

THE MANY FACES OF FAMILY IN THE TIME OF COVID-19

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OVERVIEW:

How family is defined is important because it shapes military family social policies, including which family members are entitled to benefits.

Definitions have often been based on religious norms or law rather than on how individuals relate to one another or the different functions that families have. Functional definitions of family are more inclusive and allow for a wider range of individuals, relationships, family structures, and roles. The Vanier Institute of the Family's functional definition is as follows:

- The physical maintenance and care of group members
- Addition of new members through procreation or adoption
- Socialization of children
- Social control of members
- Production, consumption, distribution of goods and services
- Affective nurturance/love

The impact of military lifestyle on families involves significant challenges related to physical separation, relocation, and risk of operational illness, injury, or death of the service member. For military households with children, these stressors are compounded. The presence of family as a support network can also influence service members' well-being. The evolving and diverse nature of families and Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) family trends were discussed with a focus on the impacts of the pandemic. The findings presented come from international research and the Canadian COVID-19 Defence Team Survey.

HIGHLIGHTS:

The Canada Census defines a family as individuals sharing a household who are married or common law, with or without children, or lone parents of any marital status with at least one child. From 1961 to 2011, the proportion of married couples among Census families dropped by a third, while single parent families and those living alone have each doubled. Household size has gotten smaller. In 2016, one-person households were the most common type at 28.2%. CAF families are evolving in similar ways to civilian ones. In 2021, there were as many married households as single ones (both at 38%).

In March of 2020, the CAF launched OpLASER, their response to COVID-19. This deployment amplified family dynamics and concerns, particularly in the beginning when the impacts on work were unclear. CAF leadership was eager to understand the impacts of the move to remote work, thus the COVID-19 Defence Team Survey was conducted. Lessons learned from the 2003 SARS outbreak in Toronto about the stressors experienced by front-line healthcare workers were reviewed. Based on these learnings, the COVID-19 Defence Team Survey focused heavily on impacts to well-being, specifically impacts to health, work, and the families of healthcare workers.

Half of the CAF personnel were working from home while one quarter remained in their usual work locations. There were interesting differences in the concerns experienced between four family composition groups: single, with or without dependent children; and married/common law, with or without dependent children. Parents ranked concern for the well-being of their children highest, but all groups shared concerns around being able to maintain close relationships and the fear of infecting loved ones. The rates of worsening mental health were similar across all groups (a range of 34.1 percent to 38.6). Loneliness was reported more frequently by people living alone, while feeling emotionally drained was reported more frequently by people with children at home. All four groups expressed concern around accessing childcare.

TAKEAWAYS AND NEXT STEPS:

Key research insights and future directions were discussed. Family related concerns are multi-dimensional and complex, their nature and impacts varying by family composition. Important changes in family characteristics suggest that researchers adopt more diverse perspectives, looking beyond demographic data to better understand the contexts and experiences of people who do not fall within the four Census family categories as currently defined. Diversity considerations regarding aspects of family concerns for military family functioning can be identified by using gender-based analysis plus (GBA+). This is integral to developing more inclusive policies and programs that better serve all CAF families. Furthermore, qualitative research exploring family concerns based on functional definitions of the family is needed to complement quantitative approaches and is crucial for identifying gaps. New developments in the collection of information, like the question on Veteran and military service in the 2021 Canada Census, are promising and will help gain deeper insights into the heterogeneous nature of CAF families and operationalizing family categories.