



# A family-centred perspective

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## Making military families in Canada a research priority

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### THE CURRENT STATE OF MILITARY FAMILY RESEARCH

Since the 1990s, the nature, frequency, and intensity of military operations have shifted, and these shifts have, in turn, had an impact on the families of Canada's military personnel. Operational tempo has increased and has been almost continuous, and the roles of Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) personnel have changed from "peacekeepers to peacemakers to warriors."<sup>1</sup> In 2013, the Office of the Ombudsman, National Defence and Canadian Forces, released its seminal report on military family health and well-being, *On the Homefront: Assessing the Well-Being of Canada's Military Families in the New Millennium*. This report brought into view the contexts, meanings, and consequences associated with recent changes in CAF military operations for members, Veterans, and families.

The Ombudsman's report noted that mobility, separation, and risk have an impact on most serving military members and their families for much of their military careers.<sup>1</sup> Canadian military families relocate 3–4 times more often than their civilian counterparts, with little input as to where, when, or for how long, disrupting continuity of access to health care services. Frequent relocations also affect children's participation in school, academic progress, and access to educational accommodations for those with identified disabilities or

though Canadian military families value and take pride in their family member's military service, mobility and separation, along with the "relentless upheaval of military life,"<sup>1</sup> can be highly disruptive to families. Civilian family members interviewed for the report shared their concern that their children were "paying a price for their parent's service to the nation."<sup>1</sup>

Although Canadian military family research has been ongoing for approximately 25 years, efforts to develop this body of research were, until recently, hampered by the lack of funding for civilian research and the infrastructure to support collaboration. This has recently changed via the networks established through the Canadian Institute for Military and Veteran Health Research. At present, research involving present-day military families focuses overwhelmingly on the US experience. In recent years, this literature has paid greater attention to understanding how military life affects families and how resilience can be enhanced within military families.<sup>3</sup> *Resilience* is defined as the "positive adaptation, or the ability to maintain or regain mental health, despite experiencing adversity."<sup>4</sup>

On the whole, the research examining military families has tended to take a risk or problem perspective.<sup>5</sup> Very little research has explored the factors, or combination of factors, that support successful and ongoing resilience within military family life.<sup>6</sup> Little is known









# IMPACTS





## The Impact of Parental Operational Stress Injury on Child Mental Health and Well-Being: A Scoping Review

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### ABSTRACT

Recognizing the impact of parental mental health on child development, the purpose of this scoping review was to identify and synthesize the research literature describing the impact of parental operational stress injury (OSI) on children and youth from military and veteran families. Arksey and O'Malley's 2005 guidelines for conducting scoping reviews were followed. A total of 18 separate databases were searched, in addition to three university-based discovery platforms. From this search, 506 potential sources were identified; 64 proceeded to full data extraction and analysis. This study identified two significant themes in the current literature. First, there are multiple ways in which parental OSIs can impact children and youth. Families need to renegotiate parenting roles and responsibilities, experience changes in spousal relationships that can cascade into parenting, and face shifting family dynamics. In addition, children and youth can experience secondary traumatization, be at risk for child maltreatment, and manifest general impacts on their mental health and development. Second, responding to the impacts through collaboration and innovation. Future directions include informing research with the voices of all members of the family. Knowledge translation strategies are necessary for collaboration across all areas to support this population.

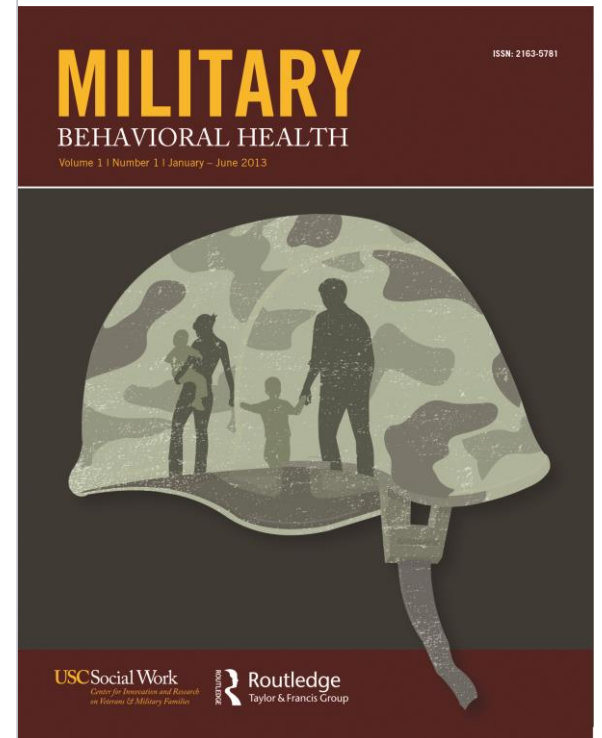
### KEYWORDS

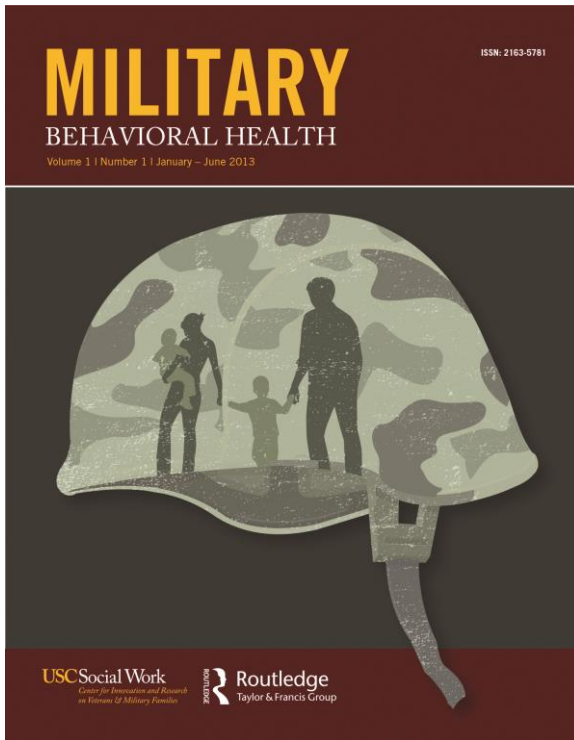
Military families; child/youth development; operational stress injuries; mental health

### Background




Poor parental mental health and associated stressful home lives can have deleterious impacts on a child's psychosocial development and academic achievement (Acri & Eaton Hoagwood, 2015; Gupta & Ford-Jones, 2014;

parents (Wilkinson et al., 2013). Research consistently demonstrates higher rates of psychosocial problems in children of parents with mental health difficulties than those in the general population (Thompson, Kemp, Wilson, Pritchett, Minnis, & Toms-Whittle, 2010).





## Impact of Canadian Armed Forces Veterans' Mental Health Problems on the Family During the Military to Civilian Transition

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### ABSTRACT

Military to civilian transition can significantly affect veterans' lives. This study aimed to increase understanding of how veteran mental health problems impact the family during the transition to civilian life. We used a sequential multiple qualitative design. Twenty-six family members of veterans with mental health problems completed individual interviews and 9 participated in 3 focus groups. Veteran's mental health problem(s) created multifaceted and pervasive changes in family structure, roles, and routines, and these changes created negative mental health and well-being impacts for family members. Transition may compound stressors related to mental health, with significant consequences for family systems.

### KEYWORDS

military to civilian transition; Canadian Armed Forces; veterans; veteran families; mental health; military families; Posttraumatic stress disorder

### Introduction

Military service and the subsequent transition to civilian life can have significant effects on the lives of all family members, including the serving personnel. During the military-to-civilian-transition (MCT), serving members engage in a complex process of entry

or co-occurring health problems (Thompson et al., 2014; Van Til et al., 2017).

Although a successful transition implicitly includes the military family, there is little research describing the impact of the transition period on spouses, children, and extended family and, in particular, the expe-



Original Article

## Navigating health care systems for military-connected children with autism spectrum disorder: A qualitative study of military families experiencing mandatory relocation

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### Abstract

**Background:** Most military families experience mandatory relocation, or posting, several times during the military career. For Canadian military families who must access provincial or territorial health care systems, maintaining reasonable continuity of care is a persistent issue. Such challenges may be amplified when a child in a military family has special needs within the health and educational systems.

**Objective:** The purpose of this qualitative study was to gain a better understanding of Canadian Armed Forces families' experiences in navigating health care systems on behalf of a child with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in the context of mandatory relocation.

**Methods:** Parents of children with ASD, where at least one parent serves in the Canadian Armed Forces and had faced military-related relocation, were recruited. Semi-structured interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed thematically.

**Results:** Twelve participants represented 12 families and 15 children with ASD. Participants discussed two primary themes. (1) High mobility inherent in the military lifestyle can create disruptions and discontinuities to service, including delays in diagnosis or intervention, losses and gains in available services determined by the direction of posting, and the need to start health care access processes



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# Exploring the experience of parents of ill and injured Veterans

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# Findings

Parents would like roles and rights acknowledged.

Great personal, financial, and occupational expense.

Responsible for their children, they see themselves as part of the military unit.

Play crucial roles but felt forgotten and marginalized.



## Experiences of children growing up with a parent who has military-related post-traumatic stress disorder: a qualitative systematic review

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### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** The objective of this review is to describe the experiences of children growing up in military families with a parent who has military-related post-traumatic stress disorder.

**Introduction:** Whether serving as a peacekeeper or warrior, military service is both physically and psychologically demanding, increasing exposures to potentially traumatic and morally injurious events and threats to personal safety. Those who have served in the military are at increased risk of developing post-traumatic stress disorder, which includes symptoms such as emotional numbing, withdrawal, and hyperarousal. Research has focused on the experiences of, and impacts on, spouses and partners of military veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder, with quantitative and synthesis studies reporting on measurable impacts on children growing up in military families where a parent is diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder.

**Inclusion criteria:** This review included children who are currently living in, or have grown up in, military families in domestically peaceful nations that deploy their armed forces to global locations of political instability, armed civil conflict, or natural disasters for the purposes of peacekeeping, humanitarian aid, or war. This review also included parents living with post-traumatic stress disorder who speak specifically about the experience of their children. Situations of homeland conflict were excluded. The military families of interest are those with one or more parent with a diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder associated with military service. Traumatic experiences leading to post-traumatic stress disorder can be acquired prior to military service or through unrelated experiences, so it cannot be presumed that military service or even combat deployment, in and of itself, causes post-traumatic stress disorder. This review includes the experiences of children currently in childhood as well as adult children of a parent with current or previous military service.

**Methods:** The following databases were first searched in August 2016 and updated in January 9, 2020: MEDLINE, Embase, Web of Science Core Collection, CINAHL, PsycINFO, AMED, ERIC, and ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global. This review was conducted in accordance with JBI methodology for systematic reviews of qualitative evidence and with an *a priori* protocol.

**Results:** Twelve studies were included. The majority of the studies were published after 2006. Elicited through data from adult (n = 65) and adolescent (n = 43) children and/or their parents (n = 65), the review represents the experiences of participants from military families in the United States, Canada, and Australia. There were four synthesized findings: i) Parental post-traumatic stress disorder creates a volatile and distressing climate within the family, eliciting a range of responses from children (87 findings across three categories); ii) Parental post-traumatic stress disorder ripples through the family system, disrupting interpersonal communication and relationships during childhood (57 findings across four categories); iii) Children can experience emotional and psychological difficulties well into adulthood (80 findings across five categories); and iv) Making sense of it all and moving beyond parental post-traumatic stress disorder can take significant time, energy, and support (74 findings across four categories).

## Qualitative Systematic Review – high level of evidence

# How do children describe their experiences of growing up in a military family with a parent who has military-related PTSD?



# Family Climate

Parental PTSD creates a volatile and distressing climate within the family, eliciting a range of responses from children

- When parental PTSD involves emotional dysregulation and reactivity, volatility, and/or abuse, family life becomes skewed around managing and mitigating the PTSD
- Parental PTSD can disrupt typical parent–child activities and roles.
- Children recognize something is wrong and struggle to find effective ways to deal with it.

# Family Relations

Parental PTSD ripples through the family system, disrupting interpersonal communication and relationships during childhood.

- Parental PTSD constrains emotional connections within parent–child relationships.
- Mothers played an important role in moderating the impact of the father’s PTSD on the family.
- Parental PTSD affects sibling relationships.
- Communication about parental PTSD is variable, tending towards extreme detail or silence.



# Lasting effects

Children can experience emotional and psychological difficulties well into adulthood.

- Children have broad psychoemotional reactions that can affect areas like well-being, sleep, and school.
- Children report a complex array of entangled negative emotions
- Children can feel responsible and at fault for the parent's PTSD, coupled with a sense of worthlessness and inadequacy well into adulthood.
- Mental health issues began in childhood, persisting into adulthood.
- Adult children describe ongoing difficulties with social and intimate relationships.

# Pathways forward

Making sense of it all and moving beyond parental PTSD can take significant time, energy, and support.

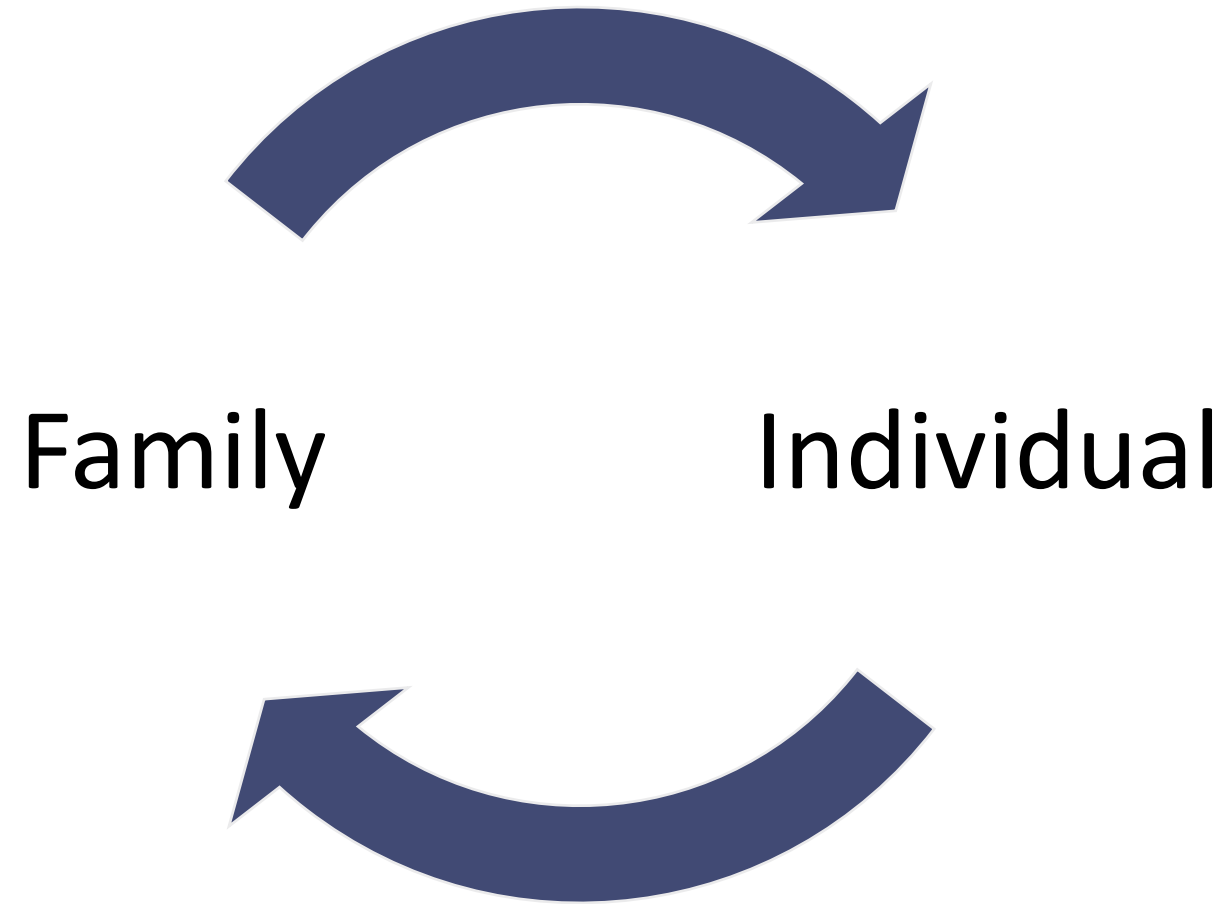
- Connecting the dots and understanding the experience to be related to parental PTSD.
- Seeing the similarities between parent and self and working to interrupt the echoes.
- Compassion for self and others, acceptance, and forgiveness can lead to reconciliation with self and second chances with family
- Adult children may find a pathway towards growth through their experiences,



# Implications & Recommendations

- There is a need to develop effective ways of communicating with children about the nature of both the traumatic exposure and the PTSD itself.
- If such issues are not systematically identified and targeted within the ecology of the family system, whatever form that may take, the issues are unlikely to spontaneously resolve or remit; intervention during childhood within family systems is needed.
- Accurately labeling parental PTSD symptoms and behaviors, as well as moving to create developmentally appropriate ways of discussing the trauma associated with the PTSD, may help prevent children from internalizing responsibility and fault for those symptoms and behaviors.
- Moving forward towards healing needs to involve a concerted, intentional engagement with how the parent has to process the trauma and how to improve parent-child relations.
- Reframing PTSD from a family systems perspective rather than an individual condition reveals multiple avenues for intervention within families to improve relationships and family functioning

# BIDIRECTIONAL CONSIDERATIONS







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DEBORAH NORRIS *Mount Saint Vincent University*

STEPHANIE VENEDAM AND LINNA TAM-SETO *Queen's University*

## Toward a Model of Military Family Resiliency: A Narrative Review

*Over the years, the construct of resilience has been increasing in complexity, indicated by the lack of consensus in its definition, operationalization, and measurement. Resiliency in military families is of particular interest given the nature of military life. A narrative review explored and synthesized how resilience and resiliency are understood in the military family literature. Twenty references were identified and underwent a detailed data extraction process focused on descriptions of resilience. Five themes were identified: the difference between resilience and resiliency, intrafamilial factors, processes that enhance military family resiliency, the role of context, and family–context interactions. These themes have informed the development of a synthesis of models of family resiliency that can reveal areas of vital significance for military families and serve as an important starting point to inform ongoing research and theory develop-*

*successful adaptation despite challenging or threatening circumstances (Baptist, Barros, Cafferky, & Johannes, 2015; Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013), is actually much more. The lack of consensus on the definition, operationalization, and measurement of resilience evident in the broader literature (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000; Munoz, Brady, & Brown, 2016) underscores this point. For example, Luthar et al. (2000) articulate the need to critically evaluate the concept of resilience: “Work on resilience possesses substantial potential for augmenting the understanding of processes affecting at-risk individuals.” Moreover, issues with operationalizing and measuring resilience persist, with conceptual challenges “particular to resilience” (Pangallo, Zibarras, Lewis, & Flaxman, 2015, p. 1) and “inconsistencies in definition, operationalization, and measurement indicat[ing] the need for further theoretical ‘delineation’” (p. 2).*

RESEARCH

Open Access



# “You can’t un-ring the bell”: a mixed methods approach to understanding veteran and family perspectives of recovery from military-related posttraumatic stress disorder

Kate St. Cyr<sup>1\*</sup>, Jenny J. W. Liu<sup>2</sup>, Heidi Cramm<sup>3</sup>, Anthony Nazarov<sup>2</sup>, Renee Hunt<sup>4</sup>, Callista Forchuk<sup>4</sup>, Erisa Deda<sup>5</sup> and J. Don Richardson<sup>2</sup>

## Abstract

**Background:** Military-related posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a complex diagnosis with non-linear trajectories of coping and recovery. Current approaches to the evaluation of PTSD and treatment discontinuation often rely on biomedical models that dichotomize recovery based on symptom thresholds. This approach may not sufficiently capture the complex lived experiences of Veterans and their families. To explore conceptualizations of recovery, we sought perspectives from Veterans and their partners in a pilot study to understand: 1) how Veterans nearing completion of treatment for military-related PTSD and their partners view recovery; and 2) the experience of progressing through treatment towards recovery.

**Methods:** We employed a concurrent mixed methods design. Nine Veterans nearing the end of their treatment at a specialized outpatient mental health clinic completed quantitative self-report tools assessing PTSD and depressive symptom severity, and an individual, semi-structured interview assessing views on their treatment and recovery processes. Veterans/partners participated in a separate interview to capture views of their partners/treatment and

FAMILIES.

THEMSELVES.

MATTER.

In their own right, not just as an extension of the organization.

Not just as caregivers.

Yes, families play that important role. But they have their own needs and experiences, in their own right.



# Travelling Towards Transition - Considerations for the Military Family

*H Cramm, D Norris, R Dekel, N T Fear*

Military-to-civilian transition is a complex and active process. Although researchers have concentrated on the experience of the serving member, there has been growing international recognition that transition involves and affects everyone in a military family.<sup>1-10</sup> Everyone leaves the military at some point, so the journey out should be an expected one.

Drawing on family science, we take an ecological systems approach to conceptualising the journey undertaken by family members experiencing military-to-civilian transition. Understanding that families are a set of individuals interacting within broader, interdependent systems,<sup>11, 12</sup> we use the analogy of a family preparing to take a trip to conceptualise family factors that need to be considered through the military-to-civilian transition process. The family will be travelling towards a destination—in this case, life outside of the military. For any trip, one needs to have a plan that includes, among others, mode of travel and travel style; these converge with the travel style to create a military-to-civilian transition experience for families. Those planning for this journey need to think beyond how the 'driver' will cope with the demands of the trip and extend that lens to consider the accompanying 'passengers'.

## Mode: How will they get there?

As transition approaches, the family will select the most appropriate mode of travel for their journey. The family may choose to travel by bike, car, train, plane, bus or boat, depending on the size, composition and family dynamics, along with the health and ages of the family members. Is everyone travelling together, joining for part of the trip, or meeting the family at the final destination? Key features related to cost, comfort and reliability of the selected travel mode will affect the journey. Is the mode of travel newer or in need of maintenance? Is it reliable or prone to breakdown or delays? How far can the selected mode of travel go before a stop is required? Depending

on the mode of travel, need diaper changes, driving may be a preferred option to flying.

## Plan: What's their plan?

Now, think of the different kinds of trips the veteran and his/her family could take. This might be a scenic drive along the old roads of the coast, with sightseeing and getting back to nature in mind. Or, it might involve a direct flight to get to an urban centre with amusement parks and shopping outlets. Alternatively, a cruise might provide something for everyone because some family members don't ride roller coasters, others don't enjoy shopping and one has a leg injury that limits the kinds of activities the family might engage in. Perhaps the family is heading back to connect with their larger, extended family in their hometown or going 'off the grid', removed from society. If the trip was unexpected, as it might be if a friend or family took ill; the family may be planning the trip as they are taking it.

## Style: What's their style?

In addition to the mode of travel and plan for the trip, organisational style and comfort have to be considered. Some families will have every stop mapped out, with a clear plan, right down to a daily schedule. These families will be stocked up with snacks, drinks, hand wipes and emergency kits. Other families might have a looser plan of what they want to do on a given day, determined the morning of, with decisions informed by factors such as weather and the collective energy of the group. Some families may be able to adapt to unexpected challenges like delayed flights and change their route, while others may feel the need to adhere precisely to the original plan.

## What about a guided tour? Trip reviews? Or travel insurance?

All of these questions concern the family's planning

# Military families and military-to-civilian transition: the current state of play

Heidi Cramm ,<sup>1</sup> D Norris,<sup>2</sup> NT Fear,<sup>3,4</sup> R Dekel<sup>5</sup>

Military-to-civilian transition is a complex phenomenon; there is no consensus concerning the determinants of success, the mechanisms that support transition, and when transition begins and ends.<sup>1</sup> Theories on military-to-civilian transition mainly conceptualise the process as unfolding through a linear, phase-based process and explore a myriad of factors that are thought to have an impact, whether positive or negative, on the transition process and outcomes for the service person. No single theoretical approach to military-to-civilian transition is dominant.<sup>1</sup>

Families have been noted to share responsibility in the veteran's transition<sup>2</sup> and can support the transition of serving members in a variety of instrumental and emotional ways.<sup>3</sup> In her testimony to the Canadian Parliamentary Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs, Dr Deborah Norris summarised the interdependence between the transition of the service person and their family's transition: 'If the family is struggling, the veteran will as well, and this, of course, would be a significant barrier to health and well-being through the military to civilian transition'.<sup>4</sup> The experiences of families through transition have typically been analysed with respect to their role in supporting the veteran through the process, not how families, in their own right, experience the transition.

Models of transition based on systems theory account for the interdependence between veteran transition and family transition, while bringing into view the unique standpoints, needs and characteristics of families as independent units of analysis.<sup>5</sup> It is time that families are more fully integrated into military-to-civilian transition theories, frameworks, policies and programmes, a step that may reveal

the complexity of transitioning family systems, both in relation to interdependence with and independence from the veteran's transition experiences.

We recommend that two broad concepts be adopted for researchers, service providers and policy makers alike (Box 1).

Over the course of the military career, families have adapted to and been impacted by the occupational risks and requirements of military service; families have their own needs and issues, in their own right. Policies and services should align with contemporary realities of what military families look like and how they function. It is critical that we move beyond the traditional perspective of family to recognise the experiences and needs of all families. The current trend towards linear, phase-based modelling of military-to-civilian transition fails to account for both the impact that the family can have on the transition experience and the complexity of the families in which those individuals are embedded. By expanding understandings of transition to a more ecological one, researchers, policy makers, programme developers and service providers—and the veterans and their families—will be able to more effectively recognise and address the ways in which families move through transition in relation to the veteran, as well as how the family might impact or be impacted by the transition.

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## Box 1 Recommendations

**Define military families in ways that promote inclusivity.**

- ▶ Recognise diversity within and across military families.
- ▶ Align research, programmes and policy with contemporary demographics of military families which represent a diversified picture of family structures (eg, dual-serving couples, blended families and single-parent families).<sup>6–8</sup>
- ▶ Counter the expectation that military families comprise a male serving member, a civilian female spouse or partner, and young children, and explicitly consider the experiences and needs of historically overlooked subpopulations such as women.

**Recognise that families are simultaneously a system and a collection of individuals.**

- ▶ Consider the family as a unit of interacting individuals. From the outside, they may appear to be a singular unit, but inside each family member has a different and dynamic state of health, well-being and functioning, along with readiness to engage in the transition to civilian life.
- ▶ Expect and explicitly acknowledge that all members of the family unit do not experience the same needs at the same point in the transition process.
- ▶ Integrate socioecological conceptualisations of family systems<sup>9</sup> and the social determinants of health for the veteran<sup>10–13</sup> to recognise the dynamic and reciprocal interactions between families and external environments such as communities and formal and informal supports.

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Families themselves matter unequivocally *in their own right*, with experiences, needs, and issues directly and indirectly related to the occupations of the family member.







# PSPNET Families Wellbeing Hub

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Drs Heidi Cramm, Heather Hadjistavropoulos, & Nathaie Reid  
(Co-Principal Investigators)



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visit [www.pspnetfamilies.ca](http://www.pspnetfamilies.ca)

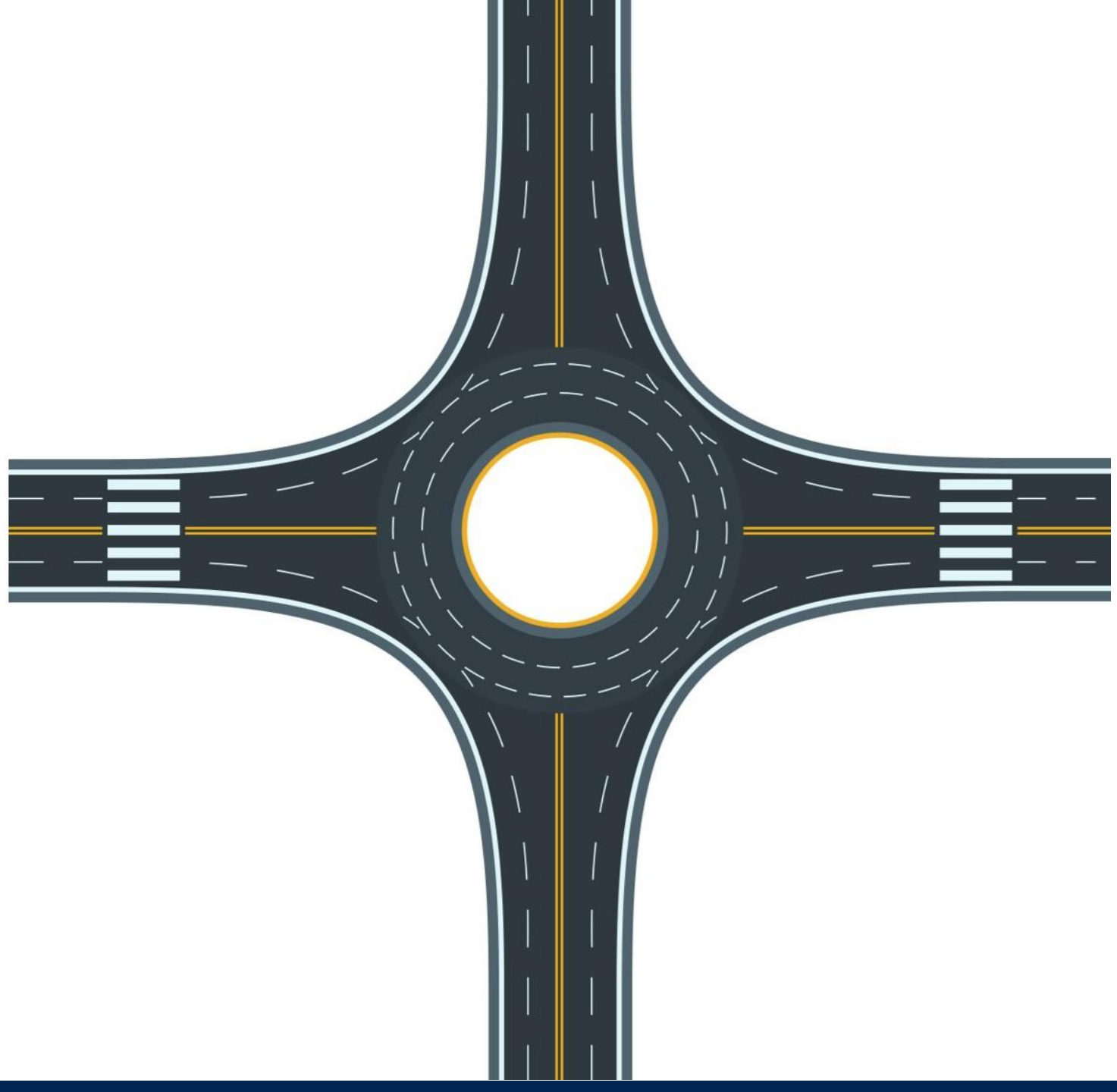
**THIS RESEARCH** is approved by the University of Regina Ethics Board & Queen's University Ethics Board



# GROUNDING PROGRAM AND POLICY DEVELOPMENT FOR VETERAN FAMILIES IN LIFESTYLE DIMENSIONS



What *about* the families?  
Strengthening a research ecosystem for defence and public safety families






THANK YOU!



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