



Military-Related Absences.

Family Resilience Experience Survey: 2024 Findings



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Military Family Services
Canadian Forces Morale and Welfare Services

March 2025

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Acknowledgments

We are thankful to the many individuals who shared their time and expertise during the design and execution of the Family Resilience Experience Survey. We also appreciate the many reviewers of earlier versions of this report for their constructive and thoughtful critique.

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Ethics

The DND/CAF Social Science Research Review Board (SSRRB), in accordance with DAOD 5062-0 and 5062-1, has approved this research. The SSRRB approval # is 2150/23F.

Questions or Comments

Questions or comments about this report should be addressed to the authors at mfsresearch@cfmws.com.

Suggested Citation

Habiyakare, C. *Family Resilience Experience Survey: 2024 Findings*. Ottawa, Ontario: Canadian Forces Morale and Welfare Services.

Executive Summary

This report presents the findings from the 2024 Family Resilience Experience Survey (FRES) on Military-Related Absences (MRAs), defined as deployments, taskings, trainings, or imposed restrictions within the past 12 months. MRAs impact military families in complex ways, influenced by factors such as occupation, rank, and years of service, and vary in length and location due to operational demands. This study explored selected challenges, lessons learned, and opportunities experienced by three main family personas: currently serving members, their spouses and/or partners, and other respondents, aiming to inform practice, policy, and future research.

The survey questionnaire used a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative techniques. Conducted online via Qualtrics XM (Qualtrics, Inc., Provo, Utah), from May 1st, 2024, and August 12th, 2024, the survey was available in French and English. Approximately, 980 individuals participated, representing diverse experiences and opinions. The study team used QDA Miner 6.0 (Provalis Research, Montreal, Canada) to clean up typographical errors and inconsistencies in the qualitative data, meticulously reviewing each open-ended text response.

The survey identified several key challenges faced by currently serving members and their spouses or partners. The main challenge is operational tempo, with a lack of advance notice creating uncertainty for families. This forces some spouses or partners to manage family routines alone, with those having children becoming solo parents. Less resilient families may consider leaving the military to maintain stability at home.

Based on the findings, the report identified several implications and provides recommendations. For practice, service providers should boost local community engagement, develop or implement consisted workshops or support groups, and expand mental health and respite child care services. Future FRES should include questions on financial stress and consider the experiences of members changing trades due to operational tempo.

In conclusion, this study offers valuable insights into MRAs, emphasizing the need for more flexible family support options and further research on optimal operational tempo. Addressing operational tempo and leveraging opportunities identified in this report can enhance military family resilience.

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1 Introduction

MRAs are a major lifestyle challenge for Canadian military families, with some members often away several times a year. Understanding their needs is essential for effective CFMWS support. This report presents valuable insights on MRAs, defined as deployments, taskings, trainings, or imposed restrictions.


The study team, with input from the MFS Division, drafted the questionnaire based on the Canadian Military Family Resilience Model. The overall research question is: *“What are the experiences of families affected by military-related absences?”* MFRC deployment support coordinators helped pilot test the order and flow of questions. The questionnaire follows the SAGER guidelines and has received SSRRB ethics approval (2150/23F).

The survey was distributed online in English and French via Qualtrics (Qualtrics, Inc., Provo, Utah) from May 1st and August 12th, 2024. About 980 individuals participated, including CAF members (Regular Force or Primary Reserve Force) and their spouses/partners, parents, or family members aged 18 or older. Participants were recruited through their local Military Families Resource Centres (MFRCs) using email invitations, posters, social media, and CFMWS communication channels, including the MyVoice Facebook group. Due to convenience sampling, the results cannot be generalized to the entire military population.

The survey data analysis focused on descriptive statistics (e.g., median, proportions) and cross-tabulations for main family personas. The study team used QDA Miner 6.0 (Provalis Research, Montreal, Canada) to review qualitative data. The Likert scale responses on the domain and factors of resilience, spanning from “strongly disagreed” to “strongly agreed”, were grouped into six categories (see Table 1).

Table 1: Domains and factors of military family resilience

Domains and factors of resilience	Likert statements
Expectations and boundaries	During a military-related absence, I am able to establish a family routine and balance within a short period of time.
Healthy coping skills	I have developed healthy coping skills for dealing with military-related absences.
Communication and problem-solving	I can find effective solutions when I am confronted with a problem during a military-related absence.



Family connectedness	I am able to stay connected with family members during a military-related absence.
Relationships and support systems	I have developed a reliable supportive network for dealing with military-related absences.
Individual health and wellness	My overall health improves during military-related absences.

2 Family personas

The first main persona, representing 378 individuals, consists of spouses or partners of currently serving members. The second main persona, accounting for 310 individuals, includes currently serving members.

Most members (281) and spouses/partners (350) live in Canada and speak English at home (members: 251, spouses/partners: 311). Of all military communities, only Halifax and Shearwater received more than 30 responses for both personas. Members were mostly women (212), followed by men (80), with 7 preferring not to disclose and 3 identifying as gender diverse. Spouses/partners were predominantly women (342), followed by men (6), with 14 preferring not to disclose and 1 identifying as gender diverse. Dual service couples were 23% among members (70) and 5% among spouses/partners (18). Financial dependents were reported by 67% of members (200) and 72% of spouses/partners (262).

The remaining responses include various personas:

- 68 parents of currently serving members participated. Most were women (56), with some men (5) and a few preferring not to disclose their gender identity (4).
- 11 family members (other than spouses/partners or parents) participated. Most were women (10), with one preferring not to disclose their gender identity.
- 52 other respondents participated, including 25 dual-service families. Most were women (37), followed by men (11), with some preferring not to disclose their gender identity (3) and one identifying as gender diverse.

2.1 Key or common challenges

The number and frequency of MRAs vary widely among families (see Table 2), as does their coping ability. In the past 12 months, half of the members experienced two or fewer MRAs, while the other half experienced more than two. Similarly, half of the spouses or partners had three or fewer MRAs, and the other half had more than three.

For members, the median duration of MRAs is 70 days, with the longest being 58 consecutive days. For spouses/partners, the median duration is 75 days, with the longest being 60 consecutive days.

Table 2: Operational tempo by connection to the military

Question	Currently serving members				Spouses or partners			
	Mean	Median	SD	N	Mean	Median	SD	N
In the past 12 months, how many times has your family been separated due to a deployment, tasking, training or imposed restriction? (<i>whole number</i>)	8.34	2	34.36	277	5.62	3	17.30	305
In the past 12 months, how many days has your family been separated for at least 24 hours due to a deployment, tasking, training or imposed restriction? (<i>in days</i>)	97.83	70	87.78	269	94.45	75	87.75	297
In the past 12 months, what was the longest period of separation in your family due to a deployment, tasking, training or imposed restriction? (<i>in days</i>)	79.72	58	73.56	272	80.17	60	73.30	313

Most members and spouses/partners responded positively to four of the six domains and factors of resilience, with more than 50% agreeing or strongly agreeing on communication and problem-solving; family connectedness; healthy coping skills; and expectations and boundaries (see Figures 1 and 2). However, most members and spouses/partners struggled with relationships and support systems, and individual health and wellness.

Figure 1: Domains and factors of family resilience by currently serving members

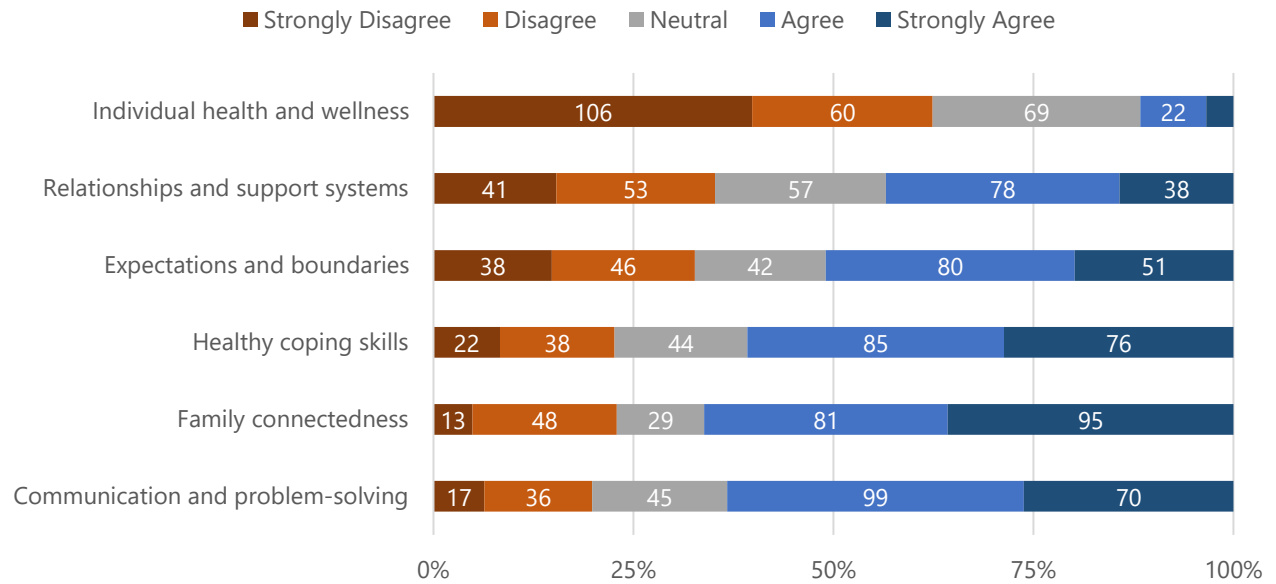
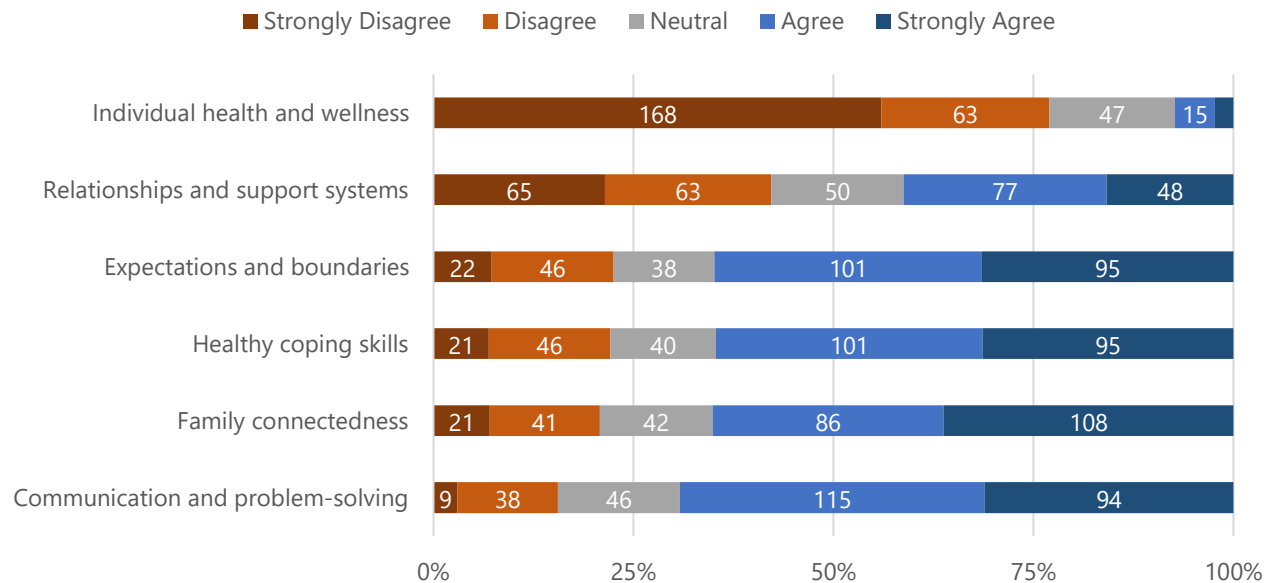


Figure 2: Domains and factors of family resilience by spouses or partners



2.1.1 Individual health and wellness

"Nobody understands how lonely, exhausting and hard it is. Not the deployed spouse. Not the neighbours, not other military family members. Deployments are very isolating for me." (MEMBER, Case #703)

More than 50% of members and 75% of spouses/partners disagreed or strongly disagreed that their overall health had improved during an MRA.

Members and their spouses/partners face various **stresses**, particularly with child care and family finances. Some feel that deployment and environmental pay may not suffice to support their families. Additionally, some members often cover expenses out-of-pocket during deployment and have limited access to banking services abroad. Custody arrangements may need renegotiation during deployments, adding to financial stress.

Some members have limited family contact, miss important family milestones, and feel **disconnected**. Prolonged deployments or separations often create anxiety for the spouse/partner, children and caregivers (grandparents or other family members). Following an MRA, the reintegration process is frequently as challenging as the separation, causing upheaval to the new family routine. Younger children may develop emotional and behavioural issues without **ongoing emotional support**.


Some spouses or partners may feel **lonely** or **depressed** due to the difficulty of maintaining communication with the member and insufficient updates from the home unit or MFCRC. Security concerns, limited Internet access, time zone differences, and lack of privacy often hinder calls home, causing worry about the member's safety or fidelity.

2.1.2 Relationships and support systems

"My spouse loses her support network as she relies on me for support, especially when deployed out of Canada. She doesn't make friends easily." (MEMBER, Case #758)

Less than 50% of members and spouses/partners disagreed or strongly disagreed that they had developed a reliable supportive network during an MRA.

When the member is absent, spouses/partners often take on extra household duties. Those with children become sole parents, managing child care, school runs, and



extracurricular activities. Working spouses may face wage loss and career setbacks if they need to take time off for family emergencies due to a lack of **child care services**.

Some spouses/partners reside in military communities with strong **community engagement**, while others face limited or costly options. Additionally, some live far from the base for affordability reasons, and close family or friends may be too distant to provide immediate support.

2.2 Lessons learned

"I can get things done one way or another without my spouse. Children are always there to help when needed." (SPOUSE/PARTNER, Case #369)

"My family can cope during long absences, but everyone feels slightly off when I am not there. My children are well adjusted as we have been doing this for 25 years." (MEMBER, Case #678)

"The CAF does not enable dual service couples. One will always be disadvantaged and resources are not available to support outside of work hours child care, as well as overnight care." (DUAL SERVICE COUPLE, Case #151)

Some members and spouses/partners demonstrate independence, resilience, and resourcefulness. They possess the mental strength and confidence to overcome most challenges. They are socially connected and maintain strong family bonds and routines. They openly discuss stressors and balance immediate needs with future planning.

Some members and/or spouses maintain a neutral stance, acknowledging their capacity to handle MRAs while disliking going through it alone. They can manage short absences but need more support for long-term ones, with some finding six months too long. They miss the member deeply and, although they can manage, they recognize that having the member present would ease the burden of household and child care responsibilities.

Some members and spouses/partners struggle to ask for help or lack social support. They harbour resentment due to unmet expectations and consider leaving the military. The lifestyle no longer suits their growing family. They desire stronger connections and believe that civilian careers offer a better future, with both parents at home.

2.3 Opportunities

"I'd like to have talked to other parents of service personnel; I'm sure we're not alone in having random niggling worries or missing our sons/daughters." (PARENT, Case #447)


"While both deployed at the same time, I wish both of our supporting units would have assisted us with working around ways to communicate with each other as we were both on very different time zones and I was in an isolated area with very limited access to communication." (DUAL SERVICE COUPLE, Case #473)"

"I wish I had an extra set of hands around that I could trust to ease the burden of yet another set of plans being broken, while being sick and needing to still be in multiple places at once for my kids." (SPOUSE/PARTNER, Case #735)

Addressing high operational tempo and the related stressors is key to improving individual health and wellness. Members and their families cannot control fluctuating leave and return dates or consecutive absences paired with geographical relocations. While a member could theoretically decline some courses or taskings, it is unrealistic to rely solely on the agency of the member. Relevant authorities should consider the following:

- Sending members to the nearest base for training to reduce PAT (Personnel Awaiting Training) time between courses.
- Awaiting training personnel could be left near their point of origin/place of recruitment and family following basic training until course loaded for trade/classification.
- Broadening pay and/or benefits (e.g., military housing, imposed restriction) to new recruits before reaching the OFP (Operationally Functional Point).
- Providing ample notice and/or reducing the number of absences in an APS (Active Posting Season) cycle.
- Facilitating occupational transfers for members seeking a lower operational tempo.

Other members prefer a high operational tempo and may not want to change trades or leave the military. For them, effective relationships and support systems depend on



strong communication between the member, their families, and the home unit. They must work together to enhance communication during absences. Here are some opportunities to improve communication:

- Providing more information about communication expectations during recruitment.
- Sharing relevant Family Care Plan information with MFRCs.
- Providing spouses/partners information regarding a member's deployment pay and benefits.
- Sharing mission details, itineraries, and opportunities for member-family interactions (morale mail, instant messages, audio/video).
- Offering more opportunities for extended family members to assist with household responsibilities and child care.


3 Conclusion

This section focuses on the implications and recommendations for military-related agencies.

3.1 Implications for practice

A minimum basket of MFS-funded services should support all MRAs. Here are some recommended family supports:

- **In-Person Community Engagement (Level 1):** Promote awareness of available supports through free, accessible meetings, events, and activities. Offer flexible scheduling for working spouses/partners and Primary Reserve Force families.
- **Workshops and Support Groups (Level 2):** Combat isolation by removing certain program eligibility requirements and enhancing the targeted delivery of R2MR, deployment support, and military spouse and partner employment programs.
- **Mental Health Services (Level 3):** The funding model should prioritize regular check-ins and active case management for anxiety, depression, and stress management of family members during absences.
- **Respite Child care Services (Level 3):** Improving child care services should include a review of Family Care Plans, with a focus on increasing access to respite child care services during standard and nonstandard hours.



Other CFMWS support divisions (e.g., CANEX, SISIP, PSP, SOT) should conduct new market research and explore funding additional service offerings. Support divisions could offer annual allowances to military families for home services, such as pet care, outdoor lawn, garden or driveway maintenance (e.g., snow removal); seasonal tire changes; meal deliveries; and laundry and cleaning services. Support divisions could also provide a free Family Pass for family-friendly activities at messes, gyms and pool facilities; year-round day camps and sleepaway camps; and evening activities for older children. Such services would greatly reduce stress and enhance the well-being of military families.

MFS LEVELS OF SERVICE:

MFS administers publicly-reimbursed funding for military and veteran family services. These are organized into three distinct levels of services based on complexity or needs:

- Level 1: Information and awareness
- Level 2: Navigational support
- Level 3: Individualized intervention

3.2 Implications for policy

To mitigate the impact of absences, employers can take several policy actions:

- **Spousal and Partner Employment:** Employers can support families by offering priority hiring and transfers, remote work policies and flexible leaves, as well as networking opportunities with other spouses or partners.
- **Financial Support and Education:** Employers can facilitate loans and grants to manage potential wage losses, subsidize activities for families and children, and offer more discounts through membership programs.

SPOUSAL AND PARTNER EMPLOYMENT POLICIES:

MFS is the preferred employer for many spouses/partners, offering policy recommendations based on:

- Career management
- Pay and benefits



3.3 Future research

Future experience surveys should explore:

- Overall experiences of dual-service families, multi-generational families (e.g., retired members with currently serving children), primary caregivers for elderly parents, male civilian spouses and same-sex spouses.
- Financial stress among civilian spouses/partners or ex-spouses/partners with children in custody arrangements.
- Challenges faced by families due to members changing trades or voluntarily releasing due to high operational tempo.
- Family situations or factors conducive to successful imposed restrictions.

Future practice surveys should investigate:

- Intake and referral management in mental health counselling services; and
- Access and cost considerations for occasional, emergency or respite child care requests beyond nonstandard hours.

MFS SURVEY RESEARCH:

MFS Research and Innovation conducts two types of survey research:

- Family Resilience Experience Survey, a survey for members and their families on military-related absences, geographical relocations due to a posting, and military-to-civilian transitions (on a 3-year cycle).
- Service Delivery Practice Survey, a survey for frontline service providers on individual health and wellness, intimate partner relationships, and financial stress (ad-hoc).



Appendix A: Glossary of terms

APS	Active Posting Season
CAF	Canadian Armed Forces
CANEX	Canadian Forces Exchange System
CFMWS	Canadian Forces Morale and Welfare Services
DND	Department of National Defence
FRES	Family Resilience Experience Survey
MFS	Military Family Services
MFRC	Military Family Resource Centre
MRA	Military-Related Absences
OFP	Operationally Functional Point
PAT	Personnel Awaiting Training
PSP	Personnel Support Program
R2MR	Road to Mental Readiness
SISIP	Service Income Security Insurance Plan
SOT	Support Our Troops
SSRRB	Social Science Research Review Board

