



NATIONAL
MILITARY FAMILY
ASSOCIATION

Military Teen Hidden Helpers

While fielding our 2022 Military Teen Experience Survey, the National Military Family Association (NMFA) asked respondents if their service member parent was wounded, ill, or injured. Nearly 35% answered yes. Here, we take a closer look at these “Hidden Helpers” and how living with a wounded parent has affected their mental well-being and daily life.

INTRODUCTION

Hidden Helpers are “children and youth who live in homes with wounded, ill, or injured service members and veterans” (Malick et al., 2021). There are about 2.3 million Hidden Helpers in the United States (The White House, 2021). Although adult caregivers of wounded, ill, or injured service members or veterans have been well-researched, less is known about the experiences of these teenage Hidden Helpers.

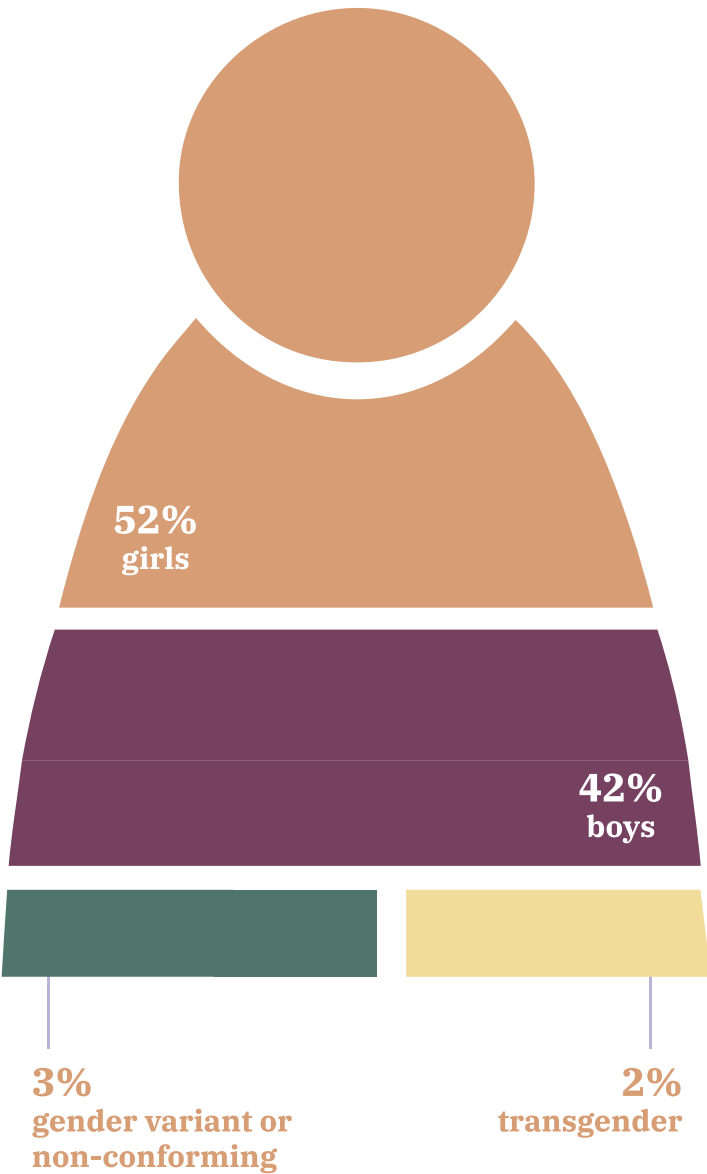
Research that has focused on children and youth in homes with wounded, ill, or injured service members or veterans has generally demonstrated adverse impacts for these children, including behavioral concerns and psychological distress (Briggs et al., 2019). The Elizabeth Dole Foundation examined children and youth living with a wounded, ill, or injured service member or veteran parent and found that children voiced needing more support in navigating their experiences as Hidden Helpers (Malick et al., 2021).

While it has shed an important light on the experience of Hidden Helpers, this previous research has primarily focused on children rather than on the experiences of our Hidden Helper teens. Teens with a wounded, ill, or injured service member or veteran in their home provided insights about their mental well-being and their family’s experience with food insecurity in NMFA’s [2022 Military Teen Experience Survey](#). Analyzing their responses allowed us to identify what Hidden Helper teens need and how local communities, states, and the federal government can respond.

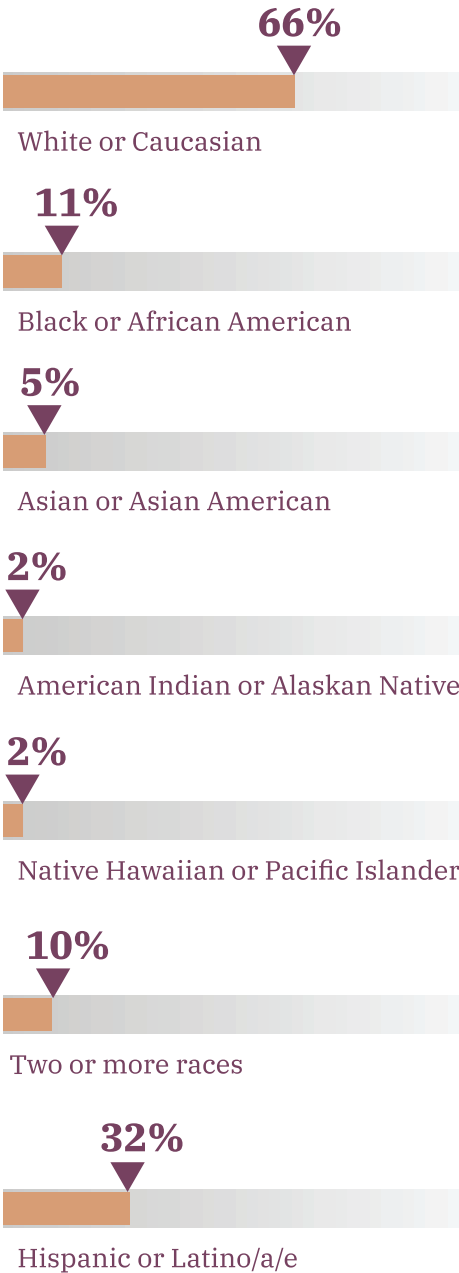
DEMOGRAPHICS

Out of the 2,254 respondents between the ages of 13 - 19 in the 2022 Military Teen Experience Survey, **34% (n = 754) reported that their serving parent had been wounded, ill, or injured.**

These Hidden Helpers were, on average, about 16 years old and identified as:

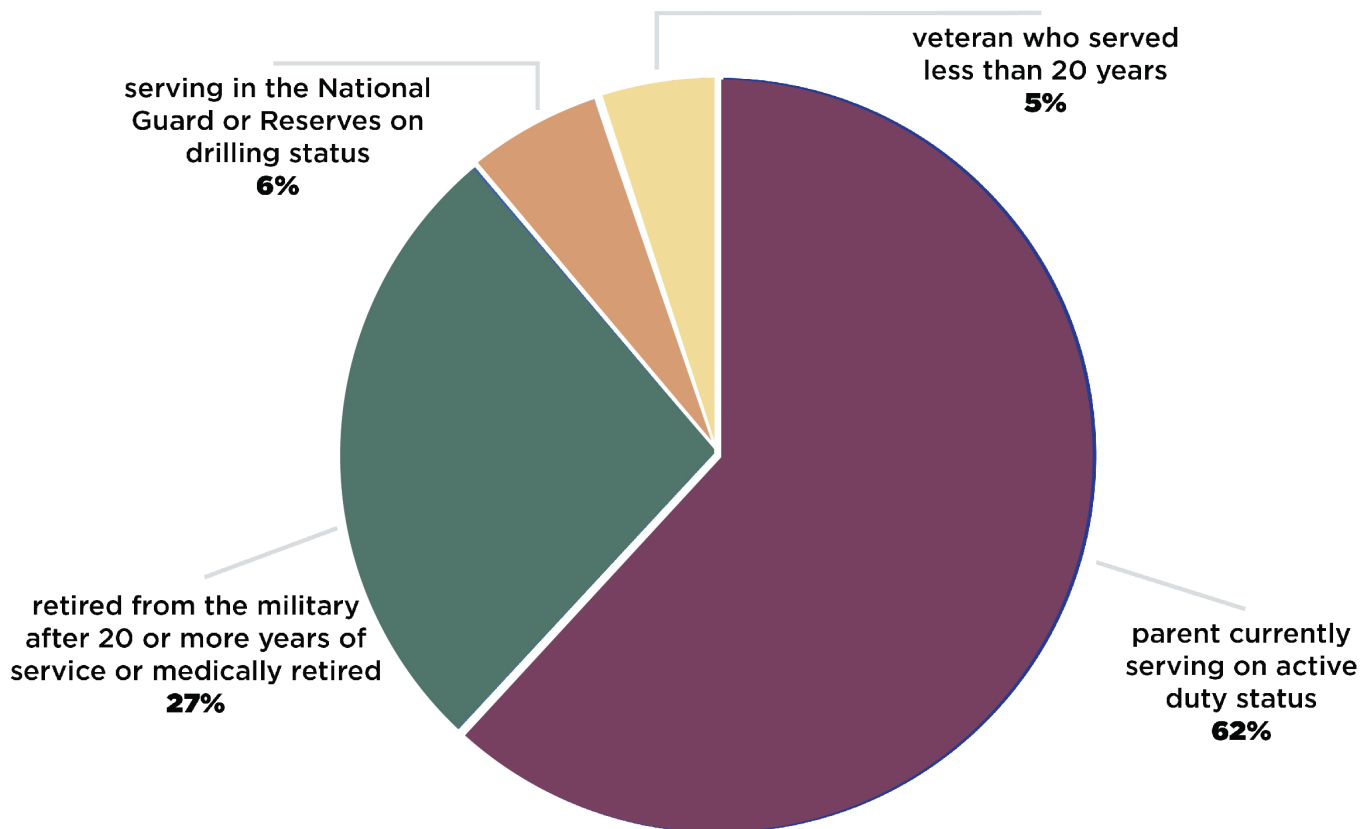


Teens primarily reported their race as:



Military teens were not required to respond to demographic questions and could choose ‘Prefer Not to Answer;’ a small percentage did not report their gender identity, race, or ethnicity.

Military Status of Hidden Helpers' Parent



Most Hidden Helpers reported that their wounded, ill, or injured parent was of an enlisted rank (63%), with less than one-third (29%) of these parents being officers.

About 31% of Hidden Helpers had more than one parent who had served in the military, and of these families, 51% (n = 162) had two parents currently serving on active-duty status, at least one of which was wounded, ill, or injured.

FOOD INSECURITY

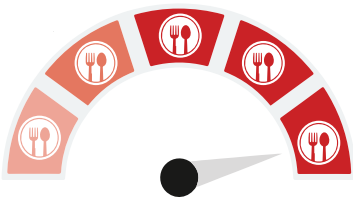
NMFA's Military Teen Experience Survey incorporated questions from the USDA's short form module to assess families' food insecurity. Among Hidden Helper teens, about 45% reported being food secure, or having no or minimal indications of difficulty or limitations accessing food.

Unfortunately, 55% reported some level of food insecurity. About 24% reported experiencing low food security (indicating reduced quality or variety of food) and 31% reported experiencing very low food security (indicating disrupted eating patterns or reduced food intake).

Hidden Helpers' Food Insecurity

	Frequency	Percent
Food Secure	480	44.8
Low Food Security	261	24.4
Very Low Food Security	330	30.8
Total	1071	100.0

When examining food insecurity, Hidden Helpers generally reported more food insecurity compared to teens who did not report that their primary service member had experienced a service-connected wound, illness, or injury. In the broader Military Teen Experience Survey, about **18% of**



military teens reported experiencing low food security and 28% indicated experiencing very low food security.

There has been minimal research to date examining the link between service-connected wounds, illnesses, or injuries and military teen food insecurity. Further research, both qualitative and quantitative, is needed to better understand the teen Hidden Helpers' struggle with food security. It is likely that there are multiple factors influencing food insecurity, such as income.

Parental Service-Connected Wound, Illness, or Injury and Food Insecurity

		Food Insecurity
Has this parent or guardian experienced a military service-connected wound, illness, or injury?	Pearson Correlation	-.095**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001
	N	2004

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

MENTAL WELL BEING

Most Hidden Helpers (**61%**) reported that their mental well-being was **moderate**.

Some Hidden Helpers reported having **low mental well-being (30%)**.

Even fewer reported experiencing **high mental well-being (10%)**.



Teens who reported high mental well-being were generally experiencing feeling optimistic, relaxed, and close with others in their lives. They were also usually able to make decisions easily and felt they were thinking clearly. Alternatively, teens who reported low mental well-being generally were rarely feeling optimistic or relaxed and felt disconnected from others in their lives. They also reported difficulty thinking clearly or making up their mind about decisions. These symptoms are similar to depressive symptoms, and lower scores on this measure can be indicative of teens experiencing depressive symptoms, emphasizing the importance for teens to have access to appropriate resources (Shah et al., 2021).

Hidden Helpers' Mental Well-Being

	Frequency	Percent
Low	316	29.5
Moderate	653	61.0
High	102	9.5
Total	1071	100.0

When examining mental well-being, Hidden Helpers generally reported similar levels of mental well-being compared to teens who did not report that their service member parent had experienced a service-connected wound, illness, or injury.

Previous studies examining mental well-being among children with a wounded, ill, or injured service member or veteran parent have found that Hidden Helpers may experience lower mental well-being. For example, one study found that children's mental health care visits increased by 50% during the initial years of a parental injury, starting from two years prior to parental injury and ending at two years after parental injury (Hisle-Gorman et al., 2019). Moreover, older children in the study averaged a greater increase in mental health visits, suggesting that teens may be particularly impacted by parental injury. More research is needed to better understand how Hidden Helpers' experiences are related to their mental well-being.

Parental Service-Connected Wound, Illness, or Injury and Teen Mental Well-Being

		Mental Well-Being
Has this parent or guardian experienced a military service-connected wound, illness, or injury?	Pearson Correlation	-.105**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001
	N	2004

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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](#).

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