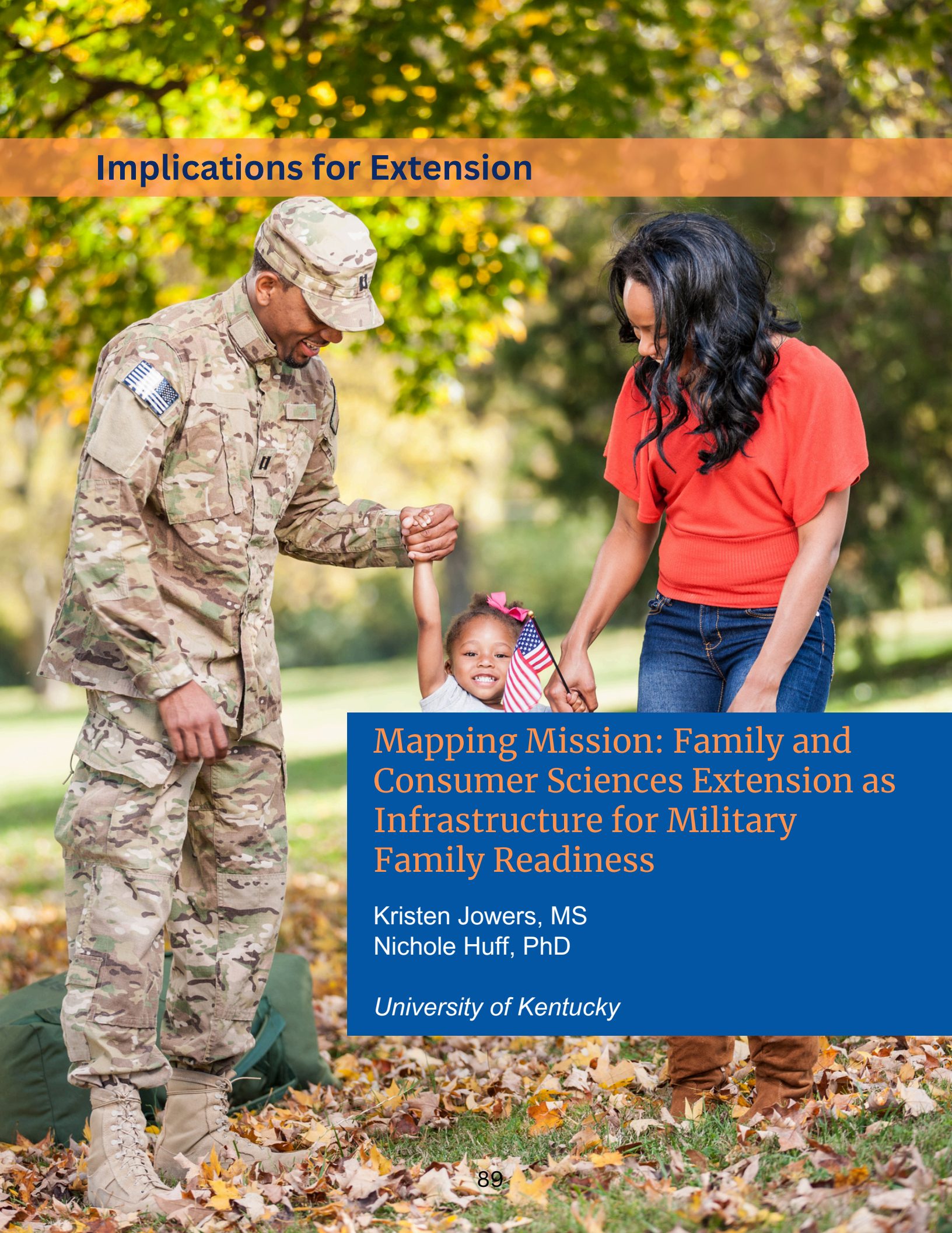


Implications for Extension



Mapping Mission: Family and Consumer Sciences Extension as Infrastructure for Military Family Readiness

Kristen Jowers, MS
Nichole Huff, PhD

University of Kentucky

Abstract

Extension educators are well-positioned to support military-connected families embedded in civilian communities. Yet, many professionals are unaware of the presence of military families and how Cooperative Extension and Family and Consumer Sciences (FCS) Extension function within the Military Family Readiness System. This “Implications for Extension” article maps FCS program areas into the five domains of military family readiness through an integrated systems model grounded in ecological systems theory. Recommendations include designating an FCS Extension-Military Liaison, strengthening connections between military and civilian professionals, and enhancing military cultural awareness.

Introduction

The Cooperative Extension System (CES) is a national educational network and agreement between the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and land grant universities. Formalized by the Smith-Lever Act in 1914, CES has delivered research-based programs and resources to diverse communities across the nation for more than a century. In addition to serving civilian communities, CES has extended its mission to support military-connected populations.

In 1982, the USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) Division of Youth and 4-H began partnering with the U.S. Armed Forces, bringing together 4-H, land-grant universities, and military support agencies. These localized collaborations between installations and land-grant universities have expanded over time into coordinated national efforts supporting military families. Ongoing programs include the Children, Youth, and

Families at Risk (CYFAR), 4-H Military Partnership Professional Development and Technical Assistance (PD&TA) program, Military Teen Adventure Camps, and the Yellow Ribbon Reintegration Internship Program (USDA-NIFA, 2025). In 2011, USDA-NIFA expanded its partnership to include the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) through the Extension-Military Partnership (Tidball, 2023). By formalizing cross-agency collaborations for military families, the partnership aims to improve the well-being of military families through coordinated research, education, and Extension programs.

Despite these long-standing collaborative efforts, the role of FCS Extension is not readily apparent. As an applied interdisciplinary field, FCS is often described as the “people-centered science” (AAAFCS, 2024). FCS professionals are employed in a variety of settings, including education, research, government, and technology, and focus on improving the conditions in which individuals and families live, work, and make decisions across the lifespan. Within the USDA-NIFA Institute of Youth, Family, and Community, FCS programming spans adult development and aging; child and family development; community resource and economic development; health and wellness; rural health and safety; and workforce development (USDA-NIFA, 2026). The FCS Body of Knowledge emphasizes the interaction between people and the environments in which they live, positioning FCS professionals to address complex, real-world challenges through education and community-based programming (AAFCS, 2017). This systems-oriented and applied focus enhances the ability of FCS professionals to be responsive to the interconnected

factors that influence military family well-being.

Purpose

The purpose of this manuscript is to increase the visibility of FCS Extension as a recognized contributor to military family readiness and well-being by mapping FCS program areas onto the five domains of military family readiness (DOD, 2026). In positioning FCS Extension within the Military Family Readiness System (MFRS), as detailed below, this manuscript increases awareness of the field's existing contributions while equipping professionals to expand their impact with this specialized population. The authors also list recommendations for strengthening FCS-military coordination, offering Extension professionals practical ways to design, implement, and evaluate programmatic outcomes through the lens of DOD policy.

Background

Military-connected families experience unique circumstances that distinguish them from civilian populations (Rea et al., 2025). For example, frequent moves can complicate access to services and installation-based support. Relocations, deployment cycles, and geographic dispersion often disrupt continuity of care, education, employment, and community connections (BSF, 2026; NMFA, 2025; OPA, 2025). Military families may also face risk for financial stress, food insecurity, unemployment, and caregiving strain (BSF, 2026; DOD, 2025a).

In response to the complex stressors of military life, and the recognition that family well-being is essential to mission readiness, the DOD provides a coordinated set of policies, programs, services, and resources aimed at

promoting military family readiness (DOD, 2026; NASEM, 2019). Military family readiness (MFR) is a multidimensional concept encompassing career, financial, social, health, and community domains (DOD, 2026). These domains reflect the extent to which individuals and families have the resources necessary to sustain both well-being and mission demands.

Career readiness refers to the degree to which service members and their families experience satisfaction with military employment. This includes the ability for families to navigate relocations and barriers to spouse employment. Social readiness encompasses the quality of interpersonal relationships across military, family, peer, and social networks. Financial readiness refers to managing household financial responsibility in ways that reduce stress, promote stability, and sustain operational focus. Health readiness is the capacity of service members and families to maintain physical and psychological well-being, including preventative health, stress management, and nutritional fitness for wartime responsibilities. Community readiness refers to the extent to which individuals and families are integrated into and embraced by the places where they live. According to the DOD (2026), "military family well-being contributes to retention, resilience, readiness, and quality of life" (p.15).

Ecology of Military Family Readiness

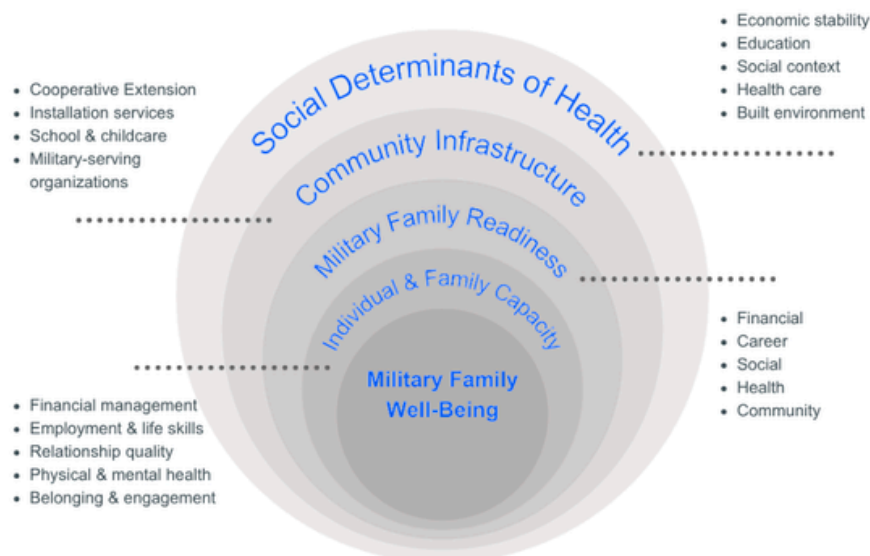
Understanding how these domains are supported requires examining the broader support systems where military families live. In 2024, approximately 74% of active-duty military spouses reported living off the installation and in local communities (OPA, 2025). Families that live outside of military installations rely on civilian systems (e.g., schools/childcare,

Extension programs, community-based organizations). As civilian practitioners, Extension professionals fill critical gaps in providing community-based education and support. With Extension educators in nearly every U.S. county, CES is uniquely positioned in geographically dispersed communities where millions of military-connected service members, veterans, and their families live (DOD, 2024; VA, 2025).

The Military Family Readiness System (MFRS) is an adaptive network of federal, state, and community-based agencies and organizations that promote positive outcomes for service members and their families across the domains of military family readiness, of which Extension plays an integral part (DOD, 2026; NASEM, 2019; Tidball, 2023). As such, MFR can be situated within the broader ecological context of Extension's Framework for Health Equity and Well-Being (Burton et al., 2021), shown in Figure 1. Like civilian families, military family well-being is connected to individual and family capacity, and the Social Determinants of Health (SDOH).

MFR is unique in that it encompasses community infrastructure from both installation-based and community-based programs and services. Policy mandates guide installation-based services and include relocation assistance, non-medical counseling, personal and family life education, financial readiness, employment readiness, Exceptional Family Member Program (EFMP), child and domestic abuse prevention, and Morale, Wellness, Recreation (MWR), among others (DOD, 2025b; DOD, 2026). These programs are complemented by civilian institutions that provide education, prevention programs, and community-based infrastructure, such as those offered through Extension, whose research-and evidence-based programming is designed to reach geographically dispersed audiences. For highly mobile military families, support infrastructure changes with each new duty station and relocation. From an ecological perspective, readiness is not simply an individual or family characteristic but a community-reinforced outcome.

Figure 1: Ecological Mapping of Social Determinants of Health and Military Family Readiness.



Mapping FCS and Military Family Readiness

Within this ecological framework, FCS Extension represents one mechanism through which community-based infrastructure can influence the conditions that shape military family well-being and readiness. To illustrate the connection between FCS programming and MFR, the authors developed an integrated systems model (see Figure 2), which depicts how the 2026 USDA-NIFA FCS program areas coalesce with the five domains of military family well-being.

This integrated systems model is grounded in ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), which conceptualizes individual and family well-being as the result of dynamic interactions

among individuals and the multiple environmental systems in which they are embedded. This perspective aligns with both FCS and MFR domains, as each recognizes that family outcomes are influenced by interconnected factors operating at individual, family, community, organizational, and societal levels. The model was developed using a conceptual framework mapping process informed by conceptual framework development methods (Jabareen, 2009). The five domains of military family readiness (DOD, 2026) served as the organizing framework. USDA-NIFA Family and Consumer Sciences (FCS) program areas were reviewed and compared against the definitions of each MFR domain to identify areas of conceptual alignment.

Figure 2: Integrated Systems Model: Family and Consumer Sciences as Infrastructure for Military Family Readiness.



Note: Outer circles are the military family readiness domains, and the inner circles are FCS Program Areas.

Program areas were mapped to the domain(s) they most directly support, recognizing that many FCS programs contribute to multiple dimensions of family well-being. Initial mapping was completed by one author and independently reviewed by the second author. Differences in interpretation were discussed and resolved through consensus. The resulting model in Figure 2 illustrates the conceptual relationships between FCS programming and MFR and provides a framework for translating DOD policy into Extension practice.

Findings

Applying this model to existing programming illustrates how FCS contributes to multiple dimensions of MFR in applied practice. Brown (1980) describes FCS as a responsive field capable of addressing complex human problems by drawing on multiple disciplines and theoretical perspectives (Wanago et al., 2025). This interdisciplinary foundation positions FCS educators to better address the interconnected needs reflected within MFR as they develop and deliver community-based programming. For example, youth development programs such as Military Teen Adventure Camps integrate leadership development, physical activity, social connection, and community engagement, contributing to career, health, social, and community readiness domains. Similarly, nutrition programs that combine healthy eating education with budgeting and resource management skills support both health and financial readiness domains. Family-focused programming may strengthen parent-child relationships, healthy relationships for military couples, and social support networks, all of which have been identified as important contributors

to family well-being and resilience among military families (NASEM, 2019). These examples demonstrate that FCS educators are already addressing interconnected aspects of military family well-being, even when those connections have not been formally framed through an MFR lens.

OneOp is another example of a national Extension-military partnership designed to address the complex needs of military-connected audiences through an MFR lens. This professional development initiative is a DOD-USDA collaboration that translates MFR research and policy into practice for service providers across multiple areas of family life, including personal finance, family and youth development, and nutrition and wellness. Through webinars, courses, and podcasts, OneOp provides an example of how Extension infrastructure can support the MFRS by strengthening the knowledge, skills, and capacity of professionals who serve military families.

Discussion

Cooperative Extension has long served military families through community engagement efforts, yet the role of FCS Extension within the MFRS has not been clearly articulated. This article contributes to the field by mapping FCS program areas onto the domains of military family readiness and situating these connections within an ecological framework. In doing so, it demonstrates how FCS Extension serves as a community-based resource that supports multiple dimensions of military family well-being and strengthens the broader infrastructure of MFR.

Implications and Recommendations

As our model illustrates, positioning FCS within the MFRS creates several opportunities to strengthen coordination, visibility, and impact between FCS Extension professionals and military-connected populations. One recommended pathway is to create an FCS Extension-Military Liaison, mirroring the 4-H Military Partnership, which formalized the collaboration between 4-H, USDA, and DOD. As a part of this partnership, the 4-H Military Liaison role was established as the state's professional connection between military service branches, installations, and the 4-H organization (4-H Military Partnership, n.d.). A similarly designated point of contact for FCS Extension in each state could strengthen coordination of programming, resource development, and formal and informal Extension-military collaborations.

Given the geographic dispersion of military families, current Extension educators are likely serving military-connected families without recognizing their affiliation. To increase local awareness, FCS professionals can identify their state's military installations, including National Guard armories, and explore service member and family demographics on Military OneSource (<https://installations.militaryonesource.mil/view-all>). FCS professionals can conduct an inventory of existing programming efforts and identify "Purple People" who are engaged with military audiences, as the color purple represents all branches of the military and advocacy on behalf of military-connected youth and families. Several national recognition efforts highlight military-connected families, including the Month of the Military Child

(Apr.), Military Spouse Appreciation (May) and National Veterans and Military Families (Nov.). These observances provide opportunities for FCS educators to engage with military and veteran families. Extension professionals can honor military families year-round by strengthening reciprocal referral pathways within civilian and military-serving ecosystems. This may include developing formal and informal connections with installation-based programs, military and veteran-serving organizations, schools, and community agencies (e.g., Family Readiness Groups, School Liaisons, Defense State Liaisons, 4-H Military Liaisons, Inter-Service Family Assistance Committees). Making military-serving partners aware of FCS Extension programs and resources can increase engagement with military audiences and thereby strengthen the MFRS.

Other opportunities include integrating military cultural awareness into FCS onboarding, ongoing professional development, and program planning to increase awareness of the presence of military families and encourage the intentional inclusion of military-connected audiences. Professional development in military cultural competence can help identify, engage, and respond to the unique needs of this diverse audience (Hall, 2011). No-cost opportunities for online learning, like those provided by OneOp (n.d.), combine subject matter expertise from national CES and DOD partners to offer interdisciplinary continuing education for professionals directly or indirectly serving military populations.

Limitations

The conceptual model introduced in this article is not without limitations. First, the model assumes that FCS program areas

categorized by USDA-NIFA translate directly to MFR domains as defined by DOD, which may oversimplify the multitude of ways FCS programs can meet the needs of military and veteran families. Additional core content areas identified by the Alliance for the American Association of Family and Consumer Sciences (AAAFCS, 2024) include food science and nutrition; health management and wellness; human and child development and family relations; and financial literacy. Additional areas, including culinary arts, hospitality, and tourism; housing and interior design; textiles, apparel, and retailing; and education and training, demonstrate the application of FCS across daily living and work contexts. FCS also addresses cross-cutting areas such as counseling and mental health, gerontology, community well-being, consumerism, and consumer safety. Collectively, these areas reflect many of the conditions that influence individual, family, and community readiness among military-connected populations.

Second, it reflects an initial framework mapping approach that needs empirical validation. Jabareen's (2009) conceptual framework analysis is based on flexible conceptual conditions and invites reconceptualization and evolution. The authors intend this model as a starting point for the field's consideration rather than a definitive or exhaustive account. Additional connections likely exist between FCS programming and military family well-being beyond those illustrated here, and future research may identify connections that the conceptual model does not capture.

Future Directions

Future research should examine how FCS programs influence military family well-

being and contribute to specific domains of MFR. More inquiry is needed to better identify military-connected audiences within Extension programs, incorporate MFR indicators into program evaluation efforts, examine outcomes among military-connected participants, and explore ways to adapt existing programs to better engage military families. Additional research documenting the reach and impact of FCS programming with military-connected populations would further strengthen conceptualizations of Extension's role within the MFRS. Increasing the visibility of FCS contributions through research and evaluation can strengthen cross-sector partnerships and advance the field's broader mission to build strong individuals, families, and communities.

Author Information

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Kristen Jowers, MS, University of Kentucky. KY. kristen.jowers@uky.edu

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