

Snapshot military families



Snapshot Noun [c] (UNDERSTANDING)

A piece of information or short description that gives an understanding of a situation at a particular time

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**A plain language summary of research and evidence
relating to the UK Armed Forces and veteran
community**

(Updated October 2021)

Produced by the FiMT Research Centre



About the Forces in Mind Trust Research Centre

The Forces in Mind Trust Research Centre was established in October 2017 within the Veterans & Families Institute for Military Social Research at Anglia Ruskin University. The Centre curates the Veterans & Families Research Hub, provides advice and guidance to research-involved stakeholders and produces targeted research and related outputs. The Centre is funded by the Forces in Mind Trust (FiMT), which commissions research to contribute to a solid evidence base from which to inform, influence and underpin policymaking and service delivery.

About Snapshots

Snapshots are designed to aid understanding of complex issues in relation to the Armed Forces (AF), and to support decision-making processes by bridging gaps between academic research, government and charitable policy, service provision and public opinion. Snapshots are aimed primarily at those working in policymaking and service provision roles for the AF, and might also be useful to those seeking facts, figures, and informed comment to empower a more objective discussion among the wider population, including the AF community and the media. The purpose of these Snapshots is to review and interpret research and policy, and to set out brief, plain language summaries to ease understanding and perception.

The FiMT Research Centre has produced a range of Snapshots covering many of the main themes and topics relating to the AF, veteran, and associated families community. Due to frequent research and policy changes, Snapshots will be updated regularly to maintain their relevance. Contributions and comment are welcome via the Veterans & Families Research Hub, where the Snapshots are hosted.

While these summaries are produced using recognised research processes, they are written for a lay audience and cover only a selection of academic and grey (unpublished or non-commercial) literature relating to UK AF issues. While searches have been conducted by reviewing electronic databases and references from relevant articles and reports, as well as a review of websites provided by government and other appropriate organisations, our Snapshots are not intended to present every available source of literature and information source on the subject under consideration.

Version and authors

Based on an original version published by Dr Linda Cooper of the FiMT Trust Research Centre in 2019, this current version was updated in October 2021 by Dr Graham Cable, Kristina Fleuty, Professor Michael Almond and Dr Chantal Radley from the Forces in Mind Trust Research Centre.

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1 Introduction and definitions

This Snapshot summarises issues relating to the families of serving military personnel in the UK AF. It also outlines policy and current structures of support, presenting research evidence where available.

The following terms are used and are defined as follows (further terms and their definitions are [here](#)):

- The term '**transition**' is used to describe the period of (re)integration into civilian life from the AF. For the purposes of this Snapshot, it starts from the point during a period of military engagement at which serving personnel begin their resettlement process, which can continue for several years after the point they leave the armed forces.
- '**Resettlement**' describes the formal processes and procedures by which military-to-civilian transition is managed, and the formal support provided to AF leavers during this transition. It starts with the activation of the resettlement process and continues until the end of resettlement support provision.
- The UK Ministry of Defence (MOD) definition of a 'veteran' is anyone who has 'served for at least one day in Her Majesty's Armed Forces (Regular or a Reserve)'.
- For distinctions between '**Regular**' and '**Reserve**' AF roles and commitments, please see example [British Army definitions](#).

2 Methods

For the first version of this Snapshot, a review was undertaken of the available UK evidence relating to serving and veteran families, using standard reviewing techniques such as searching electronic databases, hand searching of references from relevant articles and reports and a review of websites from government and relevant organisations.

This 2021 version (Version 2) supplements the above by considering relevant research conducted and reported on since the original version's publication in 2019, along with pertinent policy updates and developments.

Due to the use of hyperlinks in this report, all references cited are restricted to those openly available online.

It is recommended that this Snapshot is read in conjunction [with the others](#) in this series, as many of the themes presented are linked through each Snapshot.

3 Background

3.1 Applicability

The information in the rest of this Snapshot refers in the main to Regular serving military personnel/veterans as opposed to their counterparts in the Reserve Forces, as the terms and conditions of such service differ substantially. Where issues also apply to members of the Reserve

Forces and their families (or specifically apply), this will be made clear. Given this Snapshot's focus on the families of serving personnel, information of relevance to families that are preparing to leave or have left the AF can be found elsewhere in this [series of research summaries](#).

3.2 UK serving and veteran Armed Forces' population

Based on [MOD personnel statistics](#), there were 198,880 Regular and Reserve serving members of the UK AF as at 1 April 2021, with 16,850 leaving over the course of the preceding year. The MOD estimated the number of [former Regular and Reserve service personnel residing in Great Britain in 2019](#) at around 2.5 million. This figure is expected to decrease to around 1.6 million by 2028. [Regular and Reserve veterans are estimated](#) to make up 5% of household residents ages 16+ in England and Scotland, and 6% of household residents aged 16+ in Wales. A [separate report](#) estimates the UK AF Regular and Reserve population living in Northern Ireland to be between 40,000 to 60,000.

A significant source of views provided directly from military personnel and families can be found in the annual [Families Continuous Attitude \(FamCAS\)](#) surveys used by both internal MOD teams and external bodies to inform the development of policy and measure the impact of decisions affecting military personnel and their families. However, an [independent review](#) into military family experiences noted that FamCAS is 'is characterised by a fairly low response rate (25% in 2019) and therefore may not be representative' (p. 23). The [response rate in 2021](#) was also 25%.

4 Armed Forces Family Strategy

The [UK Armed Forces Family Strategy](#) 2016-2020 set out an approach to supporting military families, along with providing guidance for MOD policy officials. The intention of the Strategy was to encourage families to feel informed and engaged as an integral element of the AF community, using four principles of: fairness; choice; empowerment and resilience. The objective was to produce an action plan, looking at the following areas of support for AF families: partner employment; accommodation; children's education and childcare; community support; specialist support; health and well-being and transition. Its purpose was to provide direction to officials responsible for policy development in these areas.

However, a 'command brief' from the Army Families Federation (AFF), published in 2018, suggested that Army families believed they were 'being asked to do more for less' and reported a belief that the pay and pensions package had worsened. It also noted Army families were concerned about educational stability for children and employment opportunities for the partners of serving personnel. Our [Education](#) and [Employment](#) Snapshots provide more detail on responses and current provision in these areas.

5 Follow up to the Armed Forces Family Strategy

An independent [review](#) commissioned by the MOD and published in 2020 considered the diverse needs of AF families to assess whether current support provision met those needs, resulting in 110 recommendations to national and local government departments and agencies, the third (charity) and private sectors. The report defined such families as those that are directly connected to the 'Serving Community' and acknowledged that recent decades have seen a shift in society and family

make-up, prompting changes in how 'military families wish to live their lives' (p. 13). It also considered the impact of the breakdown of military families but reported that lack of data regarding separated and divorced military personnel hampered an ability to judge its impact, particularly regarding children. As is the case with much of the research referred to in this Snapshot, the review focused primarily on the families of Regular serving personnel, with coverage of issues concerning the Reserve Forces restricted predominantly to those who had transitioned from Regular to Reserve terms of service.

In response to its recommendations, the [MOD undertook](#) to 'publish an ambitious new strategy' for AF families in late 2021, aimed at providing a framework for measuring progress against the above recommendations, many of which it claims are already being actioned.

6 Armed Forces Families Federations

Each of the three AF has a 'Families Federation' to support relevant families' needs, including the commissioning of much of the research referred to in this Snapshot. More detail can be found via the [Naval Families Federation](#), the [Army Families Federation \(AFF\)](#), and the [RAF Families Federation](#).

7 Charities

According to a [2021 report](#), there are 268 armed forces charities supporting AF families, comprising around 14.8% of the AF charity sector, spending approximately £68.5 million during the year up to August 2020. The three most common areas of support are focused on social groups (examples provided are breakfast clubs, mutual support, and drama groups), along with mental health and education, while other areas less commonly supported include domestic violence, childcare and criminal justice.

8 Service Family Accommodation and housing support

8.1 Service Family Accommodation and private housing support schemes

The [MOD provides and maintains accommodation](#) for full time serving Regular and Reserve military personnel and their families that require or wish to live in them, including in some overseas locations (all of which can be fully furnished if required). It also arranges for occupants and their belongings to move from one property to another upon relocation between assignments.

As of 31 March 2021, the [MOD reported](#) that there were 49,000 Service Family Accommodation (SFA) properties in the UK, a slight decrease compared to the previous year. Almost 10,000 of those properties were vacant (20% of the total), also a decrease from the 10,500 properties (21%) as reported in 2020. The [MOD advised](#) that the number of empty properties is partly explained by the success of the [Forces Help to Buy Scheme \(FHTB\)](#), the retention of SFA to support the [Army Basing Programme](#) and the development of the [Defence Estates Optimisation Programme](#). However, it reportedly aims to further reduce the number of empty properties by broadening an entitlement to occupy them to include '[cohabiting families and veterans, and subletting](#)', along with disposal of property that is no longer required.

In late 1996, the MOD sold most SFA it then held to a private company, [Annington Homes](#), with an arrangement to lease back those it required; an agreement that has since attracted [censure](#). The quality of all MOD-managed properties is kept under review, with almost all recently rated as 'Decent Homes' or 'Decent Homes+' under the [MOD system](#). However, this rating system, along with the above leaseback arrangement, recently attracted critique from the [National Audit Office](#).

The previously mentioned [independent review](#) highlighted further concerns relating to SFA, offering a number of recommendations to address, among other issues, the 'discomfort and misery' in 'damp and mouldy', 'shameful' accommodation (pp. 24-25). It further emphasised that despite over £530M being committed to improving and modernising SFA over four years, this figure was 'not likely to be sufficient to remedy the poor state that much SFA has fallen into over the years' and reverse a belief among families that they are not 'appreciated and valued' (p. 24). These concerns were in addition to many others, including lack of choice or poor administrative procedures, ability to remain in SFA when undergoing divorce and separation, and differences in entitlement for unmarried partners or those not in a civil partnership. These issues were potentially further exacerbated by difficulties in registering with local schools and continuing or finding employment for non-serving members due to frequent moves between military bases and therefore SFA.

The report suggests that some military families consequently elect to rent or purchase private homes (further discussed in the following sub section), with the [2021 FamCAS](#) indicating that 38% of families responding to the survey lived in a privately owned home 'during the working week', an increase of 3% in four years (p. 21). Schemes, such as those outlined in the next paragraph, have been instituted in response to this trend.

The FHTB scheme, available since April 2014 to support private home ownership among serving personnel and families, has received [56,540 applications](#), with 24,100 payments made to a total of £366M (an average of £15,200 per claim) up to April 2021. While FHTB has been [extended](#) until at least 2022, the MOD is also currently piloting its [Future Accommodation Model](#) (FAM), which aims to 'provide more choice to personnel over where, how, and with whom they live [...] based on need rather than rank or relationship status', as well as providing more stability in an otherwise mobile career environment. Initially open to personnel and families in three UK pilot sites, a decision whether to extend the scheme beyond these will be taken in 2022. FAM is reportedly broadly welcomed among the military family community, although there are concerns predominantly among [Army respondents](#) that the aim is to 'do away with SFA and require Serving personnel to find their own accommodation in the private rented or home ownership sectors', therefore a 'cost-cutting exercise and one that would effectively destroy the sense of community built on the patch [SFA estates], rendering Service families more isolated' (p. 41).

8.2 'Dispersed' living

A [2020 study](#) considered the pattern and effects of 'dispersal of British military families in England', defining this as 'families living at considerable distances' from their serving relation's main workplace. An [RAF Families Federation paper](#) published the same year indicated that those living within 10 miles of this 'Parent Unit' were considered dispersed.

The 2020 [paper](#) was based on schools-related data taken from 2011 – 2019, and while acknowledging this provided only a partial account, it concluded that military families appeared to

increasingly opt for dispersed living during that period. This was reportedly motivated by housing, employment and educational stability choices, which it balanced against the risk of 'vulnerability' when families were isolated from sources of support otherwise provided in or close to military bases, particularly when the serving member is working away from that parent location. The study emphasised that the closure of smaller military bases in favour of larger more concentrated establishments has exacerbated this dispersal over the last decade, which may be further hastened by the advent of FAM. Many of these observations were also acknowledged in an RAF Families Federation [study](#) and [survey](#), along with concerns over the quality or availability of SFA, as outlined in the previous sub section.

Responding to the first [study](#), 61% of those participating indicated they felt disadvantaged by separation from partners and military bases, citing reasons such as the creation of a quasi-single parent environment and a consequent lack of involvement of partners in family dynamics, along with childcare issues, issues surrounding 'weekending' and increased stress and cost. Many of these issues were also highlighted in a [2019 study](#) commissioned by the Naval Families Federation (see our [Education and Training Snapshot](#) for more detail), which further pointed to the emergence of mental health issues associated with such separation. Both the [2020](#) and [2019](#) studies offered numerous recommendations to those supporting military families as well as those managing the serving members' military careers, urging greater consideration of family dynamics and communication, support and information efforts.

Despite the disadvantages the above studies and reports revealed, and allied to the positive stabilising effects, perceived [advantages](#) of dispersed living reportedly included an ability to maintain distance between home and work lives, being able to live near friends and family, forming friendships with the civilian community and living in a 'normal' environment. However, additional concerns cited included: civilian friends in the dispersed community not understanding the military lifestyle (especially the effects of deployment); taking a long time to establish those civilian friendships in some cases, and allied to a sense of isolation from the military community and events, a concern over lack of belonging in either the civilian or RAF community.

The MOD-commissioned '[Living in Our Shoes](#)' report, referred to previously, indicated that some of the pressures highlighted in this sub section can lead to family breakdown and/or decisions including to leave the military, not to have children, or to consider having children fostered by other families. Consequently, it urges the MOD to better balance the demands of military and family life, although it acknowledges that dispersed living towards the end of a military career can assist in the transition to civilian work and life.

A more in-depth understanding of housing and accommodation issues for serving personnel, veterans and associated family members can be found in our [Housing Snapshot](#).

9 Deployment

[A study](#) by the King's Centre for Military Health Research (KCMHR) found that military personnel who reported being in danger of injury or death during deployment, were more likely to report a perceived negative effect of deployment on their intimate relationships. Reservists were less likely to report a perceived negative impact of deployment on their children compared with Regulars. Military personnel planning to separate from their partner were at increased risk of suffering with

mental health problems while deployed. Perceived insufficient support from the MOD, and holding a junior rank, were both associated with poor mental health. The study additionally found that deployed UK military personnel with symptoms of psychological distress, who experienced stressors at home, were especially likely to perceive that their family were inadequately supported by the military.

10 Children's well-being

Despite evidence that most children of serving military members '[adapt well to Service life](#)' (p. 48), research conducted by the [Naval Families Federation](#) acknowledges the amount, patterns and types of parental absence faced by military families present additional challenges that are not routinely experienced by most civilians.

The MOD's 2021 [FamCAS](#) reported 80% of military families included children, which, according to [research published in May 2021](#), has increased from 48% in 2009. The latter report further estimated a total population of 'Service children' as 179,406, which it defined as those of 'currently serving regular personnel' but cautioned that this estimate was based on a self-selecting sample of military families and therefore might be conservative (p. 12). Neither do these include children of the Reserve and veteran communities, and [statistics](#) reported in 2016 suggest that the Royal Navy serving and veteran family community alone comprised 104,670 children (which appeared to only account for Regular as opposed to Reserve serving and veteran personnel).

A 2021 [Naval Children's Charity report](#) highlighted that frequent and lengthy absences of military parents on duty 'presents challenges to children through separation', which can reportedly lead to anxiety, impaired academic attainment, substance misuse, violent behaviour and mental health issues (p. 13). This is seemingly especially problematic for families in which both parents are serving, or for single (serving) parent families, as emphasised in the [2020 independent review](#). A 2018 report by the UK's [Children's Commissioner](#) recommended that the MOD avoid 'dual parental deployment' at the same time, and stressed the negative impact of military parental separation on family dynamics and well-being. These issues were similarly reported in a subsequent 2019 Naval Families Federation-commissioned [study](#), along with a 2021 report from the [RAF Benevolent Fund](#). However, as the former [Naval Children's Charity report](#) testifies, not all research concludes that adverse childhood well-being is associated with deployment, with one [study](#) linking poor well-being to 'probable PTSD' (posttraumatic stress disorder). While the [advent of social media](#) can help families communicate during periods of separation, several studies also indicated that this could cause complications, as could the [broadcast of images and news](#) concerning military operations involving one or more parents.

11 Children's educational trajectory and attainment

Please see our [Education and Training Snapshot](#). In addition, many of the reports cited above highlight the effect of frequent family moves during a military career on children's schooling, which can increase the pressure to elect for dispersed living (as outlined in sub section 8.2). In mitigation, the previously mentioned [review](#) recommended that the MOD consider timing moves to better coincide with the start of a school year and, more broadly, to better communicate the support

available to families in avoiding disruption during significant educational milestones, such as preparation for crucial school, college and university examinations.

12 General family health and well-being

Please see our [Physical](#) and [Mental Health](#) Snapshots for more detail. In addition, and increasingly, the effects of moral injury on military personnel [are being recognised](#), which in turn can have a negative impact on families.

13 Partners' employment

Please see our [Employment Snapshot](#) for more detail. In addition, a [2018 report on military partner employment barriers and support](#) recommended the introduction of an online jobs platform aimed at: providing information to employers on the benefits of employing military spouses; demonstrating evidence by employers of adherence to the [Armed Forces Covenant](#); providing priority recruitment of military spouses for military-related jobs; introducing university training partnerships to spouses for (re)training, and targeting the advertisement of employment support programmes to specific groups of partners. Longer term recommendations included: challenging the military culture; providing paid or subsidised childcare for military families; challenging employer stereotypes of spouses; introducing tailored training programmes for different groups of spouses or partners; and targeting overseas spouses or partners for support.

An [RAF Benevolent Fund report](#) shared similar findings, where isolation and partner employment were key concerns, while the [2020 independent review](#) offered numerous recommendations regarding partner employment and childcare.

14 Foreign and Commonwealth families

A [report](#) to consider if current support is meeting the needs of Foreign and Commonwealth personnel, veterans and their families identified that information gathering and recording is limited, thus preventing planning for service provision. Issues of immigration, settlement and visas have a considerable impact on them, especially due to recent increases in the costs of the application process. The financial pressures this process creates can in turn lead to additional burdens in terms of debt, employment, housing and marital issues, which make transition to civilian life for this community exceptionally difficult. The [AFF website](#) offers comprehensive advice and information to those affected.

According to a [2021 report](#), 79% of military charities supporting families focus on Foreign and Commonwealth issues, with almost 30% supporting the affected with resettlement, visa and immigration difficulties. The AFF has become a leading advocate for Foreign and Commonwealth families; one-fifth of its enquiries received in 2019 were related to issues particular to this community, making this the charity's second most common area of enquiry.

15 Domestic abuse

The 2020 '[Living in our Shoes](#)' study highlighted research regarding an apparent increase in concerns over domestic abuse in the AF family community, perhaps motivated by recent broader public awareness campaigns that have encouraged greater willingness to disclose such issues. Despite a lack of data, the report alludes to risk factors associated with military work and life, particularly those associated with operational deployments. In response, the same report outlines MOD initiatives to tackle these issues, including the [Domestic Abuse Strategy 2018-2023](#), but further recommendations are made.

16 Conclusion

This Snapshot has focused on the needs of the families of those serving in the UK's AF, in several areas most focused on in publicly available UK research and policy.

The most comprehensive review into issues affecting AF families, launched in 2020, can be found on our Veterans and Families Research Hub [here](#). In response, it offers 110 recommendations to a variety of agencies, including the MOD, that support military families.

As this Snapshot is the last in the series, readers might like to read it in conjunction with its linked summaries, all of which can be accessed [here](#).

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