RESEARCH
BRIEF

Civic Engagement and Sense of Community in the Military

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ABSTRACT

"In the context of current discussions among social commentators about the status and well being of community in American society, this article examines the nature of civic engagement and sense of community in the U.S. military. Framed by social disorganization theory, a conceptual model is developed and tested with a sample of married active duty Air Force (AF) members. Our analysis examines variations in perceptions of sense of community as a consequence of three indicators of civic engagement: community capacity, community connections, and community participation. The results suggest that community participation plays a particularly important role in influencing the sense of community that active duty members feel. Human service organizations and unit leaders are discussed as critical resources in promoting civic engagement and strengthening the sense of community among AF members."

RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

- Previous researchers have found that some military families feel overwhelmed by the demands on their family and their lives and that civic engagement and a sense of community help reduce service members and their families feelings of being overwhelmed.

- This 1999 study examines civic engagement and sense of community among Air Force service members on nine bases in the continental US.

- The findings from this study demonstrate that community participation leads to more community capacity and a greater sense of community.

- Findings show that community participation is the best direct predictor of a strong sense of community, followed by community connections and community capacity. This suggests that a sense of shared responsibility and collective competence among community members is facilitated when service members and their families are more active in their community and experience greater ease in making connections with each other.

IMPLICATIONS

FOR PRACTICE

Service members and their families reported more confidence in their community positively responding to their challenges when they were actively engaged in community activities as a result of knowing other fellow service members, consequently service members and families should participate in community events and activities as often as possible. Service agencies should provide opportunities for service members and their families to be actively engaged in the community activities rather than just focus on agency outreach to individuals and individual families. Agency and inter-agency efforts to promote civic engagement and community participation are essential to a high sense of community among military families. Agencies and organizations working to operate in a more collaborated effort should look at the AF Integrated Delivery System (IDS) as an example of a solid initiative that brings family support agencies together. Civilian communities organized near military bases should consider incorporating military families into volunteer opportunities and other opportunities to be engaged in the nearby community.

FOR POLICY

The Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) and other military policymakers might work together to create more opportunities for individuals and families to make connections and participate in community activities. Policymakers might encourage more formal and informal opportunities for civic engagement to ensure military families across all ranks feel supported and incorporated in their respective community. Likewise, the Veterans Administration might explore ways to continue fostering a sense of community and opportunities to be civically engaged after members and their families have separated from the military and reintegrated into the civilian sector such as partnering with local community organizations (formal and informal) to promote and foster citizen participation and community development. More research is needed on how policies and practices directly and indirectly shape the sense of community among military families.

FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future studies should include all military branches and include installations outside the continental US. Future research on civic engagement among military families should examine indicators that best capture a sense of a community and suggest useful interventions to further promote member and family member community integration. Researchers should also evaluate interventions that best promote a sense of community and encourage civic engagement among service members and their families. Given that the pace of life has quickened for military families (e.g., mobility and work demands) future researchers should examine whether greater civic engagement and community participation helps to provide a sense of support and balance. Subsequent research should assess whether policies and practices foster greater shared responsibility and collective competence. To better assess the many changes that occur in service members and their families' lives, future studies should investigate the structural and psychological aspects of family and community. It would be beneficial to study factors that might hinder or complicate civic engagement and sense of community, such as differences in pay grades. Researchers should evaluate the nuances that affect community participation, including access to some organizations and volunteer opportunities. Future studies should refine the basic concepts of the model used in this study and account for multiple contexts that might affect civic engagement, community participation, and sense of community.

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