

# Identifying the psychological health outcomes of families of those who have served in the Armed Forces in the 5-Eyes Alliance: a systematic review.

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## ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** Adult children and intimate partners of military Veterans are underrepresented in military mental health research.

**Methods:** A systematic search was conducted with 24 studies meeting inclusion criteria. Quantitative studies (N=18) were summarised by narrative synthesis and qualitative studies (N=6) were analysed using a descriptive-interpretive approach.

**Results:** Partners had higher rates of anxiety, depression, and PTSD and were more likely to suffer distress. Adult children were at increased risk for anxiety, depression, alcohol/substance misuse, and PTSD. Four themes were identified from the qualitative data: *Personal Feelings and Internal Emotions*, *Veteran-Oriented*, *Help and Support*, and *Acting as a Unit*.

**Discussion:** There are substantial gaps in the literature regarding the mental health and well-being of these populations in 5 Eyes Alliance countries. Future research is needed to address psychological outcomes among military families after leaving the military.

## OBJECTIVES

This systematic review aimed to identify the psychological health outcomes of adult children and intimate partners of military Veterans in countries of the 5-Eyes Alliance: Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

## METHODS

A review protocol was submitted to PROSPERO and approved under CRD42020221166. Search resources included electronic databases MEDLINE, PsychINFO, EMBASE, EBSCO, Informat, PTSD-pubs, and Web of Science, as well as subject-related journals. Search strings were designed and run sequentially to specify: 1) military context, 2) populations of interest, 3) adverse mental health outcomes, and 4) mental health outcomes.

Military Veterans were defined as having served at least 1 day full-time in the armed forces and now no longer serving, who may/may not have been deployed in combat/peacekeeping roles and excluded those who only served as reservists. Family members included current and past spouses/intimate partners of Veterans and adult children ( $\geq 18$  years), either biologically nor non-biologically related, of Veterans. Parents, siblings, and children ( $< 18$ ) of Veterans were excluded.

Inclusion criteria included: full/partial population of interest, population from a 5-Eyes Alliance country, psychological/mental health outcomes defined as PTSD, anxiety, depression, alcohol/substance misuse, risk, and/or resilience, and publication in a peer-reviewed journal, in English, between 2000 and 2020 (inclusive).

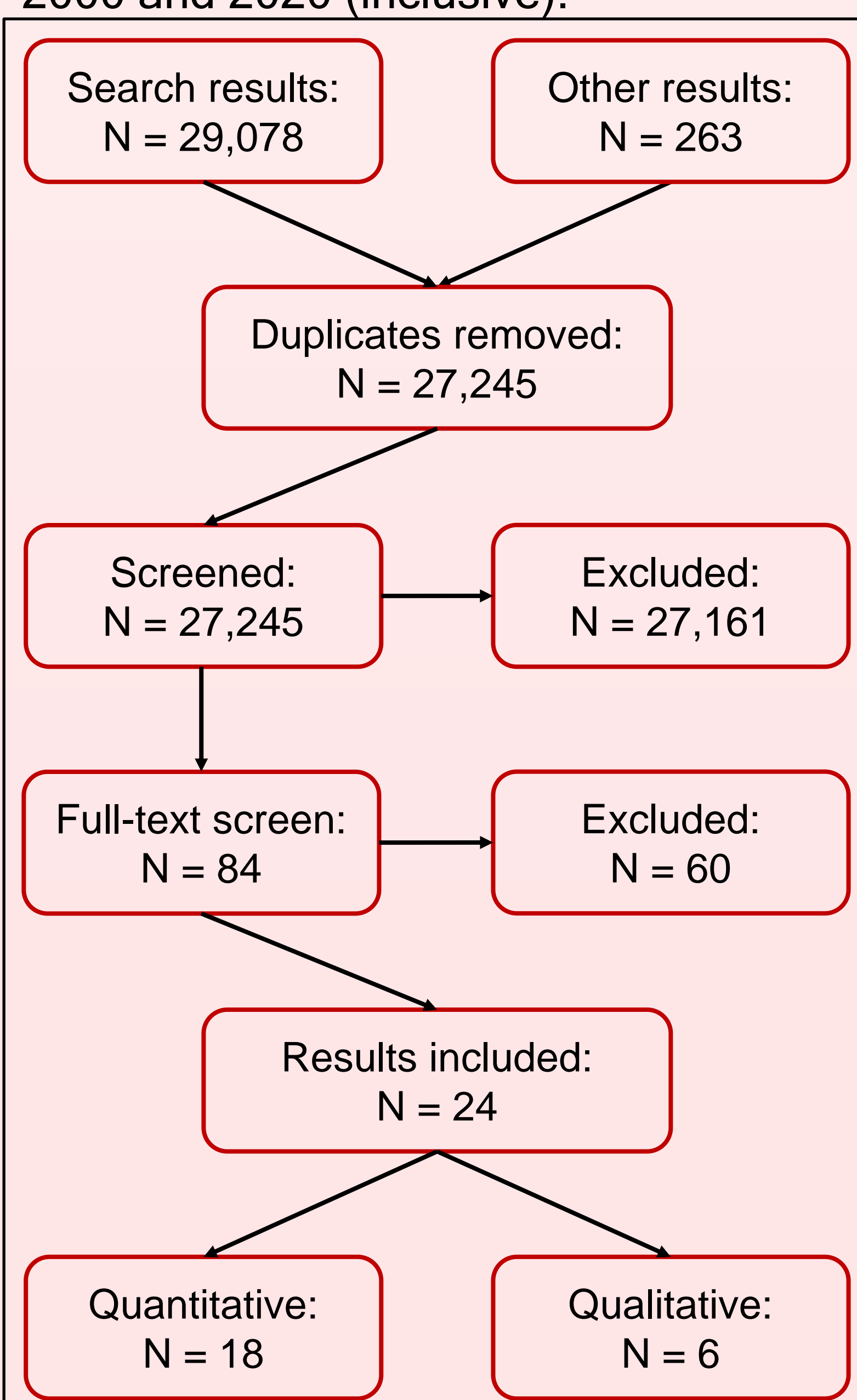


Fig. 1: PRISMA flow diagram

Two researchers each conducted a systematic search, unblinded for a full-text screening, and agreed on the included results: 24 studies with N=18 quantitative and N=6 qualitative (Fig. 1). A quality appraisal was performed by a third researcher before data extraction, with all results being found satisfactory for inclusion.

A narrative synthesis analysis strategy was selected for the quantitative studies due to the differences in methodologies across the included results. A meta-synthesis analysis strategy was selected for the qualitative studies with a descriptive-interpretive approach to accommodate the variance in methodologies.

## RESULTS

The 24 studies detailed research in Australia (N=12), the US (N=8), Canada (N=2), and the UK (N=2). Quantitative studies were assessed by study population (partners: N=12, children: N=6).

A majority of partner studies focused on partners of Veterans with PTSD and the secondary effects of the disorder on the partners, who had higher prevalence rates of anxiety, depression, and PTSD than population norms and were more likely to suffer distress because of the Veteran's mental health issues. Clinical distress was associated with increased perceived barriers to care and stigma in seeking care, and a dyadic study found a reciprocal effect of hazardous drinking between the partner and Veteran.

Studies of adult children also concentrated on Veteran parents with PTSD. This population which showed negative parental attachment and family emotional climate issues associated with Veteran PTSD, and was at an increased risk for anxiety, depression, alcohol and substance misuse, and PTSD compared to population norms. Veteran parent deployment was associated with increased risk of self-harm and suicidal ideation.

Personal feelings and internal emotions	Veteran-oriented
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- alone</li><li>- living with distress of vicarious trauma</li><li>- vicarious growth</li><li>- making meaning of dual complex trauma</li><li>- fragile intimate self</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- growthful forgiveness and self-care</li><li>- physical health</li><li>- mental health</li><li>- altered sense of self</li><li>- search for explanation</li></ul>
Help & support	Acting as a unit
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- all-consuming effects of the illness</li><li>- walking on eggshells</li><li>- ambiguous loss</li><li>- betrayal and neglect</li><li>- like father, like daughter</li><li>- challenges faced</li><li>- like living in a war zone</li><li>- wife as carer</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- facing PTSD as a unit</li><li>- veteran's mental health problems created multifaceted/pervasive changes in family structure, roles, and routines, impacting caregiving/social participation</li><li>- changes created negative mental health and well-being impacts for family members</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- desired type of support</li><li>- barriers to support</li><li>- sources of help: the veteran family</li></ul>	

Fig. 2: Meta-synthesis themes and subordinate themes

Qualitative studies (partners: N=4, children: N=1, family unit: N=1) also focused on the experiences of family members of Veterans with PTSD. Four meta-synthesis themes were identified after analysis of all themes and subordinate themes (Fig. 2): *Personal Feelings and Internal Emotions* referenced individual internal thoughts and self-referential emotions, *Veteran-Oriented* referenced experiences focused exclusively on the Veteran, *Help and Support* described help/support seeking, desires, and barriers, and *Acting as a Unit* referring to the dyad or a family unit confronting PTSD together.

## CONCLUSIONS

This review was conducted to highlight the gaps in the literature concerning mental health outcomes of partners and adult children of Veterans in 5 Eyes Alliance countries. Only 24 studies met inclusion criteria, exposing the under-representation of this population in extant research, with results indicating the potential risk of adverse psychological outcomes. Veteran PTSD was particularly prominent in the literature, leading to a constant re-focusing of Veteran family issues through the lens of PTSD, whether it is present in individual lives or not. No research was found investigating well-being, resilience, or other positive outcomes in these populations. Additional research is urgently needed to explore not only mental health outcomes in Veteran families, but also to investigate factors associated with resilience and well-being, particularly in the United Kingdom.

## REFERENCES

Available at:

Armour, C., Spikol, E., McGlinchey, E., Gribble, R., Fear, N. T., & Murphy, D. (2022). Identifying the psychological health outcomes of families of those who have served in the Armed Forces in the 5-Eyes Alliance: a systematic review. *Journal of Military, Veteran and Family Health*, 8(1), 7-27. <https://doi.org/10.3138/jmvfh-2021-0025>

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