

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Blue Star Families' annual Military Family Lifestyle Survey (aMFLS) provides a comprehensive understanding of the experiences and challenges encountered by military families. The survey is a **yearly "snapshot" of the state of military families**, offering crucial insight and data to help inform national leaders, local communities, and philanthropic actors. Most critically, the survey is an opportunity to increase dialogue between the military community and broader American society, **minimizing the civilian-military divide and supporting the health and sustainability of the All-Volunteer Force.**

Blue Star Families conducted its 7th annual Military Family Lifestyle Survey in April-May, 2016 with **over 8,300 respondents** including military spouses, active duty service members, veterans, and their immediate family members participating in the survey. The Military Family Lifestyle Survey's response rate makes it the **largest and most comprehensive survey of active duty, veterans, and their families.**

## TOP MILITARY FAMILY ISSUES

- Financial issues of military pay, changes to retirement benefits, and military spouse employment are the top concerns among military families.
- Quality of life and wellness concerns are increasing relative to financial concerns. Three of the top five issues for military families are related to quality of life: impact of deployments on children; family stability; and operational tempo.

TOP ISSUES	Active Duty Spouses	Active Duty Members	Veterans
Military Pay/Benefits	59%	61%	56%
Change in Retirement Benefits	37.5%	41%	42%
Military Spouse Employment	37.9%	23%	11%
Impact of Deployment on Dependent Children	37%	32%	21%
Military Family Stability/Quality of Life	32%	33%	15%
General OPTEMPO/Deployments/Training Time	20.7%	30%	19%
Rising Numbers of Service Member and Veteran Suicides	22%	20%	38%
PTSD/Combat Stress/TBI	21.1%	14%	38%
Veteran Employment	13%	17%	33%



## SUPPORTING MILITARY FAMILIES STRENGTHENS NATIONAL SECURITY AND LOCAL COMMUNITIES

Military families are assets to national defense and local communities. They are **central to the health and capability of the All-Volunteer Force** and are good neighbors actively **engaged in making their civilian communities great places to live**. Service members may be employed by their respective services, but they work for all Americans—and so do their families.

The past year has seen new and emerging security threats in numerous regions while Department of Defense (DoD) budget cuts and personnel downsizing continues. The resulting **operational tempo is very concerning to service members** and their families. New proposals to make further cuts to housing allowances were accompanied by **new cuts to military family support programs**. Quality of life issues like **military family stability and the impact of deployments on children** are increasing relative to **lasting concerns regarding pay, benefits, and spouse employment**.

This year's survey results show a **military community at a point of inflection**. It shows the country needs to get smarter about what a healthy All-Volunteer Force really looks like—and what it needs it to look like to ensure future success. **The All-Volunteer Force was not designed for our current security environment** of protracted low-level conflict, **nor was it designed for the modern service member**—who is better educated, married with children, and living in an increasingly diverse and inclusive society.

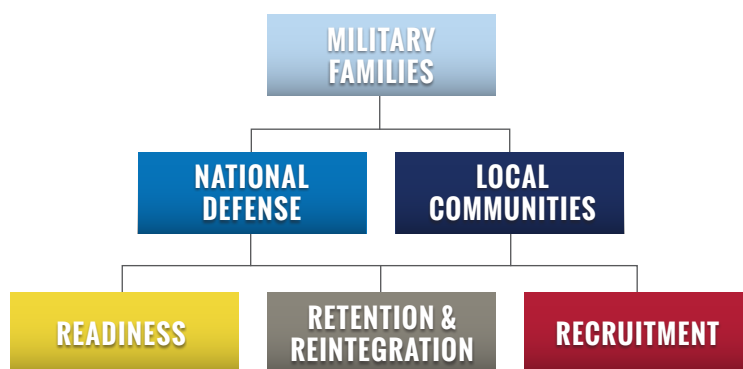
Analysis of the qualitative portions of this year's survey reinforced the quantitative findings. For example, **extended family separations, frequent moves, and outdated**

**expectations** that military spouses sublimate their personal, professional, and familial priorities to support their service member's military service are the most prevalent topics identified as substantially **reducing the quality of life and attractiveness of martial service**. Military families understand that serving may mean making sacrifices in support of service; however, DoD must also examine the military necessity of the burdens it asks military families to bear.

Despite varied topics covered in this year's survey report such as Financial Readiness, Veteran Transition, and Healthcare, **one clear and consistent theme emerged: the DoD must do a better job of incorporating military families into its current thinking and future planning**. Rather than ad hoc measures meant to provide support during periods of acute warfare, **military families must be understood as a structural component of the force**. Thinking about families in this way makes the country smarter about what it takes to ensure our nation's security and it improves the ability of the DoD to meet recruitment, retention, readiness, and reintegration goals.

For this reason, **2016's Comprehensive Report looks different** than in previous years. It is designed around the central defense priorities of **recruitment, readiness, retention, and reintegration** in order to illustrate the centrality of military families in achieving these goals and to highlight **opportunities to better integrate thinking about military families into defense policy and analysis**.

In short, the Comprehensive Report is a **framework** through which our national leaders and local communities can better understand why **supporting military families isn't just the right thing to do—it's also the smart thing**.



# TOP TRENDS AND FINDINGS FOR 2016

**Current optempo is very concerning to families.** Service members and their families feel the current optempo is unsustainable and threatens the health of their families. Active duty service members rank “general military optempo/deployments/training time” as their #5 issue and 33% rank it in the Top 5 issues overall. 72% of active duty and military spouse respondents indicated the current optempo exerts an unacceptable level of stress for a healthy work-life balance.

**Family separations continue at high levels.** Despite the troop drawdowns in Iraq and Afghanistan, military families continue to experience high rates of separation from their service member. 42% of military family respondents report experiencing more than 6 months of family separation in the last 18 months and 37% of military couples reported experiencing relationship challenges in the past year related to worry over future deployments. 16% of active duty family respondents had a family member currently deployed.

**Increasing service member worry over the impact of deployments on their children.** For the first time since the survey began ranking issues by respondent subgroups in 2014, active duty respondents ranked the impact of deployments on children as a Top 5 issue. Active duty respondents who indicated the impact of deployments on children was a Top 5 issue increased 57% as compared to the 2015 survey, with active duty and military spouse respondents both ranking it the #4 issue for 2016.

**Veterans recommend service at higher rates than active duty.** The majority of active duty military families (57%) are unlikely to recommend service to their own children. Active duty military families are more likely to recommend a young person join the military (66%) than they are to recommend service to their own children (43%). 57% of veteran family respondents would recommend service to their own children.

**Benefit cuts/changes negatively impact views of service to a greater extent than retention.** 19% of military families indicated they would recommend service if the current trend of cutting benefits continues. In qualitative responses, 27% felt changes in benefits, budget cuts, and sequestration illustrated that commitments are not being kept for those who serve; however, an additional 27% indicated that those same changes have not impacted their decision to stay in the military.

**Quality of life and wellness concerns are increasing relative to worry over changes to retirement benefits.** While “change in retirement benefits” remains in the Top 3 issues overall, the concern has decreased relative to family and quality of life concerns. The percentage of respondents who ranked it as a Top 5 issue decreased by at least 30% across all subgroups, with the greatest drop of 36% among active duty service members. It also dropped to second place among veterans, who for the first time ranked “military pay and benefits” as their #1 issue.

**Nineteen percent of active duty service members plan to exit service within the next two years.** The Top 5 reasons that veteran respondents left the military were: military retirement (40%); completion of military service obligation (25%); family reasons (25%); lost faith or trust in military or political leadership (24%); and to pursue education and training opportunities (17%). The successful re-entry of veterans and veteran families to civilian life is beneficial for both the military and civilian populations. As more service members prepare to separate from service, it is particularly critical that the transition experience be improved.

**Services recruit families, not just individuals.** History of family service was strongly associated with current service and among military spouses. Nearly half (47%) of military spouse respondents and 45% of active duty respondents had a parent who served in the military. 9% of all respondents had a child who served in the military.

**Twenty-one percent unemployment rate among military spouses.** 21% of military spouse respondents were unemployed—not employed but actively seeking work. This finding is consistent with DoD’s 2015 Survey of Active Duty Spouses which found a 23% unemployment rate. Unemployment rates in surveys of military spouses tend to be significantly higher than rates in past academic literature, suggesting military spouse unemployment may be undercounted in past studies which did not rely on direct surveys of military spouse populations.



**LGBT respondents feel comfortable on base, but identify healthcare as top area for improvement.** 90% were comfortable using on-base services such as the commissary, exchange, MWR, family readiness, and over two-thirds (68%) felt comfortable attending official military events with their partner. However, 38% felt Tricare's policies and familiarity regarding LGBT healthcare needs were inadequate and 28% felt accessibility to appropriate medical care from LGBT affirming/culturally competent providers was inadequate.

**The majority of military families earn a single income.** Military couples were 27% less likely to have dual incomes than married non-military couples with children under 18. Less than half (48%) of military families with a civilian spouse earned two incomes, as compared with two-thirds (66%) of the general U.S. population with kids under 18 who field two incomes.

**Civic engagement is high among military families and veterans.** Military families volunteer at rates three times higher than the general US population. 73% of military family and 65% of veteran respondents volunteered in the past year. Military and veteran families are more involved in their communities than the general U.S. population, with 96% indicating that working with others in one's neighborhood to improve conditions in one's community is an important civic responsibility.

**Post-9/11 GI Bill continues to be a powerful recruitment and retention tool.** Education benefits were the top reason for joining among active duty and veteran millennials. 78% of active duty families indicate that they plan to transfer the GI Bill to their spouse or child and 26% of military families felt that removing dependent BAH support from the GI Bill would cause them to leave service earlier than they currently planned. 46% of all active duty and veteran respondents indicated education benefits as a top five reason for joining.

**Low hiring rate among military spouses using federal special hiring authority.** Federal employment is not a successful strategy for military spouses despite special military spouse hiring authority, with 79% of military spouses who applied for employment and who used the hiring authority not obtaining employment.

**Veteran transition to civilian life remains difficult.** 56% of veterans who attended Transition GPS reported that it prepared them for a successful transition, while 49% of veterans who reported attending any transition programming said the programming prepared them for a successful transition. The Top 5 most useful resources during transition were: VA vocational rehab (37%); VA disability benefits (26%); family and friends support system (25%); VA healthcare (23%); and Transition Assistance programming (20%).

**BAH cuts may negatively impact military child education.** Like civilian families, many military families rent or buy homes based on the quality of the local public schools. When BAH is cut, military families may be less able to rent or purchase homes in areas with high-quality public schools—especially when families are assigned to duty stations with very high costs of living. 13% of qualitative responses described quality of school and living in substandard housing or unsafe areas as impacts of BAH cuts. Given the numerous challenges facing military children's education such as attending an average of 6-9 schools from K-12th grade, only one-third (33%) of parents indicated their children's school was doing a good job complying with the Interstate Compact on Educational Opportunity for Military Children.

**Military spouses and service members are likely to come from military families.** Military spouse respondents indicated they had a parent who served (47%) at a rate slightly higher than reported by service members (45%), while 57% of veteran respondents had a parent who served.

**Mental healthcare stigma persists among active duty.** 41% of active duty respondents were uncomfortable seeking mental health care from a military provider and 40% felt seeking mental health care programs or services would harm their career.

**Childcare continues to be a top need.** Additional support for flexible and affordable childcare remains a top request, with 66% of military families indicating they are not always able to find the childcare they need. When asked "What could DoD do to make it easier for you to ensure your family is healthy and happy during your loved one's military service," the top theme among qualitative responses was "offer accessible and affordable childcare."

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