

Military children and their families remain an invisible subculture

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Since 9/11, the United States has seen the largest sustained deployment of military service men and women in the history of the all-volunteer force, and our knowledge of military children and their families – one of the largest American subcultures, affecting 2 million children – has become outdated.

To that end, the *Future of Children* – a collaboration between the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs at Princeton University and the Brookings Institution – has released the first comprehensive report since 9/11 to uncover what we know (and don't know) about such families, including current challenges, helpful programs and policies that could strengthen these family units.

While most [military children](#) grow into resilient adults, they are not always visible to the outside community, the journal reports. Longitudinal studies charting these children's lives are needed to better understand their strengths, resilience and [social support networks](#). Likewise, the authors write, many current programs for military children were rolled out quickly, at a time of pressing need, but few are based on scientific evidence of what works.

"This issue of *Future of Children* teaches us that military children are everywhere, and that the best way to meet their needs is to build on the strengths that their families and communities already possess," said Sara McLanahan, editor-in-chief of *Future of Children* and William S. Tod Professor of Sociology and Public Affairs at the Woodrow Wilson

School.

"Much of the research about military children examines stressful experiences or difficulties," said journal co-editor Richard M. Lerner, Bergstrom Chair in the Eliot-Pearson Department of Child Development and director of the Institute for Applied Research in Youth Development at Tufts University. "While this focus is important, such research doesn't tell the entire story – the story about the strengths and resilience of military children and their families. The articles in this issue of *Future of Children* expand our knowledge by discussing the nature and sources of positive development of military children and illuminate a path toward a more representative depiction of these youth and their families."

The journal's key findings follow.

- **Demographics:** Military families are a diverse population coming in many forms, including not only categories familiar from civilian life – two-parent, single-parent, etc. – but also, unique to the military, dual-service families (both parents are service members). These families' needs will continue to change, so programs should be adaptive and flexible.
- **Economic conditions:** Service members typically earn more than civilians with comparable levels of education. They also receive housing allowances, subsidized child care, tuition assistance and comprehensive health care. However, military life takes a toll on the spouse's earnings, as their careers are interrupted with moves, and they tend to make less than civilian counterparts. Resources have been put in place to strengthen the economic livelihood of [military families](#), but they have not entirely eradicated the problem.
- **Multiple deployments:** Since 9/11, multiple deployments have become more common. This is particularly stressful for the youngest children, a group for which we have little data, and who

depend on their parents for nearly everything. Families, children and their caregivers must be prepared for disruptions in family life, and normalizing activities should be supported.

- **Child care:** The Department of Defense funds the nation's largest employer-sponsored child-care system. However, demand continues to outstrip the supply. This model could be used in civilian life, because, like the military, the civilian sector is struggling to ensure that all families can find and afford high-quality child care.
- **Resiliency:** Military life, despite its hardships, offers many sources for resilience, and most military children turn out just fine. However, programs of sustained research are needed to boost understanding of why these children are so resilient. Many current programs were rolled out quickly, without the infrastructure to fully evaluate them.
- **Transitions:** Ironically, the most stressful part of the deployment cycle is not the long months of separation. Instead, it is when service members come home, and they must be reintegrated into families whose internal rhythms have changed and where children have taken on new roles. Policy makers can help these children cope by strengthening community support services and adopting public health measures that are designed to reduce the stigma of seeking treatment for psychological distress.
- **Trauma:** Injury can alter a service member's behavior and personality in ways that make parenting difficult. A parent's death can mean that survivors lose their very identity as a military [family](#) when they must move away from their supportive military community. Current services focus on the needs of injured service members more than those of their families. For the post-9/11 conflicts, there is not enough scientific evidence documenting how visible and invisible injuries or bereavement have affected military children.

While there is much to learn about military children and their families, what is already known about military families can teach us about civilian families as well, the authors write.

"Finding what works among military families to promote resilience and protect child development may have profound significance for the future of all American children," said journal contributor Ann Masten, Irving B. Harris Professor of Child Psychology, University of Minnesota.

Provided by Princeton University

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