



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

Understanding Military Service Members and their Families



In order for the Military Family Readiness System (MFRS) to carry out its tasks effectively, it needs a clear understanding of the people it serves—that is, members of the U.S. military and their families—and of the various challenges and opportunities in these individuals' lives. This is complicated by the fact that the military is changing in various ways and by the diversity of experiences and needs among service members and their families.



Changing Demographics

A tremendous amount of data exists concerning the demographics of service members and their families—things such as age, sex, race and ethnicity, marital status, education, geographic origins, and so forth—and one of the most obvious facts that emerges from studying these data is how

much these demographics have changed over the past generation or two. The result is that today's military looks much different in terms of sex, education, race and ethnicity, and other demographic factors than it did just a few decades ago.

In 1990, for example, less than 3 percent of active-duty enlisted service members had a bachelor's degree or an advanced degree, while in 2017 about 8 percent did. In 1990, racial minorities (not including white Hispanics) accounted for about 25 percent of active-duty service members; by 2017 that number had increased to 31 percent. Hispanic service members increased from 9 percent of active forces in 2004 to 16 percent in 2017.

The number of women in active-duty service has also been steadily increasing, from 11 percent of enlisted personnel and 12 percent of officers in 1990 to 16 percent and 18 percent, respectively, in 2017. Meanwhile, the percentage of active-duty personnel who are married has decreased (from 57% in 1990 to 53% in 2017), as has the percentage of personnel who are married with children (39% to 34% during the same period). One demographic that has not changed is the average age, which has remained at around 24 years for enlisted service members and 35 years for officers.

Finally, the geographic distribution of service members has been changing. Military personnel are increasingly likely to have come from the South and least likely to have come from the Northeast, although much of that

difference can be explained in terms of the changes in other demographic characteristics, such as race, education, and religion. And today's active-duty service members have shifted from living mainly on military installations to living primarily off-installation, meaning that they are much more geographically dispersed than before, when they were mostly concentrated in specific neighborhoods.

Variability Across and Within Groups

The simplest demographic analyses divide people into groups based on single characteristics—age, sex, race and ethnicity, etc.—and look for differences among those groups. But while that can at times offer important insights, attempting to understand people based on a single demographic characteristic is far too simplistic an approach. No one's experiences can be explained by a single characteristic, such as race or sex, and the relevance of a characteristic can vary depending on things, such as time, place, context, and other characteristics. The experiences of black women, for instance, are not necessarily the same as those of White women or of Black men, and analyses that are done only by race or only by sex can miss important patterns.

Furthermore, the experiences of various people within a group—say, Black women—will also vary. They will be affected by timing, context, and other statuses, such as being a naval officer, being a pilot, having a husband who is a Marine, having children, being stationed on an aircraft carrier, or being 30 years old. Understanding an individual's experiences—rather than just the average experiences within a group—requires examining as many relevant factors as possible.

Sociologists use the term *intersectionality* to refer to how various characteristics are interrelated and interact with one another. The term was originally applied in explaining how discrimination can be shaped and amplified by the interaction of different factors—for example, how a Black gay woman's experience of discrimination could be the product of an interplay between sexual discrimination, racial discrimination, and discrimination based on sexual orientation—but in the military context, an intersectional lens can serve as an organizing framework for understanding how overlapping social statuses, including sex, race, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status, shape the experiences of individual service members and families.

The implication for the MFRS is that its support of military families should not be a one-size-fits-all approach but rather a variety of approaches that seek to align programs with the diverse needs of service members, diverse family constellations, and local social contexts. The U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) and local service providers should not make assumptions based on one or two characteristics at a given point in time (e.g., single newly enlisted service member, deployed parent, Latina Marine) concerning what is most important to military personnel and military family members, what they need, or what is the best way to support them. Instead, these providers must take into account the perceptions, priorities, and preferences of service members and their families; should provide a range of types of support from which to draw; and should ensure that the support networks contain providers with knowledge about and sensitivity to the needs of different subgroups.

Changing Contexts

Those service members in today's military serve in a very different context than did those when the all-volunteer force was originally designed in the 1970s. During the Cold War era, the military was focused on a single main adversary, but in recent decades it has faced ever-changing threats from various places around the globe and from both hostile states and nonstate actors. In response, the types of missions that the military is asked to take



on have changed and gotten more diverse. Today, in addition to combat, service members might find themselves on peacekeeping missions, taking part in disaster relief, working on public health and humanitarian efforts, or assisting with homeland security. And many of those missions require expert knowledge or advanced skills that take years to develop, such as technological expertise or the ability to work with local populations overseas. Furthermore, since 9/11, the demands on the military have increased dramatically, with one result being that the National Guard and the Reserves have been called up like never before in our nation's military history.

Thus, the expectations for today's military—both active duty and reserves—are much different than they were just a couple of generations ago, which in turn means that the challenges and opportunities facing those in the military (and their families) have changed as well.

Duration and Timing of Events

In understanding the effects that challenges and opportunities have on military families, it is important to take into account the timing and duration of those events, each of which can shape the effects of the events in important ways.

Consider, for instance, the duration of a deployment. Some deployments can be short—such as a mission to transport equipment and supplies overseas and back—while others can put service members in a combat zone for a year or more. The longer deployments have some advantages. They offer more opportunities to hone one's skills, they generally pay better because of special pays and tax benefits, and they make it more likely that a service member will be promoted or offered a coveted assignment. But they have their downside as well. Service members are away from their families for much longer times and thus are more likely to miss important events at home, such as the births of their children, babies' first steps, and holidays. And the longer a service member is deployed, the greater risk that he or she runs of injury, death, or exposure to traumatic events.

The timing of events can shape the experiences of service members and their families in a number of ways. For one thing, early experiences can influence the way that later experiences affect a person. An example of this is that service members' exposure to abuse or violence before joining the military can increase their risk of later developing posttraumatic stress disorder or attempting suicide.

Timing can affect military spouses as well. For instance, a military spouse could marry a service member well before his or her own career has been established or long afterward, and which of these it is could make a big difference in the spouse's ability to manage the demands of a military life and need for various types of support.

For the children of military families, timing can be even more important. Relocations or deployments that take place in a particularly important developmental period or at a vulnerable time in a child's life could lead to major stresses or developmental delays, for instance, while those that took place at other times might have much different results. Relocations have been shown to affect school performance years later, and early difficulties in school may lead to future problems in relationships with peers.

The cumulative long-term effects of military experiences can be positive, neutral, or negative, depending on the types of experiences and their duration and timing. This complexity makes it essential to understand an individual's experiences on his or her own terms and not to assume that any given person will fit a particular pattern.



Challenges and Opportunities for Military Children

Children being raised by a military parent (or military parents) face a number of challenges that children in nonmilitary households do not, but a military upbringing also offers a number of opportunities.

RELOCATIONS

Consider, for instance, the frequent moves made by members of the active service. These can be very stressful for military children, as they must regularly say goodbye to established friends and make new ones. The moves are particularly challenging for children's school experiences. On average, a child in a military family will change schools because of relocation six to nine times between kindergarten and high school—three times more often than a child growing up in a nonmilitary household—and while many of those moves will take place during the summer, some of them occur during the school year. These regular moves can have a number of negative effects in children, from lower grades to increased depression and anxiety, skipping class, violence and carrying weapons, joining gangs, and early sexual activity.

On the other hand, in some children at least, regular relocations can have benefits. They can help children develop resiliency and coping behaviors, and over time children may even come to look forward to the new experiences and opportunities that come with moving to a new place. Furthermore, the military and some civilian communities offer programs to support military children, such as youth and teen centers that offer educational and recreational programs to school-age children of active-duty and reserve members of the military.

DEPLOYMENTS

Even more so than regular relocations, deployments of a parent can offer challenges to children in military families. Since 2001, more than 2 million service members and their families have been affected by deployments, with some families having experienced five or more of the separations and reunions that come with deployment, and the precise effects are still being explored.

One consistent finding is that deployments take a psychological toll on military children of all ages, with the effects including behavioral problems, issues with peer relationships, and increased depression and suicidal thoughts. Children's academic performance can also be affected, with deployments being associated with lower grades, increased absences, and decreases in homework completion.

One of the complexities in understanding the effects of deployments on children is that they are difficult to separate from the effects of military service itself. Research has found, for instance, that children with family members who served but were never deployed were at an increased risk of behaviors, such as smoking or using alcohol, carrying weapons to school, and having suicidal thoughts. But other studies have found that having a family member deployed is a separate risk factor and that children whose parents were deployed were even more likely to have used alcohol, carried a knife or gun to school, or had suicidal thoughts than children of service members who had not deployed.

CHILD CARE

One key benefit of active-duty service for those members with children is the availability of high-quality and affordable child care. The DoD's Child Development Program is widely seen as a model of child care, with 97 percent of its centers nationally accredited—compared with only about 11 percent of nonmilitary child development centers nationwide. Unfortunately the demand for the military's subsidized child care is so great for infants



and toddlers that many centers are full and have wait lists. This is a particular problem in areas with large military populations and a high cost of living, such as Hawaii, San Diego, the Tidewater Region in Virginia, and the Washington, DC, metropolitan area. The DoD is currently working to expand its child care to meet this demand.

Generally speaking, the effects of these various challenges and opportunities will vary according to the child and his or her particular situation. Depending on factors, such as the individual child's developmental stage, temperament, and social capacity and the parents' maturity and behavior, one child may thrive where another one struggles.

How Experiences of Reserve Members Differ from Those of Active Service Members

In many ways, the opportunities and challenges experienced by members of the National Guard and Reserves and their families are similar to those experienced by active-duty members and their families, but there are also a number of significant differences, and these differences are crucial to take into account in efforts to improve the effectiveness of the MFRS.

One of the most obvious differences is that members of the National Guard and Reserves do not have to make the regular mandated moves known as permanent change of station that those in the active service experience. This is often seen as a positive thing since it allows service members to stay in one place of their own choosing, and, indeed, some service members transfer from active duty to the Reserves for precisely this reason.

On the other hand, there are some negative aspects to the way that members of the National Guard and Reserves are stationed as well. For instance, many military children find it beneficial to live in places, such as military bases, where they can take part in military-sponsored activities and form friendships with other military children, who share many of the same experiences and concerns; the children of National Guard and Reserve members often do not have these options. Furthermore, members of the National Guard and Reserves who do not live near their units must pay for their own transportation to and from their places of duty for training and other activities. The distance can be a particular problem before and after deployments. When service members live too far from their deploying units, they and their family members can find it difficult to attend pre-deployment briefings or support groups, and the service member and his or her family may have no previous connection with the unit the service member is joining. After deployment, service members and their families who live far from the deploying unit may find it difficult to stay in touch with members of the deploying unit or to take advantage of the various resources intended to help service members and their families transition to post-deployment lives.

Because of the lack of integrated pay and personnel status systems, members of the National Guard and Reserves have had various pay-related problems—pay and allowance delays, underpayments, and overpayments that the military later tries to recoup—as well as issues with benefits and services. In particular, the eligibility requirements for various programs and services can be confusing to figure out, as they vary considerably by program and according to such things as how recently a service member was on active-duty status and whether that was under Title 32 (federal-level) or Title 10 (federally funded state-level) orders. Health care is a particular concern, with families eligible for TRICARE benefits only when the service member is on active duty for more than 30 days or is mobilized for a contingency operation. The committee found no tool that could help National Guard and Reserve families determine exactly what they are eligible for based on their current status.



Another major issue is the job disruptions that members of the National Guard and Reserves face by being deployed. Unlike active-duty members, members of the National Guard and Reserves typically have full-time nonmilitary jobs, either with an employer or being self-employed, which they must leave when deployed. Although federal law prohibits employers from penalizing reservists for missing work for their deployments and from discriminating against them in hiring decisions, deployments can clearly pose challenges for the service members' employers, and it seems likely that reservists may find it more difficult to find jobs because of this.

All of these issues are magnified by the unprecedented frequency of National Guard and Reserve mobilizations that have been taking place since 9/11. In particular, since that time, as large numbers of reservists have been mobilized for long deployments, there have been dramatic increases in the number of veterans claiming unemployment benefits as they have experienced difficulties returning to civilian employment.

In short, the challenges and opportunities experienced today by service members and their families not only are different from those experienced by previous generations of military families, but they can vary considerably from one individual to the next, depending on a variety of factors. These factors include individual characteristics, such as age, sex, race and ethnicity, and family status; military factors, such as active or reserve status, relocations, and deployments; the timing and duration of various events; and the interactions among all of these factors. For the MFRS, a key step in providing more effective services for service members and their families will be to develop a more detailed understanding of these factors and the roles they play in military families' challenges and opportunities.

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