

# Putting Research to Work for Military Families



**Focus:**  
Multiple  
Branches

## Military Spouses Speak Up: A Qualitative Study of Military and Veteran Spouses' Perspectives

Borah, E., & Fina, B. (2017). Military spouses speak up: A qualitative study of military and veteran spouses' perspectives. *Journal of Family Social Work, 20*(2), 144-161. doi:10.1080/10522158.2017.1284702

**SUMMARY:** The life of a military spouse can be rewarding, but also challenging as deployments and time apart may contribute to increased family problems. This study examined military life and culture from the perspective of 22 female military spouses. Findings revealed seven main themes regarding various aspects of military life and its affect on the entire military family.

### KEY FINDINGS:

- The seven main themes that emerged included: accessibility to health care, identities as caregivers, marital relationships, health outcomes, social support, spouses' educational and career opportunities, and personal growth.
- Many spouses reflected that deployments attributed to their husbands' health problems (e.g., posttraumatic stress disorder, traumatic brain injury) causing family problems, including depression, anxiety, and children's behavioral problems due to separation.
- Most spouses received social support from family, friends, and online communities (e.g., social media), however Veteran spouses indicated a lack of availability in support programs.
- Due to negative experiences with health care providers, many spouses reflected on the importance of needing more quality care and support for the entire family.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Offer support groups during reintegration to help families and Service members adjust to the Service members' return
- Provide workshops to help Service members' spouses learn about available supportive services, including services not located near military installations
- Educate couples to enhance communication about adapting to changes in roles and power dynamics, especially during reintegration

### IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Encourage the development and continuation of programs that can promote resilience in Service members and their families
- Recommend professional education, including information on military culture for professionals who work with Service members and their families
- Promote reintegration programs that include attention to assisting Service members' families in adjusting to the Service members' return

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## METHODS

- Participants were recruited via email and word-of-mouth, such that spouses who completed the online survey then invited others they knew to participate in the study.
- The online survey included 25 open-ended questions examining military life and transitions, quality and accessibility to health care, social support, and opportunities for personal and family growth.
- Qualitative analyses were used to analyze the partners' perspectives and seven main themes emerged from their responses.

## PARTICIPANTS

- The sample included 22 female spouses of Active Duty and Veteran military personnel who had an average age of 39 years.
- A majority of spouses were White (73%), while 14% were Black, and 9% were Multiracial. Additional race/ethnicity information was not provided.
- Of the 22 spouses, 15 (68%) had Army husbands, three (14%) had Marine husbands, two (9%) had Navy husbands, one had a husband from the Air Force, and one spouse did not report her husband's military service branch.

## LIMITATIONS

- The sample was recruited via word-of-mouth and this recruitment method may have introduced some bias, thus findings may not be representative of all spouses and military branches.
- Limited information was provided regarding how the qualitative data were analyzed, therefore it would be difficult to replicate this same study using a different sample.
- Data were collected at one time point, which may limit the ability to understand spouses' military life experiences over time and in various transitions.

## AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Collect a random sample of military couples across multiple military branches examining their personal experiences of military life
- Assess how PTSD and related mental health problems may be related to intimacy, communication, and parenting for military couples
- Examine how professional training in military cultural competence relates to military family well-being

## ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



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