In 2021, NMFA and Bloom: Empowering the Military Teen (Bloom), now a program of NMFA, launched the annual Military Teen Experience Survey (MTES). The survey provides valuable insight into a previously understudied group: military-connected teens and young adults. Now in its third year, the MTES continues to explore the overall experience of our military-connected adolescents allowing NMFA to continue research-driven advocacy and programs that get to the heart of what military families need to survive.

The survey covers mental health, food security, future career plans, and propensity to serve in the uniformed services while examining the importance of peer connections and sports and extracurriculars in military-connected teens’ lives.

We now have an increasingly comprehensive understanding of the unique challenges of military-connected youth, including their mental health, food security, and general experiences.
Demographics

Sample Size

1,858

Age

Teens
1,021

Young Adults
837

Gender

Boys 49%

Girls 47%

2.1%

0.3%

1.2%

Gender variant/GNC

Transgender girl/woman

Transgender boy/man

Sexual Orientation

Heterosexual: 84%

LGBT: 13%

CDC Estimate: ~25%

Race and Ethnicity

2023

79% White

9% Black

5% Bi- or Multiracial

4% Asian

1% American Indian/Native Alaskan

1% Hawaiian/Pacific Islander

20% Hispanic/Latino

2021 Department of Defense (DoD) demographics

71% White

17% Black

3% Bi- or Multiracial

5% Asian

1% American Indian/Native Alaskan

1% Hawaiian/Pacific Islander

17% Hispanic/Latino

Military Status of Serving Parent

ACTIVE DUTY 69%

RETIRED 16%

VETERANS 6%

NATIONAL GUARD OR RESERVES 6%

OTHER, NOT LISTED 2%

FALLEN SERVICE MEMBER 1%

Dual Military - Active Duty 44%

Dual Military - No longer serving 22%

Respondent Currently Serving 1%
Service Member Demographics

2023

- **Army:** 36%
- **Air Force:** 15%
- **Navy:** 15%
- **Marines:** 8%
- **Coast Guard:** 7%
- **PHS/NOAA:** 6%
- **Space Force:** 3%

2021

- **Army:** 45%
- **Air Force:** 22%
- **Navy:** 19%
- **Marines:** 12%
- **Coast Guard:** 2%
- **PHS/NOAA:** 0.07%

DoD does not have numbers for Public Health Service or NOAA

Pay Grade of highest ranking service member parent

- **E1-E4:** 33%
- **E5-E9:** 44%
- **01-04/W1-W5:** 14%
- **05-09:** 9%

Wounded, Ill, or Injured Service Member: 77%

- Invisible: 46%
- Visible: 18%
- Both: 13%

Average Number of Deployments: 2

Average Number of PCS/Military Moves: 4

Average Number of School Changes: 5
Mental Health

Mental Well-being:
- 53% of respondents fell into the moderate category
- 40% of respondents fell into the low category
- 7% of respondents fell into the high category

population study comparison:
- 15% of respondents fell into the high category
- 14% of respondents fell into the moderate category
- 71% of respondents fell into the low category

Gender Differences

Girls are 1.5x more likely to be classified with low mental well-being than boys, and 1.3x more likely to be classified with moderate well-being.

Wounded, Ill, or Injured (WII) Service Members
Respondents with a WII service member parent or guardian (of any kind) were 2.5x more likely to report low mental well-being compared to respondents without a WII service member in the household.

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.

Suicidal Ideation (SI)
MTES Full Sample (SI): 11%
CDC Estimate Ages 16-24: 26%

Self-Harm (SH)
64% of respondents have never thought of harming themselves.
74% of respondents have never actually harmed themselves.

Seeking Mental Healthcare

85% of respondents reported they got the mental healthcare they needed.

Nearly half of respondents sought care for their concerns (44%) and 41% reported they did not need mental healthcare. Only 8% reported not getting the care they needed because they didn’t tell their parents, and nearly 5% did not receive needed mental healthcare because their parents were unwilling or unable to help them get care.
### In the Past 12 Months Have You Sought Care for a Mental or Behavioral Health Concern?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Percent %</th>
<th>Total (n)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>705</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No - Not needed</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>659</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No - Did not disclose to parents</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No - Parents unable to find care</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No - Parents unwilling to find care</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: These numbers exclude those that responded “Prefer not to answer” (n = 30).
Food Security

MTES Full Sample: 51% food insecure
USDA 2020 Estimate: 10% food insecure

51% 30% 21%
High Food Security Low Food Security Very Low Food Security

Food Security and Mental Well-being

Higher food insecurity is related to worse mental well-being.

Food Security and Wounded, Ill, and Injured Service Members
Respondents with a wounded, ill, or injured service member were significantly more likely to report food insecurity. Respondents with a service member with both visible and invisible WII had the greatest level of food insecurity.
Hidden Helpers and 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.

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.

Hidden Helpers and Suicidal Ideation
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.

70% of respondents with a service member with an invisible wound reported preparing to end their life at some time in their lifetime.
Population rates of SI = 26%
MTES lifetime SI = 38%
**Hidden Helpers and Self-Harm**
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. 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.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Injury Type</th>
<th>% Got Help Needed</th>
<th>% Did Not Get Help Needed</th>
<th>Total (n)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>381</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Invisible</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>725</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visible</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>283</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>192</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: These numbers exclude those that responded “Prefer not to answer”.

**Hidden Helpers and Food Security**
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 WII service member.

Having a WII service member (of any kind) significantly increased the likelihood of reporting food insecurity compared to peers with a non-WII service member.
### Food Security and Service Member WII

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Injury Type</th>
<th>% Food Secure</th>
<th>% Food Insecure</th>
<th>Total (n)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>381</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Invisible</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>743</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visible</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>291</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>205</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

### Likelihood of Reporting Food Insecurity Based on Service Member WII (Most to Least)

1. Visible
2. Invisible
3. Both
4. None
MTES Full Sample: 32%  
Recent DoD Estimate Ages 16-24: 9%  

**How They Plan to Join**  
67% plan to join after receiving a college education  
26% plan to enlist

### Top Three Reasons to Join

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teens</th>
<th>Young Adult</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To pay for future education</td>
<td>To help others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gain work experience/skills</td>
<td>Gain work experience/skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health/medical benefits</td>
<td>Health/medical benefits</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Top Three Reasons Not to Join

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teens</th>
<th>Young Adult</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Other career interests</td>
<td>Don’t believe I would qualify</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dislike of military lifestyle</td>
<td>Other career interests AND Possibility of physical injury/death</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t believe I would qualify</td>
<td>Dislike of military lifestyle</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Gender Differences in Propensity

- Boys: 43%  
- Girls: 43%

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*Note: The table and diagram are placeholders for actual content.*
Top Three Reasons to Join

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Girls</th>
<th>Boys</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To pay for future education</td>
<td>To help others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health/medical benefits</td>
<td>Gain work experience/skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To help others</td>
<td>Health/medical benefits</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Top Three Reasons Not to Join

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Girls and Boys</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Other career interests</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t believe I would qualify</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Propensity and Connection to Military Life
Lowest: Respondents with an active-duty parent or guardian (22%)

Highest: Respondents with a National Guard or Reserve parent or guardian (65%)

Propensity and Pay Grade
Lowest: Respondents with an O4-O9 parent or guardian (20%)

Highest: Respondents with an E1-E4 parent or guardian (71%)

Propensity and WII Service Member
Lowest: Respondents with a non-WII service member (27%)

Highest: Respondents with a parent or guardian with a visible injury (52%)
Peer Connections

77% of respondents felt that their friends made them feel good about themselves.

90% of respondents were confident in their ability to make and keep friends.

Respondents with more positive friendships reported better mental well-being than those with fewer positive friendships.

Respondents who were more confident in their friendship abilities reported better mental well-being than those who were less confident.

Ranking Social Media Platforms Where They Connect with Other Military Teens

- Twitter: 746
- Facebook: 716
- Instagram: 657
- TikTok: 459
- Snapchat: 454
- YouTube: 391
- Discord: 289
- BeReal: 252
- Reddit: 183
- Other: 155
Sports and Extracurriculars

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sport/Activity</th>
<th>% Participation</th>
<th>Total (n)</th>
<th>% Positive Impact</th>
<th>Total (n)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Team Sports</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>1325</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>1075</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual Sports</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>1169</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>915</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team/Group Activities</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>1328</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>1043</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual Activities</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>1277</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>980</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Main Reason for Not Participating**

Across all activities the main reason for not participating in sports and extracurriculars was lack of interest.

Most participants did not feel their access to sports and activities were limited due to their military connection.

Military lifestyle and/or military child status were not a top reason for non-participation.

Participation in individual activities outside of sports was more affected by the military lifestyle than sports or team/group activities - lack of interest was still the main reason for not participating.