

# The Demographics of Military Children and Families

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*Molly Clever and David R. Segal*

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## **Summary**

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.

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Molly Clever is a Ph.D. candidate in sociology at the University of Maryland. David R. Segal is a professor of sociology and director of the Center for Research on Military Organization at the University of Maryland.

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Since the transition to an all-volunteer force (AVF) in 1973, families have grown increasingly important to the military's personnel policy; since 9/11, military families have received greater attention in the media and from scholars. Recognizing the sacrifices and support that come from all whose lives are linked to military service members, President Barack Obama and the Joint Chiefs of Staff define the "military family" as active-duty service members, members of the National Guard and Reserve, and veterans, as well as members of their immediate and extended families and the families of those who lost their lives in service to their country.<sup>1</sup> This broad definition recognizes that the federal government and the nation have obligations to all who have served their country, as well as to those who have supported that service. However, researchers who study and collect data on military families and children tend to define military families as the spouses and dependent children (age 22 and younger) of men and women on active duty or in the National Guard and Reserve. In this issue of *The Future of Children*, we adopt this more limited definition. Military policy affects this population's daily lives; they change houses and schools, adopt new communities, take care of household responsibilities when their loved ones are deployed, and care for physically and psychologically wounded warriors when they return home.

Since the early days of the AVF, the military has recognized that whether service members decide to reenlist often depends on whether their families are happy with military life.<sup>2</sup> The military needs high-quality recruits who will stay long enough to make the expense of their recruiting and training worthwhile. Therefore, it must ensure that

service members' spouses and children are satisfied enough with military life, despite its many challenges, to encourage and support their service member's decision to join and remain in the military. Of course, military life can be stressful. The stress that wartime deployment puts on families has been recognized since World War II, and military family members have long helped units function.<sup>3</sup> After World War II, military policy increasingly institutionalized family members' roles. Beginning in the 1960s, the military adapted the strong tradition of spousal voluntarism to develop a worldwide network of federally funded community organizations for service members called Family Centers.<sup>4</sup> Family Readiness Groups (FRGs) at the unit level, often staffed by spouses and immediate family members, offer training and social support to family members and disseminate information about issues such as deployment and moving.<sup>5</sup> Many institutionalized responses to the needs of family members have sprung from grass-roots advocacy by family members themselves.<sup>6</sup>

The military has long recognized that service members' families influence the strength and effectiveness of the fighting force. Obama recently made "the care and support of military families a top national security policy priority," highlighting the need to ensure that military children develop in healthy and productive ways.<sup>7</sup> To help the spouses and dependent children of military service members, military leaders and policy makers need good and timely data. They need to know who military family members are, what hardships they face, what strengths they bring to the military community, and how these factors change over time and across an increasingly diverse population. Data of this type come primarily from three sources.

- The Department of Defense (DoD) supplies data that are largely demographic in nature and administrative in function. DoD data sources show the diversity of military personnel and reveal important ways that service members and their families differ from their civilian counterparts.
- Nonacademic research organizations, such as the RAND Corporation and the Pew Research Center, provide important quantitative and qualitative data on issues that affect service members, veterans, and military families, as well as information on public perceptions of the military and knowledge of military needs.
- Academic scholarship is paying more attention to the military and military family members. The social science subfield of military sociology focuses extensively on the interactions between military and civil society, but scholars in other social science fields, as well as public policy and health, also study military families.

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Drawing from these sources, this article provides the context to understand how military

families and children function. We begin by outlining the basic demographics of military families, comparing statistics on marriage and family formation across service branches and between service members and civilians. These data demonstrate that military families tend to marry and have children younger than civilians do, a trend that is influenced both by military policy and by the personal traits of people most likely to be drawn to military life. We then discuss the military family in the context of the military lifestyle, emphasizing how the “greedy” nature of both the military and the family places unique demands on military family members, including frequent moves and prolonged and repeated deployments. We discuss the pros and cons of these aspects of military life for children in military families, particularly in their educational and social development. For example, although frequent moves can disrupt a child’s school progress, they can also help change bad habits and strengthen parent-child bonds.

Within each of these topics, we highlight areas where we need more data, research, and discussion. For example, although we know that children in military families tend to be relatively young, we don’t know much about how young children and infants function in military families. In addition, because the military population is unique in many ways, comparing service members to civilians raises the question of how best to define an appropriate civilian comparison group. In another vein, comparisons between the active-duty and National Guard and Reserve populations highlight how little we know about the families of Guard and Reserve members. These comparisons also show the dynamic nature of the military population and the methodological challenges inherent in studying people who move among

active-duty, Guard and Reserve, and civilian communities over the course of their service.

Though certain trends distinguish military families from their civilian counterparts, our central finding is that military families are a diverse population whose needs vary over time and across demographic groups. No single story can encapsulate who military families are or what they need to flourish in military and civilian communities. Rather, the demographic context shows that military families and children need flexible policies that can adapt to their diverse and dynamic needs.

### **Demographics of Military Families**

The relationship between the military and the families of its service members has changed substantially since the advent of the AVF. In the draft era, “military family” typically meant senior officers’ wives and children, who were expected to play a supporting role in their husbands’ or fathers’ careers. Even as the force began to change, service members were typically young, unmarried men who served only briefly before rejoining the civilian world to begin their careers and start families. By the 1970s, the majority of soldiers were married, yet the adage “if the military wanted you to have a family, it would have issued you one” was common among military personnel managers into the 1980s.<sup>8</sup>

In today’s AVF, however, service members are not expected to delay marriage and children until their service is complete; rather, marriage and parenthood are common across all ranks of service. Military family members now outnumber military personnel by 1.4 to 1, and they represent a range of family forms.<sup>9</sup> In 2011, 726,500 spouses and more

than 1.2 million dependent children lived in active-duty families, and 409,801 spouses and 743,736 dependent children lived in Guard and Reserve families.<sup>10</sup> Table 1 provides basic demographic information about active-duty, Guard and Reserve, and comparable civilian populations. Comparing these groups raises important questions for research on military families. What constitutes an appropriate civilian comparison group? What do comparisons between active duty and the Guard and Reserve tell us about the differences between these populations?

As table 1 shows, the civilian population we selected for comparison consists of people aged 18 to 45 who are in the labor force. This restriction limits the comparison to populations who share certain similarities, namely, they are relatively young and they choose to work. Nonetheless, there are important differences between these military and civilian populations that restrict our ability to draw broad conclusions. Still, our comparisons provide important insight into how active-duty service members, the Guard and Reserve, and civilians differ.

The first major difference is in age distribution. The military population is relatively young compared with civilians in the labor force. Active-duty service members stay in the military for fewer than 10 years on average. And because service members can get retirement benefits after 20 years, the age distribution of active-duty service members is heavily skewed toward the under-40 population. Two-thirds of active-duty members are between the ages of 18 and 30.<sup>11</sup> The civilian working population, by contrast, is more evenly distributed by age; 45 percent of the civilian comparison group are between 18 and 30, and 55 percent are between 31 and 45. Restricting the civilian comparison group

**Table 1.** Selected Demographic Characteristics of Active-Duty, Guard and Reserve, and Civilian Populations, 2011

	Active Duty	Guard and Reserve	Civilian Workers, Aged 18–45
<b>Total Population</b>	1,411,425	855,867	91,208,300
<b>Average Age</b>	28.6	32.1	31.9
<b>Sex</b>			
Female	14.5%	18.0%	47.3%
Male	85.5%	82.0%	52.7%
<b>Race</b>			
White or Caucasian	69.8%	75.7%	72.2%
Black or African American	16.9%	15.0%	12.9%
Asian	3.8%	3.1%	5.7%
All other races and multiple races	9.6%	6.2%	9.2%
<b>Ethnicity</b>			
Hispanic	11.2%	9.8%	19.2%
Non-Hispanic	88.8%	90.2%	80.8%
<b>Education (highest degree achieved)</b>			
No high school diploma or GED	0.5%	2.4%	10.7%
High school diploma or GED	79.1%	76.8%	60.1%
Bachelor's degree	11.3%	14.3%	20.0%
Advanced degree	7.0%	5.5%	9.2%
Unknown	2.1%	1.0%	--
<b>Marital Status</b>			
Now married	56.6%	47.7%	43.0%
Divorced/separated	4.5%	7.3%	10.0%
Widowed/other	0.1%	0.2%	0.4%
Never married	38.8%	44.7%	46.1%
<b>Children</b>			
With dependent children at home	44.2%	43.3%	43.1%
Average number of children	2.0	2.0	2.0

Source: Active duty and Guard and Reserve data from Department of Defense, *2011 Demographics Profile of the Military Community*; civilian data from U.S. Census Bureau 2011 American Community Survey, obtained through [www.ipums.org](http://www.ipums.org).

to people between 18 and 45 helps us create a better match between service members and civilians, because fewer than 9 percent of the active-duty force is over 40. However, the difference in age distribution is behind some of the differences we saw. For example, the civilian group, which skews older, is likely to have older children.

But if we keep in mind that the active-duty military population skews younger

than the civilian comparison group, we can highlight some important differences. For example, although the active-duty population is younger on average than the civilians, they are more likely to be married and have children at home. Also, when families have children at home, the average number of children among active duty, Guard and Reserve, and civilians is identical at 2.0. Because the active-duty population skews much younger than the Guard and Reserve or the civilian

population, the fact that the average number of children is the same across these three groups suggests that active-duty personnel tend to form families at a younger age.

A second major difference across these groups is gender distribution. The proportion of women serving in the military has risen steadily since the 1970s, but women still make up only 14.5 percent of the active-duty force and 18 percent of the Guard and Reserve, compared with 47.5 percent of the civilian labor force. The larger proportion of women in the Guard and Reserve than in the active-duty force may reflect a belief among women that Guard and Reserve service is more compatible with family responsibilities.

A third factor to consider as we draw comparisons across these populations is the dynamic nature of the military population. The Guard and Reserve contain many people who formerly served on active duty. In addition, and particularly during wartime, people who have been called up from the Guard or Reserve are considered to be on active duty. When we directly compare these categories, then, we need to use caution and keep in mind the life-course trajectories of military personnel. We also have much less information about how military service affects the families of Guard and Reserve members than we do for active-duty personnel; until the recent conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, Guard and Reserve personnel were rarely called to active service for extended periods and so were typically left out of research. The military's increased reliance on the Guard and Reserve to supplement the active force in the past decade has brought into sharp relief the need for more data on the families of Guard and Reserve personnel.

Still, table 1 demonstrates some notable demographic differences among the active-duty, Guard and Reserve, and civilian populations. Both the active-duty and Guard and Reserve populations have a higher proportion of African Americans than does the civilian labor force, but a smaller proportion of Asian Americans. Research suggests that racial minorities, particularly African Americans (and especially African American women) are more likely to choose military service than their white counterparts because they see the military as a meritocratic institution that offers them greater opportunity than they would find in higher education or the civilian labor market.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, although the proportion of Hispanics in the active-duty force has grown in recent years, from less than 4 percent in the 1970s to 11.2 percent in 2011, it has not risen as fast as the proportion of Hispanics in the civilian population. But this disparity may be due to the military's requirements for immigration status and education. Research suggests that if we count only military-eligible people, Hispanics are overrepresented relative to the general population.<sup>13</sup>

Thanks to the military's education requirements, relatively few people on active duty (0.4 percent) or in the Guard and Reserve (2.4 percent) lack a high school diploma or GED, compared with civilians in the labor force (10.7 percent). The military's minimum requirements are a college degree for officers and a high school diploma for enlisted personnel, and the military rarely makes exceptions; fewer than 5 percent of enlisted personnel have a GED rather than a standard high school diploma.<sup>14</sup> However, more people among the civilian labor force have a bachelor's degree or higher (29.2 percent) than among the active-duty force (18.3 percent) or the Guard and Reserve (19.8 percent). Much

**Figure 1. Percentage Married by Age and Gender: Military Personnel vs. Civilians, FY2011**



Source: Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Population Representation in the Military Services: Fiscal Year 2011*.

of this difference in educational attainment may be attributed to the younger age of the active-duty population, as well as the fact that many people join the military to receive educational benefits through the GI Bill and complete their college education after leaving the service.

### Marriage and Divorce

Active-duty service members are more likely to be married and less likely to be divorced than their civilian counterparts overall, but there are differences by gender. Compared with their civilian counterparts, military men are more likely to be married at all ages. At ages 30 and under, military women are more likely than civilian women to be married, but at ages 33 and older, civilian women are more likely to be married (figure 1). This trend can be explained largely by the fact that women are more likely than men to leave the military once they get married or have children.<sup>15</sup>

As a whole, people in the military tend to marry younger than their civilian

counterparts. Among junior enlisted personnel (ranks E1 through E5, or private through sergeant in the Army, for example), 36 percent of men and 37 percent of women are married.<sup>16</sup> Among civilians aged 18 to 24 with comparable earnings, 24 percent of men and 33 percent of women are married.<sup>17</sup> These general trends, however, exhibit some variation by gender and race. In the military, women are less likely than their male rank peers to be married; 45 percent of enlisted women and 55 percent of enlisted men are married. In the officer ranks, this difference is even more pronounced: 52 percent of female officers and 72 percent of male officers are married. When married, women are far more likely than their male peers to be married to another service member; 48 percent of married active-duty women are in dual-service marriages, compared with only 7 percent of men.<sup>18</sup> While African American men and women and white men on active duty are less likely than their civilian counterparts to divorce, white women in the military are more likely to divorce than their

civilian counterparts.<sup>19</sup> And although African American civilian men are more likely to be divorced than white civilian men, this racial divorce gap nearly disappears in the military, a pattern that is likely due to the structure of the military environment, which tends to equalize the constraints faced by families of all races.<sup>20</sup>

Marriage and divorce patterns among service members reflect both push and pull factors in the military. Those who choose military service tend to have more conservative values regarding family and gender roles compared with the civilian population, and these conservative values may partly explain the fact that they are more likely than civilians to marry and have children, especially at younger ages. Indeed, civilians with conservative values are more likely than other civilians to be married. However, this association is small, and it is likely that military policy plays a larger role than values in driving service members' decisions to marry and form families.<sup>21</sup> To improve retention, the AVF has become increasingly family-friendly, with programs such as full family health coverage, family housing and accredited day care on base, and numerous programs and activity centers for children. For enlisted service members, marriage and parenthood mean higher off-base housing and moving allowances.<sup>22</sup> Service members move often (typically every two to three years), and moving presents them with an immediate context for making relationship decisions; when the change of duty station orders arrive, the couple must decide whether they will split up, maintain their relationship long-distance, or marry. When service members go to war, they may see marriage as an attractive option, because their spouses will receive military benefits if they are injured or killed. Because single service members receive far less in

moving and housing allowances than those who are married, and because many duty stations are in areas where off-base housing is scarce or unavailable, service members have little incentive to cohabit, an increasingly common choice among unmarried civilian couples. In one study, active duty men in relationships, and African American men in particular, were significantly more likely to choose marriage over cohabitation when compared with their civilian counterparts, controlling for income. The study indicated that among male service members, both personal and military environmental factors influenced decisions about whether to marry.<sup>23</sup>

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Another fact points to the strong incentive to marry that military policy produces: although people in the military are more likely than their civilian counterparts to be married, people entering the military are more likely to be single than their civilian peers of the same age. Thus, "they enter single and marry young."<sup>24</sup> This is not to say that service members choose to marry and start families solely for the financial benefits. There is no reason to



think that service members' primary reasons for deciding to marry are different from those of civilian families. Financial considerations, including job security and health benefits, play a role in relationship decisions of civilians and military personnel alike. However, because of the military's unique structural context, there are differences between service members and civilians when it comes to such things as the timing of marriage or marital stability. Among 23- to 25-year-olds, for example, those who have served on active duty are three times as likely to be married as those who have never served.<sup>25</sup>

The divorce patterns of service members and veterans further highlight the support for families that the military provides. While they are in the military, couples are less likely to divorce than their civilian counterparts. Once they leave the military, however, this trend reverses. Veterans are three times as likely to be divorced as those who have never served.<sup>26</sup> Research indicates that the military environment protects families from the stresses that often lead to divorce, and that veterans' marriages become less stable once they leave this supportive military context.<sup>27</sup>

## **Children**

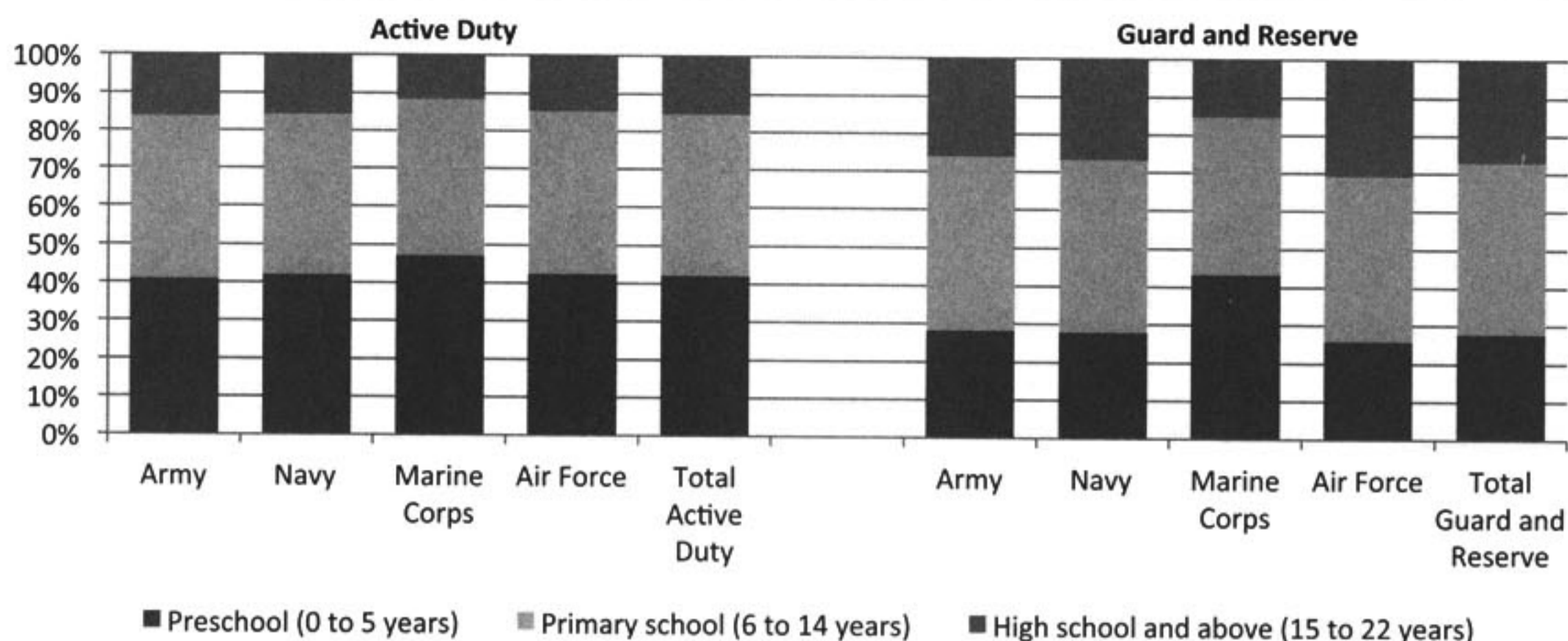
In addition to broader factors that influence marriage and the formation of families in the military as a whole, cultural differences across the branches of service influence the presence and age distribution of children in military families. Figure 2 presents the age distributions of children in active-duty and Guard and Reserve families. Among the service branches, Marine Corps families are the youngest; 47 percent of children in these families are of preschool age, and only 11 percent are of high school age or older.

This is substantially younger than the rest of the active-duty force, in which 41 to 42 percent of children are of preschool age and 16 percent are of high school age and older. Because the Marine Corps places a premium on the youth of its service members, it isn't surprising that Marine families are younger than other military families. Among the Air Force and Navy, where the organizational culture emphasizes experience and advanced technological training, service members tend to stay in the military longer, and their children tend to be somewhat older. Compared with children in active-duty families, children in Guard and Reserve families are older; 28 percent are of preschool age and 44 to 45 percent are of primary school age. Because many people in the Guard and Reserve are former active-duty service members, the fact that their children are slightly older is to be expected. That is, many of the older children in Guard and Reserve families were once preschool-age children in an active-duty family.

Although we know that the distribution of children in active-duty families is skewed toward preschool age, most scholars who study children and military families have focused on school-age children and teenagers. This partly reflects a scholarly interest in children's education, and partly the logistical challenges of studying young children and infants. Available information on infants and toddlers in military families tends to focus on physical health. For example, one study found that military women have fewer preterm births than their civilian counterparts, and that some racial inequalities in preterm births between white and African American women disappear in the military.<sup>28</sup>

School-age children in military families live in both military and civilian communities.

**Figure 2. Age Distribution of Children in Military Families, FY2011**



*Note:* Children over the age of 18 must live at home to be considered dependents. Those aged 21–22 years must be enrolled in college to be considered dependents.

*Source:* Department of Defense, *Demographics 2010: Profile of the Military Community*.

The Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA) school system operates 194 K–12 schools in seven states in the U.S., 12 foreign countries, Guam, and Puerto Rico. DoDEA schools enrolled approximately 86,000 students in 2011; 96 percent were children of active-duty service members, and 4 percent were children of DoD civilian employees.<sup>29</sup> DoDEA students represent less than 13 percent of school-age military children; the vast majority of military children attend civilian schools. Most children whose parents are on active duty attend schools in areas with a large military presence, where teachers, administrators, and civilian students alike may recognize the unique needs of military children. Moreover, evidence indicates that in the past decade, educators in these schools have become substantially more aware of the issues that military children face.<sup>30</sup> By contrast, children whose parents serve in an area without a large military base, or whose parents are in the Guard or Reserve, may attend schools that see very few military children, and other members of

the community may not know that military children attend their schools.

To understand how children function in military families, we must understand the context of their parents’ life-course transitions, service branch, and rank. Though the military lifestyle certainly has its challenges, it also offers families advantages and opportunities. As members of a military family, children are guaranteed to have at least one parent with a steady, full-time paycheck. The military pay scale is determined by both rank and years of service, which are strongly correlated with the service member’s age. Raising a family can be financially difficult for parents in the most junior enlisted ranks, but every unit offers financial counseling services, and in an emergency, FRGs can provide social and economic support. Table 2 shows the percentage of people in each rank category with dependent children, and their basic pay. Basic pay does not include other financial benefits that service members often receive, such as medical benefits and housing

**Table 2.** Percentage of Service Members with Dependent Children, by Pay Grade and Monthly Income

Pay Grade	With Dependent Children	Monthly Income Range
E1–E4	21.7%	\$1,491–\$2,363
E5–E6	60.5%	\$2,123–\$3,590
E7–E9	81.9%	\$2,680–\$5,524
W1–W5	78.6%	\$2,765–\$6,930
O1–O3	35.4%	\$2,828–\$6,136
O4–O6	76.7%	\$4,289–\$9,371
O7–O10	60.9%	\$8,046–\$15,647

Note: The Air Force does not have warrant officers, pay grades W1–W5.

Source: Department of Defense, *Demographics 2010: Profile of the Military Community*.

allowances. Among the most junior enlisted ranks, whose monthly basic pay ranges from \$1,491 to \$2,363, more than one-fifth of service members have dependent children. Among the senior enlisted ranks, 82 percent have dependent children. Most active-duty personnel (83.4 percent) are in the enlisted ranks, and 16.6 percent are officers. Officers typically must have a college degree, while enlisted personnel must have a high school diploma or equivalent. Given the differences in educational requirements, pay scale, and job responsibilities, the distinction between the enlisted and officer ranks is roughly comparable to the distinction between blue-collar and white-collar jobs in the civilian labor market. This means that the military is more blue-collar than the civilian labor force, where 61 percent of Americans hold blue-collar jobs and 39 percent hold white-collar jobs.<sup>31</sup>

### Family Types

Like civilian families, military families take many forms. For example, military families may be nuclear, single-parent, blended, multi-generational, or dual-service. Moreover, many nontraditional military families—for example, cohabiting adults and same-sex partners—may go unrecognized due to military

regulations that govern family member dependent status. Military policy, then, must recognize that the military lifestyle affects different types of families differently. We discuss some aspects of the military lifestyle that affect families in more detail below; this section describes the basic demographics of family types in the military.

Table 3 details the structures of active-duty and Guard and Reserve families by sex and race. Because women are more likely to leave the force once they start a family, military men of all races are more likely than military women to have children at home. Black women are more likely than other military women to have children; 47.3 percent of black women on active duty have children, compared with 30.4 percent of white women and 37.4 percent of Hispanic women. This racial difference may be partly due to the fact that black women tend to stay in the military longer than white women do.<sup>32</sup> The data also suggest that women are more likely than men to transition to the Guard or Reserve when they have children; white, Hispanic, and non-Hispanic women of other races in the Guard and Reserve are more likely than their counterparts on active duty to have children,

**Table 3.** Family Status of Active-Duty and Guard and Reserve Personnel by Race/Ethnicity and Sex, FY2010

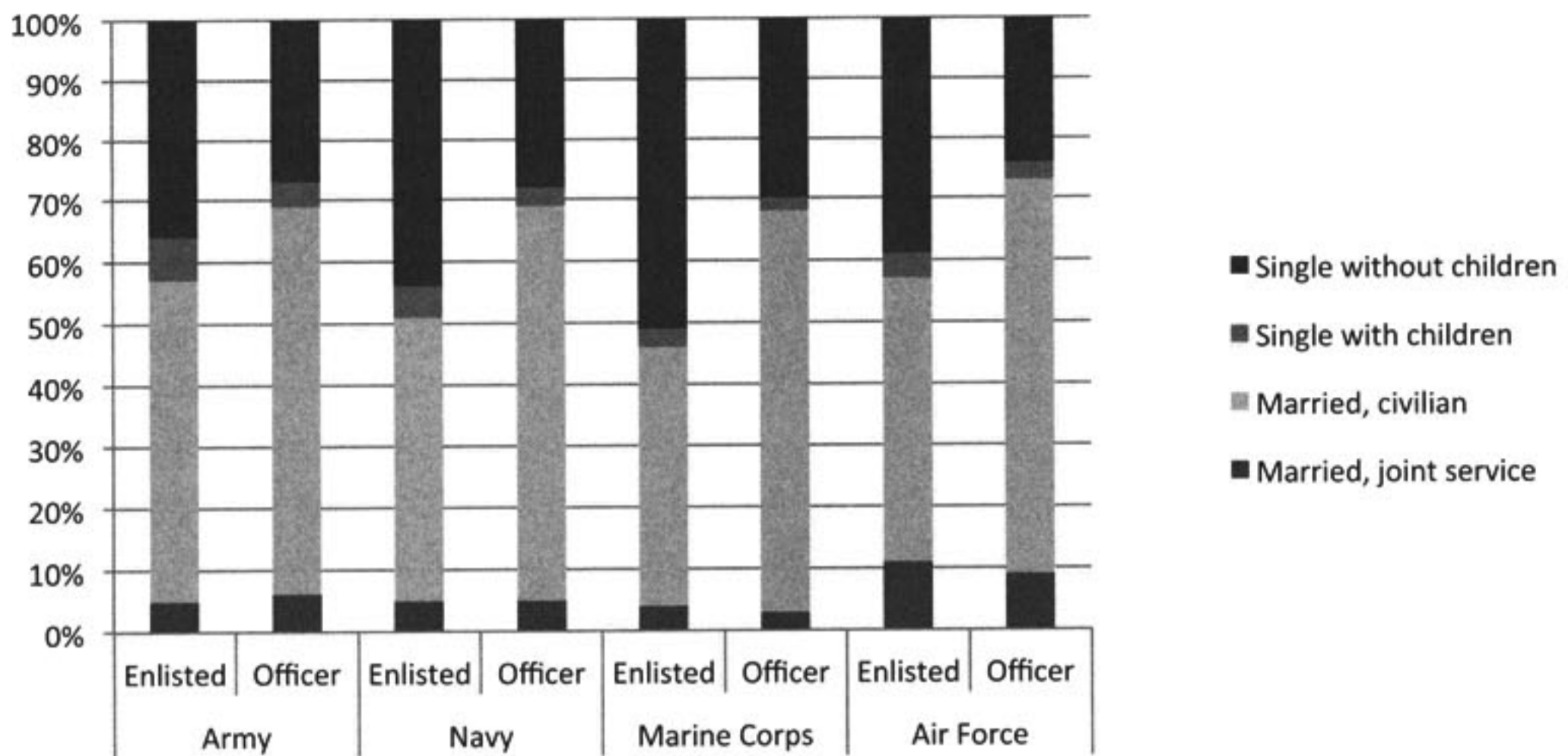
Family Status	Race/Ethnicity							
	White, Non-Hispanic		Black, Non-Hispanic		All other races, Non-Hispanic		Hispanic, all races	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
<b>Active Duty</b>	<b>823,763</b>	<b>102,546</b>	<b>177,711</b>	<b>56,510</b>	<b>114,341</b>	<b>25,698</b>	<b>133,660</b>	<b>24,468</b>
<i>With Children</i>	43.7%	30.4%	54.2%	47.3%	41.9%	32.3%	48.4%	37.4%
Single	3.4%	7.7%	8.3%	20.5%	3.1%	9.0%	4.6%	12.1%
Married to civilian	38.8%	13.8%	42.2%	16.5%	37.2%	14.2%	42.2%	14.3%
Married, dual service	1.4%	8.9%	3.7%	10.3%	1.5%	9.1%	1.6%	10.9%
<i>Without Children</i>	56.3%	69.6%	45.8%	52.7%	58.1%	67.7%	51.6%	62.6%
Single	38.5%	44.1%	32.3%	37.5%	41.8%	45.0%	35.0%	39.9%
Married to civilian	15.7%	10.0%	10.2%	7.5%	14.4%	9.8%	14.6%	9.6%
Married, dual service	2.1%	15.5%	3.3%	7.6%	2.0%	12.9%	2.1%	13.2%
<b>Guard and Reserve</b>	<b>286,569</b>	<b>56,101</b>	<b>45,419</b>	<b>21,123</b>	<b>26,419</b>	<b>7,420</b>	<b>34,177</b>	<b>9,330</b>
<i>With Children</i>	43.5%	35.1%	47.1%	45.9%	41.4%	38.2%	47.9%	40.2%
Single	6.7%	12.7%	12.6%	26.2%	6.3%	18.6%	9.2%	17.8%
Married to civilian	36.1%	17.4%	33.4%	16.6%	34.3%	14.5%	38.0%	17.7%
Married, dual service	0.7%	5.0%	1.0%	3.1%	0.7%	5.0%	0.7%	4.7%
<i>Without Children</i>	56.5%	64.9%	52.9%	54.1%	58.6%	61.8%	52.1%	59.8%
Single	41.9%	46.9%	41.6%	44.2%	44.8%	44.8%	39.2%	44.3%
Married to civilian	14.1%	13.1%	10.7%	7.9%	13.2%	11.7%	12.4%	10.7%
Married, dual service	0.5%	4.9%	0.6%	2.1%	0.6%	5.3%	0.5%	4.9%

Source: Defense Manpower Data Center.

while there is little difference in the proportion of active-duty men who have children versus men in the Guard and Reserve.

Dual-service families are unique to the military. While many civilian families have two full-time employed parents, the military's demands, especially for deployment and frequent moving, present unique challenges to families where both parents are service members. Dual-service couples are less likely to have dependent children than are couples with only one parent in the service, and among married service members, women are far more likely to be in dual-service

marriages than are men (48 percent vs. 7 percent).<sup>33</sup> This substantial gender difference in dual-service marriages reflects a number of complex factors, including the overall gender imbalance in the military, as well as individual and military contextual selection factors. Differences in the rates of dual marriage across branches of service themselves reflect differences in the gender composition and culture of the service branches. As figure 3 shows, dual-service marriages are most common in the Air Force, where 11 percent of enlisted personnel and 9 percent of officers are married to another service member, followed by the Army and the Navy,

**Figure 3.** Family Status of Officers and Enlisted Personnel, by Service Branch

Source: Defense Manpower Data Center.

and they are least common in the Marine Corps. The military requires single parents and dual-service parents to have a plan for the care of their dependents should they be deployed. Though personnel managers consider requests from dual-service parents, and they try to keep families together, the military's staffing needs take precedence. Particularly for high-level officers and those who have highly specialized occupations, the military's staffing needs may require spouses to be separated from each other for extended periods, even when they are both stationed stateside. These dual-service parents must make difficult decisions about where their children will live.

Single-parent families also face unique challenges in the military. Though on-base day care is available for all parents, single parents must make arrangements for child care during extended training exercises and deployments. Because personnel cannot expect to be stationed close to their extended families, single parents in the military are often isolated from the kind of family networks

that can greatly help single civilian parents. Nearly 76,000 single parents were on active duty in 2010. Although more than twice as many of these single parents are men than women, given the proportion of men and women on active duty, female service members are more likely to be single parents than are male service members.<sup>34</sup> Among active-duty service members, 4 percent of men and 12 percent of women are single parents; among the Guard and Reserve, 8 percent of men and 17 percent of women are single parents. Single parenthood also varies by rank and service branch. Across all branches of service, people in the enlisted ranks are more likely to be single parents than are officers. The rate of single parenthood is highest in the Army enlisted ranks, where 7 percent of service members are single parents (figure 3). The proportion of single parents in the military is higher than in the civilian population, where 2.3 percent of households are headed by a single male parent and 7.4 percent of households are headed by a single female parent.<sup>35</sup>

## The Military Lifestyle

Prolonged separation and frequent moves are two of the best-known features of military life, but many others affect family satisfaction. Mady Segal suggests that both the military and the family are “greedy” institutions, in that both require intense commitment, time, and energy while seeking to limit participants’ other roles.<sup>36</sup> The military’s demands include the risk of injury or death, whether during training, while operating military equipment, or in wartime deployment; separations from family; frequent moves; living in foreign countries; long and unpredictable duty hours; pressure to conform to high standards of behavior; and a male-oriented culture. People in many occupations experience some of these demands, but service members and their families are likely to experience all of them, often in a relatively short time. Segal conceived the greedy institution model in the context of the peacetime AVF, but it has taken on new meaning in the post-9/11 era. The military’s changing operational needs, as well as broader social changes to family structure and gender roles, have increased the potential for conflict between competing military and family demands.<sup>37</sup>

Despite the military lifestyle’s many challenges, it also offers advantages to families. Next, we discuss both the challenges and opportunities that the military lifestyle presents to families and children in the context of frequent moves and family separations.

### Geographic Location and Mobility

Active-duty families are typically tied to military installations, and they are therefore concentrated along the Eastern Seaboard and in the rural South, as well as in California, Alaska, and Hawaii. As of the end of

September 2012, about 1.1 million people, or 82 percent of the active force, were stationed in the continental United States; 5 percent were stationed in Alaska, Hawaii, and U.S. territories, or were afloat; 5 percent were stationed in Europe; 4 percent in East Asia and Pacific regions; and less than 1 percent in North and Sub-Saharan Africa and Central and South America. Approximately 3 percent of the active force is classified as “undistributed,” which includes sites in Afghanistan, Iraq, Kuwait, South Korea, and unknown or classified locations. When military personnel are sent overseas, even to noncombat areas, most family members stay stateside. Of the two million total military dependents, 94 percent reside in the continental United States and 5 percent in Alaska, Hawaii, and the U.S. territories. Only 1 percent of military dependents are in Europe, Africa, Asia, or Latin America.<sup>38</sup> Although at any given time most service members are stateside and not in a war zone, military life is dynamic. Nearly all military families experience a move outside the continental United States and deployment of a family member.

The geographic mobility that the military expects of active-duty families can be a source of both stress and excitement. Active-duty military personnel must move on average once every two to three years, meaning that military families move 2.4 times as often as civilian families. They are also more likely than civilian families to move long distances, across state lines, or to foreign countries. (Guard and Reserve families are typically not required to move, and their residence and relocation patterns are more similar to those of civilian families.)

Richard Cooney, Mady Segal, and Karin DeAngelis have said that military families are both “tied migrants” and “tied stayers.”<sup>39</sup>

As tied migrants, spouses and children must move with the service member to keep the family together, despite the cost to their own schooling or employment chances. Once the family moves, they become tied stayers, bound to the site of their service member's assignment, which may limit their opportunities for jobs and education.

Not all families move with the military, however. A minority of married service members are "geographical bachelors or bachelorettes," whose spouses and children stay in one location while they move from place to place. The evidence indicates that such people represent a small minority of married service members—approximately 6 percent of those in first marriages and 7 percent of those in second marriages.<sup>40</sup> The information we have on this phenomenon, however, was collected in the 1990s, and we don't know whether, as the pace of deployment has increased in the post-9/11 era, more families have been choosing geographical bachelorhood to keep children in the same school, stay close to extended family, maintain a spouse's career, or meet mortgage obligations. We do know that the recent mortgage crisis affected many military families, who, when faced with orders to move, found themselves unable to sell their homes because of the slow housing market or because their houses were worth far less than they owed on their mortgages. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the mortgage crisis led many military families to choose living apart over taking a substantial loss on their home;<sup>41</sup> however, we have no research data to show how widespread this phenomenon is.

Military spouses pay a cost for their families' frequent moves. Cooney and his colleagues quantified the earnings penalty that military spouses pay for frequent moves; net of other factors, each move is associated

with a 2 percent decline in a spouse's annual earnings. Frequent moves also increase the likelihood of unemployment, particularly for African American spouses. For each year in the same location, the likelihood that a white spouse will have a job increases by 12.2 percent; for African American spouses, this figure is 56.5 percent.<sup>42</sup> Frequent moves also mean that military spouses earn less than their civilian counterparts. Among married women employed full time, for example, the wage gap between military and civilian wives ranged from 20 percent to 29 percent, depending on education.<sup>43</sup> These financial penalties may shape spouses' education and employment decisions in the long term.

Military spouses also face employment challenges caused by the contextual effect of a large military presence in the places where they are likely to live. In the labor markets surrounding military bases, civilian women experience unemployment rates that are 2.3 percentage points higher and earn wages that are 5 percent lower than those of women in other areas.<sup>44</sup> These employment and wage effects represent the confluence of several factors, including loss of seniority and other occupational privileges after a move; the fact that employers may be reluctant to hire military spouses because they are likely to move again soon; and the continuous flood of military family members into a local labor market with a limited number of employers and jobs. (For more about the economic prospects of military spouses, see the article in this issue by James Hosek and Shelley MacDermid Wadsworth.)

Because so many factors limit military spouses' employment opportunities, the military has set up the Spouse Education and Career Opportunities program, which

integrates education and training, career exploration, career readiness, and career connections. The Military Spouse Career Center and Military OneSource provide counseling to help spouses connect their education to career opportunities. The My Career Advancement Accounts program provides financial assistance to spouses to train for careers that can easily transfer to a new location; it also assists with licensure requirements for jobs such as nursing and accounting that have different requirements by state. The Military Spouse Employment Partnership links spouses with federal, regional, and local employers. Despite these helpful programs, military spouses experience higher levels of both unemployment and underemployment than their civilian counterparts. While fewer than 10 percent of civilian married women work in a job that is mismatched with their education level, nearly 40 percent of military wives do so.<sup>45</sup>

For children, frequent moves can disrupt education and bring periods of stressful acclimation to a new environment where they may not have any friends and may be disconnected from school and community activities. Because of differences among school districts in the timing and format of subjects and lessons, children may find some lessons repetitive, while they may miss other lessons entirely as they move from one school to the next. The delay in transferring school records, which can take weeks or months, may mean that students are placed in classes inappropriate to their previous experiences or ability level. Several public-private partnerships, such as the Student Online Achievement Resources program, help families identify and correct education gaps associated with frequent moves and keep deployed parents connected to their children's educational progress.

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*Although moving is often stressful, it can also offer excitement and adventure, particularly for families who have the opportunity to live in foreign countries, learn new languages, and experience different cultures.*

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Because the military lifestyle introduces many sources of stress that most civilian families do not experience, such as frequent moves, some counseling and psychological research in the 1970s began to describe a "military family syndrome." According to this idea, children in military families have more behavior problems and psychological disorders than their civilian peers.<sup>46</sup> The military family syndrome has since been refuted by other studies, which suggested that the early military family syndrome research was methodologically flawed, that children in military families are at no higher risk of behavioral problems than civilian children, and that frequent moves in particular can have positive outcomes by building family cohesion and resilience.<sup>47</sup> However, some evidence indicates that many helping professionals, particularly those who do not typically interact with military families, assume that children in military families are inherently prone to behavioral problems, leading to stigmatization.<sup>48</sup> The idea that military families' frequent moves cause behavioral problems in children does correspond with studies of civilian children, which often find that frequent moves



have detrimental effects.<sup>49</sup> However, the context in which military children experience frequent moves differs in important ways. For civilian children, frequent moves may happen because their parents change jobs, like military parents. But moves may also occur when parents lose their jobs, or they may be associated with poverty, homelessness, or abuse. The supportive military environment can alleviate some of the stresses associated with frequent moves by connecting children to other military children in their communities, and by helping parents understand the social strain their children are likely to face and recognize signs of behavioral problems early. Evidence suggests that as the number of moves among military families increases, parents are more likely to develop positive attitudes about moving, which increases their children's resilience.<sup>50</sup> Other factors may have a stronger impact on military children's well-being than how frequently they move; one study found that family cohesiveness, relationships with their mothers, and the length of time they had lived at their current residence—but not the total number of moves they had experienced—predicted whether children said they were lonely, had poor peer relationships, feared negative evaluations, and had low self-esteem.<sup>51</sup>

Although moving is often stressful, it can also offer excitement and adventure, particularly for families who have the opportunity to live in foreign countries, learn new languages, and experience different cultures.<sup>52</sup> For “third culture kids,” who spend a significant portion of their childhood in foreign countries, frequent moves and separations from friends and familiar places is a source of both grief and strength; these children often report a strong sense of self and comfort with the unfamiliar, and they develop strong relationships with their parents.<sup>53</sup> Children may also

see moving as an opportunity to change their behavior and do better in school.<sup>54</sup>

Guard and Reserve families, who are typically not attached to a military base and are more dispersed than active-duty families, may struggle with isolation from the military community. The Citizen Soldier Support Program, which analyzes geographic data on service members and veterans for the Veterans Administration and civilian health-care providers, has found that all but 12 counties in the United States were home to at least one of the 1.3 million Reserve members serving in 2012. Moreover, the approximately 650,000 Reserve members who have deployed in support of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan live in all but 27 counties.<sup>55</sup> This wide geographic dispersion means that the families of these service members are typically more isolated from military resources than are families who live near large installations.

### **Family Separations**

Family separations due to training exercises and deployment are another stressful feature of military life. Children whose parents are sent on repeated and extended deployments may have more problems than children whose parents are deployed for shorter periods. Grade-school children whose parents were cumulatively deployed 19 months or longer over a three-year period did worse in school than did military children whose parents had either not deployed or deployed less than 19 months during the same three years.<sup>56</sup> Similar results were found among children who attend DoDEA schools.<sup>57</sup> This finding has different implications for different branches of service. In the recent conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Army has experienced the greatest deployment

burden of all service branches. For example, although the Army contained only 39 percent of the active-duty force in 2009, it carried 52 percent of troop deployments. In contrast, the Air Force made up 23 percent of the active-duty force but carried only 15 percent of troop deployments.<sup>58</sup> Navy deployments operate on a very different tempo from those of the other services; sailors typically spend six months at sea and then six on land. The military has activated Guard and Reserve members to a far greater extent in Iraq and Afghanistan than in previous conflicts; Guard and Reserve members have accounted for one-third of all deployments.<sup>59</sup>

Most studies that examine how parents' deployment affects children have looked at children of elementary school age. Few researchers have studied the effects of parents' deployment on infants or high school-aged children. What information we have, however, suggests that despite many similarities, there are important differences in how deployment affects older children. At all ages, the wellbeing of the parent who isn't deployed is strongly associated with children's wellbeing. Cumulative length of deployment affects older children much as it does younger children; teenagers have more behavioral problems as the cumulative length of parental deployment increases.<sup>60</sup> However, the sources of stress that teenage children face are somewhat different, and may require different responses. While young children typically experience confusion, loss, and grief when a parent is deployed, and look to the remaining parent for support and care, older children better understand the dangers the deployed parent faces as well as the challenges that the remaining parent must deal with at home.

For teenage children, a parent's deployment means taking on more responsibilities

at home, including housework and caring for younger siblings. Teenage children also feel that they must support the remaining parent emotionally, and they have to renegotiate their role in the household. When the deployed parent returns home, there is more renegotiation, and a teenager who has had greater responsibility for running the household may have to relinquish some elements of control and status. At a summer camp for teens with a deployed parent, 68 percent said that helping the remaining parent cope was the most difficult problem they faced; 54 percent said that when deployment ended, fitting the returning parent back in the home routine was their most difficult problem.<sup>61</sup>

Just as older children face different sources of stress than younger children, children in Guard and Reserve families face different stresses than those in active-duty families. Because Guard and Reserve families typically don't move as frequently, these children less often have to change schools and make new friends. However, Guard and Reserve families are more likely to face isolation from the military community. A child may be the only one in his or her school with a deployed parent, and teachers and other community members may not know the issues that families of a deployed service member face. Because Guard and Reserve families are less likely to live near a base, they may not be aware of or be able to access the resources and support services that active-duty families can take for granted. Parents in Guard and Reserve families whose spouse is deployed report lower wellbeing and more behavioral problems among their teenage children than do their active-duty counterparts.<sup>62</sup> Also, because Guard and Reserve forces have never been used as extensively as they have in the post-9/11 era, many Guard and Reserve

family members had not experienced deployment and were not prepared for it.

Because activated Guard and Reserve members are considered to be on active duty, it's difficult to disentangle data about these families from data about regular active-duty service members, making it hard to see how their experiences differ. Ideally, a longitudinal study would follow military families through their various transitions—not only relocations and deployments, but also as they move through the active-duty, Guard and Reserve, and veteran communities. Such a longitudinal study would help researchers, policy makers, and service providers to better understand the dynamic nature of military life.

### **Veteran Families**

Although people tend to serve longer now than they did during the draft era, most service members do not serve a full career of 20 years or more. The average length of service is seven years. In 2011, approximately 184,000 people left the military; with 1.4 family members per service member, this means that more than 250,000 military family members became veteran family members.<sup>63</sup> As they move into civilian communities, veteran families face new challenges and opportunities. Most veteran families remain for a while in the area of their last duty station, meaning that veteran families are concentrated in the rural South, the Eastern Seaboard, and California.<sup>64</sup>

Most service members are not wounded during service and have no long-lasting health problems. The majority of veteran families will transition into civilian employment, will receive their health care through private insurance, and will not access VA benefits.

However, because warfare has changed in recent decades, military personnel, veterans, and their families face different physical and mental health problems. Improved weapons and armor mean that service members are more likely to survive serious injuries than in the past; however, the reduction in combat fatalities has been accompanied by a corresponding rise in the number of amputations and serious physical injuries that require lifelong care.<sup>65</sup> Long-term caretaking often falls to the spouses, parents, and, later, the adult children of the veteran, who often faces multiple sources of emotional, financial, and family stress. Since Vietnam, the military has paid greater attention to the invisible wounds of war, that is, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and traumatic brain injuries, which have both short-term and long-term effects on veterans and their families. Among personnel who served in Iraq, reports of depression, anxiety, and PTSD symptoms increased between three and 12 months after returning from deployment.<sup>66</sup> For many service members, therefore, the invisible wounds may not emerge until months or years after they have returned from deployment and left military service. Furthermore, evidence indicates that symptoms of PTSD can be transferred to family members.<sup>67</sup> Therefore, programs that seek to help with PTSD and other mental health problems should take a family-centered approach and should continue to reach out to veterans and their families after they have left service, even if they did not report mental health problems when they came home from war.

For most veterans, the transition to civilian communities means looking for a civilian job. Observers disagree about whether veterans face discrimination or gain an advantage in the civilian labor market.

But the long recession and the continuing stagnation of the U.S. labor market, combined with the drawdown from Iraq and Afghanistan, ensure that veterans will struggle in the civilian job market for years to come.<sup>68</sup> Veteran unemployment is highest among males aged 18 to 34, and both male and female veterans aged 18 to 34 are less likely than their civilian peers to have a job. This trend reverses for veterans at age 35 and above; male and female veterans in this age group are more likely to have a job than are their civilian peers.<sup>69</sup> This may mean that veteran unemployment is transitional, that is, veterans experience higher levels of unemployment when they first leave the military, but not later in life. On the other hand, this trend may result from a cohort effect, in which veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are having more trouble finding civilian jobs than are veterans of previous generations. Further research, informed by a life-course perspective, would help us resolve this question.

Educational benefits are a primary reason that many young people join the military, and limited prospects in the civilian labor market spur many veterans to use their GI Bill education benefits when they leave service, rather than immediately entering the labor market. In 2009, Congress made significant changes to the GI Bill, including a provision to allow some service members to transfer their education benefits to spouses and children; this change allowed greater flexibility for those who planned to stay in service for longer periods and did not plan to go to college after separation. In the coming years, we need to keep track of military children who use their parent's GI Bill benefits so that we can understand how this policy change affects them.

## Conclusions

Military policies and programs have increasingly seen family wellbeing as central to the overall health of the force. Spouses and children who are happy with military life are more likely to support a service member's decision to stay in the military. To continue improving the military's programs and services for families, policy makers and service providers must understand the social context and needs of military spouses and children. This article has provided background information to help them do so, drawing from data and research from public, private, and academic sources. Because a relatively small proportion of the American population serves in the all-volunteer force, public knowledge about the needs of service members and their families is not likely to come from personal experience and interaction with service members, but rather from surveys, interviews, and other kinds of data. Those who collect and interpret this data must understand the social context in which military families live, as well as the diverse and dynamic nature of the military lifestyle. Because military families come in many forms, and because they move often and transition among the active-duty, Guard and Reserve, and civilian communities, longitudinal research that follows individual families through these transitions would be best suited to capture the kind of data we need. In the all-volunteer era, such data has yet to be collected. This effort should be a primary focus of military family research as the drawdown from Iraq and Afghanistan continues.

As research on military families continues, several areas need more study and more data. First, we know that children in military families skew relatively young, yet past research has tended to focus on school-age children,

leaving large gaps in knowledge about infants and toddlers in military families. In this issue, Joy D. Osofsky and Lieutenant Colonel Molinda M. Chartrand tackle some of these gaps. Yet we need to know more about young children in military families, including how they react to frequent moves and what their educational pathways look like. Second, the unprecedented post-9/11 use of the Guard and Reserve has put a spotlight on the unique challenges faced by families who do not move with the military and typically don't live in communities with a large military presence. Past research on military families has tended to exclude Guard and Reserve families, because there was no expectation that these families would face widespread deployment. This oversight has severely limited what we know about differences between active-duty and Guard and Reserve families. Finally, research on military families and veteran families is not well integrated. Past research has tended to see these populations as distinct groups, limiting our ability to understand family transitions among the active-duty, Guard and Reserve, and veteran populations. Research on military families should adopt a dynamic, life-course perspective to better understand how military service affects children who move from one population to another at different stages of development.

We need research on military families not only to improve the wellbeing of military children. This research can also contribute to the wellbeing of all children. The military presents a unique environment in which to understand how various stresses and support systems affect children's resilience and development. In addition, the wellbeing of military families and children is integral to the successful functioning of our military forces, and policy makers need accurate and timely data to respond to these families' needs and

develop solutions to the problems they face. Military family members make substantial sacrifices to support their family member's service, and they make important contributions to the military and civilian communities they inhabit. As a diminishing share of the U.S. population serves in the military and shoulders the burdens of war, all military family members need to know that, in the words of first lady Michelle Obama, "they do live in a grateful nation."<sup>70</sup>

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*Past research on military families has tended to exclude Guard and Reserve families, because there was no expectation that these families would face widespread deployment. This oversight has severely limited what we know about differences between active-duty and Guard and Reserve families.*

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How might such gratitude be expressed in policies and programs? The demographic research we have reviewed documents the diversity of our military families, by age, race, ethnicity, and cultural background. In particular, we have emphasized how the family, its forms, and its position within the military community has changed over time, suggesting that we need a programmatic and policy approach that is flexible enough to adapt to the diversity of military families and to their continual transformations. We

should not compel diverse military families to fit into a fixed and rigidly structured set of programs; rather, we should make support programs accessible to families from all backgrounds and at all stages of the life course. For instance, parents and children have very different needs, and we need programs pertinent to the particular lives that are linked across generations within any family.

In addition, family needs will continue to change. As more military roles open to women, for example, more women may choose to serve and to stay in the military longer, meaning that more male civilian spouses will need to navigate policies and programs related to moving and spousal employment training that have been designed largely to meet the needs of military wives. Family Readiness Groups and other family community service

organizations, which have traditionally been staffed and operated by the female spouses of service members, have already begun to include male spouses, but the repeal of Don't Ask Don't Tell and the increasing legal recognition of same-sex marriages mean that these groups will need to include spouses from same-sex families as well.

Creating such nuanced policies and programs is challenging. But many programs designed for diverse nonmilitary families have been well studied and evaluated, and the research on these programs should help design of the sort of adaptive and flexible policies we are calling for. In turn, future evaluation of adaptive programs for military families will provide information that can be used to enhance the lives of all American children and families.

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