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SURVEY**

2020 Military Family Lifestyle Survey Comprehensive Report

Finding 1

Funding for the 2020 Military Family Lifestyle Survey is provided through the generosity of our presenting sponsor USAA and from supporting sponsors Lockheed Martin, AARP, CSX, Hunt Companies, BAE Systems, The Barry Robinson Center, Comcast, Northrop Grumman, Walmart Foundation, and The Boeing Company.

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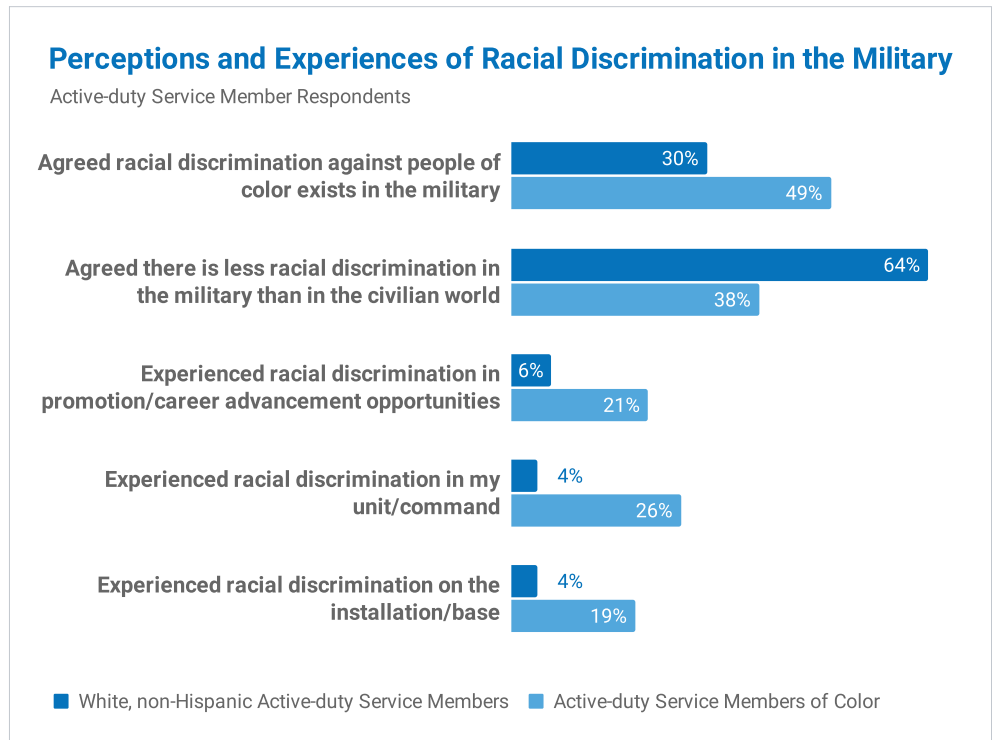
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Active-duty service members in underrepresented groups — service members of color, female service members, and LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer) service members — not only recognize discrimination in the military that their peers do not, but they also consider it in their decision to leave the service.

The events of 2020 brought into focus the experiences of members of underrepresented groups across the United States, specifically people of color, but also women and those who identify as LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer), both within the civilian population and the military. While the military has a long history of leading diversity and inclusion efforts,¹ the perception and recognition of discrimination reported by service members in minority groups indicates the work is not done. Corroborating recent DoD reports,² this year’s Military Family Lifestyle Survey found that active-duty service member

respondents in underrepresented groups — service members of color, female service members, and LGBTQ+ service members — perceive discrimination that went undetected by their peers.



SERVICE MEMBERS OF COLOR

Service member respondents of color perceive racial discrimination that their white, non-Hispanic peers do not; 64% of white, non-Hispanic active-duty service member respondents agreed there is less racial discrimination in the military than in the civilian world, compared to 38% of their peers of color

reporting the same. Similarly, fewer than one-third (30%) of white, non-Hispanic active-duty service member respondents agreed that racial discrimination exists in the military, though nearly half (49%) of active-duty service member respondents of color said the same.

26% of active-duty service member respondents of color reported experiencing racial discrimination in their unit or command; **21%** reported experiencing it in **promotion or career advancement opportunities**

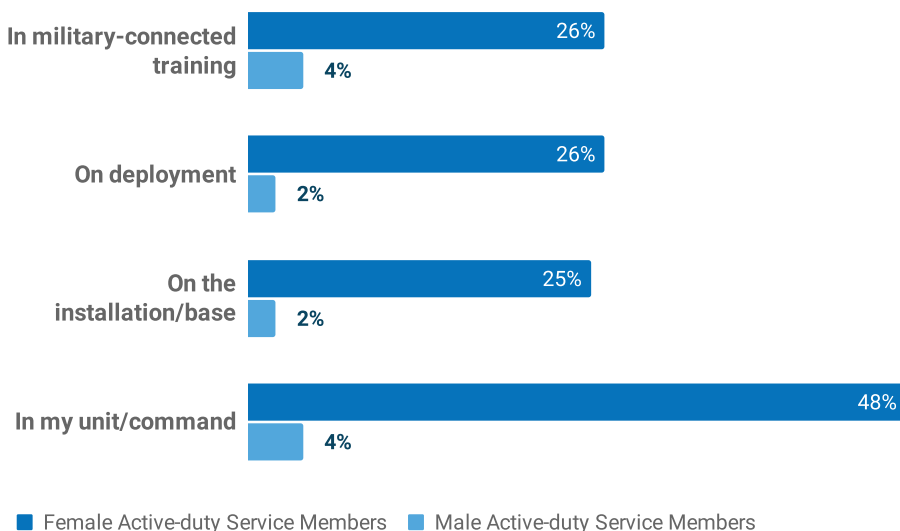
“Representation matters. It feels like the Army doesn’t care about my family. A lot of the changes from HRC are not very well explained to the force and had adverse effects on the family. Project inclusion does not seem to get to the root of racism that lingers in the military and within the civilian force. If the service member is treated unfairly then the family is also. **Leaders seem afraid to deal with race head on.**” — Black Female Army Service Member

FEMALE SERVICE MEMBERS

Female active-duty service member respondents (68%) also reported the perception of gender-based discrimination at higher frequencies than their male counterparts* (34%). This is consistent with a DoD report, which found that male service members are “less likely to recognize gender-based discrimination than female service members.”³

Experiences of Gender-Based Discrimination in the Military

Active-duty Service Member Respondents Reporting Gender-Based Discrimination



DISCRIMINATION BASED ON SEXUAL ORIENTATION

The “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy was repealed almost a decade ago, but for many LGBTQ+ service members, being open about their sexual orientation while acting in their military capacity is still uncomfortable.⁴ While only 4% of active-duty respondents in this sample identified as LGBTQ+, more than one-third (37%) of all active-duty respondents agreed that there is sexual orientation-based discrimination against LGBTQ+ people in the military. Although the sample of respondents identifying as LGBTQ+ is too low to report specific descriptive statistics, exploratory analysis suggests they experience a similar dynamic to service members of color and female service members.

EXPERIENCES OF REPORTING DISCRIMINATION

The majority (61%) of active-duty service member respondents who indicated they have experienced discrimination of any kind said the most recent incident of discrimination went unreported. Respondents who reported the incident remained unsatisfied with the result; while 35% indicated the reported incident was resolved appropriately, 65% indicated it was not. When asked in an open-ended question to describe what happened after they reported an instance of discrimination, 24% said their report was dismissed by leaders who covered up the behavior, they were told to ignore the behavior, or it was suggested that the available evidence wasn’t sufficient to justify an investigation. These responses echo findings from other recent reports,⁵ including the DoD.⁶

*The sample of gender non-conforming/transgender active-duty service members was too small (n=34) to allow comparison with male and female active-duty service member groups.

“I have a Master Chief that let it be known that he believed that women should not be in the military. He told my chief he didn’t like me and would make sure ... my career was over. **The Master Chief ended my career and it made me very suicidal.**” — Female Navy Veteran

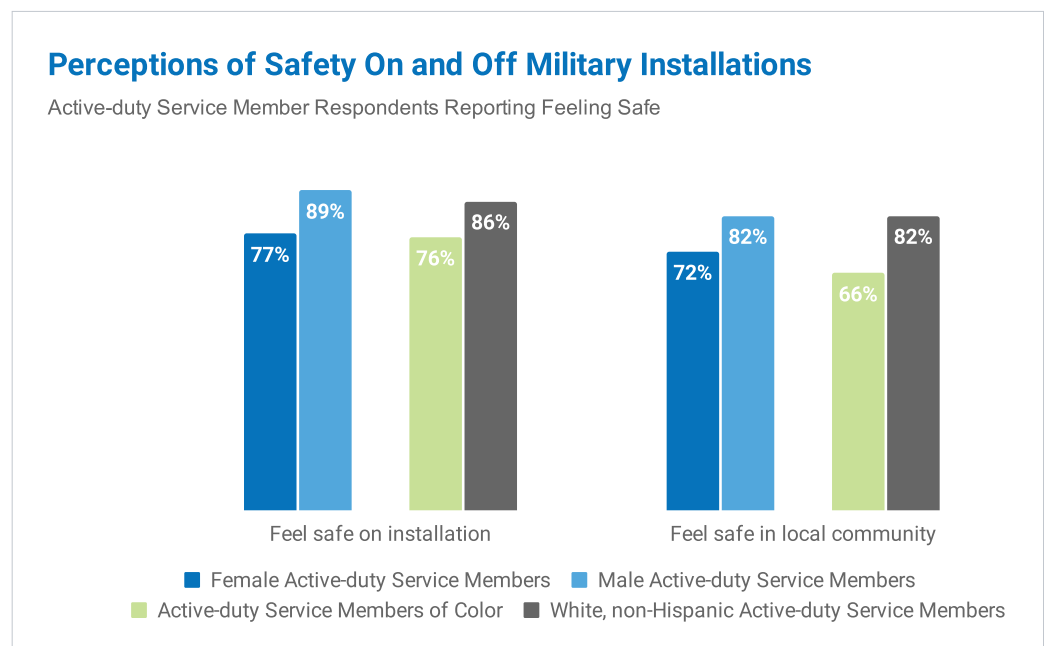
While DoD and civilian communities are actively working to prevent discrimination, underrepresented groups do not always feel these efforts are inclusive. Over two-thirds (69%) of male active-duty service member respondents agree that “the military provides activities that promote diversity and inclusion for service members and their families,” yet only 50% of female active-duty service member respondents say the same. A similar disparity exists among service member respondents of color (48% agree, compared to 64% of white, non-Hispanic peers), and service members who identify as LGBTQ+ around the provision of activities that promote diversity and inclusion. Overall, nearly two-thirds (65%) of all active-duty service member respondents reported they agree civilian organizations that serve the military and veteran families are racially and ethnically inclusive, though only 38% agree civilian organizations that serve military and veteran families are inclusive of the LGBTQ+ community.

IMPLICATIONS

Discrimination within the military has far-reaching implications to

readiness, impacting service members’ feelings of safety, a foundational human need. While the majority of active-duty service member respondents reported feeling safe both on and off the installation, fewer female service members, service members of color, and LGBTQ+ service members reported feeling safe on military installations.

Furthermore, discrimination can impact recruitment and retention, potentially leading to a departure of service members in underrepresented groups for preventable reasons, further undermining DoD efforts to increase diversity within the ranks.⁷ Responses from the survey show that only 43% of those who have experienced military-connected racial discrimination would recommend military service to a young person, compared to 63% of those who have not experienced racial discrimination. Similarly, 47% of those who have experienced gender-based discrimination would recommend military service, compared to 64% of those respondents who have not experienced gender-based discrimination. Because the military currently operates with an “up or out” promotion model,⁸ many service members may not be eligible to stay until retirement, even if they would like to. Service members from underrepresented groups, however,



report harassment and discrimination are some of the reasons they would leave active-duty service. Other than retirement or medical/administrative discharge, 12% of female active-duty service member respondents indicated gender discrimination was one of the primary reasons why they would leave the military (compared to 1% of their male peers), and 8% indicated sexual harassment/assault was a reason (compared to 1% of males). This trend persists among veteran respondents. While there are a myriad of reasons people choose to leave military service, experiencing discrimination may weigh into their decision. Excluding those who left due to retirement, 20% of female veteran respondents from communities of color and 15% of white, non-Hispanic female veteran respondents reported sexual harassment or assault as one of the reasons they left the service. One in 10 (10%) female veteran respondents reported gender-based discrimination as one of the reasons they left military service. Similarly, 8% of veteran respondents from communities of color cited racial discrimination as one of the reasons they left the service. Although Black veterans are just one racial group among the larger communities of color, nearly one in five (18%) Black veteran respondents reported racial discrimination as one of the reasons they left military service. These findings illustrate the importance of listening to voices from underrepresented communities to recognize these concerns and work collaboratively to address them head-on.

RECOMMENDATIONS



CONGRESS

- Extend Title VII Civil Rights Act protections to service members.⁹
- Create a culture conducive to unit cohesion by codifying white supremacist activity as a violation of the UCMJ.¹⁰
- Order a third-party evaluation of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) training in the military, and take the necessary steps to improve the efficacy of said training.



MILITARY

- Conduct routine exit interviews to understand service members' motivations for leaving the military; assess this data to determine reasons for leaving among underrepresented communities.*
- Solicit survey samples that are representative by race/ethnicity; routinely report on differential effects by race/ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation.
- Ensure adequate representation of under-represented groups on DoD Board on Diversity.

LIMITATIONS

The 2020 Military Family Lifestyle Survey was fielded from September to October 2020, after several months of civil unrest focusing on systemic racism following the death of George Floyd at the hands of police officers. This may have influenced how respondents viewed discrimination within the military. Furthermore, “discrimination” was intentionally left undefined, allowing respondents to interpret the questions through their own definitions and experiences. Notably, perceptions of discrimination were not limited to active-duty service member respondents in minority groups. Experiences of discrimination were reported within all groups, including those who are white, non-Hispanic, male, and non-LGBTQ+. This is consistent with research that indicates individuals more frequently recognize discrimination against their own group.¹¹

Small sample sizes of specific racial/ethnic groups prevented direct cross-group comparisons. Instead, the term “service members of color” is used to describe active-duty service member respondents who identified themselves as Hispanic/Latino/a (n=109), Black/African American (n=87), biracial/multi-racial (n=48), Asian (n=34), Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander (n=13), or American Indian/Alaska Native (n=5). It is important to note that the experiences of respondents in these ethno-racial groups may vary widely. Furthermore, sample sizes are vastly different between some groups, such as LGBTQ+ and non-LGBTQ+ active-duty service member respondents, making direct comparison difficult. Although the overall respondent sample was largely proportionate to the military as a whole in terms of race and ethnicity, female service member respondents were oversampled and represent 50% of the service member respondents, although women make up 17% of the military.¹²

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