

Historical Evidence on Selection in Union Army Recruitment

a. General patterns

The question of who fought for the Union, and why, has long been central to social histories of the Civil War, and the economic perspective is well represented in the literature.¹ In the 1920s, Fred Shannon argued that a tight labor market driven by the expansion of war-related industries was what forced the Union to turn to conscription in 1863. The Enrollment Act of that year, which initiated a Federal draft, allowed men called to arms to either furnish a substitute or pay a commutation fee of \$300. Shannon called the commutation clause “a concession to the bourgeoisie” (Snell 2002: 89, 100). It quickly led opponents of the draft to label the War “a rich man’s war, but a poor man’s fight”. In his pioneering studies in the 1940s and 1950s based on their diaries and letters home, Bell Wiley argued that soldiers on both sides of the conflict cared little about the issues at stake and initially enlisted for financial reasons (Wiley 1952).

On the other hand, the same correspondence led later scholars such as James Robertson (1988) and James McPherson (1997) to argue that ideology, political affiliations, and patriotism were more important in the decision to volunteer. Others have emphasized notions of courage, masculinity, and duty, whether internalized or externally imposed by social pressure (Hoptak 2003: 7).

Against this inconclusive historiographical background, it is useful to set out some basic facts about recruitment practices and military pay as they evolved over the war. In the first year of the war volunteers more than satisfied the government’s manpower targets; in April 1862, recruiting was even suspended briefly. That summer, however, the situation began to change, as it became clear that the war would not be short and glorious, and that military service meant not only the brutality and carnage of modern warfare, but also the daily misery of life in the camps, where illness was pervasive, food poor, furloughs rare, and pay irregular. Throughout this first phase of the war, economic incentives to enlist remained very weak. The army paid privates just \$13 per month, at a time when the wage for unskilled labour was on the order of a dollar per day. Even a Federal enlistment bounty of \$100 failed to make this competitive with civilian incomes. Military compensation was about 64% of urban wages, even including the value of rations (See Table 5 of the main text).

The previously mentioned Enrollment Act of March 1863 marked a turning point in recruitment. Passed in response to a series of military setbacks that sapped morale and made clear the need for greater manpower, the Act established Federal conscription for the first time.² Federal officials would now register all white male citizens aged 20-45, as well as immigrants who had declared an intention to become citizens (voting in local elections being construed as such a declaration). Recruitment quotas

¹ For a good survey of the literature, see Hoptak (2003), on which this brief account relies.

² The Militia Act of July 1862, which empowered the President to call up state militias for nine months of Federal service, had directed states to establish conscription procedures to make good any shortfalls in voluntary recruitment to state militias.

were allocated across communities, and where these could not be filled with volunteers, a draft was undertaken to fill the gap. Importantly, there was no residence requirement for enlistment. Anyone enlisting in a community counted towards its quota. This resulted in competitive bidding for volunteers in the form of rising local enlistment bounties, and the emergence of a brokerage industry matching men willing to fight – or at least enlist – with individuals and communities seeking substitutes. In the aftermath of the infamous draft riots in the summer of 1863, New York City began paying \$300 to drafted citizens to permit them to pay commutation or furnish substitutes. The Federal enlistment bounty was tripled to \$300 (even more for re-enlisting veterans) in October 1863. By the end of the year, the New Hampshire towns of Claremont and Newport had engaged substitute brokers to recruit for them in Canada, and were offering \$300 local bounties (Kemp 1990, p.52).

Initially successful in motivating voluntary enlistment with little actual recourse to the draft, the system began to break down in the final phase of the war.³ Commutation, which had kept a lid on the price of substitutes and on local bounties, was repealed in June 1864. There is no systematic evidence on bounties, but many local cases are documented. In his study of Ohio, Murdock (1963) reports bounties rising from near \$100 in the spring of 1864 to much higher figures: \$400 in Kenton (October '64), \$550 in New Lisbon (March '65), and in some subdistricts \$600-800 by the end of the war. In New York City, the price of a substitute in January 1865 was \$1800 for a three-year man. More systematically, a February 1865 New York state law automatically granted \$500 to drafted citizens who purchased a three-year substitute.

Contemporaries considered the recruits elicited by the new financial incentives to be of inferior quality. Complaints of bounty jumping (collection of enlistment bounties by repeatedly signing up under different names in different localities), and about the aptitude of recruits for military service became commonplace. Murdock (1963: 6) writes that “Many of the substitutes or volunteers of the later war period were common criminals, waiting to desert at the first opportunity, who had to be shipped to the front in irons. It is little wonder that Grant, Sherman, and others protested at the human refuse dumped into their camps.”

b. Local studies

Local studies of Civil War enlistment patterns offer insights into recruit characteristics unobservable in the military records. Linking military records to property tax rolls, school registers, church records, political party lists, and other sources – above all the census of 1860 – these studies trace their roots to Rorabaugh's (1986) study of Concord, Massachusetts. Rorabaugh's “poor man's fight” interpretation of the evidence was promptly contradicted by Vinovskis (1989). On the basis of a much larger sample from another Massachusetts town, subjected to multivariate analysis, Vinovskis concluded that “(a)lthough there were some occupational and wealth differences in the rates of enlistment, Union soldiers and sailors were not disproportionately drawn from the lower socioeconomic groups in Newburyport” (p. 49). And so it has continued, with studies finding both positive

³ Only 10% of native-born soldiers of all ages in the Union Army dataset are identified as conscripts among 1863-65 enlistments.

and negative selection, both ideological and economic motivations for enlistment – sometimes in the same article.⁴

What none of these studies finds is evidence of age-related selection that might make 23 year old soldiers shorter than 30 year soldiers. This can be seen in a study of Dubuque, Iowa, by Johnson (2003), who followed Vinovskis in collecting a large sample and attending to issues such as the different linkage rates from military records to the 1860 census for different social strata, which induce biases in calculated enlistment rates. Johnson separately analyzed young men living as members of their parents' household in 1860. Among these dependent sons, enlistment rates were highest for those with parents in the middle social strata, those with low non-manual or artisan occupations. Within these occupational groups, the wealth of families providing volunteers was slightly *greater* than in the Dubuque population. Johnson's interpretation was that the poorest families could not afford to send a son to war, being too dependent on his income. Meanwhile the wealthiest families could shelter their sons from pressures to enlist, even once conscription was imposed, since they could pay commutation or buy a substitute. Thus recruits came disproportionately from the middle.⁵

Among independent adults in 1860, who – as everywhere – enlisted at much lower rates than the young, the pattern was different. Adjusting for linkage rates, enlistment propensities were fairly similar across occupations, but in every occupational group soldiers' wealth was substantially *below* that in the Dubuque population. And married men, especially with children, were much less likely to enlist. To the extent that success in the “marriage market” was correlated with economic prospects, this is further evidence of some degree of negative selection. The upshot is that there is no evidence of increasingly positive selection at older ages. If anything, the opposite appears to be the case in Dubuque.

c. The wealth of Union Army recruits

Taking our cue from such micro-studies, we turn to 1860 census wealth as an indicator of selection-related characteristics that we cannot observe in the military records. As noted in the main text, data on wealth are available for a subsample of the Union Army dataset thanks to the efforts of the Early Indicators

⁴ Additional “micro-studies” in this vein include Bratt (2005) and Mitchell (2009) on Michigan towns; Hoptak (2003), Sandow (2003), and Snell (2002) on Pennsylvania locations; Kemp (1990) on two New Hampshire towns; and Rodgers (1996) on West-Central Indiana.

⁵ Sandow (2003) makes a similar argument for early recruits from Pennsylvania. “... (E)ven in this flush of patriotic enthusiasm there were doubts and hesitations. Many poorer men placed the needs of family before country and chose to defer enlistment or avoid service entirely” (p. 194). He cites the specific example of poor rural farmers who feared their homes would be seized and sold to pay store debts if they enlisted. For the better-off, enlisting in the Home Guards was an alternative that satisfied community pressure to contribute to the war effort, at least at first, especially for older men or those with valuable skills. Monetary donations, for example to support the families of volunteers, served the same purpose.

Project, which successfully linked some 40% of soldiers to the 1860 census.⁶ The linked soldiers are almost certainly not a representative subsample, but it is not obvious that this distorts the age-wealth profile, which is our concern here.⁷

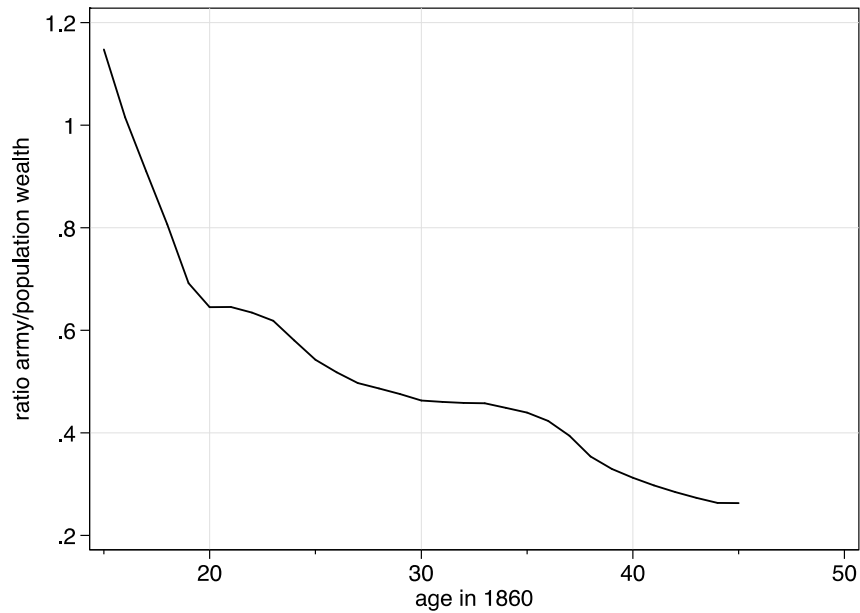
Figure 5 in the main text plots nonparametric estimates of the age-wealth relationship among linked soldiers and white, Northern men in the IPUMS 1% sample of the 1860 census. It should be borne in mind that census wealth is measured with great imprecision, not only because households self-reported their real and personal property, but because census enumerators applied a *de facto* lower censoring limit, such that median wealth in the data is zero. Appendix Figure A1 shows the ratio of soldier to civilian personal wealth by age, based on the smoothed estimates in Figure 5.⁸ Among relevant ages, the ratio is always less than 1, indicating negative selection. And this negative selection grows more severe at older ages. The decline in this ratio suggests the sort of selection by age implied by a simple assessment of opportunity costs, the opposite of what would be required to generate a spurious negative trend in height.

⁶ We downloaded the linked census data via the bulk download facility of the uadata.org website: census screens (1850-1940).

⁷ Linkage was impeded by problems typical of such exercises, such as: common surnames; incorrect information (e.g. age in the military records); large-city residence (yielding too many matches); and geographic mobility (migration after 1860 and before enlistment). A problem specific to the Union Army data is that a large share of soldiers were not heads of household in 1860, such that information on parents was required to achieve a match. Parents' identities were usually drawn from pension records, which in turn depended on a soldier both having a disability and surviving to the year in which the disability was ruled pension-eligible (e.g. the 1890 act making all disabilities, war-related or not, eligible).

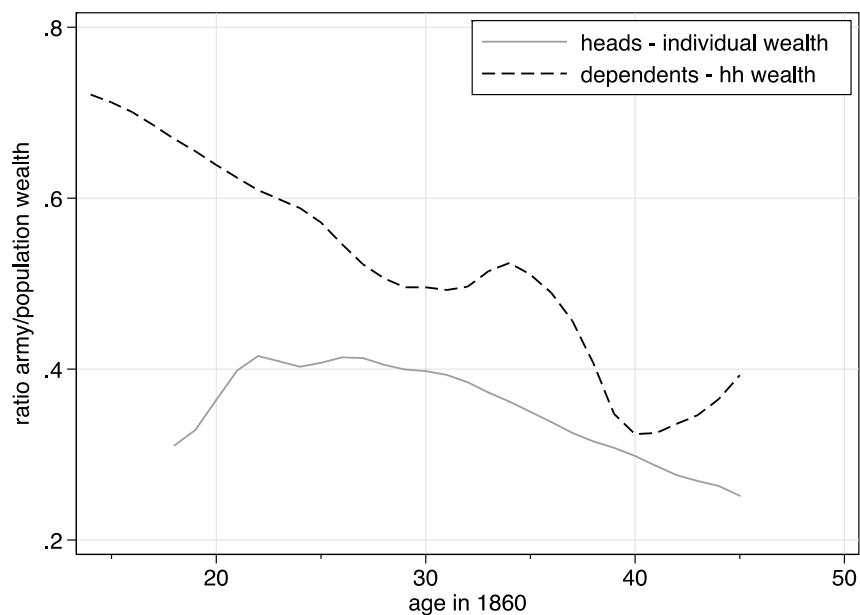
⁸ We use "personal" to mean "individual," as opposed to household. The census uses the word to distinguish two forms of wealth (personal is opposed to real).

Fig. A1. Ratio of soldier to civilian personal wealth



Personal wealth may be a misleading indicator for younger men, who typically were living with their parents as dependents in 1860 and would have reported zero personal wealth even if living in comfortable circumstances. Figure A2 plots two further ratios like that in Figure A1: one for heads of household in 1860, based on individual wealth; and one for non-heads of household in 1860, based on total household wealth. It is clear that over the relevant ranges, the relative wealth of soldiers was less than 1, and constant or declining with age.

Fig. A2. Ratio of soldier to civilian wealth by head of household status



The imprecision of the census wealth data, the potential biases induced by the linkage procedure, and the rough-and-ready nature of the age-wealth profiles (which are simple bivariate relationships uncorrected for region, occupation, etc.) all mean that this evidence can only be taken as suggestive.⁹ Still, its suggestion is unambiguous: selection was increasingly negative at older ages, the opposite of the pattern required to generate a spurious negative trend in height.

d. Rejection rates by age

We can gain some insight into selection by age from rejection rates among Union Army recruits. Fogel and Steckel (1995) collected a random sample of 1,316 men rejected for service in the Union Army at their medical examination.¹⁰ Common reasons for rejection are summarized in Table A1.

Table A1. Common causes of rejection

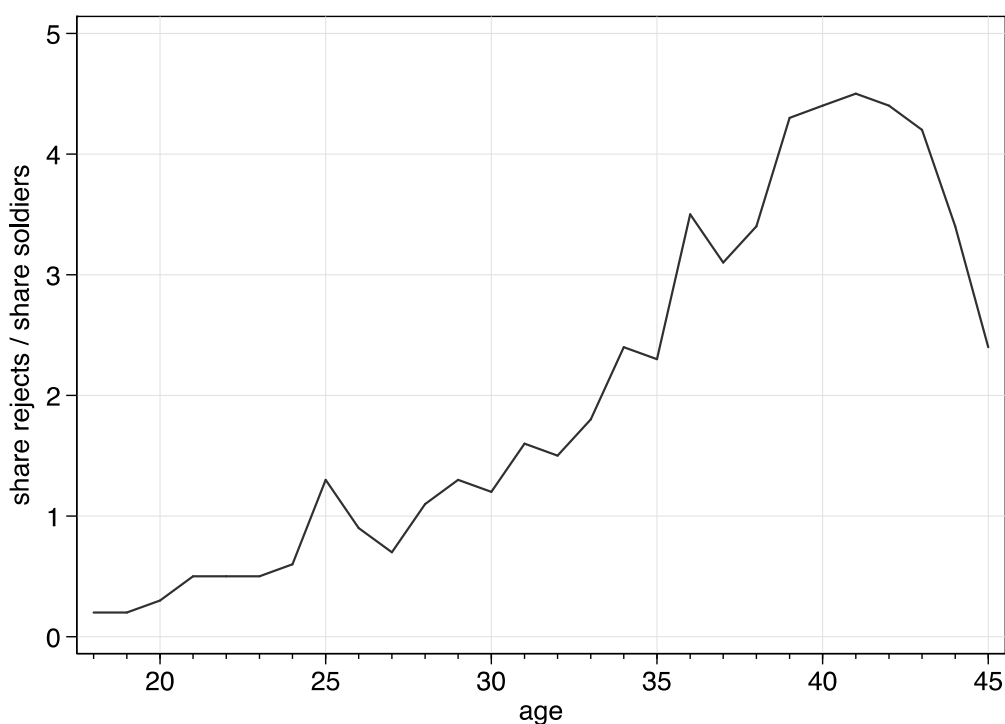
<i>cause</i>	<i>cases</i>	
dental disease	177	
hernia	115	
physical disability	68	including weakness or underdevelopment
injuries	60	
heart disease	58	
vision	50	
tuberculosis	41	
varicose veins	38	

If a falling trend in mean height by birth-year, which is also evident among the rejects, were spurious, caused by less-negative selection among older men, we might expect older men to be more healthy, in addition to being taller. At any rate, they ought to be more healthy than average, for their age. We cannot test this directly, but we can compare the age distribution of rejects with the age distribution of soldiers. Figure A3 shows the ratio of each age's share of rejects to the share of soldiers. 18-year olds were 18.5% of soldiers but just 4.2% of rejects, so the ratio is 0.2, indicating underrepresentation. 40-year olds, by contrast were just 1.1% of soldiers but 4.6% of rejects; with a ratio of 4.4, they were overrepresented.

⁹ Among the linked soldiers, mean height is 0.34 inches greater among men with positive 1860 household wealth than among those reporting none; sample means with truncation at 64" are 68.92 and 68.58 inches, respectively. The findings reported in this section can be approximately replicated in a smaller sample of linked soldiers from Franklin County, Pennsylvania, drawn from the Valley of the Shadow Project at <http://valley.lib.virginia.edu>.

¹⁰ The source does not tell us whether the rejected men were volunteers, conscripts, or substitutes.

Fig. A3. Rejection rates by age



Note: the “rejection rate” here is defined as the ratio of a given age’s share of rejects to the same age’s share of recruits, as described in the text.

In the absence of information on the health of older men in the general population, and of more detail on the data generating process for the reject sample, such evidence can be considered only suggestive. But it certainly does not lend support to the hypothesis of positive selection among older men.

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