

Jobless rate at 11.2% for veterans of Iraq, Afghanistan

By Gregg Zoroya, USA TODAY

WASHINGTON - The economic downturn is hitting Iraq and Afghanistan veterans harder than other workers - one in nine are now out of work - and may be encouraging some troops to remain in the service, according to Labor Department records and military officials.

The 11.2% jobless rate for veterans who served in Iraq and Afghanistan and who are 18 and older rose 4 percentage points in the past year. That's significantly higher than the corresponding 8.8% rate for non-veterans in the same age group, says Labor Department economist Jim Walker.

Army records show the service has hit 152% of its re-enlistment goal this year. "Obviously the economy plays a big role in people's decisions," says Lt. Col. Christopher Garver, an Army spokesman.

Some soldiers are re-enlisting specifically because of the poor civilian job market, says Sgt. 1st Class Julius Kelley, a career counselor at Fort Campbell, Ky. "It's job security (in the Army), and I try to sell that all the time," he says. "You don't have to worry about getting laid off in the Army."

The market is tough outside the Army. Unemployment among the youngest of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans, those ages 20 to 24, reached 15% in February, records show. That compares with 13.8% for the same age group of non-veterans. Some government jobs offer preference to veterans by giving them extra points on civil service exams. However, there is no evidence this is having much effect on unemployment.

The \$787 billion economic stimulus law enacted last month includes a \$2,400-per-person tax credit for employers who hire unemployed veterans in 2009 and 2010.

In addition, the Labor Department operates career centers that provide priority service for veterans and the HireVetsFirst website, says Peggy Abrahamson, a Labor Department spokeswoman.

Young veterans, Walker says, often have trouble "translating their military skills into skills on their résumé that employers recognized."

The total number of unemployed veterans of the two wars - about 170,000 - is about the same as the number of U.S. troops deployed to those wars.

Iraq and Afghanistan veterans enter the workforce at a disadvantage, says Justin Brown, a Veterans of Foreign Wars specialist in veterans' economic issues. "If you served in the military, you're disconnected from the civilian workforce, you don't have contacts that a civilian person has," he says.

The least the country can do, Brown says, is help veterans find jobs so "they come home and they're not living in the streets, unemployed, homeless or in bankruptcy."

Robert Pearson, 23, of Minneapolis, is a former paratrooper who served in Afghanistan. He says it's hard to find work as a human resources manager in order to use the skills he learned managing soldiers as a combat team leader.

He says he was shocked when a job-placement worker told him that some employers consider a military record almost like having "a felony."

"People just frown upon us nowadays, thinking we're all flying-off-the-handle crazy guys," says Pearson, who has a bachelor's degree in business management. "They don't even give us a chance"