Who is a ‘Veteran’? Understanding Definitions of the Term Among the British Public: A Research Note

Rachael Gribble, Simon Wessely, Susan Klein, David A Alexander, Christopher Dandeker and Nicola T Fear

There are currently an estimated 2.8–3.8 million people in the UK who fulfil the UK Ministry of Defence definition of a military veteran (a minimum of one day’s military service). Despite these numbers, there is little research on who the public views as a veteran and how this differs across society. Rachael Gribble, Simon Wessely, Susan Klein, David A Alexander, Christopher Dandeker and Nicola T Fear examine public conceptualisations of the term ‘veteran’ compared with definitions from the Ministry of Defence and those of ex-service personnel themselves. Factors associated with commonly endorsed definitions are identified.

Public perceptions of who is a military ‘veteran’ contribute not only to the legitimacy of the identity associated with this term but also to the social and cultural environment veterans return to. How the public views veterans can have potential implications for the provision of government support, successful reintegration, including job opportunities, and, potentially, disclosure about their veteran status within healthcare, welfare and education systems. 1 A fundamental question, however, is who does the public view as being a veteran and therefore eligible to claim the rewards, and burdens, associated with this status?

The UK Ministry of Defence (MoD) definition of a veteran – a minimum of one day’s service (including training) in any of the three services 2 – is one of the most inclusive in the world. Definitions in other Western countries, such as Australia and Canada, include reference to involvement in military operations, such as ‘deployment overseas’ (although not necessarily combat-related), 3 while the US definition requires a minimum term of service (the lesser of active duty service period or 24 months) and an honourable discharge. 4 The adoption by the MoD of this broad definition was due, in part, to political pressure from military and political leaders regarding the treatment of injured personnel returning from Iraq and Afghanistan, service charities eager to ensure access to benefits and services for all who had served, and resistance

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1. Michael Ashcroft, The Veterans’ Transition Review, 11 February 2014, <http://www.veterantransition.co.uk/vtrreport.pdf>, accessed 20 November 2019; Michael Ashcroft, The Veterans’ Transition Review: Second Follow-up Report, November 2016, <http://www.veterantransition.co.uk/vtrfollowupreport2_november2016.pdf>, accessed 20 November 2019; Russell Heimlich, ‘Government Does Not Give Enough Support to Vets’, Pew Research Center, 12 July 2011, <www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2011/07/12/government-does-not-give-enough-support-to-vets/>, accessed 31 May 2018; Futures 4 Forces and Forces in Mind Trust, ‘UK Employers’ Perceptions on the Employment and Employability of Ex-Service Personnel’, final version, August 2015, <www.fim-trust.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/20150731-F4F-Final.pdf>, accessed 14 November 2019; Tiffany M Greene-Shortridge, Thomas W Britt and Carl Andrew Castro, ‘The Stigma of Mental Health Problems in the Military’, Military Medicine (Vol. 172, No. 2, 2007), pp. 157–61.

2. HM Government, The Strategy for Our Veterans, Cm 9726 (London: The Stationery Office, 2018).

3. Christopher Dandeker et al., ‘What’s in a Name? Defining and Caring for ‘Veterans’: The United Kingdom in International Perspective’, Armed Forces and Society (Vol. 32, No. 2, 2006), pp. 161–77.

4. Veterans Affairs, ‘What is a Veteran? The Legal Definition’, 2018, <https://va.org/what-is-a-veteran-the-legal-definition/>, accessed 6 July 2018.
to creating a ‘veteran identity’ that excluded the wartime experiences of the British public. According to this definition, there are an estimated 2.8–3.8 million veterans currently living in the UK. While there are difficulties in providing exact estimates due to data limitations, this number is expected to decrease to 1.6 million by 2028, with a change towards a younger and more female veteran population.

While previous research has indicated high levels of respect and support for the serving UK armed forces among the British public, there has been less research on public attitudes towards UK ex-service personnel. Studies that have been carried out have focused on how veterans contribute to society or how skills developed in service may help them to succeed in civilian employment. Other research has described how attributes such as bravery and discipline are often cited in reference to those who have served in the UK armed forces, but that concerns about poor mental health and a lack of support are also prominent. The current lack of

5. Dandeker et al., ‘What’s in a Name? Defining and Caring for “Veterans”’; Lindsay A Hines et al., ‘Are the Armed Forces Understood and Supported by the Public? A View from the United Kingdom’, Armed Forces and Society (Vol. 41, No. 4, 2014), pp. 688–713.
6. Charlotte Woodhead et al., ‘An Estimate of the Veteran Population in England: Based on Data from the 2007 Adult Psychiatric Morbidity Survey’, Population Trends (Vol. 138, No. 1, 2009), pp. 50–54; Royal British Legion, ‘A UK Household Survey of the Ex-Service Community 2014’, p. vii, <www.fim-trust.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/2014householdsurveyreport.pdf>, accessed 14 November 2019.
7. Ministry of Defence (MoD), ‘Population Projections: UK Armed Forces Veterans Residing in Great Britain, 2016 to 2028’, 10 January 2019, p. 1, <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/775151/20190107_Enclosure_1_Population_Projections_-_UK_Armed_Forces_Veterans_residing_in_Great_Britain_-_2016_to_2028.pdf>, accessed 14 November 2019.
8. Rachael Gribble et al., ‘The UK Armed Forces: Public Support for the Troops but not Their Missions?’, in Alison Park et al. (eds), British Social Attitudes: The 29th Report (London: NatCen Social Research, 2012), pp. 138–54, <www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/media/1150/bsa29_armd_forces.pdf>, accessed 14 November 2019.
9. MoD, ‘MoD and Armed Forces Reputational Polling, Summer 2017 Survey Topline Findings (27-07-17)’, <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/684573/Public_Opinion_Survey_-_Summer_2017.pdf>, accessed 14 November 2019.
10. Jerry Latter, Tom Powell and Natasha Ward, ‘Public Perceptions of Veterans and the Armed Forces’, YouGov, 2 October 2018, <www.fim-trust.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/20181002-YouGov-perceptions-final.pdf>, accessed 14 November 2019.

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research on public attitudes in this area means it is unclear how the British public conceptualises veterans and how this may compare with definitions within government policy and the ex-serving community. Potential differences in how the public, the military and associated government branches define a veteran may be exacerbated by a widening civil–military gap. This theory outlines how a lack of contact and shared experiences between the armed forces and civilians may have implications for mutual understanding, affecting morale among personnel, support for ongoing military operations and support for veterans.

This article addresses this question by determining how the British public defines a military veteran compared with definitions within government policy and the ex-serving community. Differences in definitions between socio-demographic groups are examined.

**Methods**

This study uses data from the 2011 British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey, a multi-stage representative survey of adults aged 18 years and over living in Britain (England, Scotland and Wales). For the 2011 BSA questionnaire, the King’s Centre for Military Health Research (KCMHR), King’s College London, in conjunction with colleagues at the Aberdeen Centre for Trauma Research, Robert Gordon University, and NatCen Social Research developed a module on public attitudes towards the UK armed forces and the missions in Iraq and Afghanistan. Data was collected from June to September 2011 by fieldworkers who conducted face-to-face computer-assisted interviews and administered self-completion questionnaires. A total of 3,311 adults completed the survey, a response rate of 54%.

**Measures**

Respondents were presented with a list of brief definitions of ‘veteran’ and asked to select the one that corresponded most closely to their own understanding of this term. Information on socio-demographics (age, gender, education) and personal connection to the military through family, friends or work colleagues were collected. Such variables have been found to be influential in public opinion of military issues in previous research. For example, men, people aged 65 years and over and those with lower education have been found to have a higher opinion of the armed forces compared with women, younger people and those with higher educational qualifications.

Education categories comprised: left school with no qualifications; O-level/CSE qualification...
or equivalent (left school at 16 years); higher education or A-level qualification or equivalent (left school at 18 or obtained post-secondary school qualification, for example, a diploma); and graduate (first/Bachelor’s degree or postgraduate qualification). Military connectedness was ascertained by asking whether participants had any form of personal relationship with members or former members of the services (family member, friend, neighbour, colleague or other).

Analysis

Data was weighted to account for non-response and sampling strategies during the BSA survey. Predictors of non-response largely concerned the ability to contact potential respondents. All analyses were conducted using STATA® version 11.2.18 Public endorsement of pre-defined conceptualisations of the term ‘veteran’ was examined using weighted percentages. Logistic regression analyses were used to examine differences in responses according to socio-demographics and connection to the armed forces for the three most common responses, with all remaining options used as the reference category. This was due to low numbers in some response categories. Univariable regression results were found to be confounded by socio-demographic factors. Therefore, only significant adjusted odds ratios are reported. Non-significant relationships and unadjusted results are available from the authors. ‘Don’t Know’/‘Refusal’ responses were excluded from analyses but comprised less than 5% of responses.

Results

‘Leaving service to retire’ was the most commonly endorsed definition of ‘veteran’ (37.4%) among respondents, followed by deployment on operations (20.7%) or combat missions (17.5%) (see Table 1). The UK MoD’s designation of a veteran as someone with a minimum of one day’s service was selected by less than 2% of respondents.

Table 1: Public Definitions of ‘Veteran’

| Definition of Veteran | % (n)* |
|----------------------|-------|
| Someone who has left service to retire | 37.4 (1,221) |
| Someone who has been deployed on operations (not necessarily overseas) | 20.7 (652) |
| Someone who has been deployed overseas in a combat mission | 17.5 (574) |
| Unsure | 8.8 (278) |
| Someone who has left service after four years | 8.6 (275) |
| Someone who has completed basic training | 2.7 (85) |
| Someone who has been deployed overseas | 2.5 (82) |
| Someone who has done a minimum of one day’s service | 1.8 (56) |

Note: *n does not equal 3,311 as responses ‘Other’, ‘Don’t Know’ and ‘Refusal’ not included (n=88).

Source: Authors’ calculations based on NatCen Social Research, British Social Attitudes Survey, 2011 [data collection], 2nd Edition, UK Data Service, DOI:10.5255/UKDA-SN-7237-2.

Further analysis of the three most commonly endorsed definitions indicated that, compared with men and those with no qualifications, women (p=0.003) and respondents with O-level or equivalent qualifications (p=0.010) were significantly more likely to endorse ‘leaving service to retire’ as a definition of ‘veteran’ (see Table 2); graduates were significantly less likely to do so (p=0.019) than those with no qualifications. ‘Deployment on operations’ was significantly more likely to be endorsed as a definition among those with military connections (p=0.016) and some level of education than those without connections or qualifications (p for trend <0.001). ‘Deployment overseas in a combat mission’ was significantly less likely to be endorsed by women (p<0.001) and people aged under 34 years (p=0.011) than men and those aged 65 years and over.

17. Park et al. (eds), British Social Attitudes: The 29th Report.
18. StataCorp, Stata Statistical Software: Release 11’, 2009.
### Who is a ‘Veteran’?

#### Table 2: Public Definitions of ‘Veterans’ According to Socio-Demographic Characteristics, 2018

| Socio-demographics | Total n (%) | ‘Left service to retire’ | ‘Deployed on operations’ | ‘Deployed overseas in a combat mission’ |
|--------------------|-------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|----------------------------------------|
|                    |             | %                        | Adj. OR (95% CI)†       | %                                      | Adj. OR (95% CI)†       | %                                      | Adj. OR (95% CI)†       |
| **Gender**         |             | 14.1                     | 0.58 (0.47–0.71)         | 14.0                                   | 0.78 (0.54–1.13)         | 15.7                                   | 0.61 (0.37–0.99)         |
| Male               | 1,450 (48.7)| 34.3                     | 1.0                      | 22.4                                   | 1.0                      | 19.0                                   | 0.83 (0.68–1.01)         |
| Female             | 1,861 (51.3)| 40.3                     | 1.27 (1.08–1.50)         | 19.0                                   | 0.83 (0.68–1.01)         | 14.1                                   | 0.58 (0.47–0.71)         |
| **Military Connection** |             | 15.0                     | 0.90 (0.70–1.16)         | 21.4                                   | 1.0                      | 21.2                                   | 1.0                      |
| No                 | 1,232 (36.5)| 36.8                     | 1.0                      | 17.5                                   | 1.0                      | 16.8                                   | 1.0                      |
| Yes                | 2,079 (63.5)| 37.7                     | 0.98 (0.82–1.16)         | 22.5                                   | 1.30 (1.05–1.61)         | 17.9                                   | 1.10 (0.87–1.38)         |
| **Age at Last Birthday (yrs)** |             |                         |                          |                                        |                          |                                        |                          |
| 18–24              | 224 (12.1)  | 36.1                     | 0.78 (0.54–1.13)         | 15.7                                   | 0.61 (0.37–0.99)         | 10.6                                   | 0.50 (0.29–0.85)         |
| 25–34              | 528 (16.6)  | 35.2                     | 0.83 (0.62–1.10)         | 22.4                                   | 0.96 (0.68–1.35)         | 13.9                                   | 0.61 (0.41–0.89)         |
| 35–44              | 599 (18.0)  | 36.9                     | 0.79 (0.61–1.03)         | 23.1                                   | 1.04 (0.76–1.42)         | 15.3                                   | 0.77 (0.54–1.09)         |
| 45–54              | 560 (17.4)  | 35.6                     | 0.74 (0.56–0.97)         | 22.4                                   | 1.05 (0.77–1.44)         | 20.1                                   | 1.01 (0.72–1.42)         |
| 55–64              | 541 (15.0)  | 38.9                     | 0.90 (0.70–1.16)         | 23.9                                   | 1.25 (0.91–1.72)         | 21.2                                   | 1.08 (0.79–1.46)         |
| 65+                | 856 (21.0)  | 41.6                     | 1.0                      | 15.9                                   | 1                        | 21.5                                   | 1                        |
| **P trend**        |             | 0.176                    | 0.013                    | <0.001                                 |                          |                                        |                          |
| **Education**      |             | 14.0                     | 0.72 (0.55–0.95)         | 32.5                                   | 3.31 (2.45–4.47)         | 15.1                                   | 0.74 (0.53–1.03)         |
| No qualifications  | 928 (25.8)  | 38.8                     | 1.0                      | 13.0                                   | 1.0                      | 21.7                                   | 1.0                      |
| O-level or equivalent | 774 (25.4)  | 43.6                     | 1.37 (1.08–1.74)         | 17.0                                   | 1.42 (1.04–1.94)         | 16.5                                   | 0.82 (0.60–1.11)         |
| A-level or equivalent | 798 (27.7)  | 38                      | 1.10 (0.86–1.40)         | 22.9                                   | 2.12 (1.58–2.84)         | 15.9                                   | 0.82 (0.60–1.12)         |
| Graduates          | 610 (21.1)  | 28.8                     | 0.72 (0.55–0.95)         | 32.5                                   | 3.31 (2.45–4.47)         | 15.1                                   | 0.74 (0.53–1.03)         |
| **P trend**        |             | 0.003                    | <0.001                   | 0.098                                  |                          |                                        |                          |

Note: Responses ‘Don’t Know’, ‘Other’ and ‘Refusal’ not included (n=49–250). Baseline male/no military connection/65+ years/no qualifications. All remaining options used as reference category.

† Adjusted for gender, age, education, military connection.

Source: Authors’ calculations based on NatCen Social Research, *British Social Attitudes Survey, 2011* [data collection], 2nd Edition, UK Data Service, DOI:10.5255/UKDA-SN-7237-2.
Research Findings

These findings demonstrate that the British public has a widely shared definition of the term ‘veteran’ which adheres to historical representations of combat and deployment or retirement with the implication of such experiences. Previous research has shown similar conceptualisations of this term among the British public, with support for definitions that reflected history of service or serving in either the First or Second World Wars.29 These findings suggest that the traditional ‘hero’ veteran identity that arose from the experiences of the British military during the 20th century, perpetuated through popular culture and reinforced by imagery of personnel in Iraq and Afghanistan, remains a persistent and dominant image in the public’s mind.20 The narrow portrayal of veterans within traditional and social media can also be a source of such stereotypes, with imagery of veterans as either heroes or victims commonly used.21 As in previous studies of public attitudes to the military,22 differences between socio-demographic groups were found. While retirement was by far the most commonly endorsed public definition of a veteran, women, younger respondents and those who held some level of education were more likely to favour broader rather than narrower definitions that focused on combat deployments. Respondents reporting a connection to the military were more likely to endorse definitions that focused on deployment rather than solely on combat, suggesting greater appreciation of the different roles of the military. This reflects more recent findings that suggest lower support for the contribution of veterans to society in general among those who do not know someone who has served.23

Less than 2% of the public endorsed the official MoD definition of a veteran, suggesting that definitions which require deployment overseas, such as Australia’s, may be more aligned to public understandings of the term than the wider definition used in the UK. However, the divergence between public and government definitions is likely to relate to their differing purposes. Public conceptualisations of veterans arise from culturally determined understandings of social categories and identities that determine whether someone is seen as belonging to a social group24 and is therefore eligible to claim the status and rewards associated with it, while official definitions within policy largely aim to address access to these rewards in the form of benefits and services. In the case of the UK, the introduction of the wider definition within policy was a response to pressure from the public and the charitable sector to ensure support was readily available to all service leavers in the UK.25 This differs from other countries where a more proscribed definition of ‘veteran’ can be used to provide clearer responsibilities for government-funded services pertaining to veterans.26 Any restriction to the UK definition would therefore have consequences for access to veteran services and eligibility for support through the Armed Forces Covenant.27

While not clear from this study, the divergence between the public’s view of what constitutes a ‘veteran’ and that of the MoD may have implications for public support for veteran services for those who might not be considered as ‘deserving’. There is little evidence of this to date in either the media or public opinion in the UK, however misrepresentation of combat experience has been noted among some Vietnam veterans accessing Veteran’s Affairs services in the US.28 Historical evidence has also shown that

19. Dandeker et al., ‘What’s in a Name? Defining and Caring for “Veterans”’.
20. Helen McCartney, ‘Hero, Victim or Villain? The Public Image of the British Soldier and Its Implications for Defense Policy’, Defense and Security Analysis (Vol. 27, No. 1, 2011), pp. 43–54.
21. House of Commons Defence Committee, ‘Mental Health and the Armed Forces, Part One: The Scale of Mental Health Issues: Eleventh Report of Session 2017–19’, HC 813, 19 July 2018; Scott Parrott et al., ‘Hero, Charity Case, and Victim: How U.S. News Media Frame Military Veterans on Twitter’, Armed Forces and Society (Vol. 45, No. 4, 2019), pp. 702–22.
22. Gonzalez, ‘Spanish Attitudes Towards Multinational Defense’; Holsti, ‘Sources of Foreign Policy Attitudes’; David L. Keal, ‘American Public Opinion Toward the Military: Differences by Race, Gender, and Class?’, Armed Forces and Society (Vol. 32, No. 1, 2005), pp. 123–38.
23. Latter, Powell and Ward, ‘Public Perceptions of Veterans and the Armed Forces’.
24. Henri Tajfel, ‘Social Identity and Intergroup Behaviour’, Social Science Information (Vol. 13, No. 2, 1974), pp. 65–93.
25. Dandeker et al., ‘What’s in a Name? Defining and Caring for “Veterans”’.
26. Ibid.
27. MoD, The Armed Forces Covenant, 2012, <www.mod.uk/DefenceInternet/AboutDefence/WhatWeDo/Personnel/Welfare/ ArmedForcesCovenant>, accessed 20 November 2019.
28. B Christopher Frueh et al., ‘Documented Combat Exposure of US Veterans Seeking Treatment for Combat-Related Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder’, British Journal of Psychiatry (Vol. 186, No. 6, 2005), pp. 467–72.

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public support for compensation and pensions for injured personnel fluctuates according to times of government austerity, such as during the Great Depression, which has some relevance to current conditions in the UK resulting from government cuts. Support during transition may also be affected, especially among employers opting into schemes encouraging employment of those within the ex-service community if they do not feel candidates meet their own definition of a veteran.

Comparisons of conceptualisations of ‘veteran’ between members of the British public and veterans themselves showed some similarity in how the term is interpreted between these two groups, with only half of ex-serving personnel self-identifying as a ‘veteran’ under the official MoD definition. This suggests that while public definitions deviate considerably from those used in government policy, ex-serving personnel use similar cultural understandings as the public to construct their own identity as veterans rather than official definitions. Future research should explore the similarities in conceptualisation between civilians and the ex-serving community given the potential of improving shared understanding of this social identity in aiding successful transition and ongoing support, including how this term is created and maintained.

The positive connotations of the dominant ‘hero’ stereotype may be helpful for veterans, with the majority of UK employers viewing hiring veterans as beneficial for their organisation due to the skills and resilience associated with service. However, negative connotations regarding poor mental health, such as post-traumatic stress disorder, are also evident, which may affect not only employment opportunities but wider transition. These connotations may be underpinned by public misunderstandings of the impacts of military service.

Due to a lack of additional questions on the meaning behind the definitions presented in the BSA, it is not clear from this current study which was the most acceptable to the public or how definitions may relate to perceptions about eligibility for services or public support. Research conducted at a similar time to the BSA suggested nearly 70% of the general public felt veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan were not receiving appropriate support, but such support may be prioritised differently for different groups of veterans. Further research should be conducted to explore the role of the public, ex-serving personnel and the military in creating the identity of a ‘veteran’, how definitions relate to perceived access to support, services and the benefits associated with military service, and how this influences transition experiences.

Strengths and Limitations

This is the first UK study to examine how the British public defines who is a veteran and how definitions may differ by socio-demographic group. These findings give an initial overview of public understanding of this term. While data collection occurred in 2011, when the UK armed forces were involved in prominent combat operations, a 2016 polling of public support for the UK armed forces indicates similar levels of support for the military as reported in the 2012 BSA, suggesting public opinions regarding the military and veterans may not have altered greatly over time.

These results are subject to limitations. The BSA is a cross-sectional study, reflecting public opinion at one moment in time. While the response rate may seem low, this is typical for the BSA. Although the BSA strives to ensure a representative sample and account for non-response, some sections of society may not have been included and caution should be applied to some findings due to low numbers. The BSA does not survey members of the public in Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland, which could affect the interpretation of results.

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Ireland. Research on public attitudes to the UK armed forces suggests fewer positive opinions in this region, with 33% holding a high or very high opinion. 38 Given the political and social context of this area, the definitions of ‘veteran’ may vary from other parts of the UK and should be explored in future research.

Respondents were able to select only one definition that aligned most closely to how they would define a veteran. As such, these findings relate to the most common veteran identity within public consciousness, rather than which veteran identity is the most accepted and which has meaning in relation to accessing services and support. However, there may be differences in how the public relates to, and conceptualises, the terms ‘veteran’ and ‘ex-serving’. Perceptions were examined according to factors shown in prior research to be important in public attitudes towards the military, although there may be additional co-variates that have not been included. Given recent changes in the social and political climate in the UK, the results may be affected by emerging factors relevant to this area that were not present at the time of data collection, such as voting record in the 2016 Brexit referendum, which has been shown to also be an influential factor in public opinion. 39

Future research could address some of these limitations within the 2011 BSA by using qualitative methods to elucidate a greater sense of meaning-making around the veteran identity. The use of vignettes regarding veterans to explicitly link types of veterans to support for access to services as used in research in Northern Ireland 40 could be employed in quantitative studies. Where possible, such studies should examine differences according to common socio-demographics and include factors increasingly relevant to the current social and political climate. Qualitative methods should also be employed to elucidate public understandings and meanings of the term ‘veteran’ and explore whether ‘ex-serving’ is a more appropriate term, given an increasingly younger and more female veteran population that may not reflect common public images arising from the First and Second World Wars.

**Conclusions**

Definitions of a military ‘veteran’ among the British public continue to reflect historical representations of combat and deployment but differ from government definitions and self-definition among ex-serving personnel. The divergence between official government definitions and those of the public may arise from differences in the purpose of these definitions in either conceptualising a social identity or outlining eligibility for access to services. Significant differences in definitions were found according to gender, education and connection to the military. 38

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38. Chérie Armour et al., ‘Public Attitudes to the UK Armed Forces in Northern Ireland’, Ulster University and Forces in Mind Trust, June 2018.

39. ‘Voting: The 2017 Election: New Divides in British Politics?’, in Daniel Phillips et al. (eds), British Social Attitudes: The 35th Report (London: The National Centre for Social Research, 2018).

40. Armour et al., ‘Public Attitudes to the UK Armed Forces in Northern Ireland’.