

Research *focus*

*Making Canadian Research Meaningful to Better Serve Military Families
Issue 2 – May 2016*

Military Families: Time Away and Deployments

Families of Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) personnel face a number of unique challenges associated with the military lifestyle, including frequent relocations, separations, and deployments of their military member to potentially dangerous situations. But how often are military members required to be away from home for military taskings and deployments, and what impact does this have on families?

Outside of anecdotal feedback, much of our theoretical understanding of military families has come from research conducted in the United States with their military families. But as more Canadian research is conducted, we see considerable differences on the impacts of the military lifestyle on Canadian military families as compared to our American counterparts, presumably due to differences in socioeconomic status, culture, income levels and military requirements and services. We are now beginning to have a clearer understanding of the realities for CAF families, and consequently of how better to serve their unique needs.

Time Away From Home

Military members are expected to be away from home for long periods of time due to deployment, missions, exercises, sea time, individual or collective training courses, temporary duty, aid to civil authorities, or Canadian disaster relief missions. In one study, approximately two-thirds of military personnel had spent some amount of time away or been deployed in the past year, and approximately 40% of military personnel had been away for at least 5 monthsⁱ. In another study, total time away in one year ranged from 69 days to 92 daysⁱⁱ.

70% have experienced at least 1 deployment
17% have had 5 or more

A studyⁱⁱⁱ found that since the start of the relationships, approximately 70% of military personnel had experienced at least one deployment, while 17% of these had experienced five or more deployments.

Impacts on Military Members

While dated, the Canadian Forces Supplement to the Canadian Community Health Survey (data collected in 2002), showed that frequent or long separations from home was negatively associated

with psycho-social wellbeing. Being away from home for long periods of time was associated with life dissatisfaction. The effects were significant even after controlling for other socio-demographic and military-occupation variables such as sex, age, personal income, education, deployments and years in the service^{iv}.



More recent research shows a different picture. A 2009 study^v showed that those with a history of deployment in the previous two years were more likely to consult with mental health professionals but did not have increased rates of suicidal ideation or attempts nor were more likely to screen positive for psychological distress, depression, or PTSD compared to those without a recent history of deployment. Approximately 15% of CAF personnel consulted a health professional about their

emotions, mental health, or use of alcohol or drugs in a 1-year timeframe, and those with a history of deployment in the previous 2 years were more likely to seek care (20%). Over three quarters (78%) were very satisfied or satisfied with the services or treatment received.

It has been suggested that deployments may be especially challenging for single parents and dual-career CAF couples, in which both individuals are serving CAF members, due to child care and education challenges^{vi}.

The Spousal Experience

Contrary to research conducted in the United States, the two major Canadian studies^{vii} on the effects of the military on spouses/partners have found high levels of mastery, self-esteem, active coping strategies and support from their CAF partner with respect to deployments.



In one study^{viii}, researchers found that levels of reported stress varied across the deployment cycle, and were highest among those whose CAF spouse/partner was currently deployed. However, although the deployment period was perceived as stressful, respondents reported feelings of pride and being in control. This report also noted that psychological well-being, life satisfaction, and somatic complaints remained relatively consistent across the deployment cycle.

Similar results were found in another study^{ix}. Across the stages of deployment, respondents' positive feelings of pride and being in control increased from the pre-deployment to the deployment and post-deployment phase, whereas negative feelings such as sadness, frustration, and anxiety decreased during this time. This trend was found even among those who were out of the deployment cycle (i.e., whose military partner had returned from deployment more than one year ago). These results suggest that the increased

well-being in the post-deployment period may have continued past the initial reintegration period. Although reintegration of the military member after

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a deployment may be stressful for families, and has frequently been assumed to be the most challenging, it appears from this limited information that spouses are able to adapt well to this period in the deployment cycle.

More recently, another study^x found that most spouses indicated that they were happy, healthy and doing well in their relationships recently following a deployment and reunion. Spouses appeared to be coping well (e.g. physically, emotionally, etc.). As with many relationships, spouses were experiencing some conflict with their partners. However the sources of conflict were not atypical of those found in many non-military marital/familial relationships (e.g. the division of household labour).

Support Services

In one study^{xi} almost half of the respondents reported using at least one CAF/DND service during deployment. Of those who did not use any services, most reported that they had no need, while a smaller percentage reported that they were not aware of services or that the type of service they needed was not available.

In contrast to the use of services during deployment, only 5% of the respondents used post-deployment CAF/DND services. Of the 95% of respondents who did not use any post-deployment services, almost 25% were not aware that services were available.

It is also notable that of the spouses who did access services during deployment, many were practical services intended to help spouses with their day-to-day affairs, such as the MFRC mail drop-off or deployment information package, while fewer respondents used support services such as deployment counselling or support groups.

It is significant that the leading reason for not seeking care was no perceived need, a positive finding which indicates that many spouses are capable of coping with the stressors associated with deployment.

Effects on Children

In one study, parents reported that while more than 50% of children exhibited pride in the deployed parent, 45% reported that their children became more clingy and approximately 30% reported that their children exhibited behavioural changes such as young children sleeping with the parent, acting out, or anxiety^{xii}.

In a small qualitative study^{xiii}, children themselves identified parental deployment as the main stressor of military life during focus groups. Most children described parental deployment as the most or one of the most stressful experiences they have had. The main deployment-related stressors were lack of parental support, concerns about the safety of the deployment parent, lack of knowledge or understanding about what is happening to the deployed parent. For most children, their self-reported overall well-being dropped from 8 to 9 on a 10-point scale for regular days to 4 to 5 when the



parent was deployed.

A different study^{xiv} identified certain factors that may place the children and their families at either

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greater or lesser risk of experiencing negative effects as a consequence of a deployment experience.

Two key family resources that function as protective factors during the deployment of a parent and reduce the likelihood of negative outcomes for children include:

- Active coping strategies; and
- The presence of social support networks.

And the three key risk factors identified by the researchers that may increase the likelihood that the child may exhibit a negative outcome include:

- Reserve families;
- Young and inexperienced families; and
- Families with a pile-up of stressors and additional challenges.

Imposed Restrictions

When a CAF member is posted to a new location and it is determined by the member that moving his dependants and household goods and effects will not be in the best interest of his or her family, the military member may be authorized to move to the new place of duty on an Imposed Restriction (IR), that is to say unaccompanied. IR is intended to be a short term solution to mitigate potential friction between military service and family life, and as a means of mitigating the possible negative effects on military families that can result from frequent relocations. While the IR policy effectively addresses some of the disruptions that frequent relocations can have on spousal employment, dependant education and family medical care, it does raise other concerns that extended separations can have on family members.

In order to understand the effects of IR on families, DGMPPRA conducted subsequent data analysis using the survey of CAF spouses conducted in 2005 that examined the impacts of military life on families.

Of the respondents, 8% of the spouses reported that their military partner was currently on IR. The average length of time of the current IR was 16.2 months. Analyses were conducted to determine whether being on IR was linked to the well-being of spouses.

There were no differences in overall psychological well-being, depression, or life satisfaction according to whether individuals were on IR or not. As well, there were no differences in spousal support for the CAF member's career in the military. However, spouses of military personnel on IR were significantly more likely to report that the demands of the military interfered with their family life.



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Implications for Service Delivery

Overall, it appears that while time away and deployments are stressful, the majority of military families adjust to these family interruptions well. It is not clear however, whether this is due to inherent family resilience, levels of support and resources available (e.g. R2MR and MFRC services), or supportive military accommodations. What is clear is that not all families are aware of supports that are available to them, and more educational efforts are required.

Sources

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