



# 2023 Military Teen Experience Survey: Hidden Helpers

[Hidden helpers](#) are military-connected youth who are involved in the care of a wounded, ill, or injured (WII) service member or veteran. These youth often take on additional household responsibilities (e.g., caring for siblings, household chores) due to their service member's WII. While it is difficult to estimate the exact number of hidden helpers, [approximately](#) 2.3 million children under the age of 18 live with a disabled veteran. The experiences of this unique population are only now starting to garner more attention. In a [report](#) commissioned by the Elizabeth Dole Foundation, researchers interviewed hidden helpers and found that many struggle with needing more support, being misunderstood by their peers, and extra responsibilities related to the care of their service member and household chores. Hidden helpers are at [risk](#) for feelings of isolation, difficulty expressing emotions, and stress and burnout. Not all experiences are negative however, with some hidden helpers [reporting](#) increased self-efficacy and feelings of strength.

We had the opportunity to gain insight into teen and young adult hidden helpers through our Military Teen Experience Survey this year. We asked: “Have any of your parents or guardians experienced a military service-connected wound, illness, or injury?” Respondents who answered “Yes” are considered hidden helpers. Detailed below are findings regarding the mental health and food security of our hidden helpers, and recommendations we have to better support this population.

Demographics

A majority (**77%**) of our respondents are hidden helpers, with the highest number of respondents having a service member or veteran with an invisible wound such as PTSD, TBI, or other psychological injury or illness. WII families comprise a large number of NMFA’s constituents - especially with regard to Operation Purple Camp participation, therefore, the number of hidden helpers in this sample is not surprising. Additionally, [most](#) military families face service-connected WII at the very least.

Service Member Wound, Illness, or Injury		
Injury Type	Percent %	Total (n)
None	24	381
Invisible	46	743
Visible	18	291
Both	13	205



## Mental Health

### Mental Well-being

**Respondents with a WII service member or veteran (of any kind) were 2.5x more likely to report low mental well-being compared to respondents without a WII service member.**

When exclusively examining those with a WII service member, we found respondents with a service member with a visible wound were significantly more likely to report high and moderate well-being compared to those with a service member with an invisible wound. A couple of [studies](#) have found similar relationships, with children of invisibly injured service members (i.e., diagnosed with PTSD; psychologically injured) reporting [poorer](#) mental health. This may be due to the increased level of support service members with visible (i.e., physical) wounds receive or the [stigma](#) present in military culture that impacts help-seeking of service members with invisible wounds. Another important notion is the child's understanding of their service member's injury. Invisible wounds are more difficult to [understand](#), and can impact a service member's ability to positively communicate with their child.

### Suicidal Ideation

Service member WII was not significantly related to the likelihood of reporting Suicidal ideation (SI).

**However, we found that 1 in 4 hidden helpers with a visibly wounded service member or a service member with both types of injuries reported passive SI in the past month.**

Additionally, 70% of respondents with a service member with an invisible wound reported preparing to end their life at some time in their lifetime. This number is dramatically higher than population rates of SI, and higher than any of our other findings (across our entire sample, 38% had at some point prepared to end their life). As stated above, invisible wounds are more difficult to understand (and in some cases treat), therefore hidden helpers of service members with this type of wound may be especially vulnerable.



Self-Harm

Service member WII was significantly related to the likelihood of both thoughts of self-harm (SH) and SH behavior.

**Respondents with a service member with a WII of any kind were 1.4x more likely to report thoughts of SH and nearly 3x more likely to report actually harming themselves compared to their peers without a WII service member or veteran.**

Respondents with a service member who have both an invisible and a visible wound were 1.5x more likely to report thoughts of SH, compared to their peers with a non-WII service member. Additionally, respondents with a visibly wounded service member were 1.8x more likely to report SH behavior, and respondents with a service member with both types of wounds were 1.6x more likely to report SH behavior, compared to their peers without a WII service member.

Seeking Mental Healthcare

**We found that a majority of our hidden helpers are getting the mental healthcare they need.**

While respondents with a visibly wounded service member were more likely to report high or moderate mental well-being, 18% reported not receiving the mental healthcare they needed due not disclosing their concerns with their parents, or their parents being unwilling or unable to get them care.

Access to Mental Healthcare			
Injury Type	% Got Help Needed	% Did Not Get Help Needed	Total (n)
None	82	15	381
Invisible	91	9	725
Visible	80	18	283
Both	82	16	192

## Food Security

Associations between service member WII and food security were found. Having a WWI service member (of any kind) significantly increased the likelihood of reporting food insecurity compared to peers with a non-WII service member.

**Food security was lowest among hidden helpers with a visibly injured service member, with nearly 40% reporting very low food security, compared to 5% of respondents without a WWII service member.**

Because of the stress inherent in being a hidden helper, the food insecurity of this group is especially worrying. Specifically targeting families with hidden helpers will be important in combating the food insecurity of our military.

### Food Security and Service Member Injury

Injury Type	% Food Secure	% Food Insecure	Total (n)
None	83	17	381
Invisible	37	63	743
Visible	30	70	291
Both	48	52	205

Note: These numbers exclude those that responded “Prefer not to answer” (n = 18).





## Recommendations

Although research understanding teenage Hidden Helpers is relatively limited, some suggestions from previous research and current findings may still be relevant for these teens and their families.

1. Recognizing that family well-being is intrinsically tied to veteran health and well-being, the VA should broaden its focus to include families and implement evidence-based programs designed to assist families with a wounded, ill, or injured service member or veteran parent. Such programs may help improve teens' overall well-being.
2. Congress and the Department of Defense must address barriers that make it difficult for TRICARE beneficiaries to access needed mental and behavioral health care, including high copays, inadequate provider networks, and inaccurate provider directories.
3. School districts and states should ensure that teachers and school administrators are trained on the unique challenges facing Hidden Helpers, so they are better prepared to offer support.
4. Community members can engage with support services focused on children and teens living in the home with a wounded, ill, or injured service member or veteran. Some organizations that provide support services include Wounded Warrior Project and Comfort Crew.





# **National Military Family Association**

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