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The Military and the Transition to Adulthood

PUBLICATION: *The Future of Children* (2010); 20(1), 181-207.

PUBLICATION TYPE: Peer-Reviewed Journal Article

KEYWORDS: Military service, transition to adulthood, family formation, educational outcomes, employment outcomes

RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS:

- Military service can significantly impact the transition to adulthood through influencing family formation, educational outcomes, employment outcomes, and physical and psychological outcomes among military service members. In this article, researchers highlight many of the positive impacts of military service on military spouses, children, and service members.
- Benefits for children and spouses of service members include access to high-performing schools, accelerated citizenship for immigrants, increased employment and educational opportunities, affordable childcare, free medical care, and housing for families.
- Military service plays a key role on the transition to adulthood and can have long-term impacts on the life trajectories of those affected through the positive aspects of service, such as the military's pro-family policies and social environment, as well as the negative aspects, such as the risk of physical injury, military sexual trauma, and mental health issues such as depression and PTSD.

AUTHORS: Ryan Kelty, Ph.D.; Meredith Kleykamp, Ph.D.; David R. Segal, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT:

“Ryan Kelty, Meredith Kleykamp, and David Segal examine the effect of military service on the transition to adulthood. They highlight changes since World War II in the role of the military in the lives of young adults, focusing especially on how the move from a conscription to an all-volunteer military has changed the way military service affects youths’ approach to adult responsibilities. The authors note that today’s all-volunteer military is both career-oriented and family-oriented, and they show how the material and social support the military provides to young servicemen and women promotes responsible membership in family relationships and the wider community. As a result, they argue, the transition to adulthood, including economic independence from parents, is more stable and orderly for military personnel than for their civilian peers. At the same time, they stress that serving in the military in a time of war holds dangers for young adults. The authors examine four broad areas of military service, focusing in each on how men and women in uniform today make the transition to adulthood. They begin by looking at the social characteristics of those who serve, especially at differences in access to the military and its benefits by socio-demographic characteristics, such as age, gender, race and ethnicity, social class, and sexual orientation. Military service also has important effects on family formation, including the timing of marriage and parenthood, family structure, and the influence of military culture on families. Family formation among servicemen and women, the authors observe, is earlier and more stable than among civilians of the same age. The authors then consider the educational and employment consequences of service. Finally, they scrutinize the dangers of military service during times of war and examine the physical and psychological effects of wartime military service. They also note the sexual trauma endured both by male and female military personnel and the physical and symbolic violence women can experience in a male-dominated institution. Kelty, Kleykamp, and Segal conclude by seeking policy lessons from the military’s success in facilitating the transition to adulthood for young men and women in uniform.”

Implications

FOR PRACTICE

Service members should take steps to educate themselves about the benefits and programs available to them as a result of their military service, which may be branch specific. Community organizations and advocates for veterans and military families should also take steps to determine which benefits and programs are not being utilized, and increase awareness of these resources in the military community. Military spouses and parents who are service members should also be sure that their children are receiving any needed support and enrichment, through utilizing quality education programs, sporting activities, and childcare. Recognizing the value of JROTC programs, high schools should encourage their young students to consider participating in a JROTC program to learn skills that could potentially help them reach economic independence.

FOR POLICY

Policy makers have implemented and appealed many policies to reduce discrimination because of one's race, sexuality, or sex in the military, however problems still occur. Researchers have suggested that some individuals are unclear on what defines sexual harassment, therefore, policy makers may need to implement programs that clearly define unacceptable behavior and also empower service members to reduce sexual harassment among their colleagues. Although the military has implemented many pro-natal and pro-family policies, many female service members still find it difficult to meet the requirements of the service and their family and eventually leave the armed forces. Policy makers may wish to improve current policies to address the specific challenges that mothers and female service members face, including expanding military childcare services. With the Department of Defense's schools that produce higher test scores, education policy makers might look into what works best in DoD schools and work together with DoD officials to replicate this more successful model in underperforming educational districts, if possible. In recent years, deployments have lasted longer and service members have served in multiple tours more often, contributing to some of the increases in mental health issues among service members. Though the long term effect of recent policy changes capping tour length have not yet been studied in depth, such policies are likely more conducive to health and recovery time for service members, especially those who served in combat areas. Military and JROTC programs are helping many high school dropouts and/or high school students in vulnerable populations effectively transition to adulthood. Seeing the positive impact the military and JROTC programs have had for service members and youth, respectively, policymakers might consider implementing more JROTC programs or other programs that offer the life skills, academic support, physical activity, and assistance with work or educational placement beyond high school for at-risk communities.

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FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

More research is needed on the positive outcomes of military service for service members and their families. Future researchers should further investigate the impact of benefits provided to service members and their families, such as the outcomes of educational benefits (i.e., the educational attainment of military children whose parents chose to pass on their educational benefits). Despite the benefits offered by the military, many service members who are mothers face overwhelming stressors and subsequently leave service. Future studies are needed on the stressors women and mothers in the military experience in particular, and what resources are needed to assist them in successfully balancing parental responsibilities and military service careers. With the preliminary success of JROTC programs thus far, researchers should further explore the possible social and economic benefits of JROTC programs for particularly at-risk youth. Children growing up in military families are introduced to pro-family policies and a social environment that might encourage inter-generational enrollment in the military. This inter-generational pattern may provide an area for future study as well, with researchers exploring the longitudinal development and transmission of various and ideologies.