent – reported purchasing a poppy during the 2010 Poppy Appeal. However, as the survey did not ask about donations to other UK armed forces charities or campaigns, the true number of people supporting veterans by such means may in fact be higher. This finding is also higher than more recent estimates of 68 per cent purchasing a poppy in 2013. While at first glance this may seem like a worrying decrease in support for the Poppy Appeal, it is important to note that this campaign was not the only service charity the public were donating to and is likely to reflect competition for voluntary donations during a time of economic recession rather than an overall drop in support.

**78 per cent reported purchasing a poppy during the 2010 appeal**

This willingness of the British public to support veterans through voluntary donations may stem from inaccurate public perceptions of available support for returning personnel from government sources, as seen amongst a similar proportion of the public and media stories about the poor treatment and care of wounded personnel. As in previous research indicating that women tend to be more generous in making voluntary donations than men, women were also more likely to have bought a poppy, despite being less aware of RBL/poppies charities. Although the difference in awareness of RBL/poppies charities among men and women was small, this discrepancy hints at a possible disconnection between the campaign and the charity for which it is fundraising among women. This gap may be of concern to veteran organisations and an issue that they might seek to clarify and address by specifically targeting women in order to raise awareness.

With younger people being less likely to know of a charity for ex-service personnel, it is not unexpected that they were less likely to report buying a poppy during the 2010 campaign, although this may also be related to the lower levels of voluntary donations amongst younger age groups. Given the increased knowledge of Help for Heroes amongst younger people, it may be that these age groups are choosing to donate to this charity instead, but this possibility was not addressed by the survey.

Dissecting the results by levels of education, graduates were less likely to buy a poppy during the 2010 appeal than people in other educational groups. As those in related managerial and professional occupations are some of the highest contributors to charities in the UK, this may well hint at a potential tension between financial support for forces personnel and support for the tasks that the military is required to carry out. In contrast, the majority of those with no qualifications had purchased a poppy, despite being the educational group with the lowest proportion reporting knowledge of veterans’ charities or organisations. That people in this group who did report knowledge of a charity were most likely to be aware of RBL or the associated poppy charities might explain this discrepancy; knowledge of the charities’ fundraising efforts is also likely to be high as a result of this increased awareness.

Respondents with military connections were more likely to have bought a poppy than those without, possibly due to a greater understanding of the support needed by military personnel and their families. It is not surprising that participants who did not know of any veterans’ charities or organisations were less likely to have bought a poppy. However, it is interesting that donating to the Poppy Appeal was not only associated with knowledge of the organisations it raises money for – RBL and the poppy charities – but with awareness of Help for Heroes and other service charities and organisations as well. This suggests that knowledge of any veterans’ charity may be beneficial for increasing donations in this sector and that competition for voluntary donations may not be as important for larger veterans’ charities, given their prominent public profile.

Donations in this sector have been shown to have positive effects on contributions to other ex-service charities, with half of those responding to a recent survey indicating that they would donate to other charitable organisations after learning of the support that forces charities provide for war veterans and serving troops. Smaller charities may therefore also benefit from an increase in public awareness of the wider sector. The finding that people who did not know of any veterans’ charities or organisations were more than twice as unlikely to have bought a poppy suggests that improving overall knowledge may lead to increased financial contributions. If overall awareness of veterans’ charities is poor, contributions may be restricted to those larger charities that can afford large-scale campaigns to attract donations, confirming earlier arguments that service charities need to continue to do more to co-ordinate their work in a challenging and competitive environment.

**More than 90 per cent support veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan**

Attitudes towards the recent missions in Iraq and Afghanistan were not found to have influenced donations towards the Poppy Appeal, indicating a more nuanced opinion of the armed forces amongst the British public than might previously have been imagined. This clear capability for separating the politics of the campaigns from the politics of support for military veterans is best illustrated by the fact that despite opposition to these missions, more than 90 per cent of those surveyed support veterans of these campaigns. While opposition to the missions remains, the level of public endorsement of the armed forces is encouraging.
this support remains once the UK’s armed forces have withdrawn from Afghanistan, and the public eye, remains to be seen. Veterans’ charities may find themselves in a much less favourable position in five to ten years’ time if public opinion of military personnel becomes less positive – or perhaps more indifferent – in light of a reduced public profile of the military post-Afghanistan.

There is also the potential for austerity measures introduced in the UK since 2010 to have a major impact on the amount that the public is able and willing to donate to charitable organisations, leading to increased competition not just in this sector but across all charity groups. How the sector responds to this pressure is key: while drawing attention to the needs of this group is important, if too much emphasis is placed on issues such as mental health, this may result in increased stigmatisation of military veterans.

These findings suggest that a large proportion of the British public is willing to contribute financially to support for military veterans, although the amount donated was not measured. While there continues to be concern about the potential effect of the global recession and the withdrawal from Afghanistan on voluntary financial support for this sector, reports suggest that the current economic crisis has had less of an impact on donations to military charities in comparison to other charity sectors. Contributions to UK armed forces charities increased by 26 per cent in 2008–10, while donations to other large charities fell by 4 per cent.20 Despite the concern about financial support for veterans’ charities following the withdrawal from Afghanistan, recent survey results indicate that nearly three-quarters of the public will continue to support events for such charities once British troops return home.21 This is promising news for the veterans’ charity sector, although to which charities the public will donate remains unknown.

Another key question is who should assume the responsibility of caring for military veterans with health problems related to their service. Although donations to veterans’ charities indicate that the public sees itself as playing a role in supporting ex-soldiers, how much of this stems from a perceived failure of the government to provide services for this group is not clear.22

Conclusion

Most of the members of the British public surveyed in the 2011 BSA seemed aware of at least one veterans’ charity and had made voluntary contributions to the annual Poppy Appeal. However, the variations in awareness and donations across groups within society are suggestive of areas in which charities may wish to increase public engagement and knowledge. While it is not certain how British public opinion will change following the withdrawal of UK combat troops from Afghanistan by the end of 2014, the current high levels of support for and interest in the UK armed forces provide an excellent – although possibly very limited – window of opportunity in which favourable public opinion of the military could be used to build on current public recognition of the veterans’ charity sector and increase voluntary contributions.

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Notes


4 Peter Backus and David Clifford, ‘Are Big Charities Becoming More Dominant? Cross-Sectional and Longitudinal Perspectives’, Journal of the Royal


11 The educational categories are: No quals (left school with no qualifications); O’Level/CSE qualification or equivalent (left school aged 16 years); A Level qualification or equivalent (left school aged 18 or obtained post-secondary school qualification – for example, a diploma); higher education (first/ Bachelor degree or postgraduate qualification).

12 Park et al. (eds), British Social Attitudes.


14 Rachael Gribble et al., ‘The UK Armed Forces: Public Support for the Troops but Not for the Missions?’, in Park et al. (eds), British Social Attitudes.


22 CAF and NCVO, ‘UK Giving 2012’.


24 CAF, ‘Forces Charities Inspire Brits to Back Good Causes’.

25 This was a theme explored by some of the authors in work commissioned by the UK government in 2002 and published in 2003: see Christopher Dandeker et al., ‘Improving the Delivery of Cross Departmental Support and Services for Veterans’, Joint Report, Department of War Studies and Institute of Psychiatry, King’s College London, July 2003, <s1198596577.websitehome.co.uk/pdfs/publications/misc/kings_college_report_jul_03.pdf>, accessed 27 January 2014.

26 Gribble et al., ‘The UK Armed Forces’.

27 CAF and NCVO, ‘UK Giving 2012’.

28 Ibid.