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Australian Military and Veteran Families Study

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About the study

There is growing evidence that military service can have long-term effects on the families of Defence members, both while they are in the military and after transitioning to civilian life. Previous research indicates that the impact of military service life on families is a key reason members discharge from service voluntarily prior to retirement age (Department of Defence [Defence], 2017, 2020). Many members leave the Australian Defence Force (ADF) at or before the age of 40 (Defence, 2001) and women often leave at a younger age than this and are less likely than men to return after parental leave (Defence, 2019). Previous research also shows that transitioning from military service to civilian life can be challenging for families and members, and that younger members are at higher risk for poor outcomes after transition (Muir, 2018).

The purpose of the **Australian Military and Veteran Families Study** was to better understand how family experiences and perspectives inform continued service in the ADF, and how their experiences of transition from service can be improved. The study examined the lived experience of current and recently transitioned members and their families and provided evidence to support the retention and wellbeing of ADF members and their families. With a specific focus on younger members and their families, it aimed to better understand a period in life when there may be an increased need for family support and families are considering long-term life decisions.

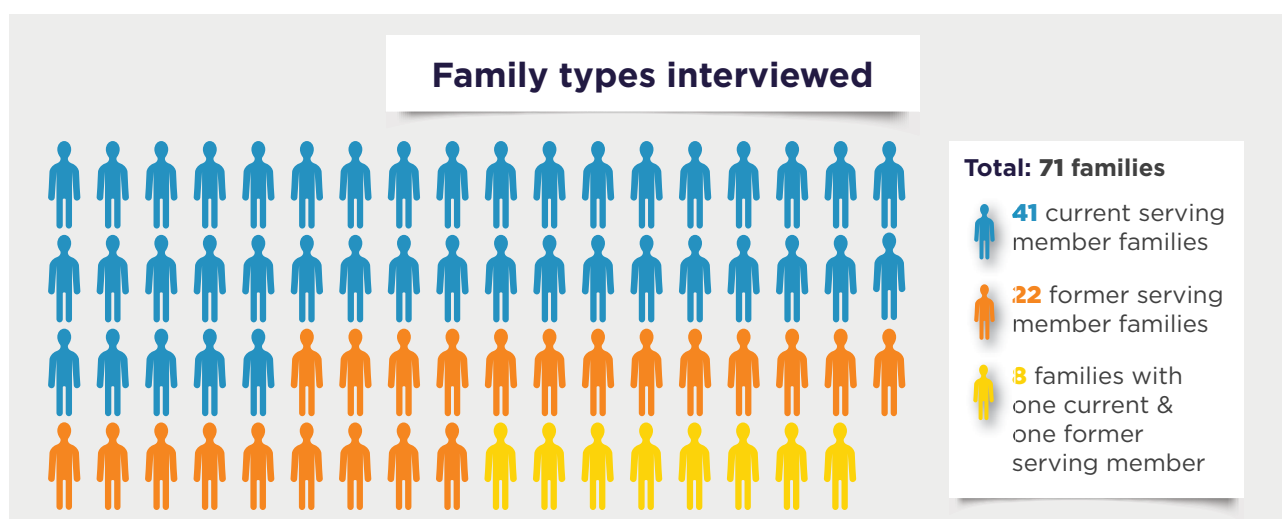
What we wanted to know

The research had three main aims:

- to gain insight into the support needs of ADF families with dependent children
- to gain insight into how family experiences of support can affect decisions about their future in the ADF
- to understand factors and supports that make for a better transition experience for families with dependent children.

What we did

Between January and May 2022, we conducted interviews with 71 families, including 41 current serving member families, 22 former serving member families and 8 families that included one current and one former serving member. Care was taken to ensure representation of different family types, ranks and roles, and each of the service types (Navy, Army and Air Force).



Among the 41 current serving member families, we spoke to 31 members with civilian partners, 4 single-parent ADF members, and 6 dual-serving couples. Of the 22 former serving member families, we spoke to 11 former members with civilian partners, 6 single former serving parents, and 5 couples where both partners were former serving members. In total, 90 current and former serving members' experiences were represented, more than a third of whom were women. To explore joint decision-making processes, interviews were conducted with both members of couples together where possible.

	Current serving	Former serving	1 Current, 1 Former serving	Total
ADF & civilian partner couples	31 (1W/30M)	11 (11M)	—	42 (1W/41M)
ADF single parent	4 (4W)	6 (6W)	—	10 (10W)
Dual-serving couples	6 (7W/5M)*	5 (5W/5M)	8 (8W/8M)	19 (20W/18M)
Total	41 (12W/35M)	22 (11W/16M)	8 (8W/8M)	71 (31W/59M)

Notes: The figures in the brackets indicate the gender of the current or former serving members within each family type (**M**en, **W**omen). *One dual current serving couple consisted of two women.

We analysed the interviews for themes. Findings were grouped into three key areas:

- families' experiences of service life
- decisions to leave or remain in the ADF
- role and experience of families in transition.

Throughout the research, we also sought to identify how family experiences, decisions and outcomes were affected by the services and supports available and used by families.

What we heard

Families' experiences of service life

It's not a job. It's actually a lifestyle.

Member of a dual-serving couple

Most of the current and former serving members we interviewed highly valued their jobs in the ADF but found it difficult to manage the demands of permanent service when they had young children.

The key issues raised by families who participated in this study were:

- the frequency of service-related relocations
- the frequency and unpredictability of member absences from home
- the need for members to work long and irregular hours when required.

Even if you could just dilute the frequency of the postings, it would make a massive, massive difference.

Civilian partner of current member

There are plenty of other, you know, mining and FIFO families or families in emergency services, whether it be police or paramedicine, that face similar challenges, in terms of unfavourable hours, unpredictable hours. I suppose the difference is all of those other occupations do have the power to say no. Whether or not they feel that they do but they can legally say no, whereas in a Defence context you do what you're told.

Member of veteran couple

These characteristics of permanent service affected families in all areas of their lives including members' health, partners' ability to work, families' financial wellbeing, ability to secure appropriate housing, children's schooling and child care arrangements, and access to services and support networks.

These conditions of service affected all families we spoke to but their impacts varied by family type, member's mental and physical health, member's rank, and whether they were in the Navy, Army or Air Force.

Single-parent families

- Single-parent families, those with young children and those without extended family support had difficulty balancing family needs and ADF service commitments. For example, many single parents were unable to accept deployment opportunities due to lack of support at home, which, in turn, affected their career progression.

If I had to go to sea or had to do an extended deployment, I don't think it'd be possible at all.

Single parent, current serving member

- Single parents and dual-serving couples were more likely than members with civilian partners to use flexible work arrangements and to say that access to these arrangements was essential to their ability to balance work and family commitments.





Dual-serving couples

- Being part of a dual-serving couple had benefits and challenges. Many said that it was beneficial that both partners understood military service life. They also believed that it was helpful having ADF career managers who were responsible for finding roles for both partners while managing postings.
- However, dual-serving couples also experienced challenges, including the need to prioritise one member's career over the other if they wanted to be posted together. This was more difficult if they were in different service types as they are often located on different bases and had different posting cycles.

We decided that once we had kids, or at least for the first few years, [his] career would take priority, and we would do anything that we could to follow his postings and be posted together. We knew that we didn't want to separate our family, particularly in those early years, that we weren't willing to be posted apart.

Member of dual-serving couple

- Some women in dual-serving couples felt that their career had been disadvantaged since becoming parents. This was seen as a result of the Defence policy of prioritising one member's career over the other's, and an assumption that serving women will take on the primary caring role when they have a serving male partner.

I think there was a lot of tension in our relationship from the way that Defence has managed our careers and managed dual-serving couples. Because I was senior member, I was a more senior rank than he was. And then because of having a child and being pushed back in my career and being delayed through his career manager, he is now an officer and I'm still a sergeant and trying to build my career status back up.

Single parent, current serving member with current serving ex-partner

- Dual-serving couples also experienced higher levels of separation from each other than ADF members with civilian partners due to both members being required to deploy or go away.

Civilian/ADF-member couples

- In Civilian/ADF-member couples, the impact of service on the civilian partner's employment was a key concern. Many civilian partners had difficulty finding jobs after relocating, had accepted jobs with lower pay or responsibility as they felt this was the only available or manageable option due to the member's service commitments. Some felt the effort of looking for new jobs was not worth it because they did not know how long they would be in a location. Some civilian partners said this had undermined their confidence, and many worried about the long-term impacts on family finances and their ability to secure a loan to buy a house.

I was kind of pigeonholed because I knew that we would be moving soon. So I ended up getting a job in retail because it was quite easy to get ... I didn't have the opportunity to look for a longer-term job.

Civilian partner of current member

- Several civilian partners had used the Partner Employment Assistance Program to develop resumes and pay for registrations when they moved interstate and found it helpful. However, others found the program of little use as they already had professional careers.

I would have been eligible for resume writing stuff, but I was pretty confident my resume wasn't really the problem.

Civilian partner of current serving member

A lot of that stuff we can easily work out on our own ... I think they were tailored to spouses who didn't have a professional career.

Civilian partner of veteran

- Because members are away so often and unpredictably, it was difficult for civilian partners to rely on members to look after the children. To manage this aspect of military service employment, many families we spoke to set up their lives so that the member did not need to be there, with the civilian partner – or one member in a dual-serving couple – taking full responsibility for parenting.

Member: *It's a tough situation because I suppose at any point in time any member of Defence can be recalled and, you know, it can be a big impact on families, the other partner, to have to drop everything ...*

Civilian partner: *We've basically set up ourselves so that [my serving spouse] doesn't have to be here but I can run everything that we need to, because we don't want to get caught out in a situation where, you know, we just don't have anything in place.*

Member and civilian partner

I've just learnt to accept that that is not really an option for [my partner]. He can't really be that involved, so the responsibility is mine. I may not be a single parent but I often solo parent. I just got used to doing it all myself.

Civilian partner of current serving member

- A lack of access to affordable childcare, especially outside standard work hours, and lack of extended family support, exacerbated the barriers to work for partners.

I'm currently not working because we can't afford to have two in day care, and with [him] going away we don't have any family support up here. ... I stopped working just because I couldn't get a job to fit in with the hours of day care and [him] being away for like the whole entire year. No one does any alternative or out of the normal hours child care times. So really, I can't work while [he] is away.

Civilian partner of current serving member

- In families where both parents were in paid employment it was also common for the civilian partner to use their leave arrangements to care for children if needed, rather than the member to ask for time off, and for families to feel this was an expectation within Defence.

I definitely feel that [my partner] has had to take the lion's share of sacrifices from a career perspective which, for all of the talk, Defence pushes ... I don't actually think that it's there yet in terms of providing that balance for young families. Particularly these first four years where [our child]'s not actually going to school, the onus has really been on [my partner]. Like if [our child]'s sick or something like that, it's pretty much always been [her] having to take the time off. There have been a few rare circumstances where I've been able to take time off ... [and] there's just that impression or that kind of that vibe, let's say, in the workplace that your wife can look after you some way, 'why do you need to take that time off?' ... I definitely feel that it's a cultural thing within Defence.

Current serving member with civilian partner

Divorced/separated ADF parents

- Divorced/separated ADF parents who did not have care of their children for at least 90 nights per year were not eligible for specific Defence supports such as family reunion travel or Defence family housing. Having their children for that number of nights was often difficult due to service requirements such as deployments, postings or training; and the lack of Defence support made it more difficult to maintain these family relationships.

New partner: *Defence had a rule of you're not entitled to a house unless you have your kids for 90 days. Which, obviously, when you're forced away for service life, you're never going to have them to meet that threshold, which then stops you from having them. Dad/Serving member:* *So it's a bit of a catch 22. If I'm to have the kids for [only] six weeks in a year, I have to pay for either hotel accommodation or something ... they gave me a two-bedroom apartment ... the situation is they're not recognised as dependents according to Defence's standards, so therefore, hand back the house.*

Serving member dad who co-parents children with a former partner

- Some divorced/separated ADF parents refused to relocate because they wanted to stay close to their children and remain involved parents, but felt they had to make career sacrifices to do this.

Mothers in Defence

- This research finds that mothers in Defence are more likely than fathers in Defence to take primary care of children within their relationships and this affects their careers relative to men.
- Ability of women in Defence to accept deployments depended heavily on family circumstances, particularly the support of partners and extended family who looked after their children when they were away. Partners were typically supportive of members deploying; but if partners were not supportive, this impacted members' capacity to progress their careers.

His frustrations with the system and his lack of support for the organisation would've made it hard for me to deploy as well. Because his attitude towards the system wouldn't be, 'It's alright, you're away because it's a good cause' and you know 'You're doing the right thing'. It would be, you know, 'Why did you have to deploy?' ... I really think that also contributed to my discharge as well. If, I think - if I had a supportive partner who was able to help me overcome some of the organisation challenges.

Veteran with veteran former partner

- Single parents (all of whom in this study were women) often found balancing parenting and the demands of military service difficult (and this extended to transition, e.g. finding time to attend transition seminars or medical appointments on discharge).
- Women in Defence emphasised the importance of tailored support when returning to work after maternity leave, such as flexible work arrangements and recognition of the challenges regaining fitness. The presence or absence of such support significantly impacted their commitment to the ADF.

Family and sexual violence

- Experiences of intimate partner and sexual violence featured in the interviews of some women. One veteran interviewed for this study described the difficulties she faced escaping a coercive controlling partner who was also an ADF member. Another woman veteran reported being raped (while serving) by Defence men in positions of power over her career. While both participants reported that they were faring well at the time they participated in this study, the lack of initial support these women received while in the ADF, and the mental health impacts of managing and responding to these situations while serving, had long-lasting impacts on their and their family's wellbeing and decisions to discharge from the ADF.

Physical and mental health problems

- In some families, the current or former serving member had physical injuries or mental health issues caused or exacerbated by service, including anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder and depression. Work pressures could interact with family pressures in contributing to poor mental health. For example, one family spoke of the member returning from a deployment with an emerging mental health issue and having to deal with the pressures of a new baby.
- In families where members were experiencing significant mental health issues, their experiences of service life were heavily affected by this and how it was handled. In some cases, families were disappointed by the Defence medical system because while it had assessed members as being at-risk when returning from deployment, the partners had not been informed. In other cases, partners were the first to identify members' mental health problems while serving and played a significant role in encouraging them to seek help. Members often took a long time to tell Defence, or seek help, because of fear that it would impact on their careers.
- For families with multiple or complex issues (such as a recent divorce or separation, intimate partner violence, or a prolonged physical or mental health issue), work-related pressures and disruptions (e.g. housing and schooling moves or excessive work hours) escalated the risk of crisis, leading some to leave the service.

Rank and family life

- Families of higher-ranking members were generally better able to balance work and family needs as these members had more control over their careers, more ability to negotiate flexible work arrangements and less pressure to deploy. However, as the sample was restricted to families with a member aged 40 or under (at the time of recruitment or discharge), participants in this study were less likely to hold the most senior ranks.

What I did notice ... over time is, as I progressed through the ranks, it became easier to juggle children. So as a warrant officer, I could just go up to the boss and say, 'hey boss, you know' - true story - 'child's just broken his arm at school, I need to go get him'. And he's like, 'Okay, off you go'. But a digger can't do that ... they don't have that voice at the younger levels, and I think that's very difficult for them. So I found the higher up in rank you get, the easier family life gets.

Single parent, veteran



Service type differences

- Families believed that the Navy, Army and Air Force varied when it came to being family friendly:
 - The Army was perceived as less family friendly than the Air Force or Navy due to shorter posting cycles, less flexibility and less individual control over one's career.
 - Many in the Navy found long sea postings difficult when they had children, and this was a factor in discharging or transferring to another service type for some members.
 - The Air Force was perceived to be the most family friendly of all services with the most flexibility and the least need to travel for work.

[My partner] is looking to maybe do a transfer to the RAAF. They seem to have a bit more family friendly positions and policies ... They sometimes get back-to-back postings, they do seem to get ability for work-life balance.
Civilian partner of current serving Army member

Deployments and other service-related absences

- Families were more accepting of members' absences if the purpose and rationale was clearly communicated and seen as valid:
 - While long deployments and/or sea postings were difficult for families, many were supportive of them because they were highly valued by the member, the purpose and importance of their time away was clear, and they came with higher allowances.
 - Families were more concerned about other service-related absences as they were more frequent, less predictable, and the purpose and rationale for the member being absent was less clear.

Just going in and out, in and out, in and out. I'd much rather a deployment. You know, nine months where they're totally gone where you know that they're gone.
Civilian partner of current serving member

Geographic relocation and career progression

- While members were sometimes able to secure back-to-back postings or remain in the same location for more than one posting cycle, they often made career sacrifices to do this. This meant that either the member posted unaccompanied, and their family managed without them, or the member would turn down their preferred job to avoid being separated from their family.

When we had our first bub that was a very strategic decision by [my partner]. He made career sacrifices. He didn't take the most preferable career option so that we could be in [our preferred location] and have parents around when we had our eldest. Had he made the career-focused decision we probably would have been in [a location we did not want] and that would have been atrocious.
Member of veteran couple

- While compassionate postings were an option used by some families, participants believed this option would leave a 'black mark' against their careers.

Member: A compassionate posting [...] that's like very shunned upon. Like you don't need a compassionate posting is just the general attitude ... It very – very rarely happens [from] what I've seen. **Civilian partner:** If you get one it's a detriment to your career. **Member:** Yeah, that's the conception of it being, yeah, detrimental to your career. If you get a compassionate posting it really sets you back and that's why people are very hesitant to ask or do it and that's why it's like kind of shunned upon ... **Civilian partner:** It's a compassionate posting or a promotion. You don't get both ... It will affect your promotion definitely.

Member and civilian partner

Member: [It] is a black flag on any service person's career saying that person needs to be home with their family ... **Veteran:** It was either a black mark on his career or, we get punished again.

Dual veteran and serving member couple

Decisions to leave or remain in the ADF

- 12 former serving members who participated in the study had discharged from service for medical reasons. While the rest discharged voluntarily. Many also felt like they had little choice. Most highly valued their ADF careers and many would have preferred to remain in permanent service if they could adequately manage work and family commitments.

I [would] absolutely love to say I'm not planning on putting in my discharge or leaving Defence any time soon. It's just purely if the circumstances arise where it no longer works and I'm, I guess, forced into a position that I don't want to be in, that's when I look at transitioning out of Defence. I guess what would make me stay is the continued flexibility.

Single parent, current serving member

Family role in decisions

- Families played an important role in members' decisions about leaving or remaining in permanent service, whether they discharged voluntarily or for medical reasons.
- Couples discussed work plans frequently due to the high level of interdependence between members' work decisions, partners' employment options and families' housing, child care and schooling arrangements.
- Families weighed up a range of factors in their decisions to stay or leave, including:
 - members' work opportunities in and out of service
 - partners' employment circumstances and aspirations
 - children's education needs
 - members' health needs
 - family social networks and supports.

Excessive family relocations and separations

- While a range of factors were taken into account, failure to secure a desired posting, or excessive family relocations, were often triggers for leaving.

I was due to post to Townsville. And yeah, that made the decision for us. I'd put in my posting letter that for family reasons, education, a whole suite of reasons, we needed to stay in Darwin. Um, they said, 'Okay, cool story, you're going to Townsville'. So that triggered me to put my discharge or transfer to Reserves and take my long-service leave. That was, yeah, mostly because we needed to stay in Darwin for the kids' schooling; we didn't really want to move them around again, we'd finally got the family settled.

Veteran with civilian partner

The reason that I got out when I did was that I had been deployed for four months and ... I got back two weeks before [partner] was going on exercise, he went on exercise for eight weeks and whilst he was on exercise my Commanding Officer pulled me into his office and said we want to deploy you for six months and I said to him you know my partner's not even back from exercise, I haven't seen him. I've seen him for like two months this year, and my Commanding Officer said, well the military comes first, you're both junior officers, and I walked out and I called [partner] and I said to him I'm resigning.

Veteran, partner currently serving

The desire for more control and flexibility

- Other factors included a desire for more control over life and to prioritise family over work needs.

I knew that I needed to wrestle control of my life that ... my life was not going to be managed and my wife's life was not going to be managed by someone in Canberra.

Member of dual-veteran couple

- Some members chose to transition from permanent to reserve service as a way of staying connected to the ADF while providing more individual control and flexibility. While many were satisfied that the Reserves gave them more ability to balance work and family needs, others were reluctant to make this transition due to a perception that the Reserves lacked job security, financial benefits and career progression.

How support influences decisions

- Parents' ability to remain in permanent service depended on their ability to rely on or share parenting roles with current or former partners, informal support from family and friends and supports provided by Defence – in particular, supportive management, ability to negotiate suitable posting arrangements and access to family-friendly work provisions. Access to these supports was highly varied and families noted that flexible work provisions were inconsistently applied, with access dependent on their Chain of Command.

It comes down to ... how supportive your boss is. In my previous unit the boss was totally supportive and finding the work-life balance was quite easy. Now I've gone to a different unit [and my] new boss who doesn't have kids or a family, I don't think really understands. So now I'm finding that the demands that they are putting on me at work is outweighing what I can manage at home. So, I'm looking to transition out.

Member of dual-serving couple



- Some families highly valued the informal support they received through units and other ADF families on base but the extent to which families were connected to these local ADF communities varied. While families did not always want to live on a base or be overly involved in the ADF community, those living on a base were more likely to report receiving a high level of support from their units and surrounding communities. This was also the case for dual-serving couples who often had support from both of their units. Some civilian partners who were working full-time had little time to engage in local activities at community centres.
- Reasons for leaving were often linked to barriers accessing formal services and supports (such as child care, mental health services or specialist medical services) due to cost, lack of availability or lack of awareness of the entitlements and supports available.

The ability for child care and access for that would definitely help keep us in this service for longer.
Current serving member with veteran partner

- Many noted the complicated nature of ADF rules and entitlements (as outlined in the Pay and Conditions Manual) and had previously missed out on accessing supports due to not knowing they were available – especially younger families and those new to the ADF.
- Most members who medically discharged would have preferred to remain in service, and some said earlier access to appropriate medical support could have helped them to remain in the ADF longer.
- Some women in Defence noted a lack of support around maternity leave and regaining physical fitness following childbirth played a role in decisions to discharge.

Role and experience of families in transition

The family unit

- The transition experiences of all family members were interconnected. When family members were doing well in transition, this helped the veteran, and vice versa.

[The children] didn't fully understand a lot of it, but they were very, very stressed by it ... They picked up on a lot of stress.
Civilian partner of a veteran

- Partners were often the main source of support for transitioning ADF members and provided them with emotional and practical support, when needed.



Employment

- Transitioning from service to civilian life was easier for those who were employed and/or engaged in other purposeful activity such as voluntary work or involvement in community organisations, soon after discharge. This was less common for those who medically discharged and was easier for those who had a job lined up before deciding to leave.
- Transition was especially positive for families when the member found a civilian job that was a meaningful step forward and progression from their Defence careers.

So I find myself now in a very, very good position, capitalising on my knowledge and experience with Defence but in a public servant capacity ... It's a very – it's a very good position to be in.
Veteran from dual-veteran couple

- Some veterans found it easier to transition to Defence-related roles, and joining the Reserves (if they are able to) provided some with a positive transition pathway and meaningful activity. When someone moved from permanent to reserve service, there were elements of change but also a sense of continuity.
- Those who left permanent service to work in a Defence-related job in the public service (such as with the Department of Defence or Home Affairs) or Defence-related industry generally found the adjustment easier. This was because it required less change in their role and the nature of their work environment and often involved more continuity of personal identity and social connections.

I don't think I've really noticed much difference in terms of the transition ... Because [he's] still working on Defence things. [He's] using a lot of the same acronyms and talking about the same kind of things, so that has been fairly smooth.
Civilian partner of a veteran

Finance and housing

- Financial challenges were common for families during and after transition and many found it difficult to navigate civilian financial systems and changes to their cost of living.
- Delays in benefit payments and processing of pension claims often left those medically discharging and single parents feeling financially precarious. Not being sure when, or if, their payments would come through left some families being worried about being left without any money or being homeless.

Before I got my pension I was shitting myself to – sorry for the language but I was very scared that I was going to be broke and homeless as well.
Medically discharged single-parent veteran

Yeah, the financial pressure that it puts on you is, you know, incredible. A lot of people are in DHA houses and they lose their entitlement. And if they haven't got their DVA payments come through and everything sorted, it's really, really hard to navigate.
Partner of medically discharged veteran

- Families often preferred to have their final posting in a home they had purchased and could stay in during and after their transition. This was motivated by a desire not to disrupt their family or face housing issues while navigating other elements of transition.

Health

- Some veterans and their families faced mental and/or physical health challenges and reported mixed experiences with supports in transition.
- Some families in these circumstances felt abandoned and left to look after their mental health alone while others found the Defence/Veteran-related mental health supports and services helpful.

Their mental health is totally put under the rug and so then it's families who have to deal with the amount of negative mental health issues that they have. So in transition I think the number one thing that needs to be worked out in transition is mental health ... 'Cause we're in the grass roots, we're the ones that have to deal with them every single day.
Civilian partner of veteran

- Partners were not always aware of a member's mental health issues as the symptoms were not always visible and Defence may not have made them aware. This left some families unprepared and unaware of the supports that the transitioning member and the wider family may have needed or had available to them.

Life skills and preparation

- Having the right amount of time to prepare for transition helped families plan for better transitions. The amount of time needed was family specific with some families wanting more time for their transition while others wanted to transition quicker and felt it took too long.
- Entering Defence after experiencing civilian adult life made it easier for veterans and their families when they transitioned.

He had no skills 'cause he joined at 17. He didn't know how to get a house. He didn't know how much things cost, like so much. And you can essentially go a long, long time without having experienced real life.

Former partner of a veteran

Social support and cultural environment

- Families often felt that the former member, and the wider family, did not receive enough support or recognition during their transition; in particular, not being followed up in a genuine manner to see how they were doing in transition or post discharge. This was particularly the case for families of members who were medically downgraded prior to discharge, as they were no longer involved in the day-to-day activities of their units.

It was just basically only really me that knew that was my [last] day. No 'see you later [or] is there anything you need'. [That was] difficult ... the only reason why I got a farewell from work was because I asked work to sign some paperwork for my medical discharge and they went 'oh ... sorry about that ... you're going - you're going next week so [here is] your certificate, here's your plaque from the unit'. But nothing from the troop - which is not really personalised. It was just a here you go.

Veteran, medically discharged

- A family's social connections and cultural environments often shifted with transition and were very important to facilitating a good transition.
- Some found it challenging adapting to different ways of communicating in civilian workplaces, while others found it challenging making new civilian social connections. These difficulties were most challenging for families who transitioned to rural/regional locations and/or places that had low Defence populations. Subsequently, some families chose to continue living in 'Defence towns' and/or joined ex-service organisations such as Mates4Mates and Soldier On.

The] camaraderie and the culture that you're within is a lifestyle as much as a job and a career and, within moments, you're just in something completely foreign and there's no culture that I'd known or anything that I had learnt or been taught or been teaching. It no longer existed. You were just a normal person and that was sort of the hard thing.

Veteran with civilian partner

- Many veteran families valued the support they received from ex-serving organisations such as Mates4Mates and Soldier On. However, some struggled to find a group that suited their family's needs and/or had other members who were similar in age/generation or gender or shared/understood their specific circumstances or post-service medical issues. Likewise, some families were simply unable to find ex-service organisations in their local community.
- Joining new civilian social networks or ongoing connections to the Defence community was associated with better adjustment for members and their families during and after transition.

[My supports have been] basically my mates from previous postings. Mates I've met in Defence, the good eggs along the way, they're the ones that have got me through.

Veteran and single parent

What does this mean?

The research points to a number of potential implications for policy and practice. They relate to key aspects of service and support systems that could be modified to improve family wellbeing, retention and post-transition outcomes.

The key challenges of service life raised by families who participated in this study have been raised in Defence family research repeatedly over the last 30 years. This suggests that new approaches to addressing these issues are required. To better support families during service and improve retention, systemic changes to Defence personnel management should be considered that make Defence careers more compatible with the realities of modern family life – including employees having working spouses and shared care of dependent children.

The findings indicate a need for an increased family voice in decision making and improved communication with families at critical times. To improve service life, they suggest a need for a more consistent application of flexible work arrangements, improved access to child care, more support for civilian partners' employment, and a review of the frequency of posting cycles and the link between relocation and career progression. The research also finds that more support for single parents and divorced/separated families is needed, and for families and members with mental and physical health issues.

To improve family experiences of transition, the report suggests there is a need to prepare members early, engage families, address housing issues, and allow for more efficient and flexible transition processes. It finds that more attention could be given to helping families make meaningful connections to Defence communities after transition and to better supporting veterans' and their families' mental health before, during and after transition. Finally, the research finds that more focus could be placed on recognising the contribution of all former members and their families, and to follow up with them in the lead-up to and after discharge to see how they are progressing and whether they need further assistance.

What will be done with these findings?

A detailed report has been presented to the Departments of Defence and Veterans' Affairs to be used to inform policy and service provision.

Where can ADF families get support?

Defence Member and Family Support (DMFS)

DMFS provides a range of programs and services to help Defence members and their families manage the military lifestyle. Families can also seek support or referrals any time of the day or night from the Defence Member and Family Helpline on **1800 624 608**. The Helpline operates 24 hours a day, 7 days a week and is staffed by qualified human services professionals, including social workers and psychologists, who can provide you with assessment, assistance or referral. You can also email the Helpline on DefenceFamilyHelpline@defence.gov.au and receive a response within 24 hours.

Open Arms Veterans & Families Counselling Service

Open Arms Veterans & Families Counselling provides nationwide, 24-hour, free and confidential counselling and peer support to anyone who has served at least one day in the Australian Defence Force, their partners and families. Former partners are also eligible for support for up to five years after separation or while they are co-parenting children with a veteran. You can speak to Open Arms Veterans & Families Counselling by calling **1800 011 046** or using the online contact form at www.openarms.gov.au/get-support/how-get-support.

The ADF Mental Health All-Hours Support Line

The ADF Mental Health All-Hours Support Line is a confidential 24-hour telephone service for ADF members and their families – call **1800 628 036**.

At Ease

At Ease helps serving and transitioned ADF personnel and their family members to recognise the symptoms of mental health issues or concerns, locate self-help tools, mobile applications and advice, and access professional support: www.at-ease.dva.gov.au.

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