Career Outlook

BLS

A closer look at veterans in the labor force

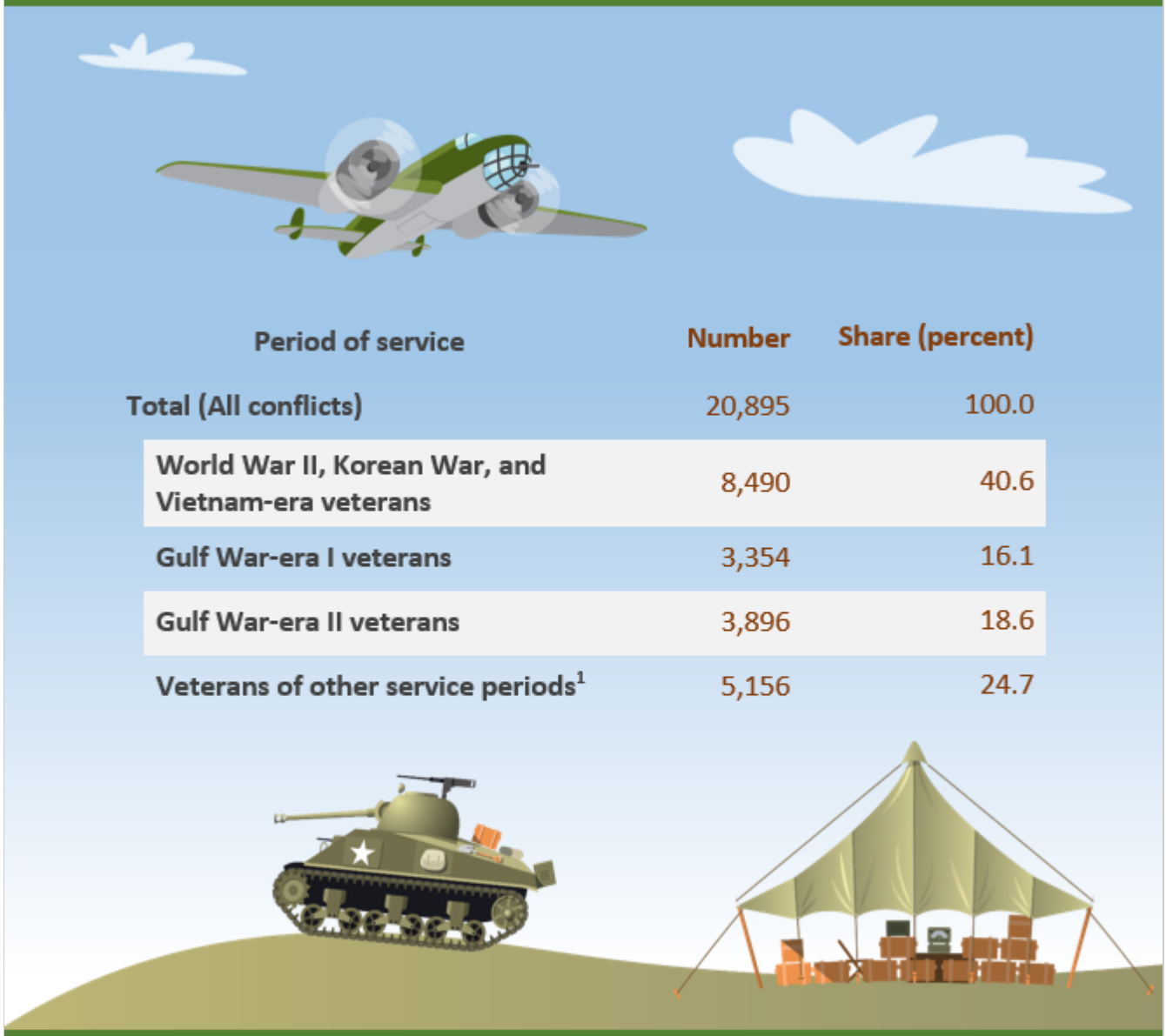
Emily Rolen | November 2017

On Veterans Day, we honor the men and women who have served our country. And our nation has quite a few veterans to thank: about 21 million! Nearly 4 million of those veterans have served since September 2001.

Data from the Current Population Survey (CPS) show that veterans ages 18 and over who previously served on active duty made up 8.5 percent of the civilian noninstitutional population in 2016. Two out of 5 veterans served during the World War II (December 1941 to December 1946), Korean War (July 1950 to January 1955), and Vietnam-era (August 1964 to April 1975) conflicts; about 1 in 6 served during the Gulf War-era I period (August 1990 to August 2001); nearly 1 in 5 served during the Gulf War-era II period (September 2001 to present); and 1 in 4 served during other service periods (all other time periods). (See table 1.)

CPS data provide details about veterans' demographics, educational attainment, and employment status.

Table 1. Civilian noninstitutional population, by veteran status and period of service, annual average, 2016 (numbers in thousands)



Period of service	Number	Share (percent)
Total (All conflicts)	20,895	100.0
World War II, Korean War, and Vietnam-era veterans	8,490	40.6
Gulf War-era I veterans	3,354	16.1
Gulf War-era II veterans	3,896	18.6
Veterans of other service periods[1]	5,156	24.7

[1] Veterans who served on active duty during dates between war periods, mainly between the Korean War and the Vietnam era and between the Vietnam era and Gulf War era I.

Note: Veterans who served in more than one wartime period are classified into only the most recent one. Veterans who served during one of the selected wartime periods and another period are classified into only the wartime period.

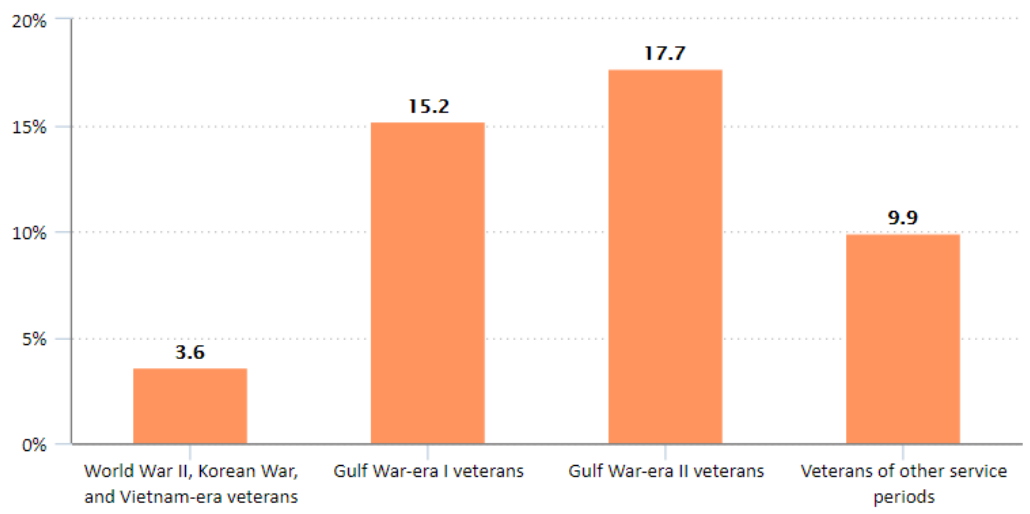
Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey.

Demographics

Combined, World War II, Korean War, and Vietnam-era veterans make up the largest and oldest of the veteran groups, according to 2016 CPS data. The group is also the least diverse in terms of gender, race, and ethnicity. Nearly 9 out of 10 veterans who served during these wars are White. The World War II, Korean War, and Vietnam-era group also has the smallest proportion of women veterans for any service period: 3.6 percent.

However, the veteran population is becoming more diverse in terms of gender, race, and ethnicity. For starters, women's share of the veteran population has grown. As chart 1 shows, nearly 18 percent of veterans who have served since September 2001 are women.

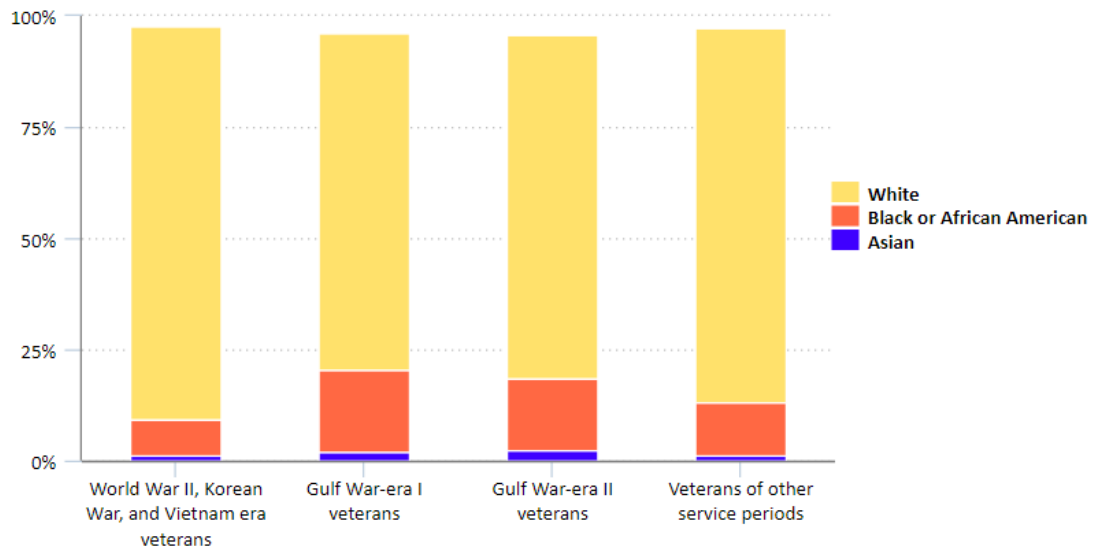
Chart 1. Share of veterans who are women, by period of service, 2016 annual average (percent)



Hover over chart to view data.
Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey.

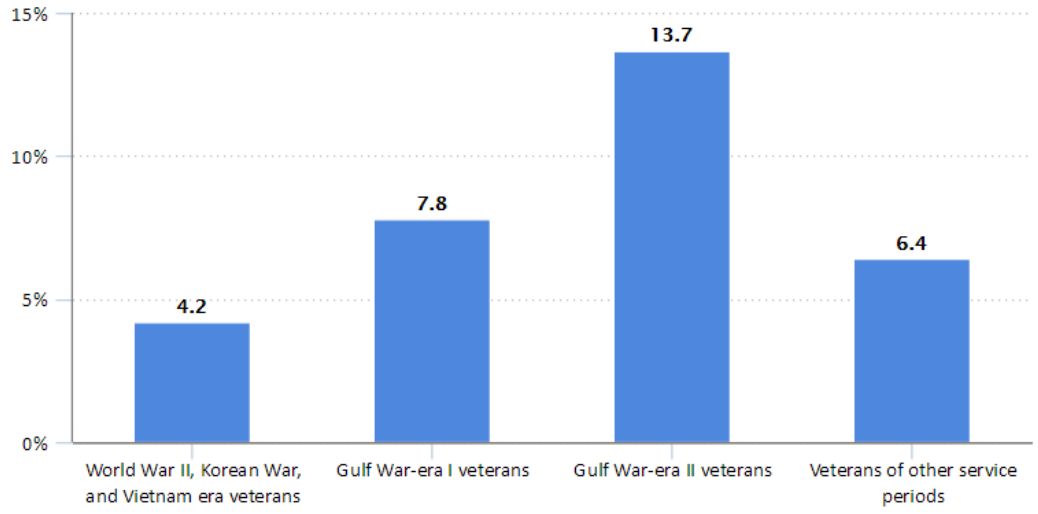
Also, the Gulf War-era I and Gulf War-era II veteran populations are more racially and ethnically diverse than the combined World War II, Korean War, and Vietnam-era veteran population. For example, nearly 1 out of 6 Gulf War-era II veterans—the youngest and most recent group to serve—is Black or African American, and nearly 1 out of 7 is Hispanic or Latino. (See charts 2 and 3.)

Chart 2. Share of veterans, by race and period of service, annual average, 2016 (percent)



Hover over chart to view data.
Note: Data sum to less than 100 percent because not all races are shown.
Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey.

Chart 3. Share of veterans, by Hispanic or Latino ethnicity and period of service, annual average, 2016 (percent)



Hover over chart to view data.
Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey.

Educational attainment

Almost all veterans had at least a high school diploma in 2016, and nearly two-thirds had completed at least some postsecondary education. As table 2 shows, higher percentages of veterans than nonveterans had an associate's

degree or some college education. A slightly smaller share of veterans than nonveterans held bachelor's degrees. Veterans and nonveterans earned graduate degrees at a similar rate.

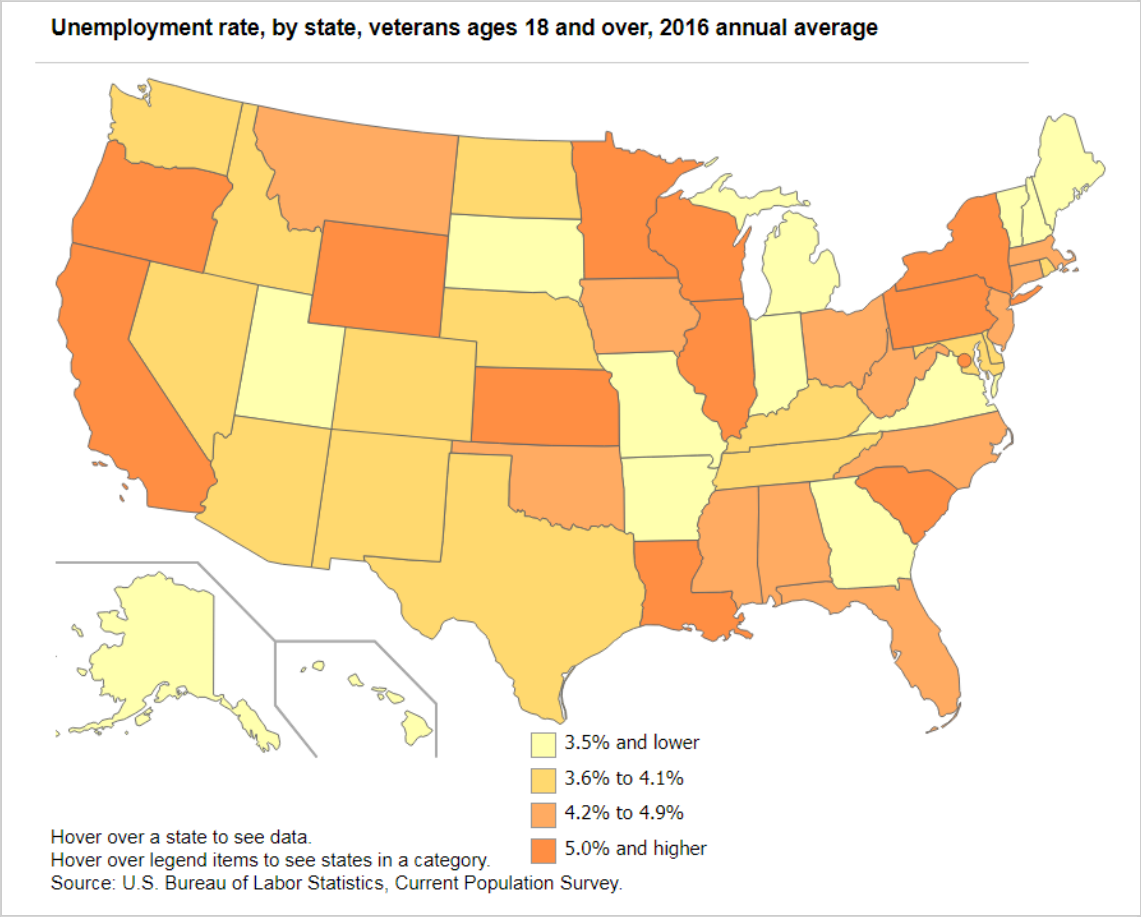
Table 2. Share of the civilian noninstitutional population, by veteran status and educational attainment, annual average, 2016 (percent)

	Veterans (percent)	Nonveterans (percent)
High school graduate, no college	29.4	29.1
Some college, no degree	22.8	18.6
Associate's degree	12.5	9.4
Bachelor's degree	18.6	19.9
Master's degree	8.9	8.3
Professional or doctoral degree	3.0	2.9

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey.

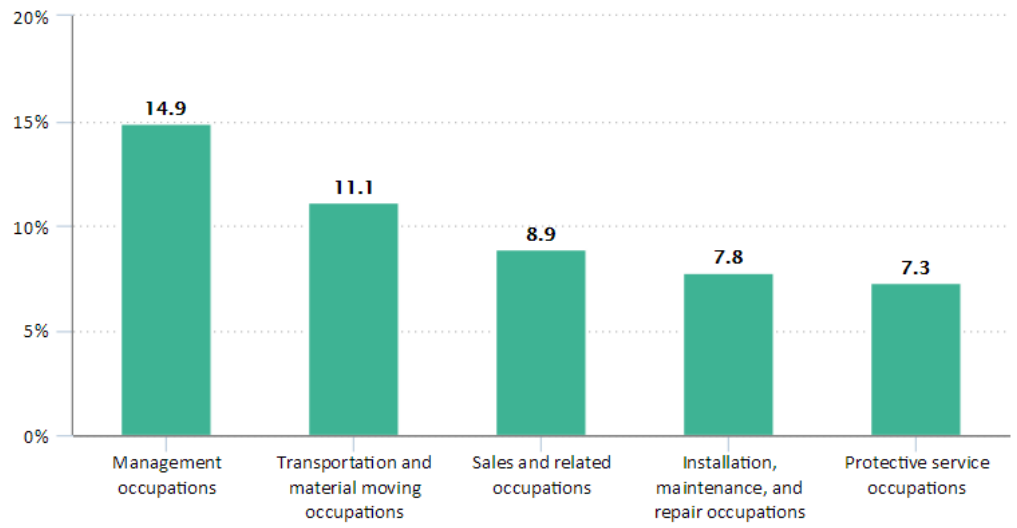
Unemployment and employment

In 2016, the overall unemployment rate for veterans (4.3 percent) was slightly lower than that for nonveterans (4.7 percent), and their unemployment rate varied across the country. (See map.) Those who live in Indiana had the lowest unemployment rate (1.8 percent) in 2016, and veterans living in the District of Columbia had the highest (7.6 percent).



Veterans are employed in a variety of career fields. Chart 4 shows that the most common occupations for male veterans were management, transportation, and sales occupations.

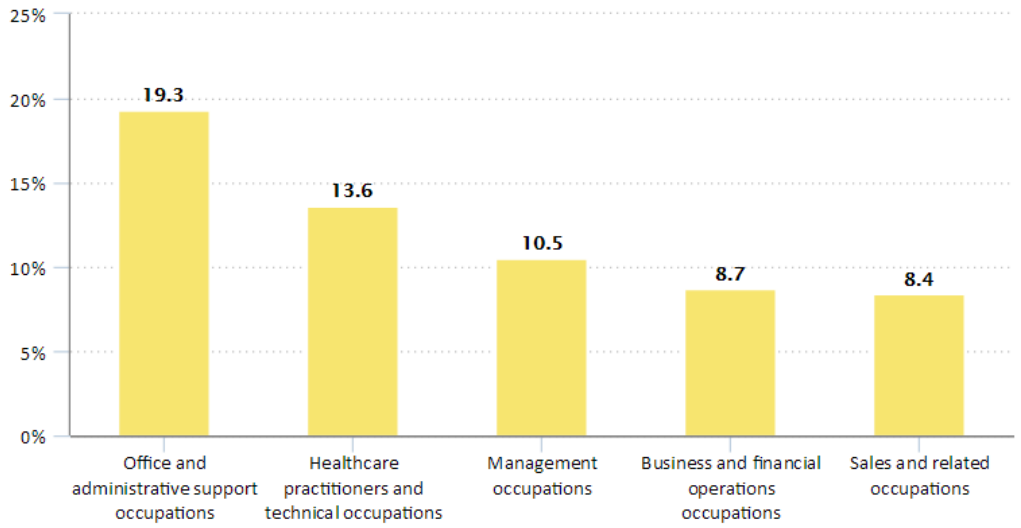
Chart 4. Share of veteran employment, by occupational group, men, 2016 annual average (percent)



Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey.

Chart 5 shows that female veterans were concentrated in office and administrative support, healthcare practitioner, and management occupations. Veterans are much more likely than nonveterans to work in the Federal government.

Chart 5. Share of veteran employment, by occupational group, women, 2016 annual average (percent)



Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey.

For more information

Find detailed data and information about hundreds of occupations in the Occupational Outlook Handbook. Related Career Outlook articles include the following:

- Projections of occupational employment, 2016–26
- You're a *what*? Peer support specialist
- Getting back to work: Returning to the labor force after an absence

The CPS is a monthly survey of about 60,000 households that provides data on employment and unemployment in the United States. Data about veterans, collected monthly, are the source of the 2016 annual averages presented in this article.

Veterans are men and women who served on active duty in the U.S. Armed Forces and were not on active duty at the time of the survey. Nonveterans never served on active duty in the U.S. Armed Forces.

For more information, see "Employment Situation of Veterans – 2016."

Emily Rolen is an economist in the Office of Occupational Statistics and Employment Projections, BLS. She can be reached at rolen.emily@bls.gov.

SUGGESTED CITATION:

Emily Rolen, "A closer look at veterans in the labor force," *Career Outlook,* U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, November 2017.

RELATED CONTENT

My Next Move for Veterans
Veteran and Military Transition Center
Veterans.gov
Veterans' Employment & Training Service
Women veterans

RELATED SUBJECTS

Diversity | Employment | Gender | Government | Infographics | Military | Unemployment