

Family Formation and Military Service among a Contemporary Cohort of Americans

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Contemporary demographic trends in the U.S. include later ages at marriage and increases in the proportion who never marry (Goodwin et al. 2009; Kreider 2005), as well as delayed childbearing and increased childlessness (Mathews and Hamilton 2009). Retreat from marriage and childbearing is a complex issue, owing to shifts in the social and economic contexts in which contemporary young Americans experience the transition to adulthood and do so differently by social class background. Recently, Meier and Allen (2008) have called for greater research attention to relationship development among military service personnel as a significant proportion of the young population from working class backgrounds. On one hand, military service may constrain courtship opportunities. However, military service benefits may ease or promote family formation.

Pronounced investment in supporting families is seen through various benefits afforded to U.S. military personnel, which include housing assistance, child care, and household maintenance allowances, among others (Gifford 2006). As a result, the military has been described as a substitute welfare program (Gifford, 2006; Segal, 1989), affording service members a type of socioeconomic security that many jobs in the current economy lack. Young people who pursue higher education and civilian employment are expected, in general, to be older when they achieve independence and security in financial status and housing—key considerations for many groups of young people contemplating marriage and children.

Questions also arise as to whether military service benefits may encourage family formation and/or differential enlistment among those with spouses/children. Existing research on earlier cohorts suggest that family formation rates among women in the military appear relatively high when compared to their civilian counterparts (Lundquist and Smith 2005). Still, it remains unclear whether the same trends continue into later decades, as the nature of U.S. military involvement abroad changes. Lundquist and Smith (2005) acknowledge data limitations that preclude a consideration of selection mechanisms, while Teachman (2007) provides support for the role positive selectivity into the military. In other work, Lundquist (2004) finds that, despite a large race gap in rates of marriage among the general population, the military serves to equalize marriage rates for Black and White service members. This may be suggestive of an influence of socioeconomic benefits on opportunities for marriage.

The goal of this study is to assess whether the military appears to help young people overcome circumstances of contemporary social and economic life that 1) impede family formation during early adulthood, 2) have led to increasing ages at marriage and childbearing, and 3) contribute to the rise in non-marriage, cohabitation, and childlessness. I use contractual data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health (Add Health). Add Health began in 1994-1995 as a nationally representative, school-based sample of 20,745 adolescents in 7th – 12th grades. The overall sample is representative of United States schools with respect to region of the country, urbanicity, school type (e.g., public, parochial, private non-religious, etc.), and school size. Members of ethnic minority groups were over-sampled. Further details regarding the sample are available at <http://www.cpc.unc.edu/projects/adhealth/>. Wave IV of Add Health was conducted in 2007-2008.

Preliminary results, presented in Tables 1 and 2 below, demonstrate differences between those who served in the military and non-military young adults. In terms of marriage, military service personnel are more likely to be married, and among those ever married, to have a younger age at first marriage compared to those who did not join the military. These findings persist net of age, gender, race/ethnicity, and education. Those who have served in the military appear more likely than their non-military counterparts to have at least one child after sociodemographics are controlled (Models 2b and 3b in Table 1). No reliable differences between military and non-military young adults are found in age at first birth for those who have at least one child. Further analyses will disentangle the timing of military service relative to marriage and childbearing to address questions of differential enlistment among those with families versus differential family formation among military personnel. Additional considerations known to predict family formation and potentially relevant military service factors, including officer status and the timing of enlistment relative to recent engagement in wars abroad, will also be considered.

The subject of family formation has come to the fore in recent years with academic, public and political discussions of family values, gay marriage, traditional marriage promotion projects, and a host of other debated concerns. Moreover, the military seeks to recruit young people at a period in their lives when family formation decisions are most salient. In the transition to adulthood, young people make decisions about educational and career pathways,

who and when they will marry, and whether and when to have children. The relationships between decisions in these realms become important. Research such as this study can shed light on ways in which individuals and governments may achieve valued goals and objectives.

References

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Table 1. Odds Ratios from Logistic Regressions of Marital and Parental Statuses on Military Experience and Sociodemographics, Add Health Wave IV

	<u>Marital Status (Never Married=0)</u>			<u>Parental Status (No Children=0)</u>		
	Model 1a	Model 2a	Model 3a	Model 1b	Model 2b	Model 3b
Military (ref=non-military)	1.912** (0.124)	2.256** (0.187)	2.205** (0.183)	1.123 (0.070)	1.461** (0.115)	1.245** (0.102)
Age		1.261** (0.015)	1.260** (0.015)		1.226** (0.014)	1.236** (0.015)
Gender (ref=male)		1.608** (0.066)	1.628** (0.067)		1.964** (0.079)	2.356** (0.102)
Race/Ethnicity (ref=White, non-Hispanic)						
Black, non-Hispanic		0.349** (0.018)	0.344** (0.018)		1.496** (0.075)	1.402** (0.074)
Hispanic		0.774** (0.044)	0.759** (0.043)		1.147* (0.065)	0.980 (0.058)
Other		0.601** (0.040)	0.606** (0.040)		0.682** (0.045)	0.707** (0.049)
Education (ref=less than Bachelor's Degree)			0.838** (0.035)			0.232** (0.011)
N of cases			11,120			11,127
SE in parentheses		* p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001				

Table 2. Age at First Marriage and Childbirth Regressed on Military Experience and Sociodemographics, Add Health Wave IV

	<u>Age at First Marriage^a</u>			<u>Age at First Childbirth^b</u>		
	Model 1a	Model 2a	Model 3a	Model 1b	Model 2b	Model 3b
Military (ref=non- military)	-0.774*** (.126)	-1.262*** (.124)	-1.042*** (.119)	0.699*** (.162)	0.085 (.156)	0.224 (.148)
Age		0.400*** (.021)	0.400*** (.020)		0.495*** (.024)	0.452*** (.022)
Gender (ref=male)		-1.153*** (.072)	-1.280*** (.070)		-1.444***	-1.672*** (.081)
Race/Ethnicity (ref=White, non-Hispanic)						
Black, non- Hispanic		0.632*** (.103)	0.679*** (.099)		-1.541*** (.099)	-1.456*** (.094)
Hispanic		-0.255** (.096)	-0.036 (.093)		-0.862*** (.114)	-0.626*** (.108)
Other		0.904*** (.146)	0.783*** (.140)		0.139 (.185)	0.052 (.175)
Education (ref=less than Bachelor's Degree)			1.880*** (.073)			3.032*** (.097)
Constant	23.844*** (.038)	12.733*** (.623)	12.162*** (.598)	23.082*** (.045)	10.041***	10.776*** (.673)
N of cases			7,691			7,953

^a Among those ever married
SE in parentheses

^b Among those who have a child
* p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001