

Harrison, D., and Albanese, P. (2016). Growing Up in Armyville: Canada's Military Families during the Afghanistan Mission. Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press.

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Deborah Harrison and Patrizia Albanese's book, "Growing Up in Armyville", is an amalgamation of their research that examines the 2006 Afghanistan deployments and how it affected Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) families in pseudonymous Armyville. Expressing their frustrations with "public invisibility of what Canadian military families have sacrificed" (p. 22), Harrison and Albanese consolidate their research findings to challenge and dispel many of the pervasive myths or assumptions held by both military institutions and the public. A delicate balance of quantitative and qualitative studies are used throughout the book to not only demonstrate the prevalence of reported issues, but to also reflect both individual and collective experiences involving mental health among many other stressors found in a military community. The data presented has been compiled through results from the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth (NLSCY), taken between 2006 and 2010, alongside extensive interviews with youth attending Armyville High School (AHS). "Growing Up in Armyville" presents its findings in a well-organized and chronological order, first examining distinct differences in a military family, followed by a look at the realities faced by these families—with a focus on adolescents—before, during, and after deployment.

Harrison and Albanese begin exploring general differences in military families by citing external studies to address three primary stressors: (1) geographic relocations, (2) frequent

separations, and (3) living under the blanket of risk. Because CAF families are found to be three times more likely to relocate than civilian families, this cycle of “relentless upheaval” often robs families of their established connections—only further emphasizing isolation alongside the loss of stability (p. 29). Harrison and Albanese also note emerging changes in the structure or form of the modern nuclear family—which challenges the traditional family—when examining the effects of extended military family separation. They cite modern examples such as same-sex marriages, dual-military households, or rising percentages of stay-at-home fathers. Lastly, the constant anxiety or fear of injury, illness, or death, coupled with the reality of military personnel succumbing to these concerns, all contribute to the disruption of relationships, parenting functions, or even the very structure of a family itself. It is within these three key points that Harrison and Albanese later categorize the findings from their interviews with the AHS community; challenges, difficulties, and concerns expressed by interviewees frequently link back to these three aspects as the foundation on which their issues compound upon one another.

The methodology for studying AHS youth involved a multi-phase process consisting of (1) a quantitative survey to approximately 1066 students, and (2) two-hour interview studies with approximately sixty-one CAF adolescents. The survey was designed to detect for any “significant differences in social or psychological indicators between CAF youth and civilian youth” (p. 46), as well as any other significant variations between AHS samples and NLSCY samples. Harrison and Albanese emphasize a correlation between multiple relocations and poor school engagement, followed by linking this with the statistically significant higher rate of relocation for CAF youth at AHS. However, all youth at AHS, regardless of CAF involvement, scored lower on mental health measures when compared to the results of the NLSCY. Harrison

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and Albanese offer a few critiques for their survey, citing assumptions that would have been more appropriate for large urban centres rather than the small town of Armyville. An example would be the fact that Armyville is largely a single-industry town (being the military industry), where the integration of civilian and military culture means “that spillover negative effects of the Afghanistan mission... have accrued to all Armyville area adolescents as opposed to simply the adolescent children of CAF families” (p. 52).

As the survey results were “inconclusive on all aspects of the mental well-being of CAF adolescents” (p. 67), Harrison and Albanese focus instead on the results from the interview phase; they arrange their findings into an anthology of different stories that touch on the challenges of living in a military family. These personal accounts specifically illuminate the realities of youth living through military relocations and deployments. An “emotional cycle of military separation” often characterizes these narratives through two aspects: (1) distinct emotional stages that occur during deployment, and (2) each emotional stage being associated with specific, identifiable experiences that are familiar to many other CAF families (p. 70). With CAF adolescents of AHS, dominant responses of fear and anxiety were widespread during the pre-deployment phase. Many reported feeling relief or even guilt when informed that a parent was to be exempt from deployment due to extenuating circumstances. Overall, the accounts of CAF adolescents during this phase echo an overwhelming sense of helplessness, denial, and desensitization to the process of deployment.

CAF adolescents’ descriptions of life during the deployment phase remains grim, often painting a picture of loss, isolation, and trepidation. Daily announcements of casualties at school alongside media reports of Afghanistan conflict escalations all affected CAF students’ capacity

to manage and cope. CAF adolescents in this stage experience the full impact of deployment differently than their younger siblings and may go through “parentification”, a process in which they forgo carefree teenage pursuits for adult responsibilities in order to compensate for the absence of a parent (p. 134). To study how these concerns may be addressed, Harrison and Albanese extend their research into supports and resources in Armyville for CAF families. An overwhelming number of interviewees had not used institutional supports (such as the Armyville Military Family Resource Centre) provided by CAF, and had also felt that guidance counsellors or support groups at AHS were unable to accommodate their needs.

It is through these complex yet humanizing narratives that a keynote theme of this book emerges: the continuity that a school can potentially provide to adolescents strained by CAF deployments and relocations. Evolving challenges such as a parent returning home with PTSD or a physical injury often proved too difficult for teenagers to handle independently. In most cases, interviewees were able to articulate how they felt during their interactions at school, and what could have been done better to accommodate their needs. Harrison and Albanese use these stories to illustrate the impacts of educational staff, and how a teacher showing empathy and understanding can be the catalyst for removing stigma and isolation for those students impacted by the effects of deployment (p. 169). Harrison and Albanese’s research also emphasizes the value of support groups in schools, as CAF youth share how these safe spaces allowed for a combination of catharsis, community, and healing.

The research process for Harrison and Albanese eventually culminated in a two-day symposium in Armyville which shared various findings and their applications. Not only do they present key insights, but they also provide ten practical recommendations to the Armyville

School District regarding the needs of CAF families. Their conclusion reads:

The current generation of CAF adolescents will soon become some of the adults whose lives will determine the vitality of Canadian society during the second half of the twenty-first century. They deserve more visibility—and more support—than they have achieved to this point. And they deserve the most competent resources that our Canadian society can provide (p. 190).

This book is a very specific examination into the small town of Armyville and the effects of the Afghanistan deployment between 2006 and 2010. Harrison and Albanese's research has sufficiently fulfilled their intention of exploring the impacts of a military family on adolescents—albeit with a few surprises along the way. Their approach of encouraging youth to engage in story-telling provides an alternate—yet important—perspective to the complexities of deployment. Harrison and Albanese's study however, did produce results contrary to popular research, instead presenting “nothing uniquely negative” about CAF youth in comparison to civilian youth at AHS (p. 67). As stated earlier, the lack of differences between the two groups could stem from the failure of this study to account for the widespread integration of military and civilian culture. This could also affect whether the results can be generalized to larger populations or other urban centres, given that all findings were acquired through the rural town of Armyville.

“Growing Up in Armyville” presents itself as an informative monograph that is well structured and easy to understand. There is a wealth of findings that could be appreciated by anyone interested in the impact of the military on a family. The subject matter of this book could be valuable for academics in the fields of sociology, psychology, social work, or education. This could also extend to professionals that interact with military families, which may include, but is

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not limited to, social workers, social policy makers, educators, healthcare providers, or counsellors. Overall, Harrison and Albanese have written a book is stimulating, relevant, and an insightful read.