

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Air Force

Civic Engagement and Sense of Community in the Military

Bowen, G. L., Martin, J. A., Mancini, J. A., & Nelson, J. P. (2001). Civic engagement and sense of community in the military. *Journal of Community Practice*, 9(2), 71-93. doi:10.1300/J125v09n02_05

SUMMARY: Belonging to a community is often an important part of an individual or family's well-being and a key source of social support. Relationships between Active Duty Air Force members' perceptions of community variables (e.g., participation, connection) were examined. Air Force members who felt that there was high community participation, that it was easy to connect in their community, and that there was a shared responsibility and ability to work together reported a greater overall sense of community.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Service members were more likely to report a strong sense of community when they perceived greater participation in community events and activities, experienced ease in connecting with others in the community, and felt there were higher levels of shared responsibility and ability to work together to achieve goals.
- The easier Service members felt it was to make military community connections and the more they felt others participated in events, the greater their sense that their community could and would care for one another, which in turn increased perceptions of the overall sense of community.
- Senior officers perceived making connections among the military community to be easier than junior enlisted or junior officers.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Garner military family input into what types of programs and events to provide in order to increase agency and sense of ownership among community members and promote a greater sense of community overall
- Provide resources for military families who recently joined a new base about community events and activities, as well as ways to get involved
- Educate military families on the benefits of social support, particular during potentially stressful experiences, such as deployment

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Recommend media campaigns on bases that encourage participation in community and portray the benefits of social support
- Encourage education of professionals working with military families about the benefits of a strong sense of community and how to increase community participation
- Continue to support group programs for military families that allow Service members and their families to support one another, participate in activities together, and learn from each other

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METHODS

- As part of a larger study, interviews and focus groups were conducted with Service members, their families, and other personnel who worked with military families that were recruited by the Family Advocacy Office at nine U.S. Air Force bases in 1999.
- Participants answered open-ended interview questions and completed rating scales regarding sense of community and community capacity, connections, and participation.
- Participants' perceptions of community were compared between different demographic groups (e.g., gender, residence location, time in community, pay grade), and the relationships between community variables (i.e., sense of community and community capacity, connections, and participation) were examined.

PARTICIPANTS

- Participants included 180 married Active Duty Air Force members (75% male).
- The majority of participants lived off-base (59%).
- Service members included officers (52%), senior enlisted members (33%), and junior enlisted members (14%).

LIMITATIONS

- Community variables were all assessed via unvalidated one- or two-item measures, which may have produced results with poor reliability and validity.
- Data were cross sectional, preventing causal conclusions from being drawn.
- Only Service members' perceptions of community were included, limiting generalizability to other military family members.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Examine other variables that may impact the sense of community among military families (e.g., work demands, family size, distance from base)
- Explore the effectiveness of several different methods (e.g., more recruitment for events, directories for community connection information) to increase a sense of community among Service members and their families
- Conduct a similar study of perceptions of sense of community with spouses and children of Service members to understand their particular needs for community

ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



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<https://reachmilitaryfamilies.umn.edu/content/assessing-research-that-works>