Strengthening the MILITARY FAMILY READINESS SYSTEM for a Changing American Society

Changes in Military Families and their Relationship with Military Readiness

The health and well-being of military families is vital to the readiness and effectiveness of the U.S. military for a number of reasons. Stresses and conflict within a service member's family can make it difficult for that person to focus and perform his or her duties, for example, and family considerations play a major role in service members' decisions concerning reenlistment and making the military a career. In light of this, the Military Family Readiness System (MFRS) was created to support military families in ways that improve military readiness—for instance, by helping to make military service more attractive than civilian employment.

But family structures in the United States are changing rapidly—becoming more diverse and more complex—and this poses a number of challenges for the MFRS. One such challenge will be to chronicle the variety of family structures that service members today experience, from the traditional family of a married man and woman raising their own biological children to divorced families, blended families, families with same-sex parents, families headed by unmarried partners, and couples without children. Once that is done, a second challenge will be understanding the needs of the different types of families and developing programs that address those needs in order to improve the resilience and readiness of the military. But the first step must simply be to improve the collection of data on the various types of families that service members belong to, with the goal of building a clear picture of the military family today.

The Connections Between Family Well-Being and Military Readiness

Family factors play a number of roles in military readiness. It begins with an individual's likeliness to enlist. Parents can play an important part in a son's or daughter's decision to enlist, for example, and individuals who were raised by step-parents or nonbiological parents are more likely to enlist than those who were raised by two biological parents.

Once an individual has joined the service, family factors affect performance in many ways. For instance, married male recruits were found to be significantly less likely to get a medical discharge from basic combat training than those who were divorced, separated, or widowed. Among female recruits, those who were divorced, separated, or widowed were more likely to receive a medical discharge than those who were single.

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Members of the military report that their family well-being affects their performance in various ways. Deployed male soldiers who have good communication with their partners, for instance, say that they are better able to focus on their jobs. Conversely, a significant number of soldiers and marines who were deployed to the Middle East reported that family-related stress or tension interfered with their ability to focus on their jobs, making it more difficult to perform their duties competently.

Various mental health issues experienced by service members are affected in one way or another by their family lives. One study found, for instance, that married service members were more likely than unmarried service members to experience mental health problems after combat exposure, perhaps because the interpersonal challenges of marriage added to the residual effects of combat exposure. And studies of both soldiers and National Guard members have found family and parenting problems to be implicated in military suicides.

More generally, various aspects of military family well-being have been found to affect military readiness. In one survey of Army personnel, for instance, soldiers reported that their readiness and satisfaction with military life were related both to stress in their personal and family lives and to how often their Army responsibilities caused problems for their families. Another survey found that soldiers' satisfaction with military life and with their Army jobs were significantly influenced by the soldiers' perceptions about the environments for their families and how satisfied their spouses were with the amount of time they were able to spend with their families.

Another important influence that family well-being has on military readiness is the role that families play in retention. Generally speaking, married service members are more committed to military service than those who are not married, and among married service members the spouses' opinions play a significant role, with those military members whose spouses are supportive of their military career being more likely to remain in the service. Conversely, service members who are having marital problems or whose spouses urge them to leave the military—sometimes because of a perception that military service was not compatible with a healthy family life—are more likely to leave at the end of their commitment.

Family-related issues seem to be especially important in the retention of female service members. Women who have left the military consistently report family considerations—particularly the birth of a child or concerns about work–family conflicts—as among those issues that played a major role in their choice to leave. Furthermore, many report that these family issues compelled them to leave sooner than they had planned or wished to.

In short, family issues can play both a positive and negative role in military readiness. Certain factors can increase stresses on service members and make them less likely to remain in the military, but other aspects of family life can be very supportive of military service, helping them deal with the stresses of their jobs and encouraging them to commit to a military career. Additionally, military life can have positive and negative effects on families and result in differing perceptions on the compatibility of military service with family life. The key to improving military readiness will lie in finding ways to mitigate the negative aspects of military life.

How the Family Has Been Changing

The general pattern of changes in the family is well known. These changes have been going on for at least 150 years, since the advent of the Industrial Revolution, and they have accelerated over the past two or three generations. The divorce rate has increased, while the marriage rate has dropped, and the age at which people first get married has grown. Women have become far more likely to work outside the home, and the average

number of children born to one woman has declined, while the average age of having one's first child has increased. As the marriage rate has dropped, it has become more common for couples to live together—and for some to have and raise children together—without getting married. And in recent years, the change in the legal status of same-sex couples has led to an increase in the number of same-sex marriages and same-sex couples raising children together.

One result of all these trends has been a major diversification in the types of family structures found in the United States. In the 1950s, the "expected" family structure, as typically portrayed in popular culture on television shows and in movies, consisted of a married man and woman raising their own biological children who had been conceived and born within wedlock. Since that time, the once-strong connections among partnering, marriage, and childbearing have weakened considerably, and it is no longer possible to speak of a "typical" family structure. There are instead many different structures, and both parents and children may experience several of them over time.

Couples are now just as likely to live together without getting wed than to live together as married partners, for instance. And when people do get married, they do so later in life than used to be the case. One result of these trends is that 40 percent of children are now born to parents who are not married, although, because of increasing levels of cohabitation, the percentage of parents who have a partner, married or unmarried, has not changed.

Another trend is that because the average number of children born per woman has dropped, the average family size—taking into account just parents and children—has been declining. Meanwhile, because of the increasing divorce rate and a growing tendency for divorced parents to share custody, more and more children are growing up under shared-custody arrangements. There are also increasing numbers of children living in households with same-sex parents, and the number of mixed-immigration-status families—that is, those with some members who are U.S. citizens and some who are not—has been growing.

One result of the growing diversity of families is that children growing up tend to experience more than one type of family arrangement. A child may, for example, start out as an only child in a single-parent household, then gain a stepparent and stepsiblings when his or her parent gets married, gain a half-sibling when a new brother or sister is born, and then experience a family breakup when the parents divorce. Young adults today tend to have accumulated more of these family transitions than those in previous generations, and children growing up today are following the same pattern. For instance, children in families today are more likely than those in the past to have ties to parents or siblings in multiple households.

This represents a type of family diversity that is referred to as *family complexity*. Generally speaking, such complexity is a result of one individual having children with multiple partners. This results in parents with children spread across multiple households and children with their siblings and parents—often multiple parents, stepparents, and partners of parents—living in different places. The complexity of families has been increasing at the same time as their diversity has been growing. One recent study estimated that among parents with at least two children, 23 percent of fathers aged 40–44 and 28 percent of mothers aged 41–49 had children with more than one other person. This growing complexity is separate from, but closely related to, the increasing numbers of transitions that children are experiencing.

Implications for the Department of Defense

The changes in the family have come quickly enough that many of the official definitions of family have failed to keep up with them. For example, the U.S. Census defines *family* as "a group of two people or more (one of whom is the householder) related by birth, marriage, or adoption and residing together." This definition leaves out various groupings that would generally be considered families today. It does not, for example, consider nonmarried partners living together and raising children together to be a single family, nor does it consider married partners living apart to be a single family.

Similarly, the U.S. Department of Defense's (DoD's) conception of "military family" is generally rooted in marriage and biological and adoptive relationships, particularly between a service member and his or her children, although in some cases the parents of a service member may also be considered to be part of that person's military family. The military's definition of family is particularly important for determining which individuals are eligible for access to various programs and services.

Because of the increasing diversity of families—and, in particular, the growing number of families that include members that do not fit the definition of military dependent as set forth by Congress—there are an increasing number of "invisible families" in the U.S. military. These are families that are neither counted in surveys of families nor targeted in family readiness efforts. They include, for instance, unmarried couples living together with or without children and households headed by same-sex couples. Although there are no data on just how many invisible military families there are, it seems likely that the number is substantial since, for instance, half of service members are unmarried, and evidence from the overall population indicates that a substantial number of them are likely to be in committed relationships.

The growing complexity of military families—as opposed to their growing diversity—has its own implications for family well-being. For example, parents who have children with multiple partners often end up with fragmented families, with their children growing up in multiple households. This complexity is often accompanied by greater family instability, or regular changes in households or the family structure, which can have negative consequences for the children. A child who lives apart from his or her biological parent will generally receive less care-giving time and financial support from that parent, will experience more transitions in living arrangements, and will be at a greater risk of mistreatment from a "social parent" (i.e., an unmarried partner of the child's parent with whom the child lives).

It is also worth noting that those who are entering the military today are more likely than in the past to be the product of such complex families—and, in particular, to have experienced more family transitions than service members from previous generations. This may have implications for their own family life and mental health.

Because of the increasing diversity and complexity of families and the growing presence of invisible families, there is a danger that DoD policies, programs, and practices could become increasingly misaligned with actual family structures. Avoiding this will require collecting more complete data about the various family structures that exist in today's military and also thinking more carefully about what sorts of policies, programs, and practices will be required to adequately support families in this era of growing diversity and complexity.

Recommendations

To sum up, this is the situation: Family issues affect military service members in various ways, so helping strengthen military families and improve their resilience can help to support service members and boost the military's readiness and resilience (which is the underlying purpose of the MFRS). However, in recent years, military families have become increasingly diverse with correspondingly diverse stressors and needs that may not always be addressed by the MFRS. Thus, DoD should work to increase its understanding of the diversity and complexity of today's military families so as to improve its ability to support these families and thus increase military readiness. With these points in mind, the committee made two basic recommendations.

First, DoD should develop clear definitions of various terms, such as "family," "family well-being," "family resilience," and "family readiness," to provide a solid foundation for data gathering and analysis. Without such agreed-upon definitions, different research studies and different programs may use the terms in different ways, making it difficult to compare results or to understand conflicting findings and also creating uncertainties concerning the precise goals of family-oriented programs.

Second, DoD should implement data-collection programs designed to increase its understanding of today's military families, including their diverse forms and needs, their well-being, and their readiness to support those family members who are serving in the military. Doing this will require not only gathering additional data on military families but also making sure that those data are used in analyses that provide insights into military families and the programs that support them. Among the types of studies that will be most helpful are longitudinal studies focused on the effects of resilience processes and protective factors over time, studies that look specifically at family members who play a large role in the care of military children, studies of service family members from ethnic and racial minorities with an eye toward identifying their concerns and factors that affect their well-being, and analyses that look for family-related factors that modify how various stresses affect service members.

Finally, DoD should share the results of its information gathering and analyses, via reports and educational materials, with researchers, service providers, program managers, and community partners in order to maximize the value of this work and, ultimately, to optimize the experiences of service members and make the U.S. military as well prepared and resilient as possible.

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