

The Military Teen Experience

The National Military Family Association (NMFA) and Bloom: Empowering the Military Teen, now a program of NMFA, launched the Military Teen Experience Survey (MTES) in 2021 to better understand the lives of military-connected teens and young adults. Now in its fourth year, this annual survey continues to explore various aspects of these adolescents' lives, including mental health and well-being, financial and food security, their experience with friends, family, and school, future career plans, and their propensity to serve in the uniformed services.

The MTES is a mixed-methods, cross-sectional study that uses both quantitative and qualitative measures to capture a detailed picture of military-connected youth experiences. Mental well-being and food security are measured using the Short Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale (SWEMWBS) and the USDA's Self-Administered Food Security Survey Module for Youth Ages 12 and Older. The Columbia-Suicide Severity Rating Scale (C-SSRS) is used to further investigate suicide and self-harm in military teens and young adults.

The MTES is a voluntary survey for kids and young adults ages 13-24 who have a parent who served or serves in the military. The limitation of this sample is that it is somewhat biased; some people will inherently volunteer more readily than others, but over the last four years, the story they told was clear.

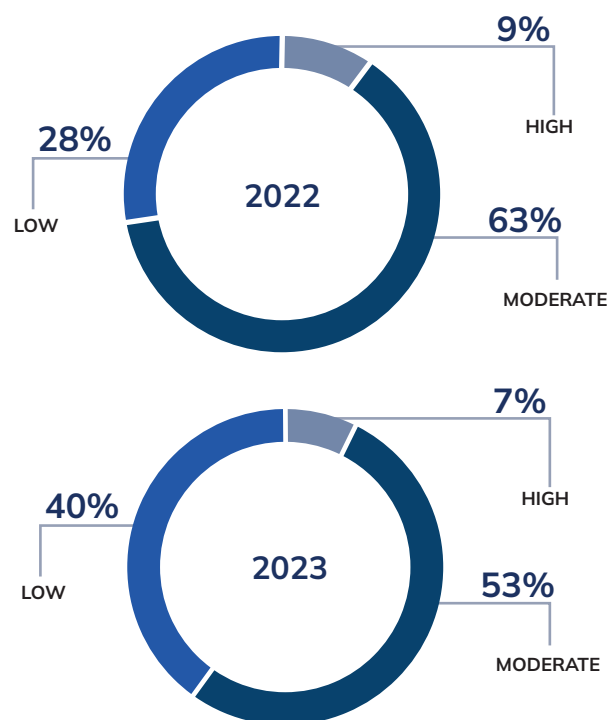
Military Teens Need Well-Being Support

Through military moves, school transitions, deployments, and adolescence, the majority of military teens are okay –but still too many struggle with mental well-being.

In 2022, we found that 9% of teens reported having high mental well-being, 63% had moderate mental well-being, and 28% scored low on mental well-being. We also found that 37% of survey respondents said they had thought about harming themselves or others.

In 2023, the majority (53%) of respondents reported moderate mental well-being, while 37% demonstrated low well-being and only 9% again reported high well-being. Factors like changing schools, having dual military parents, being a Hidden Helper (the child of a wounded, ill, or injured service member), and food insecurity were linked to lower mental well-being. More than one third (38%) of respondents reported preparing to end their life at some point.

Well-Being in Military Teens



Respondents' well-being was measured using the Short Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale (SWEMWBS)

Military Teens Experience Food Insecurity at Higher Rates

Just over half of our participants (51%) reported food insecurity, with 30% reporting low food security, and 21% reporting very low food security.

These rates of food insecurity surpass those reported in civilian populations and a 2020 estimate of 22% in U.S. soldiers. Compared to our 2022 numbers, rates of low food security increased by 12%, while rates of very low food security decreased by approximately 7%.



The Force of Tomorrow, Teens of Today

In 2023, military teens continued to report significantly higher rates of intent to serve than their civilian peers, with 32% of respondents indicating that they planned to serve in the future. That's far more than the Department of Defense's (DoD) 2020 report, which found that only 11% of teens and young adults planned on future service in the military.

Since 1969, the National Military Family Association has worked with families to identify and solve the unique challenges of military life. To learn more about our military-connected teens, the challenges they face, and how you can help, visit www.militaryfamily.org.



Military Teens At A Glance

Well-Being: 53% of respondents had moderate mental well-being, 37% had low, and 9% had high. Factors like changing schools, having dual military parents, being a Hidden Helper (the child of a wounded, ill, or injured service member), and food insecurity were linked to lower mental well-being.

Suicidal Ideation: 11% of respondents reported suicidal thoughts in the past 30 days. Hidden Helpers with a visibly wounded service member or one with both visible and invisible injuries reported a higher rate of passive suicidal ideation.

Access to Care: 85% of military-connected teens received the mental healthcare they needed. 44% sought care for their concerns, and 41% did not feel the need for mental healthcare.

Food Insecurity: 51% of respondents were classified as food insecure, compared to the USDA's national estimate of 10% in 2021. Food insecurity was notably higher among Hidden Helpers.

Friendships: 77% felt positive about their friendships, and 90% were confident in making and keeping friends. Positive friendships correlated with better mental well-being.

Activities: Most respondents participated in sports and extracurricular activities, which they felt had a positive impact on their lives.

Propensity to Serve: 32% of respondents plan to serve in the military.

