

Empirical Evidence of the Connections between Military Family Readiness and Mission and Military Readiness 14 February 2025

Aim

This brief presents evidence that links family well-being to the overall mission readiness of warfighters and military lethality.

Background

The well-being of military families is essential to the Department of Defense (DoD) for several reasons. Years of research have demonstrated a robust connection between family well-being and military mission readiness. To strengthen mission readiness, the DoD provides a range of programs and services that are designed to enhance family well-being.

A 2019 report from the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine¹ highlights that military family members can do the following:

- Provide essential support to Service members throughout their careers.
- Influence whether Service members remain in the military.
- Face challenges that can affect a Service member's ability to deploy or remain in theater.
- Raise a significant portion of future military recruits.
- Experience psychological or physical challenges when Service members struggle, and situations like this can create additional costs for the DoD.

The Military Family Readiness System delivers assistance and services that support individual, couple, family, and community well-being. These efforts improve the quality of life, resilience, and overall functioning of military-connected families and directly contribute to warfighters' abilities to focus on their mission and maintain combat effectiveness and lethality.

Approach

Clearinghouse for Military Family Readiness at Penn State (Clearinghouse) researchers conducted a literature review of recent peer-reviewed journal articles and gray literature to examine the connection between and among military family well-being, mission readiness, military readiness, and lethality.

1. Service Members Must Be Available for Training and Deployment

Family supports such as financial programs, spouse education, career services, and new parent support interventions enable Service members to focus on training and deployment. Spouses, parents, and extended family members help manage household responsibilities, child care, and financial matters at home, so Service members can fulfill mission demands.¹

Military families provide essential care for wounded, ill, or injured Service members, which can ensure continued service or a successful transition to civilian life. Family caregivers manage medical appointments, rehabilitation, and emotional support, which can reduce strain on military healthcare systems.²

Spousal and family support significantly increase military retention. Service members who have supportive spouses or partners are more likely to remain in service, and retention rates increase by up to 1.98 times for senior officers.³⁻⁶

Family challenges, such as frequent relocations, child care shortages, spousal unemployment, financial strain, and marital stress, directly impact Service member readiness and retention. Many stressors, including these listed, can affect Service members' morale, job performance, and willingness to reenlist.^{2, 7-10}

Marital satisfaction is a key predictor of military retention. Service members in stable marriages are more likely to remain in the military, while relationship strain can contribute to separation from service.^{11,12}

2. Service Members Must Be Mentally, Physically, and Emotionally Fit

Healthy family functioning allows Service members to stay mission-focused during deployment. Establishing and maintaining strong family relationships reduce stress and distractions, which enables warfighters to fully engage in their roles and duties and experience increased readiness and lethality.¹³

Family stressors such as relationship conflict, divorce, and caregiving burdens are significant risk factors for Service member mental health and suicide. Divorce or separation is linked to approximately 15% of military suicides, while family relationship problems are present in over 25% of military suicides.^{13,14}

Family well-being directly impacts Service members' performance during deployment. High levels of family tension, communication breakdowns, and unresolved conflicts are associated with Service members' reduced focus and decreased effectiveness in operational environments.^{1,15}

Access to quality military child care enhances mission readiness by reducing parental stress. Having access to reliable child care allows Service members to fully engage in their mission without harboring concerns about their children's well-being.¹

3. Service Member Resilience Is Connected to Family Resilience

Strengthening parenting skills and enhancing positive family communication reduce risks to military family resilience. Programs that teach effective parenting and coping strategies can help families manage military-related stressors to improve overall readiness.^{15,16}

Establishing and maintaining a shared family sense of mission can enhance all family members' adaptation to military life. When families align with military values and purpose, Service members experience greater support and reduced work-family conflict.¹⁷

Military families who have strong support networks experience better mental health and resilience. Peer connections, base community resources such as Family Support Centers or Child Development Centers, and social support systems can mitigate stress and improve family stability.¹⁸

Resilient families are knowledgeable, resourceful, and proactive in managing military life challenges. Being aware of available resources, being financially prepared, and learning and using problem-solving skills can contribute to overall family and mission readiness.¹⁹

Family-military role conflicts, such as frequent relocations, which can cause disruptions in education for children and employment for spouses, are major stressors for Service members. Struggles with balancing military duties and family responsibilities can lead to increased stress, lower job performance, and retention challenges for Service members.^{1,20}

Strong family communication improves Service member focus and performance. Understanding and using open and effective communication can reduce stress and enhance coping strategies for all family members and help deployed Service members concentrate on their mission.¹³

Appendix A

Definitions of Terms

1. *Mission readiness* is defined as the military's capacity to engage in combat and fulfill assigned missions and tasks.²¹ One of the most important components of mission readiness is the military's ability to attract and retain high-quality military personnel.

2. *Military readiness* is the ability of the military to carry out its assigned missions and respond to challenges.²¹ This is a top priority for the military as all Branches are expected to be ready to respond to the President's orders immediately. One component of military readiness is "medical readiness," which demands that the military have a healthy force to care for Service members and their families and respond to disasters and other emergencies. The number of available Service members is another critical component of military readiness. The military builds and sustains readiness over time within military units, and the primary focus of the unit is Service members, also known as *warfighters*.

3. *Lethality* is the military's capacity and ability to effectively neutralize or destroy an enemy target.²² Critical to the military's lethality is the size of its force, and the size of the force can improve the military's capacity to deploy forces quickly and increase their ability to identify and interpret uncertainty. The DoD describes lethality as creating a military that is the most lethal combat force in the world. In addition, lethality requires that warfighters can perform under pressure and in extreme situations.

Appendix B

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