

The Demographics of Military Children and Families

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RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS:

- A service member's decision to re-enlist in the military often rests on his or her family's satisfaction with military life. Understanding the demographics of military families can assist in better serving their needs, reducing their stress, and increasing their happiness with military life.
- Demographics of the military population differ from those of the civilian population in that the military population tends to be younger, active-duty personnel form families younger, and women comprise a much smaller percentage of the population.
- Because of the diversity of military families, there is a greater need for flexible, adaptable policies and routes of access to resources.

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ABSTRACT:

“Since the advent of the all-volunteer force in the 1970s, marriage, parenthood, and family life have become commonplace in the U.S. military among enlisted personnel and officers alike, and military spouses and children now outnumber service members by a ratio of 1.4 to 1. Reviewing data from the government and from academic and nonacademic research, Molly Clever and David R. Segal find several trends that distinguish today's military families. Compared with civilians, for example, service members marry younger and start families earlier. Because of the requirements of their jobs, they move much more frequently than civilians do, and they are often separated from their families for months at a time. And despite steady increases since the 1970s in the percentage of women who serve, the armed forces are still overwhelmingly male, meaning that the majority of military parents are fathers. Despite these distinguishing trends, Clever and Segal's chief finding is that military families cannot be neatly pigeonholed. Instead, they are a strikingly diverse population with diverse needs. Within the military, demographic groups differ in important ways, and the service branches differ from one another as well. Military families themselves come in many forms, including not only the categories familiar from civilian life—two-parent, single-parent, and so on—but also, unique to the military, dual-service families in which both parents are service members. Moreover, military families' needs change over time as they move through personal and military transitions. Thus the best policies and programs to help military families and children are flexible and adaptable rather than rigidly structured.”

Implications

FOR PRACTICE

Because military families have diverse and dynamic lives, improving understanding of the demographics of military families is key to their social, economic, and wellness outcomes. The diversity of these families significantly impacts their interaction with their social networks and societal institutions, particularly schools serving military children. Schools with students from military families should be cognizant of their unique needs and work to create a safe environment where they can voice their concerns and receive support, from both their peers in schools and from adults. Military families should also seek out additional support from other families, community organizations, and institutions, to increase their own awareness of potentially helpful programs and opportunities that can address their needs and/or provide emotional support.

FOR POLICY

Policy makers might consider funding data collection on families of National Guard and Reserve personnel. Since the advent of Operation Iraqi Freedom/Operation Enduring Freedom, the military has relied more heavily on National Guard and Reserve personnel to supplement the active force. Policies intended to help military families are most effective when they address the diverse needs and situations military families encounter, therefore, current programs may need to be reviewed to ensure that they are accessible to military families from all backgrounds and at all stages of the life course. Considering the effect a parent's deployment can have on military children, policy makers might revisit policies aimed at helping military children address deployment-related stressors. In addition to reviewing these policies, there may be a need for implementation of additional programs aimed at helping military children through critical military transition points. Policy makers might consider implementing more programs to support and train family members who care for veterans with injuries from warfare, as well. Re-evaluating the current options for medical assistance available to injured veterans and their family members could be extremely beneficial.

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FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Much of the research on military children focuses on school-age children, therefore, additional research is needed on how younger children operate in military families and the impact of supports available for spouses caring for younger children during deployments and separation from their spouse. Currently, information on the effect military service has on families of National Guard and Reserve members is minimal. Future researchers should further examine the challenges facing families of National Guard and Reserve members, including the different concerns and obstacles families encounter based on single-parent versus dual-parent households. Divorce rates for civilians are higher for African Americans, however, in the military this gap disappears. Future researchers should examine reasons that the divorce rate is lower for African Americans military families. Along with lower divorce rates for active duty members, a study found that racial inequalities in pre-term births disappear in the military. Future researchers should study the disappearance of racial inequalities in pre-term births in the military. Longitudinal research is needed that follows military families through transitions from active duty, the National Guard and Reserves, to civilian life.