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Developmental outcomes among veteran and civilian children: Evidence from linked AEDC-Census 2021

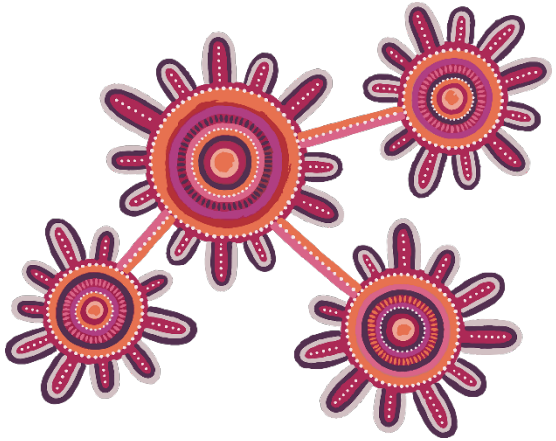
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Acknowledgement of Country

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The Australian Institute of Family Studies acknowledges the Traditional Owners of Country throughout Australia and recognises their continuing connection to lands and waters. We pay our respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, and to Elders past and present.

Project partners and contributors

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Presentation overview



- Research context
- Data and study design
- Sample participants and limitations
- Key findings
- Discussion and implications

Research context

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Why this analysis matters

- Defence service brings frequent relocations, deployments and absences from home, disrupting routines and schooling.
- Australian evidence on early development in Defence and veteran families is limited — and almost none compares these children with civilian peers at population level.
- The Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide called for better use of existing national data to understand veteran family wellbeing.
- Early childhood shapes later development, so comparison shows where extra support may be needed.

Data and study design

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- **Australian Early Development Census (AEDC)**: national census of children in their first year of school (300,000+ children in 2021, ~96% participation), scoring 5 developmental domains from 0 to 10.



- **Identifying veteran families**: AEDC does not record ADF service, so linked 2021 Census data identified children living with a current serving or ex-serving ADF parent — a population-level view for the first time.
- **Descriptive, not causal**: counts, percentages and means; regressions checked only whether differences held within comparable socio-economic and family groups.

Sample participants and caveat

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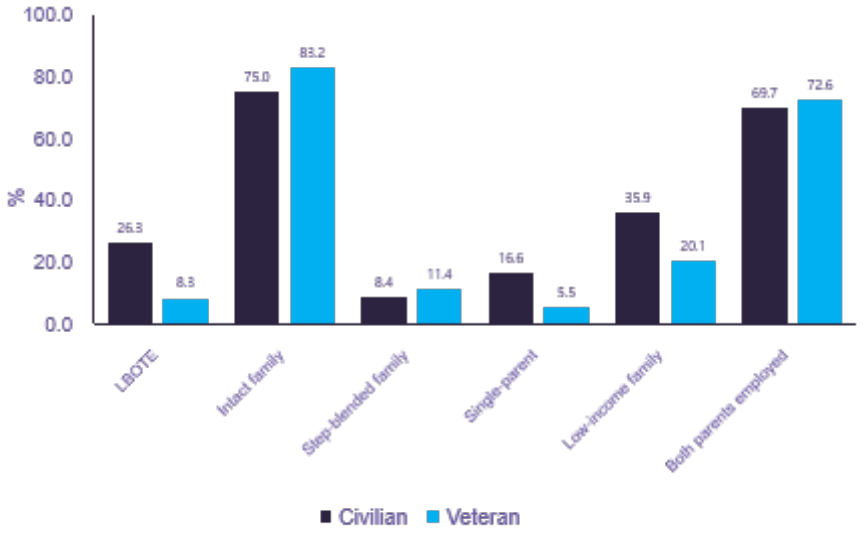
- **Focus**: children in their first year of full-time schooling (median age 5 years, 52% male).
- **Sample**: 7,983 children (~3%) lived with at least one current or ex-serving ADF parent — mostly ex-serving — compared with 244,000 civilian children.
- **Caveat**: only children living with a veteran parent on Census night could be identified; those whose veteran parent lived elsewhere are counted as civilian.

Veteran children differed on key background characteristics

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Figure 1: Characteristics of children in veteran and civilian families



Note: LBOTE: language background other than English. 'Intact family' refers to a family unit that consists of both parents living together with their biological or adopted children. 'Step- and blended family' refers to a couple family with at least one stepchild of one partner (step) or a mix of children of both partners and stepchildren (blended).
Sample: About 7,900 children of veteran parents and 244,000 of civilian parents.

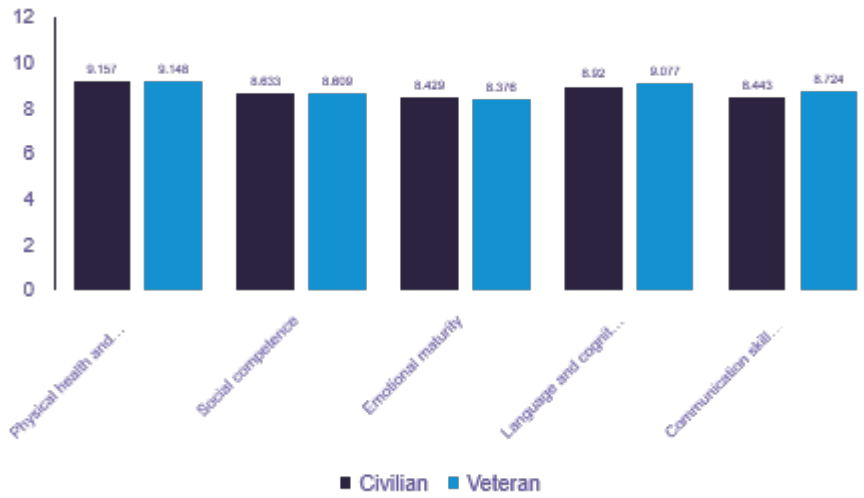
Compared to civilian children:

- Veteran children were less likely to have a language background other than English (8.3% vs 26.3%).
- Veteran children were more likely to live in intact families (83.2% vs 75%) and fewer in single-parent families (16.6% vs 5.5%).
- Veteran children were less likely to live in low-income families (20.1% vs 35.9%) and more likely to have both parents employed (72.6% vs 69.7%).
- **By service status**: the family and income patterns above were most pronounced among children of current serving members.

Veteran and civilian children entered school with similar developmental scores

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Figure 2: Average scores for veterans and civilian children by domains

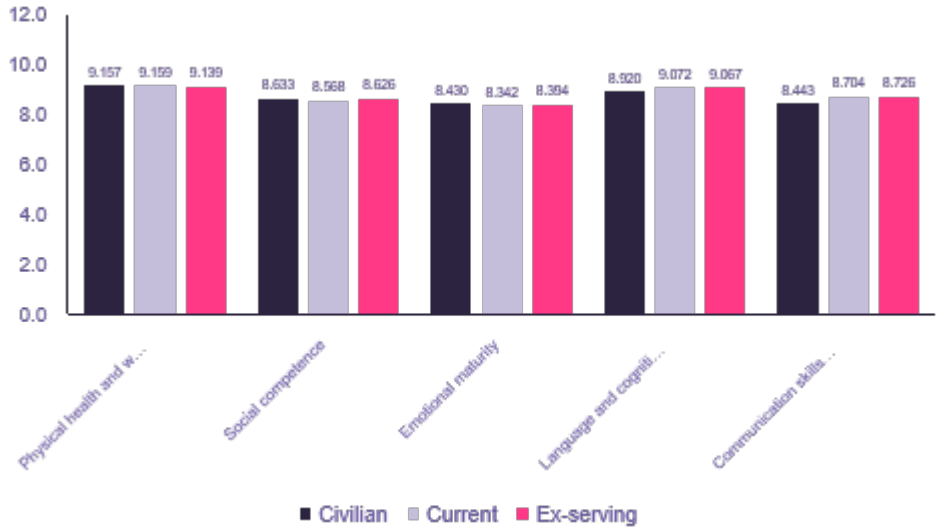


- Average scores were broadly similar across all five domains for veteran and civilian children.
- Veteran children were slightly higher on language and cognitive and communication skills.
- Emotional maturity score was slightly lower for veteran children, but still negligible.

Sample: About 7,500 children of veteran parents and 231,000 of civilian parents based on valid domain scores. Valid scores: children without special needs, in class for at least 1 month, with at least 75% of items completed by teachers in each domain.

Differences in developmental scores by service status

Figure 3: Average scores for veterans and civilian children by domain and parents' service status



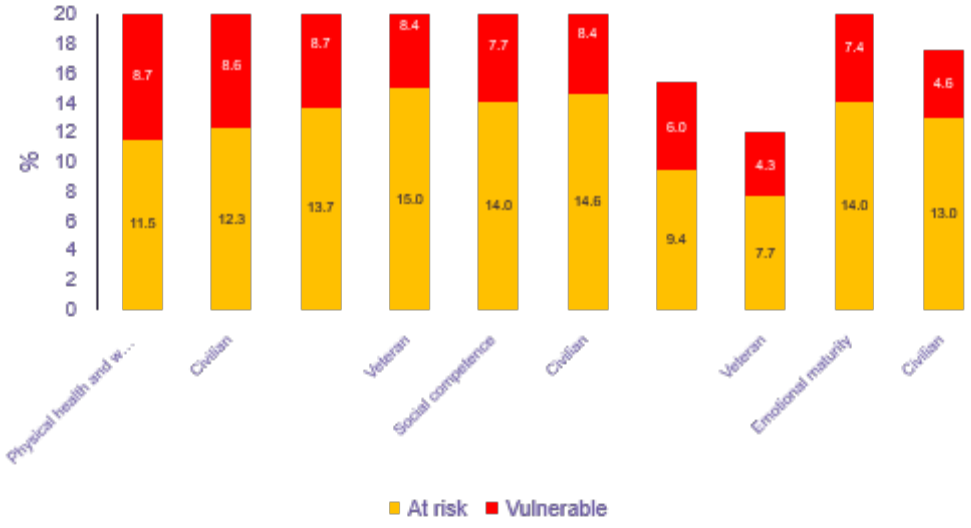
Sample: About 2,100 children of current-serving parents, 5,100 of ex-serving parents, and 231,000 of civilian parents.
Valid scores: children without special needs, in class for at least 1 month, with at least 75% of items completed by teachers in each domain.

- Average scores for children of current and ex-serving veterans were also broadly similar.
- Children of current serving members scored marginally lower in social competence and emotional maturity than ex-serving and civilian children.
- Children of current and ex-serving members scored slightly higher than civilian children in language and cognitive skills and communication.

Veteran children were more at risk in social competence, while civilian children were more vulnerable in cognitive and communication skills

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Figure 4: Proportion of children at risk or developmentally vulnerable among veteran and civilian children, by domain (% of all children in each group)

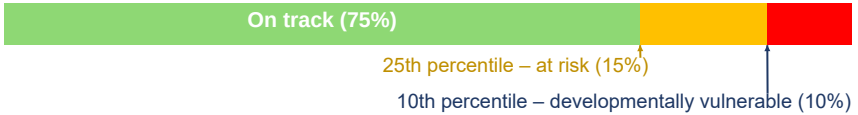


Sample: About 7,500 children of veteran parents and 231,000 of civilian parents based on valid domain scores. Valid scores: children without special needs, in class for at least 1 month, with at least 75% of items completed by teachers in each domain.

AEDC classifies children as on track, at risk or vulnerable.

- Most children were **on track** in all five domains; the chart shows the rest.
- **At risk**: slightly higher proportions of veteran children on physical health/wellbeing, social competence and emotional maturity.
- **Vulnerable**: slightly higher proportions of civilian children on language and cognitive skills and communication.

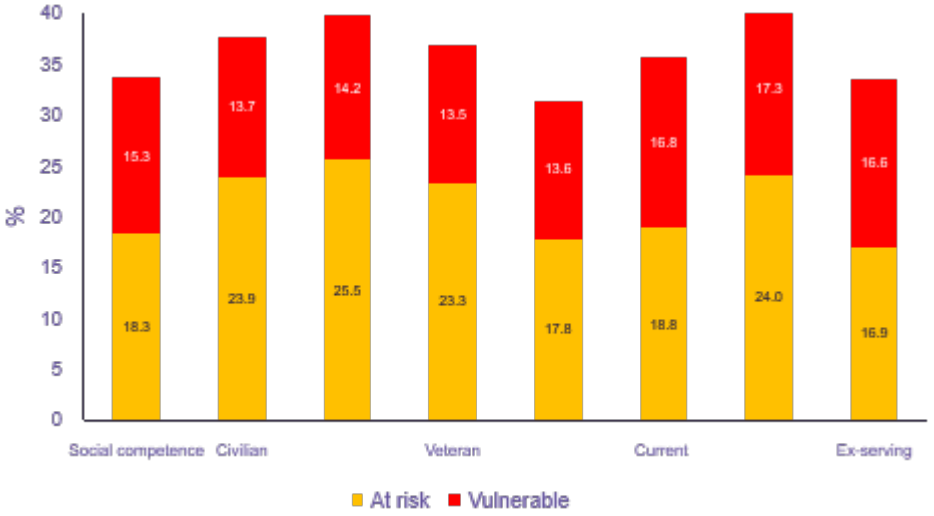
AEDC 2009 reference population



Among single-parent families, more veteran children at risk and developmentally vulnerable

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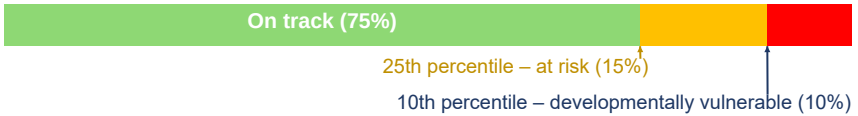
Figure 5: Proportion of children at risk and developmentally vulnerable among veterans and civilian children in a single-parent family (% of all children in each group)



Sample: About 7,500 children of veterans, 2,100 of current-serving parents, 5,100 of ex-serving parents, and 231,000 of civilian parents based on valid domain scores.
Valid scores: children without special needs, in class for at least 1 month, with at least 75% of items completed by teachers in each domain.

- In single-parent families (Figure 5), veteran children were more likely than civilian children to be at risk in social competence and vulnerable in emotional maturity.
- Where both parents were employed, a similar but smaller gap appeared in social competence and emotional maturity.
- Both patterns were most evident among children of current serving members.

AEDC 2009 reference population



Discussion and implications

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Key points

- Children in veteran families are not developmentally disadvantaged at school entry.
- Their language and communication advantage holds across most subgroups.
- Social and emotional gaps sit mainly with children of current serving members and single-parent veteran families — small, descriptive differences, not causal.

Implications

- Monitoring should be targeted, not universal — social and emotional development of children of current serving members is the priority.
- These are areas for further investigation, not yet a case for new services.
- Estimates set a baseline for future AEDC collections; national data need to capture children whose veteran parent lives elsewhere.

Q&A