

NATIONAL  
MILITARY FAMILY  
ASSOCIATION

# The Military Teen **EXPERIENCE**

A Snapshot of America's Military  
Teenagers and Future Force

# INTRODUCTION

The National Military Family Association is the leading nonprofit dedicated to serving the families who stand behind the uniform. Since 1969, NMFA has worked to strengthen and protect millions of families through advocacy and programs. The National Military Family Association provides spouse scholarships, camps for military kids, and retreats for families reconnecting after deployment and for the families of the wounded, ill, or injured. 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, and Commissioned Corps of the USPHS and NOAA. Together with Bloom: Empowering the Military Teen, NMFA fielded this military teen experience survey to better understand the experience of the military teen community.



Launched in April 2020, Bloom was created by military teens to empower, highlight, and connect military teens across the globe. “We know how isolating the military lifestyle can be,” their founders say, “and we want to make sure members of our community know they are not alone.”

NMFA and Bloom surveyed **over 2,000 military teens in May 2021** using [the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale \(WEMWBS\)](#). This validated, 7-item scale was used to measure the well-being and psychological functioning of our military teen community ages 13 and up. The scale is structured to focus on a positive approach, and it builds on previous scales to capture a wide conception of well-being, including emotional, cognitive, and psychological components, packaged in a short-form survey teens can reliably complete.

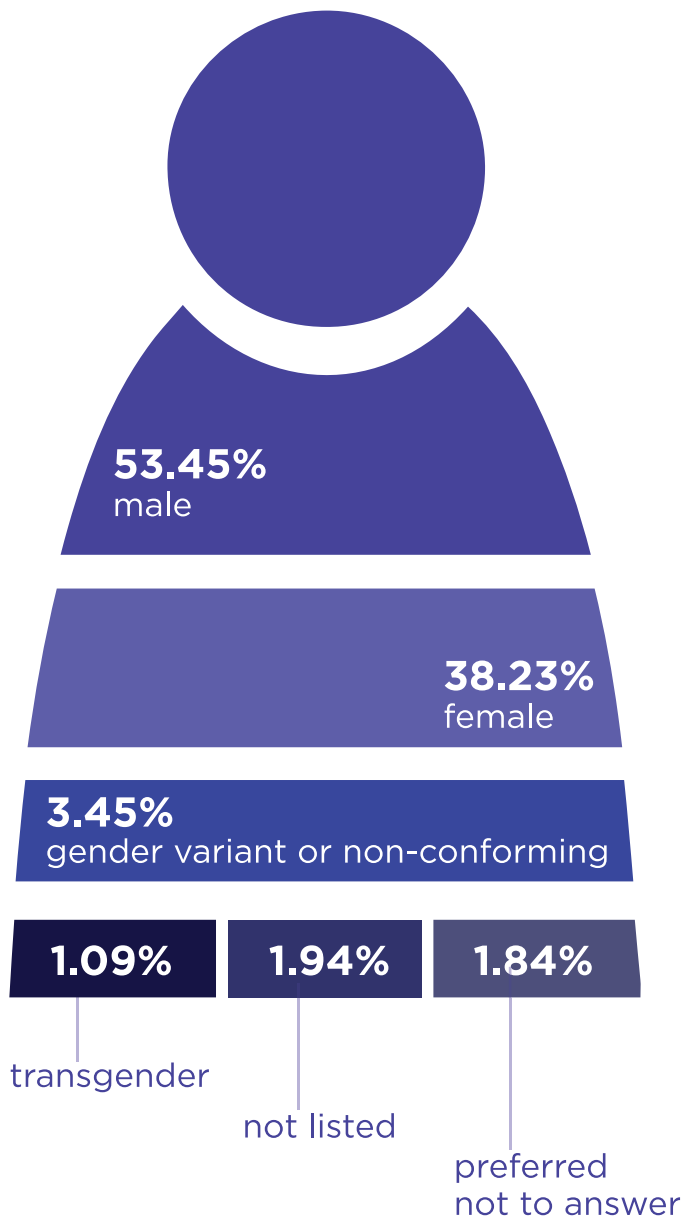
Additionally, we relied on the [USDA Food Security Survey for Youth Ages 12 & Older \(USDA short form\)](#) to measure the food insecurity levels of our military teens.



# DEMOGRAPHICS



Over **2,000 military teenagers** between the **ages of 13 and 19** responded to the NMFA + Bloom Military Teen Survey during a two-week period in May of 2021. (n=2,116)



## They are diverse:

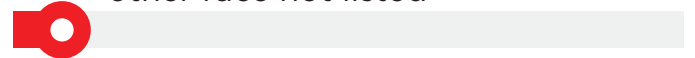
**59%** identified as people of color



**34%** identified as white



**4%** identified their background as "other race not listed"



**3%** preferred not to answer



The teens responding to our survey were somewhat representative of our entire force

**58%** were from an enlisted service member family



**35%** were from an officer service member family



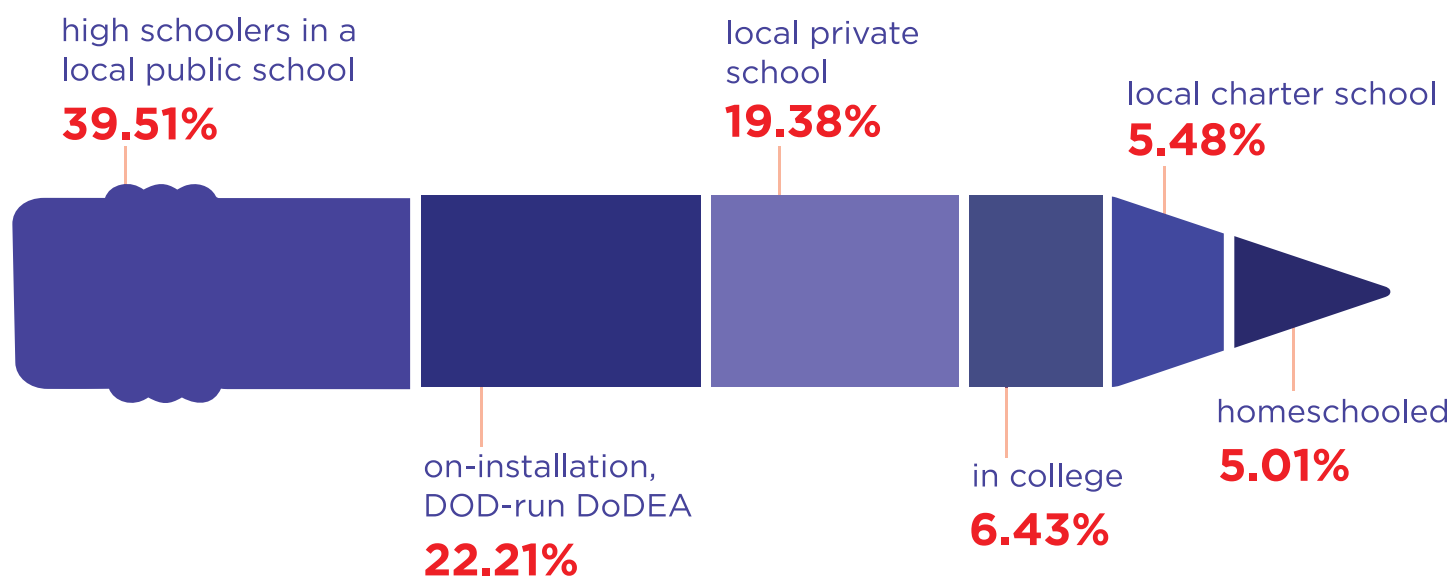
**7%** were unsure



Across the Armed Forces, **approximately 82.4% are enlisted members, and 17.6% are officers** according to the [Department of Defense](#), although that gap closes with more years served.



## The majority of survey respondents were



**Their military experience was varied.** The majority were part of **the Active Duty force (40.93%)**, while others reported being members of military families serving in the **National Guard (27.12%)**, **Reserves (13.11%)**, **retired (11.37%)**, or **veteran families (7.48%)**. Because more Guardsman were activated in 2020 than in any year since World War II and the operational tempo of the post-9/11 wars leaned heavily on the Reserves, these components are critically important to consider in looking at the overall military teen experience.

For many of the teens we surveyed, service was a family business: **43%** of all respondents indicated that not just one parent serves, but rather, two serve or have served in uniform. For these dual military families, the second parents served in **the National Guard (34.03%)**, **on Active Duty (25.52%)**, **in the Reserves (19.11)**, **were veterans (12.35%)**, or **had retired (8.97%)**.

**Their families have experienced the toll of war: 39.03% of respondents said that their serving parent had been wounded either physically or mentally.**

## What We Learned

### Military Teens of Today Are the Force of Tomorrow

The Department of Defense (DoD) knows that today's teens are tomorrow's recruits. Yet, few of America's young people are interested in a military career. [A 2019 DoD poll indicated that \*\*only 13% of Americans aged 16 to 24 said it was likely they would serve in the next few years.\*\*](#) Our military teens, however, responded with a clear message that their family's legacy of service would continue with them. We asked our military teens if they plan to serve in the military in the future. **A stunning majority (65.15%) answered yes.**

As we examine the rest of the teen experience, we keep in mind that these answers represent a snapshot of our future fighting force.

## MILITARY TEENS OF TODAY ARE THE FUTURE FORCE OF TOMORROW.



**65%** of military teens **want to serve.**



**Only 13%** of Americans ages **16-24** say they will serve.

## The Kids Are Not Okay

Military teens' well-being is low. Leaning on validated instruments, we wanted to get an accurate understanding of military teens' mental health. **The results weren't good: 42% of respondents experience low mental well-being on the Warwick scale. The majority (45%) reported only moderate mental well-being, which is still categorized as being at risk. Only 13% of respondents indicated a high level of mental well-being.**

The teen years are hard on everyone, military and civilian alike. [According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\)](#), which routinely monitors American youth mental health and well-being, about **37% of high schoolers experienced persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness in 2019**. While they note that the statistic is alarming, they temper concern by explaining that the most important way to promote positive mental health in the teen community is through connection.

“Fortunately, the same strategies that promote mental health—like helping students feel connected to school/family—help prevent a range of negative experiences, like drug use and violence,” [the CDC notes](#). “Building strong bonds and relationships with adults and friends at school, at home and in the community provides youth with a sense of connectedness. This feeling of connectedness is important and can protect adolescents from poor mental health, and other risks like drug use and violence.”



report their happiness as **low or moderate**

## Connection Can Help But Military Life Makes That Hard

When it comes to connection with people outside their families, military teens are not set up for success.

Military kids move often -- many as often as every two to three years. They are uprooted from their neighborhoods and school communities and move across the country -- or across the globe. The operational tempo of the last two decades has also meant that they're often without at least one parent, who might deploy at a moment's notice. These stressors add up.

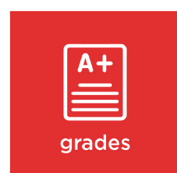
Our teen respondents indicated that moving has been a regular part of their military life. **62.18% said they had moved because of the military between one and five times; 18.50% said they had made military-mandated moves as many as six to ten times. An additional 6.73% reported moving 11 or more times with the military.**

### Military kids move often

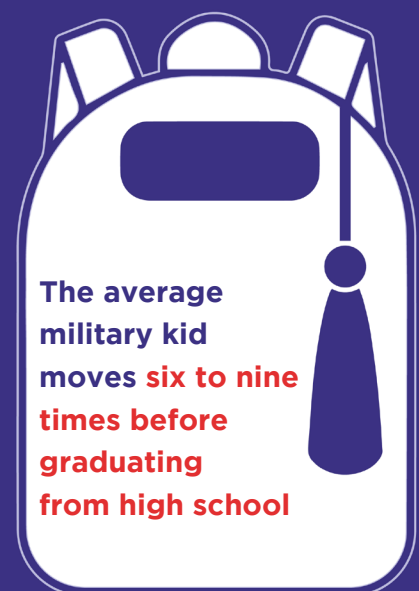
**25%**  
moved **6+ times**

**62%**  
moved **1-5 times**

#### Moving affects:



**19.57%** have been made fun of because **they're a military kid.**





Unsurprisingly, their childhoods were also marked by regular changes in schools: 64.34% attended one to five different schools; **27.83% attended between six and ten; 6.32% attended eleven or more different schools - that's a new school almost every year.**

Moving and changing schools come with their own unique challenges. **31.43%** of military teens surveyed reported that they had been denied participation in an extracurricular because of their military status or the moves required by the military. An additional **38.63%** of respondents said that they met resistance or difficulty transferring credits or taking the classes they wanted because of moving, and **19.57%** felt that they had been treated differently or made fun of because of their military connection.

#### Mental Well-being & School Experiences, Mental Well-being and Perceptions of being connected to the military

		How many different schools have you attended in your life?	How many times have you moved because of the military?	Have you ever been denied participation in an extracurricular because of your military status/ moving?	Have you ever met resistance or difficulty transferring credits or taking the classes you wanted because of moving?
Transformed Score WEMWBS	Pearson Correlation	-.117**	-.160**	-.293**	-.260**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001
	N	1962	1962	1926	1931

#### Correlations

		Do you feel that you have been treated differently or made fun of because you are connected to the military?	Do you feel that you have been treated differently by anyone because of the rank of your serving parent?
Transformed Score WEMWBS	Pearson Correlation	-.262**	-.105**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001	<.001
	N	1877	1962

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

## Teens need to count on their communities for connection, and schools can be a centerpoint of this support.

“As we’ve learned nationally during the COVID-19 pandemic, schools are critical in our communities to support children and families,” [the CDC says](#). “While the expectation is that schools provide education, they also provide opportunities for youth to engage in physical activity and academic, social, mental health, and physical health services, all of which can relieve stress and help protect against negative outcomes.” The challenges associated with the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated military teens’ sense of isolation, with many schools operating remotely through much of the 2020-2021 school year. Military teens who moved during the pandemic faced additional challenges, with little opportunity to meet their new classmates and teachers face-to-face, hampering their ability to make those connections that matter.

## For military teens, the disconnect doesn’t end at school.

For the teens we surveyed, the operational tempo of the post-9/11 wars regularly required families to undergo long and frequent deployments. **45%** of military teens reported that their family had gone through between one and four deployments three months or longer. **7.65%** experienced between five and seven deployments, **6.07% experienced between eight and 10, 3.72% experienced 11-13 deployments, 1.94% experienced 14-16 deployments, and 0.76% -- 15 respondents -- had gone through 19 or more deployments as a military family.**

## Separations Negatively Impact Teens' Well-Being

Our survey results affirm what academic analysis<sup>1</sup> has borne out and military families know first-hand: deployments and separation take a toll on a family's mental health. In our research, mental well-being and number of deployments or separations from a military parent were statistically significant in relation to each other. Military teens who reported experiencing more deployments or separations lasting three months or longer generally reported lower mental well-being.

### Mental Well-being & Number of deployment/separations

		Transformed Score WEMWBS	How many deployments or separations lasting three (3) months or longer have you experienced?
Transformed Score WEMWBS	Pearson Correlation	1	-.113**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		<.001
	N	2054	1960
How many deployments or separations lasting three (3) months or longer have you experienced?	Pearson Correlation	-.113**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001	
	N	1960	1960

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

<sup>1</sup> Cramm, H., McColl, M. A., Aiken, A. B., & Williams, A. (2019). [The mental health of military-connected children: A scoping review](#). *Journal of Child & Family Studies*, 28, 1725–1735.

Separations weren't the only challenges military teens felt at home, though. When asked about their personal experiences with violence, **11.34%** reported that they had experienced domestic abuse or violence in their homes, **5.34%** reported experiencing child abuse, **5.15%** reported experiencing dating violence, and **17.25%** selected multiple answers to this question. The majority (**57.18%**) experienced none of these, but for those who did, the consequences are substantial.

According to the Office on Women's Health, children who witness or are victims of emotional, physical, or sexual abuse are at higher risk for a variety of health problems in both the short and long term. "Children who witness domestic violence or are victims of abuse themselves are at serious risk for long-term physical and mental health problems," [they report](#). "Children who witness violence between parents may also be at greater risk of being violent in their future relationships."

**For teens, the consequences are clear: mental well-being takes an immediate hit in the aftermath of any of these experiences. Teens who witness abuse may act out in negative ways, such as fighting with family members or skipping school. They may also engage in risky behaviors, experience low self-esteem, and have trouble making friends.<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>2</sup> Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2014). Domestic Violence and the Child Welfare System. Washington, DC: Children's Bureau, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.



## Mental Well-being & Violence

		Have you personally experienced any of the following? - Child abuse	Have you personally experienced any of the following? - Domestic abuse or violence in your home	Have you personally experienced any of the following? - Dating violence	Have you personally experienced any of the following? - I have not experienced any of these
Transformed Score WEMWBS	Pearson Correlation	<b>-.167**</b>	<b>-.155**</b>	<b>-.116**</b>	<b>-.260**</b>
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<b>&lt;.001</b>	<b>&lt;.001</b>	<b>&lt;.001</b>	<b>&lt;.001</b>
	N	<b>2054</b>	<b>2054</b>	<b>2054</b>	<b>2054</b>

		Have you known someone who has experienced any of the following? - Child abuse	Have you known someone who has experienced any of the following? - Domestic abuse or violence in your home	Have you known someone who has experienced any of the following? - Dating violence	Have you known someone who has experienced any of the following? - No one I know has had these experiences
Transformed Score WEMWBS	Pearson Correlation	<b>-.163**</b>	<b>-.136**</b>	<b>-.097**</b>	<b>.204**</b>
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<b>&lt;.001</b>	<b>&lt;.001</b>	<b>&lt;.001</b>	<b>&lt;.001</b>
	N	<b>2054</b>	<b>2054</b>	<b>2054</b>	<b>2054</b>

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



## Military Teens Are Experiencing Food Insecurity

While most military families have enough to eat, more military families struggled to put food on the table during the pandemic than ever before, and military teens shared this with us in their responses.

When asked if, within the past year, they had worried about whether their food would run out before they had money to buy more, **an alarming 35.98% of respondents expressed food insecurity as defined by the USDA's validated scoring method and definition, and 28.41% told us that this was sometimes true. An additional 7.57% said that this was often true.**

**More military families struggled to put food on the table during the pandemic than ever before.**



of teens are **concerned about food scarcity**



have **sometimes run out** of food before



say this happens **often**



It's hard to feel okay when **you're worried about having enough food to eat.**

## Mental Well-being & Food Insecurity Recoded

		Within the past year, I worried whether our food would run out before we had money to buy more.	Recoded Food Insecurity
Transformed Score WEMWBS	Pearson Correlation	-.257**	-.219**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001	<.001
	N	1660	1660

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

Long a policy focus for NMFA, military family food insecurity is not a new problem. The costs associated with military-ordered moves, along with corresponding levels of high unemployment among military spouses, put a strain on many military families' finances. In 2021, NMFA surveyed over 11,000 (n=11,359) active duty military families, and **14% reported visiting a charitable food distribution site** to make ends meet at least once in the last year.

At the same time, food insecurity has become a more pressing issue around the nation. The United States Department of Agriculture **reported** that **10.5% of families were food insecure in 2020; Feeding America predicts a higher level of food insecurity for 2021 with as many as 1 in 6 American children not having enough to eat. Brookings notes that, midway into the pandemic, 27.5% of families with children were experiencing food insecurity. Military families are not immune from the pressures facing the nation as a whole.**

The data on military teens demonstrates that food insecurity and mental well-being were significantly related to each other, such that military teens who reported greater food insecurity generally reported lower mental well-being. It's hard to feel 'okay' when you're worried about having enough food to eat.

## Food Insecurity & Plans to Serve

		Do you plan to serve in the military in the future?	Within the past year, I worried whether our food would run out before we had money to buy more.
Do you plan to serve in the military in the future?	Pearson Correlation	1	.180**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		<.001
	N	1814	1574
Within the past year, I worried whether our food would run out before we had money to buy more.	Pearson Correlation	.180**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001	
	N	1574	1660

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

Despite these hardships, our military teens, including those experiencing food insecurity, are ready to be next in line to serve this nation.

“It’s not completely negative and sad as you meet new people and see new places which you never would have as a civilian,” one teen told us. “But, it’s not all unicorns and rainbows either. There’s a lot of emotional pain and baggage that comes with being a military family.”

**Before these military teens become the service members of tomorrow, they rely on us to stand up the policy and program solutions that ensure they have enough food on their tables and the supports they need to build meaningful connections and strengthen their mental well-being.**



## Recommendations

The National Military Family Association has advocated for and supported families with responsive programming for over 50 years. To meet the needs of our military teens now, we need to act on their behalf in Washington, including:

### Aggressively Addressing Food Security

Congress has taken a huge step to address food insecurity among military families in the annual defense bill, known as the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for Fiscal Year 2022. A Basic Needs Allowance would allow for low-income military families to boost their modest pay so they can reliably put food on the table. Learn more about the Basic Needs Allowance [here](#).

### Better Understanding Military Teens Through Research

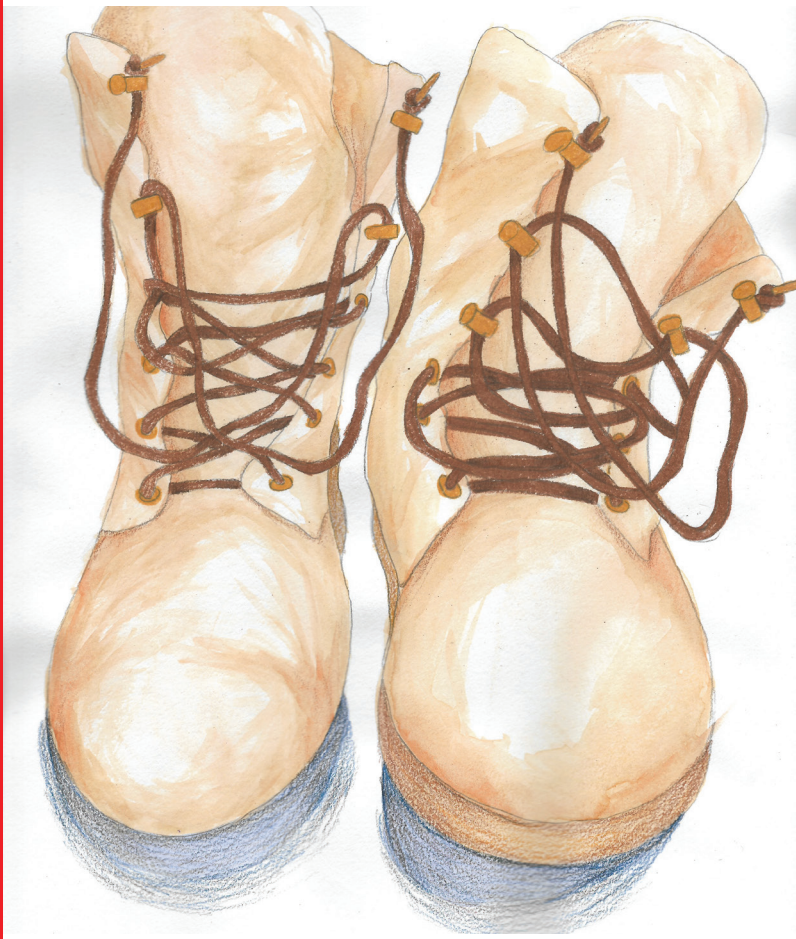
Because the military teen experience is not universal, a deeper exploration into the unique effects of military life on older children and teens is necessary, especially into the impacts of food insecurity, frequent PCS moves on quality of life, education, and career paths on overall well-being. While we already know that PCS moves impact military kids' education, we need to continue to learn about the experiences of these students, the ways PCS moves impact their K-12 and higher education careers, and the effects of persistent barriers and mobility on completion, scholarship access, and academic success. The well-being of military teens has wide implications, and because family members can impact a servicemember's willingness to continue a military career<sup>3</sup>, learning more about the experience of this demographic will provide actionable insights for DoD, partner organizations, service providers, and our communities.

<sup>3</sup> Gonzalez, G. C., Miller, L. L., & Trail, T. E. (2016). Military spouse education and career opportunities programs: Recommendations for an internal monitoring system. Report RR-1013-OSD. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation. Retrieved from [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR1013.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1013.html)

## Building Wellness and Increasing Well-Being

For nearly 20 years, NMFA has hosted Operation Purple programs to enable military kids to build meaningful connections with other children who understand their experience. With programming focused on fostering curiosity and cultivating independence in the outdoors, these in-person and virtual opportunities allow military kids to step away from the unique challenges of military life and just be kids. Programs are built with mental well-being in mind and include intervention and support from Military Family Life Counselors and experienced staff trained in helping military kids overcome the stressors specific to military families. Learn more about NMFA's Operation Purple program [here](#).

**The National Military Family Association, together with Bloom: Empowering the Military Teen, will continue to elevate the voices, experiences, and needs of this critical military family demographic.**





# In Their Own Words

- > I wish that people could understand that being a military teen is sometimes not as glamorous as it sounds. Traveling around is great, but having to constantly change schools and move around is not. Age 16, active duty (O-6) Air Force teen, 10th grader in public school
- > We only may live there 2 or 3 years, but I'm worth your time and we can learn and grow together and then have fond memories to look back on. We may even see each other again one day! Age 14, active duty (E-6) Army teen, home school
- > I was taught how to adapt to changes, my mom has made sure that I have the ability to adapt and overcome changes and challenges that come my way, and have taught me to keep my head up and stay resilient even when life gets hard. Age 18, active duty (E-6) Army, college freshman
- > I've gotten to meet so many new, amazing people over the years along with not so amazing people. I love how I can keep in contact and have different types of conversations with friends from different stations and how we can relate to each other. Age 16, active duty (E-6) Army, 10th grade public school
- > Loss. Not death but having everyone around you constantly disappear. Adjusting a new location is tolerable but losing those close to you hurts like hell. Age 16, active duty (O-6) Army, 10th grade public school

- 
- > Personally, I would say the biggest struggle I have faced went along with moving, I had a lot of trouble moving away from my friends and having to constantly make new ones. And transferring schools was very difficult as I cannot keep the same classes and quite often the credits and classes that I was taking before would not transfer to my new school. Age 18, active duty (E-6) Air Force, college freshman
  - > My IEP doesn't transfer well, and I often get left behind in class because I struggle to keep up and they won't slow down for me or give me the accommodations I need. Every time we move, they retest me for the IEP and that can take months to get the test done and then back. By that time, I am six months into school and falling behind because they won't take the accommodations the last school gave me. Age 14, active duty (W-3) Army, 8th grade, public school
  - > Constantly moving and my father being deployed often. I've grown really close to my current friends and I am scared that I would have to move away at a moment's notice. My father has been deployed often and has missed many birthdays and holidays. He was sent out right before I started high school and I was worried how I was going to get used to starting at a new school and being without my father. Age 16, active duty (responded "unsure" for pay grade) Army, 11th grade, public school

> I would say my biggest struggle as a military teen would be having gaps in my education where one school says “oh, you’ll learn this later on.” Then we move and the next school says, “you should have already been taught this.” Other than that, leaving people behind is extremely hard. Age 17, active duty (O-5) Marine Corps, 12th grade, public school

> It isn’t “better” than civilian life because everything is “given” to us. People think the military gives us housing and food and all this stuff but what they don’t know or see is how much my dad has to work and how much time he misses with his family to give us that support and stability. My mom said we can’t get food stamps because the housing that they “give” them puts their income over the limit so they have to budget every check to make sure everything gets paid and we have enough for groceries. People think it’s easier but it’s not, it’s harder. Age 14, active duty Army (E-5), 8th grade, home school