



## Screening questions to identify Canadian Veterans

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### ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** In Canada, there are an estimated 700,000 Veterans of the Canadian military. Veterans are disproportionately prevalent in sub-populations of males, persons with chronic physical conditions, chronic pain, mental health conditions, and those with disabling activity limitations. Veterans are a population of interest to Canadian researchers, but there is no publicly available comprehensive list of Veterans in Canada. This creates a need for a standard set of screening questions suitable for self-report surveys. This article proposes a series of screening questions to identify Canadian Veterans. **Methods:** The content of the questions were developed considering self-identity, past Canadian surveys, legislation, and relevant characteristics of Canadian military service. **Results:** The recommended Canadian Veteran identifier questions are: “Have you ever had any Canadian military service? Was this service with the Regular Force? Reserve Force? Navy? Army? Air Force? Are you currently in the Canadian Armed Forces? What year were you released from the Canadian Armed Forces? What year did you join the Canadian Armed Forces?” **Discussion:** The consistent use of these screening questions allows for comparisons with other studies and will contribute to a better understanding of Veterans in Canada and of the transition from military to civilian life.

**Key words:** self-report questionnaire, Veterans, Veteran definition, Veterans health, Veteran status

### RÉSUMÉ

**Introduction :** Au Canada, nous estimons qu'il y a près de 700 000 vétéran(e)s des Forces armées canadiennes. Les vétéran(e)s sont caractérisé(e)s par leur majorité de sexe masculin, et contient un nombre disproportionné aussi de personnes avec des conditions physiques chroniques, des douleurs chroniques, des conditions de santé mentale et ayant des limites invalidantes pour certaines activités. La population vétéran(e) est une population qui intéresse les chercheur(e)s canadien(ne)s, mais il n'existe pas de liste disponible au grand public des vétéran(e)s au Canada. Ceci a créé un besoin pour l'adoption d'une série de questions de contrôle normalisées pour un questionnaire d'autoévaluation. Cet ouvrage propose une série de questions de contrôle pour identifier les vétéran(e)s canadien(ne)s. **Méthodologie :** Le contenu des questions a été développé en considérant l'actualisation de soi, les sondages canadiens déjà établis, la législation, et les caractéristiques pertinentes du service militaire canadien. **Résultats :** Les questions recommandées comme questions identificatrices des vétéran(e)s canadien(ne)s sont : Avez-vous déjà servi dans les forces militaires au Canada? Avez-vous servi dans le force régulière? La réserve? La marine? L'armée de terre? La force aérienne? Êtes-vous actuellement membre des Forces armées canadiennes? En quelle année avez-vous été libéré des Forces armées canadiennes? En quelle année avez-vous joint des Forces armées canadiennes? **Conclusion :** L'utilisation régulière de cette série de questions de contrôles facilitera la comparaison avec d'autres études et contribuera à de meilleures connaissances des vétéran(e)s canadien(ne)s ainsi que de leur transition de la vie militaire à la vie civile.

**Mots clés :** questionnaire d'autoévaluation, vétéran, vétéran(e), santé des vétérans

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## INTRODUCTION

In Canada, there are an estimated 700,000 Veterans of the Canadian military living among the general population.<sup>1</sup> While in the military, they accept being lawfully ordered into harm's way in the defence of Canada. Fundamental expectations include discipline, teamwork, and physical fitness.<sup>2</sup> Veterans represent about 3% of the adult Canadian population,<sup>3</sup> but they are over-represented in some sub-populations such as males, persons with chronic physical conditions, chronic pain, mental health conditions, and those with disabling health-related activity limitations.<sup>4,5</sup> Veteran identity can be determined using military administrative data, demonstrated by the Life After Service program of population health research.<sup>6</sup> However, there is no publicly available comprehensive list of Veterans to provide the basis for a sampling frame. Veterans are a population of interest to many researchers across the country, but there is no standard set of self-reporting survey questions to identify them. This creates a need for a standard set of screening questions suitable for self-report surveys. The objective of this article is to propose a recommended series of screening questions to identify Canadian Veterans. The background considered in their development includes self-identity, past Canadian surveys, legislation, and relevant characteristics of Canadian military service.

## VETERAN SELF-IDENTITY

Former military personnel vary in their willingness to self-identify as Veterans, which introduces selection bias to the direct question of "Are you a Veteran?" The likelihood of Canadian Veterans self-identifying improves with increasing hazards and length of service,<sup>7</sup> demonstrating dimensions of military status and experience.<sup>8,9</sup> Veteran identity is also influenced by societal context,<sup>9</sup> with high levels of acknowledgement by Canadians for service in the Second World War<sup>7</sup> and renewed interest following the protracted conflict in Afghanistan. Official government recognition for the purpose of commemoration imposes other conditions that are defined in policy for "all former members of the Canadian Forces who completed Basic Military Training while in service, and received an honourable discharge upon release."<sup>10</sup> Variations in many dimensions of self-identity, therefore, make it necessary to avoid the use of this direct question.

## QUESTIONS USED IN PAST CANADIAN SURVEYS

The first major Canadian survey to use self-reporting to identify Veterans was the 1951 Census question "Did you have any wartime service in the active military forces of Canada or allied countries?" This wording reflected the legislation that was current at the time, describing active service in the Second World War with honourable termination.<sup>11</sup> The question was subsequently used on the 1961 Census, the 1971 Census, the 1988 Labour Force Survey, and the 1991 General Social Survey.<sup>12</sup> The reliability of this question was demonstrated by similar estimates of Veteran populations with wartime service, using different surveys.<sup>12</sup>

The 2003 Canadian Community Health Survey used the 1951 Census question, with additional questions: "Not counting current service, have you ever had any peacetime service in the military forces of Canada? Was this service in the Regular Forces? primary Reserves? a special duty area?" This wording reflected service locations specified in the 2001 government recognition policy.<sup>13</sup> Analysis of the 2003 survey identified problematic terminology – "special duty area" was under-reported, "allies" applied to the First and Second World War, and the differentiation of "wartime" and "peacetime" did not reflect conflict hazards experienced since 1990.<sup>3</sup>

## CANADIAN LEGISLATION

The most current legislated definition of a Veteran is "a former officer or non-commissioned member of the Canadian Forces (Regular or Reserve)."<sup>14</sup> This definition of Veteran includes all individuals with any amount of service after enrolment and at any point in their lifetime as verified by military records, but are no longer an active member. This definition is the basis for the recommended screening questions to identify Canadian Veterans.

## RECOMMENDED CANADIAN VETERAN IDENTIFIER QUESTIONS

After considering the factors influencing self-identification, experience with past survey questions, and legislation, the authors have recommended a series of five questions (Table 1). First, according to the legal definition, they must have a history of military service in the

**Table 1.** Canadian Veteran Identifier Questions

1. Have you ever had any Canadian military service?	Y/N (N = skip to end)
2. Was this service with the Regular Force? Reserve Force? Navy? Army? Air Force?	Y/N for each; not mutually exclusive categories
3. Are you currently active in the CAF?	Y/N (Y = skip question 4)
4. What year did you release from the CAF?	4 digit year
5. What year did you join the CAF?	4 digit year

Canadian Armed Forces (returned to its original name in March 2013) that is of any length. Some researchers may prefer to use two questions: “Have you ever had any military service? Was this for the Canadian Armed Forces? the military of another country?”

Second, the Regular and Reserve Force components differ in many respects. The Regular Force is a full-time career, where they are on call 24 hours a day, seven days a week without overtime pay, and accept unlimited liability for deployment that is not voluntary. The Primary Reserve Force is usually a part-time commitment, and deployment is voluntary.<sup>2</sup> Over a lifetime, many serve in both forces for a period. Within both the Regular and Reserve Force components, there are the three environments (land, sea, and air) that have distinctive military cultures, traditions, and exposures.<sup>2</sup> The proper titles for the corresponding three organizations are the Canadian Army, Royal Canadian Navy, and Royal Canadian Air Force – the recommended questions use their short titles. These basic characteristics of Canadian military service can be used to substantiate service by comparing their distribution with available administrative data,<sup>15</sup> not just their desire to belong to military culture.<sup>9</sup>

Third, those who are still in service do not meet the legal definition of “former” members. They are still immersed in the military culture and are not yet considered to be civilians. Fourth, former members are “released” from their service contract with the military, and they do not use civilian language of leaving employment. Their date of release can be used to calculate the time elapsed since military service. Post-service exposure to civilian life may be a source of mitigation of the impact of military service over an individual’s lifetime. This also provides a proxy for the era of military service during the Second World War and the Korean War, through the peacekeeping era, or during more recent conflicts such as Afghanistan.

Fifth, the date of enrolment can be used in conjunction with the date of release to determine the length

of military service. Service begins from the date of enrolment, and the length of service can be used as proxy for military exposure. Length of service is not identical for all Veterans. Less than half (48%) of the former members of the Regular Force had 20 or more years of service, 12% had 10–19 years, 20% had between two and nine years, and 21% had less than two years of service.<sup>15</sup>

## DISCUSSION

This article provides the background for a recommended series of questions for identifying Canadian Veterans. The construction of these questions uses content from the current legislated definition of a Veteran and the basic characteristics of Canadian military service. The language may not be familiar to the general public, but the terminology is understood by those with military service, and the skip pattern minimizes the response required by the civilian public. This was demonstrated by the full item response in pilot testing – no respondents (military or civilian) found the items unclear or confusing.<sup>16</sup>

The recommended screening questions have been used in a longitudinal survey of an aging population.<sup>16</sup> They have also been added to administrative data for the federal incarcerated population<sup>17</sup> and used in ongoing surveys of homeless populations.<sup>18</sup> Other researchers studying populations with disabilities and chronic diseases have also contacted Veterans Affairs Canada for expertise in identifying Canadian Veterans. The screening questions can also be useful for similar self-reporting applications such as sentinel reporting systems, case registries, and electronic health records. The use of standardized questions allows comparison across studies and facilitates the interpretation of study findings.

Screening questions have several limitations. They are not a substitute for authentication of military service using official military service files, as was achieved by the Life After Service Studies.<sup>4,15</sup> The questions do not confirm eligibility for Veterans Affairs Canada benefits

since Veterans must meet complex criteria described by the 14 acts and their regulations.<sup>19</sup> Screening cannot fully capture many important aspects of a person's military experience that require more detail than can be captured in a short series of questions. Examples of this include rank (38 titles),<sup>20</sup> military occupation (over 100 codes),<sup>20</sup> and the history of deployments (location, dates, and frequency).<sup>21</sup> Depending on the research objectives, some characteristics of military service may be captured with additional questions.

Population health research of Veterans contributes to our understanding of the transition from military to civilian life.<sup>6,22</sup> We encourage researchers to consider the identification of Veterans in their work. By including the recommended screening questions, researchers can consistently define this important Canadian sub-population, allowing comparisons with other studies. Consistent use of these Veteran identifier questions will contribute to a better understanding of the transition from military to civilian life and throughout the course of their life after service.

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## COMPETING INTERESTS

None declared.

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