

NAVAL HEALTH RESEARCH CENTER

Military Families: Looking to the Future

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Presenter: I have no interest to disclose.

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Learning Objectives

At the conclusion of this panel activity, the participant will be able to:

- Identify various definitions of a “military family”
- Discuss the value of military families to the operational mission
- Describe ways in which the military can support military families



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Background

- Military personnel are almost all part of a family system
- Out of 1.3 million U.S. active duty service members, 54.3% are married and 41.2% have at least one child¹
- Including National Guard and Reservists, there are 2.1 million U.S. service members who are associated with more than 2.7 million family members
- Our all-volunteer force is a “military of families,”² and these families will only continue to grow over time



U.S. Family Changes Over Time

- **1940**: majority of households (90%) were husband-wife family households, typically with working husband, at-home wife, and 1 or more children; <10% were dual-earner families³
- **1967**: interracial marriage became legal in all U.S. states⁴
- **1974**: women no longer faced mandatory separation from military service for pregnancy⁵
- **1989**: women constituted 45% of employed persons⁶
- **2015**: gay marriage became legal in all U.S. states⁷
- **2016**: married-couple family households were less common than in the past (73%),⁸ and in 50% of those families both spouses were working^{8,9}



Importance of Historical Context

- The military is a microcosm of our larger society
- Changes within the military reflect the shifts in U.S. public consciousness
- Military families of the past had a clear division of labor:
 - One partner working outside the home
 - One partner working inside the home
- Military families today are more fluid, reflecting U.S. cultural shifts over time



Military Challenges of Blending Work and Family

- Military duty is first, everything else is second
 - Military partner cannot always be transparent about work duties
 - Partner may feel a decrease in self-worth; the military career of one takes precedence over that of the other¹⁰
- Overall lack of personal choice for military families
 - Military families cannot always plan in advance
 - Military families move locations frequently; they are told where they can live and work¹¹
- Day-to-day family functioning can be difficult¹²
 - Child care is difficult to find for military personnel working unusual hours
 - Civilian spouses can have a harder time finding work due to frequent moves
 - Being married to a military member (as a civilian) can feel like a job in and of itself



Challenges for the Stability and Health of the Military Family

- Difficult to raise children as a military family¹³
 - Children are often far from grandparents, aunts, uncles
 - Children must, therefore, depend more on their parents who sometimes leave
 - Children may show difficulty adjusting to the demands of deployment
- “After multiple deployments, intense training cycles, and an uncertain outlook on the future, divorce became common among both the officer and noncommissioned officer ranks in the units in which I served”¹⁴
- “The military gives us tangible feedback on our performance; we get awards, promotions, recognition, and evaluation reports. Family life is much different. We don’t get ‘Father of the Year’ trophies, marriage evaluation reports, or challenge coins from our in-laws. As a result, sometimes climbing the professional pyramid seems more appealing than nurturing the homestead”¹⁴



Research With U.S. Military Families

Main Topic	Number of Articles
Mental Health and Care	276
Adult (Partner) Relationships	247
Deployment	244
Parenting	145
Health Behaviors	47
School Issues	43
Health Care System	27
Maternal/Child and Newborn	27
Health Promotion	10
Special Health Care Needs	4



Operational Readiness Now

Research suggests:

- The well-being of the service member's family is a **key factor** in the operational readiness of the service member¹⁵
- Service members' **concerns about their families** while on deployment were the cause of more stress than combat-related concerns¹⁶
- A **spouse's readiness** for an upcoming deployment is impacted by communication, marital quality, and the service member's mental health¹⁷
- Spousal employment and child care issues are important **positive factors** in military retention¹⁸



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Operational Readiness in the Future

Research suggests:

- Children from military families were up to 8 to 10 times more likely to join the service than children of non-veterans¹⁹
- Current military members are much less likely to encourage their children to join military service than in the past²⁰
- The presence of a military family can positively impact service members' likelihood of remaining in the military²¹



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How Can We Support Military Families of the Future?

- Sailor 2025: Career Readiness²²
- Extended time at one location to build military and community support systems
- Programs to strengthen marriages and committed partnerships
- Programs to further develop parenting skills and techniques in high-stress situations
- High-quality and safe child care options for working parents
- Parental leave (vs. paternity or maternity leave)
- Increase in pay for military service members, particularly in enlisted ranks
- Official military recognition for families after service member deployments



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