The Lingering Effects of Major Life Course Events:

Veteran Status and Attitudes toward Capital Punishment in the New Millennium

Lucky Tedrow

Department of Sociology

Western Washington University

Bellingham, WA 98225-9081

Ph: 360-650-3176

Email: Lucky.Tedrow@wwu.edu

Note: This research was supported by grant no. R15 HD069958 from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. Any opinions, findings, and conclusions expressed in this material are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of NICHD.

Abstract

This research analyzes one of the most debated sociopolitical issues in America: the death penalty. It tests a hypothesis that involves the largest employer in the United States: the US military. About 180,000 individuals enlist every year making the military the largest employer of young men and women in the United States. No one questions that time spent in the military differs from the life course of civilians. For example, previous research demonstrates how participation in a large-scale institution like the military can alter the life course outcomes like wages, earnings and occupation. The present research investigates whether being in a large scale institution, the military, has subsequent effects on opinions and attitudes. The findings indicate that veteran and non-veterans differ in attitudes toward the death penalty in the America.

Introduction

This research focuses on the comparison of veteran and non-veteran attitudes toward capital punishment. Using recent national survey data for the years 2010, 2012 and 2014 I examine characteristics influencing veteran and non-veterans attitudes toward capital punishment. The death penalty generates extensive debate and discussion. I seek to bring more light on the subject to a special population, former armed forces personnel. Veterans are perhaps more familiar with death and dying than individuals in the general population.

Public opinion data on capital punishment in America is reported in the media and in the literature. The death penalty continues to be a hotly debated topic in legislative bodies, the general public and regularly in the media. Whether the discussion concerns the inhumanity of a particular execution method being used, the judicial system's use of arbitrary factors leading to capital punishment, (Bowers and Foglia 2003; Burkhead, and Luginbuhl 1994; Gross 2004; Steiner 1999; Tabak 1986), the finality of punishment when it is incorrectly administered or the level of support a given society has for capital punishment – the debate and discussion continue. At the time of this writing 31 states, the federal government and U.S. military still have the death penalty for some crimes and 19 states and the District of Columbia do not have the death penalty as law (DPIC 2015). It seems incongruous that the federal government, which embraces the death penalty is located in the District of Columbia that abolished the death penalty nearly 35 years ago. Who is it that favors the death penalty? And who or which groups do not favor the death penalty? One way to better understand the divisive nature of the debate on the death penalty is to more clearly determine factors and mechanisms that affect attitudes on the death

penalty. To the extent that attitudes on the death penalty can be more clearly understood this research contributes to the effort by contrasting veterans with non-veterans and examining factors affecting attitudes toward capital punishment. Though all cross sectional analyses suffer criticism for selectivity, this research includes a control to help argue that veteran status affects death penalty attitudes and that being in the armed forces is a more likely explanation than the explanation that veterans held those attitudes prior to enlistment.

To the extent that public opinion has an influence on policy it is important to remain current and informed on public opinion regarding the death penalty. While GSS data do permit comparisons of opinions of veterans with those of nonveterans, it is not possible to determine whether any opinion differences also were present before entry to military service. As mentioned earlier, selectivity is always a concern with cross-sectional data. Recently the issue of capital punishment has continued to appear in the public media. In the past years the issues of whether or not states should be allowed to execute mentally handicapped individuals, if the use of new faulty chemicals in executions is ethical, or if older methods of executions (e.g., gas chambers, firing squads, and electrocution) should be reinstated have been controversial topics in the United States. LeGraw and Grodin (2002) summarize the difficulties in the shift to lethal injection as means of providing a more humane execution. Also, some state governors have implemented moratoriums on the death penalty. Capital punishment continues as an issue that warrants clarification, monitoring and further discussion. And specifically this examination of the opinions of those with armed forces experience is important to understand.

Military service has been linked to several life course outcomes including income, wages, earnings and occupational status (Teachman and Tedrow 2004, Teachman and Tedrow 2007). Several chapters in the book by Wilmoth and London (2013) cover the substantial literature

linking military service to life course outcomes such as health and well-being; marriage, cohabitation and divorce; and socioeconomic achievement (see Teachman 2013). Regardless of the time period in the service, veterans have fewer children than non-veterans (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs 2011; Card 1983; Teachman, Tedrow, and Anderson 2015).

Attitudes of military service personnel as a life course outcome has received little attention in the literature, however, Schreiber (1979) provides a notable exception when he reported few differences between veterans and nonveterans opinions using data from the early 1970s. Military service linkages to the life course attitudes is the focus of the current research reported here.

Review of the Literature:

Judges (1999) directly connects Terror Management Theory (TMT) to support for capital punishment. His core argument is that mortality salience terrifies people, and that the institution of capital punishment provides an unconscious, symbolic defense mechanism. TMT provides a symbolic protection against the terror of realizing one's own mortality (Judges 1999:161). To gain spiritual or religious immortality if we live according to certain social rules. Also, "culture offers symbolic immortality" because institutions are long-lasting. Even after someone dies, a part of them will live on in the institutions with which they identified (Judges 1999:165). TMT states that mortality salience is associated with hyper-punitiveness, aggression, and authoritarianism, and Judges (1999:161) finds that these tendencies are also associated with increased support for the death penalty.

McCann (2008) examines how death penalty and execution rates differ based on the conservativeness of a state and the level of threat experienced in the state. One measure he used was voter party identification in his analysis of US State death penalty sentencing over the period

1977-2004. McCann (2008) used Authoritarian Dynamic Theory (ADT) which posits that authoritarian personalities have a worldview favoring conformity, and that when faced with threat, they become even more authoritative. However, his study also utilizes Terror Management Theory (TMT). This theory purports that people are most adamant about their worldview when they have a heightened sense of mortality salience. Mortality salience means that an individual has awareness about their own death. Worldview is important because it gives meaning to life and "allays existential fear by giving meaning to our lives, by providing self-esteem if we believe that we behave in accord with its inherent value standards, and by promising 'literal' or symbolic immortality if we live by its prescriptions" (McCann 2008:914). McCann says there is no *empirical* research linking TMT and the death penalty, but he reiterates the theoretical ideas of Judges (1999). Imposing the death penalty is a way to unconsciously ignore one's own sense of mortality salience by choosing to "indulge in punitive and often authoritarian aggression against an offending target person" (McCann 2008:914).

Schreiber (1979:824) provides a broad review of research that compares opinions of veterans and nonveterans from the mid-1970s. His research was based on the socializing effects of education and the conclusion of Stephens and Long (1970) that "education promotes enlightenment; and enlightenment promotes liberalism". Schreiber considered military service experience as an additional factor in the socialization young adults in the United States. Schreiber's (1979) examination of veteran opinions was conducted exclusively on persons who were subject to the military draft. The current research is primarily based on attitudes of those individuals who would have experienced military service during the all-volunteer force era.

About 180,000 individuals enlist every year making the military the largest employer of young men and women in the United States (Department of Defense, 2005). No one questions

that time spent in the military, the training and experiences gained while in the service differ from those in civilian life. Roghmann and Sodeur (1972) suggest that veterans would be more authoritarian than non-veterans (Schreiber 1979:824). Similar to Schreiber, the present study examines whether the military service effects on opinions carry over into their subsequent civilian life. Specifically, the current research examines veterans' opinions on the death penalty.

We can assume that veterans have an increased sense of mortality salience compared to the average non-veteran because death is an unavoidable aspect of combat and war. When someone signs up for the armed forces, they know that there is a distinct possibility they will be put in harm's way. Veterans who served in combat likely put their lives in danger regularly, they may have seen their fellow soldiers, as well their enemies, wounded or even killed, and they may have been injured themselves. While personnel in non-combat positions may be somewhat insulated from the danger, there is always the risk that plans could go wrong and they could find themselves in a dangerous situation. Through their military service, veterans have had ample opportunities to consider their own death and death as a broader concept, so they probably have permanently increased their mortality salience. Therefore I suggest that veterans are more likely than non-veterans to be in favor of capital punishment. Based on the theories presented I propose the following hypotheses.

Hypothesis 1. Veterans will favor the death penalty more than non-veterans.

The second hypothesis is included as a test for selectivity. The use of cross-sectional data is always subject to the criticism that respondents held these opinions prior to the life course experience, in this case, military service. We do not have the veterans and non-veterans opinions on capital punishment at ages prior to joining the military. As a test for selectivity the interaction term, veteran times age is included in the model and leads to the next hypothesis.

Hypothesis 2. The effect of military service on favoring the death penalty attenuates with age.

The second hypotheses is key in that it tests that the effect of a life course event, military service, can diminish over time.

Data and Method

Data for this analysis are taken from the General Social Survey (GSS) for the years 2010, 2012 and 2014. The GSS is a representative sample of the non-institutional population in the United States age 18 and older and is generalizable to the United States population. The study sample is composed of 2,545 respondents who answered all the questions used in the analysis for the period of study. This study examines attitudes for men only who are at least twenty-one years of age. The sample includes 539 veterans and 2006 non-veterans.

The measure of support for capital punishment is dichotomous. Logistic regression is used for the analysis. The dependent variable is coded to a dummy variable, 0=oppose and 1=favor the death penalty based on the survey question on capital punishment: "Do you favor or oppose the death penalty for persons convicted of murder?" The question is unambiguous in that it specifies the condition, 'convicted of murder', when eliciting the respondent's answer.

The independent variable of interest in this study is whether the respondent ever served in the military. It is assessed using the question: "Have you ever been on active duty for military training or service for two consecutive months or more?" Reponses were coded 0='no' and 1='yes, served in the armed forces'. The GSS is a representative sample of the non-institutionalized population of the United States. For the study sample, 2.5% were currently in the military and only ten respondents, currently in the military, were non-veterans. A control

measure for selectivity was constructed by multiplying veteran status by age. This additional term will distinguish veterans from non-veterans over the life course. A negative effect of this interaction term in the model would indicate the attenuation of the veteran effect on the odds of favoring capital punishment with age. If the effect is negative and significant it indicates that the odds decrease more rapidly by age for veterans than non-veterans.

Based on previous research, other variables were controlled in the analysis. Education is assessed using the question "If finished 9th-12th grade: Did you ever get a high school diploma or a GED certificate?" Categories represent the respondent's highest degree attained. Dummy variables were constructed for five categories of education: less than high school; high school graduate; junior college; bachelor; and graduate. The high school graduate dummy variable is omitted in the analysis. Dummy variables for white, Black and other race were constructed, with white being omitted in the analysis. Political party identification was measured by 1=Republican and 0=not Republican. A dummy variable for South place of residence was included in the analysis. Respondents living in the East South Central, West South Central and the South Atlantic, were coded 1=South and 0=otherwise. A measure of religious fundamentalism is controlled from three categories: Fundamentalist; Moderate; and Liberal. This measure is used to assess the fundamentalism or liberalism of the respondent's religion. The dummy variable was constructed by coding 1=Fundamentalist and 0=Moderate or Liberal.

Results

Descriptive statistics for the variables are shown in Table 1 which provides the information for the full sample, veterans and non-veterans for the combined years 2010, 2012 and 2014. Over 70% of the respondents in the study period are in favor of the death penalty for

the study sample, veterans and non-veterans. This is consistent with those favoring the death penalty in America over the past several decades. Figure 1 shows the actual percent favoring the death penalty from 1974 to 2013 for the full GSS respondents (men and women) along with the number of person executed under the death penalty for the same time period. Note that actual executions per year fluctuate radically while the percent favoring the death penalty over the same time period remains stable with a minimum of 64 percent to a maximum of 79 percent of the United States population.

---------- Table 1 and Figure 1 about here ----------

Veterans compose just over twenty percent of the male GSS sample studied. The mean age of respondents in the sample is 47.9 years. The sample is 78 percent white; 11 percent black and 10 percent are in the 'other race' category. Thirty-six percent of the sample live in the South. Education was assessed using the variable that indicates highest degree completed. The less than high school category is 14 percent of the sample; high school completed is 50 percent; junior college is 7 percent; bachelor degree is 19 percent; and graduate degree is 10 percent of the sample. Religious conservatives compose 22 percent of the sample and respondents who identify with the Republican Party are nearly 38 percent of the sample under analysis.

In Table 2 the effect of veteran status on favoring the death penalty is presented in three models with Model 2 including controls and Model 3 including both controls and the interaction term for selectivity. Model 1 shows the effect of prior service, i.e., veteran status, on favoring the death penalty. Being a veteran increases the log-odds of favoring the death penalty. The odds of favoring the death penalty are 61% (1.607-1=.607) higher for veterans than for non-veterans.

The effect of veteran status on being in favor of the death penalty is statistically significant ($p<.001$), meaning that we can safely assume that the effect exists in the population from which this GSS sample is drawn. Across Models 1 through 3 the odds of favoring the death penalty are higher for veterans than for non-veterans. In Model 2 the odds of favoring the death penalty are 29% higher for veterans. In Model 3, which includes the age-veteran interaction the odds of favoring of the death penalty are 3.4 times greater for veterans than non-veterans.

---------- Table 2 about here ----------

In addition to veteran status, Model 2 includes measures of age, race, region, education, religious conservativism, and party affiliation. The first control variable is a variable indicating the age of the respondent in years. The effect of age on the death penalty is curvilinear and a squared term for age is also included in Model 2. The age coefficient is positive and the age-squared term coefficient is negative and both are statistically significant. Being either black or the 'other race' category lower the odds of favoring the death penalty compared to being white. Specifically, the odds of favoring the death penalty are about 64% lower for blacks compared to whites and the difference is statistically significant. The odds of favoring the death penalty are about 39% lower for other race category compared to whites and the difference is statistically significant. Living in the South was not significant.

Model 2 also includes the measures of education, religious conservativism and political party identification. Results for education are more complex. Being either less educated or more educated than having a high school degree lowers the odds of favoring the death penalty. The odds of favoring the death penalty are lower for respondents' with less than high school education. Similarly, those with a bachelor or graduate degree lower the odds of favoring the death penalty compared to those with a high school degree. For these three categories, (< high

school; bachelor and graduate degree), the differences from high school degree are statistically significant ($p<.001$). However, the odds of favoring the death penalty do not differ statistically when comparing junior college degree with high school graduate. The odds of favoring the death penalty are higher for religious conservatives and Republican respondents than liberals or non-Republican respondents respectively. Both of these differences are statistically significant.

Model 3 is identical to Model 2 except Model 3 includes the interaction term created by multiplying age by the veteran status variable. The GSS survey is cross-sectional secondary data and ways to control for selectivity into the military are limited. The interaction of age multiplied by veteran status is included as an attempt to control for selectivity. The interaction term in Model 3 veterans favored the death penalty prior to enlistment and not due to military service the interaction should not be negative and significant. A non-significant finding gives support to selectivity meaning veterans favored capital punishment prior to enlistment. The coefficient on the interaction term is negative indicating favoring the death penalty decreases more rapidly with the age for veterans than non-veterans and it is statistically significant ($p<.05$). The attenuation lends support to the veteran effect on the log-odds of favoring the death penalty. I determine that having prior military service, not selectivity, is the source of the veteran effect as the effect attenuates over time.

---------- Figure 2 about here ----------

In Figure 2, the odds of favoring the death penalty for veterans are calculated by age separately for whites and blacks using the coefficients from Model 3. The odds are calculated setting other variables to the respective omitted category: non-south; high school education; not religious conservative and not Republican.

The Cox and Snell R-square provides a measure of the overall fit (effectiveness) of the logistic regression model. Though somewhat similar to R-squared from Ordinary Least Squares regression the only difference is that Cox and Snell R-square can be interpreted in terms of predictive power but not in terms of variance explained. The Cox and Snell R-square of .126 indicates that we can reduce our errors in predicting whether one favors the death penalty by about 12.6% if we take into consideration their veteran status and the other variables in the analysis.

Conclusion

I find that veterans surveyed since 2010 favor the death penalty more than nonveterans. Specifically, the odds of favoring the death penalty are higher for veterans than non-veterans and the difference is statistically significant. In the analysis, controls for demographic variables are included. Salient variables known to influence opinions on the death penalty, religious conservativism and political party identification are included in the final models. This study is one of the few attempts to disentangle the effect of veteran status on attitudes toward the important and ongoing debate on the death penalty in America. The attitudes of veterans differ from those of non-veterans even in the presence of control variables and these differences are significant. In this study of a national survey veterans are found to favor the death penalty compared to non-veterans. Specifically, the odds of favoring the death penalty are higher for veterans than for non-veterans. Also, the interaction term (age x veteran), provides additional confirmation that the effect of favoring the death penalty is due to military service rather than a selectivity issue.

These results are preliminary. Limitations include the fact that only one measure, the death penalty, is investigated in this research. If being in the military, a life course experience,

has effects on views, attitudes and policy positions of veterans – this research is only a beginning. Specifically, only one opinion (attitude) is addressed here, whether veterans support for the death penalty differs from non-veterans. This study uses cross-sectional data where longitudinal data could permit superior controls for selectivity. The goal in this research was to present the possibility that there could be other outcomes of military service (e.g., opinions and attitudes) than the types of outcomes commonly discussed in the literature (e.g., wages, income, occupation, fertility). This study employs a narrow set of variables for analysis. Should other measures of religiosity be included? A measure of religious conservativism is the only one included. Suggestions for future research include testing many of the other outcome opinions and attitudes available in the data set and adding other dimensions of religiosity in the predictive models. This preliminary investigation is offered as an exploration into the effect of veteran status on attitudes in general.

Bibliography

Bowers, William J. and Wanda D. Foglia. 2003. *Still Singularly Agonizing: Law's Failure to Purge Arbitrariness from Capital Sentencing*, 39 Crim. L. Bull. 51.

Burkhead, Michael and James Luginbuhl. 1994. Sources of Bias and Arbitrariness In The Capital Trial, 50 J. Soc. Issues 103.

Card, Josefina J. 1983. *Lives after Vietnam: The Personal Impact of Military Service.* Free Press.

Death Penalty Information Center 2015. Downloaded on June 25, 2015. http://www.deathpenaltyinfo.org/states-and-without-death-penalty

Department of Defense, 2005.

Gross, Samuel R. 2000. Still Unfair, Still Arbitrary - But Do We Care?, Keynote Address, 26 Ohio N.U. L. Rev. 517.

Jones, Megan B. and Richard L. Wiener. 2011. "Effects of Mortality Salience on Capital Punishment Sentencing Decisions," *Basic and Applied Social Psychology* 33(2): 167-81.

Judges, Donald P. 1999. "Scared to Death: Capital Punishment as Authoritarian Terror Management." *UC Davis Law Review* 33(1): 155-248.

LeGraw, Joan M. and Michael A. Grodin 2002. "Health Professionals and Lethal Injection Execution in the United States." Human rights Quarterly 24(2): 382-423.

McCann, Stewart J.H. 2008. "Societal Threat, Authoritarianism, Conservatism, and U.S. State Death Penalty Sentencing (1977–2004)." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 9(5): 913–923

Roghmann, Klaus and Wolfgang Sodeur. "The Impact of Military Service on Authoritarian Attitudes: Evidence from West Germany." *American Journal of Sociology* 78:418-433.

Schreiber, E. M. 1979. "Enduring Effects of Military Service? Opinion Differences between U.S. Veterans and Nonveterans." *Social Forces* 57(3) 824-839 doi: 10.1093/sf/57.3.824.

Steiner, Benjamin D. 1999. Still Arbitrary: Capital Sentencing in the Post-Furman Era, Criminal Justice Policy Review 10(1) 85-101.

Stephens, W. N., and C. S. Long. 1970. "Education and Political Behavior." In James A. Robinson (ed.), Political Science Annual: An International Reviezv. Vol. 2. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill.

Tabak, Ronald J. 1986. The Death of Fairness: The Arbitrary and Capricious Imposition of the Death Penalty In The 1980s, Review of Law and Change 14:797-848.

Teachman, Jay, Lucky Tedrow, and Carter Anderson. 2015. "A Note on the Relationship between Military Service and Childbearing." *Sociological Perspectives* 58:595-608.

Teachman, Jay and Lucky Tedrow. 2007. "Joining Up: Did Military Service in the Early All Volunteer Era Affect Subsequent Civilian Income?" *Social Science Research* 36:1447-1474.

Teachman, Jay and Lucky Tedrow. 2004. "Wages, Earnings, and Occupational Status: Did World War II Veterans Receive a Premium?" *Social Science Research* 33:581-605.

Teachman, Jay. 2013. Pp. 275-290 in J. Wilmoth and A. London (eds), "Setting an Agenda for Future Research on Military Service and the Life Course." Life-Course Perspectives on Military Service. New York: Routledge.

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics. 2011. "America's Women Veterans: Military Service History and VA Benefit Utilization

Statistics."

http://www.va.gov/vetdata/docs/specialreports/final_womens_report_3_2_12_v_7.pdf

Wilmoth, Janet and Andrew London. 2013. Life-Course Perspectives on Military Service. New York: Routledge.

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics for Variables in the Analysis, General Social Survey 2010, 2012 and 2014.

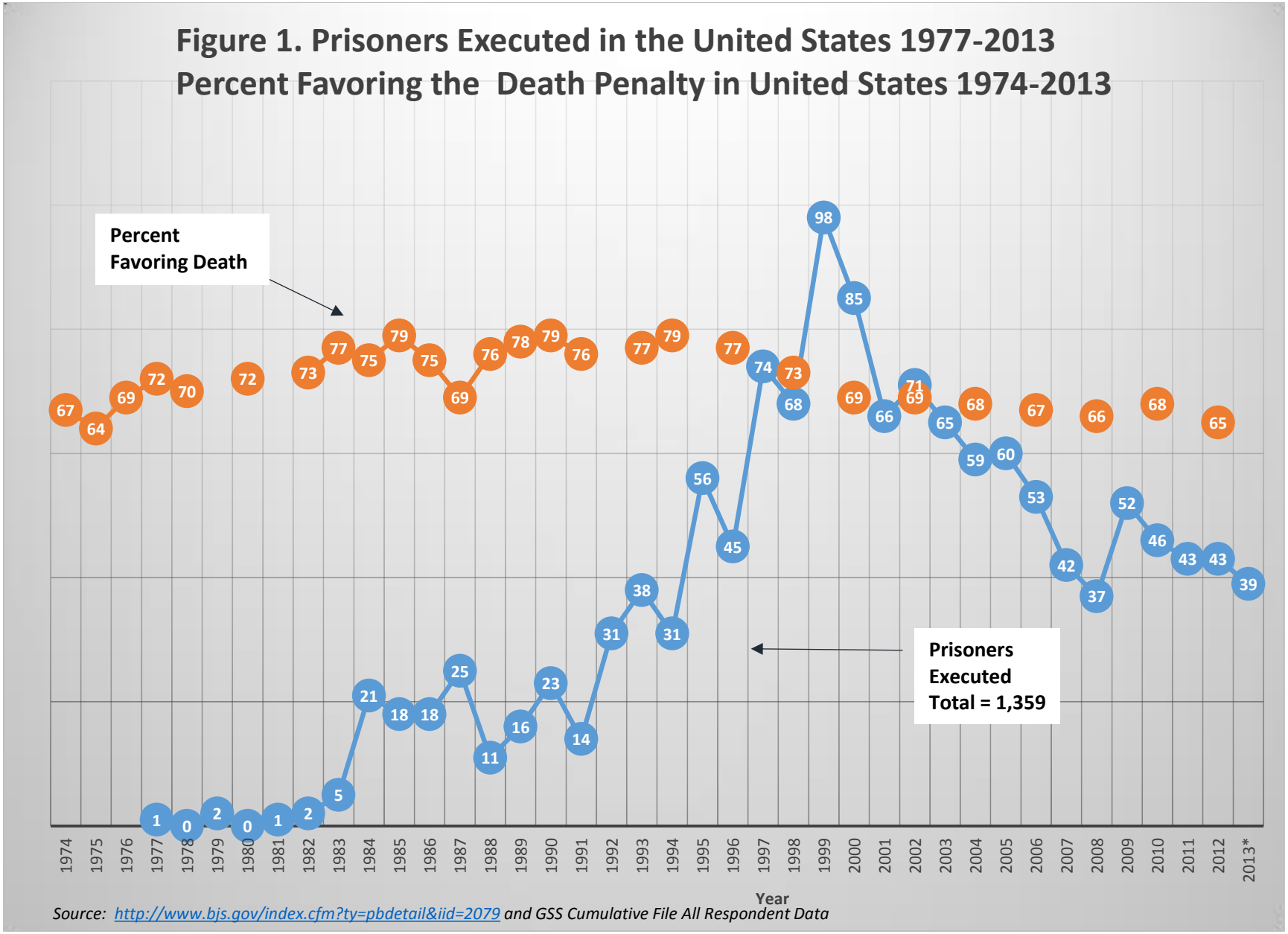
	All Respondents	Veterans	Non-veterans
Favor Death Penalty	72.0%	79.1%	70.1%
Veterans	21.2	--	--
Age Mean (std. dev.)	47.9 (16.6)	59.0 (16.7)	44.9 (15.3)
Age Squared/100	25.7	37.6	22.5
Age * Veteran	12.5	59.0	0
White[a]	78.3	84.8	76.6
Black	11.3	10.7	11.5
Other Race	10.3	.045	11.9
South	35.9	44.0	33.7
Less than High School	13.7	.1	15.5
High School[a]	50.1	55.6	48.7
Junior College	6.6	10.9	5.4
Bachelor	19.4	17.0	20.0
Graduate Degree	10.3	9.5	10.5
Religious Conservative	22.3	28.1	20.8
Republican Party	37.6	46.3	35.3
Valid N	2,545	539	2,006

[a]Indicates omitted category in the multi-variate analysis. (Analysis is for males aged 21 years and older).

Table 2 Effect on the Log-Odds of Favoring the Death Penalty: General Social Survey, 2010, 2012 and 2014.

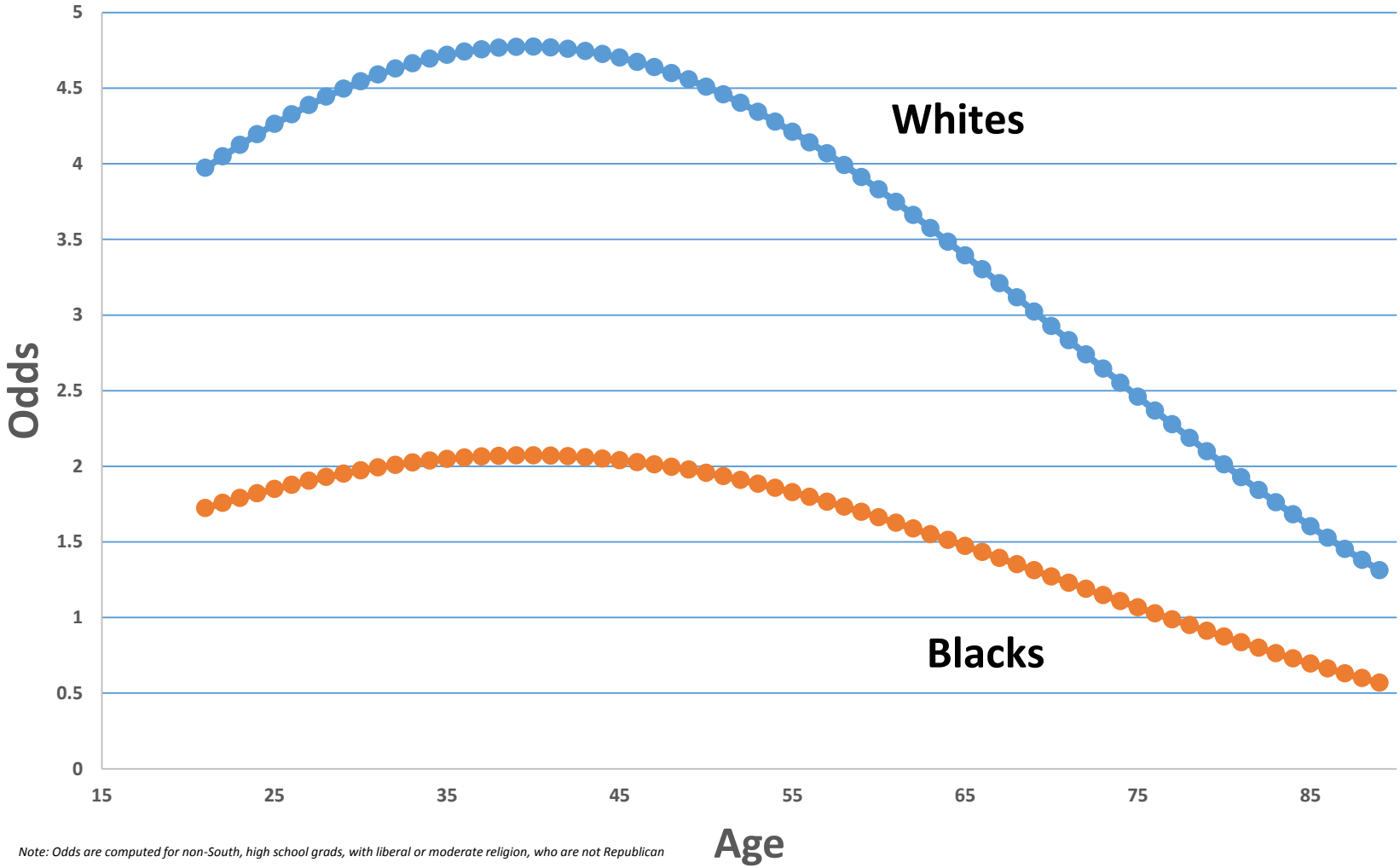
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Veteran	0.474***	.258*	1.216**
Age		.070***	.059***
Age Squared/100		-.068***	-.053***
Black[a]		-.824***	-.835***
Other Race		-.608***	-.603***
South		.029	.030
Less than High School[b]		-.524**	-.521***
Junior College		-.012	-.012
Bachelor		-.638***	-.627***
Graduate		-1.111***	-1.115***
Religious Conservative		.322**	.319**
Republican		1.323***	1.315***
Interaction Veteran x Age			-.017**
Constant	.845***	-.661*	-.485
Cox & Snell R square	.007	.125	.126

*** p<.01 **p<.05 *p<.10
N = 2,545
[a]Omitted category for RACE is White.
[b]Omitted category for DEGREE is High School.



Source: http://www.bjs.gov/index.cfm?ty=pbdetail&iid=2079 and GSS Cumulative File All Respondent Data

Figure 2. Odds of Favoring the Death Penalty for Veterans : GSS 2012-2014



Note: Odds are computed for non-South, high school grads, with liberal or moderate religion, who are not Republican