

Understanding Military-Connected Adolescent and Young Adults' Perspectives on Mental Health, Well-Being, and Care Access

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Introduction

Military dependents experience unique stressors, including frequent relocations, family separation, and potential for parental injury or death. These stressors increase risk for mental and behavioral healthcare needs. Knowledge is lacking about military-connected adolescents and young adults' (AYAs') perspectives on military childhood stressors and how these experiences shape their perspectives on mental health, well-being, and care access. Additionally, military-connected AYAs of today experienced childhood during the prolonged conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, positioning them as a cohort to assess the cumulative impacts of wartime military-connected experiences on AYAs.

Objective

To explore the experiences of military-connected AYAs regarding their mental health, well-being, and access to and engagement with mental healthcare.

Study Design and Methods

- Descriptive qualitative methodology
- Conducted semi-structured interviews
- Recruited participants via email, social media, and community partners (Military Child & Family Collaboratory, Walter Reed AYA Medicine clinic, a military teen organization, and military and veteran centers at universities across the US).
- Participants were not required to have a mental health diagnosis or concern.

My relationship with my extended family has been strained because of all the moves. We were never able to visit as much with my cousins...I always felt very separated from that....like I didn't really have a place that I belonged. (Theme 1)

I wasn't the one spending countless nights searching for doctors that took TRICARE, or a therapist that took TRICARE... I know how long it took [my mom] to call up all of these doctors, to email people to get me in. It was a difficult process... I know that I wish it had been easier for her. (Theme 2)

Being exposed to that kind of stuff [the military and global conflicts] made it more logical in my head that something [bad] could happen on a daily basis... I see people walking around in military uniforms all the time... it almost made me feel like I was— not involved in the war, but the war was around. (Theme 3)

Obviously, mental health is becoming less stigmatized in society. I think for the military specifically...somehow, I don't know how people would be able to do this, but emphasizing to dependents and active duty military that nothing has to be going terribly wrong in your life to constitute needing therapy. (Theme 4)

Results

Eighteen military-connected AYAs (ages 18-22, born 2002-2007) enrolled in the study and participated in an interview. Participants' parents represented a range of military connections, branch affiliations, and ranks. Four themes emerged from the interviews and selected data quotes are included (see left).

1. **Adolescent development amid mobility and deployment:** Participants' experiences reflected that military-specific circumstances complicated developmental experiences, contributing to challenges with relationships, sense of belonging, and emotional coping and regulation.
2. **Factors influencing mental healthcare engagement:** Participants shared their perspectives and experiences related to the processes of accessing mental healthcare, as well as factors that influenced engagement with mental healthcare. Our team identified both structural/system-level and relational facilitators and barriers that impacted AYA engagement with mental healthcare.
3. **Impact of age cohort-specific experiences:** Participants grew up during decades characterized by the Global War on Terror and increased political division. Additionally, all entered adulthood in the midst or wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. These experiences contributed to participant mental health, well-being, and worldview.
4. **AYAs' insights and recommendations grounded in mental health literacy:** Participants demonstrated mental health literacy through their awareness of adaptive coping strategies, current challenges to mental health access, and the value of proactive support. Some had recommendations for building a culture of support for military-connected adolescents.

Discussion and Recommendations

Study findings contribute to the understanding of military-connected AYA mental health and well-being by amplifying participant voices and perspectives. Developmental experiences of contemporary military-connected youth are influenced by the convergence of military-specific stressors and broader societal influences. Findings highlight opportunities to expand support for military-connected AYAs through the following:

- Expansion of school-based mental health resources
- Expansion of assistance for benefits and healthcare navigation
- Prioritization of continuity of care or warm hand-offs during relocations and transitions
- Routine mental and behavioral health screening

Increasing support for military-connected AYAs is critical to overall military family well-being and force readiness and retention.