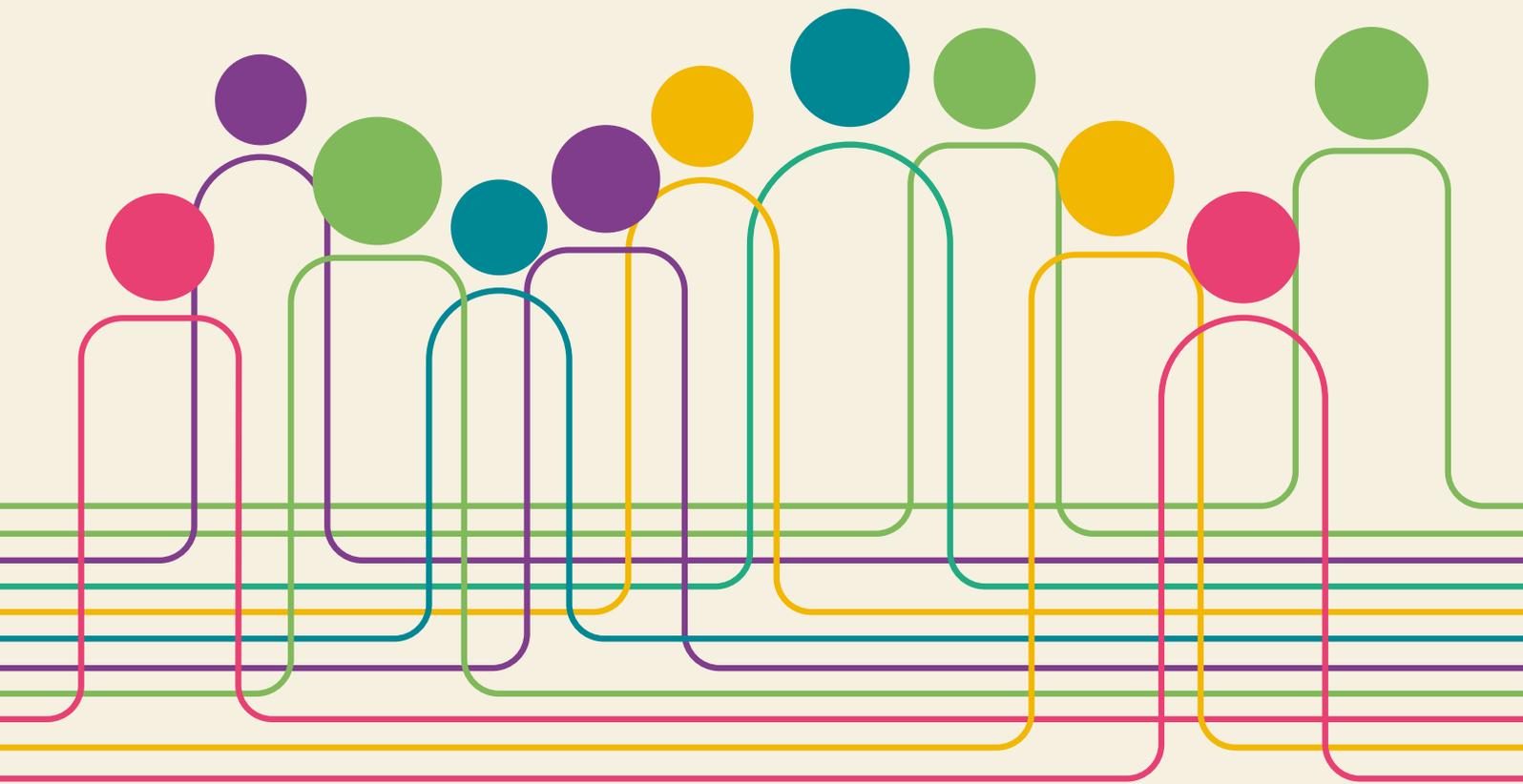


Estimating the current and future size of the UK bereaved Armed Forces community

Catherine Galley and Linda Slapakova



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Preface

This report presents findings from research estimating the current and projected size of the bereaved Armed Forces community. This research, commissioned by the Royal British Legion (RBL), is part of a wider research programme from RAND Europe that is focused on forecasting the size, demographic characteristics and support needs of the Armed Forces community. We would like to thank the RBL for funding this work and to our quality assurance reviewers, Dr Mary Keeling and Dr Andrew Gibson, for their insightful feedback on this report.

RAND Europe is a not-for-profit research institution that helps improve policy and decision making through objective research and analysis. RAND researches multiple policy areas, including military personnel, ex-service personnel and military families.

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Abbreviations

AFC	Armed Forces community
AFCAS	Armed Forces Continuous Attitude Survey
APS	Annual Population Survey
JPA	Joint Personnel Administration
MOD	Ministry of Defence
ONS	Office for National Statistics
RBL	Royal British Legion
SP	Service personnel

Foreword

In 2021/22, the national Census in Great Britain asked a question to identify veterans for the first time, following the successful 'Count Them In' campaign by the Royal British Legion (RBL). The data available as a result increased our understanding of the demographics and needs of veterans and their households in a way never previously possible.

In 2024, RBL commissioned RAND Europe to develop the UK Armed Forces sector's first detailed forecasts of the size and demographic profile of the Armed Forces Community (AFC) – including regular and reserve serving personnel, veterans, their families, and the bereaved – out to 2045. These forecasts use data from Census and Ministry of Defence sources to produce new insights about likely change over coming decades, which are essential to understand for planning of future support.

This work informed RBL's 10-year Strategy and provides evidence to ensure that wider policy, services, and support for the AFC remain fit for purpose in the context of an uncertain world, and rapidly changing demographics and needs.

This report estimates, for the first time, the size and profile of the bereaved Armed Forces community. There are no official statistics available on bereaved family members in the Armed Forces community, with the exception of family members who are in receipt of compensation from the Ministry of Defence because they were bereaved of a loved one as a result of Service. The bereaved are often 'uncounted' and fall outside usual definitions of the veteran or serving community, yet are

a vital and valued part of the Armed Forces community, and often eligible for support.

This report aims to address the gap in information about the size and profile of people in the Armed Forces community who are bereaved, and to help ensure this part of our community are considered, visible, and recognised in policy and service delivery.

It shows that at present, there are likely to be over 100,000 people in our community each year who are bereaved, the vast majority of these being spouses or partners bereaved of a veteran, or a veteran bereaved of their spouse or partner. Alongside these, in 2025, we estimate around 1200 children and young people aged under 18 were bereaved of a veteran parent, around 30 partners, and a similar number of children, were bereaved of a serving person, and around 40 serving personnel were bereaved of their partner.

This report also explores the limitations in understanding the wider bereaved Armed Forces community, including parents and siblings, or the impact of bereavement on those who have lost someone who provided unpaid care. It sets out how the bereaved community may change in coming years in scenarios where there is a large-scale conflict, likely resulting in higher numbers of bereaved family members in younger age groups, again requiring a shift in support and recognition of changing experiences and needs. It is vital that we continue to build our understanding of the profile of the bereaved community, their experiences, and the support they need, in coming years.

The insights from this report are being used by RBL to inform planning for change in service design and delivery, and wider activities like influencing government policy, and engagement with the community. It is our hope and intention that the findings from this research will also be of use across the Armed Forces sector and in

wider planning for public policy and services, ensuring the needs of the whole Armed Forces community are understood and met effectively in coming years.

Ann Griffiths

Head of Policy and Research, Royal British Legion



1. Introduction

The UK Armed Forces community (AFC) comprises a diverse population connected to the Armed Forces through service or family ties. As this community continues to evolve – shaped by changes in personnel patterns, social structures and demographic trends – service providers and charities are reflecting on how these changes will affect the requirements for support provision in the years ahead. One area of unmet need increasingly being recognised is support provision for

the bereaved community, including families bereaved of a service person or veteran and serving personnel or veterans who have been affected by the bereavement of a family member.¹ Despite this growing recognition, there is limited understanding of the size of the bereaved community within the AFC.

This report addresses this gap by using publicly available data to provide an overview of the current size and demographic profile of the bereaved AFC and forecasts how

this community is likely to change out to 2045. While, at its broadest definition, the bereaved AFC includes any member who has experienced the death of a loved one, due to data availability, this research focuses specifically on individuals bereaved of a partner, or of a child aged 18 or under. This research finds similar results to research published in 2024 in relation to bereaved children, with differences likely reflecting differences in data sources and methodologies.²

Chapter 2 of the report describes the methodology used for developing the forecasts, **Chapter 3** provides forecasts for the size of the bereaved serving community, **Chapter 4** provides forecasts for the size of the bereaved veteran community, and **Chapter 5** provides a conclusion and short discussion of key trends that may impact the bereaved AFC over the forecast period.



2. Methodology

This research builds on work by RAND Europe forecasting the size and demographics of the AFC to estimate the size of the bereaved AFC; the estimates do not specify expected causes of death for any individual. Due to data constraints, our analysis focuses on bereavements affecting service personnel (SP), veterans, their partners and their children. The forecasts provide annual estimates from 2025 to 2045 for each group below:

- Partners bereaved of an SP
- Children bereaved of their serving parent

- SP bereaved of a partner or a child
- Veterans bereaved of a partner or a child
- Partners bereaved of a veteran
- Children bereaved of a veteran.

While the impact of bereavements extends beyond immediate family members, the estimates give an overview of key bereavement circumstances within the AFC and of those most likely to require support from the RBL and other charities.

For this research, we relied on RAND Europe forecasts of the size and demographics of the

AFC. More details on the data, methodology and limitations of these forecasts are provided in a separate RAND Europe report.³ For data on mortality, we used the UK Armed Forces death in service statistics⁴ and civilian mortality rates.⁵

Forecasting the mortality rate of SP and the number of partners and children bereaved of an SP

We used publicly available Ministry of Defence (MOD) and civilian data to forecast the annual number of SP deaths per person (mortality rate) for each age group and for each major cause of death: suicide, land traffic accidents, diseases and other causes of death.⁶ The MOD provides data on the number of deaths in each age group for both suicides and land traffic accidents. For diseases and other causes of death, we assumed that the age distribution is similar to civilians for diseases and accidents.⁷ We then forecasted each mortality rate out to 2045 using Bayesian regression⁸ and summed the forecasted mortality rates for each cause of death to estimate the total mortality rate for each age group. Subsequently, we made the following estimates:

- Number of SP who will die in service each year. To forecast this number, we

multiplied the forecasted number of SP by age group in each year by the forecasted mortality rate.

- Number of partners bereaved of an SP each year. To forecast this number, we multiplied the forecasted number of SP with a partner by the forecasted mortality rate.
- Number of children bereaved of an SP each year. To forecast this number, we multiplied the number of children in each parental age group by the forecasted mortality rate for that age group.

We used both the Joint Personnel Administration (JPA) and Armed Forces Continuous Attitude Survey (AFCAS) estimates for the number of SP in a relationship and with children for this research. Data using estimates from JPA includes only spouses and civil partners, while estimates using data from AFCAS includes spouses, civil partners and partners in a long-term relationship with an SP.⁹

Forecasting the mortality rate of partners of SP and the number of SP bereaved of a partner

To forecast the mortality rate of partners of SP, we used historic UK mortality rates up to 2022 and projected these out to 2045 for each age group and gender, using Bayesian hierarchical

3 Galley & Slapakova (2026a).

4 Ministry of Defence (2025).

5 Office for National Statistics (2024a).

6 As the mortality rate for different causes of death among SP varies substantially by age group (e.g. older personnel have a much higher mortality rate due to disease and a lower mortality rate due to accidents), we project the mortality rates by age group and mortality rate for SP at the early stage of our analysis. We then aggregate this data and do not report the projected mortality rate by cause of death in this report.

7 Office for National Statistics (2024c).

8 Regression analysis identifies the line that best fits the pattern in this historical data. Bayesian regression analysis incorporates our prior expectation about the pattern to include uncertainty in the estimate of the 'line of best fit'.

9 Long-term relationship is not defined but likely includes relationships over 12 months. For more information on the benefits and limitations of each data source, please see Galley & Slapakova (2026a). The JPA data is based on whether the SP self-declared any children and may include children over 18. The AFCAS data is based on how many children under 18 respondents said they supported financially.

regression¹⁰ to share information across genders. We then multiplied the forecasted number of partners in each age group by their age-specific mortality rate. As above, we used both the JPA and AFCAS estimates for the number of partners.

To estimate the total number of bereaved personnel, we also projected the number of SP in each relationship status using data from AFCAS and used this to estimate the percentage of SP in each relationship status. We then multiplied these percentages by the forecasted number of SP to forecast the number of widowed SP. However, this method cannot account for forecasted changes in the composition of the Armed Forces that may impact relationships status and rates of widowhood.

Forecasting the mortality rate of veterans and the number of partners and children bereaved of a veteran

To forecast the mortality rate of veterans, we applied the age- and gender-specific mortality rate forecasts (calculated above) to the forecasts of the number of veterans by age and gender. The mortality rate forecasts were subsequently applied in two ways:

- Forecasting the number of partners bereaved of a veteran by estimating the number of veterans with a partner. Because we have adjusted these estimates to only capture civilian partners, we may not capture cases where a veteran is bereaved of a veteran partner.

- Forecasting the number of children bereaved of a veteran by estimating the number of children of veterans, intentionally double counting where both parents are veterans as a child becomes bereaved if either veteran dies.¹¹

Forecasting the mortality rate of partners of veterans and the number of veterans bereaved of a partner

To forecast the mortality rate of partners of veterans (i.e. the annual number of veterans bereaved of a partner), we multiplied the forecast of the number of partners by the age- and gender-specific mortality rate forecasts (calculated above). To estimate the total number of widowed veterans (compared with the annual number of bereaved veterans), we also projected the number of veterans in each relationship status using data from the Annual Population Survey (APS) and the 2021 England and Wales Census. We then multiplied these percentages by the forecasted number of veterans to forecast the number of widowed veterans. However, as APS data does not provide data on relationships status by age, this does not capture changing age dynamics within the veteran community.

Forecasting the number of SP and veterans bereaved of a child

To forecast the number of SP and veterans bereaved of a child, we multiplied the forecast of the number of children within the Regular and veteran communities by the expected mortality rate of children. As we did not have sufficient data on the ages of children within the Regular and veteran communities (specifically,

10 Hierarchical Bayesian regression builds on Bayesian regression (defined above) to share information across different groups (in this case, gender) to improve the robustness of the estimates. In this case, our model assumes that both females and males with an age group are likely to have a similar trend in mortality rate, although there may be small differences between the two groups.

11 This research relies on estimates from the England and Wales Census which includes 'children or step-children living with a veteran on census day). For more details on how we generated forecasts for the total number of children aged under 18 of a veteran living in England, Wales and Scotland, please see Galley and Slapakova (2026a).

the number or proportion of children under one year old, who have a higher mortality rate compared with other children), we sampled from a uniform distribution of between 0.1 and 0.2 deaths per 1,000 children, which reflects the historical mortality rate of children.¹²

Aggregation and reporting

Throughout the research, we used Monte Carlo sampling¹³ to aggregate and multiply samples, and to preserve the uncertainty in the personnel/veteran forecasts and the mortality rate forecasts. For all forecasts, we used a Bayesian approach with 60,000 samples to ensure a robust approach. For historical data in this report, we do not report the uncertainty, but we provide credible intervals for all forecasted data.

Limitations

This research is subject to several key limitations:

- **Defining the bereaved community:** It is not possible to forecast the total size of the bereaved community, given that bereavement is a permanent state and does not end until an individual dies. In some cases, individuals may experience decades of bereavement after the death of a partner or child. Individuals can also experience multiple bereavements, but should only be counted once. Instead, we focus on two measures of recent bereavement: the forecasted number of individuals bereaved each year, and the forecasted number of individuals bereaved within the last ten years, who are most likely to require support for their bereavement.
- **Estimated partner mortality:** When forecasting expected partner mortality, we used the age and opposite gender of the SP or veteran. As most veterans are male, this may slightly underestimate partner mortality, particularly where same-sex male partners are classified as female. Most veteran partners are slightly younger than veterans on average, which may also result in a slight overestimation of partner mortality due to applying higher mortality rates.
- **Child mortality:** We assumed a mortality rate between 0.1 and 0.2 deaths per 1,000 children under the age of 18. This intentionally reduces the mortality rate of children aged under one year as we do not know the percentage of this age group.
- **Excluding SP aged 60+:** Forecasts do not include SP aged 60+, as historical increases in this group are numerically small (but have a large relative effect) and disproportionately affect total estimated deaths due to higher disease-related mortality. Furthermore, we did not forecast the number of children of SP aged over 60+. As there have been substantial changes in the number of SP aged 60+ and the number of children of SP aged 60+, these forecasts were overly sensitive to small fluctuations, and it was not possible to generate sufficiently robust forecasts. Nevertheless, we do provide additional details in the footnotes on the expected impact on deaths of SP, bereaved SP and bereaved partners of SP if the number of SP aged 60+ does increase as forecast.
- **Excluding reservists:** We excluded reservists from our estimates of the bereaved serving community due to the very low mortality within this community

¹² Office for National Statistics (2024a).

¹³ Monte Carlo sampling requires repeatedly drawing many random samples from a distribution. For this research, using Monte Carlo sampling when adding or multiplying numbers allows us to preserve the uncertainty from the projections in our forecasts.

and limited data on deaths of reservists when not on duty.

- **Use of civilian mortality data:** These analyses rely on civilian mortality rates, which may over- or underestimate mortality among veterans; however, no evidence demonstrates significant discrepancies within the UK.
- **Mortality within couples:** As partners are typically of similar ages and experience comparable mortality rates, estimates of total widowed veterans or bereaved partners over a ten-year period may not fully account for cases in which both partners die within that timeframe.
- **Dual-service couples:** There is considerable overlap between veterans and partners of veterans, with approximately 9 per cent of veterans in a relationship with another veteran. Both individuals are counted as veterans in this research, which may undercount cases where a veteran is bereaved of their veteran partner.



3. Bereavement within the serving Armed Forces community

This section provides estimates on the number of bereaved SP and partners of SP within the serving community. It uses data on historical numbers of SP who died in service to estimate the number of bereaved partners of SP, and historical data on the average mortality rate by age and gender to estimate the number of SP bereaved of a partner. While this section treats SP and partners separately, it is likely that there is some overlap between the two groups due to

dual-serving couples. It is also likely that some partners of an SP are also veterans.

3.1. Partners bereaved of serving personnel

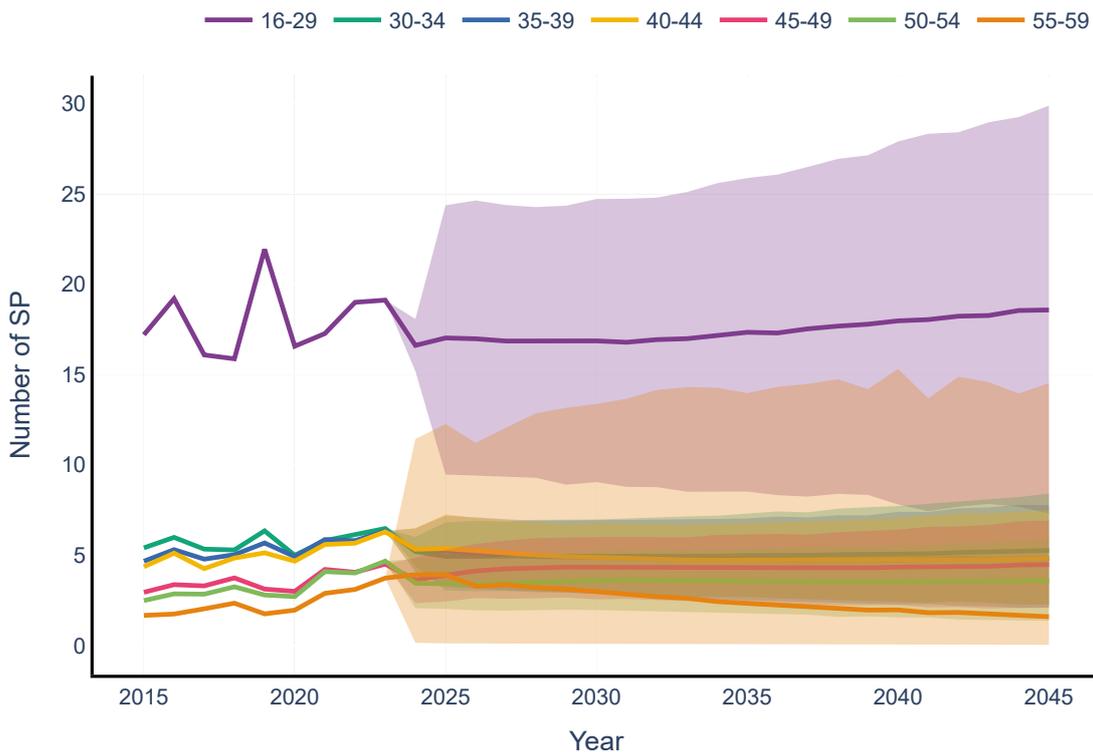
The mortality rate of SP is currently very low: fewer than 75 personnel have died each year since 2015.¹⁴ This reflects both the age and health of SP in general (health selection effect) and the very low number of combat

deaths since the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan (only three SP were killed in combat between 2015 and 2024). Since 2015, 39 per cent of deaths have been due to illness, 32 per cent due to accidents, 23 per cent due to suicide and 6 per cent due to other causes.¹⁵

It is likely that the number of deaths of SP will remain low out to 2045 if historical trends continue (see forecast in Figure 3.1).¹⁶ The slightly higher forecast for deaths among SP aged 16–29 reflects the slightly higher mortality rate of this group due to accident. In the event of a major conflict, the number of deaths is likely to increase substantially, depending on the extent and lethality of the

conflict. For reference, in total, 457 SP were killed in Operation Herick (Afghanistan) and 178 in Operation Telic (Iraq), with deaths of SP reaching rates of over 150 SP per year in 2009 and 2010 (over 100 of these in each year were ‘deaths as a result of operations’).¹⁷ Future conflict at this level or higher will substantially increase the number of casualties and bereaved family members, although the age and demographic profile of these casualties is likely to be different to peacetime casualties. Whereas a large proportion of peacetime deaths are due to illness, primarily among older SP, wartime casualties are more likely to affect mortality rates among younger SP.

Figure 3.1: Forecast of the number of deceased SP



15 Ministry of Defence (2025).

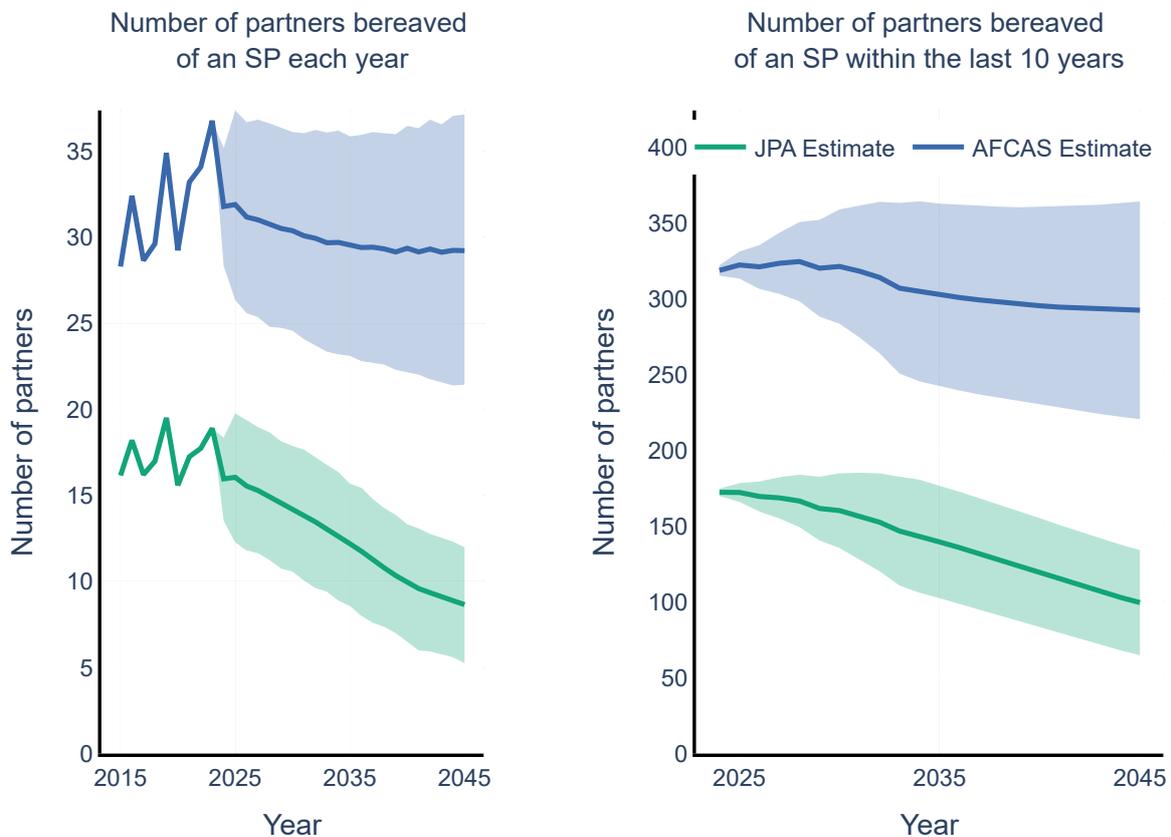
16 As discussed in the methodology, we don't include forecasts for SP aged 60+ in this graph or the main discussion. Our forecasts suggest that if the number of SP aged 60+ increases as forecast, the number of deaths among SP aged 60+ would increase from between 0 and 7 in 2025, to between 46 and 92 in 2034 and between 91 and 180 in 2045. However, our forecasts do not account for a potential health selection effect that may influence whether SP choose to remain serving after they turn 60.

17 Ministry of Defence (2024).

The left-hand graph of Figure 3.2 shows the estimated annual number of partners bereaved of an SP using estimates from both JPA and AFCAS, and the right-hand graph shows the estimated number of partners bereaved within the previous ten years. This graph shows that **the estimated number of bereaved partners**

in the serving community is likely to remain low out to 2045, assuming historical trends continue.¹⁸ Table 3.1 summarises the forecasts for the number of deceased SP and bereaved partners for each five-year interval using both data sources.

Figure 3.2: Estimated number of bereaved partners of an SP



18 For SP aged 60+ (not included in Figure 3.2), our forecasts suggest that (using JPA data and age-specific SP mortality rates) there will likely be fewer than 5 bereaved spouses in 2025, fewer than 40 bereaved spouses in 2035 and fewer than 70 bereaved spouses in 2045, if the number of SP aged 60+ increases as forecast. Our forecasts using AFCAS data suggest that in 2025 there will be fewer than 4 bereaved partners of SP aged 60+, in 2035 between 10 and 60 bereaved partners aged 60+ and in 2045 between 20 and 100 bereaved partners of SP aged 60+, if the number of SP aged 60+ increases as forecast.

Table 3.1: Forecast of the number of deceased SP and bereaved partners of SP

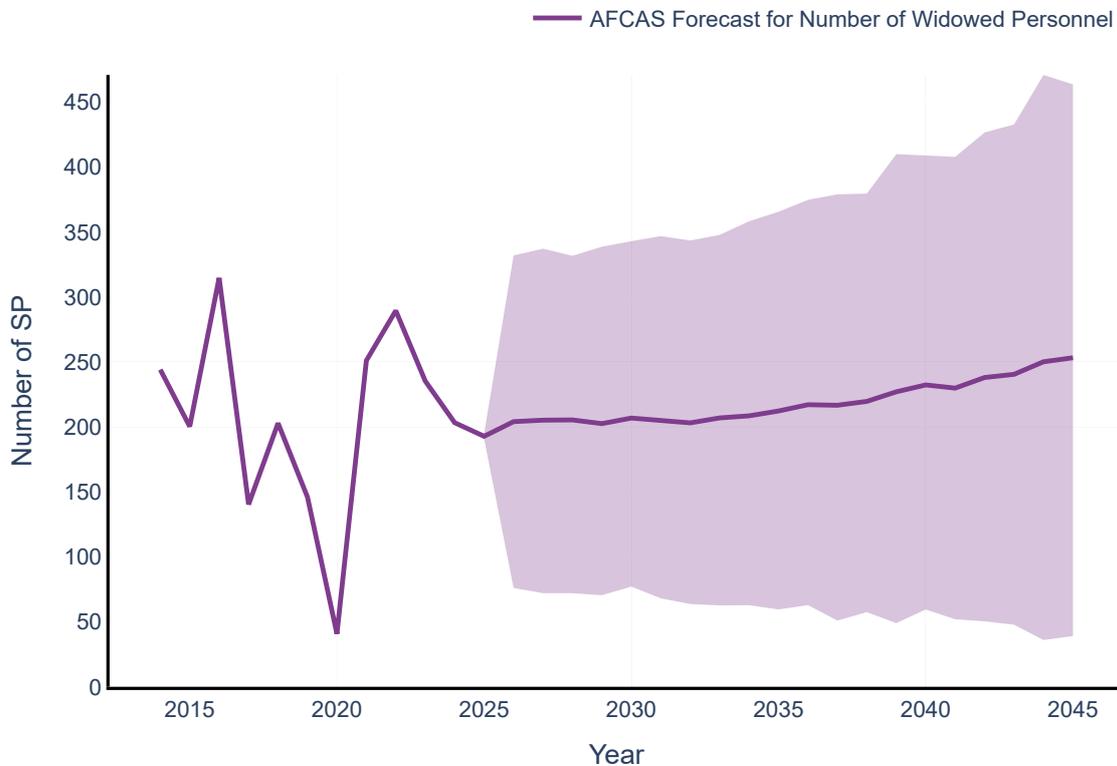
Category	2025	2030	2035	2040	2045
Deceased SP	40 (30–50)	40 (30–50)	40 (30–50)	40 (30–60)	40 (30–60)
Bereaved partners (JPA) (annual)	20 (10–20)	10 (10–20)	10 (10–20)	10 (10–10)	10 (10–10)
Bereaved partners (AFCAS) (annual)	30 (30–40)	30 (30–40)	30 (20–40)	30 (20–40)	30 (20–40)

Note: The first number in each cell is the mean estimate and the numbers in brackets are the 95 per cent credible interval for each estimate.

3.2. Serving personnel bereaved of a partner

Data from AFCAS indicates that there were approximately 200 widowed SP in 2025, with this figure remaining relatively stable at between 0.1 per cent and 0.2 per cent of SP since 2007. This reflects the total estimated number of widowed SP (based on the proportion of AFCAS respondents who gave their relationship status as widowed) and does not indicate how recent the bereavement is.

While there is unlikely to be the same health selection effect among partners as there is with SP, most partners of SP are likely to be of a similar age to SP (i.e. aged below 60) and thus have a relatively low mortality rate. Figure 3.3 shows the estimated number of widowed personnel using projections on relationship status data from AFCAS, which shows that the total number of widowed SP is expected to remain between 200 and 250 out to 2045.

Figure 3.3: Forecast of the number of widowed SP

However, AFCAS data on relationship status only includes SP who have lost a spouse, not those bereaved of a long-term partner. It also does not capture SP who have since entered a new long-term relationship or remarried, or individuals bereaved of a former partner, which may have a significant impact, particularly when children are involved.

An alternative estimate of SP bereaved of a partner can be produced by applying population mortality rates to forecasts of the number of partners each year. The left-hand graph of Figure 3.4 shows our forecasts for the annual number of SP bereaved of a partner. Using JPA data on the age, gender and marital status of Armed Forces personnel, these forecasts suggest that **between 35**

and 50 SP are bereaved of a spouse each year. Alternatively, using AFCAS data on the estimated number of partners, including those in long-term relationships, **the annual number of SP bereaved of a partner is likely to be between 180 and 200.** This higher estimate reflects both the greater number of partners identified in AFCAS (more than double that in JPA) and the assumption of even distribution of partners across age groups when using AFCAS data.

For both forecasts, the research assumes that partners are in the same age group as the SP, as there is no sufficient data on partners' ages.¹⁹ The right-hand plot in Figure 3.4 shows the estimated number of SP bereaved of a partner over a ten-year period. These forecasts

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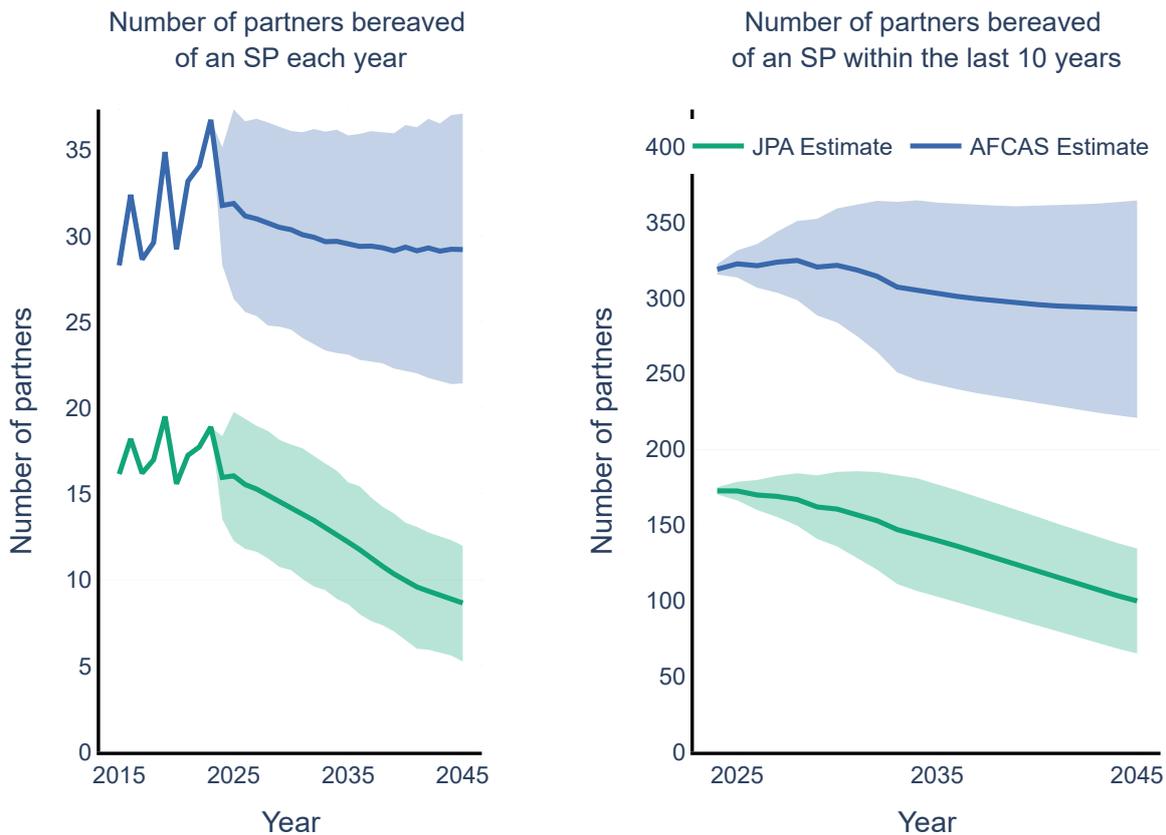
While the estimates using JPA data reflect the actual partnership rates by age from JPA, the estimates using AFCAS assume a constant rate of partnership across SP of all ages, and thus may overestimate the number of partners.

reflect both projected changes in the number of SP in each age group out to 2045 and projected changes in the number of SP who are married in each age group out to 2045, and in particular, the projected decrease in the number of SP aged under 30 who are married.²⁰ Figure 3.5 shows the estimated number of bereaved SP by the age and Table 3.2 summarises the forecasts for the number of widowed and bereaved SP.

A key challenge in estimating the number of bereaved SP is the lack of information on their circumstances following bereavement. Some bereaved SP may remain in the Armed Forces, but others may be more likely to

leave, particularly if they are balancing work, bereavement and single parenthood. While AFCAS estimates may overstate the number of SP becoming bereaved each year, it is also possible that the higher figure reflects SP who become bereaved and subsequently leave the Armed Forces, and thus are not counted as 'widowed' in subsequent AFCAS years, which would explain the difference between the annual number of bereaved SP and the total number of widowed SP. The AFCAS estimate also includes bereavement among SP in long-term relationships who are not formally classified as widowed but are nonetheless affected by bereavement.

Figure 3.4: Forecast of the number of bereaved SP



20 If the number of SP aged 60+ increases as forecast, it is likely that the number of SP aged 60+ bereaved of a spouse will remain below 5 per year using JPA data and below 20 per year using AFCAS data.

Figure 3.5: Forecast of the number of bereaved SP, by age of SP

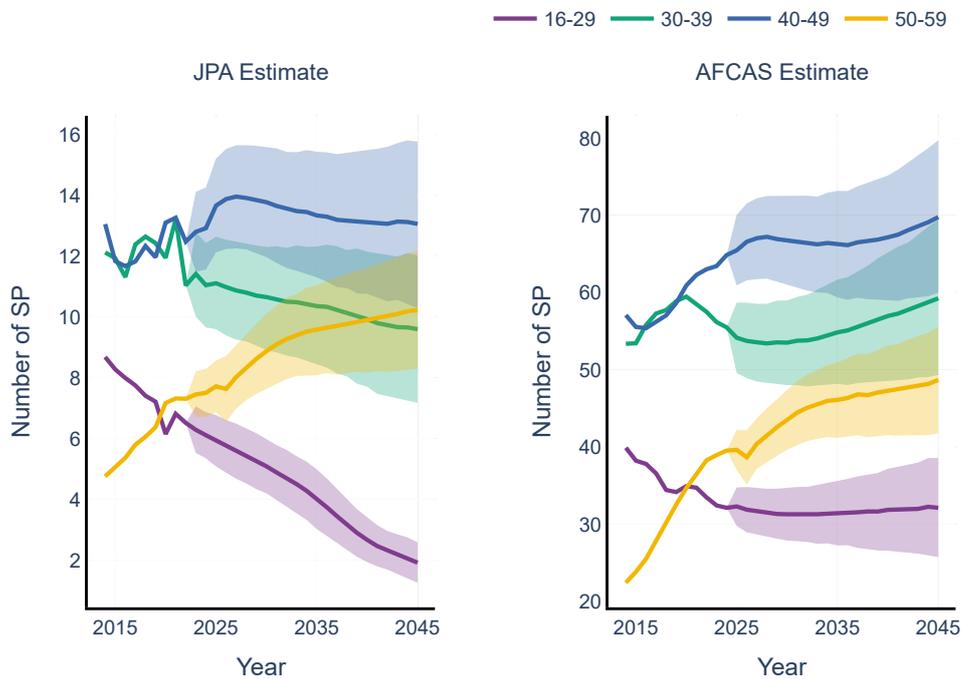


Table 3.2: Forecast of the number of SP bereaved of a partner

Category	2025	2030	2035	2040	2045
Bereaved SP (JPA) (annual)	40 (40–40)	40 (40–50)	40 (30–40)	40 (30–40)	30 (30–40)
Bereaved SP (AFCAS) (annual)	190 (180–200)	200 (190–200)	200 (190–210)	200 (190–220)	210 (190–230)

Note: The first number in each cell is the mean estimate and the numbers in brackets are the 95 per cent credible interval for each estimate.

3.3. Children bereaved of a serving parent

We estimate that approximately 30 children will be bereaved of a serving parent in 2025. Figure 3.6 shows the forecasted number of children bereaved of an SP each year, which is likely to remain relatively constant out to 2045, if historical trends continue. This reflects the relatively low and constant mortality rate of SP

since 2015 and the relatively stable forecast of the number of children in the serving community.²¹ The forecast is summarised in Table 3.3. We were not able to estimate the number of children bereaved of a non-serving parent each year, but it is likely to be similar to the number of children bereaved of a serving parent. While the mortality rate of civilians is likely to be slightly higher than SP as they do not benefit from the health selection effect,

21 As discussed in the methodology, we could not include forecasts for the number of children bereaved of an SP aged 60+ due to the substantial changes in the number of SP aged 60+ and the number of children of SP aged 60+ since 2013. However, if the number of SP aged 60+ increases as forecast, it is likely that there could be up to 150 children per year bereaved of an SP by 2045.

children of dual-serving couples can only be bereaved of a serving parent. These two effects work in opposite directions as the lower mortality rate of SP is likely to reduce

the expected number of children bereaved of a serving parent, while having two serving parents will increase the expected number of children bereaved of a serving parent.

Figure 3.6: Forecast of the number of children bereaved of an SP parent

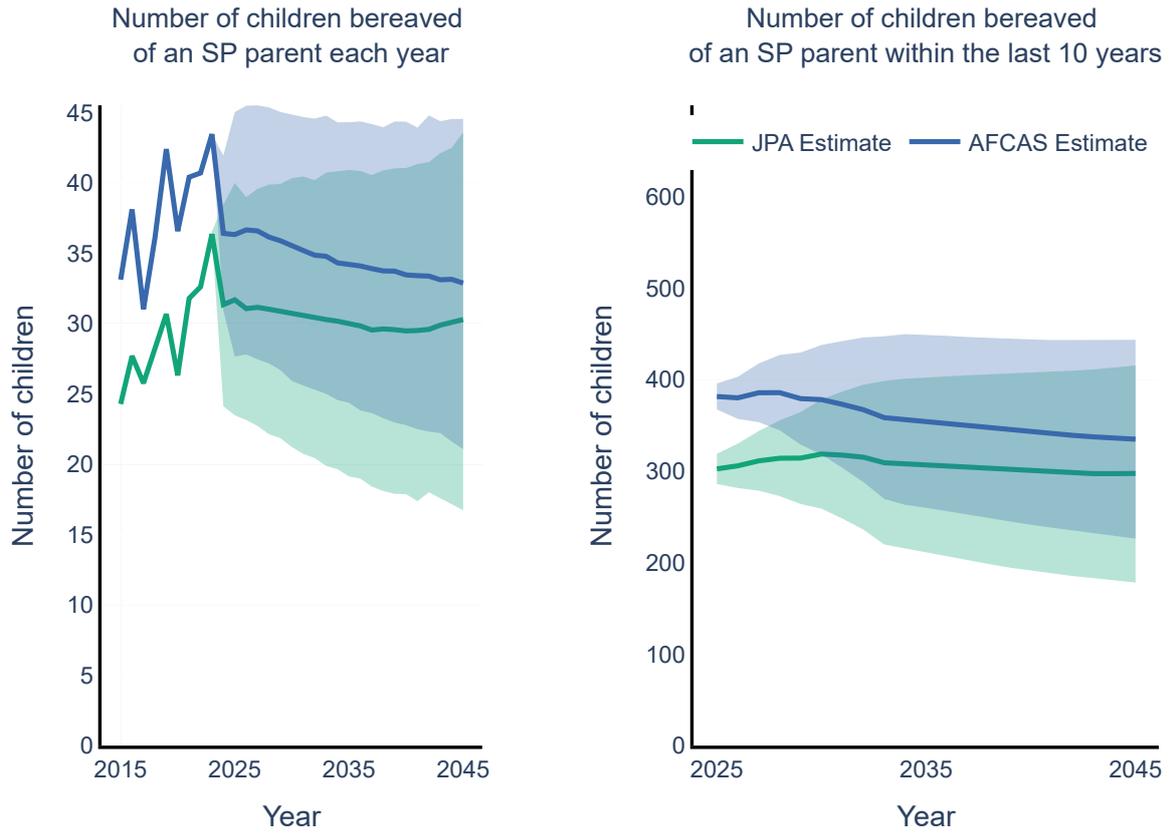


Table 3.3: Forecast of the number of children bereaved of an SP parent

Category	2025	2030	2035	2040	2045
Bereaved children (JPA) (annual)	30 (20–40)	30 (20–40)	30 (20–40)	30 (20–40)	30 (20–40)
Bereaved children (AFCAS) (annual)	40 (30–50)	40 (30–50)	30 (30–40)	30 (20–40)	30 (20–50)

Note: The first number in each cell is the mean estimate and the numbers in brackets are the 95 per cent credible interval for each estimate.

3.4. Serving person bereaved of a child

We estimate that fewer than 20 SP are bereaved of a child each year. This reflects the very low mortality rate of children and the stable forecast of the number of children in the

serving community. Figure 3.7 shows both the estimated number of SP newly bereaved of a child and the estimated number of SP bereaved of a child in the last ten years (although not all SP bereaved of a child will remain in the Armed Forces for the subsequent ten years). Table 3.4 provides a summary of the forecast.

Figure 3.7: Forecast of the number of SP bereaved of a child

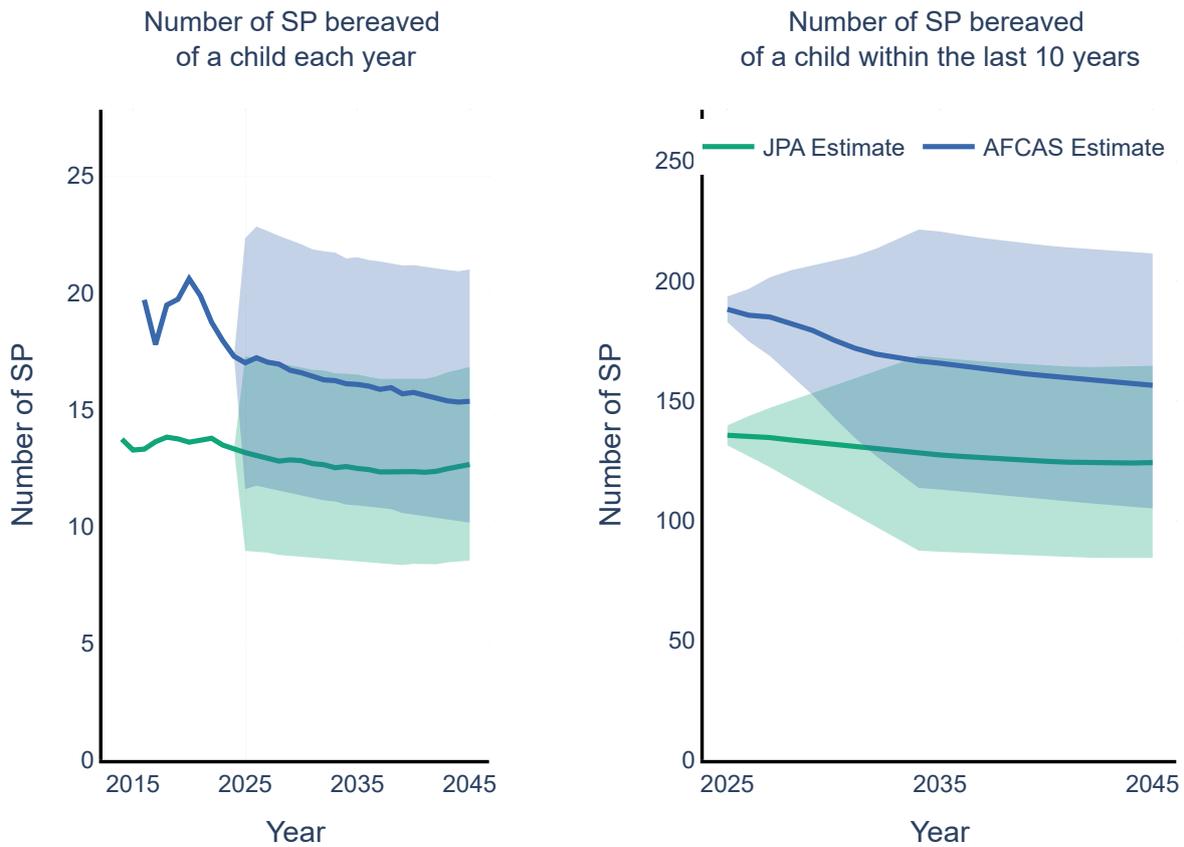


Table 3.4: Forecast of the number of SP bereaved of a child

Category	2025	2030	2035	2040	2045
Personnel bereaved of a child (JPA) (annual)	10 (10–20)	10 (10–20)	10 (10–20)	10 (10–20)	10 (10–20)
Personnel bereaved of a child (AFCAS) (annual)	20 (10–20)	20 (10–20)	20 (10–20)	20 (10–20)	20 (10–20)

Note: The first number in each cell is the mean estimate and the numbers in brackets are the 95 per cent credible interval for each estimate.



4. Bereavement within the veteran community

This section presents analysis of the size of the bereaved veteran community, including the number of partners and children bereaved of a veteran, and the number of veterans bereaved of a partner or child. The mortality rate within the veteran community is significantly higher than within the serving community, largely due to the older average age of veterans. This is particularly pronounced among veterans and their partners aged over 80 years old. The predominance of male veterans also contributes to a higher average mortality rate, as men generally have higher mortality rates than women.

4.1. Partners bereaved of a veteran

Our population forecasts show a significant decline in the number of veterans in Great

Britain, from approximately 1.83 million in 2025 to 1.06 million by 2045. This reduction reflects the ageing profile of the veteran community. **In 2025, around 86,000 veterans are expected to die each year, with this figure falling to about 34,000 annually by 2045.**²² Many of these veterans will be in relationships, resulting in a substantial number of newly bereaved partners each year. The left-hand plot of Figure 4.1 shows the estimated number of newly bereaved partners of veterans for each year, which is summarised in Table 4.1. The right-hand plot in Figure 4.1 shows the estimated total number of bereaved partners of veterans within a ten-year period. This provides an estimate of the 'recently bereaved' partners of veterans, who are more likely to require support as a result of their bereavement. It is not possible to estimate the

22

Our estimates for the annual number of deaths are higher than Office for National Statistics (ONS) estimates in 2021, where they matched records between the ONS death registrations database, the England and Wales Census 2021, and the Service Leavers database. Our estimates are higher for two reasons: first, we include veterans living in Scotland; and second, we use population estimates on mortality by age and gender. This means that we may not be able to capture veteran-specific deaths as well as the ONS (as we don't have access to the data sources used by the ONS), but we will also capture individuals missed through records linkage between databases. Office for National Statistics (2024b).

total number of living partners ever bereaved of a veteran. **While both the annual number of bereaved partners and the total number of**

bereaved partners is likely to decrease out to 2045, bereaved partners will continue to be a sizeable group within the veteran community.

Figure 4.1: Forecast of the number of partners bereaved of a veteran

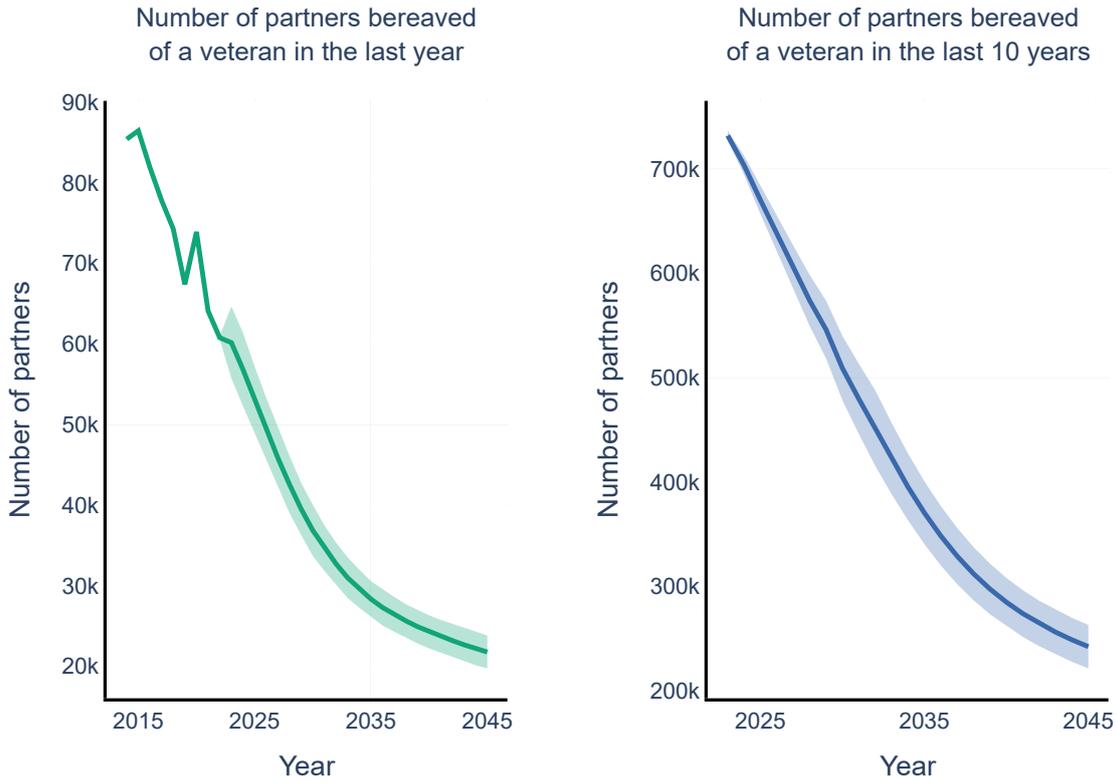


Table 4.1: Forecast of the number of partners bereaved of a veteran

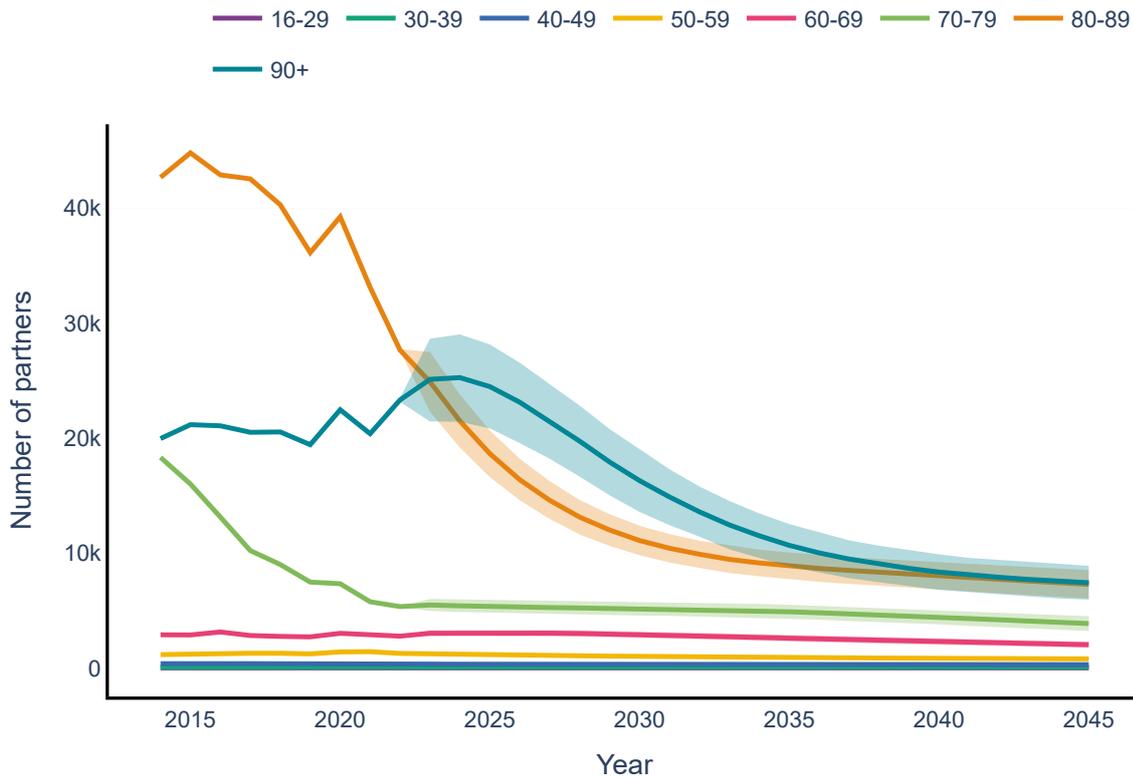
Category	2025	2030	2035	2040	2045
Bereaved partners (annual)	53,100 (49,000–57,200)	36,800 (33,800–40,000)	28,300 (26,000–30,600)	24,300 (22,300–26,300)	21,800 (19,700–23,800)

Note: The first number in each cell is the mean estimate and the numbers in brackets are the 95 per cent credible interval for each estimate.

Figure 4.2 shows the estimated number of newly bereaved partners by the age of the veteran. While partners are, on average, slightly younger than veterans, it is likely that the majority of partners are in the same age group

as the veteran. Out to 2045, there are likely to remain a substantial number of newly bereaved partners aged over 80, reflecting the high mortality rate of veterans in this age group.

Figure 4.2: Forecasts of the number of bereaved partners of veterans, by age of veteran



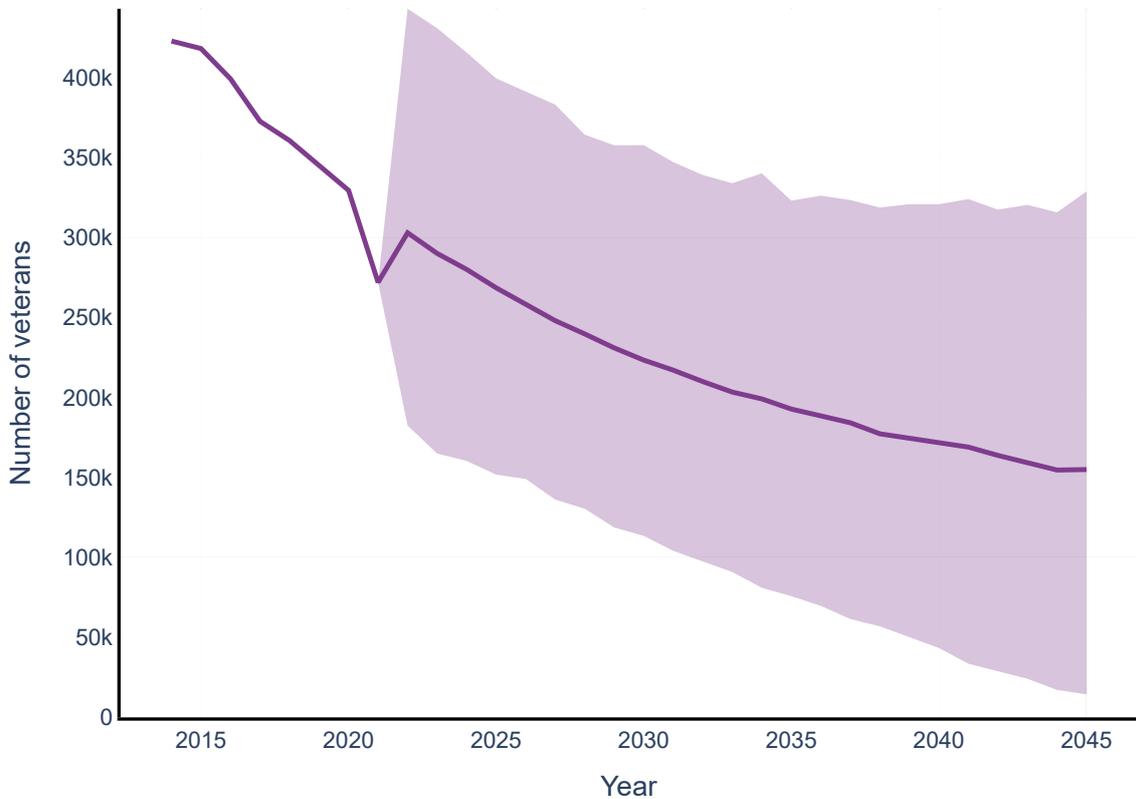
4.2. Veterans bereaved of a partner

Data from the APS and the England and Wales Census indicates that **approximately 15 per cent of veterans were widowed between 2014 and 2021, which equates to around 280,000 individuals in Great Britain in 2025.**

As shown in Figure 4.3, the number of widowed veterans is likely to decrease as the overall

veteran population declines, although there is considerable uncertainty around this estimate. APS data does not provide relationship status by age, so this projection only estimates how the percentage of widowed veterans may change relative to other relationship statuses, without accounting for shifts in the age profile of the veteran community.

Figure 4.3: Forecast of the number of widowed veterans



An alternative approach uses civilian data on the expected number of partners by age, applying age- and gender-specific mortality rates to forecast the number of partners likely to die each year, and thus the number of bereaved veterans. This method also includes unmarried veterans bereaved of a cohabiting partner.

The left-hand plot of Figure 4.4 shows the estimated annual number of newly bereaved veterans for each year, and the right-hand plot shows the estimated total number of bereaved veterans within a ten-year period. **The number of veterans bereaved of a partner in the past**

ten years is expected to decline by 2045 but will remain a substantial proportion of the veteran community. Table 4.2 summarises this forecast. Figure 4.5 shows the estimated number of newly bereaved veterans each year by age group. Out to 2045, there are likely to remain a substantial number of newly bereaved veterans aged over 80, reflecting the high mortality rate of this age group. The increasing number of veterans aged over 90 experiencing a bereavement likely follows the increasing number of National Service veterans transitioning from their 80s to their 90s.

Figure 4.4: Forecast of the number of veterans bereaved of a partner

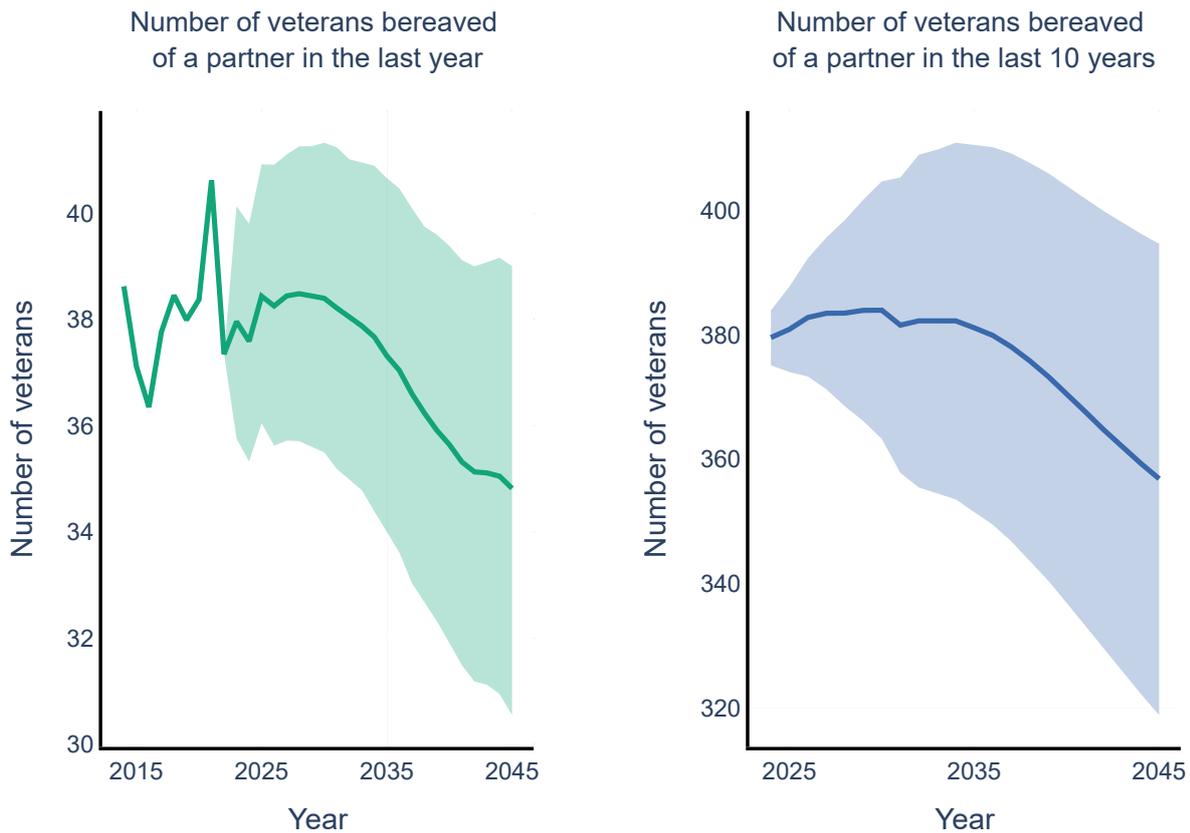
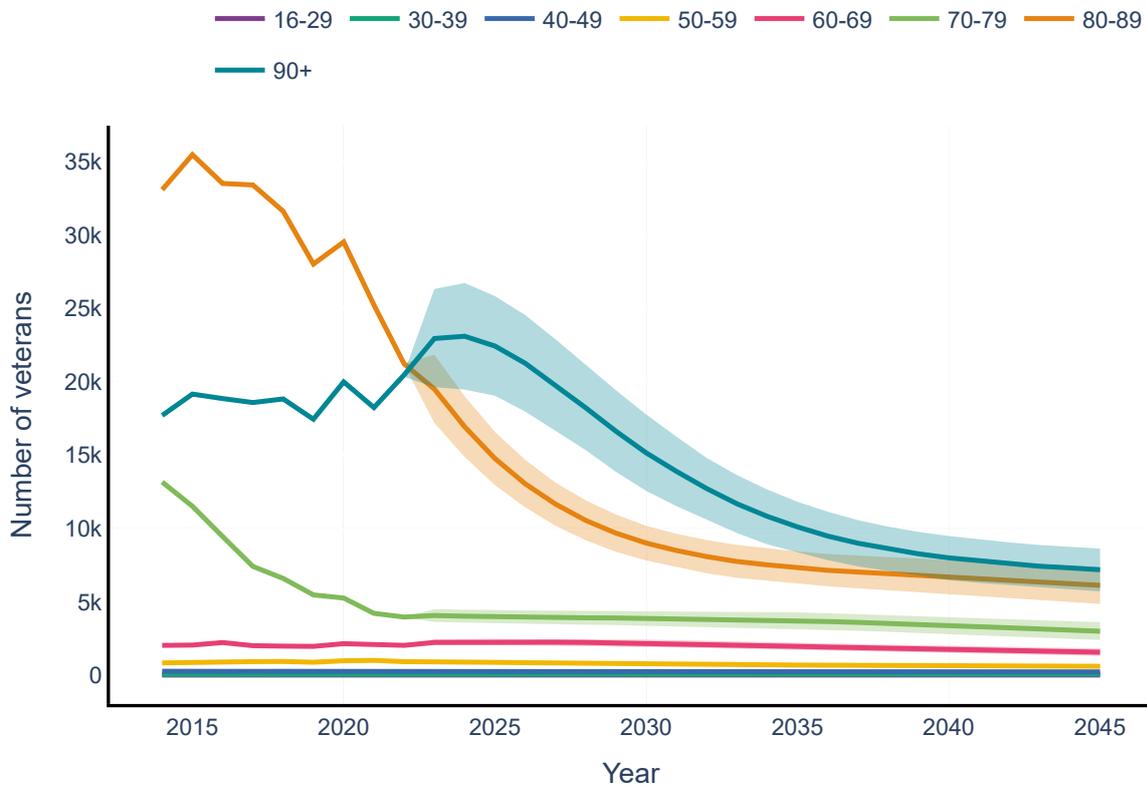


Figure 4.5: Forecast of the number of veterans bereaved of a partner, by age**Table 4.2: Forecast of the number of veterans bereaved of a partner**

Category	2025	2030	2035	2040	2045
Widowed veterans (total number)	269,400 (151,700–399,300)	223,200 (113,400–357,600)	192,700 (75,700–322,900)	171,600 (43,400–320,700)	154,900 (14,400–328,700)
Bereaved veterans (annual)	44,600 (40,600–48,400)	31,300 (28,500–34,200)	24,100 (22,000–26,200)	20,700 (18,700–22,800)	18,800 (16,800–20,800)

Note: The first number in each cell is the mean estimate and the numbers in brackets are the 95 per cent credible interval for each estimate.

4.3. Children bereaved of a veteran parent

Our forecasts estimate that approximately 1,200 children aged under 18 years in Great Britain will be bereaved of a veteran parent or stepparent (that they live with) in 2025.²³

Figure 4.6 shows both the forecast of newly bereaved children of a veteran parent or stepparent and the rolling total of children bereaved of veteran parent or stepparent (also

summarised in Table 4.3). This reflects that most parents to children aged under 18 are under 65 years old and thus have relatively low mortality rates. Figure 4.7 shows the estimated number of children bereaved of a veteran parent or stepparent each year, by the age of the veteran. As the number of veterans decreases out to 2045, it is likely that the annual number of children bereaved of a veteran parent or stepparent will decrease to approximately 900 per year.

Table 4.3: Forecast of the number of children bereaved of a veteran parent or stepparent

Category	2025	2030	2035	2040	2045
Bereaved children (annual)	1,200 (1,100–1,200)	1,100 (1,000–1,100)	1,000 (900–1,000)	900 (900–1,000)	900 (800–1,000)

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This forecast intentionally includes double-counting where both parents of a child are veterans, as a child will be bereaved of a veteran parent if either veteran parent becomes deceased. While this research could not estimate the number of children of a veteran who were bereaved of a non-veteran parent, it is likely to be slightly lower than the number of children bereaved of a veteran parent. This is for two reasons: first, some parents have two veteran parents and thus do not have a non-veteran parent; second, most veteran parents are male, and men have a slightly higher mortality rate. Thus, it is likely that children are slightly more likely to be bereaved of a male veteran parent than of a female non-veteran parent. Due to the available data, this forecast only includes children living with a veteran parent or stepparent, thus excluding children not living with a veteran parent (such as due to family breakdown) but who would still be impacted by their death.

Figure 4.6: Forecast of the number of children bereaved of a veteran parent

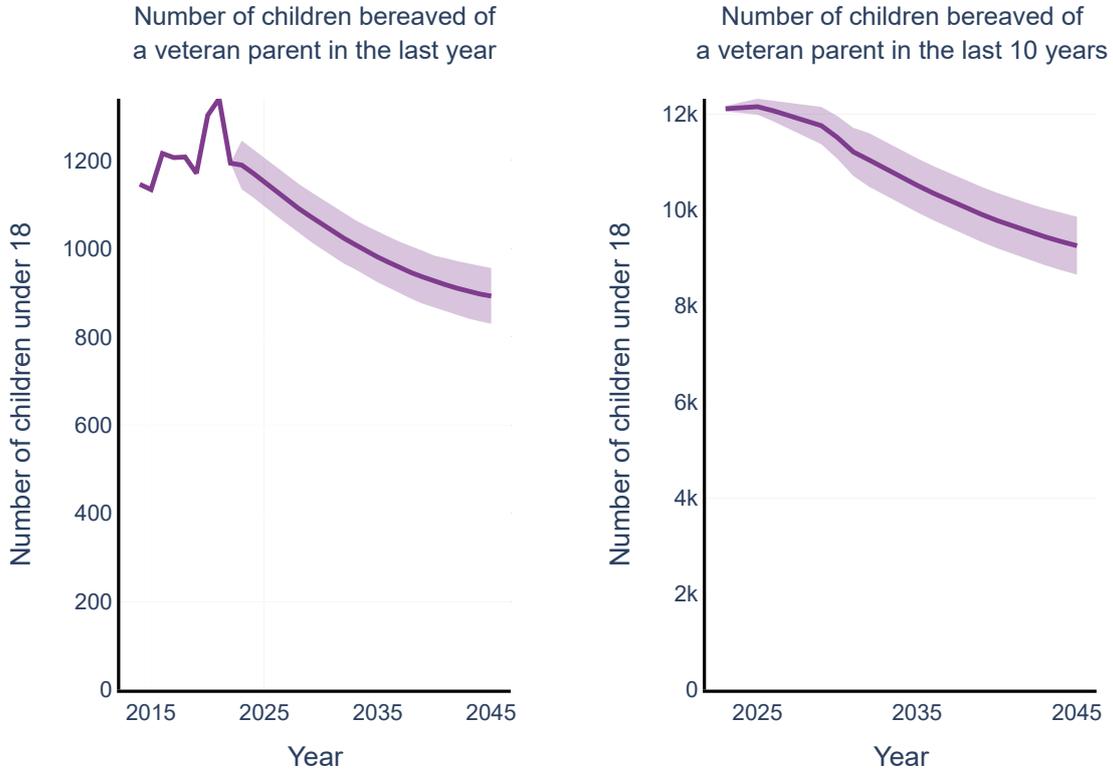
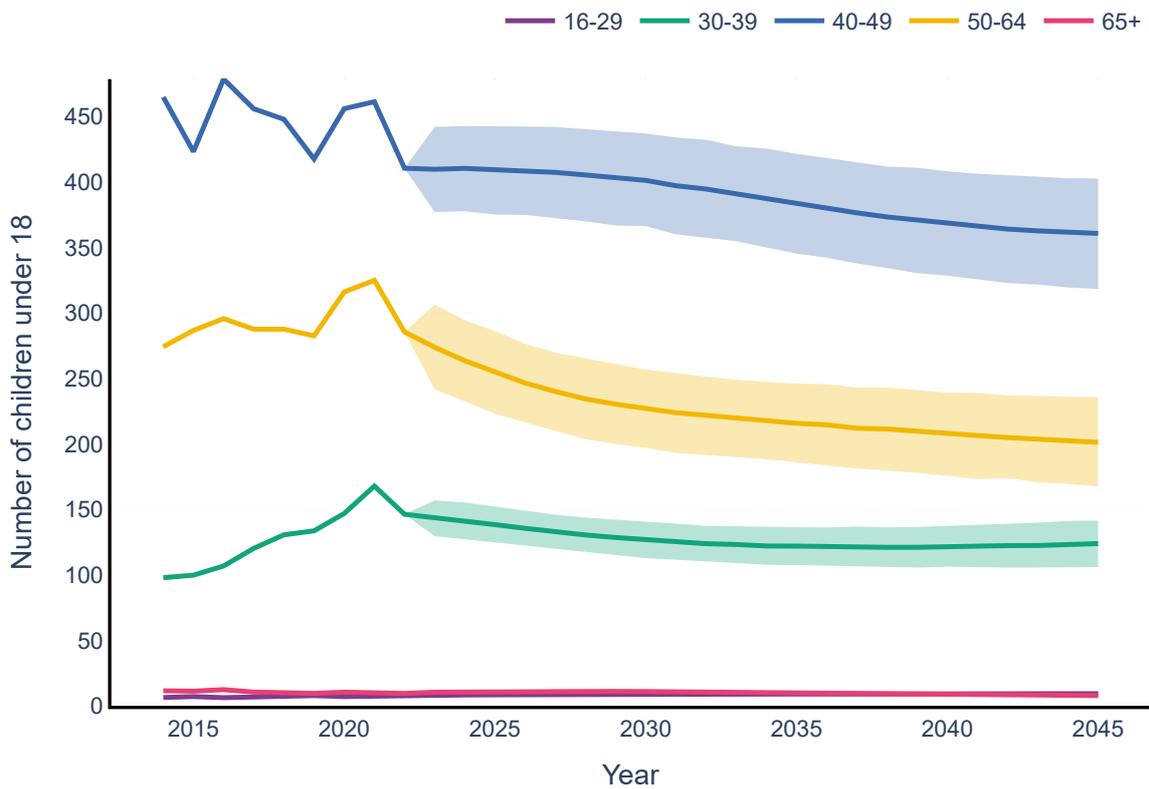


Figure 4.7: Forecast of the number of children bereaved of a veteran parent, by age of parent

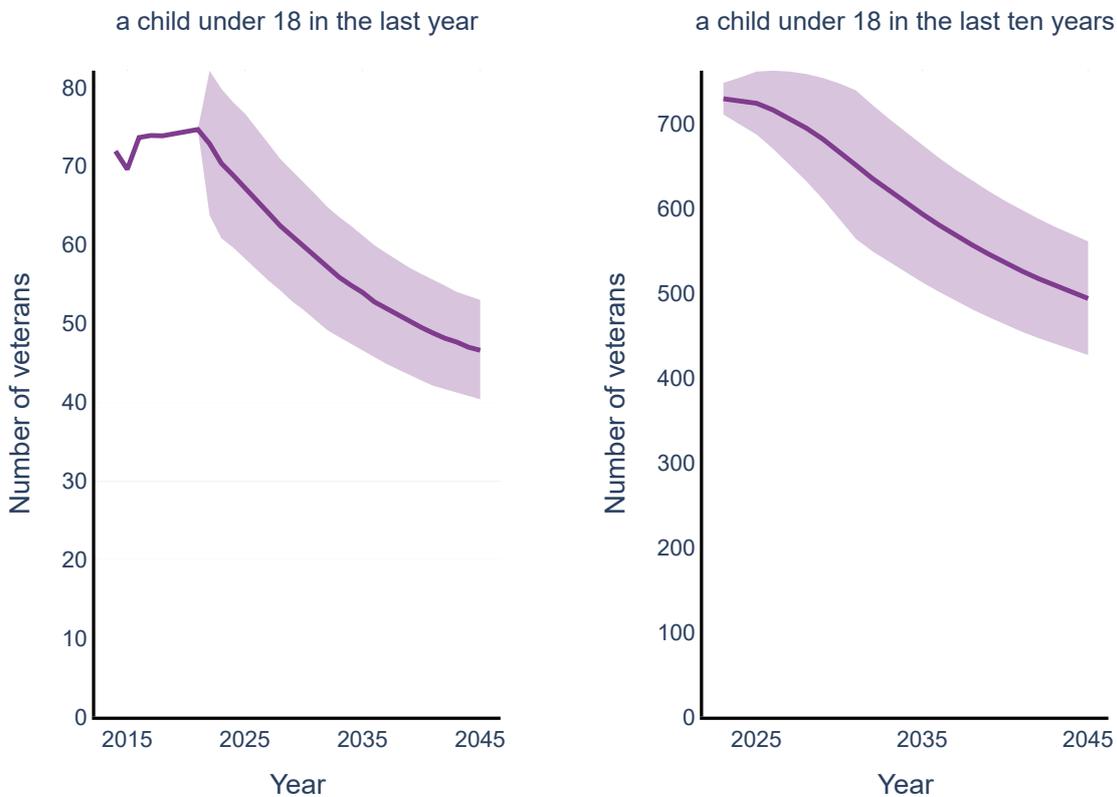


4.4. Veterans bereaved of a child

Our forecasts estimate that approximately 65 veterans living in Great Britain will be bereaved of a child under the age of 18 in 2025.²⁴ This reflects both the low numbers of children under 18 in the veteran community and the very low mortality rate of children. Figure 4.8 shows both the estimated number of

veterans newly bereaved of a child and the ten-year estimate (summarised in Table 4.4). As the number of veterans declines out to 2045, it is likely that the number of veterans bereaved of a child will also decrease.²⁵ Figure 4.9 shows the estimated number of veterans bereaved of a child by the age of the veteran.

Figure 4.8: Forecast of the number of veterans bereaved of a child



24 This estimate includes double counting where a child has two veteran parents, as both parents would be veterans bereaved of a child. While this research could not estimate the number of non-veteran parents bereaved of a child of a veteran, it is likely to be similar to the number of veteran parents bereaved of a child, although slightly lower to account for veterans in dual-veteran relationships. Due to the available data, this forecast only includes children living with a veteran parent or stepparent, thus excluding children not living with a veteran parent or stepparent (such as due to family breakdown) but who would still be impacted by their death.

25 The increase in the forecasted number of deaths prior to 2021 reflects the increasing number of veterans aged between 30 and 65 between 2014 and 2021, and thus a likely corresponding number of both children and deceased children. When our stocks-and-flows model starts adding service leavers to the total estimated number of veterans, the number of veterans aged 30-64 years is expected to decrease. Our forecasts suggest a 40 per cent decrease in the total number of working age veterans between 2025 and 2045, which also suggests both a 40 per cent decrease in the number of children over this period and a 40 per cent decrease in the number of veterans bereaved of a child.

Figure 4.9: Forecast of the number of veterans bereaved of a child, by age of veteran

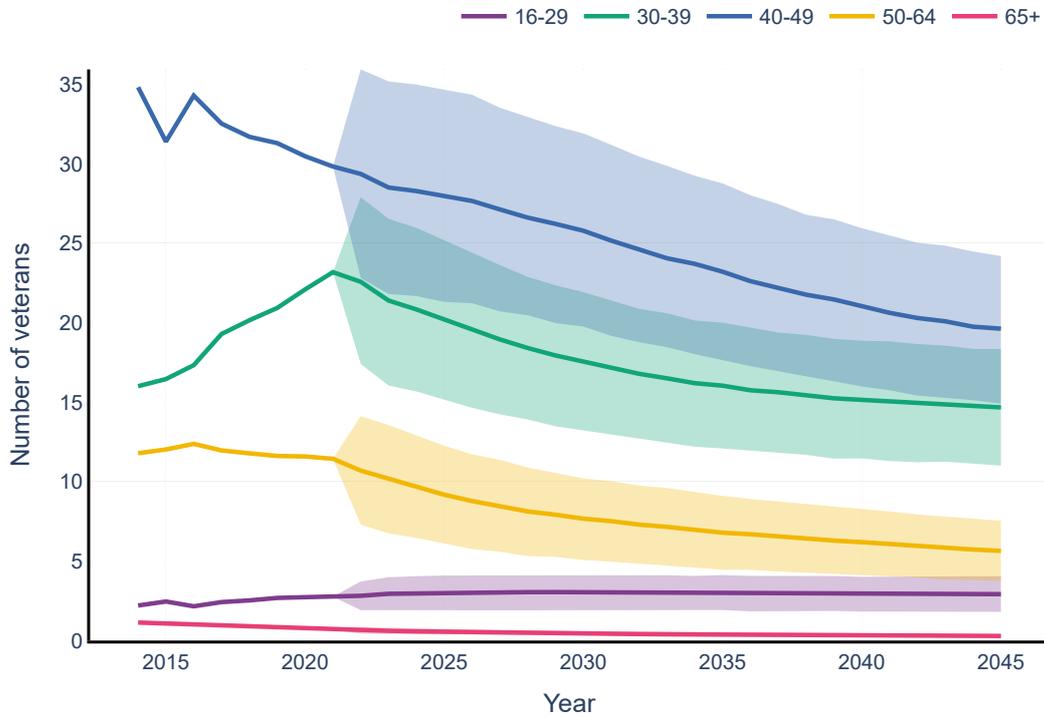
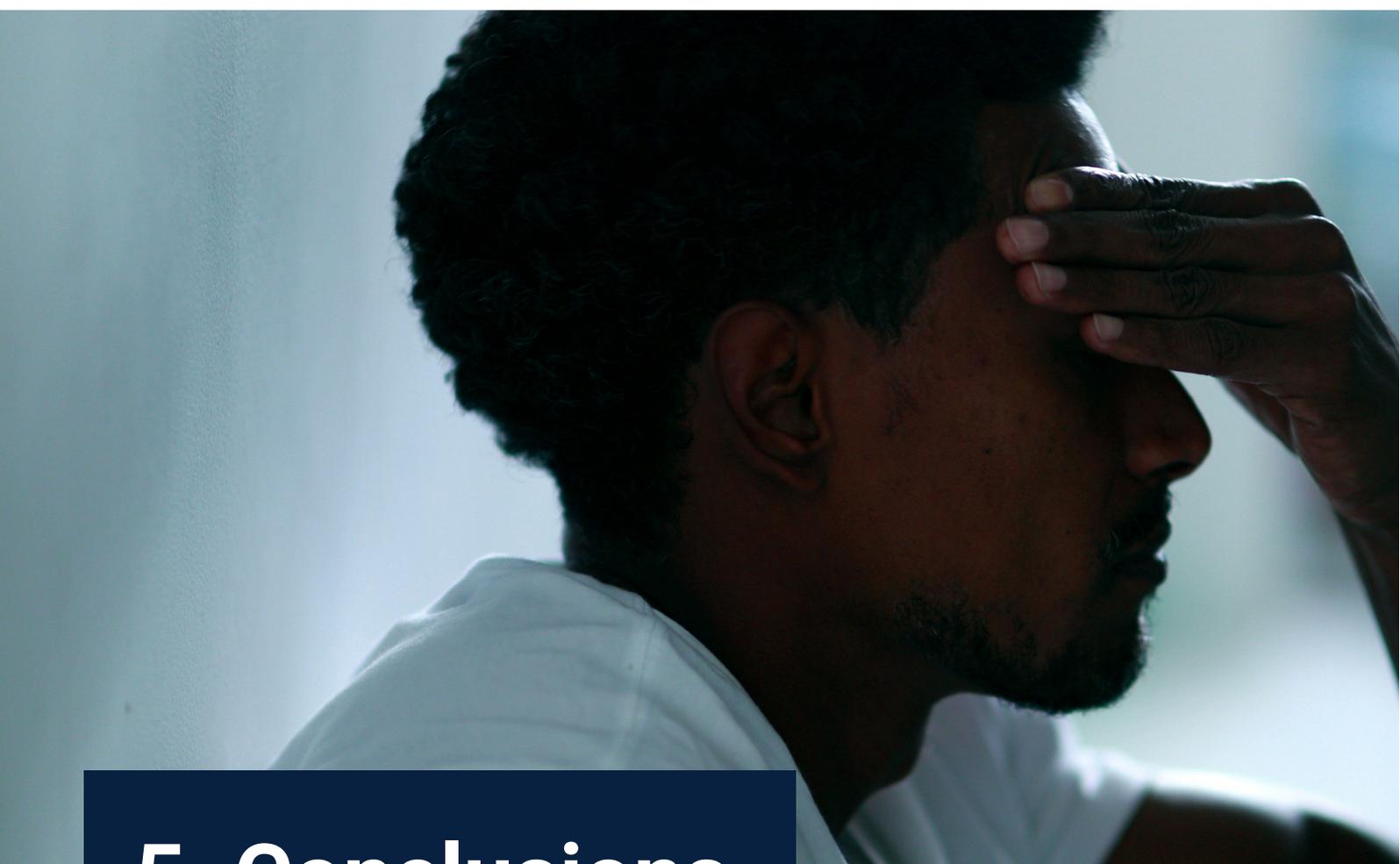


Table 4.4: Forecast of the number of veterans bereaved of a child under 18

Category	2025	2030	2035	2040	2045
Bereaved veteran parents (annual)	70 (60–80)	60 (50–70)	50 (50–60)	50 (40–60)	50 (40–50)

Note: The first number in each cell is the mean estimate and the numbers in brackets are the 95 per cent credible interval for each estimate.



5. Conclusions

This report provides an overview of the estimated size of the bereaved AFC in 2025 and presents forecasts to 2045, assuming historical

trends continue. Table 5.1 summarises the key findings from the research.

Table 5.1: Summary of the size of the bereaved AFC

Category	2025	2030	2035	2040	2045
Deceased SP	40 (30-50)	40 (30-50)	40 (30-50)	40 (30-60)	40 (30-60)
Partners bereaved of a SP (JPA) (annual)	20 (10-20)	10 (10-20)	10 (10-20)	10 (10-10)	10 (10-10)

Category	2025	2030	2035	2040	2045
Partners bereaved of a SP (AFCAS) (annual)	30 (30–40)	30 (30–40)	30 (20–40)	30 (20–40)	30 (20–40)
SP bereaved of a partner (JPA) (annual)	40 (40–40)	40 (40–50)	40 (30–40)	40 (30–40)	30 (30–40)
SP bereaved of a partner (AFCAS) (annual)	190 (180–200)	200 (190–200)	200 (190–210)	200 (190–220)	210 (190–230)
Children bereaved of a SP (JPA) (annual)	30 (20–40)	30 (20–40)	30 (20–40)	30 (20–40)	30 (20–40)
Children bereaved of a SP (AFCAS) (annual)	40 (30–50)	40 (30–50)	30 (30–40)	30 (20–40)	30 (20–50)
SP bereaved of a child (JPA) (annual)	10 (10–20)	10 (10–20)	10 (10–20)	10 (10–20)	10 (10–20)
SP bereaved of a child (AFCAS) (annual)	20 (10–20)	20 (10–20)	20 (10–20)	20 (10–20)	20 (10–20)
Partners bereaved of a veteran (annual)	53,100 (49,000–57,200)	36,800 (33,800–40,000)	28,300 (26,000–30,600)	24,300 (22,300–26,300)	21,800 (19,700–23,800)
Widowed veterans (total number)	269,400 (151,700–399,300)	223,200 (113,400–357,600)	192,700 (75,700–322,900)	171,600 (43,400–320,700)	154,900 (14,400–328,700)
Veterans bereaved of a partner (annual)	44,600 (40,600–48,400)	31,300 (28,500–34,200)	24,100 (22,000–26,200)	20,700 (18,700–22,800)	18,800 (16,800–20,800)
Children under 18 bereaved of a veteran parent (annual)	1,200 (1,100–1,200)	1,100 (1,000–1,100)	1,000 (900–1,000)	900 (900–1,000)	900 (800–1,000)
Veterans bereaved of a child under 18 (annual)	70 (60–80)	60 (50–70)	50 (50–60)	50 (40–60)	50 (40–50)

Note: The first number in each cell is the mean estimate and the numbers in brackets are the 95 per cent credible interval for each estimate.

While this research represents an advance in understanding the size of the bereaved AFC, the process of conducting this research also highlighted challenges in forecasting the broader size of this community. We initially

intended to include forecasts for several other groups within the bereaved community:

- Partners (of SP and veterans) bereaved of a child under 18

- Children under 18 (of an SP or veteran) bereaved of a civilian parent
- Children under 18 (of an SP or veteran) bereaved of a sibling
- Parents or siblings bereaved of a SP

However, we were not able to create forecasts for these categories due to insufficient data. Two further groups are not reflected in the forecasts: SP, veterans and partners bereaved of a carer and bereavements of older children.

It is likely that many people, particularly in the veteran community, are affected by the bereavement of their carer due to the high rate of unpaid caring responsibilities within this community.²⁶ While the forecasts for children bereaved of a veteran and veterans bereaved of a child focused only on children under 18, there are also a substantial number of adult children living with a veteran: 115,000 children aged between 19 and 24 years and 185,000 children aged over 25 years in the 2021 England and Wales Census. It is likely that a substantial number of these adults may be living with a veteran parent either because they have caring responsibilities or because they are being cared for by a veteran parent. Existing data does not allow us to estimate the size of this community, but it should be considered in planning by support providers.

In addition to the findings presented here, several factors may influence the size and profile of the community in the future which cannot be accurately captured in the modelling. These factors should be considered in further research and when developing strategies, policies and programmes to support the bereaved community. **The most significant potential change to the size and profile of**

the bereaved community would result from an increase in SP casualties during a major conflict. Such an increase could arise from higher casualty rates due to combat lethality or high numbers of deployed personnel, including mobilisation of the Reserve force and the strategic Reserve. In a conflict scenario, higher SP casualties would affect the bereaved community, including next of kin. A rise in young SP casualties may lead to a relatively small increase in bereaved partners but a larger number of bereaved parents or siblings entitled to support.

Support providers also need to consider the changing nature of conflict and the defence context, as these may impact the characteristics and support needs of the bereaved community. For example, a major future conflict could result in more female SP being killed in combat, a trend not seen in previous conflicts as women were only permitted to serve in combat roles from 2018. The demands of modern combat may also affect the long-term health and life expectancy of SP after they transition to civilian life (although the effects of combat exposure on life expectancy of veterans are disputed).²⁷ The implications of a major conflict for bereavement support are therefore multifaceted.

Beyond those directly affected by bereavement during a future conflict, **wider societal and demographic trends will shape experiences and support provision for the bereaved AFC.** The changing information environment and increased accessibility of information from conflict zones may, for example, present challenges for notifying families of deaths of SP before details become public, increasing the risk of potential misinformation among

26 See 'Forecasting the Support Needs of the Veteran Community in Great Britain' for more information on the rate of unpaid caring responsibilities within the veteran community (Galley & Slapakova, Forthcoming).

27 See e.g. Wilson et al. (2023), Carey et al. (2024).

families and challenging the ability of support providers to provide appropriate care for families. The potential rise in female SP deaths, media coverage of wounded personnel returning home, repatriation of casualties, and SP being captured or missing may also increase anxiety, fear and uncertainty among families as well as the wider AFC, increasing demand for relevant support for those who may be at risk or experience service-related bereavement. The changing information landscape and conflict dynamics also reinforce the need for trauma-informed care and communication with families.

Changing family structures, such as multi-parented families, will also influence the size of the bereaved AFC. **More complex family arrangements mean that bereavement may affect a greater number of individuals than expected, as most data assumes nuclear families.** This is difficult to quantify. Conversely, an increase in single-parent families, where no other parent is present, could have a particularly significant impact on children bereaved of an SP or veteran. It will be important for those supporting the bereaved community to keep abreast of these and other demographic trends to effectively plan for and tailor relevant services.

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