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Original Research Article

Transition and Tribes: Understanding parkrun's Potential to Support Veteran Well-Being

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Abstract

Key intervention priorities to improve military veterans' long-term mental and physical health and well-being include promoting physical activity and reducing social isolation and loneliness. parkrun is a free, weekly, timed, community-based 5-km walk/run event, which demonstrates positive impacts on social, physical and mental well-being. Our qualitative study explored parkrun engagement experiences and perceived impacts among veterans and non-veterans attending a parkrun in an area with a high veteran population. We conducted semi-structured interviews with 16 (10 veteran; 6 non-veteran) participants (including volunteers, runners and walkers). We used an interpretivist approach and generated two themes that help explain the value and impact of the selected parkrun and parkrun more broadly. *Aligned but distinct from military* illustrates how parkrun affords some of the positive aspects of being in the military (structure, physical challenge and a unifying identity), but without commitment, obligation or performance pressure. *Implicit, unconditional support* conveys the tacit and passive support parkrun affords to veterans' well-being through broadening social connection, camaraderie and knowledge sharing. Importantly, neither the

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appeal nor value of parkrun is contingent on military affiliation. Our findings suggest that a non-targeted and highly replicable service model, when locally driven, can successfully engage veterans and enhance their social connection and well-being.

Keywords: veteran, parkrun, physical activity, social connection, well-being

Introduction

In 2021, there were approximately 496,300 ex-serving Australian Defence Force (ADF) veterans (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022a) and each year 5,500 to 6,000 veterans transition out of the ADF (Department of Veterans' Affairs, 2018). Transitioned veterans are generally older than serving personnel, but the age profile differs by gender: 56% men aged 65+ years and 58% women aged 35 to 64 years (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022b). Transitioning from military to civilian life can be challenging for veterans, who may experience a sense of loss in identity and structure as conferred by military life, fragmentation of social networks, detachment disconnection from civilian society and employment and financial stressors (Bryant et al., 2019; Department of Veterans' Affairs, 2018; Guthrie-Gower & Wilson-Menzfeld, 2022). There is evidence that ex-serving ADF veterans have greater risk of mental health conditions such as anxiety and depression (Bryant et al., 2019), as well as suicide (Sadler et al., 2021), compared to current-serving veterans. A recent Australian study showed almost half (46%) of transitioned veterans experienced a mental disorder in the previous year, one-third (33%) had high/very high psychological distress, and almost one in five (18%) had post-traumatic stress disorder ([PTSD]; Van Hooff et al., 2019). In addition, 70% of transitioned veterans were overweight or obese, more than half (51%) rated their physical health as fair-poor and almost half (48%) were insufficiently active (Kelsall et al., 2018). Therefore, this group bears a significant burden in terms of physical and mental health risk.

Along with the increased risk of poor health described above, transitioned Australian veterans may experience greater than average social isolation and/or loneliness. Social isolation is an objective measure indicating a person has few social relationships and infrequent social contact with others; loneliness is a subjective feeling of a lack of connection with others and a desire for more (Badcock et al., 2022). Nearly one in five veterans who had ever served in the ADF (i.e. both current- and ex-serving) report being lonely and 1 in 10 are socially isolated (1 in 7 for those aged 45–64) similar to rates among non-veterans (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2023b). Rates of

loneliness and social isolation among transitioned veterans specifically are unknown; however, they are likely to be higher, due to disruptions in structured social networks and a cultural disconnect from civilian society (Barnett et al., 2022; Miller & Saling, 2025). We do know that veterans with a disability, poor physical health or psychological distress are particularly vulnerable to social isolation and loneliness in their transition (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2023b; Kelsall et al., 2018; McGuire et al., 2023) which can negatively impact their social reintegration, long-term physical and mental health and well-being (Kelsall et al., 2018) and risk of suicidality (McGuire et al., 2023). Social isolation and loneliness have become significant public health issues in Australia, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2023a; Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015) and causing substantial harm to people's health and well-being (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2023a). Loneliness is linked to biological (e.g. high blood pressure, obesity), psychological (e.g. anxiety, depression, PTSD) and behavioural (e.g. physical inactivity, poor sleep) risk factors (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015), as both cause and consequence, creating a vicious cycle of chronic illness (Ahmed et al., 2023). Social isolation and loneliness increase premature mortality risk by 29% for social isolation and 26% for loneliness, independent of behavioural and psychological risk factors, and middle-aged adults appear particularly vulnerable compared to older adults (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015).

Reducing social isolation and loneliness and promoting physical activity are key intervention priorities for transitioned veterans to improve their long-term mental and physical health and well-being (Warren et al., 2022). Transitioned veterans often seek out opportunities to connect with others who have mutual understanding through shared experience and identity (Brewster et al., 2020; Guthrie-Gower & Wilson-Menzfeld, 2022). Supportive communities and social engagement activities that foster connection amongst specific populations with shared experiences and identity can protect against social isolation and loneliness (Ahmed et al., 2023). Veterans' rates of active membership of clubs or associations, and volunteering are high (40% and 19%, respectively), compared to non-veterans (29% and 14%), which can broaden their social networks, and re-establish a sense of purpose and belonging in their transition out of service (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2023b; Russell & Russell, 2018). Veterans who are able to combine their military and civilian social identities can have more stable reintegration into civilian life; thus, the veteran identity should be considered in the design and implementation of healthy ageing interventions for veterans (Warren et al., 2022).

There is a longstanding connection between sport and military, with sport serving to enhance veteran's physical fitness, as well as foster discipline and

camaraderie (Van Hooff, 2025). Research has demonstrated the positive impacts of sport and active recreation on veteran health, well-being and overall quality of life (Fogle et al., 2020; Milanese et al., 2018). Veterans' participation in sport and recreation tends to be driven by health and fitness goals, a desire for belonging and purpose, the pursuit of mastery and challenge and opportunities to connect with family, friends or others with shared experiences (Clearinghouse for Sport, 2025). The opportunity to reconnect with the structured, performance- and team-based aspects of their military identity through sport is particularly relevant for transitioned veterans (Van Hooff, 2025). Sport and recreation can play a valuable role in supporting the physical, mental and social well-being of transitioning veterans by fostering resilience, social connection and empowerment (Van Hooff, 2025).

Informal sport can make a meaningful contribution to health and social policy goals, through increased physical activity, enhanced social connection and mental well-being (Jeanes et al, 2024). Informal sport typically occurs outside the formal structures of organised clubs or bodies (e.g. membership fees, uniforms, fixtures) and is participant-driven and flexible. Research has demonstrated its cost-effectiveness, producing comparable social, physical and mental health outcomes to formal sports, but requiring fewer resources and investment (Jeanes et al., 2024). parkrun (www.parkrun.com) a free, weekly timed community-based 5-km walk/run event held on a Saturday morning parkrun is an example of an informal sport with open, casual elements of engagement (Hookway & Dwyer, 2025) offering reliable and regular, gently competitive physical activity along with casual social interaction (Hindley, 2018) and volunteering opportunities (Mitchell, 2023). Previous research has referred to parkrun as a "third place" (after home and work), a social environment where people interact in non-demanding ways, forming both strong or weak social ties for mutual support (Dunne et al., 2024; Hindley, 2018). However, parkrun's informal elements are grounded in characteristics typical of more formal sports – an organisational infrastructure (e.g. consistent format in terms of course length, event frequency, communication platforms, local volunteer teams, results website and database, central organising staff; Cranney et al., 2025). Each parkrun event, initiated by community member(s), requires parkrun and landowner approval to ensure each event is safe and respectful of the local environment and community (parkrun, 2025). Standardised format and procedures are designed to provide volunteers and walkers/runners with a safe, consistent and simple process for participation (Cranney et al., 2025).

Research on parkrun demonstrates improved outcomes related to social, physical and mental well-being with participation (Ashdown-Franks et al., 2023; Grunseit et al., 2020; Morris & Scott, 2018). parkrun has also

successfully engaged communities typically underrepresented in physical activity participation such as women, socio-economically disadvantaged, people experiencing mental health issues; Grunseit et al., 2020; Morris & Scott, 2018; Quirk et al., 2018). Relevant to veteran transition, previous research shows how parkrun participants can derive new identity features (Bowness et al., 2020; Warhurst & Black, 2021) and offers a non-stigmatising parkrunner identity for those experiencing mental health challenges (Morris & Scott, 2018).

Study Purpose

Our study aims to explore parkrun attendees' (both veteran and non-veteran) engagement experiences with a selected parkrun located in a residential area with a high veteran population, and the perceived impacts on social connectedness, health and well-being. We also examine whether there are any contextual and intervention factors that might distinguish the selected parkrun from other parkruns, the factors supporting participation and volunteering amongst veterans and their families, and whether there are differences in the experiences, motivations and benefits between veterans and non-veterans. Our research questions are:

1. What motivates participants to join parkrun in general and the selected parkrun in particular? Are motivators different between veterans and non-veterans?
2. What social, health and well-being benefits from joining the selected parkrun are perceived by participants?
3. Are there any perceived effects on volunteers and non-veteran participants of having a parkrun with a veteran emphasis (if any)?
4. To what extent do volunteering and participation at the selected parkrun differ from those in other parkruns?

Our research aims to address a dearth of evidence on the acceptability and impact of health interventions on social connectedness amongst Australian veterans (Warren et al., 2022).

Method

We conducted an exploratory qualitative study comprising semi-structured interviews with volunteers and participants of a selected parkrun site located in an area with a relatively high veteran population. For the purposes of this study, we define any person who has ever served with the ADF as a

member, that is, both current- and ex-serving personnel (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2018, 2024). We took an interpretivist approach to allow for multiple social realities related to people's perceptions and experiences of parkrun, which acknowledges the interaction of our own social realities with those of our interviewees (Hanson et al., 2019). Semi-structured interviews drew out participants' parkrun perceptions and experiences in their own words to explore already known factors related to parkrun participation and volunteering, with sufficient flexibility to surface novel impressions in this population (Braun & Clarke, 2022). This study was approved by the University of Technology Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee (approval number: ETH24-9764).

Site Selection

The parkrun event was identified as being of particular interest prior to its launch by parkrun Australia and Invictus Australia as part the research and evaluation planning process for the latter. Invictus Australia is a not-for-profit organisation which aims to improve veterans' and their families' health and well-being through connection to sport (https://invictusaustralia.org/). Distinguishing characteristics of the parkrun were: having a core volunteer team that includes current- and ex-serving ADF members; and being located in an area with a high veteran population (13.5% of residents in the suburb were current-serving or transitioned ADF personnel, compared to the national average of 2.8%; Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021), but there were no known differences in terms of event design or format or promotion. Both organisations wanted to investigate whether these characteristics invoked particular operational or experiential issues for veteran and non-veteran participants and event organisers. The first author sought permission from the selected parkrun's co-Event Directors (co-EDs) to participate in the study.

Recruitment

We recruited eligible adults who were ≥18 years old, had run, walked or volunteered at the selected parkrun site at least six times and with sufficient English to comprehend the participant information sheet and participate in an interview. The authors attended one of the weekly parkrun events at the selected site during September 2024 to introduce the study and recruit participants (date determined in consultation with parkrun co-ED). The co-ED and AG provided a brief description of the study during the pre-run briefing. Both authors approached and invited participants one-on-one after their run or walk, and volunteers prior to and during the event, offering them a Participant

Information Sheet, determining eligibility and seeking verbal consent to record their contact details, veteran status and parkrun barcode. These details were collected using iPads and the REDCap electronic data capture tool hosted at the University of Technology Sydney (Harris et al., 2009, 2019). Participant's parkrun barcodes were recorded to check study eligibility (participation results) and maximise variation of the sample (in terms of gender, whether they had volunteered, run or walked at the event and their running group/club membership), via their publicly available online parkrun results. Study participants were offered the opportunity to be interviewed in person (the day of the event) or later via a videoconferencing platform. The co-ED also posted the study invitation on the parkrun event's Facebook page (including web-link and QR code to access the Participant Information Sheet and consent and nomination form) and emailed it to volunteer Run Directors.

Participants

Sixteen people were interviewed: 10 were veterans (7 of whom were ex-serving and 3 were current-serving ADF members); and 6 were non-veterans (one of whom was a veteran interviewee's family member, one was a first responder and four reported no affiliation with veterans or first responders). Eleven of our interviewees were men and five were women; most were middle to older aged: 30 to 39 ($n=1$); 40 to 49 ($n=6$); 50 to 59 ($n=4$); 60 to 69 ($n=5$). Twelve of our interviewees had volunteered at the selected parkrun (two co-EDs, three Run Directors (of nine) and seven in event day roles on multiple occasions); four interviewees had run or walked only. The co-EDs noted the majority of Run Directors (6 of 9) were veterans. We do not distinguish veterans' quotes as to their current- or ex-serving status to preserve confidentiality.

Data Collection

The authors developed the interview guide (Supplemental Appendix) in consultation with representatives from Invictus Australia, parkrun Australia and the selected parkrun's co-ED. The guide was informed by the research questions and authors' knowledge of parkrun events, participation and volunteering gained through previous research (Cranney et al., 2025; Grunseit et al., 2020) and personal participation experiences.

The co-EDs' interview explored: motivations for their role; how and why the selected parkrun was established; how the event is maintained and promoted (to veterans and in general); perceptions of the level of engagement of veterans and their families, as well as non-veterans and any social, health and

well-being impacts on veteran participants and volunteers. Interviews with other event team volunteers and participants explored: how they engage (walk, run, volunteer, combination) with the selected parkrun, their motivators for engaging and any benefits they have experienced and their perceptions of whether and how the selected parkrun engages and impacts veterans' and their families' social, health and well-being. Non-veteran interviewees were additionally asked for their perceptions and any implications of having a veteran emphasis at the parkrun (if at all).

Semi-structured one-on-one interviews were conducted either: (a) in person at the local post parkrun coffee venue on the day of the recruitment event ($n=2$), or day prior for the two co-EDs; or (b) via phone or videoconference (Zoom) up to 1 month after the event ($n=12$). Interviews were recorded using a digital voice recorder or Zoom. Both authors conducted interviews, who are experienced population health qualitative researchers who have conducted previous parkrun research and have participated in parkrun. Interviews were transcribed by an external transcription company. L.C. checked a subsample ($n=4$) for accuracy and rectified any other transcription errors during data immersion and analysis.

Data Analysis

As this was an exploratory study, there was no theory selected a priori to frame or analyse the results. We used Reflexive Thematic Analysis within an interpretivist approach, which acknowledges our role in constructing meaning from the data, and how our experiences conducting parkrun research and participating in parkrun influenced our interpretation of the data and shaping of themes (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Hanson et al., 2019). L.C. analysed interview data inductively using NVivo qualitative analysis data software version 12 (Lumivero, 2017). After listening to all interviews and checking a subsample of transcripts for accuracy, L.C. developed a draft coding framework, informed by the research questions for the current study along with codes used in a qualitative study exploring parkrun dissemination and sustainability (Cranney et al., 2025). L.C. coded all interview transcripts at the semantic level. Candidate themes were developed initially by L.C. and were iteratively discussed and refined with A.G. Themes which best accounted for the impact of parkrun on veterans and the effect of a veteran focus at the selected parkrun were selected for reporting by A.G. and L.C. In the final phase of writing, themes were renamed to be more descriptive (e.g. "Passive support" became "Implicit and unconditional support"), and themes were restructured to segregate veteran and non-veteran findings.

Results

We generated two main themes which accounted for the perceived value and impact of parkrun in general and the selected parkrun in particular: (a) *Aligned but distinct from military* (with two subthemes *Health, teamwork and purpose* and *Casual, self-directed and equalising*) and (b) *Implicit, unconditional support*. Broadly these two themes locate parkrun as something which affords some of the positive aspects of being in the military namely structure, physical challenge and a shared identity, but neither acceptance nor value is directly connected with military affiliation.

Aligned But Distinct From Military

Our first theme was central to our veterans' perceptions and experiences of parkrun, explaining why they join, participate and volunteer. Positive elements of their military experience were replicated in the parkrun context, yet the parkrun experience remained distinct from that experience, which provided additional motivation to engage.

Health, Teamwork and Purpose

For veterans, features of the parkrun identity seem to resonate with central aspects of their military identity, namely a pursuit of health and fitness, and for (parkrun) volunteers, being highly organised, team-oriented and selfless.

> Veterans do tend to be, as a group, probably into their wellbeing and so in my experience . . . it [parkrun] attracts that type of person . . . a lot of us have had to pass fitness tests for, like, 20 years. So you don't stop having to do the things that you need to do.
>
> [*Veteran 1*]

For example, when explaining why many volunteer Run Directors were ex or serving, one veteran noted:

> ADF people or veterans are quite comfortable to go, look, if someone needs to do it, I'll do it. Because you're used to just making sure something happens. Because that's the nature of being in the ADF, you can't sit on your hands and wait for someone else to do it.
>
> [*Veteran 2*]

Our interviewees felt that veterans are accustomed to and enjoy physical challenges, and parkrun allows them to maintain self-imposed fitness standards and monitor their own performance. parkrun seems to appeal to veterans because

it offers regular, timed, group-based exercise with an element of challenge that they incorporate into their weekly exercise routine. For example, when explaining what makes parkrun attractive to ex-military, one veteran noted:

> Probably the fitness because we have to maintain our fitness . . . So I guess they can still come out and go running and in a safe environment, controlled.
>
> [*Veteran 3*]

Our veterans also highlighted other commonalities between their parkrun and ADF experiences, which drew them to parkrun and enhanced their parkrun experience, such as teamwork, mateship and camaraderie. Those who volunteered described the familiarity and value of pulling together to achieve a common purpose (i.e. the operation and sustainment of the event), and as a fundamental part of who they are.

> Being in the Defence, like, if you were out for yourself, you would never join the Defence Force. So you're, you know, being part of a team that's got a bigger, more virtuous purpose, I guess, and while parkrun doesn't have a virtuous purpose, per se, it's – you know, it's encouraging people to participate in their physical wellbeing by just getting out and having a go without any pressure. I think a lot of veterans identify with that.
>
> [*Veteran 1*]

Our veterans regarded the simple, replicable and well-organised format as something akin to the regimented activities they were accustomed to and valued. As one core volunteer team member noted, the intentional feel of their event was "low drag," free from extraneous detail or complications, to make participation and volunteering easy, simple and therefore attractive.

> I think we offer low drag, no drama, easy to get to, easy to participate or volunteer and replicatable [*sic*] events. I think that's what makes us [*selected event*] a success with veterans. Veterans don't want – we want lots of rules, but we don't want lots of crappy no reason rules.
>
> [*Veteran 4*]

> I think to veterans, I think deep down when you've spent a good chunk of your working life in the ADF or even a smaller amount, you become indoctrinated into things being quite regimented, for want of a better term. So, when something is well organised, you just respond to it.
>
> [*Veteran 2*]

Relatedly, our interviewees highlighted transitioned veterans' vulnerability to a loss in purpose, identity and community, and how parkrun can help fill the gaps and foster resilience.

> On a Saturday morning, my purpose is to get out of bed because I'm going to parkrun. And a lot of veterans struggle when they don't have employment, they've decided to retire, that they don't have a plan on how they're going to occupy themselves . . . our minds aren't programmed to do that. We've got to be engaged one way or another.
>
> [*Veteran 2*]

Similar to their ADF experience, parkrun not only seems to afford veterans a sense of purpose but also routine through regular participation and volunteering.

> It's our Saturday routine whether we're doing it here or have travelled away. It's something we always try and make time for.
>
> [*Veteran 5*]

> I think for people who are say serving or ex-serving, it'll probably be a place of comfort without them necessarily realising on a conscious level what's happening. It's something that is routine.
>
> [*Veteran 6*]

Non-veterans were also attracted to more or less the same parkrun features which aligned with their own values and interests, providing a sense of familiarity and "knowness."

> People like to go to the same things because they're familiar with it and they feel relaxed with it. No matter what it is – if you shop at a particular shop or go to a particular service station or café . . . it's just being familiar and know what's happening. No surprise or expectations.
>
> [*Non-veteran 2*]

Casual, Self-Directed and Equalising

Although veterans aligned with parkrun identity features that resonated somewhat with their military identity, they seem equally attracted to parkrun's more flexible features, as distinct from their ADF experience. Veterans could take from parkrun the aspects of service they liked and perhaps missed, but the very fact it was not the military made parkrun attractive.

> parkrun is a place for people to reconnect with those with the same ethos without pressures of any times or performance.
>
> [*Veteran 4*]

Specifically, many of them commented on parkrun's less competitive and casual environment in which fitness and performance expectations were self-determined, compared to the imposed standards of the ADF.

> You get a time, so that's always good, but it's not a competition, so you don't feel like you have to, you know, be on every single time. We have fitness standards in Defence that you have to maintain . . . people build it [parkrun] in as part of their fitness program as well.
>
> [*Veteran 1*]

Similarly, having greater autonomy in their terms of engagement around such challenges (where, when, who and how they choose to engage), without obligation or commitment was favourably compared with the requirements of their military service.

> I think every veteran can do it on their own terms. Whether or not you want to talk or you don't want to talk, you want to walk, you want to run.
>
> [*Veteran 4*]

> There's so many ways you can go about using parkrun as an experience. One end of the spectrum just sort of turn up, do the activity and then leave . . . Or you can totally immerse yourself.
>
> [*Veteran 2*]

Veterans also valued parkrun as equalising or unifying, where they become a parkrunner and social categorisations related to their service are irrelevant during that one hour each week. In fact, the disclosure of people's veteran identity appears uncommon, at least initially.

> It's not something really brought up at parkrun. You're not talking to other people and talking about Defence or anything like that . . . and a lot of Defence people don't openly advertise – I don't – that you're either a Defence member or ex-Defence member anyway. So you wouldn't know.
>
> [*Veteran 5*]

> It helps that you're not alone . . . you're not the only one, you're not special . . . There's people in your situation, there's people in your services, there's

> people in defence, non-defence and it just puts us all, I guess, on a level playing field.
>
> [*Veteran 3*]

It would seem that rather than being attractive to veterans because of a veteran focus, our interviewees identify with parkrun as an activity and collective because it draws in those with values and identity features that are similar to their own. According to our interviewees, targeted promotion to veterans was perceived as not in keeping with parkrun's inclusive ethos. The relatively higher proportion of veteran attendance compared to other parkrun events was largely seen as a consequence of the event's location, as proximity and local connection were key motivators for parkrun attendance.

> They don't specifically target veterans to come along. I think it's more just the fact of the demographic who live there and also the – you know, there's a great camaraderie.
>
> [*Veteran 1*]

> From my point of view, there's no defence flavour to the way that parkrun is organised and presented. The flavour is that there's a number of people who are defence or veterans, but . . . if we go down to [*local shops*], we'll find a similar sort of percentage.
>
> [*Non-veteran 1*]

parkrun's regular, group-based offering and its casually competitive, low-demand and equalising nature were elements that appear equally valued by non-veterans.

> Go as hard or as far as you want and nobody's – you know, there's no pressure, there's no judgement.
>
> [*Non-veteran 1*]

> Well, you just turn up don't you? You know there's no commitment really in parkrun, whereas in our athletics club, you have to pay to start off with, you have to become a member, and then there are sort of some obligations . . . .
>
> [*Non-veteran 3*]

> You're just like everyone else that's there. You're there to run or walk or do whatever you do.
>
> [*Non-veteran 4*]

In summary, parkrun offers veterans consistency through group-based exercise and companionship, which resonates with positive aspects of their ADF experience related to fitness and teamwork. Through its organised, fixed 5-km format in a socially competitive environment, parkrun provides familiarity, but without necessarily imposing commitment, obligation or performance pressure. It appeals to veterans and non-veterans because they identify with these features of parkrun, but it is not exclusive to veterans, consistent with the parkrun ethos (inclusivity; Cranney et al., 2025). The equalising nature of parkrun and absence of a need to declare any affiliation allows for uncomplicated interaction for and between civilian and veteran.

Implicit, Unconditional Support

Our second theme, which helps explain the mechanisms driving veterans' parkrun engagement conveys the implicit support parkrun affords to veterans' well-being, without directly targeting them as a group. "Support" included regular physical activity, connection and belonging and social capital in terms of links to support services. Critically though, such support was provided without declaration of military identity or any proof of need.

Our veterans seem to value belonging to a network of parkrunners with similar community and well-being values, from which they receive benefits of casual companionship, encouragement and exercise.

> It's that one hour a week where everybody you see is in a good mood, happy, wanting to chat. It seems to be that the group of people who attend parkrun every week is just different from the rest of your week . . . because you're choosing to go on your Saturday and giving up your time, everyone there is just pleasant to be around.
>
> [*Veteran 5*]

Some veteran interviewees attributed improvements in their mental health, specifically to parkrun.

> I have a few mental health conditions from my time in Defence, and I really do find it to be such a positive experience for me attending parkrun each week.
>
> [*Veteran 5*]

The "casual sociability" (Hindley, 2018) afforded by parkrun appears to allow veterans to put aside traumatic or distressing experiences for a time, but with the knowledge that a support network is there if needed.

> I like to have places to be where I run into people that matter, but also where you're not forced to have to hang out for a period of time . . . parkrun's an hour and a half with someone. It's lovely. You can walk with anybody you want that week or you can run and avoid everybody or you can stick your headphones in or not.
>
> [*Veteran 4*]

> It's a common point that would allow people to join together without knowing each other's life stories.
>
> [*Veteran 6*]

parkrun's inclusivity allows veterans to benefit from its mental health and well-being support, without being classified as in distress, in contrast with veterans' services, which primarily target those in dire need.

> A lot of the services projected for veterans are for those already in the orange and red part of the wellness zone. I think parkrun gives veterans a green zone space. That you don't have to be broken, you don't have to be bitter and twisted . . . You're just looking for a next chapter or you are looking for a participation with low drag and without commitment.
>
> [*Veteran 4*]

parkrun appears to foster a sense of belonging to a social collective among our veterans, which they felt was significant for mental well-being.

> From a community aspect, the fact that you can come by yourself, but you're not alone, that could have a big impact on someone who's having a bit of a hard time, to feel they're part of something, part of a community.
>
> [*Veteran 1*]

This sense of collective belonging extends beyond local place to the broader parkrun community, which was described by our interviewees as particularly helpful for a sense of constancy and social connection when they transitioned to new locations when serving, or out of service.

> I have become part of the actual community that is parkrun.
>
> [*Veteran 2*]

> As a Defence Force member, you get so used to moving all the time, it's [parkrun] a thing that can be consistent wherever you go, as long as it's in that community, and if it's not, you can start one.
>
> [*Veteran 7*]

> For some groups of people, it's very easy to slide from one parkrun to another because you've got commonality. Same thing if you move to a common job or role elsewhere. It's a lot easier to transition and find your way in a new place as well.
>
> [*Veteran 8*]

The shared understanding and experience of military life were not only of benefit among veterans at parkrun in terms of engendering trust and support; knowledge sharing also built social capital in the event community.

> I found that once I had first spoken to [*name removed*] and [*she/he*] realised I was a veteran, [*she/he*] started suggesting other veteran things to me, in fact, which was really good. And suggesting some other stuff beyond parkrun that may be beneficial to me . . . .
>
> [*Veteran 2*]

> I think we can be some people's linkages when they want us and when they don't. A lot of dog sitting and dog exchanges go on, but that's helpful.
>
> [*Veteran 4*]

The broadening of veterans' social connections with non-veterans was also seen as an important part of a positive transition to civilian life, buffering the loss of military-based networks.

> When you're in the Defence force, you are so focused on being part of that organisation . . . and you find that a lot of your social connections are also ADF members. But, when you transition, you don't have that connection anymore . . . All the people that go to parkrun, they're not all ADF or ADF veterans. There's people from all walks of life.
>
> [*Veteran 2*]

Our interviews suggested that rather than target veterans, the core volunteer team aim to create a place in which like-minded members of the local community (veterans and non-veterans alike) can find and draw benefit from connection, community and exercise. For instance, they commented on the welcoming and inclusive community vibe that the volunteers cultivated.

> It's just about finding the right people, or the right people finding us.
>
> [*Veteran 8*]

> For me it's that purpose, place, community spirit, plugging into something that other people think matter as well.
>
> [*Veteran 4*]

> I certainly think the exuberance and enthusiasm and open welcoming attitude that is demonstrated by [*co-EDs*] has an ability to filter its way down into others . . . that's then a behaviour that is also able to be modelled within the broader volunteer cohort.
>
> [*Veteran 6*]

Many of our interviewees noted their preference for the selected parkrun event over other (larger) events in their area due to its convenience, challenging terrain, spaciousness, natural surroundings and smaller participation group in which they felt less anonymous.

> It's my favourite one because there's just so much space and . . . it's a physical and a mental challenge as well.
>
> [*Veteran 9*]

> The community feel for me is definitely – [*event*]'s been one of the favourites. Just nice and small, everyone's great, everyone's chatty . . . and it feels comfortable. It doesn't feel like an effort.
>
> [*Veteran 3*]

Our non-veterans' responses also indicate the benefits they find from a sense of belonging, connection and community at the event through casual companionship, encouragement and implicit support.

> You know when you haven't seen your family for a long time and then you go home on the weekend and you say hello to everyone. It feels a little bit like that . . . Like I know nothing about their lives and they know nothing about my life. But yeah, it's sort of, you know them and they're always sort of happy to see you.
>
> [*Non-Veteran 4*]

> It's a great kind of support – people encouraging each other and supporting each other and all that kind of thing . . . obviously it's done everywhere else as well, but it's got a great community feel to it.
>
> [*Non-veteran 5*]

Similar to veterans, the passive social support appears particularly valuable for non-veterans' well-being who may experience social isolation or personal challenges. For example, when describing a time of personal and financial difficulties, one non-veteran noted:

> It was like going to parkrun, none of that sort of mattered for that hour. No one there knew anything about me like they, no one was judging me . . . it was just an environment where I was me . . . parkrun especially for me has really helped.
>
> [*Non-veteran 4*]

> I think some people, if they're isolated, they feel like they're a part of a group or part of something and they look forward to it, and they make sure they get there and they just interact with people and have a chat before and afterwards.
>
> [*Non-veteran 1*]

Some non-veterans noted the significance of fostering belonging and community in contemporary society and highlighted the role sport can play.

> Well it's [parkrun] just a regular thing you do, and you know, it's part of your – it's your tribe, isn't it? . . . we all need a tribe, don't we? And in the modern world, we don't have tribes in big cities, so we have to create one. And so one of those tribes is sporting connections.
>
> [*Non-veteran 3*]

In summary, parkrun supports those who engage with it, whether they are veterans or non-veterans, through building an inclusive social network that gives non-demanding opportunities for connection. Importantly for veterans, the support comes without being in crisis and regardless of their military affiliation, which can remain undeclared. For current-serving veterans, parkrun can provide a thread of constancy across time and place. For those transitioning to civilian life, it may enhance resilience by providing a sense of belonging, comradeship and purpose lost with leaving service, as well as affording opportunities for knowledge exchange with other veterans. The support however is passive – on offer but on the participant's terms.

Discussion

Our study contributes much needed practice-based evidence on veterans' motivations to engage in a social and physical activity initiative and the subjective impacts on their social connection and well-being. We are the first

study to explore parkrun engagement and impact amongst a veteran population, with additional insights provided by non-veterans participating at the same parkrun site. We generated two themes which describe how parkrun provides familiarity and constancy to veterans by offering a regular group-based exercise challenge, but in a non-pressurised and social environment. Moreover, in keeping with parkrun's inclusive ethos (Cranney et al., 2025), social support is on offer without requiring any demonstration of need or military affiliation. Despite this, parkrun's appeal to the veterans in our sample, their attendance and the benefits which ensue are unrelated to veteran status but nonetheless work well for it. It seems the features attractive to veterans and non-veterans are the same, but the value for veterans is both as echoing military life (structure, physical challenge, teamwork) but also being different to it. Below we reflect on how our findings link with the veteran and parkrun literature and the implications for parkrun and physical activity initiatives more broadly.

Our findings support previous parkrun research that indicates those who participate in parkrun benefit from a broadening social circle and sense of belonging to a welcoming and supportive community (Hindley, 2018; Stevinson et al., 2015). From an operational point of view, despite the higher concentration of veteran participants, there was no evidence of an explicit veteran focus. Consistent with this, non-veterans did not describe feelings of being an outsider. It seems the sense of belonging and mutual support transcends any boundaries around veteran or civilian status in the social milieu of parkrun, allowing all individuals to identify simply as a fellow parkrunner on a Saturday morning. Previous research has argued that parkrun can help people build a new sense of self or positive identity as a parkrunner (Bowness et al., 2020; Hindley, 2018; Stevens et al., 2019; Warhurst & Black, 2021), which may replace fragmented or insecure identities tied to work (Warhurst & Black, 2021), or mental health challenges (Morris & Scott, 2018). For our veteran (and non-veteran interviewees), parkrun can be a respite from, or positive alternative to, an identity that may be tied to past or current distressing aspects of their lives. Angel et al. (2018) also reported veterans seek social connection and purpose in places where there issues are not "pathologised," which can support their reintegration. Organisations serving veterans may find strategies that help people build a new, positive and unifying identity with local collectives valuable, as a way of building a sense of belonging and purpose that can foster their resilience and reintegration.

Interestingly while part of the value of parkrun to the veterans we interviewed was the development of a non-military identity, there was a strong sense that the resonance of some parkrun features with aspects of military life facilitated their engagement. For example, parkrun's physical challenge,

teamwork, shared purpose and collective identity were aspects which our veterans felt familiar with and natural to perform given their service background. Others have argued that when civilian life is too much in contrast with military ways of being, veterans can feel disoriented as they struggle to apply their habitual social frames in a different context (Cooper et al., 2018). Our theme of "Aligned but distinct from military" suggests that parkrun may assist veteran reintegration by bridging the military way of being and non-military life, creating continuity for desirable aspects of the "military habitus" (Cooper et al., 2018) in a sport context. Similarly, for those still serving, parkrun through its regularity and multiple locations lent itself to continuity even when personnel had to relocate and became a unifying thread connecting their civilian and military lives benefiting both physical and mental well-being. Activities in the civilian context which can recall the positive skills and ways of being of the military and allow crossover between the two may assist service personnel past and present to feel more integrated. For example, Invictus Australia's "Battlefields to Footy Fields" initiative promotes veteran integration into their communities by offering them opportunities to upskill as rugby league officiators or trainers (Invictus Australia, 2025a). Veterans' resilience and experience resonates with these roles and the initiative provides a way for veterans to find common purpose and community (Invictus Australia, 2025b).

parkrun appears to offer an implicit social support which has been defined by Taylor et al. (2007, p. 832) as "the emotional comfort one can obtain from social networks without disclosing or discussing one's problems vis-a-vis specific stressful events." Our veteran and non-veteran interviewees highlighted the value of parkrun in providing a social network that its members may draw upon if needed for companionship, without necessarily requiring disclosure of personal details or effort to maintain deeper social connections. Our findings support the notion of parkrun as a "third place," which affords a restorative "episodic togetherness" – a positive, light-touch and fluid form of community (Hindley, 2018; Hookway & Dwyer, 2025). It seems this is attractive to veterans, who can connect with others on their own terms and at a level they feel comfortable with. Our study illustrates the public health potential of parkrun or similar community-driven social physical activity initiatives in addressing social isolation and loneliness amongst veterans.

While it is clear that the social interaction that occurs at parkrun is valued by veterans and non-veterans alike, we also found that social connection amongst fellow veterans cultivates a sense of camaraderie and offers opportunities for knowledge sharing that can enhance their resilience and well-being. Reconnecting with ADF friends allows for a sense of continuity, and the broader evidence also indicates that services managed by other veterans

hold appeal due to shared understanding (Department of Veterans' Affairs, 2018). However, according to our interviewees, interactions with other service personnel may also result in knowledge exchange relevant to their service or transition to civilian life. Sociological research with parkrunners (Wiltshire & Stevinson, 2018) highlighted the potential for the building of cultural capital through bringing together people who may not otherwise have interacted. Wiltshire and Stevinson (2018) noted that the interaction of experienced with inexperienced runners could lead to increases in cultural capital in the latter as the former passed on acquired knowledge on injuries and how to enhance performance. In our study, through meeting fellow veterans and serving personnel in support positions at parkrun, veteran participants could learn of services and how to navigate them through informal means. Our theme *Implicit, unconditional support* highlighted the value of garnering support without formal engagement with post-service systems demonstrating the important role of informal social networks in assisting veteran reintegration (Van Hooff et al., 2019). Initiatives like parkrun when strategically placed may facilitate local social networks that generate cultural capital that has relevance and value for the community they are born from.

The importance of the placement of this parkrun in an area with a higher than average serving and ex-military population was particularly evident amongst the participants who performed in voluntary roles at parkrun. Volunteering can reduce veteran's social isolation and loneliness (Lawrence et al., 2017) and having a sense of purpose and community involvement can foster resilience among veterans (Angel et al., 2018) thus facilitate a healthier transition from serving to civilian life for veterans (Fogle et al., 2020). Our study shows how parkrun provides a sense of purpose in terms of routine, activity and roles (for volunteers). Furthermore, there appears a sense of cohesion and trust amongst core volunteer team members and regular volunteers, built through a shared benevolent purpose to support their local community, including veterans. For volunteers, feeling an integral part of the local parkrun event may provide the sense of belonging, identity and purpose that veterans can lose in transitioning from military to civilian status (Bryant et al., 2019; Department of Veterans' Affairs, 2018; Guthrie-Gower & Wilson-Menzfeld, 2022). From an operational perspective, local engagement and custodianship of parkrun events is key to volunteering (Mitchell, 2023) and event sustainment (Cranney et al., 2025). The location of our selected event afforded a convenient opportunity to veterans (albeit open to anyone who would like to join), a group primed to engage in the sort of teamwork managing parkrun requires. Our findings highlight the impact of operational decisions around the establishment of parkrun events in areas with priority

populations, which must be balanced with parkrun's community-driven principle that is critical to event sustainability (Cranney et al., 2025).

Strengths and Limitations

This is the first study to explore veterans' motivations to engage in parkrun and the perceived impacts on their social connection and well-being, drawing on the perspectives of veterans and non-veterans to examine any differences. Our study was conducted at a single parkrun site located in an area with a high veteran population. While this provided rich insights into how parkrun operates for veterans in that context, whether these patterns hold in different parkrun events is unknown. We acknowledge our findings represent the way parkrun works for veterans who stayed with our selected parkrun, and who agreed to participate in an interview, meaning our results may be biased to more positive parkrun views and experiences. Our eligibility criteria of having run, walk or volunteered at least six times ensured interviewees had sufficient experience to meaningfully reflect on the selected event. It is also possible that other parkruns perpetuate the military identity, and veterans who aligned with that gravitated away from this particular parkrun. Further research in other parkrun events located in areas with high veteran populations could help substantiate our findings. Research examining veterans' perceived barriers to parkrun participation and volunteering would also be worthwhile, and whether these differ from non-veterans, which could inform parkrun's promotional efforts.

We recruited more veterans than non-veterans, possibly due to the title and aim of our research, although we emphasised in our recruitment that we would like to speak to both, non-veterans may still not have felt this was important or relevant to them. The non-veterans included may possibly have been more invested in how parkrun impacts veterans than those who did not opt in.

In addition, we collected only minimal demographic information and were unable to explore how other factors (e.g. marital status, education) might influence veterans' parkrun experiences. Further studies that incorporate a broader range of demographic variables could provide a more nuanced understanding of how parkrun impacts specific subgroups within the veteran community.

Implications

Organisations offering services to veterans could add parkrun as an option not only for support, especially for reintegration, but also for those still serving, given the transferability. The parkrun practice initiative (Leese et al.,

2025) may present a valuable primary prevention opportunity to link veterans to their local parkrun event through trusted health practitioners, offering a non-clinical pathway to social connection, physical activity and improved well-being.

Beyond individual benefits, our findings suggest broader implications for health promotion and prevention strategies. Australian health and veteran policy frameworks (Australian Government Department of Health and Aged Care, 2021; Department of Veterans Affairs, 2025) highlight the importance of community-based, non-clinical programs to reduce chronic disease risk and improve mental health. Recommendations to integrate physical activity and social connection into health promotion practice and policy reinforce the potential of existing initiatives like parkrun to augment clinical services provided to specific at-risk populations such as veterans. For example, embedding parkrun referrals into veteran preventive care pathways as done in social prescribing models (Morse et al., 2022) could operationalise these policy goals in a way that is scalable and at minimal cost. As demonstrated by our findings, opportunities which are not specific to, but are appropriate for such populations have their own unique value. Further grafting onto an already proven and scaled initiative makes for a more accessible and sustainable approach.

Conclusion

Our study illustrates why and how a non-targeted and highly replicable service model can successfully engage and positively impact veterans because it is locally placed, driven, designed and managed. Importantly, the appeal to veterans does not transgress the feature of inclusivity central to the parkrun ethos; we did not encounter any feelings of exclusion from non-veterans despite the perception that there were many veteran participants. Furthermore, the social aspects of parkrun have the potential to cultivate greater resilience amongst veterans through direct and indirect social support. Our study suggests that parkrun can reduce veterans' risk of physical inactivity and social isolation as they transition from military to civilian life by reintegrating their military and civilian personas and affirming identity features related to health and fitness, teamwork and community service.

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Ethical Approval

This study was approved by the University of Technology Human Research Ethics Committee (approval number ETH24-9764).

Consent to Participate

All participants provided informed consent via the REDCap electronic data capture tool hosted at the University of Technology prior to enrolment in the study, and verbal consent prior to interview.

Author Contributions

The authors were responsible for conceptualisation and methodological design. L.C. was responsible for funding acquisition, project administration, conducting the analysis and preparing the initial draft manuscript. A.G. contributed to data collection and analysis, and reviewed and edited manuscript drafts.

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Data Availability Statement

The datasets generated and analysed during the current study are not publicly available due to potential re-identification. Data will be shared on request to the corresponding author with permission of study participants.

Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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