sociological science

Fathers' Military Service and Children's College Attainment

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Abstract: Men's early adult experiences shape the life chances of their future children. For Black men in the United States, systemic exclusion from educational and labor market opportunity has long constrained intergenerational mobility. We examine whether military service alters this trajectory, drawing on the US Panel Study of Income Dynamics (1968–2023, N=7,808 father–child pairs) to investigate college completion among adult children whose fathers were born between 1920 and 1976. Since the mid-twentieth century, the Armed Forces have offered Black men racial integration, occupational advancement, economic stability, and educational benefits that were less available in civilian society. Black fathers' military service increased children's probability of earning a bachelor's degree by 53 percent compared with children of Black nonveterans, with larger differences when fathers served before the transition to an all-volunteer force. Gains were attributable to GI Bill benefit receipt and diversion out of limited civilian opportunity in early adulthood. White fathers' veteran status conferred no educational advantage to their children, reflecting different counterfactuals: service provided greater relative benefits when the alternative was a racially closed civilian opportunity structure rather than an open one.

Keywords: educational attainment; military service; intergenerational mobility; racial inequality

Reproducibility Package: Reproducibility package available at: https://www.icpsr.umich.edu/sites/psid/view/studies/303003

Citation: Fomby, Paula, Patricia van Hissenhoven Flórez. 2026. "Fathers' Military Service and Children's College Attainment" Sociological Science 13: 441-475.

Received: January 6, 2026

Accepted: March 9, 2026

Published: April 20, 2026

Editor(s): Stephen Vaisey, Ellis Monk

DOI: 10.15195/v13.a18

MEN'S human capital and resource accumulation during early adulthood begins to shape their children's status attainment even before those children are born. Young men who finish high school and enter stable employment or earn a college degree have children who are likely to achieve the same (Blau and Duncan 1967; Mare 1981; Teachman 1987). Conversely, young men's curtailed educational trajectories, early incarceration, or unstable employment can impinge upon their own and their children's eventual life chances (Cabrera, Fagan, and Farrie 2008; Duncan et al. 1998; Edin and Nelson 2013; Furstenberg 2014; Turney 2017).

Variation in men's experience with the social institutions that structure the transition into adulthood does not occur by chance. In the United States, centuries of interconnected laws, policies, and practices have stymied young Black men's educational attainment and labor market opportunities and disproportionately subjected them to police surveillance and incarceration compared with White men. This racialized exclusion from the hegemonic opportunity structure that scaffolds the early accumulation of resources and human capital has inhibited upward social mobility among Black men and their children (Bloome 2014; Bonilla-Silva 1997; Cross 2025; Cross, Fomby, and Letiecq 2022; Williams 2023).

We consider whether outcomes differ for children in families in which Black men were in the military service as young adults. Compared with other social institutions

encountered by young Black men, the Armed Forces offer greater residential and occupational racial integration, structured opportunities for occupational advancement, economic stability, and pathways to subsidize higher education and homeownership after completing service (Butler 1991; Lundquist 2004, 2006; Moskos and Butler 1996; Nalty 1986; Segal 1989). Prior research has described active-duty military service as a bridge that diverts young Black and socioeconomically disadvantaged men out of marginalized opportunity structures and provides training and credentials for later participation in the civilian labor market (Browning, Lopreato, and Poston 1973; Elder 1986; Kleykamp 2009; Sampson and Laub 1996). We examine whether this upward mobility persists across generations and influences the likelihood of college completion among adult children of Black male veterans.

We offer three contributions. First, the intergenerational consequences of men's contact in early adulthood with postsecondary education, the labor market, and the criminal justice system are well documented, but to date we lack a sociological literature on how military service shapes life chances from one generation to the next. This gap is surprising given the US Department of Defense's status as the nation's largest public employer (US Department of Defense 2024), its distinctiveness as a total institution, and mixed evidence regarding its role in intragenerational upward social mobility (Angrist, Chen, and Song 2011; Angrist and Krueger 1994; Bailey and Sykes 2018; Bound and Turner 2002; Kleykamp 2013; MacLean 2010; Teachman 2007; Teachman and Call 1996). Second and relatedly, we consider the different counterfactuals available to White and Black men who enter military service. Historically, young White men have had greater opportunities in civilian society for continuing education and stable employment in early adulthood compared with Black men. We assess the intergenerational returns to fathers' military service when the alternative is early participation in a more open civilian society compared with a more closed one. Third, we revisit explanations for what men gain from their membership in the Armed Forces, contrasting active-duty service during a period distinguished by conscription and frequent engagement in foreign wars (1938–1972) with service in a mostly peacetime, all-volunteer force (1973–1994).

We use data from the US Panel Study of Income Dynamics, a multigenerational family panel study, to investigate the educational outcomes of children aged 25 and older whose fathers were born between 1920 and 1976. To summarize our main findings, Black men's military service increases the probability that their children will earn a bachelor's degree by 53 percent compared with children of fathers with no military service. The difference is larger for children whose fathers served during the conscription era and is partially explained by circumstances that are consistent with veteran fathers' use of GI Bill benefits. In contrast, White young adults with veteran fathers are no more likely than their same-race peers with nonveteran fathers to complete college.

Background

During the early 1900s, Black Americans were significantly underrepresented in military service. They comprised only 1.5 percent of active-duty service members in 1940 and were barred from the United States Marine Corps until 1942 (MacGregor

1981). Service members lived and worked in racially segregated units, and Black troops were typically assigned to manual labor and service occupations rather than combat positions.

The movement toward greater representation and integration began during World War II. The Selective Training and Service Act of 1940, which introduced peacetime conscription in anticipation of US entry into the war, required the War Department to accept Black draftees proportionally and prohibited discrimination in their training. Approximately one million Black men enlisted during World War II, but they continued to be consigned mostly to service roles in segregated units and faced significant harassment and discrimination both within the military and from the broader public during and after the war (MacGregor 1981).

In 1948, President Harry S. Truman issued Executive Order 9981, mandating desegregation of the Armed Forces.[1] Integration proceeded slowly and faced strong public and institutional opposition, with the Marines the last branch to integrate in 1960. Although halting, uneven, and deeply contested, this effort resulted in the Armed Forces becoming the first publicly financed institution to implement desegregation nationally.

The end of conscription and a return to an all-volunteer force (AVF) in 1973 marked another turning point. This shift prompted the Department of Defense to expand recruitment of Black, Hispanic, and female volunteer service members to achieve enlistment goals, a strategy that generated significant criticism across the political spectrum (Moskos and Butler 1996; Rostker 2006). It also led to new incentives for enlistment, including higher pay and a more generous GI Bill after education subsidies in the bill were reduced between the Korean War and the Vietnam War (Mercer and Skinner 2007).

Today's armed forces include about 1.3 million active-duty personnel, 80 percent of whom are enlisted service members (US Department of Defense 2024). This figure represents a significant reduction compared with the period between World War II and the Vietnam War and a further decrease since the end of the Cold War in 1990. More than 83 percent of today's enlisted members are men, and three-quarters have a high school diploma but no college credential. Two-thirds are classified racially as White, one-fifth as Black, and one-fifth of service members are of Hispanic or Latino ethnic origin (of any race).[2] Thus, the armed forces are more male and less educated than the young adult population overall but more racially and ethnically diverse than the *de facto* segregated neighborhoods and institutions that young adults typically occupy in civilian society.

Despite relatively high social and occupational integration, the armed services are not free of interpersonal or institutional discrimination (Burk and Espinoza 2012). And there is ample evidence that the attractiveness of military service has declined for Black men over the past quarter-century (Armor and Gilroy 2010; Kleykamp 2006; Lutz 2008). Yet some indicators suggest that the armed forces have provided Black service members with skills, stability, and assets that are less available in civilian society, particularly for young men without a college education during the period we consider. Below we review three perspectives on how Black men's service may carry over to affect their children's eventual educational attainment: through diversion out of limited opportunity structures in civilian life, through transferable

skills gained during service, and the GI Bill benefits available to veterans to facilitate reintegration into civilian life.

Intergenerational pathways from service to college attainment

Diversion out of disparate opportunity structures

Entry into military service occurs against a backdrop of social and economic circumstances that shape prospects for education and civilian employment as alternatives. Since the mid-twentieth century, military service has diverted Black men out of a systemically constrained opportunity structure during a critical life stage, when forestalled educational attainment, unstable or poorly paid employment, or contact with the criminal legal system could derail human capital and resource accumulation (Armor and Gilroy 2010; Burk and Espinoza 2012; Butler 1991; Lundquist 2004; Lutz 2008; Moskos and Butler 1996). We posit that this diversion out of constrained opportunity yields intergenerational returns, increasing the likelihood of college completion among the children of Black veterans. To illustrate, we consider historical trends in the experiences of Black and White young men with three key civilian institutions, paying particular attention to the period when fathers in our population of interest were entering adulthood (1940–1994).

Educational attainment. After World War II, college attendance gradually eclipsed military service as a post-high school pathway for young men. Figure 1 shows that the number of men aged 18 to 24 enrolled in college (line graph) surpassed the size of active-duty armed forces personnel (shaded area) in the early 1960s and continued its steady climb into the twenty-first century, peaking at over 9 million in 2010.

However, the overall trend in college attendance and completion conceals significant differences in Black and White men's educational attainment. Between 1950 and 2023, the share of White men aged 30–39 years with a bachelor's degree increased from 9 percent to 41 percent, whereas the share of same-aged Black men with a bachelor's degree increased from 2 percent to 18 percent (author estimates from the US Census Bureau and American Community Survey, Ruggles et al. 2025). Conditions contributing to these racial disparities in college enrollment and completion nationally include an entrenched history of racial segregation from primary through postsecondary education (Gavins 2009; Herbold 1994); bias in teachers' assessments of students' ability and use of punitive disciplinary action (Owens 2022; Thompson 2024); Black families' lower available wealth to finance a college education (Sanchez et al. 2024); and Black children's more limited exposure to college attendees and graduates in their social networks compared with White children (Farmer-Hinton 2008; Harper 2008; Iantosca et al. 2024). Among those who enroll, Black men leave college without a degree at higher rates than White men (Zhou and Pan 2023), take on greater student loan debt (Houle and Addo 2022), and see weaker earnings with a college degree (Ren 2022). Black men's own lower chances of completing college during early adulthood, in turn, reduce their children's chances of completing college (Mare 1981; Teachman 1987).

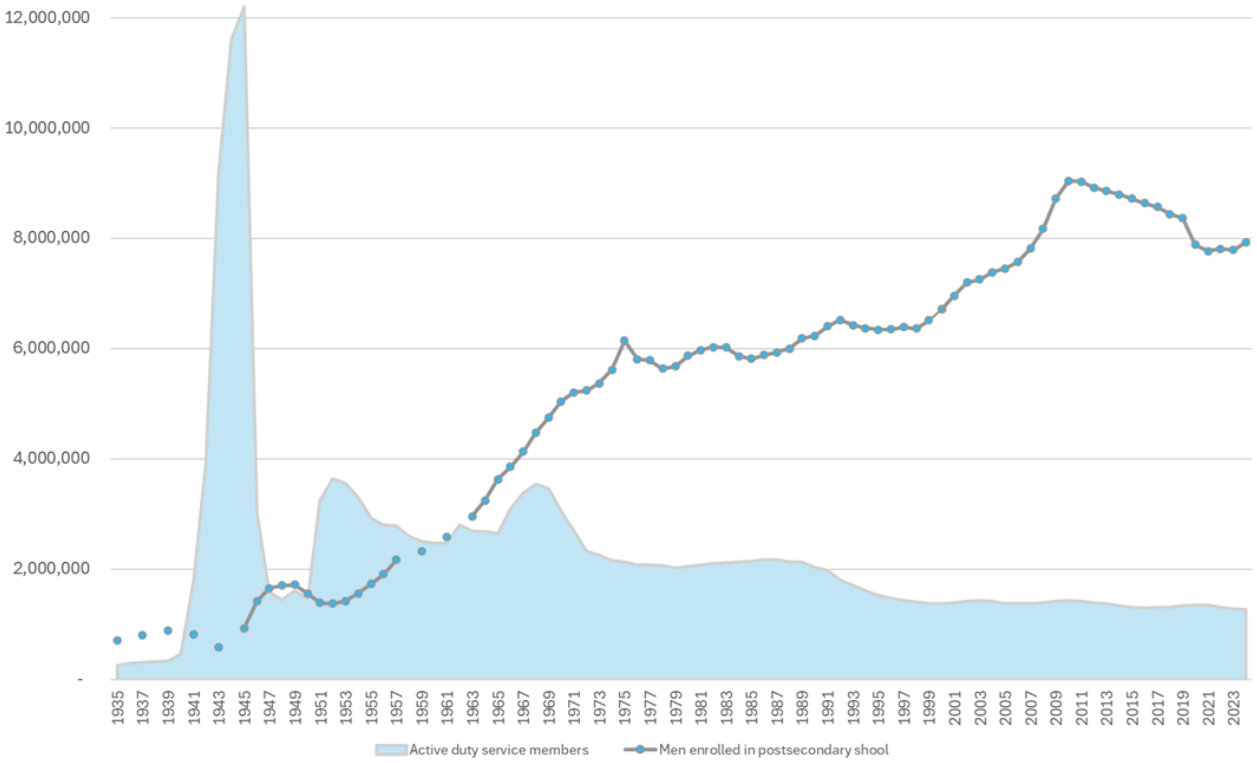

Figure 1: Size of active-duty Armed Forces and number of men enrolled in postsecondary education, 1935–2024. Sources: Active-duty Armed Forces: Our World in Data (1935–1938 and 1946–1953); National World War II Museum (1939–1945); Department of Defense (1954–2024). Postsecondary enrollment: National Center for Education Statistics.

Employment and earnings. Compared with their White peers, high school–educated Black young men have encountered greater barriers to stable, well-paying jobs.[3] Alexander, Entwisle, and Olson's (2014) longitudinal study of youth raised in Baltimore, Maryland, in the 1980s, present in microcosm the labor market advantage held by White working-class men compared to Black men. After completing high school, White men were more often employed full-time and in craft trades (versus unskilled labor) and had higher hourly earnings than Black men, and these differences compounded over the next 10 years. The authors attribute White men's ongoing employment advantage to interrelated factors, including a legacy of blocked opportunities for Black workers in the city's skilled trades, better access to high-skill, higher-paying jobs through social networks, and a lower burden of stereotyped negative identities, particularly among men with prior contact with the criminal-legal system. These localized disparities have been reported broadly across place and time in the United States (Chetty et al. 2014; Crutchfield 1989, 2014; Pager 2007; Sampson and Sharkey 2008; Wilson 1996), culminating in persistent differences in early civilian labor market outcomes for young Black and White high school–educated men.

Figure 2 shows these differences at the national level. Employment rates (right axis) and median annual income (left axis) are shown for high school–educated

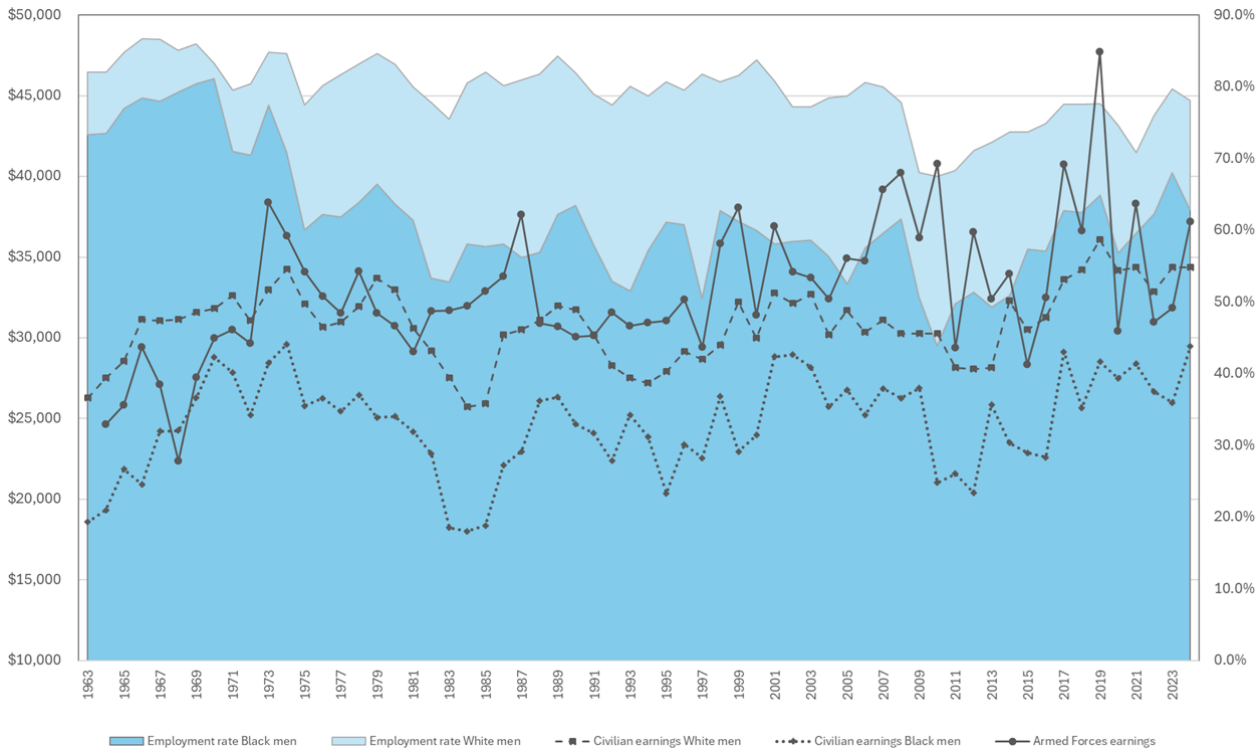

Figure 2: Employment rate and average civilian earnings (2024 dollars) by race and average Armed Forces earnings, male high school graduates ages 18–24, 1963–2024. Source: Current Population Survey, Integrated Public Use Microdata Series.

Black and White men in early adulthood (aged 18–24) from 1963 to 2024 (author estimates from Current Population Survey, Flood et al. 2025). The bottom (dark blue) segment of the stacked-area graph describes Black men's employment rate in each year, and the full shaded area (dark blue and light blue) represents the employment rate for White men. The light blue area indicates the difference in the employment rate between the two groups. In all years, White men were more often employed than Black men, but the disparity became more pronounced after 1973, when the decline in manufacturing jobs in US cities began to disproportionately affect Black men (Wilson 1996). On average across all years, young high school–educated Black men were about 22 percent less likely to be employed than White men with the same educational attainment. The dotted and dashed lines describe annual earnings in civilian occupations over the same period for Black and White men, respectively (2024 dollars). For both groups, earnings have stagnated since 1980, but across years, White men earned about $6,000 more than Black men. In contrast, comparable men in active-duty military service have had higher earned income than their civilian peers since 1973 (solid line). Black and White service members also have near parity in earnings, with Black service members' annual income equal to about 98 percent of White men on average across years (not shown). Thus, while high school–educated young Black and White men both experience an earnings advantage in military service compared with civilian occupations in the AVF era, the advantage is larger for Black men.

Incarceration. Mass incarceration between the mid-1970s and the 2000s, along with concurrent federal policies affecting formerly incarcerated people, profoundly reduced opportunities for human capital accumulation among low- and moderately-educated young men born between 1960 and 1990, especially for Black men (Neil and Sampson 2021; Roehrkasse and Wildeman 2022). During this period, the number of prisoners serving custodial sentences increased more than fivefold, peaking at 1.55 million in 2010 (Carson 2020). In this period, Black men made up between one-third and nearly half of all male prisoners despite comprising only 12 percent of the US adult male population (Beck and Harrison 2001; Perkins 1994). Among those born between 1970 and 1984, the cumulative risk of incarceration by age 24 was 15–17 percent for Black men versus 3–4.7 percent among non–Hispanic White men (Roehrkasse and Wildeman 2022).[4] A person with a felony conviction is generally ineligible for military service[5] (but see Lundquist, Pager, and Strader 2018), and the scale of mass incarceration has contributed to declining enlistment rates among Black men in the current century (Han 2018; Pettit and Western 2004; Sykes and Bailey 2020).

Although hardly a panacea, active-duty military service has provided an alternative to constrained opportunity structures for young men otherwise at risk of being channeled into unproductive activity. Prior work has described wartime military service as a turning point for young men with limited prospects (Elder 1986; Sampson and Laub 1996). Those studies considered mostly poor or socially disadvantaged White men and proposed that camaraderie, sense of purpose, exposure to a wider world, and the institutional erasure of background difference enabled men to return to civilian life with a sense of self-efficacy and social belonging. Whether this explanation extends to Black men, whose wartime service largely occurred under segregation or during the slow process of desegregation, is an open question. Other work has considered a more instrumental explanation for what peacetime military service offers during young adulthood, highlighting the stability that the institution provides in terms of steady income, access to medical care, housing, and other benefits as contributors to Black men's higher marriage rates during enlistment (Kelty, Kleykamp, and Segal 2010; Lundquist 2004; Teachman 2007). Together, these perspectives describe active-duty service as a total institution that provides social integration and material security otherwise lacking during a critical developmental life stage.

Military service as a bridge to stability

A second perspective focuses on the transferable skills acquired during military service that increase earnings and job security in later civilian occupations. The *bridging hypothesis* posits that participation in the armed forces provides service members from socially or economically-marginalized backgrounds with occupational training and soft skills to navigate complex organizations that enable a transition from a structurally disadvantaged position into a productive civilian career after service (Browning et al. 1973). In support of the bridging hypothesis, Browning and colleagues reported that among men who served during the conscription era, Black and Mexican-American veterans—but not White veterans—had higher earnings than their same-group nonveteran peers in skilled occupations. Beyond the specific

skills learned, the bridging mechanism also may operate through credentialing. In an audit study, Black veterans with transferable (in other words, non-combat) occupational skills were rated as more employable than nonveterans with the same skills in the entry-level labor market, whereas no such advantage held for White veterans (Kleykamp 2009). We extend the bridging hypothesis to consider whether Black veterans' later employability and earnings facilitate their children's eventual educational attainment.

Others have argued that the Armed Forces' bridging power may be overstated or was limited to the conscription era (MacLean and Elder 2007). While veterans of America's mid-century wars were more likely than their nonveteran peers to finish college, they also had lower lifetime earnings, a consequence of disrupted participation in the labor force (Angrist 1990; Angrist et al. 2011). In more recent years, veterans have become less likely than nonveterans to complete college, and the deterrent effect of military service on later criminal behavior has declined (MacLean and Elder 2007; but see Teachman and Tedrow 2016). Across all eras, combat duty has harmful lasting effects on veterans' employability, physical and mental health, and social relationships (MacLean 2010; MacLean and Elder 2007; Robinson et al. 2023). Yet the mixed effects of military service and the question of the appropriate comparison group persist. For example, Kleykamp (2013) reported that among Iraq and Afghanistan war veterans, the gains to service were greatest among those who were most disadvantaged before enlistment.

GI Benefits

A third perspective considers that the benefits available to veterans may improve their own and their children's eventual status attainment. We focus on two benefit programs: the GI Bill for postsecondary education and training and the Veterans Administration (VA) home loan guaranty program, both created under the Serviceman's Readjustment Act in 1944. The first GI Bill covered tuition and other educational expenses and provided a subsistence allowance to World War II veterans enrolled in education or training activities. Benefits were reduced but fully federally subsidized for veterans of the Korean and Vietnam wars (Mercer and Skinner 2007). The bill had a powerful positive effect on educational attainment in this period: Veterans achieved an additional 0.5 years to 1.4 years of schooling on average and increased college completion rates by about five percent compared to nonveterans and veterans who served before the GI Bill was introduced (Angrist 1993; Angrist et al. 2011; Bound and Turner 2002; Stanley 2003; Teachman 2005).[6]

In the AVF era, the GI Bill was restructured as a contributory program, meaning infantry members pay into the program while in service to become eligible for benefits afterwards. It continues to cover tuition and fees for enrollment in college, vocational programs, and other occupational training but does not provide a stipend. Although the GI Bill remains an important recruiting tool, veterans have become less likely to complete college than nonveterans in the AVF period (Teachman 2007), a trend that may be attributable to selection into service and to rising tuition costs and perceived opportunity costs to service and postsecondary educational attainment (Bound and Turner 2002).

The generous benefits of the early GI Bill program did not yield equal gains for White and Black veterans. In the years after World War II and prior to the 1964 Civil Rights Act, Black veterans confronted discriminatory admissions policies at majority-White colleges and universities and overcrowding at historically Black institutions. Further, Veterans Administration career counselors routinely directed Black veterans away from college and toward vocational training (Herbold 1994; Humes 2006; McCardle 2017). As a result, the GI Bill had little positive effect on college attainment for Black veterans of World War II and the Korean War (Turner and Bound 2003). Mid-century Supreme Court decisions barring discrimination in public schools and universities, along with the Civil Rights Act, expanded enrollment opportunities for Black veterans. Today, Black veterans are about eight percentage points more likely than White veterans to use the GI Bill (61 percent versus 53 percent) but somewhat less likely to complete a degree program within six years of enrollment (44 percent versus 48 percent) (Radford, Bailey, and Bloomfield 2024).

The VA home loan guaranty program has a similar history. The program guarantees a portion of a private lender's home loan, reducing lender's risk and enabling better lending terms for borrowers. It also allows veterans to make no or reduced down payment on a home purchase (Perl 2018). The program was especially impactful in its early years, contributing to about eight percent of the rise in home ownership between 1940 and 1960 (Fetter 2013). However, Black veterans in that period had far less success in accessing home loans because of residential redlining practices and discrimination in the lending industry (Faber 2020; Katznelson and Mettler 2008; Woods II 2013). With passage of the Fair Housing Act in 1968, Black veterans' access to home ownership improved. Today, roughly equal shares of Black and White veterans have VA-backed home loans, and both groups are more likely than nonveteran peers to be homeowners (Strochak, Choi, and Goodman 2020).

Research hypotheses

In sum, we consider three ways through which men's military service may influence their children's eventual college attainment: diversion out of constrained opportunity structures, transferable skills acquired during service, and access to veterans benefit programs. We expect that each of these potential explanations will operate differently in Black compared with White families and in earlier versus later historical periods. We evaluate four non–mutually exclusive research hypotheses.

Hypothesis 1: Military service removes young adults from civilian life during a critical life stage for human capital development and early resource accumulation. Because young Black men have historically been excluded from the civilian opportunity structures that enable this development, military service as a total institution will confer larger relative gains for their children's educational attainment. We refer to this as the *diversion hypothesis.*

Hypothesis 2: Military service provides skills that enable a transition from a structurally disadvantaged position into a productive civilian career after service. This bridging function will be more impactful for Black veterans' future economic security than for their White counterparts. Any positive association between Black fathers' military service and their children's college completion will be mediated by

veterans' higher income and employment stability as their children are growing up. We refer to this as the *bridging hypothesis*.

Hypothesis 3: GI Bill programs facilitate veterans' postsecondary educational attainment and home ownership. Any positive association between Black fathers' military service and their children's college completion will be mediated by veterans' more frequent college completion and home ownership. We refer to this as the *GI benefits hypothesis*.

Finally, historical context may condition the extent to which Black men's military service is associated with their children's educational attainment, and the mechanisms delineated above could run in either direction. On one hand, any positive effect of Black men's military service could be greater during the conscription era (1940–1972) because of (a) the generosity of GI Bill benefits, (b) the gains to service as an alternative to the institutionally constrained opportunities in education and civilian employment for young men and their children, and (c) a period of exceptional economic growth and educational expansion nationally. Alternatively, Black fathers' military service after 1973 may more powerfully influence children's educational attainment in response to (a) the transition to an all-volunteer force where service members of color were actively recruited, (b) the declining civilian labor market position of high school–educated men, which affected Black workers earlier than White workers, and (c) federal civil rights legislation introduced in the 1960s to protect people of color in education, employment, and housing, enabling veterans to more effectively leverage the benefits of military service when they return to civilian life.

Hypothesis 4: We anticipate period differences in the strength and magnitude of the influence of Black men's military service on children's educational attainment but are agnostic about the direction of these differences. We refer to this as the two-tailed *historical contingency* hypothesis.

Data and Method

We use data from the US Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID), the world's longest-running household panel study. It began in 1968 with a nationally representative sample of 4,802 US households including an oversample of low-income, mostly Black families. It has a genealogical design, following biological or adopted descendants of original family household members as they establish their own households. This design provides a unique resource to investigate historical trends in intergenerational social and economic mobility. Interviews were conducted with one adult per household annually until 1997 and biennially thereafter. As of 2023, there have been 43 waves of data collection over 55 years. The active sample includes about 10,000 family units (in other words, family households) and 25,000 individuals (Panel Study of Income Dynamics 2025).

Sample

The analytic sample is restricted to Black and White men who grew up in a US state between 1920 and 1976 and who (a) were ever a family unit reference person and

(b) had at least one adult biological child descended from an original PSID sample member who ever lived in the father's household during childhood and whose educational attainment at age 25 is known. The unit of analysis is a father-child pair. Fathers' birth years captures men who would have become eligible for military service between 1938 and 1994, and the upper bound limits the sample to men whose children are old enough to have completed a bachelor's degree by 2023. Among 4,748 US-born Black or White male reference persons born in the years of interest, 4,338 had at least one age-eligible child (25 years or older by 2023). Of these, 4,260 fathers lived with at least one age-eligible child while the child was a minor. From this set, 3,648 fathers had 7,808 children who were observed at least once after reaching age 25. The final analytic sample includes 1,217 Black fathers of 2,653 adult children and 2,431 White fathers of 5,155 adult children. The analysis excluded 29 otherwise eligible fathers (37 father–child pairs) who were missing on individual-level or family-level covariates.

Key variables

PSID collects information about all coresident family members' income, assets, education, employment, health, marriage and childbearing, and other topics. More detailed information is available about the family unit reference person (formerly "family unit head") and their spouse or partner, if present.

Military service experience. Information on military service is available for the family unit reference person every year. Until 1984, respondents were asked, "Are you (HEAD) a veteran?" Beginning in 1985, the wording changed to, "Have you (HEAD) ever been in the United States military service?" Information is collected in the survey year when someone becomes a family unit reference person and is updated only when question wording changes.

From this report we constructed a dichotomous measure of any military service. This approach obscures variation on many dimensions of service including age and year at entry, rank, duration and branch of service, combat exposure, active-duty status, conscription status (prior to 1973), and discharge status. Consequently, our models estimate the average effect of military service across a diverse set of conditions. To assess whether this imprecision contributes bias or inefficiency to our estimates, we conducted a supplementary analysis on a restricted sample using more detailed information from a questionnaire module administered in 1994 about active-duty service.

Period of military service. We assume that men became eligible to enter service in the calendar year of their 18^{th} birthday and, for those with any service, treated that as their year of entry. This will be inaccurate for commissioned officers and people who were drafted or enlisted at older ages.

Race. Men's race was derived from the family unit reference person's race in the most recent year they occupied that role. In survey years where multiple categories of racial identity could be reported (since 1985), we used the first recorded response. We excluded men who did not identify as White or Black.

To assess the *diversion* hypothesis, we accounted for four aspects of fathers' family background that may be associated with their children's later college completion: whether either parent completed high school; whether the father grew up in a rural

area (versus a small town, a large city, or multiple places); whether he grew up in the US South census region (versus other); and whether he grew up in a poor family (versus average or "pretty well off"). All information was collected in the first year a man occupied the role of family unit reference person. To consider the intergenerational consequences of fathers' opportunity structure in early adulthood, we accounted for four indicators of state-level conditions at age 16. Three are from one percent US Census microsamples (1930–1990, IPUMS-USA, Ruggles et al. 2025) and describe the labor market position of same-race men aged 18 to 24 years in the state where the focal person grew up. They are share of men enrolled in school, employed, and working in a manual labor occupation (conditional on employment). We used cubic spline interpolation to generate annual estimates between decennial years for all Census statistics. The fourth indicator is the number of prisoners (natural log) in each state and year (Bureau of Justice Statistics 2022).[7] Published reports do not disaggregate the number of prisoners by race.

We included two indicators to evaluate the *bridging hypothesis*: whether the father was ever *unemployed* while his child was growing up (from birth to age 18) and whether *family income* was ever less than 200 percent of the federal poverty level during the same period. Indicators of the duration of unemployment or low family income yielded less efficient estimators than the results described here.

To evaluate whether *GI benefits* might have contributed to men's capital accumulation, we included two indicators: college completion and home ownership. For men who were reference person in a family unit in 1975 or later, bachelor's degree attainment was derived from a survey question about highest degree attained. For men who dropped out of the study before 1975, the measure was based on completed years of schooling, with 16 or more treated as Bachelor's degree attainment. Home ownership was measured by whether someone living in the household owned the residence. If owned, we assumed that the reference person was the owner or co-owner. A man was considered a homeowner if he owned the home at any point while his child was growing up. A measure of duration of home ownership produced similar results to those presented here.

Dependent variable

Children's bachelor's degree attainment was constructed parallel to the measure of fathers' educational attainment. If the child was ever the reference person or the reference person's spouse or partner in their own family unit after 1974, the measure was based on their highest degree earned. Otherwise, it was based on years of completed schooling (16 years or more signifies bachelor's degree attainment).

Control variables

Control variables include the proportion of years from birth to age 18 that the father and child lived in the same household, child sex, child birth year, and father's birth cohort. Models evaluating the GI benefits hypothesis also controlled for the presence of a spouse or partner and that person's educational attainment. All analyses were weighted using the most recent longitudinal weight for the focal

child in each father–child pair. The weighted sample is representative of fathers and children in families present in the United States at least since 1968.[8]

Method

We used weighted logistic regression to estimate the log-odds that an adult child completed college as a function of father's military service, net of sociodemographic controls, family background, early adulthood opportunity structure, and hypothesized mediators. We report predicted probabilities of college completion averaged over the observed covariate distribution within each racial group and average marginal effects of father's military service. We also report average marginal effects restricted to children whose fathers were ever in service to assess whether estimated associations are driven by the covariate distribution of that subgroup. We refer to this as the average marginal effect on the treated, analogous to the average treatment effect on the treated in a causal framework. Models were stratified by father's race and clustered on the father's identifier to adjust for non-independence among siblings. A full reproducibility package is available at https://www.icpsr.umich.edu/sites/psid/view/studies/303003.

Results

Table 1 shows weighted descriptive statistics by race and veteran status. One-third of Black fathers and nearly half of White fathers were veterans. Twenty-eight percent of children with a Black veteran father had completed college compared with 21 percent of peers with a same-race nonveteran father. Children in White families were more likely to have finished college overall, and group differences by veteran status were smaller and in the opposite direction (48.3 percent of nonveterans' children versus 44.9 percent of veterans' children). Within-race group differences by veteran status on relevant covariates were largely consistent with the bridging and GI benefits hypotheses. As expected, Black men grew up in less advantaged family circumstances compared with White men on average and had more limited employment and educational opportunities in early adulthood. Among Black men, veterans and nonveterans had similar backgrounds and early adulthood opportunity structures, whereas among White men, veterans were less advantaged on these characteristics compared with nonveterans.

Tables 2 and 3 show results from our test of the diversion hypothesis in four steps. First, we asked whether children of Black fathers were less likely to finish college than children of White fathers. Controlling only for father's race and birth cohort and child characteristics, Table 2, Model 1 supports this expectation (B=-0.969, $p<.01$). Children of Black fathers were about 21 percentage points less likely to finish college compared with otherwise similar children of White fathers (Table 3, Panel 1, average marginal effect =-0.209, $p<.01$). Second, we considered whether group differences in fathers' family background characteristics and state-level labor market conditions for same-race young adults when a father was 16 years old partially explained the lower probability of college completion among Black fathers'

Table 1: Descriptive statistics (proportion/mean and standard deviation), dependent variable and covariates, by father's race and military service status, Panel Study of Income Dynamics, 1968-2023.

	Black father-child pairs		White father-child pairs	
	No military service	Any military service	No military service	Any military service
Key independent variable				
Father ever in military service		0.321		0.483
Dependent variable				
Child earned Bachelor's degree	0.209	0.284†	0.474	0.449
Covariates				
Family income ever <200% federal poverty level	0.866	0.763*	0.552	0.461*
Father ever unemployed	0.289	0.211	0.188	0.162
Father ever out of labor force	0.223	0.208	0.117	0.084*
Father earned Bachelor's degree	0.100	0.139	0.353	0.301*
Father ever homeowner	0.741	0.698	0.901	0.919
Father relationship status				
No spouse or partner present	0.025	0.022	0.003	0.003
Spouse or partner does not have Bachelor's degree	0.890	0.796*	0.688	0.812*
Spouse or partner has Bachelor's degree	0.085	0.182*	0.308	0.185*
Share of years father and child (age 0–17) coresident	0.770	0.801	0.899	0.923*
	(0.308)	(0.286)	(0.222)	(0.202)
Child is female	0.525	0.525	0.517	0.514
Child's birth year	1975.325	1971.6*	1977.362	1966.647*
	(13.099)	(13.294)	(12.601)	(11.214)
Father background characteristics				
Raised in rural area	0.403	0.252*	0.277	0.277
Either parent finished high school	0.453	0.486	0.731	0.609*
Raised in US South	0.780	0.706	0.243	0.220
Raised in poor family	0.718	0.731	0.407	0.546*
State-year characteristics at father age 16 (same-race men ages 18–24)				

Table 1: (*Continued*)

	Black father-child pairs		White father-child pairs	
	No military service	Any military service	No military service	Any military service
Percent enrolled in school	18.996	16.287†	29.156	18.146*
	(11.963)	(11.821)	(13.193)	(12.931)
Percent unemployed	8.499	9.222	6.536	8.186*
	(4.402)	(5.253)	(3.088)	(4.627)
Percent in manual labor occupation	58.426	60.595	33.979	40.551*
	(12.894)	(13.354)	(8.522)	(10.428)
Prison population, logged	8.387	8.279	8.460	8.422
	(1.063)	(1.066)	(0.963)	(0.924)
Father's birth cohort				
1920–1929	0.108	0.296*	0.082	0.34*
1930–1939	0.235	0.175	0.140	0.285*
1940–1949	0.211	0.193	0.232	0.245
1950–1959	0.252	0.166*	0.329	0.088*
1960–1976	0.195	0.171	0.217	0.042*
N	1,796	857	2,857	2,298

Notes: Statistics are weighted by the focal child's last observed longitudinal individual weight.
$^{*}p < 0.05$, $^{\dagger}p < 0.10$. Group differences are statistically significant.

Table 2: Coefficients and standard errors from logistic regression models estimating the log-odds of children's college attainment and father's military service, Panel Study of income Dynamics, 1968–2023.

	Child completed college, all father–child pairs		Father ever in military service by father's race		Child completed college by father's race	
	(1)	(2)	(3) (Black)	(4) (white)	(5) (Black)	(6) (white)
Father is Black (vs. white)	−0.969*	−0.651*				
	(0.108)	(0.198)				
Father ever in military service					0.604*	−0.026
					(0.228)	(0.092)
Share of years father and child (age 0–17) coresident	0.946*	0.912*			−0.077	0.865*
	(0.164)	(0.169)			(0.243)	(0.186)
Child is female	0.399*	0.403*			−0.149	0.386*
	(0.063)	(0.063)			(0.237)	(0.066)
Child's birth year	0.035*	0.027*			0.715†	0.029*
	(0.006)	(0.006)			(0.330)	(0.006)
Father's background						
Raised in rural area		−0.292*	−1.293*	−0.319†	−0.319†	−0.297*
		(0.092)	(0.328)	(0.148)	(0.148)	(0.097)
Either parent finished high school		0.602*	0.292	0.325†	0.325†	0.672*
		(0.094)	(0.292)	(0.159)	(0.159)	(0.101)
Raised in US South		−0.152	−0.214	−0.001	−0.001	−0.198
		(0.101)	(0.397)	(0.163)	(0.163)	(0.108)
Raised in poor family		−0.110	0.082	0.282†	0.282†	−0.107
		(0.077)	(0.276)	(0.128)	(0.128)	(0.081)
State-year characteristics at father age 16						
Share enrolled in school		0.004	−0.007	−0.001	0.002	0.003
		(0.007)	(0.025)	(0.011)	(0.023)	(0.007)

Table 2: (*Continued*)

	Child completed college, all father–child pairs		Father ever in military service by father's race		Child completed college by father's race	
	(1)	(2)	(3) (Black)	(4) (white)	(5) (Black)	(6) (white)
Share unemployed		−0.015	−0.008	0.046†	0.020	−0.009
		(0.014)	(0.038)	(0.027)	(0.033)	(0.016)
Share in manual labor occupation		−0.001	−0.026	−0.010	−0.001	−0.005
		(0.007)	(0.019)	(0.013)	(0.016)	(0.009)
State prison population (natural log)		−0.083†	−0.191	0.114	−0.029	−0.087
		(0.042)	(0.123)	(0.070)	(0.101)	(0.045)
Father's birth cohort (vs. 1920–1929)						
Born 1930–1939	0.003	−0.130	−1.964*	−0.579†	0.580	−0.170
	(0.135)	(0.177)	(0.456)	(0.293)	(0.416)	(0.197)
Born 1940–1949	0.102	−0.124	−2.001*	−1.414*	0.898†	−0.220
	(0.155)	(0.242)	(0.603)	(0.371)	(0.464)	(0.274)
Born 1950–1959	−0.290	−0.639†	−2.746*	−2.841*	0.892	−0.786†
	(0.183)	(0.289)	(0.751)	(0.433)	(0.609)	(0.326)
Born 1960–1976	−0.847*	−1.082*	−2.371*	−3.366*	0.060	−1.206*
	(0.226)	(0.287)	(0.796)	(0.389)	(0.715)	(0.319)
Constant	−69.653*	−53.512*	4.790*	0.235	−23.300	−56.537*
	(11.004)	(11.410)	(1.825)	(1.009)	(32.509)	(12.263)
N	7,808	7,808	2,653	5,155	2,653	5,155

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses. Statistics are weighted by the focal child's last observed longitudinal individual weight.
*$p < 0.01$, †$p < 0.05$.

Table 3: Average predicted probability of adult children's college attainment and average marginal effect (AME) of father's race and military service, Panel Study of Income Dynamics, 1968–2023.

Panel 1	Pooled sample	
	(1)	(2)
Father's race is white	0.460	0.452
	(0.009)	(0.010)
Father's race is Black	0.251	0.31
	(0.018)	(0.037)
AME (father's race is Black)	−0.209	−0.142
	(0.021)	(0.041)
N	7,808	7,808
Panel 2	Black father–child pairs	White father–child pairs
	(5)	(6)
Father never in military service	0.201*	0.465*
	(0.018)	(0.014)
Father ever in military service	0.307*	0.459*
	(0.038)	(0.014)
AME (father ever in military service)	0.106†	−0.006
	(0.043)	(0.021)
N	2,653	5,155
AME among children of fathers ever in service	0.100†	−0.006
	(0.040)	(0.021)
N	857	2,298

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses. Estimates are derived from corresponding model in Table 2. Predicted probabilities are averaged over the observed covariate distribution within race.
*$p < 0.01$, †$p < 0.05$.

children (Table 2, Model 2). This reduced the average marginal effect of father's race to –0.142 (Table 3, Panel 1, $p<.01$), a 32 percent difference in magnitude compared with Model 1.

Third, we stratified the sample by father's race and estimated his odds of participating in military service as a function of the same background characteristics. Among Black men, service was largely independent of background (Table 2, Model 3); only rural childhood residence was significantly associated with lower odds of service, and all other covariates were jointly zero (F=0.80, p=0.58). Among White men (Table 2, Model 4), there was greater selection into service. Those from poor families, with a parent with at least a high school diploma or living in states with a higher young-adult unemployment rate were more likely to enter the military.

Fourth, we re-estimated the odds of children's college completion in race-stratified models that accounted for father's military service. Black fathers' military service (Table 2, Model 5) was positively associated with children's college completion (B=0.604, $p<.01$) and increased the probability of its occurrence by 10.6 percentage points (Table 3, panel 2) compared with children of nonveteran fathers. The average marginal effect on the treated was slightly lower (0.100, $p<.05$). White

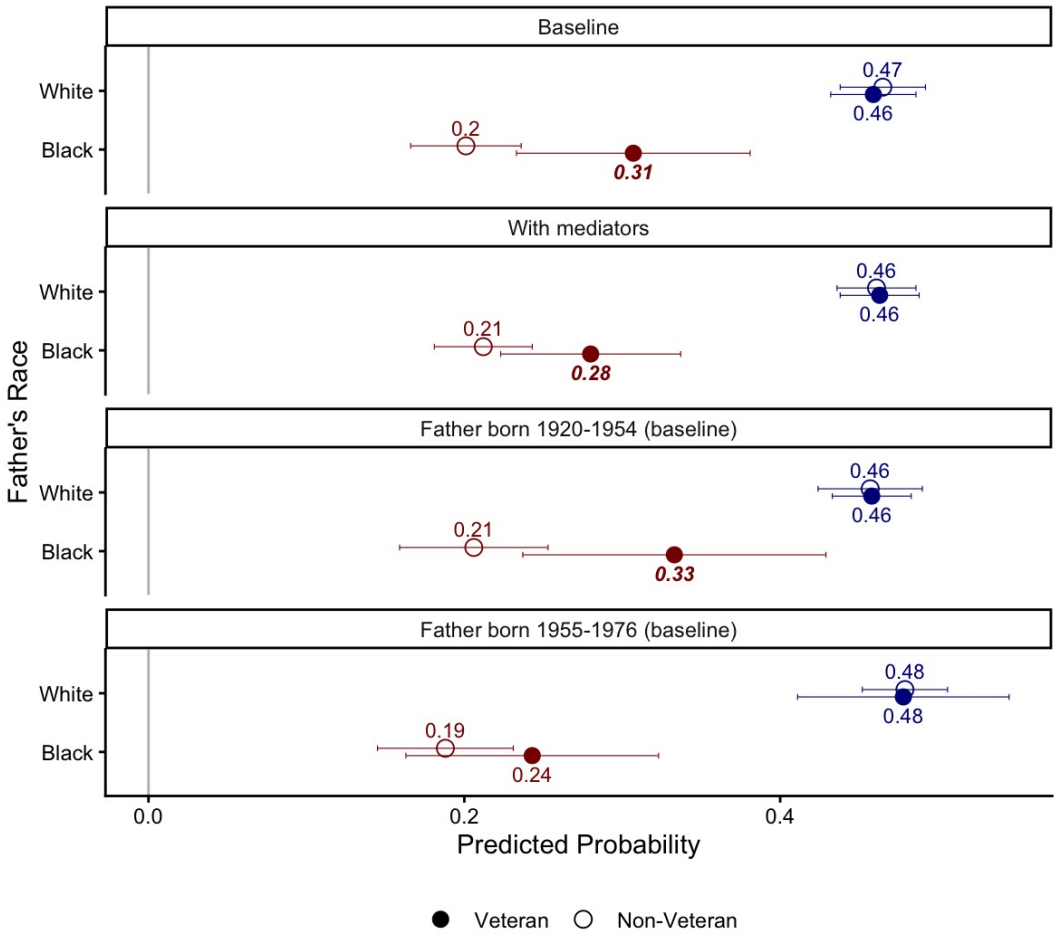

Figure 3: Average predicted probability of children's college completion by father's race and veteran status. Note: Bold italics indicate same-race group difference by veteran status is statistically significant ($p < 0.05$). Source: Panel Study of Income Dynamics, 1968–2023.

fathers' military service was unrelated to their children's odds of college completion (Table 2, Model 6). This supports the *diversion hypothesis*: Part of the Black/White disparity in children's college completion is attributable to racial differences in the resources and opportunities available when their fathers were young men. Among Black families, fathers who entered service were similar to those who did not. Their service diverted them from early structural disadvantage (relative to White young adults) and was positively associated with their children's eventual college completion. Among White families, fathers who entered service had fewer resources and opportunities in young adulthood compared with same-race peers. Their military service may have enabled their children to catch up to the educational attainment of their peers, but not to surpass it.

To facilitate interpretation, Figure 3 provides a visual representation of the predicted probability of children's college completion by father's race and veteran status under different model specifications. The top panel ("Baseline") presents estimates from Table 3, Panel 2. Bold italics indicate that the probability of college

Table 4: Selected coefficients and standard errors from logistic regression models estimating the log-odds of adult children's college attainment with mediators, US Panel Study of Income Dynamics, 1968–2023.

	Black father–child pairs			White father–child pairs		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Father ever in military service	0.592*	0.428†	0.432†	−0.027	0.015	0.009
	(0.229)	(0.209)	(0.204)	(0.094)	(0.095)	(0.097)
Family income ever < 200% federal poverty level	−0.574†		−0.221	−0.950*		−0.614*
	(0.235)		(0.258)	(0.084)		(0.090)
Father ever unemployed	0.555†		0.760*	−0.416*		−0.259†
	(0.259)		(0.249)	(0.105)		(0.107)
Father ever out of labor force	−0.289		−0.388	0.080		−0.018
	(0.298)		(0.253)	(0.125)		(0.122)
Father earned Bachelor's degree or higher		0.769†	0.936*		0.984*	0.816*
		(0.311)	(0.320)		(0.095)	(0.096)
Father ever owned home		0.617†	0.665*		0.602*	0.402*
		(0.247)	(0.244)		(0.140)	(0.142)
Father has no spouse or partner		0.426	0.431		−0.893	−0.900
		(0.856)	(0.853)		(0.839)	(0.783)
Father's spouse or partner has Bachelor's degree		1.465*	1.444*		0.750*	0.666*
		(0.277)	(0.274)		(0.101)	(0.101)
Share of years father and child (age 0–17) coresident	0.797†	0.480	0.363	0.689*	0.359	0.346
	(0.351)	(0.364)	(0.345)	(0.191)	(0.190)	(0.194)
Constant	−21.634	30.690	26.611	−49.502*	−16.926	−19.594
	(31.229)	(31.554)	(31.135)	(12.510)	(12.840)	(12.947)
N	2,653	2,653	2,653	5,155	5,155	5,155

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses. Model covariates include control variables, father's background, and state-year characteristics at father age 16.
*$p < 0.01$, †$p < 0.05$.

completion for children with a veteran father is significantly different ($p<.05$) compared with same-race peers with a nonveteran father.

Beyond the expected conditioning effect of race, father's background characteristics may further moderate the association between military service and children's college completion (Elder 1986, Sampson and Laub 1996). Table A1 in the Online Supplement summarizes conditional average marginal effects of military service moderated by family background characteristics for Black and White fathers. No moderators were statistically significant; however, among Black father–child pairs, differences in average probability by rural upbringing, parental educational attainment, and family poverty status were substantively large. The analytic sample size may be underpowered to identify true within-race group differences in the influence of father's military service.

Table 4 shows estimates from logistic regression models including covariates hypothesized to mediate the association between father's military service and children's college attainment. In the interest of space, coefficients associated with background covariates and controls are not shown. The first three panels evaluate the bridging hypothesis (Model 1), the GI benefits hypothesis (Model 2), and both hypotheses simultaneously (Model 3) for Black father–child pairs. Models 4 through

Table 5: Mediator-adjusted average predicted probability of adult children's college attainment and average marginal effect of father's military service, US Panel Study of Income Dynamics, 1968–2023.

	Black father–child pairs			White father–child pairs		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Father never in service	0.202	0.212	0.212	0.465	0.461	0.461
	(0.017)	(0.017)	(0.016)	(0.013)	(0.013)	(0.013)
Father ever in service	0.304	0.280	0.280	0.459	0.464	0.463
	(0.038)	(0.030)	(0.029)	(0.013)	(0.013)	(0.013)
Average marginal effect (AME)	0.102†	0.068†	0.068†	−0.006	0.003	0.002
	(0.042)	(0.035)	(0.033)	(0.020)	(0.020)	(0.020)
N	2,653	2,653	2,653	5,155	5,155	5,155
AME among children with father ever in service	0.097†	0.067†	0.067†	−0.006	0.003	0.002
	(0.039)	(0.033)	(0.032)	(0.021)	(0.020)	(0.020)
N	857	857	857	2,298	2,298	2,298

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses. Estimates based on Table 4. Predicted probabilities are averaged over the observed covariate distribution within race.
$^{*}p < 0.01$, $^{\dagger}p < 0.05$.

6 are analogous for White pairs. Table 5 shows predicted probabilities and average marginal effects from each model.

The bridging hypothesis (Model 1) received little support among Black father–child pairs. Father's military service remained significantly positively associated with children's college completion (Table 4, B=0.592, p <.01). As expected, ever having low family income while the child was growing up was negatively associated with the probability of college completion (B=-0.574, p<.05). Contrary to expectations, father's unemployment (versus continuous employment) was positively associated with college completion (B=0.555, p<.05). Accounting for these mediators did not change the marginal effect of father's military service on college completion among children of Black veterans (Table 5, probability = 0.304) compared with nonveterans (probability = 0.202, average marginal effect = 0.102, p<.05). For White father–child pairs, there was no group difference in father's veteran status to explain, but the covariates associated with the bridging hypothesis were in the expected direction and statistically significant at p<.01 or lower.

The GI benefits hypothesis (Model 2) more effectively explained differences in the probability of children's college attendance in Black father–child pairs, although father's military service remained independently associated with the log-odds of children's college completion (B=0.428, p<.05). Father's own college completion and homeownership while the child was growing up were positively associated with children's college completion. Having a college-educated spouse or partner (almost always the child's mother) was also strongly positively associated with children's college completion. Accounting for these factors reduced the marginal effect of Black fathers' service to 0.068 (Table 5, p<.05). In Model 3, coefficients associated with military service and the GI benefits hypothesis remained statistically significant and in the expected direction, and the average marginal effect remained the same compared with Model 2. In all models, the average marginal effect on the treated was slightly lower than the marginal effect for the full sample of Black

father–child pairs. Among White father-child pairs, the marginal effect of father's service on children's college completion was not significantly different from zero in any model. The second panel of Figure 3 summarizes the mediator-adjusted predicted probabilities that appear in Table 5, Model 3 (Black father–child pairs) and Model 6 (White father–child pairs).

The fourth hypothesis considered whether gains from military service differed between the conscription and AVF eras. Birth year was used as a proxy for age eligibility in each period. Men born before 1955 were assigned to the conscription era. Table 6 shows estimate from a model with control variables and background variables only (baseline) and a model including all mediators for each racial group in each period. Table 7 shows estimated probabilities and marginal differences.

Among Black father–child pairs, father's military service during the conscription era was positively associated with children's college attendance in Model 1 (B=0.712, $p<.05$). The probability that a child of a Black father who served in that era would finish college (Table 7) was 0.333, about 61 percent higher than for an otherwise similar peer with a nonveteran father (0.206; marginal difference = 0.128, $p<.05$). Hypothesized mediators (Model 2) reduced the marginal difference by about 44 percent (0.072, $p<.10$). In the later period, the coefficient associated with Black fathers' military service (Model 5) was positive but not statistically significant (B=0.356). The estimated probability that a child of a Black AVF-era veteran would complete college was 0.243 (Table 7, Model 5), about 27 percent smaller compared with children of same-race veterans who served during the conscription era. The marginal effect of father's veteran status in the AVF era (0.056) was nontrivial, but not statistically significant. This diminished association between father's service and children's college attendance is not attributable to Black young adults having become more likely to complete college overall. Rather, the probability of college completion was roughly the same in the two periods for nonveterans' children and decreased in the more recent period for veterans' children.

Among White father–child pairs, the probability of college attendance was between 0.46 and 0.48 in both periods, regardless of veteran status, and the average marginal effect was not significantly different from zero. The bottom two panels of Figure 3 provide a visual representation of the stable null relationship between veteran status and children's college completion among White fathers (Table 7, Models 3 and 7) and the declining magnitude of the association between the two periods among Black fathers (Models 1 and 5).

Sensitivity/robustness

Active-duty service. A limitation to the preceding analysis is that father's military service may include time in the Reserves or National Guard, which do not have the same structure or benefits as active-duty service. In a one-time module administered in 1994, male householders were asked whether they had ever been in service and if so, whether they were on active duty. About nine percent of White men and 12 percent of Black men who previously reported being a veteran or having been in military service did not report ever having been on active duty.

We replicated our analysis on the subset of fathers present in the 1994 wave, contrasting those who had ever served on active-duty with all others (see first panel

Table 6: Selected coefficients and standard errors from logistic regression models estimating the log-odds of adult children's college attainment by period, US Panel Study of Income Dynamics, 1968–2023.

	Father born 1920–1954				Father born 1955–1976			
	Black father –child pairs		White father –child pairs		Black father –child pairs		White father –child pairs	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Father ever in military service	0.712†	0.455	−0.009	0.000	0.356	0.462	−0.036	0.073
	(0.291)	(0.246)	(0.105)	(0.110)	(0.281)	(0.273)	(0.178)	(0.186)
Family income ever <200% federal poverty level		0.102		−0.665*		−0.702†		−0.475*
		(0.340)		(0.109)		(0.281)		(0.149)
Father ever unemployed		0.996*		−0.177		0.317		−0.444*
		(0.302)		(0.134)		(0.298)		(0.171)
Father ever out of labor force		−0.338		−0.025		−0.511		−0.133
		(0.319)		(0.154)		(0.361)		(0.191)
Father earned Bachelor's degree or higher		0.377		0.798*		1.535*		0.861*
		(0.526)		(0.119)		(0.329)		(0.151)
Father ever owned home		0.913*		0.322		0.280		0.585†
		(0.313)		(0.178)		(0.370)		(0.231)
Father has no spouse or partner		1.742*		[a]		−2.315		0.741
		(0.684)		[a]		(1.280)		(0.848)
Father's spouse or partner has Bachelor's degree		1.711*		0.659*		0.942*		0.740*
		(0.351)		(0.129)		(0.290)		(0.156)
Constant	−27.687	20.355	−53.394*	−30.502	−35.960	42.099	−103.228*	19.217
	(36.906)	(35.699)	(14.814)	(15.602)	(56.250)	(54.998)	(26.123)	(28.975)
N	1,678	1,678	3,640	3,640	975	975	1,515	1,515

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses. Model covariates include control variables, father's background, and state-year characteristics at father age 16.

[a] "No spouse or partner" combined with "Spouse or partner present, no college degree" due to perfect prediction ($N = 11$).

*$p<0.01$, †$p<0.05$.

Table 7: Average predicted probability of adult children's college attainment and average marginal effect of father's military service by period, US Panel Study of Income Dynamics, 1968–2023.

	Father born 1920–1954				Father born 1955–1976			
	Black pairs		White pairs		Black pairs		White pairs	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Father never in service	0.206	0.223	0.459	0.457	0.188	0.186	0.479	0.475
	(0.024)	(0.021)	(0.018)	(0.017)	(0.022)	(0.018)	(0.016)	(0.014)
Father ever in service	0.333	0.295	0.457	0.458	0.243	0.249	0.471	0.490
	(0.049)	(0.033)	(0.015)	(0.013)	(0.041)	(0.037)	(0.037)	(0.034)
Average marginal effect (AME)	0.128†	0.072	−0.002	0.000	0.056	0.064	−0.008	0.014
	(0.055)	(0.040)	(0.024)	(0.023)	(0.046)	(0.040)	(0.040)	(0.036)
N	1,678	1,678	3,640	3,640	975	975	1,515	1,515
AME among children with father ever in service	0.118†	0.069	−0.002	0.000	0.054	0.060	−0.008	0.014
	(0.050)	(0.037)	(0.024)	(0.023)	(0.044)	(0.037)	(0.040)	(0.036)
N	636	636	2,040	2,040	221	221	258	258

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses. Estimates are based on Table 6. Predicted probabilities are averaged over the observed covariate distribution within race.
$^{*}p < 0.01$, $^{\dagger}p < 0.05$.

of Table A2, Online Supplement).[9] Among Black father–child pairs, the average marginal effect of service in the active-duty sample (0.132, $p<.05$) in the baseline model (including demographic controls and background covariates only) was about 25 percent larger than the marginal effect reported in the bottom panel of Table 3, and remained statistically significant in the full model (0.098, $p<.05$). Among White father child–pairs, the marginal effect was close to zero.

We repeated the analysis on the same sample using the more inclusive measure of military service (second panel of Table A2). For Black families, the positive marginal effect in the baseline model was 0.102 ($p<.05$), nearly identical in magnitude but weaker in statistical significance compared with the marginal effects reported in the bottom panel of Table 3. The size of the marginal effect in White families remained near zero. To summarize, when the definition of military service was restricted to include self-reported active-duty service only, there were larger positive effects of Black men's service experience than a measure based on survey questions that did not ascertain active-duty status. We conclude that our main results are conservative estimates of the effect of Black men's active-duty service on their children's educational attainment.

Unobserved confounding and institutional selection into service

To assess whether the observed association between Black fathers' military service and children's educational attainment was driven by unobserved confounding, we calculated the E-value statistic (VanderWeele and Ding 2017) for the full sample from Table 2, Model 3. The E-value describes the minimum strength of the association that an unmeasured confounder would need to have with both the treatment (father's service) and the outcome (children's educational attainment) to fully explain away their association conditional on covariates. It is measured on the risk ratio scale. For Black father–child pairs, the E-value was 2.04, indicating that an unmeasured confounder that increased the risk of both father's service and children's college completion by a factor of about 2 could fully explain away the observed association. A more moderate confounder with a risk ratio of 1.38 would be sufficient to shift the lower bound of the confidence interval to include the null. This more modest estimate reflects the width of the confidence intervals obtained from clustered, probability-weighted observations with robust standard errors, as well as any residual confounding.

An important source of potential confounding is in how the Armed Forces evaluates men's eligibility for service. Most relevant here, otherwise eligible prospective service members are disqualified if they score below a stated threshold on the Armed Forces Qualification Test (AFQT), which assesses verbal skill, literacy, and mathematical reasoning. If men who score above the threshold are more likely to have children who complete college than men who score below the threshold, then any relationship between father's military service and children's educational attainment may be spurious and driven by men's cognitive achievement. To evaluate this hypothesis, we draw upon an inadvertent natural experiment.

The AFQT has been used for eligibility screening in all branches since 1950. A version adopted as part of the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery in

October 1976 was misnormed, resulting in nearly half of recruits being classified as having low aptitude for service when re-assessed by 1978. This misnormed version remained in use for recruitment until October 1980 (Rostker 2006). We distinguished men who enlisted between 1977 and 1980 from those who enlisted in earlier and later periods to identify potential differences in the probability of children's college completion. We use the 1994 active-duty sample, which includes actual dates of service, and limit it to men born after 1945 to compare individuals who were eligible for service during roughly the same historical period.

Results from baseline and full models are summarized in Table A3 in the Online Supplement. We report estimated average predicted probabilities and average marginal effects. Among children of Black men, those whose fathers enlisted when the misnormed test was in use had a higher probability of college completion (0.417) compared with those whose fathers enlisted immediately before (0.36) or after (0.41) in the baseline model. Marginal differences for dates of entry were larger but not statistically significant in the full model. The patterns were similar but the marginal effect for period of entry was smaller among White father–child pairs. We interpret these results cautiously as evidence that the association between father's service and children's college completion is not driven by unobserved differences in men's cognitive achievement.

Educational timing. The relationship between father's military service and children's college attainment may be misspecified if fathers had already completed at least a bachelor's degree before entering military service. Using the 1994 wave to compare year of service entry against the year when a man's highest postsecondary degree was earned. No Black men had earned at least a bachelor's degree before service entry, whereas 39 White men had. We estimated the baseline and full models for White father–child pairs excluding those observations. Results were nearly identical to models that included pre-service college graduates (not shown, available upon request).

Intergenerational transmission of military service. Children of veteran fathers may be more likely to enlist than children of nonveterans, which could mediate the association between father's status and children's college completion. We restricted the analytic sample to father–child pairs in which the child had ever been a family unit reference person or spouse/partner reporting their own veteran status. Among Black (N=2,365) and White (N=4,865) pairs, veterans' children were three percentage points more likely to have ever enlisted (in both groups, 9% versus 6% among nonveterans' children). Among Black children military service was marginally positively associated with their own college completion ($p<.10$) but accounting for that status only trivially reduced the marginal effect of fathers' service (not shown, available upon request). Own military service was not associated with White children's college attainment.

Discussion

For generations in the post–Civil War United States, Black men have largely continued to enter adulthood with more limited educational, labor market, and housing opportunities than their White peers because of persistent *de facto* segregation and

discrimination. These constraints on men's early prospects affect their own and their children's life chances.

We asked whether Black children's outcomes would look different if their fathers entered adulthood in an opportunity structure that provided occupational and social integration, job training, health care, affordable housing, predictable income, and subsidized pathways to college attainment and homeownership. The counterfactual that comes closest to this model is the US Armed Forces, a total institution that moved from near exclusion of Black troops before World War II to proportional representation and occupational and social integration across all branches four years before passage of the Civil Rights Act.

Adult children of Black men who were in military service between World War II and the mid-1990s were about 10.6 percentage points (53 percent) more likely to finish college than children of nonveterans. These intergenerational educational returns to service were concentrated among children of Black fathers who served before the transition to an all-volunteer force in 1973. These children were 12.8 percentage points (61 percent) more likely to complete college than peers with nonveteran fathers. Among those whose fathers served in the AVF era, the marginal difference was less than half as large.

We tested three mechanisms to explain why Black veterans' children were more likely to finish college than their same-race peers. The diversion hypothesis anticipated that any gains from military service came through removing men from a constrained opportunity structure during a critical life stage, when limited educational opportunity, unstable or poorly paid employment, or contact with the criminal legal system could derail human capital and resource accumulation. This hypothesis was supported. It is consistent with prior work that described wartime military service as a turning point for young men facing limited horizons (Elder 1986; Sampson and Laub 1996). Other work (Kelty et al. 2010; Lundquist 2004) has suggested that peacetime military service offers economic security that enables Black service members to anticipate a more stable future, as evidenced by their higher marriage rates compared with civilians. Although, we cannot directly describe how the context of fathers' military service shaped children's educational outcomes, the robust association warrants further consideration.

The GI benefits hypothesis was also supported. About two-fifths of the intergenerational gain to Black veterans' service was attributable to their higher likelihood of finishing college themselves and their higher rates of homeownership while their children were growing up. Black veterans were also more likely to have college-educated spouses or cohabiting partners. These conditions had more explanatory power when fathers served in the conscription era than in the AVF era. This may seem unexpected because Black men who served in the earlier era—especially before passage of the Civil Rights Act and the Fair Housing Act—were less able to leverage GI Bill benefits to earn a college degree or purchase a home compared with White veterans. But compared to the assets available to same-race nonveteran peers at the time, the purchasing power of the GI benefits may still have been sufficient to generate a within-group advantage for Black veterans and their children.

The bridging hypothesis anticipated that military service would prepare high school–educated Black veterans for higher paying and more stable occupations in the civilian labor force than would otherwise be available, and that these conditions

would increase children's likelihood of college attainment. This hypothesis was not supported. Although Black veterans were less likely to have low income and more likely to be working than nonveterans, these circumstances were common in both groups. Three-quarters of Black veterans had low family income while their child was growing up, one-fifth were ever unemployed, and one-fifth were ever out of the labor force. These circumstances occurred more often among Black than White veterans. Thus, although prior research has found that transferable skills and the credential of veteran status carry greater returns for Black compared with White men, these may be insufficient to provide families with the multiple forms of capital that facilitate children's college enrollment and completion (Cross 2025).

These conclusions collectively point to two aspects of military service that enable intergenerational upward mobility. First, as a total institution, the Armed Forces alters the material and social conditions of men's young adulthood (*diversion* hypothesis). Second, as a public agency, the Department of Defense sets the terms for the transfer of public resources that endow veterans' accumulation of human capital and housing wealth (*GI benefits* hypothesis). Service appears to be less effective in shifting men's civilian labor market position to impact their children's life chances (*bridging* hypothesis). We interpret this as evidence that for young Black men during the mid-to-late twentieth century, service in the Armed Forces functioned as a substitute for rather than a conduit to incorporation into civilian opportunity structures that scaffold intergenerational mobility.

Children with White fathers were about twice as likely to complete college as those with Black fathers, but those with veteran fathers were no more likely to finish college than their peers with nonveteran fathers. This does not mean that White fathers' military service was inconsequential to their children's life chances. Among disadvantaged White men, service may have elevated their children's chances of finishing college to match children of nonveteran peers. However, because young White men generally had more early opportunities than their Black peers to attain human capital and resources through the civilian labor market, the relative benefits of service are less evident.

Our findings pertain to men who reached adulthood during the second half of the twentieth century. They do not imply that military enlistment should be promoted to redress racial and socioeconomic inequalities in opportunity today. Like other US institutions, the Armed Forces continues to exhibit institutional racism and personal discrimination (Burk and Espinoza 2012).The share of young people who choose to enlist is declining (Armor and Gilroy 2010). Further, service carries its own heavy costs, especially in wartime (MacLean 2010; MacLean and Elder 2007). And to the extent that service enables intra- and intergenerational mobility in Black families, its strongest influence seems to be in the past. Instead, the analytic framework and empirical findings can guide further inquiry into whether and how the institutions that contemporary and future young adults encounter will amplify or dampen racial inequality in intergenerational mobility.

This study has limitations. First, the measure of military service lacks information about conscription versus enlistment, occupation, branch, rank, or discharge status. We interpret the strength and magnitude of observed associations as conservative. Second, no information is available on the aspects of service that had a

lasting impact on men's skills and orientation, and there are no direct measures of receipt or use of GI Bill benefits. We infer their influence through mediator variables. Third, we have an incomplete view of the characteristics that led men to enter service and cannot rule out that the relationships we observe are due to unobserved personal or institutional selection mechanisms. Sensitivity analyses offer assurance that observed associations are unlikely to be entirely attributable to unobserved confounding or institutional selection. Fourth, greater attention to the role of military service or veteran status in assortative mating is warranted given the mediating effect of spouse or partner's educational attainment in our models.

Despite these limitations, our analysis yields novel insight into the intergenerational consequences of one form of institutional membership during young adulthood. These findings underscore the intergenerational consequences of early institutional contact and may guide future research examining whether and how contemporary institutions mitigate or reinforce entrenched racial inequality.

Notes

1 Beyond Truman's publicly expressed anger about the violence and mistreatment perpetrated against Black veterans, the order was motivated by pressure from Black civil rights organizers and Truman's desire to appeal to Black voters in the upcoming Presidential election (Moskos and Butler 1996).

2 Figures for white and Black active-duty service members refer to enlisted members only. The figure for Latinos includes all active-duty service members (enlistees and commissioned officers).

3 We focus on this group because most general infantry are high school graduates with no further credential.

4 Black men also more frequently experience pretrial detention and jail incarceration and serve longer sentences than white prisoners for the same class of offense (Alexander 2011; Beck and Harrison 2001; Western et al. 2021).

5 10 USC§504 "Persons Not Qualified", Public Law Number 90-235, 81 Statute 753 (1968).

6 In contrast, the GI Bill was not available to veterans who served between 1955 and 1965, and those service members were *less* likely than their peers to finish college, even among those who were academically ambitious (MacLean 2005). Educational funding was restored to veterans who served in this period when the GI Bill was reinstated in October 1965 (Veterans' Administration 1975).

7 Information on prison population size is not available for Hawaii or Alaska before statehood. No information is available from Tennessee before 1980, so we imputed the average state-year prison population from eight contiguous states. In two states, one state-year was missing. We imputed the average from the preceding and following years for each state.

8 We exclude families added to the PSID sample through immigrant refreshers in 1997 and 2017 because we cannot ascertain whether a parent's military service occurred before or after their entry to the United States.

9 The 1994 sample includes a more limited range of birth years compared to the full analytic sample, and due to attrition, participants in that wave may differ from the broader sample on unmeasurable characteristics associated with variables in the analytic model.

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Acknowledgments: We are grateful to Angela Dixon, Megan Reed, Christine Schwartz, and participants in seminars at Emory University, University of Maryland, and University of Wisconsin for comments on earlier versions of this manuscript and to the University of Pennsylvania Population Studies Center and its NICHD Center Grant (P2C HD044964) for administrative and computing support. All errors and omissions are the responsibility of the authors.

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