

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



2017  
**BLUE STAR FAMILIES**  
**MILITARY FAMILY LIFESTYLE SURVEY**

**TOP MILITARY FAMILY ISSUES**

- Amount of time away from family is the top concern, surpassing pay and benefits, which had been the top concern since 2013.
- Time away from family, military spouse employment, and pay & benefits are the top concerns among military families.
- Concerns over the impact of service on military children are increasing. Military child education is new to the Top 5 for service members and military spouses. Both groups also ranked impact of deployment on children in the Top 5.

**Understanding of the new Blended Retirement System (BRS) remains low.** The majority (51%) of those who indicated they were eligible for the new BRS say they do not understand it and 42% indicated they did not know how the new system compared to the old benefit.

**Military spouse respondents earned far less than their civilian counterparts in 2016.** Fewer than half (47%) of military spouse respondents were employed, and of those who were employed, the majority (51%) earned less than \$20K in 2016--with 39% earning less than \$10K.

**Willingness to recommend service to one's own children continues to decrease; however, regular civilian community engagement was associated with a greater willingness to recommend service.** 60% were unwilling to recommend service to their own children this year.

**Unemployment rate among military spouse respondents increased by 33% from 2016.** The percentage of military spouse respondents who indicated they were unemployed (those not employed but who had actively sought work in the past four weeks) increased to 28% in 2017. While two-thirds of U.S. families with children under 18 earn two incomes, less than half (47%) of military families with a civilian spouse reported the same.

**An employed spouse was associated with a positive veteran transition experience.** Among veteran respondents who reported their spouse's employment status made a positive impact on their transition experience, 83% indicated their spouse was employed full-time when they transitioned from active duty to civilian life.

**Childcare continues to be a top need.** 67% of military family respondents indicated they are not always able to obtain the childcare they need. 67% of female service members reported they could not find childcare that works with their schedules compared to only 33% of male service members. Male military spouse respondents were also far less likely to indicate childcare challenges as a factor in employment or education decisions, with 40% of male military spouses versus 17% of female military spouses reporting their employment or education decisions had not been impacted by childcare challenges.

**Female military spouse respondents experience greater challenges when seeking employment. Desire and ability to work were impacted by gender-based caretaking expectations.** Almost half (49%) of male military spouse respondents reported working full-time, compared to just 27% of female military spouse respondents. Male and female military spouse respondents also differed substantially on the impact of family obligations on their career, with 50% of female spouses citing family obligations as a top career obstacle compared to 30% of male spouses. 44% of employed male military spouse respondents earned more than \$50,000 in 2016, while only 19% of females reported the same.

**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 8th annual Military Family Lifestyle Survey in April-May, 2017 with **over 7,800 respondents** including military spouses, active duty service members, veterans, and their immediate family members. The Military Family Lifestyle Survey's response rate makes it the **largest and most comprehensive survey of active duty service members, veterans, and their families.**

TOP ISSUES	Active Duty Spouses	Active Duty Members	Veterans
<b>Time away from family</b>	<b>46%</b>	<b>47%</b>	27%
<b>Military spouse employment</b>	<b>43%</b>	28%	15%
<b>Military pay &amp; benefits</b>	<b>40%</b>	<b>42%</b>	<b>42%</b>
<b>Military child education</b>	<b>39%</b>	<b>32%</b>	19%
<b>Impact of deployment on children</b>	<b>36%</b>	<b>33%</b>	20%
Military family quality of life	34%	<b>34%</b>	18%
Change in retirement benefits	25%	25%	<b>30%</b>
Veteran employment	12%	17%	<b>42%</b>
PTSD/combat stress/TBI	14%	11%	<b>34%</b>
Service member & veteran suicide	11%	9%	<b>30%</b>

*Funding for the 2017 Military Family Lifestyle Survey is provided through the generosity of our presenting sponsor USAA and from Lockheed Martin Corporation, Facebook, and Northrop Grumman.*

## SUPPORTING MILITARY FAMILIES STRENGTHENS NATIONAL SECURITY AND LOCAL COMMUNITIES

The **All-Volunteer Force continues to serve** in uncertain and challenging times. With our nation's **sixteenth consecutive year at war** drawing to a close, military families continue to endure **multiple prolonged periods of separation** from their service members. The majority of military families indicated that the current **operational tempo exerts an unacceptable level of stress**, making a healthy work-life balance difficult to achieve. Quality of life issues, including **time away from family, military family stability and the impact of military service on children**, are top concerns this year, along with **lasting concerns regarding pay, benefits, and spouse employment**.

The Department of Defense (DoD) must do a better job of **incorporating military families into its current thinking and future planning**. This year's report identifies three key topics central to improving support: **opportunity costs that accompany service; civilian community integration; and diverse experiences of service**.

This year's survey results show military families are **increasingly concerned about the continued sacrifices** that accompany this **prolonged period of conflict**. Military families have a **strong desire and commitment to serve**; however, responses suggest they remain **rational actors** who are **increasingly assessing alternatives to service**.

Increasing civilian-military community connections that **improve local integration** is important for the overall **health and wellbeing of military families** and is a **smart recruitment and retention policy**

for DoD. The mobile lifestyle required of military families means that **local support networks have to be rebuilt** with each move. The majority of military families reside in their local civilian communities, and want **greater opportunities to meet people, make friends, and expand their professional networks** in these communities. Yet, most military families indicated they **do not feel part of the civilian communities** in which they live.

**Diverse experiences of service require modern support** for military families. The All-Volunteer Force was not designed for our current security environment or the modern service member. Service members may be single parents, have professional spouses, or have children with special needs. Yet, many aspects of the **military's personnel and family support policies remain based on an outdated, draft-based military**.

2017 survey results indicate service members and their families are experiencing **substantial difficulties balancing work and family**. Today's military requires technological and cultural expertise from all ranks. Just as a strong defense requires diverse skills, **strong military family support requires a comprehensive understanding** of the diversity of today's military families. It is time for an **updated understanding of military family support needs**.



## TOP TRENDS AND FINDINGS FOR 2017

**High rates of family separation continue. Time away from family surpassed pay and benefits as top concern for military families.** Nearly half (46%) of military family respondents ranked time away from family as their top concern. One-third of military family respondents had experienced at least 25% of the last 16 years away from their families and 40% reported experiencing more than 6 months of family separation in the last 18 months.

**Concerns about the impact of service on dependent children are increasing.** Military child education and impact of deployment on children ranked as Top 5 concerns for both service members and military spouses for the first time in the history of this survey. Two-thirds of military families could not reliably find the childcare they need and the majority (56%) indicated DoD does not provide adequate support to help children cope with the unique challenges associated with military life.

**The majority of military families do not feel they belong in their local civilian communities.** 51% of military family respondents indicated that they did not feel a sense of belonging within their local civilian community and 53% felt they were not valued members of the local community. The majority of military families lack adequate time to form local community bonds on their own, as 72% of military family respondents indicated living in their current community for two years or less.

**Veteran respondents indicate many positive impacts of military service on their lives.** 95% of male and 93% of female veteran respondents indicated that military service had a positive impact on their life. Similarly, 97% and 96% of male and female veteran respondents, respectively, reported feeling pride from their accomplishments during military service. 88% of both male and female veteran respondents indicated they appreciate the little things in life more now, and male (96%) and female (97%) veteran respondents reported having matured as a result of their service.

**Caregivers requested more diverse forms of support, with mental health and financial support especially acute needs.** 30% of military caregiver respondents reported being unemployed (seeking work) and 50% reported feeling isolated. Of those caregiver respondents who reported caring for someone with emotional or mental health problems, the majority (53%) reported having been diagnosed with anxiety or depression (45%). Financial assistance was ranked the most helpful resource and 43% reported debt repayment was their top financial goal.

**Concerns about the impact of military service on family was the top driver for exiting service.** 22% of service member respondents indicated they plan to transition out of military service in the next two years. Their top reasons for exiting service, after controlling for retirement, were: "Concerns about the impact of military service on my family" (30%) and "The military lifestyle did not allow me sufficient time with my family" (25%).