

The great majority of Armed Forces veterans never enter the criminal justice system. A minority do, however, and there is now a substantial network of statutory and voluntary-sector support intended to identify veterans who come into contact with the police, courts, prisons and probation services and, where appropriate, help them address the problems associated with their offending.

Some, perhaps especially some other veterans, take a cynical view of veterans citing their service in the hope of leniency when they fall foul of the law. Previous service to the nation is, however, an entirely legitimate consideration under sentencing guidelines.

This is not necessarily about giving veterans special treatment or excusing criminal behaviour. An offender who happens to have served in the Armed Forces remains responsible for his or her actions.

There is nevertheless a strong practical case for identifying veterans and making appropriate support available. If an intervention helps an offender deal with problems such as housing, employment, substance misuse, relationships or mental health – and thereby reduces the likelihood of further offending – the benefit extends well beyond the individual veteran. Fewer offences mean fewer victims and less demand on the police, courts and prison system.

That approach is reflected in government policy. The UK Veterans' Strategy Action Plan described the objective as putting the right support in place for veterans in the criminal justice system, including “**reducing the risk of re-offending**”, while improving identification of veterans so that appropriate support can be provided.

Support at different stages

Veteran-specific support is not confined to convicted prisoners.

The current government guidance covers veterans dealing with the **police, courts, prison and probation services**, as well as those looking for help after release. It points veterans towards assistance with housing, employment and finances as well as rehabilitation, wellbeing and reconnecting with the community.

Among the services currently signposted are:

- [Op NOVA](#), an NHS-commissioned support program delivered by the Forces Employment Charity that helps UK Armed Forces veterans who are in contact with the justice system in England
- [SSAFA's Veterans in the Criminal Justice System service](#), a UK-wide network of Prison-In-Reach volunteers to support members of the Armed Forces community who are in prison, and their families.
- [Care after Combat](#), "dedicated to providing unwavering support to former British Armed Forces personnel in the justice system and their families".

- [Sacro's Veterans Mentoring Service](#), practical and emotional support for military veterans who are involved in, or are at risk of becoming involved in, Scotland's Justice System.
- [Veterans in the Criminal Justice System: Help and Resources](#), our fuller list of agencies and help available.

There are differences between the criminal justice systems in different parts of the UK. In Scotland, in addition to Sacro's Veterans Mentoring Service listed above, [NOVA Scotland](#) has also established a formal referral arrangement with Police Scotland custody centres. This provides an opportunity for intervention at a very early stage – before somebody necessarily reaches prison, or even conviction.

Not simply mitigation

Discussion of veterans and criminal justice sometimes concentrates on whether military service should mitigate a sentence. There can certainly be cases in which an offender's personal history, including experiences during military service, is relevant to sentencing. That is ultimately a matter for the court applying the ordinary principles of sentencing.

But veteran support within the criminal justice system is much broader than mitigation.

An offender may require assistance while serving a sentence, approaching release, on licence or trying to establish a stable life afterwards. Participation in rehabilitation and evidence of progress may sometimes become relevant to decisions concerning release or parole, but that is not the principal justification for providing the support.

The more fundamental question is whether an intervention works.

BAFF and veterans in the justice system

BAFF will use this blog topic principally to provide information and signpost useful services, research and developments affecting veterans who come into contact with the criminal justice system.

Supporting a veteran who has offended does not require anyone to minimise the offence or overlook its effect on victims. Nor does veteran status in itself provide an explanation or excuse for offending.

The case for effective rehabilitation can be made on much simpler grounds. Where veteran-specific knowledge, organisations or peer support can help an offender to address problems and avoid further offending, there is every reason to use them.

Successful rehabilitation is good for the veteran, and for his or her family. Preventing or reducing further offending is surely good for everyone.

For relevant stakeholders, COBSEO – the Confederation of Service Charities – hosts a Justice Cluster which meets three times a year to "bring together cross-sector stakeholders to address the key issues facing those seeking to identify, engage and support veterans in the justice system. It provides members with a platform to workshop challenges and an opportunity to drive progress through informed collaboration."

[BAFF archived article \(2008\): Veterans in prison and the criminal justice system](#)