



Socio-Emotional Well-Being and Economic Outcomes for Currently Serving Military Families: Examining Differences Relative to Civilian Families Through a Series of Rapid Reviews.

Project Summary

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Professor Jennifer E. McIntosh, Dr Heng Jiang, Dr Anna Booth, Dr Jessica Opie, Felicity Painter, An
Vuong, Rowan Dowling, Dr Mohajer Hameed

Summary

The Bouverie Centre reviewed the evidence-base about the health and wellbeing of currently serving members, their families, spousal partners, and children, to guide policy and practice decisions. Studies exploring the impacts of military service on well-being and upon military retention have to date focused on the individual serving member, and/or on veterans, leaving the contemporary military family under-researched. Further, studies focusing on currently deployed or serving members are few, and those with such a focus rarely use civilian families as a control group. Thus, understanding the real differences between currently deployed or serving military families and civilian families, as well as the impacts these factors may have on military retention, are critically important research topics with significant policy implications.

In this light, the core research question was this:
What unique influence does current military service have
on the well-being of military family members?

A series of rapid reviews was designed, to understand differences between military and civilian family populations on:

1. Family social and economic outcomes
2. Child social, emotional, behavioural and educational outcomes
3. Couple health, social and emotional outcomes
4. Family and couple relationship quality.

Summary of Rapid Review Method and Findings

The four rapid reviews utilised the systematic methodology of the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-analyses (PRISMA) guidelines (Moher et al., 2009). In total, 23,191 records were systematically retrieved and rigorously screened for inclusion. Four overarching findings were clear. When compared with outcomes of civilian families, currently serving military families experienced:

1. lower spousal employment opportunities and risk of lower overall income;
2. higher psychosocial concerns for children, across all developmental stages (e.g., infancy, childhood, and youth). Children above the age of 12 years reported higher rates of suicidal ideation/attempts, and other mental health concerns;

3. higher levels of couple relationship distress and lower marital satisfaction, worsening with increasing length of deployment; and
4. higher prevalence of intimate partner violence (IPV) that increased with length of deployment. Specific risk factors for IPV included histories of childhood abuse and/or neglect, alcohol and other drugs misuse, younger age and physical and mental health concerns.

Conclusion

In addition to the normative transitions, stresses and losses faced by all families, within-military studies have long suggested added strains for military families who endure multiple moves, frequent loss of social and family supports, separation from the serving member often for unknown intervals, post-traumatic stress, and significantly lower opportunity for spouses to progress their own education and career pathways.

This series of studies sought to inform a core policy-related question: what is the current evidence about promotive and risk factors experienced by military relative to civilian families? Within a small pool of well conducted studies, we found moderate to strong evidence for unique additive risks of current military service for family socio-economic status, social and emotional well-being of the serving member and spouse, and for family structure, coherence, and relationship functioning.

The need for early detection of risk and for graded levels of educational and family-led therapeutic support for military families is clear. So too is the need for nuanced research into the future, to support the valued asset of family life for all serving military members.

The individual reviews are being prepared for publication.

Contact:

Professor Jenn McIntosh: jenn.mcintosh@latrobe.edu.au

Director of Research, The Bouverie Centre, La Trobe University