



# 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 10th annual Military Family Lifestyle Survey May-June, 2019, with **over 11,000 respondents** including active-duty service members, veterans, National Guard, Reserve, and their immediate family members. The annual Military Family Lifestyle Survey’s response rate makes it the **largest and most comprehensive survey of active-duty service members, veterans, National Guard, Reserve, and their families.**

## TOP MILITARY FAMILY ISSUES

- Issues related to instability and unpredictability remain a focus for military families’ top issues this year.
- Amount of time away from family was followed by military spouse employment, dependent children’s education, military family stability and quality of life, and lack of control over military career as the top-five issues of concern.
- Military spouse under- and unemployment can exacerbate financial concerns for families.

TOP ISSUES	Military Spouses	Service Members	Veterans
<b>Military spouse employment</b>	<b>48%</b>	27%	13%
<b>Amount of time away from family</b>	<b>45%</b>	<b>50%</b>	27%
<b>Dependent children’s education</b>	<b>44%</b>	<b>33%</b>	16%
<b>Military family stability</b>	<b>42%</b>	<b>44%</b>	19%
<b>Lack of military career control</b>	<b>34%</b>	<b>41%</b>	15%
Military pay	33%	<b>33%</b>	29%
Access to VA/military health care	18%	22%	<b>49%</b>
Understanding of military/veterans	14%	12%	<b>38%</b>
Military benefits	16%	19%	<b>37%</b>
Veteran employment	8%	12%	<b>30%</b>
PTSD/combat stress/TBI	11%	7%	<b>30%</b>

## SUPPORTING MILITARY FAMILIES STRENGTHENS NATIONAL SECURITY & LOCAL COMMUNITIES

Military families are American families, and as such, want similar life expectations and family dynamics as their civilian counterparts. These expectations, however, are fundamentally at odds with the unpredictable, and often inflexible, day-to-day military job demands, routine relocations, and many elements of the current defense personnel system. This year's survey results continue to illuminate this tension felt by military family respondents as issues related to family stability/quality of life—time away from family, military spouse employment, dependent children's education, and lack of control over their military career—remain ranked as their top-five issues of concerns. Issues associated with financial implications such as financial issues, relocation issues, and the inability to reliably earn two incomes remain their top stressors.

In addition to further understanding the challenges associated with the uncertainty that accompanies military life, this year's survey also explores the capacity of local civilian communities to support military families. For over a decade, researchers have been calling for communities to increase their capacity to support military-connected community members (Bowen, Orthner, Martin, and Mancini, 2001). With almost 70% of military families living off-installation, they are increasingly reliant on their local communities for support and resources that meet their needs. This year's survey findings suggest that more than showing appreciation of service and demonstrating understanding of

military life, it's military family cultural competence—respondents' perceptions of community awareness, community appreciation, community understanding, community support, and community respect of military-connected families—that is the foundation upon which military families' sense of belonging to their local civilian community may be based. Military family resilience is, in large part, contingent on an effective, culturally-competent support network within the community (Unger, 2019).

Many Americans are unaware that the one percent of the nation that makes up the All-Volunteer Force has been at war for the last two decades and seemingly without end. This civilian-military gap emerged with the advent of the All-Volunteer Force in the 1970s, but despite efforts to close it, it still exists. The responsibility of supporting military-connected families is a shared responsibility that spans across the federal government, civilians at large, and the military-connected community. It's often unclear, however, how to translate the issues that are impacting military families into actions that can improve their lives and support their mission readiness. The 2019 Comprehensive Report takes a deeper look at the key challenges facing military families related to stability and financial security; the factors that bolster one's sense of belonging and local civilian communities' ability to support; and targeted, actionable recommendations aimed to promote improvements to families' quality of life and overall well-being.



## TOP TRENDS AND FINDINGS FOR 2019

### **Military families act to offset the impact of relocation on their children's education, an issue that continues to be a top-five issue of concern for respondents.**

Military family respondents rank concerns around family stability and dependent children's education in their top-five issues of concern, and appear to turn to homeschooling and voluntary separation from their service member (geobatching) to offset the impact of relocation. Eleven percent of respondents report currently homeschooling, and of those who geobatched in the last five years, 32% did so for their children's education. Flexibility to spend time as a family, stabilizing their child's academics, and poor public school options are the most cited reasons for homeschooling.

### **Availability and affordability of childcare are barriers that negatively impact service members' pursuit of employment and/or education.**

Over half of service member respondents with children report the unavailability of childcare had negatively impacted their pursuit of employment and/or education. Of those who report childcare problems moderately, significantly, or completely negatively impacted their pursuit of education and/or employment, 50% report it was difficult to find a childcare provider they could afford.

### **Military spouse respondents who are unemployed indicate their top challenge to working is service member day-to-day job demands making it difficult to balance work and home demands.**

Previous survey results found service member job demands to be one of the top three reasons for not working among those military spouse respondents who wanted to work. This year's results specifically identify service member day-to-day job demands as a top barrier to employment among unemployed military spouse respondents (44%). Top barriers differ for spouses when children are present.

### **Three-fourths of employed military spouse respondents experience some degree of underemployment; this issue persists among spouses of veterans.**

Seventy-seven percent of employed military spouse respondents and 68% of spouses of veterans report at least one circumstance of underemployment. Employers can do a better job of actively demonstrating an understanding of military life when recruiting and retaining military spouses, particularly because spouse respondents believe their local communities are not eager to hire them.

### **Potential impacts on a service member's career is the most common reason for not seeking treatment for active-duty, National Guard, and Reserve family respondents who had seriously considered attempting suicide/had attempted suicide in the past year.**

Among military, veteran, National Guard, and Reserve family respondents who had seriously considered attempting suicide or had attempted suicide in the past year and received help after the most recent incident, 40% did not find those services to be helpful and 8% could not obtain it. Of those who did not receive help after their most recent incident, 53% of military family and 39% of National Guard family respondents chose not to do so over fear that it would hurt their or their service member's career.

### **Families enrolled in the Exceptional Family Member Program (EFMP) report difficulty obtaining specialty medical care in a reasonable amount of time after a relocation.**

Forty percent of military family respondents who have an EFMP family member are unable to obtain a referral and be seen by a specialist in a reasonable amount of time after relocating. Respondents most commonly report the process taking too long and limited provider/specialist availability. Alarming, in open-ended responses, 9% report going without care or otherwise bypassing the health care system due to difficulties in obtaining referrals.

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**Military family respondents caring for a child with special needs report their community does not have all the resources their family needs.**

Among military family respondents who are caring for a child with special needs, more than a third (36%) indicate their community does not have all the resources their family needs. These families also report significantly greater social isolation than military family respondents who are not caring for a child with special needs.

**National Guard and Reserve families feel local civilian support agencies are not effective in addressing their needs.**

Many National Guard and Reserve family respondents live more than an hour from a military installation, making local resources important. However, nearly half feel their local civilian support agencies are not effective in addressing their needs. In addition to increasing resources in the community, in open-ended responses, Reserve family respondents also indicate improving Tricare/VA/health care as another way their local civilian communities could best support them.

**Military and veteran family respondents who perceive that civilians in their local communities have greater military family lifestyle competence feel a greater sense of belonging to that community.**

Forty-seven percent of military family respondents feel their local civilian community has limited military family lifestyle cultural competency (MFLCC). MFLCC includes community awareness, appreciation, understanding, support, and respect of military families and their service. Similarly, 40% of military family respondents do not feel a sense of belonging to their local civilian community.

**The majority of military families have a positive experience with their children's schools but identify improvement opportunities related to the Interstate Compact on Educational Opportunity for Military Children.**

The majority of families with school-age children report their oldest child is thriving at school, the school did an excellent job of welcoming their child, the school is receptive to their advocacy for their child, and their child has a strong sense of belonging to the school. Schools can improve upon better implementation of course placement, special program placement, and extracurricular participation elements of the Interstate Compact on Educational Opportunity for Military Children, which applies to families who are relocating.

**Veterans who have a difficult transition, especially female veterans, may experience long-term impacts on social isolation, financial stability, and navigation of community resources.**

While half (51%) of male veterans report their transition was difficult or very difficult, two-thirds (66%) of female veterans indicate this to be the case. Furthermore, female veterans report being less prepared on every aspect of transition (i.e., overall transition, employment, higher education, navigation of resources in the local community, and navigation of the health care and benefits system), and have significantly greater feelings of social isolation.

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