



The SAGE Encyclopedia of Lifespan Human Development

Military Families

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Book Title: The SAGE Encyclopedia of Lifespan Human Development

Chapter Title: "Military Families"

Pub. Date: 2018

Access Date: April 2, 2018

Publishing Company: SAGE Publications, Inc.

City: Thousand Oaks,

Print ISBN: 9781506307657

Online ISBN: 9781506307633

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781506307633.n527>

Print pages: 1411-1413

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Military families are those in which one or more members serve in some capacity in the armed forces. Although there are certainly many military families worldwide, this discussion will be limited in scope, addressing military service members who serve in the U.S. Armed Forces and their families. The unique role played by members of the armed forces necessarily affects their spouses, partners, parents, and children (if they have any)—which means a life-span approach is essential for understanding military families. This entry describes the diversity found among military families, examines stressors encountered by military families, and highlights resilient family processes by exploring resources and support available to military families.

Diversity Within Military Families

To understand military family life, it is important to recognize the diverse roles and responsibilities of military members. As ties to the military vary, the salience of military life and its impact on the family also varies.

One important distinction among military members relates to the amount of time devoted to training and serving. Military members belong either to the active duty or the reserve component of the military. *Active duty* military members work full-time within one of the active duty service branches; these include the army, navy, marine corps, air force, and coast guard. The *reserve* component of the U.S. military is collectively referred to as the guard and reserves and includes the Army National Guard, Army Reserve, Navy Reserve, Marine Corps Reserve, Air National Guard, Air Force Reserve, and Coast Guard Reserve. Members of the reserve component are sometimes referred to as citizen soldiers because they typically hold full-time civilian jobs and dedicate approximately 1 month each year to military service during drill weekends and annual training exercises. Most guard and reserve members are eligible to be called into active duty service should a need arise. Both the active duty and reserve components comprise officers and enlisted personnel.

Officers are those with advanced leadership and postsecondary education who plan missions and assign responsibilities. *Enlisted personnel* are military members with specific specialties who carry out the missions. Officers and enlisted personnel can retire after 20 years of service, but most military careers tend to be fewer than 10 years. Less than one third of the individuals leaving the military each year retire. The majority leave because of personal choice or because of the *up or out* policy of the military which mandates that service members have a specified time to move up to the next rank. If not promoted within the time frame, the service member is discharged from the service.

Active Duty Military Members

The remainder of this entry focuses on active duty military members who have full-time military responsibilities because the expectations and experiences of service and commitment are systematically different from those in the reserve component. Active duty military members are a diverse group of men and women with regard to their stage in the life span and in family life. The majority (over 60%) are under the age of 30 and, accordingly, are in the life stage known as emerging adulthood. Emerging adult service members may view their military experience as a mechanism for identity exploration and self-discovery because they are still considering permanent career options and have few obligations to others (e.g., unmarried, without children). Scholars have even characterized military service as a *moratorium*, or

holding pattern, in the transition to adulthood as young military members are able to delay adult responsibilities. This was particularly evident during the periods of conscription when individuals were enlisted or *drafted* into the military for a mandatory but finite amount of time.

In 1973, the U.S. Armed Forces became an all-volunteer force, so that joining the military became a personal choice. Since then it appears that active duty military service tends to expedite the journey to adulthood as individuals exercise their decisional independence and choose military service as a career option. The military provides a means for financial independence and a context that promotes responsibility. Some would even argue that current military policies prompt, or inadvertently encourage, the transition into marriage and family life. Specifically, the benefits and compensation structure of the military favors those who are married; benefits for married members include permission to move out of the barracks, nontaxable cash allowances for housing, and access to family health insurance. In fact, active duty military members are more likely to marry and marry at earlier ages than their civilian counterparts.

Approximately 3 in 5 active duty military members have some form of family responsibility; over half are married (1995 = 60%; 2013 = 55%) and almost half (43%) have one or more children. Of those with children, approximately 10% are single parents. Accordingly, military family structures vary and include but are not limited to (a) the military member and his or her spouse, (b) the military member, his or her spouse, and child(ren), and (c) the military member and child(ren).

Stressors

Military members and their families have an important and distinct role in *servicing and sacrificing*, one that is associated with unique stressors. The most widely studied military family stressor is *deployment*, an experience in which a military member receives orders and is mobilized to a location away from home for military action. Active duty military members are generally deployed between 90 days and 15 months depending on their branch of service and their mission. During this time, families experience ambiguous loss, as they mourn and cope with the physical absence of their military member and uncertainty of his or her return. Some military families recruit help from extended family members, such as grandparents, for short- or long-term assistance during deployments to provide support to the family unit, particularly with regard to child care. For children in military families, deployment has been associated with behavior problems, poorer school performance, and mental health symptomatology; for most, these effects are small or negligible. The period of *postdeployment* when military members return home and reintegrate back into family and civilian life can present new challenges, as family members become reacquainted and roles and responsibilities must be renegotiated. Reintegration can be particularly difficult if the military member returns with physical injuries or posttraumatic stress. In some cases, family members may be susceptible to secondary traumatization, experiencing stress and/or fatigue brought about by trying to help their military family member who is experiencing trauma.

Another common stressor for military families is the regularity with which *transitions* and permanent change of station orders occur. Active duty military families tend to relocate to different duty locations every few years. Multiple school changes and neighborhood transitions can enhance isolation and impair psychosocial adjustment for children as peer groups change and circumstances feel unstable. Because military installations are located worldwide, relocating outside the continental United States is not uncommon. This type of relocation enhances physical distance from familiar others and may present challenges such

as cultural and language barriers.

The *rank* of one's military member has also been identified as a potential risk factor associated with family-level vulnerability because rank is associated with pay grade and social hierarchy. Those of enlisted ranks more frequently report financial difficulties and lower socioeconomic standing. Additionally, children of enlisted personnel report more depressive symptoms and fewer social supports compared to those of officers. The chronic nature of these military-related stressors has promoted research focus and policy attention on the family system.

Promoting Resilience

Military-related stressors can enhance susceptibility to adverse outcomes such as poorer mental health of family members and strained interpersonal relationships between family members. Yet, many military families are resilient and adaptable. Research has focused on understanding how families respond to persistent stressors in an effort to identify factors that promote resilience. One important distinction that has emerged is the family's use of available resources and their connection to others. Two important sources of support have been identified: formal systems and informal networks.

Formal systems provide support through programs and services. Engaging in formal systems such as civic groups, religious institutions, and need-based services (e.g., therapy) has been associated with individual and family well-being. The military also recognizes that military members are best able to engage and complete their missions when their families are healthy. The military term *family readiness* embodies the idea that military members and their families need to be prepared, or ready, to manage the challenges associated with military life. To promote family readiness and formal systems of support within the military, Department of Defense policy emphasizes soldier well-being and healthy family life by reflecting these priorities within the goals and mission of the military.

Additionally, *informal networks* of support promote military family resilience. Relationships and meaningful connections to others serve as a protective factor for military families. One-on-one sources of support (e.g., friends, neighbors, grandparents) as well as collective support systems (e.g., family readiness groups, online support groups) appear to serve as a buffer and protect individual family members and, consequently, the family unit from stressors associated with military family life.

See also [Emerging Adulthood](#); [Marriage](#); [Posttraumatic Stress Disorder \(PTSD\)](#); [Work/Family Conflict](#)

- military families
- military
- families
- stressors
- all volunteer force
- duty
- military service

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781506307633.n527>

10.4135/9781506307633.n527

Further Readings

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