



Strengthening the **MILITARY FAMILY READINESS SYSTEM** for a Changing American Society



Identifying the Research Gaps



In a recent publication, the Committee on the Well-Being of Military Families of the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine examined the Military Family Readiness System (MFRS) and recommended various ways that the system could be improved. In particular, the report detailed a number of gaps in the research on military family well-being that should be addressed.

For example, there are a variety of data currently gathered or monitored by the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD), such as through the Status of Forces Surveys, that offer information about some aspects of family well-being, but

this information primarily concerns subjective well-being, while information about objective and functional well-being is limited or lacking. Research to address this gap could provide the MFRS with a clearer picture of how military families are faring.

This brief describes a number of such gaps and the research needed to fill them.

Demographic and Military Service Characteristics of Military Families

If the MFRS is to effectively meet the needs of military families and promote their well-being, the service must have a clear idea of the demographic characteristics of the families it seeks to serve. The needs of, for example, a single, childless lesbian service member in her early 20s are likely to be significantly different from those of a late-30s married heterosexual male service member with multiple children. But much is unknown about the demographics of today's military families because the United States has seen significant demographic changes over the past few decades, and the DoD does not have sufficient data on military families to understand the degree to which societal shifts in the family are reflected in today's military population.

For example, the percentage of adult Americans who are married has been dropping steadily, and, concurrently, the percentage of children being born to parents who are not married has been increasing, but the level of cohabitation has been steadily increasing, and the overall percentage of parents with partners has stayed constant.

It is difficult to know, however, to what degree this overall pattern is mirrored in the military. For instance, while there are good data on the percentage of service members who are married, the DoD's demographic profiles do not report how many unmarried service members are in long-term relationships or cohabitating with a significant other, such as a fiancé or fiancée or a boyfriend or girlfriend.¹ Thus it is difficult to know, among other things, how many children in military families are being raised in households with two partners.

Similarly, there are a number of unknowns about military spouses. The committee did not find, however, any published statistics on the citizenship status of spouses that had been extracted from administrative records, and DoD's recurring spouse surveys do not currently ask spouses about their citizenship. Nor is the committee aware of any statistics on the religious affiliation of military spouses or partners.

Even though children make up a significant proportion of the military community, the DoD's demographic profiles of the military community are missing several key demographics with relevance for the potential needs of military children. These missing data include the race and ethnicity of military children, which the committee had been specifically asked to consider in its work. Although such data do exist for service members and their spouses, because of adoption, blended families, and inter-racial partnering, the parents' race and ethnicity cannot be assumed to be proxies for the children's. Other gaps concerning the demographics of military children include their school status (i.e., DoD, public, private, or home school), their Exceptional Family Member Program status, whether they live on or off base, whether they live in the United States, and whether they live with the service member.

Another major research gap concerns post-9/11 veterans and, in particular, their transition experiences once they leave active service. With little empirical information on the subject, it is difficult to understand the concerns that are most relevant to veterans at the time of military separation. Moreover, it has been difficult to determine how veterans' needs change over time, because the vast majority of studies of veterans are cross-sectional. Although a number of large-scale longitudinal studies have been done to examine the effects of war-zone deployments on health and health-related quality of life among U.S., United Kingdom, and Canadian veterans, none of these studies has examined how the veterans' needs change throughout the period immediately following their transition from service, none has examined how veterans are functioning in terms of employment and finances, and none provides information about the veterans' children or families. One recent longitudinal study, the Veterans Metrics Initiative, does attempt to address these shortcomings by examining the military-to-civilian transition process within a national sample of post-9/11 U.S. veterans, and data from this study may provide important information about veterans' well-being.

In short, the DoD's existing data on military families are insufficient for understanding the degree to which societal shifts in family structure are reflected in today's military community. Data gaps include information on long-term nonmarital partners, parents, ex-spouses and ex-partners, and others who play a significant role in the care of military children and service members. Purposefully gathering these data as well as information on additional characteristics, including sexual orientation, citizenship status, English as a second language, and Exceptional Family Member Program status by age or relationship to service member, would improve the MFRS's ability to address the variation in military family needs, well-being, and readiness.

¹The 2015 DoD Health Related Behaviors Survey of active component personnel actually did include "cohabitating (living with fiancé[e], boyfriend, or girlfriend but not married)" among its marital status categories, but the survey report did not provide the size of the cohabitating population separately.



Military Life Opportunities and Challenges

Military life has many opportunities and challenges that play a major role in the well-being of service members and their families, and understanding them is important for the effectiveness of the MFRS. But there are many gaps in knowledge concerning these opportunities and challenges.

For example, the use of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) by service members indicates that food insecurity is significant among service members, but DoD does not have a full picture of the extent to which service members need or use food assistance programs. Some of the best data come from a 2015 study that examined SNAP use by active-duty, veteran, and reservist participants in the American Community Survey from 2008 to 2012. It found that the reliance on SNAP was low but “nontrivial” among the active-duty respondents, with only 2.2 percent indicating use, while 9 percent of reservists and about 7 percent of veterans reported using it.

Relocations are another aspect of military life for which there is much that is not known. In some cases, families do not relocate together, perhaps because the military spouse needs time to find a new job or the decision is made to wait until a child has graduated from his or her school, but there is little in the scientific literature about how often families relocate together or in a staggered fashion or remain separated or on the effects of these various types of relocation strategies on the family. Similarly, although it is known that relocations sometimes have negative effects on military children—reduced grades, increased depression and anxiety, skipping class, early sexual activity, and others—little is known about the effects of single relocations versus accumulations of relocations over time.

In understanding various effects of military life on children, it would be particularly useful to have information on the differences between military and civilian families, but there have been few studies in this area. For instance, there are currently no publicly available large-scale studies presenting well-controlled comparisons of military and civilian families concerning their parenting beliefs or practices or other family behavior. Well-controlled comparisons of child outcomes among military and civilian children. There are some data from the Youth Risk Behavior Survey because a few states have incorporated a military identifier into the survey, but this area remains a major research gap.

Similarly, there is very little research on motherhood in the military—and almost no research on the effects that a military mother’s deployment to war has on her family. There are some data from a series of studies of Navy mothers during the Gulf War, which found, among other things, that anxiety and distress were higher among the children of mothers who were deployed than among those whose mothers were not. And research on mothers who had deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan found that reintegrating mothers experienced more depression and PTSD symptoms than nondeployed mothers. But more research is needed to examine the adjustment of deployed mothers, how programs and policies may affect them, and the influence of other factors, such as societal norms that stigmatize a mother’s leaving her children for war.

Finally, there is little known about LGBT service members, couples, parents, and families, and there has been no synthesis done across the literature looking at how race and ethnicity relate to military family well-being. Furthermore, little has been done to understand the top problems and needs of racial and ethnic minority families or how well the MFRS is addressing these problems and needs.



Much as with depression, substance use disorder has been associated with combat deployments, and studies in the general population have found that these disorders are linked to both marital distress and parenting problems. However, the effects of substance use disorders have not been studied within military families.

The Programs Offered by the Military Family Readiness System

The MFRS offers a large number of policies, programs, services, and resources aimed at improving the well-being of military families. The components have been steadily changing in recent years as the MFRS has worked to meet the emerging needs of military families within an ever-changing political and budgetary landscape. At the same time, there has been an expansion of research on the impact of military life on families and children as well as research on approaches developed to enhance family well-being in the context of military life stressors. This is helpful because MFRS programs, services, resources, and practices need to be grounded in the best available evidence.

On the other hand, the vast majority of these MFRS offerings have never been evaluated for effectiveness. In an ideal world, there would be strong evidence of these components' effectiveness in supporting military family readiness, resilience, and well-being, including their effectiveness at producing the desired effects reliably and in real-world conditions. At present, however, evidence for the effectiveness of the various MFRS military programs and services remains a gap that needs to be filled.

As evidence is accumulated concerning the effectiveness of various of these offerings, it will be important to encourage the widespread implementation of the most effective among them, and the best way to do that is itself the subject of research. More than a decade ago, the field of dissemination and implementation science began to focus on understanding and improving the evidence-to-practice gap. This new approach arose primarily because of failures in the adoption, implementation, and sustainability of evidence-based practices. Dissemination and implementation science—also referred to as “implementation research”—has been described as a “multidisciplinary set of theories, methods, and evidence aimed at improving the processes of translation from research evidence to everyday practices across a wide variety of human service and policy contexts.” This science is devoted to rigorously studying research-to-practice gaps in order to identify effective ways to improve the adaptation, adoption, implementation, and sustainment of evidence-informed and evidence-based practices in routine delivery settings. Ultimately the success of the MFRS in offering programs that are highly effective at improving the well-being of military families will depend not only on research into what such programs look like but also on research into how best to disseminate and implement those programs once they have been developed and tested.

These are only some of the research gaps related to military family well-being that were identified by the committee. Addressing them should help the MFRS to improve the various programs, services, and resources that it offers to military families.

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