

CLEARINGHOUSE **FOR MILITARY FAMILY READINESS**

The Military Spouse Experience: Current Issues and Gaps in Service Rapid Literature Review

Clearinghouse Technical Assistance Team

As of June 3, 2021

This material is the result of partnership funded by the Department of Defense between the Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Military Community and Family Policy and the USDA's National Institute of Food and Agriculture through a grant/cooperative agreement with Penn State University



PennState

Table of Contents

Executive Summary	3
Introduction	3
The Military Spouse Experience	4
Demographic Data	4
Age	4
Race and Ethnicity	4
Sex.....	5
Employment Status.....	5
<i>Military Spouse Demographics by Service Branch, 2019</i>	5
Education Status.....	5
Family Dynamics.....	6
Children	6
Service Member’s Rank	6
Spouses’ Satisfaction and Support for the Military Lifestyle	6
Current Issues Facing Active Duty Military Spouses	7
<i>Active Duty Military Spouses’ Issues or Concerns, 2016 - 2020</i>	7
Top Three Issues Facing Active Duty Military Spouses, 2017 – 2020	8
<i>Military Spouse Employment</i>	8
<i>Time Away from Family</i>	10
<i>Children’s Education</i>	10
Additional Issues or Concerns.....	11
<i>Quality of Life and Well-being</i>	11
<i>Military Pay and Financial Stability</i>	12
Gaps in Services or Continued Need	12
Access to Affordable Child Care	12
<i>Active Duty Military Families’ Ability to Find Child Care by Service Branch, 2020</i>	13
Access to Healthcare and Counseling Services	13
Family Support During a Service Member’s Deployment	13
<i>Active Duty Military Spouses’ Needs During a Current or Upcoming Deployment or Activation</i>	14
Spouse’s Employment and Education.....	15
Recommendations	16
Additional Assistance	17
Suggested Citation	17
References	18

Executive Summary

This rapid literature review was conducted on behalf of the Department of Defense's Office of Military Community and Family Policy in response to a request for information on the military spouse experience, pressing issues faced by active duty military spouses, and gaps in services.

There are nearly 1 million U.S. military spouses (U.S. Department of Defense, 2020), and each has an individual story. A military spouse's experience will vary based on several factors (e.g., Service branch, age, geographic location, number of children). However, there are certain events that shape the "typical" military spouse experience. These include frequent relocations due to Permanent Change of Station (PCS) orders, deployments, and geographic separations from the Service member and other support systems. Military spouses report the top issues they currently face are their employment opportunities, the Service members' time away from family, and their children's education (Blue Star Families, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2021).

This report provides the following elements:

- Background information on what shapes a military spouse's experience with the military;
- Data on spousal support for continued military service;
- Descriptions of the top issues that active duty military spouses face;
- Identification of gaps in service and continued need; and
- Recommendations for moving forward.

Note, this rapid literature review provides a preliminary examination of the research. Thus, given the brief timeline, this report is not intended to serve as a comprehensive review of the literature, and the resources provided are not endorsed by the Clearinghouse for Military Family Readiness at Penn State. Rather, the information about the resources is provided to help you make a data-driven decision about next steps.

Introduction

The Technical Assistance (TA) team at the Clearinghouse for Military Family Readiness at Penn State (Clearinghouse) conducted a brief, rapid literature review on the military spouse experience, including current issues facing active duty military spouses and gaps in services. Research that examines this topic was identified by searching peer-reviewed journal articles and grey literature, and an emphasis was placed on research published between 2018 and 2021. Search queries included various combinations of the following

terms: military, spouse, families, children, demographics, experience, active duty, PCS, relocations, and surveys.

The Military Spouse Experience

A military spouse's experience with the military can vary based on a variety of factors. However, there are certain events that create the "typical" military spouse experience. These include frequent relocations due to Permanent Change of Station (PCS) orders, deployments, and geographic separations from the Service member and other support systems. Among active duty military spouses surveyed in 2019, 81% experienced a PCS with their spouse in the past 5 years, and 76% had a Service member who had deployed at least once during his or her career (Office of People Analytics, 2020). Relocations, deployments, and family separations due to military service also create stressors within the family. Among active duty military families, 36% report relocations, 38% report deployments, and 21% report separations due to military service other than deployment as the main sources of stress in their families (Blue Star Families, 2021).

This section provides information on topics that may influence the individual military spouse's experience during his or her Service member's career: demographic data, employment and education status, and family dynamics.

Demographic Data

Age

In 2019, there were 605,716 active duty military spouses and 363,462 Selected Reserve military spouses. Of these, almost two-thirds (64%) were less than 36 years old. Active duty military spouses tend to be younger than Selected Reserve military spouses. About 71% of active duty military spouses are less than 36 years old, and nearly half (49%) are 30 years old or younger. Among Selected Reserve military spouses, 50% are less than 36 years old; however, 30% are 41 years old or older (U.S. Department of Defense, 2020). Table 1 provides a breakdown of military spouses' average ages by Service branch.

Race and Ethnicity

Most active duty military spouses identify as White (79%), followed by Black/African American (15%), Asian (9%), American Indian/Alaska Native (3%), and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander (2%). Sixteen percent of active duty military spouses also identify as Hispanic/Latino (Office of People Analytics, 2019).

Sex

Most military spouses are women. Among active duty military spouses, 91% are women. Among Selected Reserve military spouses, 86% are women (U.S. Department of Defense, 2020). Table 1 provides a breakdown of military spouses' sexes by Service branch.

Employment Status

The unemployment rate for military spouses has decreased in the past decade. Among active duty military spouses in the civilian labor force, the unemployment rate decreased from 26% in 2010 to 22% in 2019. Among Selected Reserve military spouses in the civilian labor force, the unemployment rate decreased from 9% in 2014 to 7% in 2019 (U.S. Department of Defense, 2020).

Several factors increase the likelihood of a military spouse being unemployed. These factors include the following: experiencing a relocation due to PCS orders within the past 12 months, having children, being less than 26 years old, having less than a college degree, being a spouse of a Service member with a rank of E1-E4, and belonging to a minority race or ethnicity. Spouse employment rates also vary slightly between Service branches (Office of People Analytics, 2020). Table 1 provides a breakdown of military spouses' unemployment rates by Service branch.

Table 1

Military Spouse Demographics by Service Branch, 2019

	Number	Average age	Sex	Unemployment rate
Active Duty Army	240,127	31.4	Men: 7.8% Women: 92.2%	25%
Active Duty Marine Corps	67,404	29.5	Men: 3.3% Women: 96.7%	23%
Active Duty Navy	146,077	32.7	Men: 9.9% Women: 90.1%	21%
Active Duty Air Force	152,108	31.9	Men: 12.7% Women: 87.3%	21%
Selected Reserve	363,462	36.5	Men: 14.0% Women: 86.0%	7%

Sources: (Office of People Analytics, 2020; U.S. Department of Defense, 2020)

Education Status

In 2019, 23% of active duty military spouses were enrolled in school or training, and 41% were not currently enrolled in school or training but wanted to be. Spouses of Service members with a rank of E1-E4 and E5-E9, unemployed spouses, and dual-military couples had higher than average rates of participating in school or training (28%, 25%,

28%, and 37%, respectively). Spouses of Service members with a rank of E1-E4 and unemployed spouses reported higher than average desires to be enrolled in training or education (49% and 50%, respectively) (Office of People Analytics, 2020).

Family Dynamics

Children

In 2019, 67% of active duty military spouses reported having children under the age of 18 living at home full time or part time, 57% had children under the age of 5, and 25% had at least one child who was 2 years old or younger. In addition, 25% of active duty military spouses reported having a child with special needs (Office of People Analytics, 2020). The 2020 Military Family Lifestyle survey details similar numbers: 80% of active duty military families report having a child 18 years old or younger at home, and 22% report having a child with special needs (Blue Star Families, 2021).

Service Member's Rank

Over three quarters (76%) of active duty military spouses are married to enlisted members, and 24% are married to officers. Thirteen percent of active duty military spouses are in dual-military marriages (Office of People Analytics, 2019).

Spouses' Satisfaction and Support for the Military Lifestyle

About half (56%) of active duty military spouses are satisfied with the military lifestyle, and 59% support their spouse continuing to stay on active duty. However, about one in five active duty military spouses is dissatisfied with the military lifestyle, and one in four favors his or her spouse leaving active duty. Spouses who are more likely to view the military lifestyle favorably are Air Force spouses, spouses of Service members with a rank of O4-O6, and spouses who are not in the labor force (60%, 68%, and 59%, respectively). Spouses of Service members with a rank of E1-E4 are more likely to be dissatisfied with the military lifestyle than the average military spouse (23% versus 18%, respectively) (Office of People Analytics, 2020).

Similarly, military spouses' levels of support for Service members to stay on active duty vary by Service branch, each Service member's rank, and each spouse's employment status. Air Force spouses, spouses of Service members with a rank of E5-E9, and spouses not in the labor force support their spouse staying on active duty at higher rates than the average military spouse (63%, 62%, and 64% versus 59%, respectively). Spouses of Service members with a rank of E1-E4 and O1-O3 and dual-military couples favor leaving active duty more than the average military spouse (27%, 30%, and 35% versus 24%, respectively) (Office of People Analytics, 2020).

Current Issues Facing Active Duty Military Spouses

Blue Star Families has conducted the annual Military Family Lifestyle Survey since 2009. This survey identifies the top issues and stressors that face military families at a specific point in time. The 2020 Survey occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic (the Survey was open September to October 2020), and these unusual circumstances most likely altered the stressors felt by military families. However, the top three issues that active duty military spouses encounter (i.e., employment, time away from family, and children’s education) have remained constant since 2017.

Military spouses continue to report their employment opportunities, the Service member’s time away from family, and their children’s education as the top issues they face. In addition, quality of life, military pay, family stability, and the impact of deployments on military families have been reported as issues of concern by military spouses for several years (Blue Star Families, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2021). Many of the issues or concerns reported by military spouses are uniquely related to the military lifestyle: deployments, frequent relocations, and geographic separations.

Table 2 provides additional information on active duty military spouses’ issues or concerns from 2016 – 2020. The bold percentages in Table 2 correspond to the top five issues or concerns per survey fielding year for the Military Family Lifestyle Survey.

Table 2

Active Duty Military Spouses’ Issues or Concerns, 2016 - 2020

Topic	Percent of military spouses ¹ reporting a topic is an issue in the Military Family Lifestyle Survey, separated by fielding year				
	2020	2019	2018	2017	2016
Military spouse employment	52%	48%	45%	43%	38%
Time away from family	46%	45%	51%	46%	21% ⁵
Children's education	42%	44%	42%	39%	N/A
Quality of life	29%	N/A	33%	34%	32% ⁶
Military pay	27%	33%	35% ³	40% ³	59% ³
Family stability	26%	42%	N/A	N/A	32% ⁶
Military career control	22%	34%	N/A	N/A	N/A
Deployment impact on children	22% ²	N/A	39%	36%	37%
Military/VA healthcare	11%	18%	N/A	N/A	N/A
Military benefits	10%	16%	35% ³ & 19% ⁴	40% ³ & 25% ⁴	59% ³ & 38% ⁴

Topic	Percent of military spouses ¹ reporting a topic is an issue in the Military Family Lifestyle Survey, separated by fielding year				
Post-traumatic stress disorder/combat stress/traumatic brain injury	9%	11%	14%	14%	21%
Understanding of military/veterans	N/A	14%	N/A	N/A	N/A
Veteran employment	N/A	8%	N/A	12%	13%
Service member & veteran suicide	N/A	N/A	11%	11%	22%
<p>1. Reports specify respondents were active duty military spouses for fielding years 2020, 2018, 2017, and 2016. The 2019 fielding year reports on “military spouses.”</p> <p>2. Fielding year 2020 reported on the impact of deployment for families.</p> <p>3. Fielding years 2018, 2017, and 2016 combined military pay and benefits into one category.</p> <p>4. Fielding years 2018, 2017, and 2016 include a separate question on the change in retirement benefits.</p> <p>5. Fielding year 2016 reported on general operational tempo/deployments/training time.</p> <p>6. Fielding year 2016 combined family stability and quality of life.</p> <p>Sources: (Blue Star Families, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2021)</p>					

Top Three Issues Facing Active Duty Military Spouses, 2017 – 2020

The top three issues that active duty military spouses encounter have remained constant since 2017: spouse employment, Service member’s time away from family, and children’s education. Service member’s time away from family was the number one reported issue in 2017 and 2018 (Blue Star Families, 2017, 2018). Spouse employment was the number one reported issue in 2019 and 2020 (Blue Star Families, 2019, 2021). Children’s education has remained the number three reported issue since 2017 (Blue Star Families, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2021). Details on the top three issues reported by active duty military spouses are provided below.

Military Spouse Employment

Compared to civilian spouses, military spouses are more likely to be unemployed or underemployed (Gonzalez et al., 2015), and more than half of active duty military spouses say employment opportunities are an issue (Blue Star Families, 2021). Among active duty military families, 44% report spouse employment challenges as a big stressor in their families, and 18% report spouse employment challenges as a reason for potentially choosing to separate from the military (Blue Star Families, 2021).

Although the unemployment rate for active duty military spouses in the civilian labor force has decreased in the last decade, the unemployment rate remained 22% in 2019 (U.S. Department of Defense, 2020). Of the active duty military spouses who are employed,

only 56% are employed in their area of education or training, and 32% are working part time (i.e., less than 35 hours per week) (Office of People Analytics, 2020). In addition, 35% of active duty military spouses are not employed but need or want to be. This number varies by race, and 43% of spouses of color are unemployed, but need or want to work, compared to 32% of White, non-Hispanic spouses (Blue Star Families, 2021).

Frequent relocations negatively impact military spouses' abilities to retain employment, which can impact their abilities to establish or progress in their careers (Gonzalez et al., 2015; Owen & Combs, 2017). In 2020, only 18% of active duty military spouses were able to retain employment through a PCS (Blue Star Families, 2021). Spouses who relocated due to a PCS within the past year were more than twice (2.3 times) as likely to be unemployed than spouses who did not relocate within the past year (Office of People Analytics, 2020). The time it takes a military spouse to find employment after a PCS also varies: 45% of active duty military spouses were able to find employment within 4 months of their last PCS, while 35% of active duty military spouses took over 7 months to obtain employment (Office of People Analytics, 2020).

Professional licenses required by the military spouse's career may also impede his or her ability to find adequate employment (Owen & Combs, 2017). If a military spouse has a career that requires a license to practice (e.g., nurse, lawyer), that license may not be valid in the new location, which forces the spouse to either obtain a license in the new location or find a career field or job that does not require a license to practice. Among active duty military spouses who acquired a new professional or occupational license or credential after a PCS, the time to obtain the licensure was less than 1 month for 12% of spouses, 1-4 months for 42% of spouses, 4-7 months for 19% of spouses, 7-10 months for 7% of spouses, and more than 10 months for 20% of spouses (Office of People Analytics, 2020).

Another issue related to military spouse employment is adequate, available, and affordable child care (Owen & Combs, 2017). If child care is not available, a spouse may not be able to work as much as he or she would like or need to. For example, 12% of active duty military spouses who are working part time report child care problems as the main reason for working less than full time. In addition, 14% of active duty military spouses who are not looking for work report the high cost of child care as the reason (Office of People Analytics, 2020). For those active duty military spouses who are not working but need to work, 34% report the cost of child care (i.e., too expensive) as the top barrier to employment (Blue Star Families, 2021).

Time Away from Family

Service members may experience time away from family due to working long hours that are often unpredictable, being assigned to a location that does not allow families to relocate with them, or being deployed overseas. Another reason Service members may experience a prolonged time away from their family is “geo-bashing.” Geo-bashing is when a military family does not relocate with the Service member when the Service member receives a PCS order. According to Blue Star Families (2021), 23% of active duty military families have geo-bashed in the last 5 years, and 41% report the spouse’s career, and 49% report children’s educational concerns as the reasons for doing so (Blue Star Families, 2021).

Regardless of reasons, nearly half (46%) of active duty military spouses report the Service member’s time away from family is an issue. Among active duty military families, 21% report Service members’ time away from their families, not related to deployments, as the biggest stressor for their families, and 38% report deployments as the biggest stressors in their families (Blue Star Families, 2021).

In 2019, 12% of active duty military spouses reported their Service member was currently deployed, 28% had a spouse who had deployed within 12 months of the Survey, and 76% had a Service member who had deployed at least once in his or her career (Office of People Analytics, 2020). According to Blue Star Families (2021), 24% of active duty military families reported a deployment or activation from March through October 2020, and 66% of those families experienced unexpected extensions or extra time away from family due to COVID-19 precautions.

Children’s Education

Military-connected children, on average, change schools six to nine times from kindergarten through 12th grade; this is about three times more than civilian children change schools (National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine, 2019).

One of the hardest aspects of the PCS for families with school-aged children is the school transition process (Center for Public Research and Leadership at Columbia University & Military Child Education Coalition, 2017). Children’s education is consistently listed as the third biggest issue that military spouses encounter; among military families who have a child with special needs, children’s education is the biggest issue faced by the family (Blue Star Families, 2021).

To alleviate some of the pressure felt by military families during a PCS and to increase consistency regarding school-transition issues, the Interstate Compact on Educational Opportunity for Military Children (Compact) was developed. Despite the implementation of the Compact, challenges remain for military families who face frequent relocations. A

2017 report identified some of these remaining challenges as difficulties in accurate course placement, registration delays, and the socio-emotional impacts of moving on children. Difficulties or delays in registering for classes were amplified if the child had an Individual Education Plan (IEP) and if this IEP was not received by the new school prior to the family's arrival (Center for Public Research and Leadership at Columbia University & Military Child Education Coalition, 2017). In 2020, over half (51%) of active duty military families, who relocated from March through September or October 2020, had trouble transferring their child's IEP, and 48% had trouble transferring their child's 504 Plan to the new school (Blue Star Families, 2021).

Additional Issues or Concerns

Quality of Life and Well-being

In general, most (67%) active duty military spouses rate their health as excellent or very good (Office of People Analytics, 2019). However, according to the 2020 Military Family Lifestyle Survey (surveyed during the COVID-19 pandemic), 24% of active duty military spouses report a current diagnosis for generalized anxiety disorder, 9% report a current diagnosis for major depressive disorder, 7% report a current diagnosis for PTSD, and 6% report a current diagnosis for sleep disorders. In addition, 4% of active duty military spouses and 6% of active duty military children reported suicidal thoughts in the past year (Blue Star Families, 2021).

Further, in 2019, active duty military spouses reported their physical health was not good 3.7 out of 30 days, their mental health was not good 6.9 out of 30 days, and their poor physical or mental health kept them from doing their usual activities for 3.8 out of 30 days. These numbers varied by the spouse's rank and Service branch, but, most notably, unemployed spouses reported more days with "not good" physical and mental health and more days when poor physical or mental health kept them from doing their usual activities (5.0 days versus 3.7, 8.8 days versus 6.9, and 5.8 days versus 3.8, respectively) (Office of People Analytics, 2020).

Among active duty military families, 43% report isolation from family and friends and 23% report emotional or mental health issues as the biggest stressors in their families (Blue Star Families, 2021). Among Army spouses, feeling stressed, being overwhelmed, or feeling tired are the most frequently reported well-being issues followed by feelings of loneliness or boredom (Trail et al., 2019). In 2019, 54% of active duty military spouses rated their levels of stress as more than usual, while only 9% rated their stress levels as less than usual. Marine Corps spouses, spouses of Service members with a rank of E1-E4, and unemployed spouses were more likely to rate their levels of stress as more than usual (59%, 58%, and 63%, respectively) (Office of People Analytics, 2020).

Military Pay and Financial Stability

Seventy percent of active duty military spouses feel financially comfortable, 20% report some financial difficulty, and 11% are not financially comfortable. Spouses of a Service member with a rank of E1-E4 and unemployed spouses report higher levels of not being financially comfortable than the average active duty military spouse (19% and 22% versus 11%, respectively) (Office of People Analytics, 2020).

Among active duty military families, 39% report being financially stressed (Blue Star Families, 2021). Financial issues create several concerns: 21% of active duty military spouses report relationship problems, 13% borrow money from friends and family to pay bills, 9% take money out of a retirement or investment fund to pay living expenses, and 5% use a local food pantry to ease financial constraints (Office of People Analytics, 2020). In 2020, 14% of active duty enlisted military families had low or very low food security in the 12 months prior to Survey administration (Blue Star Families, 2021).

Factors that contribute to financial stability beyond military pay are spouse employment and out-of-pocket housing costs. Spouse employment contributes to financial stability and food security among enlisted military families. Among active duty enlisted military spouses who are unemployed but need or want to work, 20% reported very low or low food security compared to only 10% of active duty enlisted spouses who are employed. For active duty military families, the rate of financial stress reported generally increases as the amount of out-of-pocket housing costs increase (Blue Star Families, 2021).

Gaps in Services or Continued Need

Access to Affordable Child Care

Access to affordable child care continues to be an issue for military families. The inability to access affordable child care can impede a military spouse's capability to engage in educational opportunities, pursue employment opportunities, or obtain healthcare. Indeed, among active duty military spouses who are not working but need to work, 34% report child care costs (i.e., too expensive) as the top barrier to employment (Blue Star Families, 2021).

Among active duty military families who need child care, only 23% can find child care that works for their current situation all of the time, 39% can sometimes find child care, and 35% cannot find child care that works for their situation. If a family has a child with special needs, the family is less likely to be able to find child care that works for them, and only 19% of families who have a child with special needs are able to find child care that works for their family (Blue Star Families, 2021). The ability to find child care also varies by Service branch; active duty military families whose Service member is part of the Navy

are less likely to be able to find child care that works for their family than those associated with the Air Force, Army, or Marine Corps. Table 3 provides a breakdown of active duty military families' ability to find child care by Service branch.

Table 3

Active Duty Military Families' Ability to Find Child Care by Service Branch, 2020

Service branch	Percent of responses to the statement, "I am able to find child care that works for my current situation," by active duty military families who need child care.		
	Yes	Sometimes	No
Air Force	27%	39%	30%
Army	25%	35%	36%
Marine Corps	22%	40%	35%
Navy	19%	40%	37%
Source: (Blue Star Families, 2021, p.56)			

Access to Healthcare and Counseling Services

Active duty military spouses rate access to quality healthcare as the most important military-related benefit they receive; 90% of active duty military spouses rate access to quality healthcare as largely important, and 87% rate healthcare in retirement as largely important (Office of People Analytics, 2020). However, in 2020 (even with greater access to telehealth services), 21% of active duty military spouses reported wanting to receive mental healthcare but being unable to receive the desired care. Reasons for not receiving care include difficulty in scheduling appointments (45%), difficulty in finding child care (40%), not knowing where to get help (26%), and treatment not being sensitive to their needs (24%) (Blue Star Families, 2021).

Access to quality healthcare for military-connected children is also important to military spouses. However, only 51% of active duty military families report being able to access high-quality mental health services for their child. In addition, active duty military families who have a child with special needs have difficulty locating a specialist. Half of these families disagreed with the statement that they were able to see a specialist in a reasonable amount of time in 2020 (Blue Star Families, 2021).

Family Support During a Service Member's Deployment

Military families need support during their Service member's deployment. Among active duty military spouses whose Service member had deployed at least once, 57% rate the military support their family received during the deployment as fair/poor, 24% rate the support received as good, and 19% rate the support they received as excellent (Office of People Analytics, 2020). Those most likely to report military support during a deployment

as fair/poor were Army spouses and unemployed spouses (60% and 66%, respectively). (Office of People Analytics, 2020). Further, only 33% of active duty military spouses who have experienced a deployment say their command communicates well during that time (Blue Star Families, 2021).

Although deployment readiness programs exist to support military families during a deployment, many spouses do not know how to access critical information during this time. Military spouses generally report knowing how to access the common family needs during a deployment; however, the less-reported needs (e.g., social opportunities with child care options, resources for social support) have higher rates of spouses who desire this support but do not know how to access it (Blue Star Families, 2021). This highlights the need for enhanced communication and information sharing with the military family during a deployment.

Table 4 lists active duty military spouses needs during a current or upcoming deployment and the percent of spouses who report a need but do not know how to access it (i.e., unmet needs). Unmet needs of more than 50% are bolded in the table.

Table 4
Active Duty Military Spouses’ Needs During a Current or Upcoming Deployment or Activation

Needs during deployment or activation	Critical deployment needs (% of respondents who reported this need during deployment)	Unmet needs (% of those who report this need but do not know how to access it)
Ability to communicate with spouse	79%	7%
Emergency contact information for the unit/command	72%	38%
Access to medical care	71%	7%
Opportunity to exercise	57%	24%
Access to mental health	46%	16%
Resources for children's activities	44%	48%
Social/recreational activities that include child care options	38%	65%
Resources for social support	34%	50%
Communication from unit/command	33%	33%
Child care	32%	49%

Needs during deployment or activation	Critical deployment needs (% of respondents who reported this need during deployment)	Unmet needs (% of those who report this need but do not know how to access it)
Assistance with children's education	29%	40%
Resources for sports/recreation	24%	49%
After-school care	24%	54%
Employment/job opportunities	22%	39%
Help with yard/house maintenance	21%	58%
Caregiver respite or support	18%	74%
Resources for my education	15%	53%
Financial support	14%	51%
Assistance with special needs children	14%	53%
Assistance with shopping (curbside pickup, someone to shop for me)	10%	35%
Resources for job preparedness	10%	59%
Food support	9%	49%
Transportation assistance	4%	64%
Source: (Blue Star Families, 2021, p.26).		

Spouse's Employment and Education

According to the Office of People Analytics (2020), several factors increased the likelihood of a spouse being unemployed in 2019. Some of these factors include experiencing a relocation due to PCS orders within the past 12 months, having children, being less than 26 years old, having less than a college degree, being a spouse of a Service member with a rank of E1-E4, and belonging to a minority race or ethnicity. Some of these factors are modifiable (e.g., level of education), and others can be improved (e.g., relocation).

In terms of education, there are many active duty military spouses (41%) who would like to be enrolled in training or school but are not. The top five reasons for not attending school or training are the cost of education (73%), family responsibilities (69%), hours and location not being convenient (49%), the cost of child care (48%), and the availability of child care (42%) (Office of People Analytics, 2020). Scholarships and access to affordable child care could remove barriers to education for some of these spouses. Although there are programs available, they may not be widely known. For example,

nearly half (46%) of active duty military spouses are not aware of the Military Spouse Career Advancement Accounts (MyCAA) Scholarship, and only 4% report using a MyCAA Scholarship in the past 12 months (Office of People Analytics, 2020). Consequently, enhanced communication and information sharing about these, and similar, services could prove beneficial to military spouses who are seeking educational opportunities.

PCS orders also greatly affect the military spouse's ability to work - only 18% of spouses retain employment through a PCS (Blue Star Families, 2021). If a military spouse has a career that requires a license to practice (e.g., nurse, lawyer), that license may not be valid in the new location; this situation forces the spouse to either obtain a license in the new location or find a career field or job that does not require a license to practice. The most commonly cited reasons for retaining employment during a PCS were the spouse's ability to do remote work or transfer within the same company to a new location (Blue Star Families, 2021). Identifying additional ways to help military spouses retain employment is paramount to many military families' financial stability.

Recommendations

1. Conduct a review on current child care trends and affordability and ways to make child care more accessible and affordable to military families. As child care continues to be a major barrier to military spouses' abilities to retain employment, obtain training or additional education, and access healthcare services, enhancing accessibility to affordable, reliable, and safe child care could provide one avenue to improving military families' financial well-being.
2. Conduct a review of the current communication methods used to relay important information to military family members throughout the Service member's career, especially during times of deployment. As noted in this report, some of the unmet needs reported by military spouses may be due to a lack of awareness of specific programs (e.g., MyCAA Scholarship) and not an actual need for additional services.

In addition, military spouses may prefer to communicate by different sources depending on the topic of information or deployment status of the Service member. For example, in a recent study of military spouses who were married to deployed Service members, Facebook announcements were found to be most useful (Seagle et al., 2021). However, according to Blue Star Families (2021), 81% of active duty military spouses prefer to receive information via email, 45% prefer to receive information via social media, and 41% prefer to receive information via a

phone call or text message (Blue Star Families, 2021). The Office of People Analytics (2020) reports that 27% of active duty military spouses prefer to receive information about programs and services through email; 20% prefer to receive information from their spouse; 18% prefer to receive information from social media; 13% prefer to receive information from websites; and 7% prefer to receive information from newsletters.

3. Conduct a review of the current language included in the Compact to determine if children who participate in homeschool should be included. In addition, identify ways to enhance the usability of the Compact by children who have an IEP or 504 Plan.
4. Continue to support the work of Defense-State Liaison Office in actively promoting the transportability of professional or occupational licenses between states to allow military spouses to be employable immediately following a PCS.

Additional Assistance

The TA specialists at the Clearinghouse provide support to professionals as they examine and make informed decisions about which programs fit specific situations and are worth the investment. Whether connecting one with the resources and tools to conduct a needs assessment in a specific community, suggesting the best evidence-based program or practice for a certain situation, or developing an evaluation plan, the TA team of experts is a call or email away.

Please visit the Clearinghouse's website at www.militaryfamilies.psu.edu or call 1-877-382-9185 to speak with a TA specialist.

Suggested Citation

Clearinghouse for Military Family Readiness. (2021). *The military spouse experience: Current issues and gaps in service. Rapid literature review.* [Literature Review]. Clearinghouse for Military Family Readiness.

References

- Blue Star Families. (2016). *2016 Military family lifestyle survey: Comprehensive report*. <https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/ComprehensiveReport-33.pdf>
- Blue Star Families. (2017). *2017 Military family lifestyle survey: Comprehensive report*. <https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/MFLS-ComprehensiveReport17-FINAL.pdf>
- Blue Star Families. (2018). *2018 Military family lifestyle survey: Comprehensive report*. <https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/2018MFLS-ComprehensiveReport-DIGITAL-FINAL.pdf>
- Blue Star Families. (2019). *2019 Military family lifestyle survey: Comprehensive report*. <https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/BSF-2019-Survey-Comprehensive-Report-Digital-rev200305.pdf>
- Blue Star Families. (2021). *2020 Military family lifestyle survey: Comprehensive report*. https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/BSF_MFLS_CompReport_FULL.pdf
- Center for Public Research and Leadership at Columbia University & Military Child Education Coalition. (2017). *The challenges of supporting highly mobile military-connected children in school transitions: The current environment*. https://www.militarychild.org/upload/images/CPRL/Military_Student_Transitions_Student.pdf
- Gonzalez, G., Matthews, L., Posard, M., Roshan, P., & Ross, S. (2015). *Evaluation of the military spouse employment partnership: Progress report on first stage of analysis*. RAND Corporation. <https://doi.org/10.7249/rr1349>
- National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine. (2019). Strengthening the military family readiness system for a changing American society. In A. Editor, B. Editor, & C. Editor (Eds.), *Strengthening the military family readiness system for a changing American society*. The National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/25380>
- Office of People Analytics. (2019). *The military spouse at a glance: 2019 DOD survey of active duty spouses*. Military OneSource. <https://download.militaryonesource.mil/12038/MOS/Infographic/Military-Spouse-Glance-2019.pdf>
- Office of People Analytics. (2020). *2019 survey of active duty spouses (2019 ADSS)*. Military OneSource. https://download.militaryonesource.mil/12038/MOS/Surveys/ADSS1901_MOS-Briefing-508-Revised.pdf

- Owen, R., & Combs, T. (2017). Caring for military families: Understanding their unique stressors. *Nurse Practitioner*, 42(5), 26–32.
<https://doi.org/10.1097/01.NPR.0000515421.15414.fb>
- Seagle, E. S., Xu, J., Edwards, N., & McComb, S. A. (2021). Social networking, social support, and well-being for the military spouse. *Journal for Nurse Practitioners*.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nurpra.2020.12.013>
- Trail, T. E., Sims, C. S., & Tankard, M. (2019). *Today's Army spouse survey: How Army families address life's challenges*. RAND Corporation.
https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR3224.html
- U.S. Department of Defense. (2020). *2019 Demographics: Profile of the military community*. Military OneSource.
<https://download.militaryonesource.mil/12038/MOS/Reports/2019-demographics-report.pdf>