

Family Wellbeing Study

Key Findings

The *Family Wellbeing Study* was commissioned jointly by the Departments of Defence and Veterans' Affairs, and conducted by the Australian Institute of Family Studies. It explores the effect of military service on families through:

- quantitative research, where data covering many areas of military family life were collected using structured online or paper surveys from spouses/partners, the adult children and parents of serving and ex-serving members, and
- qualitative research, which sought to understand the support families give ex-serving ADF members following transition, and ways in which families could be better supported.

The Government greatly appreciates the contribution of the serving and ex-serving members and their family members who took the time to participate in the study. Overall, the Study provides a positive picture of both serving and ex-serving military families, with most ex-serving families coping well with the transition to civilian life.

Similarities between families of current serving and ex-serving ADF members

The families of serving and ex-serving ADF members were similar on many of the aspects examined. For example:

- Rates of mental health problems among all adults and children aged 2-17 years were low and generally no greater than in comparable general Australian populations.
- Risk taking behaviours such as problem drinking, illicit drug use and gambling were no more common than in comparable Australian populations, with spouses/partners and parents tending to report lower rates of these activities than comparable general populations.
- Couple relationships seemed to be healthy and strong in most families, and those who were parents seemed to be rearing children effectively.
- The majority of spouses/partners were in employment, with rates similar to the general Australian population of a similar age and sex.
- Relatively few families experienced financial hardships although the rate was slightly higher than in Australian general community studies.
- As would be expected, the Study showed that families had experienced considerably more residential and school relocations than the general Australian population.
- This generally positive picture was a little at odds with family members' perceptions of how military service had affected them. For example, over half of spouses/partners felt that

military service had negatively affected their employment and careers, although their actual rate of employment was reasonably high and similar to the general population.

- The study's measures of psychological wellbeing suggest that Australian military families were resilient and coping well with the pressures of a military family lifestyle.

Insights from family members

- When family members were asked about services and supports that could help ease the transition from military service, three main types of suggestions were made:
 1. Better preparation for transitioning members and families. In particular, more targeted personalised assistance when ADF members were medically discharged or had severe or ongoing medical or physical health issues.
 2. Clearer and better targeted communication with families.
 3. More proactive service provision.

Differences between families of current serving and ex-serving ADF members

- Spouses/partners were satisfied in their couple relationships although spouses/partners of ex-serving ADF members tended to be less positive about this relationship than spouses/partners of current serving ADF members.
- Ex-serving spouses/partners of ADF members were less positive about their relationship than current serving.
- Spouses/partners of ex-serving ADF members were significantly more likely to have shown signs of suicidality in the past 12 months than of current serving ADF members (18.3% compared with 11.1%), but there were no significant differences on suicide plans or attempts.
- Spouses/partners of ex-serving members significantly more often reported problem drinking and illicit drug use in the previous 12 months, but not for their lifetime, than the spouses/partners of current serving ADF members.

Challenges identified for some sub-groups

- The study identified particular sub-groups who seemed to be encountering more challenges and might benefit from targeted support and assistance including:
 - adult children
 - More adult children aged 18-37 years reported high levels of psychological distress than in the Australian population of a similar age and sex.
 - a higher percentage of dependent children aged 2 to 17 years in families of current serving ADF members showed higher levels of emotional, hyperactive or peer

problems than would be expected normatively with hyperactivity significantly different than children of ex-serving ADF members.

- O spouses/partners who are serving or ex-serving ADF members
 - Mental health problems in this sub-group were more frequent than in civilian spouses/partners.