

Should we give military families a break? A call for research on military family holidays

Whilst the wellbeing of the family unit is increasingly acknowledged (e.g. in academic research, policy debate, and podcast media) as central to the fitness and resilience of the Armed Forces, initiatives to support family wellbeing have been slow to emerge. One proposed means of support is the provision of holidays (whether abroad or ‘staycations’) to families who may be struggling to cope stressors related to military life. Building on evidence from leisure and tourism studies, holidays are understood as providing benefits to family wellbeing, including rest and recuperation, respite from the stressors of everyday life, and building resilience and social capital. With a view to developing policy and practice, we suggest that research could meaningfully examine the use of holidays as a means of supporting military families. This article aims to stimulate debate regarding how families are supported within the UK Armed Forces.

Keywords: *families; holidays; wellbeing; social capital; resilience*

Many countries' Armed Forces are increasingly recognising the central role families play in supporting the military workforce, for example by providing practical and emotional support, making sacrifices to enable their partner's or parent's career, and by shouldering the responsibilities of childcare and household labour¹. Whilst many families find the Forces lifestyle rewarding, and many adapt well to the challenges it presents, the stresses and hardships facing military families are also well documented. The potential challenges of military life – including frequent separation and parental absence, employment difficulties for spouses, and dealing with the emotional and relational fallout of traumatic injury or mental health problems – have also been studied, and can include family breakdown and relationship difficulties, pile-up of stress and fatigue, and secondary traumatisation²⁻³.

An intervention model is increasingly used within military-connected populations to promote resilience and develop people's ability to cope with stressors⁴. One form of targeted intervention that has recently been proposed as a means of supporting UK military families is the provision of holidays designed to provide a break, or 'respite', from stressful circumstances. The UK military charity 'Give Us Time' provide a model for this approach⁵. Families who are identified as at risk of breakdown or separation are provided with a holiday away from home to allow 'quality time' used to recover from stress and rebuild relationships, thereby intended to enhance resilience and boost the functionality of the military worker.

The rationale underpinning this approach is that some military families encounter multiple stressors simultaneously (e.g. deployment separation, post-deployment stress and fatigue, relocation, injury or ill health, and in some cases, financial strain), and that these stressors may lead to family breakdown or attrition from military service. The argument here is that early intervention can lead to enhanced ability to cope with stressors, and that it can build resilience of the military family which underpins and supports a healthy military workforce. Alongside resilience, the notion of 'social capital' (i.e. the social resources that

derive from strong communities, networks and relationships), can be used to understand the potential benefits of this approach. However, this approach along with any benefits that might accrue from it have not yet been subject to rigorous empirical study in the context of military families. This article is therefore a call for research into the potential use of holidays or ‘respite’ breaks as a means of supporting military families. It is intended to stimulate debate as to the merits and practicalities of this approach, and whether it might be added to existing interventions used to support military family wellbeing.

Whilst to our knowledge there has been no published research on the impact of holidays on military family wellbeing, there are good reasons to suspect that this approach could add value to creating more resilient families, and by extension, improving the health of the military workforce. Evidence from wider bodies of research (for example in ‘leisure and tourism studies’) strongly support the therapeutic potential of holidays for boosting wellbeing in individuals and families⁶⁻⁹. Indeed, holidays are associated with enhanced wellbeing and life satisfaction^{6, 8} as well as improved social interaction, bonding and cohesiveness within families^{6, 9-10}. Holidays’ beneficial aspects included unbroken leisure time, relief from the constraints of everyday life, an opportunity to escape from routine, as well as the time and space needed to strengthen relational ties¹⁰. Such findings are echoed by other studies which describe family holidays as offering a means of psychologically detaching from work and mundane environments¹¹, reflecting on the frustrations and challenges of everyday life in a calmer, more neutral environment^{6, 12}, experiencing freedom from the pressures, chores, bills, and constant scheduling of family life, and a chance to create lasting positive memories¹³.

Another strand of research on the health impact of holidays uses the concept of ‘social tourism’ to describe an approach to provision of holidays for health and wellbeing benefits. Social tourism has been defined as “tourism with an added moral value, of which the primary aim is to benefit either the host or the visitor in the tourism exchange”¹⁴, and provides

opportunities for people on low incomes – or those experiencing chronic stress and other forms of social disadvantage – to go away from home on holiday. In a review of social tourism research, Morgan et al. found substantial evidence that holidays and vacations helped support families experiencing numerous forms of disadvantage in dealing with the challenges they face¹⁵. As these authors argue, “studies overwhelmingly find that social tourism offers opportunities for escape from the stresses of mundane life, routine variation, new experiences and a “fresh sense of perspective on problems”¹⁵. Moreover, McCabe succinctly captures the essence of this approach: “Given the opportunity of time and space away from the home environment, people have the chance to actively solve their own issues without the intervention from others. They have a chance to build or heal relationships and recover from past difficulties and an opportunity to reassess issues and face the future in a positive way”¹⁶. As such, there is a clear emphasis on giving families the opportunity to work out solutions to their own problems, free of more intrusive forms of family intervention.

More specifically, social tourism research indicates that families who are faced with specific challenging circumstances (such as low household income, illness and disability, and social deprivation) can benefit strongly from a break from these circumstances, gaining fresh perspective and reflecting upon new ways to be a family, spending quality time together in a different environment, improved social functioning, improved self-esteem, and a peaceful sense of respite from the anxieties of home life^{10, 13-18}. In this regard, holidays can be seen as a means of boosting social capital (i.e., the social resources that derive from communities, networks and relationships) for those who cannot afford to go on holiday, or whose circumstances would otherwise restrict them from going on holiday¹⁰. With holidays and vacations understood as a necessity in contemporary social life, non-participation could also be considered a form of social exclusion¹⁰. Researchers thereby advocate social tourism as a potential means of alleviating some of the harmful effects of social exclusion⁹. Holidays

might therefore not be considered a frivolous pursuit, but a social necessity; an investment in the wellbeing and social fabric of society^{10, 17-18}. Acknowledging the broad range of personal, social, and financial challenges that military families can face (as highlighted above), a case could be made for social tourism as a (hitherto overlooked) means of supporting military families.

Given the lack of specific research in this area, there is also a case to be made for research to examine the potential impact of holidays specifically for military families. As a targeted intervention, families in greatest need of assistance due to stress could be identified at unit welfare level as the primary beneficiaries of this approach. Providing military families with holidays thus ties into a welfare-based approach to supporting families. Circumstances under which these could be offered might include (for example) families identified as strained by repeated deployments, families identified as at-risk of separation or breakdown, families dealing with the effects of physical or psychological injuries sustained during training or on operations, and/or families experiencing financial hardships that would otherwise prevent them from arranging their own holidays as a means of recovering from stress.

There are a number of key outcome measures that would be of interest with regard to research undertaken to explore the impact of holidays on military family wellbeing. At the individual/family level, these would include metrics determining wellbeing and resilience¹⁹, as well as the subjective nature and extent of any benefits derived. At the population level – and from the perspective of the military employer – key outcomes might include retention of personnel in service, along with ‘key performance indicators’ of work performance and effectiveness. Divorce and separation rates might constitute a further consideration for longitudinal research; for instance whether early intervention through provision of holidays exerts any impact on divorces rates in military populations²⁰. Finally, there is an adjunctive

question worth exploring as to whether length of leave entitlement in different countries' contractual service arrangements may be associated with differences in general levels of wellbeing and resilience.

The provision of holidays as a targeted intervention, offering a kind of 'whole family respite', has been proposed as a third sector initiative, spearheaded by the charity Give Us Time in the UK. It is not yet known whether this approach is effective in promoting wellbeing and resilience in military families. If research is conducted which demonstrates effectiveness, a case could then be made for expanding third sector provision of such targeted interventions, or indeed, moving them within the realm of military welfare provision. Holidays may play a role in minimising some of the stressors that can affect military families, and effectively managed could provide an adjunct to existing interventions and support mechanisms. Indeed, "the diversity of approaches suggests that currently, there is no one approach that suits all family situations and that a range of approaches is likely to be warranted"⁴. It is worth exploring, through rigorously conducted research, whether holidays might be used as an additional tool or approach to help military families recover and thrive.

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