



MILITARY AND VETERANS FAMILY HEALTH RESEARCH: SETTING THE STAGE FOR THE NEXT CHAPTER

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Research about the families of military personnel and Veterans families has grown considerably in the past decade, both in Canada and around the world. This cross-sectoral and interdisciplinary research field has raised awareness of service-related experiences and their impacts on families. Experts in the field shared recent research advances and discussed pathways forward to enhance relevance, reach, uptake and impact. The event was moderated by Nora Spinks, CEO and Team Lead for The Vanier Institute of the Family.

Dr. Heidi Cramm, Research Advisor on Military and Veteran Families for CIMVHR and Associate Professor at Queen's University's School of Rehabilitation Therapy, presented key milestones in the evolution of military personnel and Veterans' families research. The health of military families was recognized as a research priority when CIMVHR launched the Journal of Military, Veteran, and Family Health in 2015. Military families were further recognized through several significant policy reports through the Canadian Armed Forces and the Veterans' Ombudsman which positions family members as beneficiaries with health and well-being needs independent of Veterans' treatment plans.

Dr. Deborah Norris, a CIMVHR Fellow and Professor at the Department of Family Studies and Gerontology at Mount Saint Vincent University, elaborated on the history of military personnel and Veterans' families research. Previously, the military family was assumed to be a traditional nuclear model with highly gendered roles, and there were few Canadian studies. Subsequent research collaborations revealed that Canadian military families were resilient and resourceful, having interdependent relationships with the military institution. Dr. Norris noted that CIMVHR was "a game changer" for so many researchers in the emerging field of military personnel and Veterans' families research by promoting networks across disciplines and countries.

Lynda Manser, Associate Director of Research and Strategic Program Development for Military Family Services, Canadian Forces Morale and Welfare Services, presented on the contemporary military family in Canada. While the information age has allowed for more contact between serving military and family members over long absences and distances, it is unknown if this impacts attachment issues between individuals and more research is needed into the lived experiences of different identity groups. Infrastructure is needed to resource and support our collective readiness, to share knowledge between researchers, practitioners, military and family members, and to learn how to adapt quickly. We should also be learning from and sharing with our international partners to mobilize knowledge.

Professor Nicola Fear, Co-Director of the King's Centre for Military Health Research and Professor of Epidemiology at the Academic Department of Military Mental Health, presented an international perspective on new and emerging issues impacting military families. Professor Fear stressed the need for longitudinal studies that capture the diversity of military families, and the importance of including all family members' perspectives in developing appropriate interventions because no member exists in isolation.

TAKEAWAYS

THE FOLLOWING ARE ACTIONABLE ITEMS STEMMING FROM THE EXPERT PRESENTERS AND PANEL.

For **Research Funders**, it is important to identify whose needs are not being met, whose voices are under-represented, including Veterans undergoing the transition experience to catch those at risk of falling through the cracks when support networks disappear. New this year, the 2021 Canadian Census will have a Veteran identifier. This will help researchers better understand the demographics of Veterans and the relationships between household members.

For **Policy Makers**, the Canadian military institution is interested in the following topic areas:

- The reduction in the use of base housing.
- An increase in military partners in paid employment.
- The impact of intensified military tempo in hot spots.
- More female serving members who are parents are involved in the caring and health of their families along with work and cycles of deployment.



For **Practitioners and Clinicians**, international data suggests that 30 percent of military families are not functioning ‘well.’ This is a result of communication challenges, multiple members having mental health issues, and some fathers displaying highly expressed emotion that is intolerant or critical of family members. However, military children report on positive factors in their lives, like travelling to different places, meeting different people, and the pride in having a parent who is saving people’s lives.

For **Researchers**, emerging international research in military and Veterans family health topics include:

- The mental health of pregnant and new parent spouses and partners as compared to civilian partners (e.g., depression).
- The effects of COVID social distancing on loneliness, isolation and changes to childcare arrangements.
- The educational attainment and pathways of children from service families who have to change schools frequently, interrupting curriculum.
- Research on the mothers of physically injured service personnel.

THE WAY FORWARD

Two expert panels discussed how to move the research forward, put knowledge into practice, and make changes that have a positive impact on the lives of military and Veteran families and their well-being. Engaging a diversity of families and all family members in the research is needed to ensure that the multiple perspectives of serving members, their spouses, and children are heard. Professor Fear described the research as “messy, but we live in the real world [where] families are messy – they are complicated.” The diversity and complexity of military and Veteran families entails collaboration. This includes links to research and feedback loops by users on how well programs and services are working for them, so researchers, service providers, family and extended family members can all work together.