



Generations of Veterans: Socioeconomic Attainment from World War II to the Contemporary Era

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Abstract

Scholars have long examined how generations or, more technically, cohorts produce social change. According to theory, people's lives are shaped by the years in which they were born because they experience, along with their peers, particular historical events at the same points in the life course. Despite the importance of history, however, many scholars have evaluated cohorts not defined by clear start and end dates, but rather by arbitrary cut points, such as five-year intervals. In contrast, this article uses defined changes in military service in the United States stemming from shifts between war and peace, and from draft to volunteer service to assess how cohorts have contributed to change in socioeconomic attainment. It uses the Current Population Survey from 1971 to 2017, which has not previously been used to evaluate how veteran status may have produced shifting outcomes across cohorts. It finds evidence that cohorts had different average income overall and between groups, with veterans earning more money than nonveterans who were eligible to serve during the draft era before the Vietnam War. These gaps are partially explained by racial and educational differences. The findings provide a model for analyses of changes in the relative status of other groups, as well as information about how the role of military service in social mobility changed historically.

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