

Combat Injury and Employment After Leaving the UK Armed Forces

Burdett H, Schofield S, Dyball DM, et al. (2025). Relationships between combat injury, pain, mobility and post-service employment: the ADVANCE study. *Occupational & Environmental Medicine*. <https://doi.org/10.1136/oemed-2025-110328>

What does this research look at?

During the war in Afghanistan, many UK Armed Forces personnel survived very serious injuries that would previously have been fatal. Some lost limbs, while others experienced severe injuries without amputation. We wanted to know whether these injuries affected people's ability to find and keep paid work after leaving the military. We were also interested in whether ongoing pain or difficulties with mobility (walking and moving around) might explain any differences in employment outcomes.

Who took part?

The study used data from the ADVANCE Study, a long-term research project following UK military personnel. We looked at:

- 406 former service members who had been seriously injured in Afghanistan, and
- 107 former service members who had not been seriously injured and served as a comparison group.

All participants had left the Armed Forces and were of working age.

Our findings:



Most participants were in paid employment after leaving the military regardless of injury

79%

Of the injured group were employed at the time of their study visit

86%

Of the uninjured group were employed at the time of their study visit

Although unemployment was somewhat more common among injured veterans, the difference was not large enough for us to conclude that injury alone was responsible.

We expected that people with amputations would have the greatest difficulties finding work. Surprisingly, this was not clearly the case. While those with limb loss showed a trend towards higher unemployment, the evidence was not strong enough to confirm a clear difference from the uninjured group.

Why are pain and mobility important?

The study found an interesting pattern among people who had been seriously injured without losing a limb. In this group, employment outcomes appeared to be influenced by:

- Ongoing pain
- Problems with mobility, such as difficulty walking or moving around.

In other words, it was not simply the fact that someone had been injured that mattered. Rather, the long-term consequences of the injury, especially pain and reduced mobility, seemed to make employment more difficult. For those with limb loss, pain and mobility problems did not explain employment outcomes in the same way. We believe that this may be because people with limb loss often receive intensive rehabilitation, advanced prosthetic support, and specialised help with returning to civilian life and work. Other factors, such as employer attitudes or the availability of suitable jobs, may be more important for this group.

What Does this mean?

Overall, the study shows that serious combat injury does not necessarily prevent people from finding work after leaving the military. Many injured veterans are successfully employed in civilian life. However, for veterans with serious injuries that do not involve limb loss, ongoing pain and mobility difficulties may create barriers to employment.

Why does it matter?

These findings suggest that support services should not focus only on veterans with limb loss. People with other serious injuries may also need help managing pain, improving mobility, and accessing employment support. Addressing these challenges could improve their opportunities to work and participate fully in civilian life.

What is the ADVANCE Study?

The ADVANCE study examines the long-term physical and psycho-social impact of combat injuries on male British military personnel. A collaboration between the Ministry of Defence, Imperial College London, and King's College London, it follows 1,145 participants who served in the Afghanistan conflict (2002–2014) with half sustaining serious battlefield injuries, while the other half, a demographically similar comparison group, were deployed but not injured. Participants will be followed for the rest of their lives, with regular check-ins to track health and well-being.

Many thanks to the ADVANCE cohort for taking part and to all ADVANCE funders for their generous support.