



# The state of military families in Canada: A scoping review

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## ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** For some families, the military way of life fosters close social support networks and adaptability. For others, the stresses and strains resulting from military operational requirements are challenging. Canadian Forces Morale and Welfare Services reviewed the most recent Canadian research to detail the issues currently facing Canadian military families. **Methods:** The scoping review yielded 72 articles and reports. Additionally, exclusive demographic data on family members were analyzed using data compiled by Chief Force Development. **Results:** Of the 72 Canadian articles, 53 were published within the past 5 years. These were organized thematically into categories, including demographics, common military lifestyle challenges, common family transitional challenges, and family resiliency. **Discussion:** Canadian military families commonly face three military journey challenges and three family journey challenges: geographical relocations due to postings; absences from family due to operational tempo; operational illness, injury, or death; personal well-being and mental health; financial stress; and intimate partner relationships. The majority of families are resilient and manage these challenges successfully; only a small percentage struggle. For those who struggle, access to systems of care and supports could enhance their resilience to manage these transitional challenges. Overall participation rates in programs and services are currently low, but the majority of those who used them perceived that they were helpful. For families to experience a stabilized family life in the face of military challenges, they need to be aware of, and able to advocate for services that are available and aligned with when, where and how they need them.

**Key words:** Canadian Armed Forces (CAF), Canadian Forces Morale and Welfare Services, demographics, family relations, financial stress, intimate partner relationships, lifestyle, mental health, military challenges, military family, military personnel, military relocations, resilience, services available

## RÉSUMÉ

**Introduction :** Dans certaines familles, le mode de vie militaire favorise l'adaptabilité et d'étroits réseaux de soutien social. Dans d'autres, le stress et la tension liés aux exigences des opérations militaires représentent un défi. Les Services de bien-être et moral des Forces armées canadiennes ont analysé les plus récentes recherches canadiennes pour identifier plus précisément les enjeux qu'affrontent les familles des militaires canadiens. **Méthodologie :** L'examen exploratoire a permis d'extraire 72 articles et rapports. De plus, les chercheurs ont analysé des données démographiques exclusives sur les membres des familles à partir de données compilées par le Chef – Développement des Forces. **Résultats :** Cinquante-trois des 72 articles canadiens avaient été publiés dans les cinq années précédentes. Les chercheurs les ont classés par catégories, y compris la démographie, les difficultés courantes du mode de vie militaire, les difficultés de transition courantes des familles et la résilience des familles. **Discussion :** Les familles des militaires canadiens affrontent souvent trois difficultés dans le parcours des militaires et trois difficultés dans le parcours des familles : réinstallations géographiques à cause des affectations, absences à cause du rythme des opérations, maladies, blessures ou décès pendant les opérations, bien-être et santé mentale individuels, stress financier, relations avec le conjoint. La majorité des familles sont résilientes et gèrent bien ces difficultés. Seul un petit pourcentage d'entre elles ont plus de mal. Pour celles-ci, l'accès aux systèmes de soins et de soutien peut accroître leur résilience à gérer ces difficultés de transition. Actuellement, les taux de participation globaux aux programmes et aux services sont faibles, mais la majorité des personnes qui les utilisent les jugent utiles. Pour que les familles connaissent une vie familiale stable malgré les enjeux militaires, elles doivent revendiquer des services disponibles et adaptés au moment, à l'endroit et à la manière dont ils en ont besoin et connaître ceux qui sont en place.

**Mot Clés :** famille des militaires, personnel militaire, santé mentale, relations familiales, mode de vie, démographie, satisfaction personnelle, mode de vie militaire, difficultés des militaires, bien-être, stress financier, réinstallations des militaires, rythme des opérations, relations avec le conjoint, Forces armées canadiennes, opérations militaires,

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## LAY SUMMARY

Military families are the strength behind the uniform. But who are they? How many are there and where do they live? What challenges are they facing? And what exactly do they need to be resilient and continue to be the strength behind the uniform? This article provides a summary overview of the results of a scoping review to better understand the state of Canadian military families.

## INTRODUCTION

Life in the Canadian military can be quite different from that experienced by civilians in Canada. For many families, the military way of life often fosters close family ties, adaptability and an appreciation for the importance of duty and responsibility. Military families are linked by a shared Canadian military identity and culture. It is not uncommon for tight bonds between military families to form quickly and to endure for years. While military families are perceived as the strength behind the uniform, and often buoyed by a profound sense of duty and pride, their dedication to the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) requires sacrifice, adaptability, resourcefulness, and resilience.<sup>1</sup>

Military service is considered a career rather than a job. A CAF member's career path begins at one of the CAF Recruiting Centres and detachments across Canada, where they decide whether they want employment in the Regular Force (full-time) or Reserve Force (part-time), whether they are joining as an Officer or Non-Commissioned Member, and which of the approximately 100 occupations they would be suited to best.<sup>1</sup> The career paths are unique and different depending on these decisions. Once accepted and the Oath of Allegiance is taken, they will complete their in-depth on-site Basic Officer Training Course or Basic Military Qualification Course. After initial training, CAF members receive their first posting which is dependent on where their new skills are most needed. A posting is a reassignment to a new job, and sometimes requires a geographical relocation for the military member and their family. Posting duration varies greatly depending on the member's occupation and rank. Postings allow for diversity in the scope of a member's career experiences and are meant to enhance training and experience as well as to keep members alert and ready to handle new challenges.

Throughout the remainder of their career, additional individual training is required at set periods to develop specific skills for their trade, to increase rank or responsibilities, and to maintain proficiency in emerging technologies and strategies.<sup>1</sup> Collective unit training is

also required throughout their career to build cohesive teams and skills. These additional trainings may require the military member to be temporarily separated from their affiliated unit/base for more than a 24-hour period (temporary duty), and as such, usually away from their family as well.

CAF members can also expect to be deployed domestically or overseas at various times throughout their careers.<sup>1</sup> A deployment is a temporary relocation of the military member (without their family) to an operational setting. The type and frequency of deployments depend on an individual's skill set, rank and qualifications, as well as the needs of the specific mission. Deployments can last a few days or weeks when providing disaster relief, or last for 6–12 months as part of an international commitment like those in Latvia or Kuwait or in the past like Afghanistan or Bosnia.

With this type of career path fairly consistent across most CAF occupations, there are three transitional challenges commonly assumed that distinguish the military from other professions and occupations: mobility, separation, and risk.<sup>2</sup> Few occupations have the requirement to be available to serve in a variety of conditions 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, in locations across the country and the world. Families may face challenges associated with frequent relocation, such as finding new family health care providers, re-establishing child care, moving children between schools and education systems, professional licensing, and dealing with inconveniences such as changing driver's and vehicle licences when moving between provinces.<sup>3</sup> They may also deal with the financial instability resulting from frequent moves, whether it be the loss of employment, different tax systems or changes to post-living differentials. Families share in the stresses and strains that may result from deployments of their loved ones into dangerous operational duty, and the prolonged separations they entail. From recruitment through training and temporary duty, through postings and deployments, possibly through injury, and finally through to release, families must adapt to the challenges that sometimes arise from these transitions.

On the surface, it may seem easy to point to a few unique challenges facing military families. However, the solutions are not as easy to point to. While there are micro and systemic barriers to easing challenges in a simple manner, the amount of research that has recently been conducted to better understand military family experiences in Canada provides detailed information on the scope of the issues, the scale of the number of families affected by those issues, and potential recommendations and strategies to improve their experiences. To inform the development of the Comprehensive Military Family Plan as part of Canada's Defence Policy, Canadian Forces Morale and Welfare Services conducted research to detail the issues currently facing Canadian military families. To understand the scope of these issues, a scoping review was conducted, focused on a broadly defined research question ("What are the most common challenges facing military families in Canada?"), with study inclusion/exclusion criteria developed post hoc at the study selection stage, in order to "chart" the data according to key themes and issues. A wide variety of study types, and more than 70 articles and reports published predominantly in the last 5 years were reviewed as part of this scoping review. And to understand the scale of these issues, the demographics of military family members were analyzed to determine who they are and where they are living.

## METHODS

The scoping review followed the methodological framework of Arskey and O'Malley<sup>4</sup> through five stages.

### Stage 1. Identifying the research question

The scoping review included three concepts: "military family members," "military lifestyle challenges," and "family resiliency." The target population was family members of Regular Force personnel posted in Canada. The outcome of interest, the well-being of Canadian military families, was addressed through the following research question: "What are the most common challenges facing military families in Canada?"

### Stage 2. Identifying relevant studies

The goal was to be as comprehensive as possible in the identification of relevant studies and reviews, including published and unpublished literature, suitable to answer the research question. Literature searches were conducted electronically using EBSCO Information Services and through the Google search engine. Key articles were identified and reference-mined, identifying additional

literature that did not surface in the electronic sweep. Professional networks were accessed for sources. Information was also drawn from internal reports prepared for the National Defence, CAF, and Military Family Services. Finally, exclusive demographic data on family members as of August 2017 were analyzed by the author using data compiled by Chief Force Development.<sup>5</sup>

### Stage 3. Selecting the studies

Criteria for selection were devised post hoc to allow for familiarity with the literature. If the literature did not meet these criteria, there were not included in the scoping review. The inclusion criteria included:

- literature available in English and/or French;
- literature published in the past 10 years (post-2008) for timely relevance;
- studies examining CAF personnel and member(s) of their family (broadly defined to include spouses, children, other dependents, parents, siblings, etc.);
- studies with search terms explored including family resilience, well-being, mental health, transition, adjustment, deployments, posting relocations, military lifestyle, and unique operational stressors;
- studies employing quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methodology; and
- studies and reports not publicly available but prepared specifically for National Defence, CAF, or Military Family Services.

This report does not include research on military families conducted outside Canada. In the past, outside of anecdotal feedback, much of our theoretical understanding of Canadian military families have come from research conducted in the United States with their military families. But as more Canadian research is conducted, we see considerable differences on the impacts of the military lifestyle on Canadian military families as compared to our American counterparts, presumably due to critical differences in socioeconomic status, culture, income levels, national policies and regulations, provincial and state policies and regulations, and military requirements and services. For instance, in Canada, unlike in the United States, military families are dependent on the civilian health care system. When relocations are required for postings, families need to navigate access to a family doctor as well as any required specialists, often across provincial jurisdictions in which systems and eligibility for services may differ.<sup>6</sup>

Some of the research findings included in this report are not in the public domain. In general, research commissioned by Military Family Services is for internal use and the reports are not available publicly.

Most of the existing research and demographics focus on the military family as a single entity (e.g., examined as a common unit). However, families are not a single distinct entity. Therefore, findings only reflect the general experiences of families but not necessarily the uniqueness of individual family experiences.

#### Stage 4. Charting the data

Relevant information was extracted into a data charting form to organize details useful for answering the research question.

#### Stage 5. Collating, summarizing, and reporting results

Literature identified as meeting the inclusion criteria were reviewed and categorized including the geographic location of the study, how the family or family member was defined, and what aspect of their life/well-being/resilience/military lifestyle and operational challenge was examined.

### RESULTS

Of all the articles and reports reviewed, 72 met the inclusion criteria. All of these were Canadian reports published between 2009 and 2018, with almost 70% of them between 2015 and 2018 (see Figure 1). Approximately half of these articles and reports were available publicly on websites or in various peer-reviewed journals. The other half were not in the public domain, as they either were commissioned by Military Family Services or were statistical reports on CAF personnel information, both of which had the intended purpose of informing internal strategic direction for programs, services and resources rather than for public education. All articles in both the public domain and those internal to Military Family Services and CAF report on results from a variety of different study types – literature reviews, environmental scans, personnel human resources data analyses, and qualitative and quantitative studies. Some of the qualitative studies had small sample sizes ( $n = 50$ ) but delved deeply into specific issues; others had large samples sizes ( $n = 8,000$ ) but covered a wide range of issues lightly. Qualitative study designs ranged from interviews to focus groups to anonymous online surveys. Some studies used stratified samples while others relied on snowball sampling. No studies were longitudinal.

Not all 72 articles and reports are detailed; only those who have been directly cited are in the reference list.

Articles were thematically organized into categories, including demographics, common military lifestyle challenges, common family transitional challenges, and family resiliency.

### DISCUSSION

#### Canadian military family demographics<sup>7</sup>

In August 2017 there were 63,269 Regular Force members posted in Canada. More than half of all Regular Force personnel posted in Canada were under the age of 35 (54%) or had less than 11 years of service (54%). Combined, those under the age of 35 with less than 11 years of service represented 44% of all Regular Force personnel posted in Canada.

Just over half (56%) of all Regular Force members were in a legal relationship (married or common-law), and 44% were single of which 8% have dependent family members. Almost half of all Regular Force members posted in Canada (47%) had children. In addition to the 63,269 Regular Force members posted in Canada, there were 94,279 other family members (including spouses = 34,906; children = 57,639; and other family dependents = 1,734).

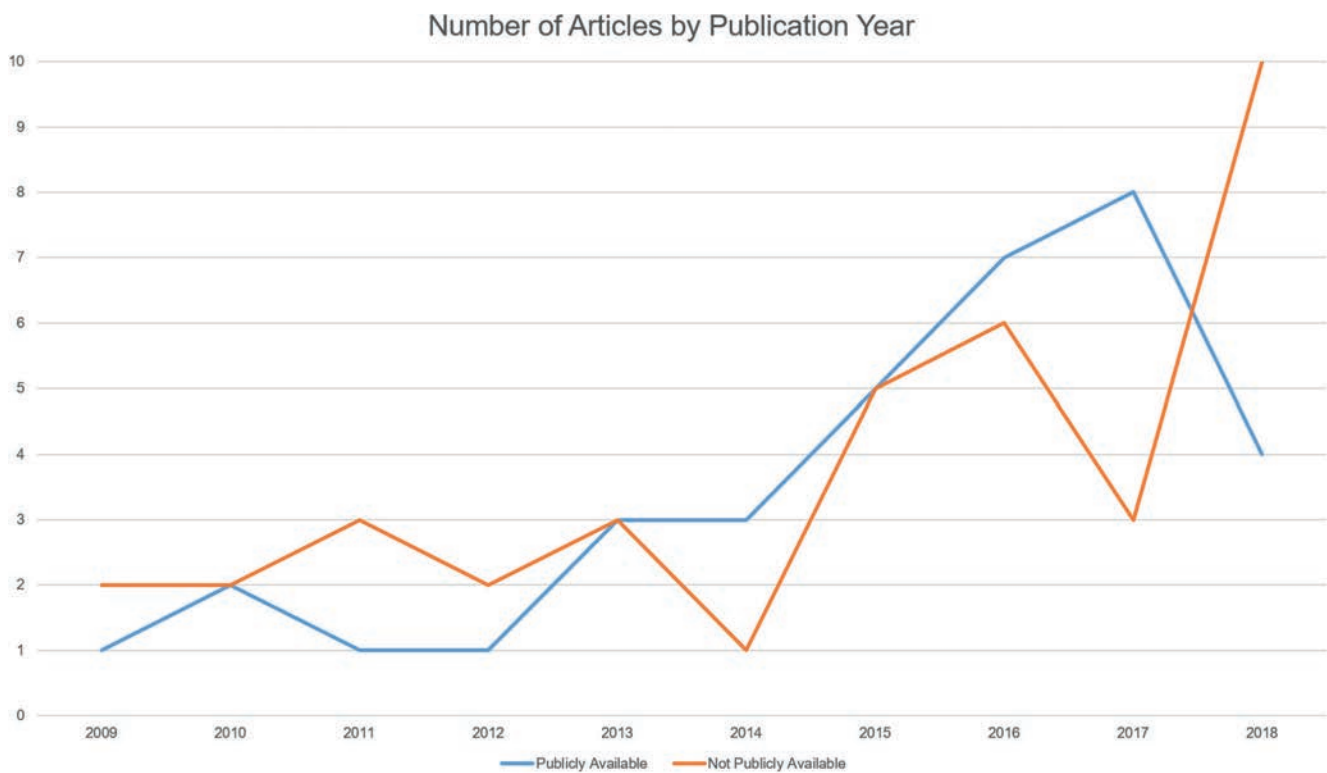
Almost 40% of all Regular Force personnel posted in Canada lived in Ontario. More than 80% lived on or within a 30-minute drive away from their posted base.

#### Common challenges facing Canadian military families

Canadian military families commonly face three military journey transitional challenges and three family journey challenges: geographical relocations due to postings; absences from family due to operational tempo; operational illness, injury or death; personal well-being and mental health; financial stress; and intimate partner relationships.<sup>1</sup> The vast majority of families manage these challenges successfully and are resilient (80%); only a small percentage (10%) struggle.<sup>8</sup>

#### Military lifestyle challenge 1. Geographic relocations due to postings

Approximately one-quarter of all Regular Force personnel are required to relocate to a new location each year due to a posting.<sup>9</sup> An estimated 10,000 families are required to relocate each year, of which approximately 8,000 must move to a new province or territory.<sup>1</sup> While relocations appear to be the biggest challenge for



**Figure 1:** Research trends by publication year

military families, and the consequences of relocations are stressful and challenging to address (e.g., financial, intimate partner relationship, health care for non-military family members, spousal employment and child care / education), the majority manage relocations successfully with little external support.<sup>1</sup> Some family personas face more difficulties with relocations than others (e.g., single parents, caring for elderly parents or special needs children, adolescents, dual service couples), and may require additional external supports.<sup>10–11</sup>

### ***Military lifestyle challenge 2. Absences from family due to operational requirements***

Approximately two-thirds of military families experience periods of absence from their loved one due to operational requirements.<sup>8,12,13,14</sup> The frequency and length of absences vary greatly. While absences appear to increase the stress level for family members, specifically during the deployment phase as opposed to pre- or post-deployment, the majority of families quickly return to regular functioning after the deployment, without the requirement of external formal supports.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, for families affected by Imposed Restriction

absences, more than half felt the absence strained their relationships, but most believed their relationships improved afterwards.<sup>16</sup> Imposed Restrictions are intended to be short-term solutions to mitigate potential friction between military service and family life. The CAF expects that its members will relocate their families when posted to a new location, but they recognize that there are factors and circumstances that may temporarily require the member to elect to be separated from the family and proceed unaccompanied to the new place of duty. This is considered an Imposed Restriction. While this policy effectively addresses some of the disruptions that frequent relocations can have on spousal employment, childcare and education, and family medical care, it has raised other concerns about the long-term effect that extended separation may have on family members. In general, spouses and partners (the family member most commonly studied) show high levels of mastery, self-esteem, active coping strategies and support from their CAF partner with respect to absences.<sup>12,13,17</sup> Some family personas face more difficulties with absences than others (e.g., single parents, parents of CAF members, younger children, dual service couples), and may require additional external supports.<sup>18</sup>

### **Military lifestyle challenge 3. Operationally-related illness, injury or death**

While only approximately 1% of military families are affected by illness or injury resulting in medical release from the CAF, the impacts of the illness/injury on these families can be significant.<sup>19</sup> These impacts vary depending on a wide range of factors. For most medically released Veterans, their spouse/partner was their primary caregiver. In general, injured members and spouses both found the following most stressful on a day-to-day basis: “physical/mental health,” “work,” “family,” and the “military release.”<sup>20</sup> While the majority make the military to civilian transition successfully, some do struggle.<sup>21</sup> This applies to both the military member and their family members, as the family also goes through the transition from a military family identity and culture to a civilian identity and culture.<sup>22</sup>

### **Family challenge 1. Personal well-being and mental health**

About one-quarter of military families are concerned with their work-life balance, and to a lesser degree, their personal well-being and mental health.<sup>14</sup> But the majority are physically and mentally healthy.<sup>8</sup> Those caring for special needs children or elderly parents feel their emotional well-being suffers more as a result of the increased caregiving burden.<sup>11</sup> Children in military families may be using public mental health services more than children in the general population.<sup>23</sup>

### **Family challenge 2. Financial stress**

Financial stress affects some military families. About 10% of families say financial problems are their biggest challenge.<sup>14</sup> Challenges contributing to their financial stress include “finding suitable employment for the non-military spouse,” “unable to afford extracurricular activities,” and “trouble paying debt or bills.”<sup>14</sup> Relocation negatively impacts the financial situation of about half of families who must move due to a posting.<sup>16,24</sup> Housing and cost of living are the two major contributors to financial stress specifically related to relocations, with non-military spousal employment a lesser contributor.<sup>16,24</sup>

### **Family challenge 3. Intimate partner relationship**

While the majority of military couples are satisfied with their intimate partner relationship, a small percentage (8%) are concerned with it.<sup>14</sup> Most commonly, couples who are concerned with their relationship are having

“problems communicating/expressing feelings,” “arguments,” “growing apart or in different directions,” and “little or no physical affection.”<sup>14</sup> Relocations, deployments, Imposed Restrictions, and illness/injury all place additional stressors on the intimate partner relationship, though most recover quickly afterward.<sup>1</sup> A small percentage (5%) have experienced some sort of family violence.<sup>12</sup> Work-family conflict and marital dissatisfaction were found to be predictors of emotional and physical intimate partner violence. Emotional intimate partner violence negatively impacts psychological well-being<sup>25</sup> and significantly predicted psychological distress.<sup>26</sup>

### **Military family resiliency**

When the military journey and the family journey combine, at times these transitional challenges can compound or even collide, impacting the family more intensely. And depending on the family (where they are on their journey, what their composition is, what state their collective resiliency is at, etc.), each transitional challenge will be experienced and reacted to differently.

In a review of existing research on military families and resilience, it appears that little is known about the practices and processes enacted by resilient military families.<sup>27</sup> The study researchers posit that resilience involves ongoing work through bidirectional interactions across multi-systemic levels mediated through boundary maintenance, shared identities, family belief systems, organization patterns and communication processes. These researchers conclude that while it is incumbent upon the military family to take responsibility for their own resilience, the military institution can also take responsibility for their families’ resilience through the development and implementation of relevant policies and programs.

Canadian research findings suggest that 4 out of 5 military families are resilient and supported within a healthy CAF community, and only 1 in 10 feel they do not successfully meet the challenges of the military lifestyle.<sup>24</sup> A higher percentage (9 out of 10) believe they successfully meet the overall responsibilities they have in their lives.<sup>28</sup> However, some families need additional support to access CAF, community and provincial systems of care. As well, just like any family, a military family can experience resiliency under the right conditions, but should they experience enough stressors, they can become at risk for a variety of poor outcomes. Access to systems of care and supports at the CAF level, community level, and the provincial level would enhance their

resilience to manage the transitions inherent with CAF operational requirements and their family journey challenges.

Only about one-third of CAF spouses believe that the CAF looks after military families, while one-third did not think so, and one-third were neutral.<sup>8</sup> Overall participation rates in programs and services are low, but the majority of those who used programs and services were satisfied with the services they received and perceived that they assisted them in coping with their situations.<sup>8</sup> Most commonly, families tend to rely on non-military sources, such as personal networks, private doctors/counsellors, or the Internet.<sup>14</sup> The most common reasons for not using CAF community supports included “not thinking the support was required to deal with their problem,” “the program/service did not meet their needs,” or “they were not aware of the support.”<sup>14</sup>

## Conclusion

While the amount of research conducted over the past 10 years on issues facing military families is extensive, there are still many gaps in the overall knowledge base, including the basic demographics of military families. Research to date has mostly focused on families as a single entity (e.g., examined as a common unit experiencing the same issues), but families are not a single distinct entity. Future research needs to examine different types and personas of families, especially those who may have higher needs (e.g., single parents, special needs, etc.). And more research is needed specifically to better understand the needs of children and youth in military families. Research is also needed on the interaction of various factors, rather than simple questions on primary challenges. Research is needed to better understand the protective factors at play that seem to be inherently contributing to the high rate of military family resilience without systemic interventions or supports. Ideally, longitudinal research would be conducted to understand the cumulative impacts and trajectories of families throughout the course of the military career. And finally, research needs to be conducted acknowledging the ecological framework that families exist in, looking not only at the individual or the family unit, but also the communities they are part of, the provinces they live in, and the CAF itself as an institution and a culture.

There is a clear and basic requirement for existing military family services to be aligned with the current research on their needs and challenges. Services must be focused on these current needs in a way that reflects both

the numbers of families affected and the locations where those needs are being realized. The multitude of CAF services needs to be communicated more effectively to families, to ensure that when families need assistance to be more resilient, they know where to access those supports and that their resiliency is not hindered by a lack of knowledge of where help is available. Services need to align not only with the needs of families but also delivered using evidence-based practices and strategies that support the determinants of wellness and the domains and factors for resilience, at the individual, family and community levels. Ultimately, services for families need to be aligned with their realities, families need to be aware of those services, families need to know how to advocate for themselves and others on how to access those services, and if services are not available to address their needs, then we need to develop them collectively.

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## COMPETING INTERESTS

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## CONTRIBUTORS

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