



10 YEARS



 **BLUE STAR FAMILIES**
MILITARY FAMILY
LIFESTYLE SURVEY

SUMMARY OF TRENDS
& RESULTING IMPACT

In collaboration with

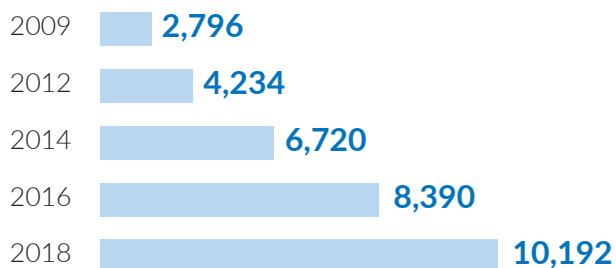


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Blue Star Families' (BSF) annual Military Family Lifestyle Survey (aMFLS) provides a comprehensive understanding of the experiences and challenges encountered by military families. Since its inception in 2009, the survey has provided a **yearly "snapshot" 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.**

The aMFLS has become widely regarded as the **gold standard** among military family surveys; results have made an impact on childcare and spouse employment legislation and on ways to improve military family readiness through community engagement and defense personnel reform. The aMFLS's focus on military and veteran family issues has provided a unique opportunity to talk about **challenges that transcend over time**; many of the overall challenges veterans face are rooted in issues that carry over from their time on active duty. To commemorate the tenth anniversary of the aMFLS, this summary is intended to facilitate a **broad understanding of the military and veteran family experience over the past 10 years** so that communities and policymakers can best serve each of their diverse needs presently and in the future.

Progressive response rate reflects increasing buy-in among military families who know BSF has a proven track-record of elevating the voices of those who serve



TIMELINE OF KEY SURVEY RESULTS

 *BSF influenced or directly impacted*



\$ Top Issue: Military Pay & Benefits

2009

- 94% feel general public doesn't truly understand or appreciate their sacrifice
- 51% experienced service member deployment for 13+ months since 9/11
- 41% experienced 13+ months additional separation since 9/11 due to training/schools/temporary duty

Key Recommendation: Connect efforts with partners and current military family research

RESULTING IMPACT:

-  Inaugural White Oak Summit: "America Joins Forces with Military Families" (2010)
-  Presidential Study Directive-9: "Strengthening Our Military Families: Meeting America's Commitment" (2010)

What's Special about the aMFLS?

- Largest annually conducted comprehensive survey of military and veteran families
- Our lead survey analysts are research professionals who are also military spouses
- We ask open-ended questions to provide the opportunity for honest answers
- Most current and extensive data about the experience of women in uniform
- We partner with the Institute for Veterans and Military Families (IVMF) to conduct and analyze the survey
- Survey data provides the impetus for key stakeholders to storm the Hill and create change



2010



Top Issue: Operational Tempo

- 90% experienced increased stress during deployment; 38% reported much more stress
- 86% had child who experienced at least one deployment of military parent(s)
- Top reasons for military spouses not working: 1) childcare costs, 2) deployment/relocation timing

Key Recommendation: Increased need for dialogue to include military families due to current operational tempo

RESULTING IMPACT:



Joining Forces initiative launched (2011)



Hiring Our Heroes expanded to include military spouses (2011) & executed Military Spouse Employment Toolkit with BSF (2011)



BSF CEO presented 2010 survey findings to Senate Armed Services Committee, Subcommittee on Personnel: "Active, Guard, Reserve, and Civilian Personnel Programs" (testified in 2011)

Evolving civil-military understanding

Civilians' collective ability to understand military and veteran families is the foundation for sustainable military and veteran policy and program development. Every critical military life issue is influenced by the extent to which those outside of the military comprehend the unique and diverse experiences of this lifestyle.

Over the past decade, Blue Star Families has recognized civilian understanding as the cornerstone to broader success and actively seeks to improve it at the local and national level. In 2009, **only 4% of survey respondents felt the general population understood or appreciated them.** This alarming statistic underscored the need for multi-faceted, collective action to bridge the civil-military

Civilian understanding of the military influences:

<p>Military's ability to recruit and retain personnel</p>	<p><i>"Showing normal life, meeting Soldiers, etc. will show people that the military allows you to serve with amazing people, learn leadership skills that will benefit you the rest of your life, and grow as a person in a way that few other professions allow." - 2018 Army service member</i></p>
<p>Civilian schools' ability to effectively support military students and families</p>	<p><i>"We live away from a base in a small town. Reintegration has been terrible for him because the school doesn't get it [...] they just don't understand our lifestyle as a reserve family." - 2015 Reserve spouse</i></p>
<p>Civilian employers' understanding of military spouse & veteran employment needs</p>	<p><i>"[P]ublic understanding is truly important in hiring veterans [...] I think most large businesses get it and put forth a helping hand with employment, but I'm not so sure about the small businesses' understanding." - 2018 Air Force spouse</i></p>
<p>Civilian physical & mental health providers' knowledge of military life issues</p>	<p><i>"Civilian mental health counselors have little experience with military members." - 2016 Air Force spouse</i></p>
<p>Military families' sense of belonging in their local civilian community & veteran families' ability to transition into civilian life</p>	<p><i>"Military families go through a lot and to have the community not be empathetic makes the situation worse." - 2018 Navy spouse</i></p>

TIMELINE OF KEY SURVEY RESULTS

2012



Top Issue: Changes in Retirement Benefits

- 77% social media important or very important for communicating with service member during deployment
- 81% volunteered in the last year
- Military spouse (10%) and service member (9%) percentage who considered suicide almost equal

Key Recommendation: Increase training on safe social media use and assist military commands with leveraging platforms to communicate with families, utilize volunteerism to build bridges with civilian community, and track military spouse suicide

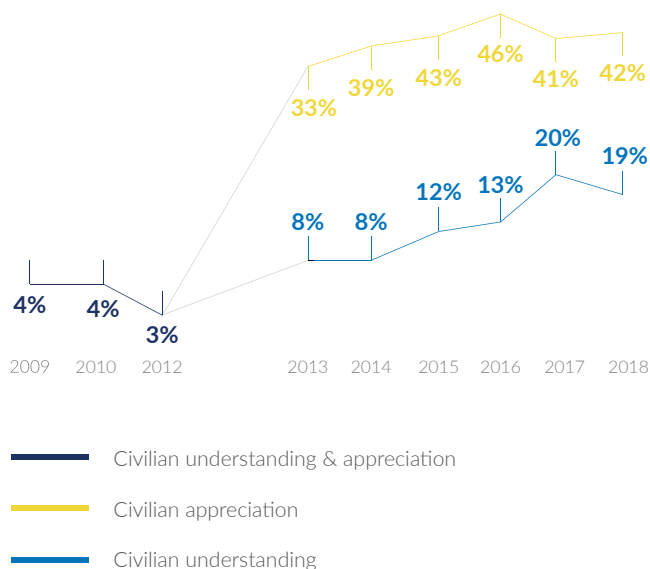
RESULTING IMPACT:


- U.S. Army changed its policy on social media
- Community Blueprint program launched to encourage local community integration (2012)
- BSF became a voting member on the Military Family Readiness Council (2012-2015)

gap. Two major initiatives were launched to address this need. In 2010, BSF--in collaboration with key partners--hosted the inaugural America Joins Forces with Military Families White Oak Retreat. Since 2010, White Oak has served as a regularly occurring venue for harnessing the power of collaboration and formulating cross-sector solutions, in areas such as military children’s education, mental health, and veteran and military spouse unemployment. In 2011, former First Lady Michelle Obama and former Second Lady Dr. Jill Biden launched Joining Forces, a “nationwide initiative calling all Americans to rally around service members, veterans, and their families and support them through wellness, education, and employment opportunities.”¹

These initiatives, among others, advanced civil-military discourse nationally and had a tangible impact on civilian understanding and appreciation. Although the majority of military families still do not feel the general population understands or appreciates them, a trend does exist toward greater understanding and appreciation. In 2018, **19% of survey respondents felt the general population understood the sacrifices** made by service members and their families, and **42% felt the general population appreciated those sacrifices**.

Respondents’ perceptions of civilian understanding and appreciation of military service and sacrifice



 BSF influenced or directly impacted


2013

\$ Top Issue: Military Pay & Benefits

- Operational tempo/deployment dropped out of Top 5 Issues; financial and family concerns increase
- 39% feel their child’s school wasn’t responsive/proactive to unique military situations (deployments/relocation)
- 8% of veterans reported their Military Occupational Specialty (MOS) translated into civilian licenses/certifications

Key Recommendation: Support national legislation to create a military student identifier and closely review transition resources

RESULTING IMPACT:

-  Caregivers Empowering Caregivers launched (2013)
- 2015 NDAA: Congress expanded DoD authorization to use funds to assist service members with obtaining credentials that translate to civilian jobs (passed in 2014)
- 2016 NDAA: Congress codified requirement for military student identifier (passed in 2015)

THE WAY FORWARD: FUTURE STEPS

While shifting national narratives have bolstered the sense that the general public appreciates the sacrifices service members and their families make, there is still work to do with regard to improving the general public’s understanding of these issues and to enhance civilian community integration. When asked what the Department of Defense (DoD) could do to improve the general public’s understanding of military service, the most commonly cited recommendation among 2018 survey respondents was for DoD to be honest and

transparent about the difficult realities of military life. In other words, respondents seek honest messaging and authentic representations of their experience that go beyond the sometimes confusing dichotomies of happy homecomings and broken heroes. Military families have diverse life experiences, and recent aMFLS trends indicate that broader American and generational norms continue to influence how military families perceive their own expectations of military life and service.

“Civilian community partnerships[...] would be extremely beneficial to bridge the understanding divide between military and civilian families. I do sincerely believe the military members and their families are deeply appreciated by our civilian counterparts. Creating a sense of community and partnership with them would allow them to fully understand what it means to be a military family.”

- 2018 Navy spouse

TIMELINE OF KEY SURVEY RESULTS

2014

\$ Top Issue: Military Pay & Benefits

- Top financial obstacles (among those stressed by financial condition): 1) spouse employment, 2) military life uncertainty, 3) potential benefits change uncertainty
- Of military spouses whose career required licensure/certification, 70% encountered challenges maintaining it
- 85% of respondents who indicated they were physically assaulted did not report the incident

Key Recommendation: Increase coordination to develop employment resources and high quality portable or work-from-home positions for military spouses, and provide DoD leadership training on military and civilian protective orders to ensure awareness of options for assault victims

RESULTING IMPACT:



Philanthropy-Joining Forces Impact Pledge unites philanthropic community in supporting veteran & military support organizations (2014)

2016 NDAA: Congress directed DoD to enhance confidentiality & other rights for victims of domestic abuse & sexual assault (passed in 2015)

2018 NDAA: Congress authorized DoD to reimburse spouse licensure or certification up to \$500 (passed in 2017)

Evolving military life expectations and experiences

Military families are American families, and when it comes to life expectations and family dynamics, they are remarkably similar to their civilian counterparts. The overwhelming majority of military members are 35 years old or younger.² These Millennials (born 1981-1996)³ are more likely than previous generations to make career decisions that support a healthy work-life balance,^{4,5} to spend more time with their children and family,^{6,7} and to jointly make decisions with their partner.⁸ They are less likely to want to move.⁹ These expectations are fundamentally at odds with unpredictable--and often inflexible--day-to-day military job demands, routine relocation, and many elements of the personnel system.


In 2018, the top two reasons for leaving service among those exiting in the next two years (excluding retirement and administrative discharge) were “concerns about the impact of military service on my family” (42%) and “the military lifestyle does not allow me sufficient time with my family” (39%). These findings are bolstered by general trends in survey respondents’ top concerns and stressors over the past decade. Although exact survey questions and answer choices fluctuated slightly from year to year, when it comes to top military life concerns, there has been a relative decrease in ranking of tangible benefits (pay and benefits, retirement benefits) and a relative increase in ranking of family and quality of life issues (children’s education, time away from home, spouse employment).

Top Issues of Concern over the past 5 years among service member and military spouse respondents

TOP ISSUES	1.	2.	3.
2014	Military pay/benefits	Change in retirement benefits	Impact of deployments on children
2015	Military pay/benefits	Change in retirement benefits	Military spouse employment
2016	Military pay/benefits	Change in retirement benefits	Impact of deployments on children
2017	Amount of time away from family (new option in 2017)	Military spouse employment	Military pay/benefits
2018	Amount of time away from family	Military spouse employment	Dependent children's education

Decrease in ranking of tangible benefits

Increase in ranking of family & quality of life issues

 BSF influenced or directly impacted




2015

\$ Top Issue: Military Pay & Benefits

- “Veteran employment” top 5 issue for service members for the first time
- Roughly half of employed veterans not working in preferred career field
- 76% transferred/plan to transfer Post 9/11 GI Bill to spouse or child

Key Recommendation: Improve and increase resources, as well as sharing best practices, for hiring and supporting veterans in the workplace

RESULTING IMPACT:

-  BSF executed strategic alliance with U.S. Small Business Administration to strengthen and expand small business development for veterans, service members, and their spouses (2015-2017)
-  BSF CEO presented 2015 survey findings to Senate Armed Services Committee, Subcommittee on Personnel: “Military Personnel Posture” (testified in 2016)
-  Forever GI Bill (2017)

SHIFTING FAMILY ROLES AND INCREASING EXPECTATIONS

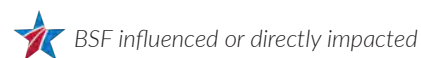
The aforementioned trends illuminate generationally-driven changes in military family dynamics. The survey in recent years has highlighted that military spouses' expectations for employment are increasing. A majority (70%) of Millennial family respondents in 2018 reported having two incomes is vital to their family's well-being. Although the top issue of "pay and benefits" has gradually reduced in ranking among military family respondents, "financial stress" and "relocation stress" have risen as

military life stressors among both military spouse and service member respondents. Given that spouse un/underemployment is identified as a consistent top financial barrier among respondents and that relocation is directly associated with spouse un/underemployment,¹⁰ it is unsurprising to see this shift as it becomes increasingly clear that spouses and service members expect both partners in a relationship to be able to find employment and sustain a career.

Financial stress and relocation stress are increasing among service member and military spouse respondents

TOP STRESSORS		1.	2.	3.	4.	5.
2016	Active Duty Members	Deployments 47%	Job 46%	Separation 41%	Relocation 41%	Financial 37%
	Military Spouses	Deployments 50%	Separation 47%	Financial 45%	Relocation 43%	Isolation 40%
2017	Active Duty Members	Deployments 47%	Relocation 44%	Separation 39%	Financial 38%	Job 35%
	Military Spouses	Deployments 53%	Financial 46%	Relocation 45%	Separation 44%	Isolation 40%
2018	Active Duty Members	Relocation 37%	Financial 36%	Deployments 36%	Job 35%	Separation 34%
	Military Spouses	Financial 49%	Deployments 47%	Relocation 42%	Isolation 39%	Separation 37%

TIMELINE OF KEY SURVEY RESULTS



\$ Top Issue: Military Pay & Benefits

2016

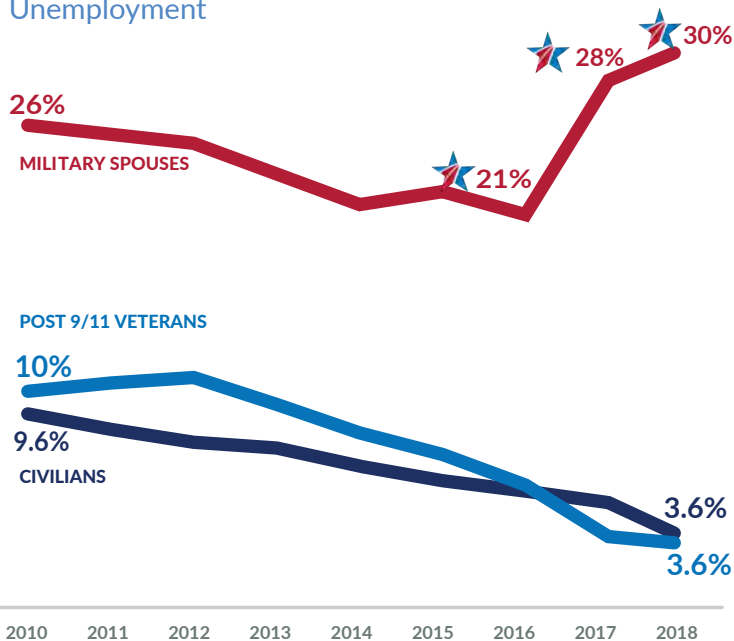
- 66% cannot obtain reliable childcare
- Top reasons for staying in military - 1) retirement benefits, 2) health care benefits, 3) financial security
- Top stressors among those likely to leave service - 1) high operational tempo, 2) service member job stress, 3) financial concerns

Key Recommendation: Prioritize military family programming as essential component of readiness and consider concerns in decision-making process

RESULTING IMPACT:

- ★ BSF CEO presented BPC Task Force recommendations for sustaining All-Volunteer Force to Senate Armed Services Committee, Subcommittee on Personnel: "Flexible Personnel System" (testified in 2017)
- ★ 2018 & 2019 NDAA: Congress enacted provisions from ACCESS Act and Military Spouse Employment Act (passed in 2017 & 2018, respectively)
- ★ BSF CEO presented 2016 survey findings to Senate Armed Services Committee, Subcommittee on Personnel: "Department of Defense Single Service Member and Military Family Programs" (testified in 2017)

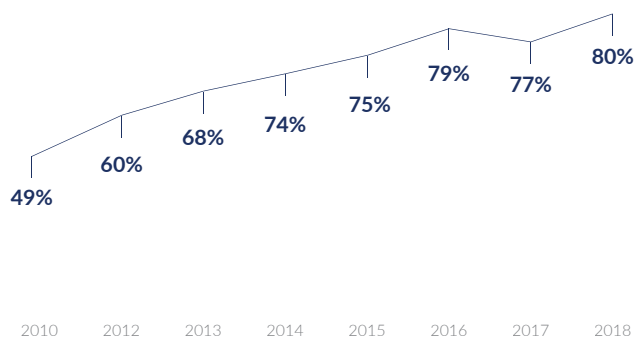
Unemployment



“We constantly prioritize my service member’s job and deprioritize mine, which gives me uncertainty about how my daughter will grow up to understand gender equality.”

- 2016 Army spouse

Percent who indicate being a *military spouse* has had a negative impact on employment



2017



Top Issue: Time Away from Family (new response option)

- 66% financial assistance top resource for caregivers
- 67% female service members cannot obtain reliable childcare vs. 33% male service members
- 55% of employed military spouses are underemployed

Key Recommendation: Prioritize creating a work environment where both service men and women are afforded equal opportunity to tend to responsibilities at home and improve flexible work hiring initiatives to employ military spouses

RESULTING IMPACT:

- ★ VA Mission Act expanded caregiver training & eligibility for financial resources & legal services (2018)
- ★ 2019 NDAA: Congress enacted provision of the Military Spouse Employment Act to temporarily expand non-competitive hiring authority to all military spouses, not just those who relocated (passed in 2018)
- ★ BSF CEO presented 2017 survey findings to Senate Armed Services Committee, Subcommittee on Personnel: “Military and Civilian Personnel Programs and Military Family Readiness” (testified in 2018)

Applying lessons learned at the community level

The civilian-military gap emerged with the advent of the All-Volunteer Force in the 1970s¹¹ and efforts to close it have existed since that time. The trends previously discussed demonstrate that strategically-coordinated initiatives to ensure sustained, multi-faceted efforts to bridge that gap can be successful. In the coming decade, it is imperative that these efforts continue at the national level as they enter their next logical stage: strategic alignment with community-based engagement.

Almost three-quarters of military families live off-installation,¹² which creates a clear opportunity to

establish local strategic initiatives that incorporate collaborative, multi-stakeholder solutions responsive to local community needs. Similar efforts can also benefit communities with large numbers of National Guard or Reserve component forces and veteran families. These efforts will help further alleviate the burden on federal resources while also increasing community connectedness and belonging among military-affiliated families in the long-term.

The Living Survey: Looking Forward

The annual Military Family Lifestyle Survey informs understanding of military and veteran families over time. The greatest effect of the survey is the **dialogue that occurs in the space due to the data and the development and evolution of programs that create positive change** for military families.

Each year we explore with new questions and follow trends in areas that are not already well-known. We are able to digest the results and reflect on the responses which have informed our understanding over time. This process is the **underlying reason** for our understanding and latest focus around **community connection and belonging**.

In 2017, as a result of a consistent theme of isolation as a top stressor among military spouse respondents, BSF added new survey questions related to community connectedness and belonging. Since belonging and community connectedness are new to the aMFLS and BSF only has two years of data, there are no trends to highlight.

In the coming years, BSF will continue to explore the relationship between belonging, community integration, connectedness, and family outcomes, in addition to considering how individual and community traits influence military and veteran family resilience.

TIMELINE OF KEY SURVEY RESULTS

2018



Top Issue: Time Away from Family

- Military families identified solutions for modern families needed to combat the impact of service on their health and well-being
- 70% of Millennials say two incomes vital to family's well-being
- Service member and military spouses: Best way to improve sense of belonging is to increase military spouse jobs
- 47% want large corporations to design military spouse-friendly flexible work options

KEY RECOMENDATION:

Explore creative ways to provide or replicate geographic stability to improve the un/underemployment of military spouses and differentiate between military spouse and veteran employment challenges when designing military spouse employment initiatives

Endnotes

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