



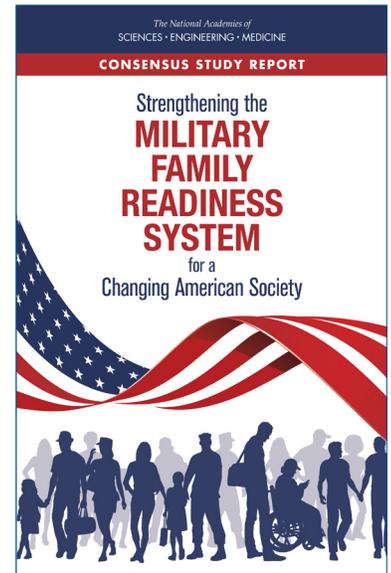
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Strengthening the Military Family Readiness System for a Changing American Society

Supporting the well-being of military families is foundational to ensuring the readiness of U.S. military personnel. Military families encompass a broad spectrum of American society and have diverse needs that have materially changed in recent years.

In an effort to make sure its efforts to support military families are addressing their needs in a rapidly changing society, the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) asked the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine to study the challenges and opportunities facing military families and what is known about effective strategies for supporting and protecting the functioning and well-being of these families.

The National Academies' report, *Strengthening the Military Family Readiness System for a Changing American Society*, finds that the DoD and military branches have many programs and policies to support the well-being of military families, but they need to employ a more coordinated and comprehensive approach to matching the needs of individual families to available programs. While most military-connected children and families are doing well, some families are falling through the cracks and would benefit from greater support. The report also concludes that due to the widespread changes in American societal norms and family structures that have occurred in recent years, addressing military families' needs today requires greater attention to the diversity of family structures that exist today.



WHY FAMILIES MATTER TO MILITARY READINESS

The DoD relies on the well-being of military families. For example, family members provide support to Service members while they serve, are injured, or transition back to civilian life. Likewise, family problems can interfere

with the ability of Service members to deploy or to remain in theater. Family members also are central influences on whether Service members continue to serve.

In addition, Service members' psychological or physical difficulties can reverberate within families, potentially generating a need for costs for various DoD support programs. Moreover, military families raise a disproportionate number of future military Service members, so the well-being of the military family is important for future military Service members too.

MILITARY FAMILY READINESS SYSTEM WOULD BENEFIT FROM GREATER COORDINATION

Recognizing the key role of families, the DoD developed the Military Family Readiness System (MFRS). The MFRS includes a plethora of policies, programs, services, resources, and practices to support and promote the readiness and resilience of families. Through this system, nonmedical counseling assistance and referrals are available to address areas of need that include the military life cycle (e.g., basic training, service, advancement, reenlistment, separation, transition/retirement), family and relationships, moving and housing, financial and legal aid, education and employment, and health and wellness.

The vast array of social supports available to Service members and their families are organized and provided at various levels within the military—the DoD level, the service branch level, and in many cases the installation or military base level. However, it is unclear to what extent service providers at the various levels of the military are aware of one another, and coordinate the provision of services with one another.

The report concludes that while the current MFRS provides many valuable services for military families, it is siloed, resulting in a diffusion of labor and responsibility and, in some instances, fragmented service delivery. The system lacks a comprehensive, coordinated framework to support individual and population well-being, resilience, and readiness among military families. Addressing this weakness could improve the quality of services provided, encourage innovation, and support effective response capabilities.

MORE DATA NEEDED ON THE CHANGING NATURE OF MILITARY FAMILIES

Widespread changes in American societal norms and family structures have occurred over the last few decades. The diversity and complexity of families have increased, and these shifts have multiple implications for DoD and the MFRS. For example, individuals entering the military today may have experienced more family transitions as children, such as the divorce and remarriage of parents, than their predecessors. Similarly, today's Service members may create new families that are more diverse or complex than in the past.

Because of these changes, fully understanding today's military families and their needs requires greater attention to family diversity and complexity. This rising diversity and complexity also will likely increase the difficulty of creating military policies, programs, and practices that adequately support families in the performance of military duties.

The report concludes that 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 measurements of the military community. Existing data lack 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. As a result, current military statistics may mislead policy makers and program managers, potentially resulting in some types of families being underserved by the MFRS.

SUPPORTING FAMILIES IN RESPONDING TO THE STRESSES OF MILITARY FAMILY LIFE

Certain challenges faced by military families can create levels of stress and burden that overwhelm some families, if only temporarily. Physical injury and psychological traumatic stress are defining events that can complicate the well-being of military families, leading to problems within the family, affecting marital and parenting relationships, and undermining adult and child well-being.

Fortunately, there is evidence that the effects of severe stressors can be ameliorated or prevented with evidence-based interventions focused on strengthening family relationships, caregiving/parenting, and the family environment. Processes that support the resilience of families—effective communication strategies, emotion

regulation, problem solving, and competent parenting—serve as opportunities for promotion, prevention, and intervention in the wake of stress and trauma.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The report recommends that the DoD enable military family support providers and consumers to access effective, evidence-based and evidence-informed programs, resources, and services to strengthen families. To meet the diverse and ever-changing needs of Service members and their families, DoD should strengthen the MFRS so that it:

- provides a comprehensive, coordinated continuum of support across providers, locations, and changing benefit eligibility;
- facilitates adaptive and timely approaches to stepped-care delivery;
- draws upon effective evidence-based or evidence-informed approaches;
- integrates routine screening and assessment tools in the delivery of family support programs;
- builds and employs a robust data infrastructure, both implementation and outcome data, that supports a continuous quality improvement system; and
- coordinates referrals and care across military and nonmilitary resources, institutions, and communities.

Additional steps DoD should take to strengthen its efforts to support family well-being include

- developing and implementing standardized, military-specific definitions of “family well-being,” “family readiness,” and “family resilience” in order to allow information to be compared and synthesized across datasets and studies, and to support evaluations of the effectiveness of programs;
- taking immediate steps to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the diversity of today’s military families and their needs, well-being, and readiness to support Service members;
- reviewing its current policies, programs, services, resources, and practices for supporting military families—according to how Service members define families—to ensure that they recognize the wide diversity of today’s military families and address the special circumstances of military life, especially with regard to major transitions (e.g., entering military service, moving to new duty stations, deploying, transitioning to veteran status);
- developing, adopting, and sustaining a dynamic learning system as part of its MFRS, so that its policies, programs, practices, and services are informed by a continuous quality improvement process;
- more fully identifying, analyzing, and integrating existing data to track child risk and adversity over time, while also ensuring the privacy of individual family member information;
- providing guidance for military leaders and service providers on how to readily and reliably access and utilize information about the surrounding communities in which their personnel are situated;
- building its capacity to support Service members and families by promoting better civilian understanding of the strengths and needs of military-connected individuals;
- investigating innovations in big data and predictive analytics to improve the accessibility, engagement, personalization, and effectiveness of policies, programs, practices, and services for military families; and
- continually assessing the availability and effectiveness of specialized family-centered policies, programs, services, resources, and practices to support the evolving and unexpected needs of families facing exceptionally high stressors.

In addition, to facilitate the continuation of its policies regarding military family readiness and well-being across political administrations and changes of senior military leadership, the report recommends that the DoD update and promulgate its existing instruction that operationalizes the importance of military family well-being by incorporating the conclusions and recommendations contained in the report.

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For More Information . . . This Consensus Study Report Highlights was prepared by the Board on Children, Youth, and Families based on the Consensus Study Report, *Strengthening the Military Family Readiness System for a Changing American Society* (2019). The study was sponsored by the U.S. Department of Defense. Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the views of any organization or agency that provided support for the project. Copies of the Consensus Study Report are available from the National Academies Press, (800) 624-6242; <http://www.nas.edu/MilitaryFamilies>.

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