

Research focus

*Making Canadian Research Meaningful to Better Serve Military Families
Issue 4 – January 2017*

Impacts of Military Lifestyle on Military Families: Results from the Quality of Life Survey of CAF Spouses

The Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) regularly evaluates the impact of the military lifestyle on the well-being of CAF spouses through the Quality of Life of Military Spouses Program of Research. The most recent administration of this survey in 2013 investigated spousal resilience – the outcome of military spouses’ responses to the challenges they were facing. It also assessed their awareness and use of family support programs and services.

In total survey responses from approximately 1,800 CAF spouses (married or common-law) were analysed in the Impacts of Military Lifestyle on Military Families Results from the Quality of Life Survey of CAF Spouses Scientific Report¹ (hereafter referred to as “the Scientific Report”). The Terms of Release of this Scientific Report specify it is for internal use and limited external use in accordance with the original distribution list, and as such further distribution of the original document or information contained is prohibited without the written approval of the client for whom it was written. All content in this Research Focus brief is taken from the Scientific Report with permission granted to MFS for distribution to MFRCs.

Spousal Demographics

The majority of spouses are post-secondary educated, employed, Anglophone females (p.9). Two-thirds of the spouses had children living in their homes, the majority full-time (p.11).

More than one-quarter of CAF spouses were CAF members themselves.

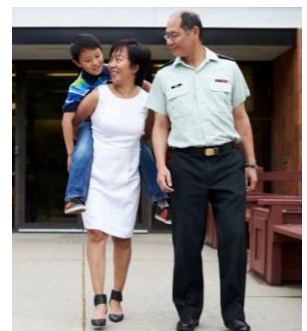
Based on the survey respondents and sampling frame, the Scientific Report estimates the following CAF spousal population demographics (pp 9-10):

Spousal Demographic Characteristic		Estimated Population
Sex		
	Male	4,252
	Female	34,852
Age		
	Under 30	7,341
	30-39	15,896
	40-49	10,485
	50+	5,331
First Official Language		
	English	27,657
	French	10,888

More than one-quarter of CAF spouses were CAF members themselves (p.9).

Relocations

Over the course of the military career, just over half had relocated 1-3 times due to postings. Just over 20% had relocated 4 or more times, and fewer than 20% had never relocated due to postings. (p.14)



When asked how difficult it was to re-establish various aspects of their lives after relocation, the following were most frequently reported as “extremely difficult” to re-establish (p.15):

Aspect of life perceived to be difficult to re-establish after relocation	%
Medical services	44.4%
Support network / social contacts	40.6%
Your employment	39.7%
Your seniority at work	32.8%
Child care	24.4%
Your professional certification(s)	17.5%
Access to services to support your family’s needs	14.3%

Time Away and Deployments

About two-thirds of respondents reported that their CAF partners had been away from home for 1-4 months in the past 12 months while 9.2% had not been away from home (p.12).

There was no difference in the stress levels of those spouses whose partner had deployed and those whose partner had not deployed.

In the five years prior to the survey (2008-2013), one-third of their military partners had not been deployed, and two-thirds had been deployed at least once (p.16).

There was no difference in the stress levels of those spouses whose partner had deployed and those whose partner had not deployed (p.16).

Health, Well-Being & Resilience

The overwhelming majority of spouses are physically and mentally healthy (p.16) and have family doctors (p.24). Some respondents self-reported having been diagnosed with depression (23.5%) or anxiety disorder (16.6%) at some point during their military partners' careers (p.16).

The majority of spouses successfully meet the challenges of military life and are resilient, but a small percentage struggle.

CAF spouses had average life satisfaction, low levels of psychological distress, high levels of mastery, high degrees of support, are satisfied with their marriages, are not distressed, and have high degrees of resilience. Over 80% of spouses meet the challenges of military life, while only 11% feel they do not successfully meet the challenges (p.18).

The majority of CAF spouses were very supportive of their military partners' services. Less than half of respondents were supportive of their partner being deployed in the near future. (p.20)

Three-quarter of CAF spouses were employed – full-time, part-time, self-employed or otherwise employed (p.19). Only 4.5% of spouses were unemployed (seeking employment). The remaining 20% were not in the labour forces (not looking for work, homemaker, retired).



Awareness of Family Services

Only 25% - 70% of military spouses were aware of specific Military Family Resource Centre (MFRC) services or Military Family Services (MFS) services.

The following table shows the percentage of spouses who were aware of specific programs (p.26):

<i>MFRC Program</i>	<i>%</i>
Deployment Support	69.4%
Emergency Child Care	67.9%
Parenting and Children's Programming	63.1%
Welcome Packages	61.8%
Second Language Training	61.8%
Youth Programming	60.4%
Employment / Education Assistance	57.7%
Crisis Intervention Support	54.7%
Information and Referral	54.1%
Family Liaison Officer Support	49.5%
R2MR	28.7%
<i>Children's Mental Health Programs:</i>	
Children's Deployment Support Program	47.8%
Kids Have Stress Too!	31.1%
Rainbows Grief Support	29.6%
Triple P Positive Parenting	27.4%
Friends for Life	25.8%
E=MC3	25.4%
Friends and Neighbours	25.2%
<i>Other Programs and Services</i>	
CFMAP	45.2%
familyforce.ca	40.5%
Family Information Line (FIL)	39.7%

Only 25% - 70% of spouses were even aware of specific MFRC / MFS services.

Use of Family Services

Less than 10% of spouses had used MFRC / MFS services (p.27). The top 3 MFRC programs and services that CAF spouses most frequently used are Parenting and Children Services (14%), Welcome Packages (12%) and Information and Referral Services (9%).

The following table shows the percentage of spouses who had used specific programs (p.28):

<i>MFRC Program</i>	<i>%</i>
Parenting & Children's Programming	14.0%
Welcome Packages	12.1%
Information & Referral	9.4%
Deployment Support	8.8%
Second Language Training	6.9%
Employment / Education Assistance	5.7%
Youth Programming	4.9%
Emergency Child Care	4.2%
<i>Other Programs and Services</i>	
familyforce.ca	7.2%
CF Padres	6.6%
CFMAP	4.6%
Deployment Support Groups	4.6%

Less than 10% of spouses had used specific MFRC / MFS services.

Satisfaction with Family Services

Among the few respondents who had used MFRC programs and services, the majority were satisfied with them (57%-77%), would use them again (70%-90%), and perceived that the service had assisted them in coping with their specific situations (60%-87%) (p.29).

There was an even split amongst respondents who perceived the CAF look after military families, those who did not think so, and those who were neutral (p.21). Some of these spouses (17.4%) were more satisfied with CAF support now than they were with the support they had received in the last five years, while one-third of spouses did not think so and 42.2% were neutral (p.21). With respect to specific MFSP services, the majority of respondents were either less satisfied with the services now than five years ago, or felt the same level of satisfaction (pp 22-23). Not one program/service was reported by the majority of families to have had an increase in satisfaction.

Implications for Service Delivery

The vast majority of military spouses are post-secondary educated, employed, Anglophone females with children living in their homes full-time. More than one-quarter of military spouses are CAF members themselves. It is essential to acknowledge and serve the vast diversity of families in the modern Canadian military, but it is likely that the current MFSP services originally designed for "traditional" families are still addressing the profile of the majority of modern military families. Though more spouses are now employed than in the past, and as a result, programming must accommodate the working schedules of dual income homes. Also, given the large number of dual-serving military families, MFSP services and programs must take into account the direct military work requirements placed on both spouses, as well as place more consideration on the needs of Reservists.

The vast majority of spouses state they are physically and mentally healthy and have a family doctor. Long waiting times was the primary reason for not receiving required health care. Additional focus should be dedicated to education and awareness of alternative primary health care access points.

Over half of respondents had relocated residences 1-3 times due to postings over the course of the member's career. The most challenging aspects of life to re-establish after relocation are medical services, social support network and employment. Yet this Scientific Report (and previous research) shows that the vast majority of spouses have family doctors and are employed. This implies that issues such as access to health care and employment are limited to the transitional periods during geographical moves rather than universal ongoing long-term problems.

Health care and employment challenges are transitional, not universal problems resulting from geographic relocations.

Given that many of the identified challenges facing military families result from relocations due to posting, more effort needs to be put into preparing for these transitions in advance rather than waiting until families arrive at the new location to begin re-establishment of services. Presumably, the posting season (March to August) should be one of the busiest times for MFRCs providing preparatory / transition support, yet this tends to be a quieter time focusing on year-end reporting with programs / services winding down for summer.

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Two-thirds of the spouses' military partners had been deployed at least once over the previous 5 years, while one-third had not. There were no differences in the spousal stress level of those who had experienced deployment and those who did not. It should be noted that, while not statistically significant, there are a small number of families that do struggle with deployments, and for these families, there is a great deal of research available to understand their challenges and service needs. But in general, based on this Scientific Report and other Canadian research, it appears Canadian military families are inherently resilient throughout deployments.

The percentage of spouses who were aware of specific military family service programs and services ranged from as low as 25% to as high as 70%. Less than 10% of spouses used these services. But of those who did use these services, the majority were satisfied with the services. While there is room for improvement in current MFSP services, it appears most are effectively adequate. And while the fact that less than 10% of spouses use any services sounds alarmingly low, given that only 11% of spouses feel they are not successfully meeting the challenges of military life, these numbers seem tolerably harmonized. It is unclear however if the spouses who are using services are

using services that directly address their most pressing needs or are simply using services that are available. It is also unclear if the 10% of families who use services are among the same families as those 11% who are struggling or if they are among those who are successfully meeting the challenges of military life. It is entirely possible that the 11% of those spouses not successfully meeting the challenges are also not aware or utilizing support services. The implementation of the new MFRC/PSP Community Needs Assessments in Fall/Winter 2016 will provide much needed insight into the match between current services and current needs.

Most disconcerting, however, is the number of spouses who are unaware of MFSP services. On average 50% of spouses are unaware of services despite the fact that one-third of them are CAF members themselves. Clearly the current marketing and outreach strategies require enhancements in order to reach the other 50% of families. With only 7.2% of spouses using familyforce.ca, alternate communication channels will need to be leveraged until such time that familyforce.ca usage increases. As one-third of spouses are CAF members themselves, more effort should be focused on formal CAF messaging mechanisms.

Sources

ⁱ Wang, Z., Aitken, N. CAF Family Research Team. (2016). Impacts of Military Lifestyle on Military Families: Results from the Quality of Life Survey of Canadian Armed Forces Spouses. Director Research Personnel and Family Support, Director General Military Personnel Research and Analysis, Defence Research and Development Canada Scientific Report DRDC-RDDC-2016-R012, Ottawa, Canada.

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