Since at least the Civil War, Americans have expressed concern that poor men have been more likely than the rich to fight in wars, facing the risks of death and injury inequitably. The following report reviews the debate regarding who serves and fights during wartime to address what appears to be a simple question: Did the men who served in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan come disproportionately from minority and low-income families? While it is relatively easy to assess the racial component of this question, it is more difficult to evaluate the socioeconomic characteristics of service-members.

This report: 1) describes the roots of this perennial concern in previous eras; 2) describes why available data make questions about class and service difficult to answer; 3) describes previous research evaluating how those who served and died in wars differed from those who did not, including the few documents that have addressed socioeconomic inequity in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan; and 4) presents figures based on data from the Department of Defense that show how the demographic characteristics of recruits have changed over time; and 5) presents new analyses based on data that have apparently never been used to assess the socioeconomic characteristics of people who began entering the armed forces during the height of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, between 2004 and 2012. In brief, while there is little evidence of a “poverty draft” based on currently-available data, this analysis finds that there may have been a wealth exemption or a “middle class draft” during the contemporary wars. The report concludes with suggestions for future research and data collection.

1) The Historical Debate: From the Civil War to the contemporary era

Americans have feared that military service in the United States is inequitably distributed since at least the Civil War, and this fear has become particularly salient during wartime. During the Civil War, men were able to buy their way out of service if they had enough money to pay someone to serve in their place (Severo and Milford 1989).
During the early part of the Vietnam War, civil rights activists demonstrated that the armed forces drew disproportionately from minority communities. Indeed, in the early years of that war, blacks were disproportionately likely to be killed (Appy 1993). By the end of the war, however, blacks were no more likely to have died in the war than were whites.

In 1973, the US military shifted from a draft to an All-Volunteer Force (AVF), which led to new concerns about inequity. In the most recent decade, congressional representatives and advocates have expressed renewed concern with the inequities of service after the US entered the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. In 2003, the year after the start of the US engagement in Afghanistan, Congressman Charles Rangel first introduced legislation to reinstate the draft (Rangel 2002). He and journalists suggested that people were subject to a “poverty draft,” in which the poor and minorities were disproportionately likely to enlist and fight because they had fewer options in the civilian labor market (Mariscal 2007).

2) Difficulties in Assessing the Inequities of Wartime Service

When people discuss a “poverty draft,” they address a simple question, namely are the people who serve, fight, and die in the armed forces more likely than those who do not to be poor? This question is difficult to answer for several reasons.

a) Different military outcomes may be inequitably distributed

Researchers could conclude that poor people are not more likely than the affluent to serve in the armed forces, and service might still affect disadvantaged people more negatively than the privileged because soldiers follow particular paths that lead to different outcomes (e.g., combat duty) and that, in turn, may be socially patterned.

People first enlist in the military, choosing in which branch to serve from among the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, and Coast Guard. As Figure 1 shows, within these branches, they are assigned to different occupations. They may be assigned to combat or support occupations. Only 27 percent of a sample on active duty in 1999, for example, worked in combat positions (Burland and Lundquist 2013). Most previous researchers have evaluated either the first outcome, into the military, or the last - into death. But one might also care about the other, intermediate experiences such as not yet deployed (safe from combat) or deployed in comparative safety zones.
The distinctions between these types of service are important because the military can have either positive or negative effects based largely on when and how troops serve. Veterans and service-members have been shown to experience positive effects of service in general, particularly if they are minorities or grew up in disadvantaged families (Browning, Lopreato, and Poston 1973; Teachman and Tedrow 2007). However, soldiers may not benefit from positive effects if they fight in wartime and thus can be killed or injured. Combat veterans are also more likely than people who did not see combat to be unemployed and suffer disabilities later in their lives (MacLean 2010). They confront a host of issues with what has been called “readjustment,” such as the increased odds of divorce and other negative family outcomes (Institute of Medicine 2013).

b) Few sources of information assess military inequity

It is difficult to ascertain whether a poverty draft existed during the contemporary wars because the Department of Defense has not often collected the necessary information about recruits. When people apply to enlist in the military they provide information about their race, geographic origin, and educational attainment, but not about their socioeconomic status. In the absence of the necessary information, researchers have analyzed two sources of data.

First, they have evaluated information from the Department of Defense not about the families of recruits, but about their neighborhoods (e.g. Kane 2006). Since 1975, or close to the beginning of the all-volunteer force era, Defense Department analysts have prepared an annual report on the types of people who serve in the military, titled Population Representation in the Military.
At the request of Congress, to evaluate whether service was fair and equitable, the armed forces administered an additional annual Survey of Recruit Socioeconomic Backgrounds between 1989 and 1999 to assess the status of new enlistees. Yet they appear to have administered the last such survey in 1999. During the contemporary wars, the Population Representation has not directly assessed socioeconomic status, though it has recently begun to present the socioeconomic characteristics of neighborhood.

Evaluating the neighborhood rather than the family characteristics of recruits presents two potential problems. First individual characteristics may not accurately reflect average neighborhood level characteristics. Second, recruits may report not their home neighborhood, but that of the base to which they are assigned (Department of Defense 1998). In spite of these potential problems, this has been the best proxy available at the national level for many years and has been used in many studies attempting to answer questions about class and service.

In addition to the data collected by the military, researchers have also used a number of civilian surveys to assess socioeconomic characteristics but these analyses are based on respondents who enlisted mostly before the beginning of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. There are even fewer options for examining selection into combat roles, with the last survey apparently the Survey of Active Duty Personnel from 1999 (Burland and Lundquist 2013).

c) Changes in recruiting standards and targets over time

In addition to challenges in specifying and measuring inequities, changes in military recruitment targets, practices, and standards over time should also be considered as a factor influencing who is eligible to serve. The numbers of people on active duty in the armed forces between 1977 and 2012 dropped as the Cold War ended, from a high of 2.13 million in 1989 to 1.39 million just ten years later. Even during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the number on active duty did not rise above 1.43 million.

Service is a function of supply and demand for recruits, and is likely to be influenced by recruitment strategies. Demand tends to be higher during times of war and lower during times of peace. Supply tends to be higher when birth rates have been higher, leading to larger cohorts, and is also affected by whether the military uses a draft. Over the last three decades, the US armed forces have fallen short of their recruiting goals twice, first in 1998-1999 and again in 2005. Recruiting shortfalls can be due to one or a combination of economic, demographic, and military factors (Rostker 2006), such as a strong civilian economy or ongoing combat conditions. In the late-1990s, for example, the economy was strong, eligible cohorts were small, and some argued that the armed forces was not providing enough of a clear incentive to enlist.

In 2005, the armed forces began admitting more high school dropouts in order to meet recruiting goals (Schmitt 2005). In 2006, they began admitting a larger percentage of recruits who were below the cutoff on the aptitude test (Associated Press 2006). In 2007, the armed forces admitted a greater share of people who had committed crimes than they had the year before, using what
they label “conduct waivers” (Waxman 2008). These issues continued throughout the latter half of the 2000s, according to Harrison (2009).

As a result of these changes, the profile of service members has changed. For example, as the armed forces faced recruiting difficulties in the mid-2000s, service members became relatively less likely than civilians to hold a high school degree, dropping below 90 percent for the first time in two decades. These changes in recruiting standards also change the pool of eligible recruits.

3) Previous research regarding inequities by race and socio-economic status (SES) in military outcomes

Findings from previous research about enlistment, type of service, and death are summarized below. These studies show that the demographic characteristics of those who serve and die in the US armed forces have varied historically.

**Enlistment** - During the Vietnam War, research suggested that more privileged men were shielded from danger. Higher status men (whose fathers graduated from college) were less likely to be Vietnam veterans than men with lower status (Wilson 1995) Vietnam veterans were also less likely than comparable non-veterans to have themselves graduated from college (Mazur 1995).

Researchers have also examined whether poor and minority men were disproportionately likely to enlist during the volunteer era, since 1973. Among high school seniors in 1992, men were less likely to enlist if they came from families with higher income (Lutz 2008). Department reports published between 1989 and 1991 argued that military recruits were similar to civilians in many respects such as marital status and homeownership but had grown up in families with slightly lower educational and occupational attainment (Department of Defense 1989; Department of Defense 1990; Department of Defense 1991). Later reports demonstrated that recruits were also less likely than the general population to have grown up in two-parent homes.

Other researchers have found that people were most likely to enlist if they came from neither the upper nor lower parts of the distribution, but from the middle class. Young adults appeared to view the military during the peacetime volunteer era as a middle option, more desirable than entering the labor market after high school, but less desirable than going to college. According to the later *Population Representation* reports, recruits were less likely to come from both the higher and the lower ends rather than the middle of the socioeconomic distribution when measured by occupational status (Department of Defense 2000).

These patterns in enlistment by SES varied by race, with whites more likely to enlist if they grew up with fewer resources, while blacks were more likely to do so if they grew up with more resources. (e.g., Department of Defense 2000).

Overall, African-Americans were disproportionately likely to enter the military in the AVF era but this began to change in the early part of the twenty-first century. In 2002, the over-
representation of blacks enlisting in the military dipped precipitously. By 2004, they were less likely to enlist than would be expected given their share in the population for the first time in the previous 30 years. They continued to be less likely than would be expected to enlist between 2005-2007, the period when the armed forces failed to meet their enlistment goals. Since 2008, blacks have, once again, been disproportionately likely to enlist.

**Type of Service**-- There are apparently only two articles that evaluate the factors that determine how people come to serve in the military may differ from those that determine who comes to fight battles. According to these articles, men were more likely to serve in the military if they came from the middle of the socioeconomic and ability distributions. Yet, among those who served, they were more likely to be assigned to combat occupations or be exposed to combat if they came from the bottom.

Scholars have also examined whether military service was affected by race bias. During much of the draft era, blacks were less likely than whites to serve in the military. They were also less likely to see combat during the second World War, but nearly as likely to do so in the Korean and Vietnam wars (MacLean 2011). In the late 1970s and early 1980s, blacks were more likely to enlist in the military, but, once in the military, no more likely to serve in combat positions (MacLean and Parsons 2010). By the late-1990s, whites were disproportionately likely to serve in combat positions, while blacks were more likely to serve in support roles (Burland and Lundquist 2013).

**Deaths** - Since at least the 1950s, scholars have evaluated the class bias hypothesis, which is that poor and working class people are more likely than the rich to fight in wars. They have assessed this hypothesis, for the most part, using data on combat casualties in previous wars derived from neighborhoods. During the Korean war, men from Detroit were more likely to be killed in combat if they came from poorer neighborhoods and from those with greater shares of minorities (Mayer and Hoult 1955). Since at least the Vietnam war, US men were more likely to die if they came from poor rather than from wealthy neighborhoods (Kriner and Shen 2010). Only one article tests the class bias hypothesis using family level data and finds that Wisconsin men who died in the Vietnam war were more likely to have grown up in poor and working class families (Zeitlin, Lutterman, and Russell 1973).

**Available research on Iraq and Afghanistan** - According to an exhaustive examination of casualty records, researchers found that the service-members who died in Iraq were disproportionately likely to have grown up in neighborhoods with lower median income and less likely to have grown up in wealthier neighborhoods. They were also more likely to come from neighborhoods that had lower rather than higher rates of college graduation (Kriner and Shen 2010). In addition, they were more likely to have been killed during this war if they came from rural rather than from urban areas (Curtis and Payne 2010). Thus, they grew up in places that had fewer average resources.

In terms of race, white and Hispanic service-members were disproportionately likely to die in Iraq. Black service-members were not disproportionately likely to die, and may, in face, have
been less likely to be killed. The result regarding blacks was unexpected, given the history of black over-representation in the military, but can be explained by the fact that blacks were less likely than whites to serve in combat occupations (Burland and Lundquist 2013).

4) NEW FINDINGS: Socioeconomic characteristics of recruits during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, 2004-2012

The current analyses, based on the Educational Longitudinal Survey (ELS) evaluate whether the students who were high school sophomores in 2002 had enlisted by 2012, and whether such enlistment varies by race and family income, as well as parents’ socioeconomic (SES) status. The study gathered data from respondents in 2004, 2006 and 2012, a period covering the height of the recruiting difficulties for the armed forces during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The ELS is conducted by the Department of Education and designed to be a nationally representative sample of high school sophomores in 2002.

Figure 2 shows the differential enlistment by race and ethnicity. According to the figure, Hispanics were the most likely to enlist, whites and blacks were relatively less likely to do so, though these differences are not statistically significant. These three groups are all statistically more likely to enlist than those classified as other. Hispanics have been more likely to enlist if they are the children of immigrants (Lutz 2008).

Figure 2. Percent of 2002 high school sophomores enlisted by 2006 and 2012 by race

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1 The measure of parents’ socioeconomic status combines the occupational status of the parents with their educational attainment and income. The measure is then divided into quartiles, ranging from highest to lowest.
People were the least likely to serve in the armed forces if their parents had dropped out of high school (Figure 3). They were more likely to enlist if their parents had achieved a moderate level of education, attending college. They were relatively less likely to have enlisted if their parents had only graduated from high school or gone on to graduate from college. These findings are consistent with a middle class draft.

Figure 3. Percent of 2002 high school sophomores enlisted by 2006 and 2012 by mother’s education

People from the second SES quartile or, lower middle class, were most likely to enlist (Figure 4). They were less likely to enlist if they were in the upper middle class, but still more likely to do so than those at the bottom and top of the status distribution. These findings also suggest a middle class draft, though in this case, with emphasis on the lower middle class.
As figure 5 shows, people were the least likely to enlist if they were at the top of the income distribution, though this difference is only statistically significant for 2006, two years after the respondents were high school seniors. They were slightly more likely to enlist if they grew up in families at the bottom of the income distribution, but still more likely to do so if their parents had earnings in the middle categories.
5) Conclusion and recommendations

These data are inconsistent with the notion of a “poverty draft,” but instead suggest that the armed forces depended on the middle class during the recent wars. In addition, there may have been an informal “wealth exemption,” in which the affluent were less likely to enlist than everyone else (at least in the two years immediately after high school). Furthermore, at least during these wars, minorities were not disproportionately likely to enlist.

The preceding analyses suggest several recommendations:

First, the Department of Defense should collect information on the socioeconomic standing of recruits, so that questions about potential inequities in service can be more easily and directly answered in the future. Alternatively, the services could collect more information about all recruits at the time of application, when they ask other background questions about gender, race, and age.

Second, researchers should attempt to assess how the people who enlist may differ from the service-members who were deployed, saw combat, or died.

Third, researchers should pay particular attention to how military outcomes may have different associations with, on the one hand, status or class differences, and, on the other, race differences. To date, advocates and journalists have tended to combine the poor and minorities in describing potential inequities. Researchers, however, have tended to examine these factors separately. Yet it appears that people have tended to enlist according to different, potentially overlapping patterns with respect to poverty and race.

Fourth, future research should more directly address how the predictors of service have changed between the peacetime period of the 1990s and the wartime period of the 2000s.