



**BLUE STAR
FAMILIES**

**MILITARY
FAMILY
LIFESTYLE
SURVEY**

2020 Military Family Lifestyle Survey Comprehensive Report

Executive Summary

In collaboration with

S **Syracuse University**

**Institute for Veterans
& Military Families**

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Blue Star Families' annual **Military Family Lifestyle Survey (aMFLS)** has been providing a comprehensive understanding of the experiences and challenges encountered by military families since 2009. It offers crucial insight and data to help inform national leaders, local communities, and philanthropic actors — functions that are even more important as decision makers assess how to support military and veteran families while the nation recovers from a global pandemic. The survey also presents the opportunity to increase dialogue between the military community and broader American society by highlighting areas for improvement and offering solutions to **bridge the civil-military divide, strengthen communities, and bolster the health and sustainability of the All-Volunteer Force.**

Blue Star Families conducted its 11th annual Military Family Lifestyle Survey from September to October 2020. Capturing experiences of **nearly 11,000 respondents** worldwide, and generating millions of data points, it remains the **largest and most comprehensive survey of active-duty, National Guard, and Reserve service members, veterans, and their families.**



OVERVIEW OF TOP MILITARY FAMILY ISSUES

The widespread impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic may have magnified long-standing issues for military families. Time away from family, already a top concern, may have been intensified by unexpected quarantines and extensions, or have had a greater impact on service members and family members managing work and home demands in an unprecedented work, school, and home environment. Balancing work, child care, child education, and home obligations in a global pandemic brought new challenges to the perennial issues of spouse employment, child education, and military family quality of life.

- Amount of time away from family due to military service remains the top issue for active-duty service members, veteran families, National Guard families, and Reserve families; however, it was the second top concern for spouses, behind military spouse employment.
- Military spouse under- and unemployment — consistently a top issue for active-duty spouse respondents — may have intensified due to COVID-19 impacts; this issue rose to the top five issues for active-duty service member respondents for the first time.
- Access to pay and benefits earned through military service, such as military pay, support for PTSD and combat stress, and health care and benefits, summarize veteran family concerns.

	Active-duty Spouses	Active-duty Service Members	Veteran Families	National Guard Families	Reserve Families
Spouse employment	52%	31%	19%	12%	17%
Time away from family	46%	52%	38%	52%	51%
Child(ren)'s education	42%	33%	19%	12%	17%
Quality of life	29%	29%	17%	17%	23%
Military pay	27%	29%	31%	27%	25%
Family stability	26%	34%	18%	17%	23%
Military career control	22%	29%	18%	24%	18%
PTSD/combat stress/TBI	9%	8%	30%	21%	18%
Military/VA health care	11%	12%	28%	19%	22%
Military benefits	10%	13%	24%	23%	21%
Deployment impact on family	22%	18%	23%	38%	34%

Active-Duty Spouses (n=3,647) Active-Duty Service Members (n=791)

Veteran Families (n=2,690) National Guard Families (n=375) Reserve Families (n=348)

TOP 5 ISSUES FOR EACH SUBGROUP IN RED

SUPPORTING MILITARY FAMILIES STRENGTHENS NATIONAL SECURITY & LOCAL COMMUNITIES

The tumultuous events of 2020 intensified some pre-existing concerns common across military families. Military spouses, who already encounter considerable barriers to employment due to the military lifestyle, often found their tenuous connection to the workforce snapped as employment opportunities shrank and responsibilities of managing their children's education landed on their shoulders. Military children, who already experience educational transitions because of frequent relocation, adjusted to new methods of learning, often shifting between virtual learning, in-person learning, and homeschooling. Service members, who are already concerned with the amount of time their service requires them to be away from family, experienced extended deployments and some saw more activations.

This year's events underscored the importance of addressing these long-standing concerns, while also shining a spotlight on systemic problems. Civil unrest and national conversations of racial inequity brought more attention to the experiences of people of color, increasing awareness of challenges that



have long been overlooked. The global transition to remote work demonstrated how the nation can harness the power of technology to improve outcomes for military families on issues as wide-ranging as military spouse employment (through telework), to concerns about continuity of health and mental health care (through access to telehealth), to easing school transitions (through online enrollment and virtual schooling). Abrupt shifts to virtual schooling shed light on the tremendous support many military families rely on local schools to provide and the issues that are exacerbated when those services become unavailable, from supplemental food assistance to a variety of therapies and services for children with special needs. While the stormy year of 2020 created significant challenges, it also clarified issues and sparked changes, giving stakeholders interested in supporting military and veteran families a clearer view of the path to recovery.

The 2020 Military Family Lifestyle Survey Comprehensive Report examines these shifts and opportunities through the social determinants of health, exploring the five pillars that set the conditions for individual and family health and well-being: community and social context, health care access, education access and quality, neighborhood and the built environment, and economic stability.¹ The community and social context lens examines how relationships can impact well-being positively or negatively, including experiences of discrimination, sense of belonging to the unit, supports during stressful times like a deployment, and the military family lifestyle cultural competence of the local civilian community. Access to and desire for mental health care, as well as access to health care services after a relocation, are examined through the health care access and quality lens. High-quality education access sets the conditions for healthy children and families; military children's education is a perennial concern that has been worsened by COVID-19-driven instability. Housing and neighborhood quality have received increasing attention in recent years² and are indelibly tied to a family's economic condition. In turn, economic stability, the final social determinant, is connected to affordable, available child care and spouse employment challenges.

TOP FINDINGS FOR 2020

Community and Social Context

Service members reported experiencing racial and gender discrimination, potentially impacting readiness and retention. Most did not report the most recent incident of discrimination. Also, a smaller proportion of those active-duty service member respondents who experienced military-connected racial discrimination (43%) would recommend service than those who had not experienced discrimination (63%). Nearly one in 10 veterans of color reported racial discrimination was one of the reasons they left military service.

Fewer than half of service members reported feeling a sense of belonging to their unit. The number was even lower for female service members. Fewer than half agreed their command communicates well, and makes good decisions, but those who did agree reported significantly less stress.

More than half of families who experienced a deployment or activation during COVID-19 experienced an unanticipated extension of their time apart. Service members and their family members reported their top needs during deployment include communication, opportunities to exercise, and access to medical care and mental health resources.

Reserve and National Guard service members reported negative employment consequences during their career after an activation or deployment. Despite federal legal protections, nearly a quarter (23%) of National Guard and a third (34%) of Reserve service member respondents noted negative consequences with their civilian employers after returning from activation, such as losing promotion or training opportunities, involuntary reductions in hours or pay, or loss of employment. Over half of National Guard family respondents reported an activation since March 2020.

Health Care Access

Families still experience barriers to mental health care; 21% would like to receive care but don't currently. Nearly one-quarter (23%) of active-duty spouse respondents and 16% of active-duty service member respondents indicated having a current diagnosis for Generalized Anxiety Disorder. Despite increased use of telehealth services, active-duty family member respondents continue to report difficulty scheduling appointments, difficulty getting time off work for treatment, difficulty finding child care, and concerns about confidentiality.

Education Access and Quality

Families with kids who have special needs have difficulty maintaining educational and health care services during COVID-19 or after a PCS. The majority (78%) of active-duty family respondents with a child receiving special education services lost those educational support services during COVID-19 closures. Those transitioning to a new duty station encountered additional challenges; half of active-duty

family respondents with a child enrolled in special education who PCSed since March 2020 reported they had trouble transferring their child(ren)'s IEP (51%) or 504 Plan (48%) to their new school. Families are choosing to live apart ("geobach") to avoid these challenges.

Virtual education tripled in the last year, and more families are moving to homeschooling. Fifty-one percent of active-duty family respondents reported their oldest child participated in virtual education delivery in the 2020-2021 school year; 13% reported homeschooling. The shift to virtual education has impeded spouse employment; 36% of active-duty spouse respondents who are not working reported they were not working so they could homeschool their child(ren) or supervise virtual schooling.

Neighborhood and the Built Environment

Most families pay well over the monthly out-of-pocket housing costs the Department of Defense projects they should be paying (\$70-\$158); of those active-duty families who reported out-of-pocket costs, 77% pay more than \$200 out-of-pocket each month. When choosing housing, families prioritize proximity to base, family safety, a desirable school district, pet acceptance, and whether BAH will cover the costs. Financial stress increases with greater out-of-pocket housing costs.

Economic Stability

Child care remains a top barrier to spouse employment, and it has intensified during COVID-19; it's a greater challenge for families with kids with special needs. Lower-income families have a harder time finding child care that works for their situation, but higher-income families still encounter challenges. Over half of service member respondents reported "permission to work remotely" would alleviate child care and schooling challenges.

While low food security is most prominent among junior enlisted family respondents (29%), higher-ranking enlisted families also experience it. Fourteen percent of enlisted active-duty family respondents reported low or very low food security. Improving military spouse employment could be a sustainable upstream solution; enlisted spouses who are employed reported lower food insecurity (10%) than those who were not working but need or want to work (20%).

The spouse unemployment rate is higher in active-duty spouse respondents of color (27% vs. 17%) and recently relocated spouses (31% vs. 16%). Since March 2020, 42% of active-duty spouse respondents who had been working prior to the pandemic reported they had stopped working at some point during it, with layoffs and furloughs as the top reported cause. Most (68%) of those who stopped working remained unemployed at the time of survey fielding. Spouses identified remote/telework, transferring to a new location within the same company, and more flexibility from their service member's command over their day-to-day job demands as preferred solutions.

1. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion. (n.d.) *Healthy People 2030*. <https://health.gov/healthypeople/objectives-and-data/social-determinants-health>
2. Military Family Advisory Network (MFAN). (May 2019). *Final Research Report: Living Conditions of Families in Privatized Military Housing*. https://militaryfamilyadvisorynetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/FINAL-report-5.20-_FOR-RELEASE_5_22.pdf