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# Professionals Perspectives and Influence: Exploring Attitudes Towards Military Veterans Who Commit Crimes

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Professionals Perspectives and Influence: Exploring Attitudes Towards Military  
Veterans Who Commit Crimes

by

Katherine A. S. Morsch, B.A.

MSW Clinical Research Paper

Presented to the Faculty of the  
School of Social Work  
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St. Paul, Minnesota  
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The Clinical Research Project is a graduation requirement for MSW students at St. Catherine University/University of St. Thomas School of Social Work in St. Paul, Minnesota and is conducted within a nine-month time frame to demonstrate facility with basic social research methods. Students must independently conceptualize a research problem, formulate a research design that is approved by a research committee and the university Institutional Review Board, implement the project, and publicly present the findings of the study. This project is neither a Master's thesis nor a dissertation

**Abstract**

This research aims to explore the intersection of two factors, the positively regarded veteran and negatively viewed criminal. Through that exploration this research will look more deeply into the attitudes of professionals working with veterans that commit crimes and whether a criminal background affects VTC providers' perspectives of the veteran clients with whom they work. Utilizing a 22-question survey consisting of quantitative and qualitative items, respondents were asked questions focused on attitudes towards veterans, crime, veterans that commit crimes and punishment. In addition, this research examined the level of control each respondent felt in the admission and termination processes. Lastly, looking at program improvement, respondents were asked to identify one rule they would like to change in the VTC. This research determined that most decisions for both entry and termination are made utilizing a team approach, professionals thought highly of veterans, most believed that veterans deserve a second chance and that veterans have unique experiences, which justifies the development of a specialized court to meet their needs.

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### **Introduction**

According to the Defense Manpower Data Center (2015) there are nearly 1.4 million active duty and 826,106 Reserve and National Guard personnel currently serving in the armed forces. In addition, the National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics (2014) reports that there are 22 million military veterans that have served in the armed forces. Therefore approximately 7.3% of the U.S. population has served in the armed forces at some point in their lives.

Military members past and present have experiences the general public often does not. They receive specialized training to prepare them to defend, protect and potentially go to war. The specialized military training and deployments may also lead to trauma and social problems such as increased chemical use, criminal activity or mental illness. Some of those problems may also include interactions with the criminal justice system (Huskey, 2015).

Specialized military training influences how military members make decisions and therefore how they interact with their civilian community. Military members are taught to be hypervigilant, drive aggressively and use and carry a weapon. Hypervigilance, in addition to aggressive driving, use of a weapon and anger are seen as protective mechanisms while deployed, however, once a veteran returns home post-deployment, the warzone protective factors can cause problems in the civilian world (Huskey, 2015). In addition, military members suffering from mental health diagnosis related to deployment are more likely to engage in risky behavior such as substance use, interpersonal violence, risky sexual behavior and weapon-related aggressive behavior- all behaviors that likely would have a negative reaction from the civilian and criminal justice community (James, Strom & Leskela, 2014). Readjustment post-deployment is a long process and many veterans have difficulty integrating back into civilian society upon

their return from war. Long periods away from family, friends, civilian employers and community networks may put veterans at an increased risk of criminal activity and eventually incarceration (Greenburg & Rosenheck, 2009).

The experience of being deployed could also cause or contribute to a number of mental health diagnoses or symptoms. Most notable among veterans are posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and traumatic brain injury (TBI). Often these are related to the military member's deployment. Of those returning from the most recent conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, 18.5% have PTSD and 19.5% experienced a TBI while deployed (Tanielian et al., 2008). The symptoms of PTSD and TBI may decrease the veteran's ability to interact with society in a positive way. This decreased ability may then lead to interactions with the criminal justice system (James, Strom & Leskela, 2014).

One way that veterans cope with their deployed experiences is to use chemical substances. Members that have multiple deployments and combat experience are at the highest risk of abusing substances such as alcohol (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2013). The substances of choice for many veterans are alcohol, tobacco and prescription drugs. All of which are used at a higher rate among military members when compared to the civilian population. Illegal drug use is lower among military members, yet still is seen as a problem. Due to the stigma and zero tolerance policy in all branches it may be difficult for military members to seek help for substance abuse (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2013). With lack of support, substance use may lead to increased risky behavior and negative outcomes. Veterans who use substances and have some of the common mental health diagnoses of PTSD or TBI are at an even higher risk of negative drinking outcomes. These negative outcomes may include criminal activity (Adams, Larson, Corrigan, Ritter, & Williams, 2013).



To help meet the unique needs of veterans coming in contact with the Criminal Justice system and in an effort to end homelessness the Veteran Treatment Court (VTC) was developed (Cananaugh, 2011). The first VTC was in Buffalo, New York in 2008. Veteran Treatment Courts were established to address the unique needs of veterans facing criminal charges. VTCs are based on a problem-solving model seen in Drug and Mental Health courts, in order to address the chemical and mental health issues veteran offenders often face (Minnesota, 2013). It is an intensive problem-solving court that supports sobriety with a focus on recovery and stability. Veteran Treatment Court (VTC) depends on the collaboration with the court system, probation officers, Veteran Administration (VA) medical center, VA benefits Administration and in some cases, veteran peer-mentors (Huskey, 2015). These specialized courts aim to understand and be sensitive to the veteran's war and training experiences to help them through the criminal justice system and avoid future incarcerations and interactions with the justice system, reduce homelessness and decrease barriers to employment (McGuire, Clark, Blue-Howells & Coe, 2013).

The success of the veteran depends in some part on the efforts of the service providers involved in the court system. The team of providers surrounds the VTC veteran to provide support and services to the veteran to put more focus on the treatment and success of the veteran and less on incarceration (Cavanaugh, 2011). Members of the military are thought to voluntarily put themselves in harms way to defend the United States therefore many in the civilian community, including those working within the VTC, often regard military members past and present positively. Because of this, many favor ongoing support for military members. The civilian population often do not see veterans as criminals instead they recognize that military service and deployments may be the cause of a veteran's involvement in the criminal justice

system (Huskey, 2015). In contrast, criminals are often regarded as deviant, dishonest and less deserving therefore more deserving of punitive punishment (Schneider & Ingram, 1993). This research aims to explore the intersection of these two factors, the positively regarded veteran and negatively viewed criminal, and look more deeply into whether a criminal background affects VTC providers' perspectives of the veteran clients with whom they work.

## **Literature Review**

### **Military Culture**

The military has a culture that is comprised of a unique language, beliefs, values, traditions and norms. The military culture varies slightly between branches; however, despite these differences each branch maintains the highest regard for their core values. The core values across branches include: honor, courage, loyalty, integrity and commitment. These core values determine how military personnel should behave and conduct themselves regardless of whether members are in uniform or not. In addition to having its own beliefs and values, the military also has its own codified laws and rules outlined in the Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ). Some of those laws place restrictions on personal behavior and hold military members to a higher standard of conduct than required among civilians within civil law (Rubin, Weiss & Coll, 2013).

The military focuses heavily on mission readiness, chain of command, rank structure, loyalty, obedience and willingness to sacrifice one's life for one's country. These areas of emphasis support the military's essential hierarchical structure. This hierarchy creates an implicit understanding among military members that they must follow lawful orders to accomplish the mission. Group solidarity and obedience contribute to task completion and are generally more important than individual achievement (Rubin, Weiss & Coll, 2013).

The military is comprised of five branches: the Army, Navy, Marines, Air Force and Coast Guard. Within each of those branches there are three components, the Active Duty, Reserves and the National Guard. Each branch and component also has its own unique culture and path to veteran status (Rubin, Weiss & Coll, 2013).

**Veteran benefits.** Defining the term “veteran” can be difficult due to the various services, benefits and reasons why one would need to qualify as a veteran. For example, if seeking veteran benefits from the VA medical center a military member must have completed their term of active duty service-likely 24 months or more--and have an other-than-dishonorable discharge (Szymendera, 2015), According to the United States Department of Veteran Affairs Compensation and Pension Manual, “a person who served in the active military service and who was discharged or released under conditions other than dishonorable” is considered a veteran for the purposes of health benefits and services (U.S Department of Veteran Affairs, 2015). There are many other variables that also contribute to the status of a veteran. For example, if a member served in the National Guard or Reserve components they would be consider a veteran if they served for 20 years or more or if they served twenty-four months of continuous active duty most likely in a deployed location (Szymendera, 2015).

### **Public Attitudes towards Veterans**

According to a Pew Research Poll, “Americans continue to hold the military in high regard, with more than three-quarters of U.S. adults (78%) saying that members of the armed services contribute “a lot” to society’s well-being. That is, however, a modest decline from 84% four years ago” (Pew Research Center, 2013). According to the military.com website national poll (2012): “America Values Vets but Stereotypes Them,” 86% of respondents said that veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan were valuable assets. However, in this same survey

respondents believed that the military was less educated than they actual are and that most veterans come back from war with PTSD, while in actuality, only approximately 30% do (Huskey, 2015).

### **Public Attitudes Towards Crime and Punishment**

As of December 31, 2014 there were approximately 1.5 billion prisoners held by state and federal correctional authorities, which is about 612 prisoners for every 100,000 U.S. residents (Carson, 2015). Between 1980 and 2006 there was a 77% increase in state and federal inmates. This was an increase from 275 to 591 per 100,000 during that time (Costelloe, Chiricos, & Gertz, 2009). With this large number of people in the jails and prisons and their varied convictions, it is not surprising that the attitudes towards criminals varies depending on interactions, experiences and relations to those who have committed crimes. Not only have members of the general public been victims of crimes, but they may also have personal relationships to persons convicted. Based on their relationship with the person that committed the crime the level of sympathy could vary.

Furthermore, the attitudes of individuals that work with criminals may be different than the general publics given their close contact and relationship with them. Whether these perspectives are positive or negative can have an impact on the services people receive and potentially the success of the imprisoned. According to Mauna and King (2009) there are four types of attitudes towards offenders. The first is the idea that the offender is permanently damaged by society. They believe that the causes of crime are social but they also see the adult criminal is unlikely to change, therefore they believe in longer sentences based on the potential risk the criminal might pose. The second type is the offender that makes poor choices. This group of people believes that crime is a choice and under the control of the person. Given this, a

choice can be made not to commit crimes. The punishment for criminals in this category includes punitive punishments but also preventative measures and retribution. The third view is that offenders are evil. They believe that crime is choice but that once that choice is made it is likely that they will always be criminals. This group believes in the most punitive responses to criminal acts for the “damaged” person. The final view is that the offender is a victim of society. They believe that criminals are led to a life of crime through external means such as poverty – and given this, they tend to believe in the least punitive types of punishment (Maruna & King, 2009).

### **Veterans and Crime**

Despite the slight decline of veterans in state and federal prisons, as of 2012 there were still approximately 181,500 veterans incarcerated (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2015). Statistics from 2015, however, likely do not accurately reflect the current status of incarcerated and justice system-involved veterans, which are not available. Despite the lack of data, the VA has identified a connection between homelessness, mental health and incarceration. Because of their desire to end homelessness among veterans they expanded their outreach to the incarcerated population (McGuire, 2007). In addition to addressing homelessness, the VA was attempting to broaden the veteran enrollment rate and therefore reached out to the veterans who were incarcerated and identified this group as a priority population (McGuire, 2007). It is important to note that a majority of the veterans incarcerated did not experience combat while in the military (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2015). The Bureau of Justice Statistics (2015) found in their study, however, that 56% of incarcerated veterans reported combat duty broken down by 25% in prison and 31% of veterans in jail.

**Types of crimes committed.** While Veterans commit a variety of crimes much like the general public. Over half (67%) of veterans in 2012 were serving time for a violent offense. Of

those that committed a violent crime, 35% were for violent sexual assault. Civilians, on the other hand, have a lower percentage of violent crime with 52% for violent offenses, 23% for sexual offense (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2015). In a similar study in 2007, 25% of veterans in state prisons were sex offenders which is much more prevalent than prisoners from the general population which tends to be about 1 in 10 nonveterans (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2007).

**Mental illness and veterans.** Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is a common diagnosis of military members returning from a warzone deployments with 12 to 20% of military personnel meeting the criteria for a PTSD diagnosis. PTSD is often associated with an increased likelihood of impulsive and risky behaviors to include interpersonal violence, weapon-related aggressive behavior, self-injury, risky sexual behavior, aggressive driving behavior and thrill seeking, increased substance misuse and aggression (James, Strom & Leskela, 2014). According to Tsai, Rosenheck, Kasparow and McGuire (2013), veterans from the Operation ENDURING FREEDOM (OEF), Operation IRAQI FREEDOM (OIF) and Operation NEW DAWN (OND) conflicts were three times more likely than veterans from other conflicts to have combat related PTSD. In addition, veterans who had multiple combat tours have a 25% greater likelihood to have PTSD (Cavanagh, 2011). According to Cavanagh (2011), “PTSD and other mental diseases have been linked to substance abuse-as a means of self-medication-domestic violence, and other criminal activity.” The symptoms veterans experience as a result of PTSD from their military experience may lead them to commit criminal offenses (Cavanagh, 2011, p.465). Greenberg and Rosenheck also found evidence that PTSD is a risk factor for veteran imprisonment (2009).

**Substance use and veterans.** Mental health treatment has shown to produce significant declines in symptoms of PTSD and other mental health diagnoses (Vazan, Golum & Bennett, 2015). The support network through the VTC Minnesota program connects veterans to mental

health treatment when appropriate (Minnesota, 2013). Therefore, by decreasing PTSD symptoms veterans may reduce recidivism and continued contact with the criminal justice system. Most incarcerated veterans had some mental health or substance abuse diagnosis. Many of the offenses seen in VTC are either directly or indirectly related to symptoms or behaviors from these diagnoses (Tsai et al., 2013).

**Homelessness and veterans.** The U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs is committed to ending homelessness among veterans. A strong link between incarceration and homelessness seems to exist according to research (McGuire, 2007). In a study of 5,432 people experiencing homelessness and mental illness they found that veterans who suffer from dual diagnosis-mental health and chemical dependency- were more likely to have more homeless experiences and reported more involvement with the criminal justice system (Gonzalez & Rosenheck, 2002). In addition, these veterans reported a lower quality of life. According to Gonzalez and Rosenheck (2002), demanding and structured therapeutic treatment is highly effective for veterans.

Since the 1980's the VA has administered programs to engage veterans experiencing homelessness, connect them with services and work towards ending homelessness for veterans. Male veterans are at a higher risk of becoming homeless compared to the general population. For males, prior incarceration is a risk factor associated with homelessness (McGuire, 2007). Veteran Treatment Courts were established with the goals of preventing incarceration, recidivism and future homelessness (Tsai et al., 2013). In an attempt to reduce and prevent homelessness of military veterans, focused efforts were placed on working with incarcerated veterans and those already involved with the criminal justice system (McGuire, 2007).

**Pre-military factors.** Tsai et al (2013) found that in addition to combat related experiences, some pre-military factors may also contribute to criminal behavior and

incarceration. They found that it may not only be the combat related experiences, PTSD or military training that brings veterans to the criminal justice system. They found that non-military related factors, such as social and demographic factors were also likely to determine if veterans would commit a crime or be involved with the criminal justice system (2013). While some branches and components of the military allow for moral waivers for enlistees that have prior criminal backgrounds, most services screen for criminal behavior prior to entry. The process of recruitment has changed over the years depending on the operations tempo, recruiting requirements, military pay rates and manpower needs (Greenberg & Rosenheck, 2009).

### **Veteran Treatment Court**

**History.** The first official VTC was modeled after already existing specialized Drug Courts. In 2008, as part of a movement recognizing the special needs of veterans, Judge Robert Russell established the first VTC in Buffalo, New York after noticing the increase in veterans coming through the courts (Minnesota Judicial Branch, Fourth Judicial District, 2013). Five years later there were approximately 168 VTCs established in the United States, all modeled after Judge Russell's VTC (Huskey, 2015). As of 2014, there are 220 officially recognized VTCs in the U.S. with many more under development (Justice for Vets, nd).

Veteran Treatment Courts were established to address the unique needs of veterans facing criminal charges. Veteran Courts are based on a problem-solving model seen in Drug and Mental Health courts, thereby addressing the chemical and mental health issues veteran offenders face (Minnesota, 2013). VTCs recognize and take into account the military members' service and the likelihood that exposure to military related situations and/or training may have caused or exacerbated the member's mental health or chemical use. This exposure may have contributed to their criminal activity (Huskey, 2015).



The VTC is a voluntary program that often involves intensive supervision by probation officers, case management through the Veteran Justice Outreach Officer at the VA Medical Center, frequent appearances before the VTC Judge, mandatory treatment for chemical dependency and/or mental health, support groups and random drug and/or alcohol screenings. The multidisciplinary team works collaboratively to meet the veterans where they are and help them navigate the criminal justice system, all while being sensitive and informed about the unique mental health and chemical dependency issues of veterans (Minnesota, 2013). In addition, connecting veterans with ongoing VA services and utilizing the mentorship program aims to establish ongoing support and services for eligible veterans after they exit the VTC program (Minnesota, 2013). In addition, the Veteran Justice Workers assigned to the VTCs were focused on assisting veterans with connecting with other VA services such as medical, pensions and benefits (Tsai, Rosenheck, Kasproff & McGuire, 2013).

**Programs and Services.** The National VTC has ten key components that are encouraged as a foundation for the VTC programs across the country. The ten components include integration of alcohol and drug treatment with mental health services and ongoing access to treatment and rehab services, use of a team approach with the absence of the standard adversarial relationship, early identification of eligibility, abstinence monitoring, use of rewards for cooperation and appropriate responses to noncompliance, regular and ongoing interaction with the judge, ongoing monitoring and evaluation of the program, training and education for VTC staff, and constant partnership building between VTC, Veterans Administration, community organizations and other stakeholders and support systems (Town, 2015).

**Eligibility.** Eligibility varies greatly between all of the VTCs across the country. Most courts require that the Veteran be eligible for VA medical benefits. Some accept based on the

military member's era of service (i.e. Operation Enduring Freedom, Vietnam, etc.). Others look at the level of the offense, whether the member has a mental health or chemical use diagnosis, residency of the county in which the court is located and a connection between the crime being charged and the military service (McGuire et al, 2013). VTC seeks to change the behavior of the veterans enrolled in the program. Each VTC determines the eligibility of the participants, thereby creating boundaries to more closely target or narrow their population.

### **Conceptual Framework**

**Street Level Bureaucracy.** A street-level bureaucrat is described as a person that works for the government in a public position, regularly interacts with citizens, has some level of independence to make decisions, has an impact on the citizen clients and where the attitudes and approach the person takes could have a significant impact on their clients. In most cases the clients are not voluntary (Lipsky, 2010). In this research, clients are in the criminal justice system and must participate in the courts on a nonvoluntary basis due to the crime they have committed, however VTC is often a voluntary enrollment. The judges, parole officers, county and VA social workers all are government employees with some level of independence when working with veterans in the veteran treatment court. From this theory, the beliefs and perspectives of the street level bureaucrats will have a direct impact on how the clients are treated. In the VTC, the parole officers, lawyers, judges, county, court and VA social workers beliefs about criminals and veterans will have an impact on and inform how they implement program policies and treat their clients. Each of these individuals plays a unique role in shaping the VTC in which they work. Depending on the VTC system those involved could have an impact on their clients due to their direct work and authorization to interpret the policies guiding the VTC program (Lipsky, 2010).

**Social Construction of Target Populations.** Social Construction of Target Populations Theory is based on the idea that our knowledge of various groups is constructed and has an influence on how policies are created (Schneider & Ingram, 1993). Veterans are often highly regarded by the public. Many believe they deserve respect because of their service and sacrifice to our country. They are portrayed in the media as disciplined, strong and capable of navigating difficult situations. Criminals on the other hand are likely seen as deviants and less deserving of societies respect. They could be described as dishonest and untrustworthy (Schneider & Ingram, 1993). In VTC these two areas intersect when the Veteran becomes the criminal. The behavior and the well being of the Veterans are directly affected by the policies of the VTC. The perceptions of the VTC providers could potentially influence how services are provided based on who they believe to be worthy or unworthy. Because of the intersecting category of veteran and criminal the provider is left to decide which role is more powerful or important.

## **Methods**

### **Research Design**

This research aims to explore whether a criminal background affects VTC providers' perspectives of the veteran clients with whom they work. A combination of qualitative and quantitative survey research using a cross sectional design was used to answer this research question.

Surveys were distributed via email to 325 Veteran Treatment Court contacts listed on the Justice For Vets Website (Justice for Vets, nd) and the United States Department of Veteran Affairs website (U.S Department of Veteran Affairs, nd). Surveys were sent to Veteran Justice Outreach Workers listed on the US Department of Veteran Affairs website and the Veteran Treatment Court Contact person from the Justice for Vets Website. The person emailed was

asked to forward the survey to peers also working with the Veteran Treatment court to include court employees such as parole officers, judges, attorneys, peer mentors and social workers. They were specifically asked not to forward the email to their subordinates. There is very little research done on professionals' attitudes towards justice involved veterans, therefore three qualitative questions within the survey aim to more deeply understand the experience of court employees and their attitudes towards justice involved Veterans, their ability to influence admission and termination within their court system and also their suggestions for rules they would like changed.

This data was quantified and summarized. The results were compared with the results from across all of the VTC respondents. This information will provide a better understanding of the attitudes of service providers in the VTC, services and support available in other areas across the country and how court professionals are able to influence policy within their court system. In addition, it will provide insight as to selection/intake criteria and major players in the VTC. This research may also shed light on areas for improvement or gaps in the services.

### **Sample**

The sample consists of 325 service providers from the Veteran Treatment Court from across the country as listed on the Justice for Vets website and the US Department of Veteran Affairs website. Surveys were emailed out to all VTCs with contact information available publically. Generally each state has at least one VTC with most states having multiple at different levels of jurisdiction to include state, county and municipal courts. The person receiving the email could be considered a coordinator, a lead worker, the judge, or any number of varied disciplines, depending on the structure of the court. The court could be a county, state or municipal court. In each email, recipients were encouraged to forward the survey to other

VTC providers and other VTCs. The respondents included Veteran Justice Outreach workers, judges, mentors, prosecutors and various other professionals associated with the VTC. Therefore, a single veterans court may have provided a number of surveys. This is not problematic because the research question is about attitudes towards veterans as a group of providers, rather than summarizing or comparing particular services provided.

### **Protection of Human Subjects**

There are no known risks for respondents in this study. All respondents will be VTC providers such as social workers, parole officers, judges, defense attorneys, prosecutors or peer mentors. Program participants were not surveyed. Only group demographic information will be reported out, therefore individuals will not be identifiable. Responses will remain anonymous, as no names were requested. The informed consent, which all respondents saw prior to accessing the survey, outlined the purpose of the study and estimated of how long the survey would take to complete. It will also indicated the location of the survey and assurance that the computer in which results were stored and the program used were password protected. Contact information was provided if respondents had any questions, concerns or comments.

### **Data Collection Instrument**

An electronic survey using Qualtrics consisted of 22 questions and was distributed via email. The cross sectional design focused on the currently listed Veterans Treatment Courts as identified on the Justice for Veterans website and Veteran Justice Outreach Workers as identified on the Veteran Affairs website. Both quantitative and qualitative questions were asked.

**Data Analysis Plan**

Data was analyzed upon receipt. Most of the questions were analyzed using descriptive statistics, although some inferential statistics may be possible depending on the response rate. Because the Likert scale questions on the survey are not weighted the responses are viewed independently and not summarized.

**Findings**

A total of 325 mixed method surveys were emailed to Veteran Outreach Workers and Veteran Court contacts as listed on the Department of Veteran Affairs and the Justice for Vets websites. Those that received a survey were encouraged to forward the survey to their colleagues who also worked with the Veteran Treatment Courts. A total of 62 people responded for a response rate of 19%. The survey strove to examine the attitudes and perspectives of professionals that work with military veterans that have committed crimes.

**Sample Demographics of Respondents**

A variety of roles were represented in the responses. Sixty percent ( $n=37$ ) of the respondents were Veteran Justice Outreach Workers 35 were social workers and two responded as psychologists. Six court coordinators and five judges responded. Two probation or parole officers and three respondents working with substance abuse and/or mental health services completed the survey. One prosecutor, one evaluator and one pre-trial release worker responded as well.

Table 1

<i>Role in the Veteran Treatment Court</i>	
	<i>n=62 (%)</i>
Veteran Justice Outreach Worker	37 (60%)
Probation/Parole Officer	2 (3%)
Judge	5 (8%)
Public Defender	0 (0%)
Prosecutor	1 (2%)
Private Attorney	0 (0%)
Mentor	0 (0%)
Court Coordinator	6 (10%)
Other:	11 (18%)

*Note: This table reflects respondents' answers to the question: What is your role in the Veteran Treatment Court?*

Table 2

<i>Veteran Justice Outreach Worker Credentials</i>	
	<i>n=37 (%)</i>
Social Worker	35 (95%)
Psychologist	2 (5%)
Other:	0 (0%)

*Note: This table reflects the respondents' answer to the follow-up question: Are you a: This question was asked to respondents that selected Veteran Justice Outreach Worker in the previous question*

Over half (61%) of the respondents had never served in the military. Those that had served or are currently serving represented four branches. Ten respondents (45%) served or are currently serving in the Army. Six Marines (27%), four Air Force (18%) and two Navy (9%) also responded. Eighteen (39%) of the respondents served some time on Active Duty, three (14%) served with the Reserves and one (5%) with the National Guard. One respondent did not identify the branch or component in which they served.

Table 3

<i>Military Service</i>	
	<i>n=59 (%)</i>
Yes	23 (39%)
No	36 (61%)

*Note: This table reflects the respondents' answer to the following question: Have you served in the Military?*

Table 4

<i>Branch of Service</i>	
	<i>n=22 (%)</i>
Air Force	4 (18%)
Army	10 (45%)
Marines	6 (27%)
Navy	2 (9%)
Coast Guard	0 (0%)

*Note: This table reflects the respondents' answer to the following question: What branch of the Military did/do you serve?*

Table 5

<i>Component of Service</i>	
	<i>n=22 (%)</i>
Active	18 (82%)
Guard	1 (5%)
Reserve	3 (14%)

*Note: This table reflects the respondents' answer to the following question: What component of the Military did/do you serve?*

All five regions were represented in the responses. Slightly less than a third (31%) of the respondents were from the Midwest (see chart for states included in this region) followed closely by the Southeast at 24%, the West at 23%, the Southwest at 13% and the Northeast at 10%.



Table 6

<i>Region</i>	<i>n=62</i>	<i>(%)</i>
Northeast (CT, DE, ME, MD, MA, NH, NJ, NY, PA, RI, VT)	6	(10%)
Southeast (AL, AR, FL, GA, KY, LA, MS, NC, SC, TN, VA, WV, PR, VI)	15	(24%)
Southwest (AZ, NM, OK, TX)	8	(13%)
Midwest (IL, IN, IA, KS, MI, MN, MO, NE, ND, OH, SD, WI)	19	(31%)
West (AK, CA, CO, HI, ID, MT, NV, OR, UT, WA, WY, GU)	14	(23%)

*Note: This table reflects the respondents' answer to the following question: In what region is your VTC?*

### **Veteran Treatment Court Description**

**Level of offense.** The Veteran Treatment Courts (VTCs) that responded served veterans charged with either misdemeanors or felonies with 52 respondents reporting as such. Seven respondents were associated with VTCs that only served veterans charged with misdemeanors and two respondents worked with VTCs that only served veterans charged with felonies.

Table 7

<i>Level of Offense</i>	<i>n=61</i>	<i>(%)</i>
Misdemeanor	7	11%
Felony	2	3%
Both Misdemeanor and Felony	52	85%

*Note: This table reflects respondents' answer to the following question: What level of offense does your VTC serve?*

**Admission criteria.** Each court has unique criteria for admission into their VTC. Most (77%) reported that to be admitted the veteran must meet the veteran definition as defined by the US Department of Veteran Affairs but only 28% reported veterans had to be eligible for care at the VA Medical Center. Thirty respondents (49%) were associated with VTCs only served veterans with honorable or general discharges while ten respondents (16%) worked with veterans with discharges other than honorable or general. Five (8%) respondents reported they worked with VTCs that required veterans to have served in a recent conflict such as Operation Enduring

Freedom, Operation Iraqi Freedom or Operation New Dawn and seven respondents (11%) work with VTCs that require their participants be combat veterans. Twenty-five respondents (41%) work with VTCs that require the veteran to have a mental health diagnosis and 17 respondents (28%) reported that the veteran must prove they have a military-related mental health condition to be admitted to the VTC.

Table 8

<i>Admission Criteria</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>(%)</i>
Has a mental health diagnosis	25	(41%)
Has a MILITARY-RELATED mental health condition	17	(28%)
Is a veteran (as defined by the US Department of Veteran Affairs)	47	(77%)
Must be eligible for care at the VA Medical Center	17	(28%)
Served in the Armed Forces	45	(74%)
Combat Veteran	7	(11%)
Served in OEF/OIF/OND	5	(8%)
Honorable or General Discharge	30	(49%)
Discharged as anything other than Honorable or General	10	(16%)
Current or former Active Duty	18	(30%)
Reserve/Guard	13	(21%)
Veteran Family Member	0	(0%)
Other:	5	(8%)

*Note: This table reflects respondents' answers to the following question: The following are required for admission into your VTC: Check all that apply*

*Control in admission.* Fifty-five respondents answered the question asking how much control they had in determining a person's entry into VTC. There were four main themes in the responses. The most common theme ( $n=14$ ) was that they were a part of a team that decided if a veteran would be allowed entry into the VTC. Among those responses some stated that despite it being a team decision some members of the team had increased influence in the final decision. Others stated that they provide information to a team of people that make the decision and that the information they provide can influence how the team will decide. The next most common theme among responses ( $n=11$ ) was that they felt they had no control in the decision to admit a

veteran into VTC. Ten responses identified that they felt they had significant control in determining a person's entry into VTC. The next most common theme seen was little to minimal control in determining entry. Of those, two respondents stated that they had "50%" control and three said they had moderate to fair control. There were six unique responses that did not fall into any of the major themes. Most of those responses indicated what their role in the VTC is and not necessarily indicating how much control that affords them in the entry decision of veterans. Throughout the responses it was mentioned four times that the judge was either the final decision maker or the member with the most say in the team decision. Slightly more often at five times, the District Attorney was identified as the member with the most control in a veteran's entry into the VTC.

*Eligibility criteria overlooked.* Forty-two people responded to the question asking to list and explain any eligibility rules that are commonly overlooked. Most ( $n=25$ , 60%) of the respondents stated that there were not any eligibility rules overlooked. Four (10%) responded that they did not know or were unsure if there were any eligibility rules that are commonly overlooked. One respondent indicated that there were eligibility rules that are overlooked but did not give specifics as to which rules they were. Other rules mentioned were service connection, combat status, discharge status, component of the military, jurisdiction and level of risk. One respondent stated that all of the eligibility rules are or can be overlooked.

### **Attitudes towards Crime**

Seven questions were asked regarding the respondents' attitudes towards crime. Sixty people responded to these questions. A majority of respondents ( $n=54$ , 90%) strongly disagreed ( $n=21$ , 35%) or disagreed ( $n=33$ , 55%) that people who commit crimes are permanently damaged. Two respondents (3%) agreed that people who commit crimes are permanently

damaged. A majority of respondents ( $n=54$ , 90%) do not believe (either strongly disagreed ( $n=30$ , 50%) or disagreed ( $n=24$ , 40%)) that people who break the law are deep down evil. None of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed with this question. Thirty-three respondents (55%) believed (agreed or strongly agreed) that external factors pushed people into crime and 17 respondents (28%) were neutral (neither agreed or disagreed) in their answer. The remaining ten respondents (17%) disagreed or strongly disagreed that external factors push people into crime. One respondent agreed that once a criminal, always a criminal and 53 respondents (88%) disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement. The results from this section show that a large majority of respondents do not believe that committing crimes puts a person a path of no return or that crime is at the core of a person's identity. Most agree that it is society and external factors that lead people to crime.

Table 9

<i>Attitudes Towards Crime</i>					
	Strongly Agree <i>n</i> (%)	Agree <i>n</i> (%)	Neither agree nor disagree <i>n</i> (%)	Disagree <i>n</i> (%)	Strongly disagree <i>n</i> (%)
People are pushed into crime because of external factors such as poverty.	5 (8%)	28 (47%)	17 (28%)	7 (12%)	3 (5%)
People who commit crimes are permanently damaged.	0 (0%)	2 (3%)	4 (7%)	33 (55%)	21 (35%)
People who commit crimes have just made a bad choice.	2 (3%)	24 (40%)	21 (35%)	13 (22%)	0 (0%)
Once a criminal always a criminal.	0 (0%)	1 (2%)	6 (10%)	28 (47%)	25 (42%)
People commit crimes because they lack strong moral fiber.	1 (2%)	7 (12%)	13 (22%)	24 (40%)	15 (25%)
People break the law because deep down they are evil.	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	6 (10%)	24 (40%)	30 (50%)
Just because someone commits a crime it doesn't mean they are a bad person.	26 (43%)	27 (45%)	5 (8%)	1 (2%)	1 (2%)

### **Attitudes towards Punishment**

Just over half (52%) of the 61 respondents disagreed ( $n=21$ , 34%) or strongly disagreed ( $n= 11$ , 18%) that the world is a just place and similarly 57% disagreed ( $n=23$ , 38%) or strongly disagree ( $n=11$ , 18%) that people get what they deserved. Over half of the respondents ( $n=35$ , 58%) strongly agreed ( $n=8$ , 13%) or agreed ( $n=27$ , 45%) when asked if they were confident that justice always prevailed over injustice.

Table 10

<i>Attitudes towards Punishment</i>										
	Strongly Agree		Agree		Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree		Strongly Disagree		
	<i>n</i>	(%)	<i>n</i>	(%)	<i>n</i>	(%)	<i>n</i>	(%)	<i>n</i>	(%)
Serious crimes deserve serious punishment, no matter who commits them.	6	(10%)	21	(34%)	18	(30%)	15	(25%)	1	(2%)
I think the world is a just place.	0	(0%)	5	(8%)	24	(39%)	21	(34%)	11	(18%)
I believe that people get what they deserve.	0	(0%)	2	(3%)	24	(40%)	23	(38%)	11	(18%)
I am not confident that justice always prevails over injustice.	8	(13%)	27	(45%)	11	(18%)	10	(17%)	4	(7%)

### Attitudes towards Veterans

Twenty-seven respondents (44%) disagreed or strongly disagreed that veterans should be held to a higher standard while nineteen (31%) neither agreed nor disagreed, and fifteen (24%) agreed or strongly agreed.. Twenty-five respondents (41%) either strongly agreed or agreed that veterans should be given special treatment based on their time served in the military. Thirty-two (52%) respondents neither agreed nor disagreed when asked if they trust military members to do the right thing. The responses were close between those that agreed and strongly agreed ( $n=16$ , 26%) and those that disagreed and strongly disagreed ( $n=13$ , 31%). While most believe that veterans should be held to a higher standard, responses varied across the responses as to if veterans should receive special treatment based on military experience with just slightly more respondents agreeing that they should receive special treatment. Over half of the respondents

were neutral in trusting military members to do the right thing with the remaining respondents almost equally split on either side.

Table 11

<i>Attitudes Towards Veterans</i>					
	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
	<i>n</i> (%)	<i>n</i> (%)	<i>n</i> (%)	<i>n</i> (%)	<i>n</i> (%)
Veterans should be held to a higher standard.	2 (3%)	13 (21%)	19 (31%)	22 (36%)	5 (8%)
Veterans should be given special treatment based on their time served.	7 (11%)	18 (30%)	16 (26%)	13 (21%)	7 (11%)
I trust military members to do the right thing.	0 (0%)	16 (26%)	32 (52%)	10 (16%)	3 (5%)

### **Attitudes towards Veterans that Commit Crimes**

Most that responded to this section answered that they disagree ( $n=41$ , 67%) or strongly disagree ( $n=16$ , 26%) that veterans that commit crimes should be treated more harshly ( $n=57$ , 93% in total). Fewer respondents answered that they strongly agree ( $n=0$ , 0%) or agree ( $n=5$ , 8%) that veterans should be given special treatment (8%) and similarly answered that they strongly agree ( $n=0$ , 0%) or agree ( $n=8$ , 13%) that veteran should be given a break when they commit crimes (13%). Many were neutral in their answers to both of the questions regarding veterans getting a break and special treatment (43% and 38%, respectively). Eighty-four percent ( $n=50$ ) disagreed or strongly disagreed with giving special treatment to only veterans that had gone to war and committed crimes. One respondent identified that they agree that veterans that commit crimes should be treated more harshly and two either strongly agreed or agreed that veterans should lose their VA benefits if they commit a crime. Fifty-five respondents (92%) of

respondents disagreed ( $n=27$ , 45%) or strongly disagreed ( $n=28$ , 47%) that veterans should lose their VA benefits if they committed a crime. Most respondents did not believe that veterans deserve harsher treatment for committing crimes and very few believed that veterans should lose their benefits if they commit a crime. While in the previous section 41% of respondents leaned towards giving special treatment towards veterans based on their time served, in this section of questions only 13% believed veterans should be given a break when they commit crimes and 28% stated that they believed that veterans should be given special treatment when they commit crimes.

When asked why the respondents believed that veterans should have a special court 56 (92%) responded that veterans have unique experiences that require special attention in courts. Thirty-three (54%) responded that veterans deserved it because they served our country. One respondent did not believe that veterans should have a special court. One of the respondents that selected “other” suggested that veterans have a greater potential for rehabilitation. Two respondents identified that veterans have different resources such as the VA and other treatment resources not available to the general public. One respondent stated that the VTC provides a structure much like the military that military members often seek. Another respondent identified the camaraderie that exists in the VTC between veterans. It is clear by the responses that respondents believe that veterans have unique experiences, which would benefit from a specialized court system. Despite their unique experiences very few respondents thought that working with justice involved veterans were more difficult to work with and over half believed that they deserved it due to their service.



Table 12

*Attitudes towards Veterans that Commit Crimes*

	Strongly Agree <i>n</i> (%)	Agree <i>n</i> %	Neither agree nor disagree <i>n</i> %	Disagree <i>n</i> %	Strongly disagree <i>n</i> %
I believe that veterans who commit crimes deserve special treatment.	2 (3%)	15 (25%)	23 (38%)	13 (21%)	8 (13%)
I believe that veterans who commit crimes should be treated more harshly.	0 (0%)	1 (2%)	3 (5%)	41 (67%)	16 (26%)
I believe veterans should be punished more severely for crimes they commit.	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	3 (5%)	32 (52%)	26 (43%)
I believe veterans should be given a break when they commit crimes.	0 (0%)	8 (13%)	26 (43%)	19 (32%)	7 (12%)
I believe only veterans who have gone to war should deserve special treatment.	0 (0%)	5 (8%)	5 (8%)	37 (62%)	13 (22%)
Veterans that commit crimes should lose their VA benefits.	1 (2%)	1 (2%)	3 (5%)	27 (45%)	28 (47%)

Table 13

<i>Why Should Veterans Have a Special Court</i>	
	<i>n (%)</i>
Veterans deserve it because they served our country.	33 (54%)
Veterans are disproportionately represented in the court system.	11 (18%)
I do not think Veterans should have a special court (VTC).	1 (2%)
Veterans have unique experiences that require special attention in courts.	56 (92%)
Military members are more difficult to work with.	4 (7%)
Other:	11 (18%)

*Note: This table reflects the respondents' answers to the following question: Why do you think Veterans should have a special court (check all that apply)?*

### **Termination from VTC**

Termination was explored in three separate ways in this research. The first was through a Likert scale of three questions about attitudes toward termination. Later in the survey respondents were asked to select all reasons a person may be terminated from the VTC. Lastly, a quantitative question asked how much control the respondent felt they had in determining a veteran's termination from the program.

**Attitudes towards termination.** Seventy-six percent of the respondents strongly agreed ( $n=6$ , 10%) or agreed ( $n=40$ , 66%) that veterans who do not follow the rules should be given a second chance. While only twenty-five respondents (41%) stated that they disagreed ( $n=20$ , 33%) or strongly disagreed ( $n=5$ , 8%) that veterans who do not follow the rules should not be terminated. Most of the respondents disagreed ( $n=16$ , 26%) or strongly disagreed ( $n=40$ , 66%) that the VTC is a get out of jail free card for veterans that are enrolled. While the results for termination of veterans that do not follow the rules were only slightly higher among respondents that disagreed about immediate termination for not following the rules, a much larger percentage of respondents believed that veterans should be given a second chance if they do not follow the

rules. Most believed that veterans should be given a second chance and an even greater majority believed that VTC is not a get out a jail free card.

Table 14

*Attitudes towards Termination*

	Strongly Agree <i>n</i> (%)	Agree <i>n</i> (%)	Neither agree nor disagree <i>n</i> (%)	Disagree <i>n</i> (%)	Strongly disagree <i>n</i> (%)
Veterans who do not follow the rules should be terminated.	4 (7%)	13 (21%)	19 (31%)	20 (33%)	5 (8%)
Veterans who do not follow the rules should be given a second chance.	6 (10%)	40 (66%)	9 (15%)	5 (8%)	1 (2%)
VTC is a get out of jail free card.	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	5 (8%)	16 (26%)	40 (66%)

**Reasons for termination.** There are many reasons that veterans are terminated from the VTC program. Forty-eight respondents (80%) reported that one reason for termination from their program is that the military veteran does not remain law abiding, and 43 stated (72%) similarly that receiving additional charges was a reason for termination. The VTC is not a mandatory program, which is reflected in the 52 respondents (87%) that identified that veterans chose to withdraw from the program. Thirty respondents (50%) identified that chemical use is a reason for termination. Of the respondents that marked “other” two reported that when veterans move they are terminated from the program, two reported that veterans are terminated for unwillingness to “work the program” or “no intention of making meaningful change”. One respondent stated that termination is determined on a “case by case basis”. Another respondent stated that it is often a culmination of multiple factors/violations that leads to termination.

Another response indicated that successful program completion was a reason for termination from the program. Attitude and potential for success appeared as a theme in a couple of responses. One respondent also mentioned that they did not have any terminations due to death or suicide. All of the options were selected by at least 50% of the respondents indicating that there are many reasons by which military members are terminated from the VTC not just one particular reason. According to most of the literature on VTC, most require sobriety as a main component of the program (Town, 2015), however only half of the respondents identified chemical use as a reason for termination.

Table 15

<i>Reasons for Termination</i>	
	<i>n (%)</i>
Chemical Use	30 (50%)
Additional Charges	43 (72%)
Missing Court	35 (58%)
Noncompliance with Probation/Parole	46 (77%)
Did not remain law abiding	48 (80%)
Choose to withdraw	52 (87%)
Death/Suicide	40 (67%)
Other:	10 (17%)

*Note: This table reflects the respondents' answers to the following question: Reason(s) for termination in VTC services (Check all that apply):*

**Control in termination.** Forty-eight respondents provided responses to the question asking how much control they have in determining a person's termination from VTC. There were four significant themes in the responses. The most common ( $n=17$ ) theme was that termination was a team decision. Some broke this down further stating that they had one vote and the decision was based on the votes of the team. Others stated that it was a team decision but certain members of the team had greater weight in the voting. It was most commonly mentioned ( $n=4$ ) that the judge had the final decision despite the amount of perceived influence the

respondent had. The second most common theme ( $n=10$ ) was that the respondents felt that they did not have any say in the termination decision of the veterans in VTC. The third most common theme ( $n=7$ ) was that they felt they had minimal control in the termination decision of the veterans in their VTC. Six respondents identified that they had moderate or fair amount of control. Four indicated that they had significant control in the decision to terminate a person in VTC. Two respondents responded with “25%” and two explained their role on the team but didn’t indicate how much control they have in determining a person’s termination. While there were varying degrees of perceived control in the termination of veterans most of the respondents felt that they had some control, even if it was minimal, in the termination of veterans from the VTC.

### **Discussion**

This research aimed to examine the attitudes of professionals working with veterans that have committed crimes. Questions were asked exploring the professionals’ perspectives on their level of influence for entry and termination and overall attitudes regarding crime, veterans, veterans that commit crimes and punishment. These questions were important to explore the varying degrees in which providers felt they influence entry and termination and how their attitudes may impact the work that they do with justice involved veterans. The results of this study showed that there are varying perspectives and attitudes towards veterans, crime and veterans that commit crimes among service providers in the VTC system. Nearly all of the respondents recognized that veterans have unique experiences, which may require a specialized court. Also, most believed that veterans should be given a second chance if they don’t follow the rules in the VTC. A majority of the respondents believed that people commit crimes because of external factors. Very few seemed to believe that crime is caused by internal factors such as

lacking a strong moral fiber, being deep down evil or being a bad person. Surprisingly, however, there were a small percentage of respondents that believed it was internal factors that caused people to commit crimes.

The outlier responses in this research are interesting in that despite a general consensus of service providers there are pockets of influence that think differently, often times more negatively, than the general population of professionals working with this demographic that responded to the survey. Perhaps this small subset of respondents believe that veterans should be better behaved than the general public and therefore should receive a harsher punishment when they commit a crime. It is unclear from the research where these beliefs come from, however, previous research shows that those who believe crimes are committed as a choice by the individual without external influences or circumstances often favor more punitive punishment (Maruna & King, 2009).

The information found through this research and the opinions of the respondents supports the need for a specialized court addressing the unique needs of veterans and that the VTC is not a “get out of jail free” card and therefore takes great effort from service providers and veterans to succeed. It also supported the need for second chances prior to termination, maintaining VA benefits despite criminal record, flexibility in admission and termination and the prevalence of a team approach to decisions regarding the veterans in the VTC.

As suggested in the Street Level Bureaucracy theory (Lipsky, 2010), the beliefs and perspectives of direct service providers have a direct impact on how veterans in the VTC are treated and therefore the professionals’ beliefs about criminals and veterans will have an impact on how they treat the military veterans. It was repeatedly stated that decisions in eligibility and termination are made using a team approach but that often times, judges have increased power in

those decisions. The Street Level Bureaucracy Theory may not, however, be as relevant to the workers in the VTC because the decision making process appears to be somewhat transparent within the group and most decisions are not made without group input and discussion.

Regardless, each professional working with the VTC teams has a unique role in the service delivery and the climate of the VTC. Therefore, the findings that are the most concerning in this research are the beliefs that people who commit crimes are permanently damaged, will always be a criminal or that criminals are bad people. While it is a small minority that responded in this way, it remains a concern as each of these service providers likely have some level of influence on their team, are currently working with veterans that have committed crimes and have the potential to make decisions that have direct impacts on veterans, that veterans' family and society. Also, according to Maruna and King (2009) and Ortet-Fabregat and Perez (1992), those that believe criminal acts are a result of internal factors and individual behavior are more likely to favor punitive punishment and those that believe that crimes are committed due to external factors tend towards rehabilitation. Therefore understanding how a service provider views the causes of criminal activity could have an impact on how that service provider views the punishment they receive for committing the crime, their effort in advocating for a second chance and how they influence any of the team decisions with regards to the veterans' outcomes in the VTC.

The attitudes towards crime can be broken down by beliefs that it is society that pushes a person into criminal activity or an individual decision that results in criminal activity. Very few believed that people that commit crimes are evil and only a two felt that committing crime meant the person was a bad person. Most respondents believed that external factors lead a people to crime and that while some have just made a bad decision it does not make them a bad or evil

person. According to Ortet-Fabregat & Perez (1992) professionals who believe external and societal factors lead a person to commit crimes are more likely to support policies and practice that emphasize rehabilitation instead of punitive punishment. This research did not directly explore the type of punishment the respondents would recommend for veterans that commit crimes, however many of the respondents made comments that indicated they believed in second chances and indicated that termination is often avoided for reasons such as lapses in sobriety.

The attitudes towards punishment section focused mostly on justice. Considering the respondents all work or have some connection to the criminal justice system through the VTC it was surprising to see that very few believed that the world is a just place. Similarly, over half of the respondents were not confident that justice would prevail over in justice. This could be reflection of the current societal climate surrounding the criminal justice system or because some believed they do not have a say in the eligibility and/or termination of people in the VTC. It is unclear if similar attitudes towards justice are found in other specialty courts or among other similar career fields such as police officers. According to a national survey of registered voters on behalf of the National Center for State Courts, the public perception of state courts integrity is high however, they found that this view could shift quickly based on what is happening in the media such as high profile cases (National Center for State Courts, 2014).

### **Implications for Social Work Practice**

Social workers have a responsibility to treat every person with dignity and respect regardless of the person's situation. It is possible that the attitudes and beliefs that social workers, service providers or any professional has may have an impact on the way services are provided. The respondents from this study seem to be understanding of the unique needs of veterans and recognize the need and benefit of VTCs when working with justice involved



veterans. Recognizing and examining the beliefs and attitudes of service providers in the VTC may help ensure that when attitudes and beliefs turn negative proper action can be taken to ensure services are still administered with dignity and respect.

### **Implications for Policy and Research**

While this study aimed to explore the attitudes of professionals working with military veterans in the criminal justice system, it also identified areas in which respondents believed there could be changes to rules in the VTC. By examining these suggested changes it appears some of the service providers see a need for allowing second chances and changes to entry and termination criteria. For example, respondents suggested that additional services such as more home visits and rewards such as gas cards and movie tickets would be beneficial to the outcomes of veterans. Multiple respondents identified a need to streamline the admission process and get veterans in the VTC system quicker. In addition, shortening the length of VTC was mentioned. On the other hand, there was disagreement on whether there should be more strict requirements to get into the VTC or if any person that has served any amount of time should be admitted. A few respondents also suggested additional decision power be placed on the Veteran Justice Outreach worker and less on the District Attorney and/or Probation.

Additional research and further exploration of the attitudes of professionals could have a direct effect on future policy and program development. The proposed changes suggested in this study could also have implications to policy and practice and therefore the larger federal policies that contribute to the VA's influence in the VTC could greatly benefit. The more aware social workers and policy makers are of the limitations of the programs in which veterans receive support and service, the more able we will be to determine the need for changes in policy. Also recognizing negative attitudes may give an indication that certain policies and practices are

making the work of professionals in the VTC difficult or challenging and implementing new policies could result in improved outcomes.

Several respondents in this research indicate that there is a need for ongoing criminal justice support for military veterans due to their unique needs and experiences. Some respondents identified a need to add additional support services, which would require additional funding. Also, because many respondents identified military veterans have unique needs it is the researchers belief that specialized training for all professionals associated with VTCs should be developed.

Veteran Treatment Courts are relatively new to the specialized court system with the first court established in 2008 (Huskey, 2015). Because they are new there is very little research and programmatic review available on the VTC. Additional research is needed to more deeply understand how the attitudes of professionals working with VTCs impact the services and outcomes of the military veterans. Future research is also needed focused on the perspective of the military member and their beliefs and ideas for program improvement.

### **Strengths and Limitations of the Study**

The strengths of the study was the ability to send the survey to all of the 220 register VTCs in the country and all Veteran Justice Outreach Workers listed on the Veteran Affairs website totally 325 surveys distributed. The survey was quick and easy to complete- taking only approximately ten minutes to complete. Qualtrics had an easy to use interface, which should have been accessible to all that took the survey. The topic of asking about service providers' perspectives about the veterans they serve is a new area of research and resulted in direct emails to the researcher seeking follow up with findings.

Limitations included the limited scope of the project. The survey design limited the ability to ask follow-up questions about attitudes. A majority of the respondents were Veteran Justice Outreach Workers and therefore the perspective and attitudes of other professionals working with veterans in the VTC is lacking. The VTC contacts from the Justice for Veterans website returned numerous emails stating that they in fact do not work with a VTC but instead another specialty court.

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### Appendix A. Survey Questions

1. What is your role in the VTC?
  - a. Veteran Justice Outreach Worker
    - i. Are you a \_\_\_\_\_
      1. Social Worker
      2. Psychologist
      3. Other: \_\_\_\_\_
  - b. Probation/Parole Officer
  - c. Judge
  - d. Public Defender
  - e. Prosecutor
  - f. Private attorney
  - g. Mentor
  - h. Court Coordinator
  - i. Other \_\_\_\_\_
2. Have you served in the Armed Forces?
  - a. Yes
    - i. Branch
      1. Air Force
        - a. Active
        - b. Guard
        - c. Reserve
      2. Army
        - a. Active
        - b. Guard
        - c. Reserve
      3. Marines
        - a. Active
        - b. Reserve
      4. Navy
        - a. Active
        - b. Reserve
      5. Coast Guard
        - a. Active
        - b. Reserve
    - b. No
  3. In what region is your VTC?
    - a. Northeast (CT, DE, ME, MD, MA, NH, NJ, NY, PA, RI, VT)
    - b. Southeast (AL, AR, FL, GA, KY, LA, MS, NC, SC, TN, VA, WV)
    - c. Southwest (AZ, NM, OK, TX)
    - d. Midwest (IL, IN, IA, KS, MI, MN, MO, NE, ND, OH, SD, WI)
    - e. West (AK, CA, CO, HI, ID, MT, NV, OR, UT, WA, WY)
  4. What level of offense does your VTC serve?
    - a. Misdemeanor



- b. Felony
  - c. Both Misdemeanor and felony
5. The following are required for Admission: Check all that apply:
- a. Has a mental health diagnosis
  - b. Has a **military-related** mental health condition
  - c. Is a veteran (as defined by the US Department of Veteran Affairs)
  - d. Must be eligible for care at the VA Medical Center
  - e. Served in the Armed Forces
  - f. Combat veteran
  - g. Served in OEF/OIF/OND
  - h. Honorable or General discharge
  - i. Discharged as anything other than Honorable or General
  - j. Current or former Active Duty
  - k. Reserve/Guard
  - l. Veteran Family member
  - m. Other \_\_\_\_\_

#### Likert Scale Questions

Strongly Agree (1), Agree (2), Neither agree or disagree (3), disagree (4), strongly disagree (5)

#### Attitudes towards crime

- 6. People are pushed into crime because of external factors such as poverty
- 7. People who commit crimes are permanently damaged
- 8. People who commit crimes have just made a bad choice
- 9. Once a criminal always a criminal.
- 10. People commit crimes because they lack strong moral fiber.
- 11. People break the law because deep down they're evil.
- 12. Just because someone commits a crime it doesn't mean they are a bad person.

#### Attitudes towards punishment

- 13. Serious crimes deserve serious punishment, no matter who commits them
- 14. I think the world is a just place
- 15. I believe that people get what they deserve
- 16. I am not confident that justice always prevails over injustice

#### Attitudes towards Veterans

- 17. Veterans should be held to a higher standard
- 18. Veterans should be given special treatment based on their time served
- 19. I trust military members to do the right thing

#### Attitudes towards veterans that commit crimes

- 20. I believe that veterans who commit crimes deserve special treatment
- 21. I believe that veterans who commit crimes should be treated more harshly
- 22. We should punish veterans more severely for crimes they commit
- 23. We should give veterans a break when they commit crimes

24. I believe only veterans who have gone to war should deserve special treatment
25. Veterans that commit crimes should lose their VA benefits

Attitudes towards termination from VTC

26. Veterans who do not follow the rules should be terminated
27. Veterans who do not follow the rules should be given a second chance
28. VTC is a “get out of jail free card”
29. Reason(s) for termination of services (check all that apply):
  - a. Chemical Use
  - b. Additional Charges
  - c. Missing Court
  - d. Noncompliance with Probation/Parole
  - e. Did not remain law abiding
  - f. Choose to withdraw
  - g. Death/Suicide
  - h. Other \_\_\_\_\_

Please answer the following questions based on your role (i.e. Treatment provider, judge)

30. How much control do you have in determining a person’s entry into VTC? (open response question)
31. How much control do you have in termination? (open response question)
32. Are there any eligibility rules that are commonly overlooked? (open response question)
33. What is the most common termination rule that is overlooked (open response question)?
34. If you could change a rule in your VTC what rule would it be? (open response question)
35. Have you ever been a victim of crime?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
36. Why do you think that veterans should have a special court (check all that apply)
  - a. They deserve it because they served our country
  - b. Veterans are disproportionately represented in the court system
  - c. I do not think veterans should have a special court (VTC)
  - d. Veterans have unique experiences that require special attention in the courts
  - e. They are more difficult to work with
  - f. Other \_\_\_\_\_