



National
Military Family
Association



The Military Teen Experience in 2026:

A Data-Driven Understanding
of Our Military-Connected Teens
and How We Can Help

Around the Kitchen Table

In 1969, five military spouses sat down together, determined to do better by their widowed friends: military families who had given everything for their country but were left without the support they needed to navigate the emptiness and aftermath alone. They went door to door in Congress, telling their own stories and those of their friends, carrying anecdote into action and their deeply felt call to serve this country directly to the lawmakers charged with upholding and strengthening it. That is where we come from: a table, a conviction, and the belief that military families belong in the rooms where decisions about their lives are made.

Fast-forward to 2020, and we found ourselves gathered around our kitchen tables again—this time with our children beside us. Our children, our spouses, our laptops and Chromebooks, our kids straining to reach one another and hold on to their friendships through the quarantine protocols designed to keep them safe. We already knew the teenage years were hard, but every adult is living proof they're survivable. What became impossible to ignore was that the pandemic was making it even harder to be a teenager. We weren't at all surprised when the American Academy of Pediatrics, joined by the nation's child and adolescent psychiatrists and children's hospitals, declared a national emergency in youth mental health. We were watching it unfold at our own tables.

And for military families, there was another layer. Orders would come, as they always do. A family would pack up and move to the next duty station with a teenager who had never set foot in the new school and had met their new classmates only through a screen. Our families crossed the world through uneven waves of outbreak and precaution: athletics canceled, clubs gone virtual or gone altogether, a new hometown offering none of the ordinary opportunities a young person needs to build the relationships we know sustain them. So we began to ask the question that has animated this work ever since: if being a teenager is hard, what about this experience makes it harder for a military teen?

That question is what brings us here. The 2026 Military Teen Experience Survey offers a decidedly post-pandemic look at our military-connected adolescents and young adults, who are navigating every ordinary difficulty of adolescence while also carrying everything military life asks of them. They are moving, adapting, grieving, hoping, and building connection wherever they land.

What does that look like? The pages that follow are our attempt to let military teens honestly share those answers with us while doing what NMFA's founding mothers did at that kitchen table more than 50 years ago: taking what our families are living through and putting it into the hands of the people who can act on it.



Introduction and Methods

About NMFA

The National Military Family Association (NMFA) is the leading nonprofit dedicated to serving military families around the world. Since 1969, NMFA has worked with families to identify and solve the unique challenges of military life through innovative advocacy and effective programming. NMFA serves the families of the currently serving, veteran, retired, wounded or fallen members of the Army, Marine Corps, Navy, Air Force, Space Force, Coast Guard, the Commissioned Corps of the United States Public Health Service (USPHS), and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). To get involved and learn more, visit www.MilitaryFamily.org.

About Bloom

Bloom: Empowering the Military Teen, a program of NMFA, was created in 2020 by and for military teens to empower, highlight, and connect military teens across the globe. Founded by two teens who were struggling with a difficult move, Bloom builds community and connection for military teens no matter where the military has sent them. NMFA's premier youth leadership program, Bloom, elevates the voices of military teens and has published hundreds of articles, narratives, and works of art on its website and across social media. Bloom is regularly invited to represent the experience of military teens at conferences nationwide and in the press around the world. Bloom leaders have been recognized throughout their communities for their work, authenticity, and storytelling, including in the Military Child of the Year awards and at the White House's International Day of the Girl celebration. To learn more about Bloom, visit www.bloommilitaryteens.org.



Methods

The Military Teen Experience Survey is a mixed-method, cross-sectional study designed to examine the experiences of military-connected adolescents and young adults. Consistent with previous survey administrations, the study incorporates both quantitative and qualitative measures to provide a comprehensive understanding of respondents' experiences. Because the survey uses a cross-sectional design, data were collected at a single point in time. This approach allows for comparisons across respondent groups and the identification of patterns in reported experiences but does not permit conclusions about causal relationships.

Respondents were recruited through their parents or guardians using email, social media, and web-based outreach during late 2025 and early 2026. Because participation was voluntary and respondents were not selected through probability sampling, the study represents a self-selected convenience sample. Although approximately 800 military-connected youth participated, the sample is not statistically representative of the broader population of military-connected adolescents and young adults. Accordingly, the findings are best interpreted as describing the experiences of survey respondents and identifying patterns and differences across groups rather than estimating population-wide prevalence.

As with all self-report surveys, the findings reflect respondents' perceptions and willingness to disclose their experiences, including on sensitive topics. In addition, because each administration of the survey includes a different sample of respondents, year-to-year differences should be interpreted cautiously and considered indicators of potential trends rather than definitive evidence of change. Findings that remain consistent across multiple survey administrations may provide stronger evidence of stable patterns among military-connected youth.

Skip logic was used throughout the survey to present respondents only with questions relevant to their experiences. Survey topics included mental health, food security, peer relationships, educational and career aspirations, attitudes toward military service, and the experiences of military-connected youth serving as caregivers, referred to in this report as Hidden Helpers.

Participant anonymity was maintained throughout the study. Identifying information was removed from the dataset before analysis.

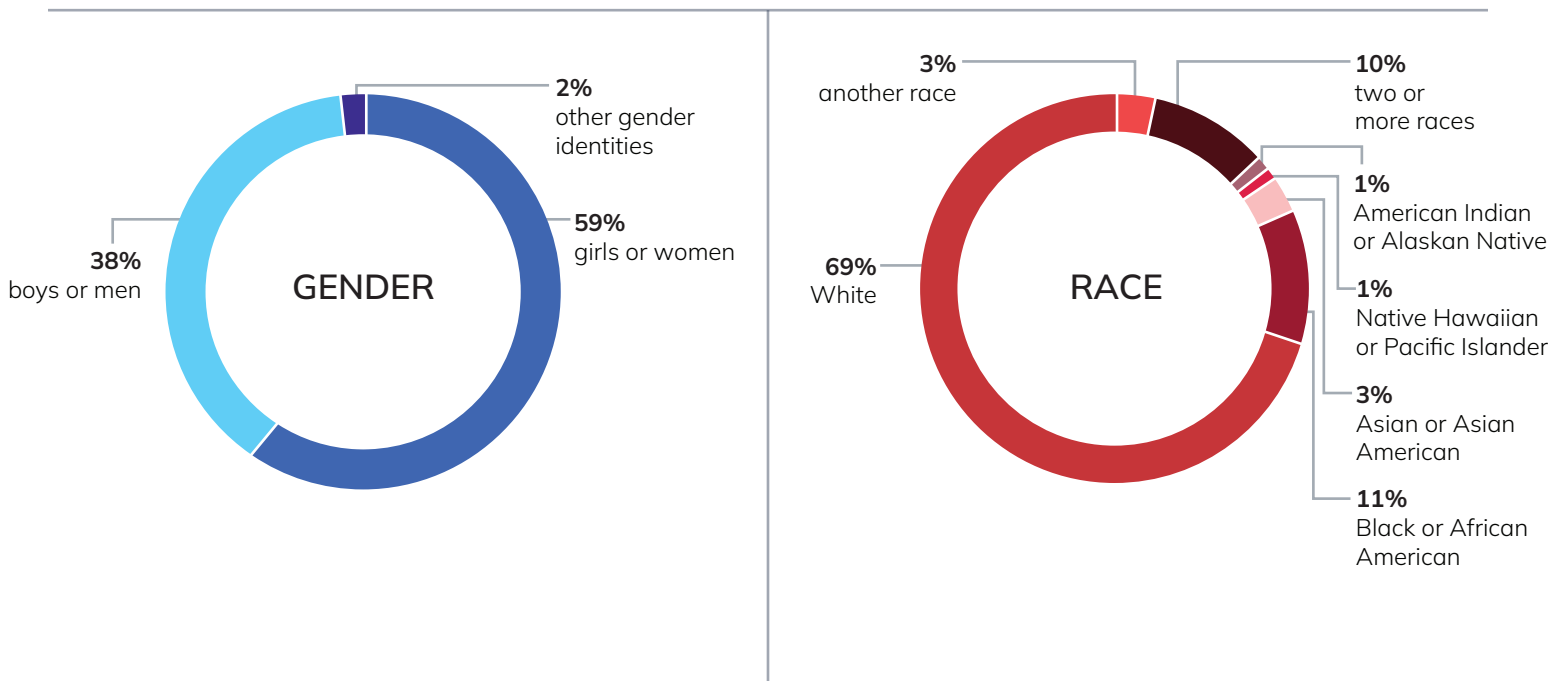


Demographics

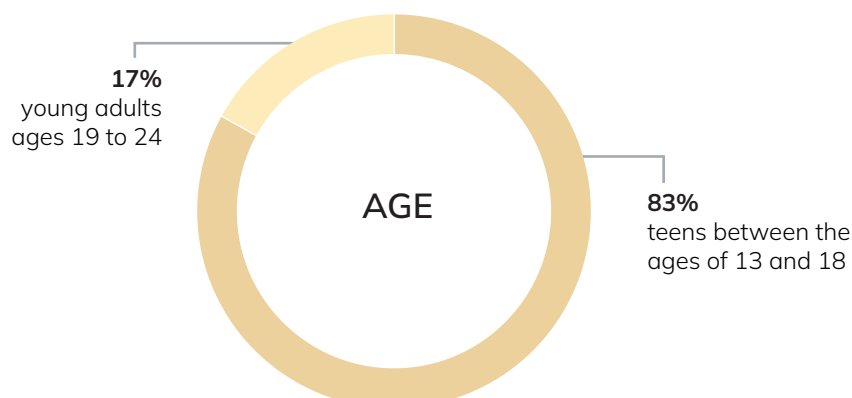
For the 2026 Military Teen Experience Survey, we analyzed approximately 800 responses from military teens and young adults out of a total of more than 1,100 entries. This report shares findings from this survey and the experiences that military teens and young adults shared with us. *Throughout the report, due to rounding, percentages may not total 100%.*

Over half (59%) of our sample consisted of girls or women, 38% of respondents identified as boys or men, and 2% reported other gender identities, such as gender variant or non-conforming. Respondents were also asked about their sexual orientation. Most (79%) identified as straight or heterosexual, with about 12% identifying as gay, lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, asexual, or queer. About 6% preferred not to answer.

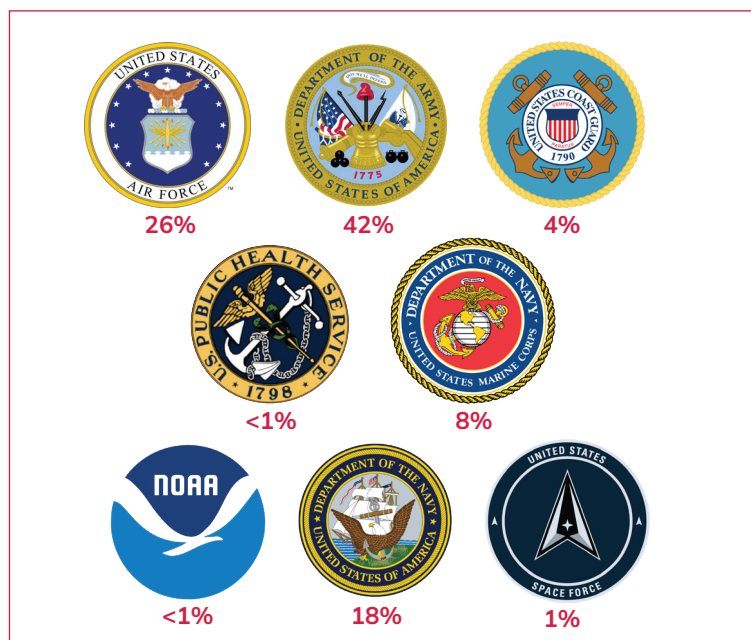
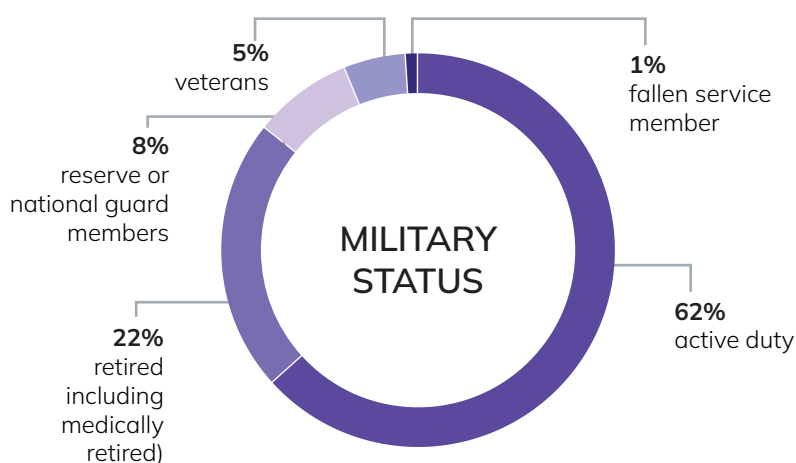
The majority of the sample was White (69%) with the remainder of the sample being comprised of respondents who were Black or African American (11%), Asian or Asian American (3%), American Indian or Alaskan Native (1%), Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (1%), two or more races (10%), or another race (3%). Almost a quarter (23%) of respondents were of Hispanic or Latin American descent.



Eligible respondents ranged in age from 13 to 24 years old. Of that range, 83% of teens were between the ages of 13 and 18, and 17% were young adults aged 19 to 24 years old. The average age was 16 years old.



The survey also required that respondents be connected to military life by being the child of someone who has served in one of the eight branches of uniformed services. Teens and young adults with a parent serving on active duty comprised the majority of the sample (62%), with the second largest group being those with a parent who retired from military service, either after completing 20 years of service or being retired (including medically retired) (22%). Children of Reserve or National Guard members made up 8% of respondents, and 5% of respondents' parents were veterans, having served in the military without retiring. Finally, 1% of respondents indicated that they were a child of a fallen service member. Respondents were connected to the Air Force (26%), Army (42%), Coast Guard (4%), USPHS (<1%), Marine Corps (8%), NOAA (<1%), Navy (18%), and Space Force (1%).



Most teens and young adults were from enlisted families (55%). Many respondents shared that both of their parents had served at some point in the uniformed services (20%) or had two parents currently serving (6%).

Military teens had experienced an average of



four
deployments



five permanent
changes of station



attended an average of
four different schools



Mental Health and Well-Being

Since the Military Teen Experience Survey was first administered in 2021, NMFA has consistently found that most military-connected adolescents report low to moderate levels of mental well-being. In 2026, the proportion of respondents reporting high mental well-being remained unchanged. However, a greater proportion of respondents fell within the moderate well-being category, while fewer were categorized as experiencing low mental well-being compared with previous survey administrations. These findings may indicate an encouraging shift in the distribution of mental well-being among respondents. Continued data collection across future survey administrations will help determine whether this pattern represents a sustained trend. Despite these changes, the majority of respondents continued to report low or moderate levels of mental well-being, underscoring the ongoing importance of efforts to support the well-being of military-connected adolescents.

Mental Well-Being

Adolescence is a formative period for developing social and emotional habits critical to individual well-being. Because a teen's mental health is already under stress, we strive to better understand how factors unique to military life affect their overall mental well-being.

Suicidal Ideation

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) [defines suicidal ideation](#) as "thinking about, considering, or planning suicide". Suicide is a leading cause of death for adolescents and young adults. The [CDC found](#) just under 20% of deaths among youth ages 13 – 24 were due to suicide in 2024.

Self-Harm

Self-harm is the act of hurting oneself on purpose. Many individuals who self-harm are not attempting suicide. Self-harm is a maladaptive coping mechanism used for a variety of reasons, including dealing with stress, anger, sadness, and emotional pain. It arises from a lack of healthy or adaptive coping strategies. Globally, [about 20% of adolescents](#) engage in self-harm behavior.



What We Asked

Mental Well-Being

For the fifth consecutive year, mental well-being was assessed using the Short Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale (SWEMWBS). The SWEMWBS is a validated seven-item instrument that measures mental well-being and psychological functioning among adolescents and young adults. The scale assesses multiple dimensions of well-being, including emotional, cognitive, and psychological functioning, and is designed to capture overall positive mental well-being rather than symptoms of mental illness. NMFA is licensed to administer the SWEMWBS for non-commercial purposes.

Suicidal Ideation

The Columbia-Suicide Severity Rating Scale (C-SSRS) was used for the third year. The C-SSRS is a validated, 6-item scale used to screen for suicidal ideation. This instrument assesses suicidal ideation, suicidal intention, and plans for suicide.

Self-Harm

Self-harm thoughts, behaviors, and functions were also assessed. The two items listed below were taken from a study of adolescent self-harm. Respondents reported the number of times they engaged in these thoughts or behaviors, ranging from “never” to “more than 10 times.”

Have you ever thought about hurting yourself, even if you would not really do it, in the last 6 months?

Have you ever hurt yourself on purpose in any way (e.g., by taking an overdose of pills or by cutting yourself) in the last 6 months?

Based on findings from previous administrations of the Military Teen Experience Survey, the 2026 survey incorporated the Inventory of Statements About Self-Injury (ISAS). The ISAS is a validated 39-item instrument designed to assess the functions of non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI). The measure evaluates 13 distinct functions associated with self-injurious behavior, providing insight into the reasons adolescents and young adults may engage in NSSI.

What We Found

Mental Well-Being

Overall, 70% of respondents demonstrated moderate mental well-being, 9% demonstrated high mental well-being, and 22% demonstrated low mental well-being. Compared with previous administrations of the Military Teen Experience Survey, a greater proportion of respondents fell within the moderate mental well-being category, while fewer were categorized as having low mental well-being. The proportion of respondents reporting high mental well-being remained consistent across survey administrations.



Higher SWEMWBS scores are generally associated with greater optimism, relaxation, positive relationships, confidence in decision-making, and clear thinking. Lower scores reflect lower levels of these aspects of mental well-being, including reduced optimism, greater difficulty making decisions and thinking clearly, lower levels of relaxation, and weaker feelings of connectedness with others. Although the SWEMWBS is not a diagnostic measure, lower levels of mental well-being have been associated with an increased likelihood of experiencing symptoms of common mental health conditions, including depression and anxiety.

Teens' mental well-being is impacted by external factors.



For respondents of this survey, experiencing greater food insecurity,



more deployments,



more permanent changes of station (PCS),



and having attended more schools due to relocations were linked to having lower mental well-being.

Related to mental well-being, teens were asked about their experiences seeking mental health care.

- Over half of teens (57%) stated that they did not need care for a mental or behavioral health concern.
- An additional 21% shared that they needed mental health care and were able to get it.
- In other cases, some teens said they did not get the help they needed due to not disclosing their concern with their parent (9%) or their parent being unwilling (3%) or unable (4%) to find mental health care.

Although many respondents shared that they felt their mental health needs were well understood by the adults in their lives, others expressed the desire for parents to acknowledge their emotions and experiences of stress (e.g., moving schools, rebuilding peer connections) and to have more open, supportive communication about their mental health with their parent. [A recent study](#) of adolescents with a history of depression or anxiety and their parent or guardian shared some communication strategies that they found helpful, including discussing familial mental health history, being open-minded, and having patience.





WHEN KIDS GO QUIET

I'm still here,
and I'm listening.



The same research, together with a broader evidence base on adolescent communication, points to concrete things parents can do when kids don't open up about needing help. The most consistent finding is deceptively simple: listen before fixing. Teens open up more readily to parents who approach them with openness and curiosity; listening carefully and empathizing rather than judging or jumping to provide solutions. It also helps to lower the stakes of the conversation itself. Some of the most honest exchanges happen during low-pressure time together; a drive, a walk, or watching a show side by side rather than a formal sit-down "talk." Parents who share a little of their own experience with stress or anxiety, and name their family's mental health history openly, can help signal that struggling isn't shameful, and seeking help is not a failure. Because a teen may not be ready the first time, the message that matters most is often the gently repeated one: "I'm still here, and I'm listening."



Understanding why a teen stays silent matters just as much as knowing what to say. In the study of adolescents with depression or anxiety, teens described holding back for reasons rooted in love rather than distrust. They feared burdening their parents, worried their concerns would be dismissed, and felt guilty about struggling at all. Just as telling, the researchers found a perception gap: parents rated their communication as more open than their teens did, and the teens reported facing more barriers to seeking help than their parents realized. A parent can believe the door is open while their teen still finds it hard to walk through. Simply naming that gap by asking, and then listening for what isn't being said, is itself a strategy.



For military teens, some of the most meaningful acknowledgment a parent can offer is by recognizing that a PCS move is also a loss, that starting over at a new school is genuinely hard, and rebuilding friendships from nothing takes real energy. Resilience is not automatic, and our teens are working hard to rebuild and maintain their own lives inside of their military family journey.



When a young person cannot or will not turn to a parent, as some teens indicated in this survey, the wider circle becomes the safety net. A trusted adult beyond the home or a strong friendship can be where a teen first says out loud that they are struggling. The goal is not for parents to be the only door, but for there to be enough open doors that no military teen must carry their struggles alone.

Suicidal Ideation

In the past 30 days, 17% of respondents reported some level of suicidal ideation—ranging, in the scale's terms, from a wish to be dead to active thoughts with a specific plan and intent. Most did not report a specific plan:

- 71% indicated none over their lifetime
- A smaller group, 13%, reported preparatory behavior—the scale's term (Category 6) for early steps toward an attempt—at some point in their lifetime.
- 2% had made a suicide plan within the past three months.



If you, a service member, or a military family member you know is in crisis, you're not alone. Dial 988, then press 1.



National data provide important context for interpreting these findings. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), suicide was the second leading cause of death among individuals ages 10 to 24 in 2024. In the 2023 Youth Risk Behavior Survey, the CDC reported that 20.4% of high school students had seriously considered attempting suicide and 9.5% had attempted suicide during the 12 months preceding the survey. Because these national estimates reflect a 12-month reporting period, they are not directly comparable to the 30-day timeframe used in the Military Teen Experience Survey. However, together these findings highlight the prevalence of suicidal thoughts and behaviors among adolescents and underscore the importance of continued attention to the mental health of military-connected youth.

Suicidal thoughts and behaviors exist along a continuum of distress and should not be interpreted as representing a single or inevitable trajectory. The presence of suicidal thoughts does not necessarily indicate suicidal intent or predict a suicide attempt, particularly when protective factors and timely support are available. As discussed throughout this report, protective factors such as strong social connections, supportive family relationships, trusted adults, and healthy coping strategies play an important role in promoting youth mental well-being and reducing suicide risk.



Self-Harm Thoughts and Behaviors

Concerns about self-harm among military teens have been consistent over recent administrations of the Military Teen Experience Survey. Self-harm is the act of hurting oneself on purpose. Critically, many individuals who self-harm are not attempting suicide. Rather, self-harm is sometimes utilized to avoid or distract oneself from suicidal ideation. Self-harm is a maladaptive coping mechanism that is used for a variety of reasons, such as dealing with emotional pain or demonstrating toughness. Additionally, individuals may engage in self-harm for multiple reasons rather than only one reason. Globally, [about 20% of adolescents](#) engage in self-harm behavior over their lifetimes.

We looked at the prevalence of self-harm behavior in our military teens over the last six months. During that time, nearly one-third (29%) of respondents reported experiencing thoughts of self-harm, and 16% reported having intentionally harmed themselves at least once in the past six months.



Thoughts of Self-Harm In the last six months

71%

Never

11%

Once

9%

2-5 times

4%

6-10 times

5%

10+ times



Self-Harm Actions in the past six months

85%

Never

6%

Once

5%

2-5 times

2%

6-10 times

3%

10+ times



Why We Looked Closer This Year

Last year's Military Teen Experience Survey identified a finding that warranted closer examination: nearly half of respondents reported having engaged in self-harm at some point in their lives, and nearly one-third reported doing so more than once during the previous six months. Although these findings demonstrated the prevalence of self-harm among respondents, they did not explain why military-connected teens were engaging in these behaviors. To better understand the functions of self-harm, the 2026 survey incorporated the Inventory of Statements About Self-Injury (ISAS), a validated measure that assesses the motivations underlying non-suicidal self-injury.

Only respondents who reported engaging in self-harm during the previous six months completed the ISAS. The measure assesses 13 functions of self-harm, grouped into two broad categories: interpersonal functions, which relate to interactions with others, and intrapersonal functions, which reflect internal emotional experiences.

Consistent with previous research, respondents more frequently endorsed intrapersonal functions than interpersonal functions, suggesting that self-harm was more commonly used to manage internal emotional distress than to influence relationships with others. There were no gender differences in endorsement of intrapersonal functions. However, respondents identifying as boys and men were more likely to endorse interpersonal functions, suggesting that social factors may play a greater role in self-harm within this group.

Of the 13 functions measured, 80% of respondents who reported engaging in self-harm identified using it for affect regulation. Other frequently endorsed functions included self-punishment (66%), anti-dissociation (66%), and anti-suicide (52%). These findings suggest that, for many respondents, self-harm functions primarily as a coping strategy rather than an interpersonal behavior. **It is a skills gap under real pressure, and one that can be closed.**

These findings should be considered alongside the broader patterns identified throughout this report. Military-connected youth navigate challenges that may include repeated relocations, parental deployment, caregiving responsibilities, financial strain, and parental injury or illness. Respondents with an injured service-member parent were more likely to report low mental well-being, thoughts of self-harm, and self-harm behaviors, suggesting that cumulative stress may contribute to poorer mental health outcomes for some military-connected youth.

These findings are consistent with the broader research literature. Analyses of the California Healthy Kids Survey have found that military-connected adolescents report higher rates of suicidal ideation, suicide planning, and suicide attempts than their civilian peers, with risk increasing as the number of family deployments increases (Cederbaum et al., 2014; Gilreath et al., 2016). At the same time, studies such as the Healthy Kids Colorado Survey demonstrate that protective factors, including school belonging, supportive family relationships, and trusted adults, are associated with substantially lower rates of persistent sadness and hopelessness.

These findings suggest that adolescent mental well-being should not be viewed separately from broader discussions of military family readiness and long-term force health. We cannot afford to treat these as separate conversations. Supporting the well-being of military-connected youth is also an investment in the future strength of military families and, for many respondents, the future military community.

Together, these findings reinforce the importance of strengthening protective factors while military-connected youth are still adolescents. Helping young people develop healthy emotion regulation skills, strengthening supportive relationships, and reducing avoidable stressors may improve their ability to cope with the unique demands of military life while promoting positive long-term outcomes.

Peer Connections

Positive mental health outcomes are supported by strong social connections, and military-connected youth are no exception. Throughout this report, friendships emerge as an important protective factor that helps adolescents navigate the unique challenges of military life. These relationships may develop through school, sports, clubs, military-connected programs such as Bloom, or ongoing connections maintained across moves and deployments. Their importance extends beyond social interaction, providing stability, belonging, and support during periods of transition, parental deployment, and other military-related stressors.

In 2026, we asked the following:

How many friends make you feel good about yourself?

Are you good at making friends?

Are you good at keeping friends?

Friendships and peer connections are protective factors for mental health, and our respondents bear this out. Over half said that most or all their friends make them feel good about themselves, and most reported being good at both making and keeping friends. Those capacities track directly with well-being: teens who felt less able to make and keep friends, and who had fewer friends who lifted them up, were more likely to report low mental well-being, while those rich in affirming friendships reported higher well-being. The teens' own words, shared throughout this section, show what the percentages can't: That for a military kid, the friend who just gets it without needing the backstory is not a luxury.

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[I feel seen or heard] When military kids talk about the things they miss about certain countries. Like how we miss the food or the geography in Germany.

17-year-old child of Air Force Retiree

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“

As a military teen, I feel most seen and understood by the people who recognize that constantly moving shapes you in ways that aren't always obvious. Other military kids especially get it. We don't have to overexplain what it feels like to leave friends behind or start over at a new school.

16-year-old child of Navy Sailor

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That connection matters because, year after year, our data tells us the same, stubborn truth: being a teenager is hard, and being a military teenager is harder. This mirrors what we see across military family life. Military families shoulder the same pressures as every working family in America: the cost of housing, the scramble for childcare, the work of making ends meet while reaching for something better. However, military life adds a layer of challenge. It raises the temperature in the house, multiplying stressors often without notice. Our teens live inside that temperature. It is part of why, even as individual numbers rise and fall from one year's sample to the next, the well-being needle barely moves. The difficulty these young people are adapting to is not a fluke of any single group of respondents. It is structural. And structural challenges require structural protection. For a mobile, high-stress childhood, connection is that protection. It is the counterweight that makes a difference.

That is why we want to widen the frame beyond peers. Research on adolescent resilience is remarkably consistent on one point: across decades of “beating the odds” studies, the common thread among young people who navigate hardship well is the presence of at least one caring adult beyond their parents. Natural mentors, the non-parental adults in a young person’s life, are associated with fewer depressive symptoms over time and help shape how they see their future. Young people with a trusted adult they can rely on for a serious problem are substantially less likely to sink into persistent sadness or hopelessness. For military teens, these are often the adults who don’t PCS with them but still leave an indelible mark on their lives: the coach who kept a locker open, the teacher who noticed, or the youth pastor, scout leader, or band director who truly saw them during the 18 months they were together. They may only be there for a short season, but that season can change the whole arc of that military teen’s story.

“

[I feel seen or heard] When I meet other military teens and we discuss what we have experienced.

13-year-old child of Army Soldier

”

This is the conviction behind our ***Field Guide to the Military Teen: A Guide to Military Teens, By Military Teens, For Communities with Military Teens***, which we are proud to re-release alongside this year’s survey results. Military kids are making friends just as they always have, wherever the military sends their family. What they need now are deep, lasting friendships and connections not only with one another, but also with caring adults.

“

I definitely appreciate the military kid accounts on Instagram and TikTok. The content posted is very relatable and makes it feel like I’m not the only one. I also really enjoy talking to my military friends who understand what it’s like.

17-year-old child of Navy Sailor

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“

The things that make me feel seen or heard are my friends due to the fact that they do not ask about my parents and their service – they just care about who I am as a person and what my goals are in life.

14-year-old child of Army Retiree

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Food Security

The [United States Department of Agriculture \(USDA\)](#) [defines food security](#) as people having access to enough food at all times for an active, healthy life. Food security shows up as a range of experiences. Households that are experiencing food security (high or marginal food security) typically have no or minimal indications of difficulty accessing food or changes in their diets. Alternatively, households experiencing food insecurity (low or very low food security) often show reduced quality or variety of the types of food they are able to access or show reduced food intake. This survey utilizes the USDA Self-Administered Food Security Survey Module for Youth Ages 12 and Older, which asks adolescents about their food quantity and quality over the past month.

In 2024, the [USDA reported that](#) 18% of U.S. households with children under the age of 18 were affected by food insecurity. Although children are usually protected from substantial reductions in food intake in these households, having adults affected by food insecurity negatively impacts a child's overall well-being. Food insecurity impacts homes with children more frequently than those without children (at 14% of U.S. households).

For the fifth consecutive year, NMFA found that the respondents of this survey are experiencing food insecurity at higher rates than their civilian peers. One-third (34%) of participants reported experiencing some level of food insecurity in the past month. This percentage is also troublingly higher than what is reported for military families. [The Military Family Advisory Network reported](#) that about 20% of military or veteran families in their sample experienced food insecurity in 2023, with food insecurity being more frequently reported by families with children.



Challenges with food insecurity are not equally experienced across the military family community, and some geographies experience food insecurity at higher rates than others. When military families are relocated to a new installation, they carry their financial situation – secure or insecure – with them, retaining any challenges they may be experiencing and potentially taking on financial challenges associated with relocation. [Combining three years of data from 2022 – 2024, the USDA](#) found that Texas, Mississippi, Louisiana, Arkansas, Oklahoma, and Kentucky experienced food insecurity above the U.S. average. Many military families call these states home, as there are military installations located in each of these areas. Texas alone is home to [more than 450,000 military service members and their families.](#)

Unsurprisingly, food security was associated with service member rank, with enlisted households generally experiencing lower food security. The service member parent's military status was also associated with food security, with active duty and National Guard and Reserve families reporting higher levels of food insecurity than families in other military statuses.

As in [previous survey results](#), we found that households with both parents currently serving in the military were more likely to experience food insecurity. Further, experiencing more deployments and having a parent with service-connected injuries were linked to experiencing greater food insecurity.



A Symptom of Financial Insecurity

It would be wrong to view these numbers as a sign that the problem has gone unaddressed. Across recent Administrations, Congress, the Pentagon, and throughout the military support community, military family financial well-being has drawn real and sustained attention. The House Armed Services Committee's Quality of Life Panel made pay and food security a central focus, and several of its recommendations were enacted in the FY2025 National Defense Authorization Act. It also included a targeted raise for junior enlisted service members worth roughly 15% over 2024 pay rates and an expansion of the Basic Needs Allowance, to reach more low-income families. The Pentagon has also lowered commissary prices, adjusted store hours, and added online shopping and grocery delivery.

Yet the problem persists. Close to a quarter of military families continue to report food insecurity, use of the Basic Needs Allowance has remained strikingly low, and the cost of daily life keeps climbing faster than these measures can close the gap. The 34% we found among military teens doesn't suggest that efforts aren't being made. It does, however, show that those efforts have not yet caught up to the need.

This is likely because food insecurity is a symptom of the greater problem. It is the most visible edge of a deeper condition: Military family financial insecurity combined with household budgets stretched until something must give. And when money is short, food is often the first expense to flex, because rent and the electric bill cannot. Nationally, families facing hardship report trading off between food and utilities, food and medical care, and food and housing. For a teenager, that abstraction translates to a home where meal size doesn't grow with you in your teenage years, and quality is quietly traded down.



What typically gets traded first is exactly what a growing body needs most. Fresh produce, dairy, and lean protein are among the most expensive items in the cart, and they are the first to be cut in favor of cheaper, more calorie-dense, less nutritious options. In practice, this looks like one fewer egg, one fewer glass of milk, one fewer serving of chicken; small subtractions, repeated across a month, in the years when a body is building bone and muscle and a brain is still forming. The research on what this does to children is consistent. Independent of poverty itself, childhood food insecurity is associated with stunted growth, iron-deficiency anemia, weakened immune function, and developmental delay, alongside higher rates of depression, anxiety, and behavioral difficulty, and substantially greater use of emergency medical care. These are not the consequences of going hungry for a day, but the costs of being forced to “make do” and going without for years.

There is a cruel paradox at work here. The same budget pressure that removes the eggs, the milk, and the chicken also pushes families toward the cheapest available calories: refined, processed, energy-dense, and nutrient-poor. A food-insecure teen can be undernourished in ways that matter for growth and create heightened risk of the very weight conditions that now keep most young people out of uniform. In other words, food insecurity can produce both too little and too much: not enough of what a body needs, and too much of what it doesn't.

Because so many military teens will one day wear the uniform themselves, their nutrition today is a matter of tomorrow's military readiness. The nation already faces a recruiting crisis where roughly seven in 10 young Americans are ineligible to serve since excess weight is the single leading medical disqualifier. Food insecurity feeds that pipeline from both directions. The protein a military teen goes without today is the muscle the future force will need tomorrow. If our country wants a ready all-volunteer force in 20 years, it must be fed properly now.



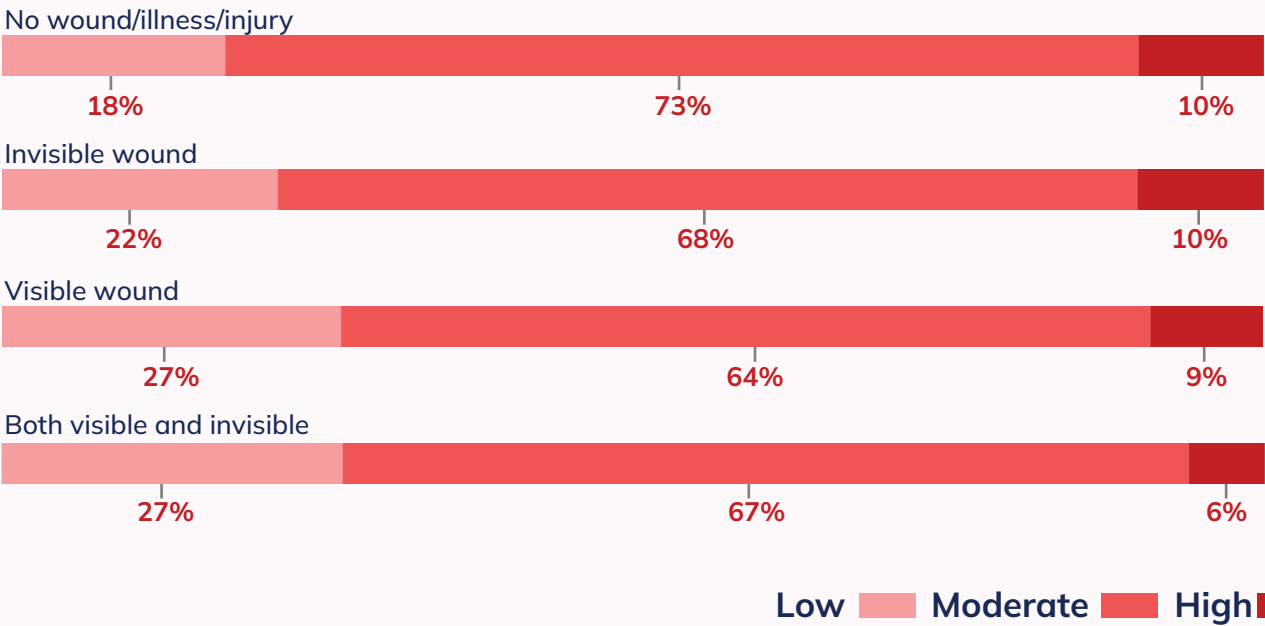
Hidden Helpers

Hidden Helpers are the children, youth, and young adults who are impacted by or involved in the mental, emotional, or physical care of a wounded, ill, or injured service member or veteran. There are approximately [2.3 million Hidden Helpers](#) under the age of 18 in the United States, and understanding their experiences gives us an opportunity to share their stories, better understand their challenges, and build programs and policies that support their well-being. For the purposes of this survey, service member wound, illness, or injury was classified under two types: visible (e.g., physical injury or illness) and invisible (e.g., post-traumatic stress disorder, traumatic brain injury).

About half (52%) of teens and young adults who responded to the Military Teen Experience Survey live with at least one parent with a military service-connected visible or invisible wound, illness, or injury. About one-fifth (21%) of respondents had a parent with an invisible injury, and 13% had a parent with a visible injury. Moreover, 18% of respondents reported having a parent with both an invisible and visible injury, demonstrating the impacts of modern-era combat.

Respondents with a service member parent who had experienced any service-connected injury were more likely to report low mental well-being compared to respondents without an injured service member. Previous studies have found that children of psychologically injured service members (i.e., diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder) reported poor mental health.

Well-Being in Hidden Helpers Based on Parent's Injury Type



Thoughts of self-harm and actual self-harm behavior were more prevalent among respondents with a wounded, ill, or injured service member parent than those from families who did not experience a service-connected injury.

Of teens and young adults with a wounded, ill, or injured parent



40% experienced self-harm thoughts and **24%** reported self-harm behaviors.

Although Hidden Helpers are often described as resilient, resilience should not be viewed as an inherent or automatic characteristic. Research consistently demonstrates that resilience develops through the presence of protective factors and supportive environments. Among military-connected youth, these protective factors include strong family relationships, positive social connections, trusted peers and adults, and healthy coping strategies. These same protective factors are identified throughout this report and are associated with improved well-being among Hidden Helpers.

These findings highlight the importance of increasing awareness and recognition of Hidden Helpers both within the broader public and across the military community. Their caregiving responsibilities and lived experiences often remain overlooked despite their significant contributions to family functioning. This survey contributes to a growing body of research by documenting the experiences of military-connected youth who provide care for family members. Recognizing Hidden Helpers as individuals with distinct experiences and support needs is an important step toward informing policies, programs, and services that address the unique challenges they face.



Already Serving: Propensity + Work

For military teens, the moves, deployments, caregiving responsibilities, emotional demands, and financial concerns described throughout this report are not simply experiences they will leave behind as they enter adulthood. These experiences occur alongside their educational pursuits, employment, future planning, and meaningful contributions to their families. When asked about their educational experiences, employment, and future plans, respondents described balancing preparation for adulthood with significant personal and family responsibilities.

Education and Employment

The majority of young adults between the ages of 19 and 24 were enrolled in a 4-year college (44%), a graduate program (16%), or a community college or a vocational program (10%). Another 14% were working, and 8% were already serving in the United States military.

Most teen respondents planned to attend college after they graduate high school (61%), and 15% planned to go to college and then commission in the military as an officer. Another 4% intended to go to a trade school or get a certification, while 3% planned to join the workforce immediately. An additional 11% planned to enlist in the uniformed services.

Nearly one-third of respondents (31%) reported worrying about their family's finances. Although most respondents who work indicated they are saving for college or covering their own expenses, some reported working to help their families meet household financial needs, while others may contribute to household financial stability by covering their own expenses. For many of these teens, employment represents more than a traditional adolescent experience. It serves as a meaningful contribution to their households while supporting their own educational and financial goals.

Why are you working?



46% Saving for college or another expense



28% Personal spending



13% Wanting work experience



7% Help with family finances



6% Other, not listed



Propensity to Serve

Military service often spans generations, and many individuals serving today grew up in households with a parent or caregiver who also served. To better understand future military service intentions among military-connected youth, NMFA has included questions about respondents' plans for military service in each iteration of the Military Teen Experience Survey. Consistent with previous survey findings, military-connected youth in this study reported plans to serve in the military at higher rates than their civilian peers. A [recent Department of War Study](#) estimated that approximately 10% of civilians ages 16 to 24 plan to join the military.

Among respondents in this survey, 34% reported planning to serve in the military, and 8% of young adult respondents indicated they were already serving. Respondents from dual-military families were twice as likely to report plans for future military service compared with respondents who had one parent or guardian who was currently serving or had previously served.

For those planning to serve, the most common routes to join the military were enlisting (30%), enrolling at a traditional university through a Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) program (24%), attending a senior military college or service academy (21%), or attending Officer Candidate School (OCS) after graduating from college (14%).

Why Military Teens Plan to Serve



28% Serving their country



18% Paying for future education



12% Gain experience/work skills

Respondents who indicated plans for future military service were asked to rank the factors that most influenced their decision. An overwhelming majority (76%) identified pride in witnessing their parent serve as one of the two most influential factors in their decision to pursue military service. In contrast, only 11% identified family expectations as a primary influence. Together, these findings suggest that respondents were more likely to attribute their interest in military service to admiration for a parent's service than to perceived expectations to continue a family tradition.



Among respondents who did not plan to serve in the military, the most commonly reported reasons were having other career interests (47%) and not wanting the military lifestyle (21%). Despite their own plans not to pursue military service, one-third (33%) indicated they would recommend military service to friends, and most (76%) reported speaking positively about military life with friends or extended family who did not have a parent who served.

The Force of the Future

Taken together, these findings highlight both the strengths of military-connected youth and the importance of continued investment in their well-being. Throughout this report, respondents described educational aspirations, career goals, meaningful family responsibilities, and, for many, a continued interest in military service. Those planning to serve most often attributed their decision to pride in a parent's service rather than family expectations, suggesting that military service continues to inspire the next generation through lived experience rather than obligation.

At the same time, this report demonstrates that many military-connected youth develop qualities such as adaptability, responsibility, empathy, and perseverance while navigating the unique demands of military life. These strengths, however, should not be interpreted as evidence that support is unnecessary. Resilience develops in the presence of protective factors, including strong family relationships, trusted adults, positive peer connections, and healthy coping strategies. Continued access to these supports remains essential to promoting positive outcomes.

Ultimately, the findings presented throughout this report underscore the importance of recognizing military-connected youth not only for the challenges they experience but also for the contributions they make to their families, schools, and communities. Ensuring they have access to evidence-informed programs, supportive relationships, and meaningful opportunities for growth will help strengthen the protective factors that contribute to their long-term well-being. As these young people transition into adulthood, continued investment in their success represents an investment in the future of the military community and the nation it serves.



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**National
Military Family
Association**
Together We're Stronger®

2800 Eisenhower Avenue, Suite 250
Alexandria, VA 22314

703.931.6632

info@MilitaryFamily.org

MilitaryFamily.org