A SNAPSHOTH OF
MILITARY AND VETERAN FAMILIES IN CANADA
The Vanier Institute of the Family is a national, independent, charitable organization dedicated to understanding the diversity and complexity of families and the reality of family life in Canada. The Vanier Institute offers access to a range of publications, research initiatives, presentations and social media content to enhance the national understanding of how families interact with, have an impact on and are affected by social, economic, environmental and cultural forces.

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This is an updated version of *A Snapshot of Military and Veteran Families in Canada,* originally published in November 2016. The original version is archived, but is available upon request (publications@vanierinstitute.ca).
Canada’s military and Veteran families are diverse, resilient and strong, and they are a source of pride for the country. They engage with – and play important roles in – their workplaces, communities and society as a whole.

Approximately nine in 10 military families (85%) live in civilian communities, where they access and rely on the same variety of programs and services as civilians, including (but not limited to) child care and eldercare, health and mental health, community recreation and leisure, education and employment. As such, these programs and services are typically delivered by civilian professionals and practitioners, who often have little awareness of military life stressors and their impact on spouses and children.

The “military journey” is often characterized by mobility, absence and the risk of illness, injury or death. Professionals and practitioners can benefit from military literacy and an understanding of the unique experiences and lifestyle characteristics of Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) personnel, Veterans and their families.

In 2017, there were approximately 60,600 CAF Regular and Reserve Force military families in Canada and overseas (42,500 Regular Force families and 18,000 Reserve Force families).

Most (96%, or approximately 58,400) of these families were posted in Canada (40,200 Regular Force families and 17,900 Reserve Force families).

In 2017, the military family population in Canada totalled more than 190,600 people:
- 58,200 CAF personnel
- 49,400 CAF partners
- 78,000 children under 18
- 5,000 other dependants (dependent parents, siblings, grandchildren, nieces/nephews, etc.)

As of March 2018, there were approximately 601,000 CAF Veterans in Canada.

The vast majority of military and Veteran families now live in civilian communities

In the mid-1990s, 80% of military families in Canada lived on a base, where they have ready access to support from Military Family Resource Centres (MFRCs). MFRCs offer “military literate” programs and services that support a variety of aspects of family life, such as child care, family caregiving, employment, education and mental health support. By the mid-2010s, this had fallen to only 15%, though, in 2016, 83% of military spouses indicated that they live within a 30-minute drive to a base.

In 2018, 71% of surveyed CAF members said that they chose to live off base for their last relocation, citing as the top two reasons that they wanted to own (or already owned) their own home and that they preferred to live in the civilian community. However, one-quarter said they would prefer military housing.

Canada’s military and Veteran families are diverse, resilient and strong, and they are a source of pride for the country.
Many military families experience high mobility and frequent separation

Military families experience frequent moves, with little say in when or where they will be posted, nor the length of time they will spend at each location. With each new posting, these families often must establish new community ties and “get in line” to access community resources. Military family members have reported in multiple studies that the most challenging aspects of life to re-establish after relocation are medical services, a social support network and non-military spousal employment.17

Moving across provinces can have a significant impact on families, since many essential services fall under provincial jurisdiction such as health care, education and child care. This is reflected in a 2013 survey that found non-military spouses identifying relocations as the highest overall challenge for military families.18

In addition, the reality of deployments means that CAF personnel often experience more frequent periods of separation from their families compared with other families in Canada.

Every year in Canada, an estimated 10,000 military families are relocated due to postings, 8,000 of whom move to new provinces.19

30% of all interprovincial moves are to Ontario20

27% of all interprovincial moves are to Quebec21

Military children are affected by relocations, but they are resilient and most adjust quickly

Research shows that while most military children do find relocation stressful (particularly among adolescents, for whom peer relationships play a more significant role in their identity and social support network), they are resilient and this stress typically diminishes within a half-year after moving.28

In 2016, among surveyed CAF parents, only one in 10 (10%) reported that their child(ren) “had trouble adjusting after moving/relocation,” while nearly half (47%) did not experience any issues.29
The transition to civilian communities has had an impact on the school experiences of military children. Most used to attend on-base Department of National Defence schools (which no longer exist), but now attend civilian schools, where educators, school counsellors and their peers may not have an understanding of their experiences or how to provide support.

Many parents have expressed concern, with more than half (54%) of surveyed CAF spouses reporting that they felt “military children are at a disadvantage because civilian public schools do not understand military life.”

Relocation can have an impact on academic performance, particularly if the move occurs mid-year or if it’s across provincial borders, since academic progress can be affected by differences in school curricula and standards.

More than one-third (36%) of surveyed CAF spouses whose partners were ill or injured said that most days were “quite a bit” or “extremely” stressful. The most frequently cited stressors include partner and partner’s health (e.g., physical, mental), family, work and military (e.g., partner’s medical release).

CAF personnel report spending one-quarter (24%) of their time away from home on military-related duties.

In 2017, two-thirds of Regular Forces personnel reported experienced extended absences from their family.

Military and Veteran families access services in their neighbourhoods

High mobility among many military families can lead to difficulties securing quality, regulated child care. With each move, CAF parents can find themselves repeatedly at the bottom of wait lists. Furthermore, available child care services are usually arranged to accommodate typical 8-hour workdays, and are not always responsive to the immediate and emergency taskings, relocations and irregular hours associated with military life. This has an acute impact on the 8.2% of CAF families with children who have special needs.

In 2017, military families in Canada and abroad included 81,400 children under 18, most of whom (96%, or 78,000 children) are in Canada.

As with child care services, military families sometimes face difficulties securing a family doctor. While the Canadian Forces Health Services (CFHHS) provides medical and dental services to military personnel, their families do not have any access to military doctors, dentists or other CAF health care professionals. Instead, they rely on the same health care providers as the civilian population.

In 2015, 44% of surveyed CAF spouses reported difficulty re-establishing medical services after relocation.

In 2013, surveyed CAF spouses reported that they manage child care in diverse ways, including through civilian daycare centres (26%), relatives (16%) and Military Family Resource Centre (MFRC) daycare services (13%).

In 2013, 24% of military spouses said they did not have a family physician for themselves and 17% did not have one for their children. This compares with just under 16% among the general population.
The “military lifestyle” can have an impact on family finances and career development

Research shows that the relocations associated with military life can have a significant impact on family finances due to a variety of factors, including resulting changes in the cost of living, wages (CAF member or spouse), mortgage/rent, tax rates and more.43

Military and Veteran families also have unique employment experiences and challenges in the labour force. Due to the high mobility associated with military life, many CAF partners experience difficulty developing or progressing in their careers, while some Veterans navigate significant periods of transition as they adjust to civilian life.

In 2018, 43% of surveyed CAF members who had been posted to a new geographic location and 52% of CAF spouses reported that their financial situation had become worse, with a change in the cost of living cited as the main reason.44

Many non-military spouses surveyed in 2018 reported difficulties finding employment that matches their experience and education and/or maintains their seniority.45

More than half felt (15% agreed, 37% strongly agreed) that they “had to take a job for which [they] were overqualified as a result of relocating for [their] spouse’s military career.”46

More than half (51%) of surveyed CAF spouses say they have made some career sacrifices because of their partner’s military service.47

While three in 10 (30%) surveyed CAF spouses say their career has not been affected, one in 10 (11%) report that they are unemployed or that their career has been “severely affected” because of their partner’s military service.48

Regular Force Veterans reported that the transition to civilian life is easier when they find satisfying employment, take care of their mental health, maintain their family relationships and can access other social support networks.49

According to the Life After Service Study (LASS), in 2016:

Veterans were more likely to report that their transition to civilian life was easy (52%), compared with those who said it was difficult (32%).50, 51

57% of Veterans felt their military skills transferred to their civilian job.56

84% of Veterans reported having high social support and 96% said they had people they could count on in an emergency.57

57% of Veterans reported having a strong sense of community belonging.58

86% of Veterans reported being satisfied/very satisfied with life, and 88% were satisfied/very satisfied with family.59

65% of Veterans in Canada were employed.52

8% of Veterans were unemployed – similar to Canadians of comparable age and sex.53

28% of Veterans were not in the workforce, compared with 20% of the total population.54

81% of Veterans who listed working as their main activity reported that they’re “satisfied/very satisfied” with their main activity.55

57% of surveyed Veterans felt their military skills transferred to their civilian job.56

57% of Veterans reported having a strong sense of community belonging.58

86% of Veterans reported being satisfied/very satisfied with life, and 88% were satisfied/very satisfied with family.59
Military and Veteran Families in Canada: Vanier Institute Resources

School Counsellors Working with Military and Veteran Families
A resource designed to increase military literacy among school counsellors serving military and Veteran families in Canada. This second of the Working With series was a collaboration between the Vanier Institute of the Family, the Canadian Counselling and Psychotherapy Association, Veterans Affairs Canada, Military Family Services and other key members of the Canadian Military and Veteran Families Leadership Circle.

Family Physicians Working with Military Families
A military literacy resource for family physicians and medical professionals who serve military and Veteran families in Canada. The first in the Working With series, this resource was developed with a panel of experts drawn from civilian practice and the military and Veteran community, including the Vanier Institute of the Family, the College of Family Physicians of Canada, Military Family Services, National Defence Health Services Group, Veterans Affairs Canada and the Canadian Institute for Military and Veteran Health Research.

Military and Veteran Families in Canada: Collaborations and Partnerships Compendium 1.0
This reference publication profiles organizations that are engaged in partnerships and collaborations that support military and Veteran families in Canada. Produced in collaboration with members of the Canadian Military and Veteran Families Leadership Circle, this resource was created to raise awareness of initiatives underway and to strengthen the community of support among organizations and professionals that study, serve and support Canada’s military and Veteran families.
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