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SURVEY**

2020 Military Family Lifestyle Survey Comprehensive Report

Finding 12

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Some degree of food insecurity was found in all enlisted ranks, beyond junior enlisted families, and is intensified in families with a spouse who needs or wants to work but is not employed.

Food security – the ready availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods¹ – is essential for good health. However, 11% of Americans were food insecure at some point during 2019,² and as many as one in five reported food insecurity six months into the COVID-19 pandemic.³ Despite the generally steady income of military service, 14% of enlisted active-duty family respondents reported food insecurity (low or very low food security) in the 12 months preceding the September-October 2020 MFLS fielding.

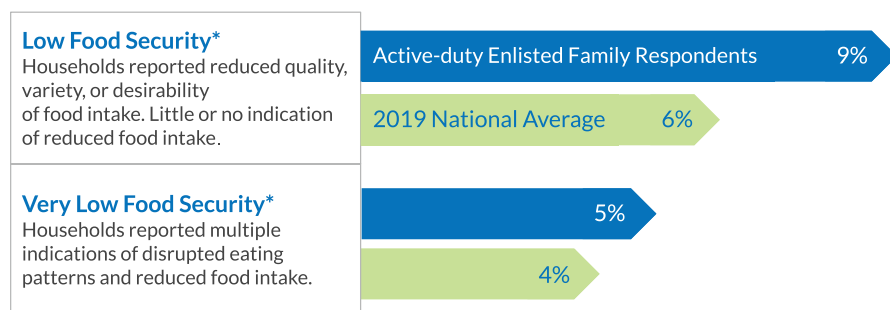
14% of enlisted active-duty family respondents reported low or very low food security in the previous year.

Food insecurity is a complex issue, and low income levels are not the sole risk factor.⁴ While a greater proportion of junior enlisted (E1-E4) family respondents reported food insecurity (29%), this issue was not limited to junior enlisted ranks. Lower education level, lack of homeownership, lack of savings/emergency funds,

income changes, poor health status, and social isolation are all factors that can influence food security.⁵ While military spouses are generally more highly educated than their civilian counterparts,^{6,7,8} high unemployment rates among military spouses,⁹ child care costs, student loans, and high out-of-pocket housing and relocation costs can contribute to military families' financial instability.¹⁰ This issue is particularly apparent among

Active-duty Enlisted Family Respondents' Food Insecurity Rates

Active-duty enlisted family respondents who reported low or very low food insecurity during the twelve months preceding survey fielding



*Adapted from USDA Economic Research Service

active-duty enlisted spouse respondents who are unemployed but need or want to work; 20% reported low or very low food security, compared to the 10% among active-duty enlisted spouses who are working (both full time and part time).

To meet their needs, military families have made use of charitable food assistance; 5% of active-duty spouses reported using a food pantry in the previous 12 months.¹¹ In line with existing data that show the use of charitable food assistance is higher for active-duty families with a spouse who is unemployed (7%) or not in the labor force (6%), compared to families with employed spouses (4%),¹² the 2020 MFLS also

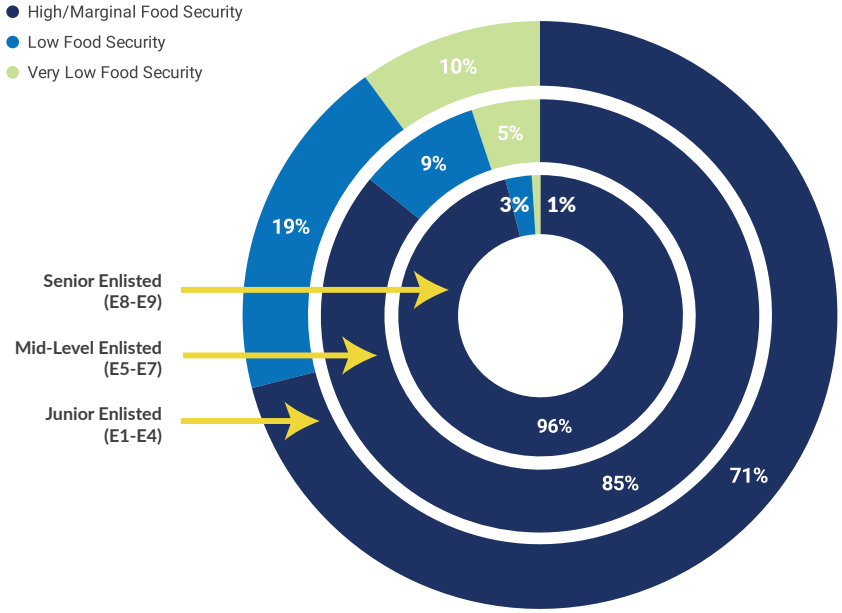
shows higher frequencies of food insecurity in active-duty spouse respondents who were not employed but need or want to work. Military families may turn to charitable food assistance due to concern about the potential impact to their careers if they seek assistance through their chain of command¹³ or are unaware of existing military resources,¹⁴ whereas food pantries may be more visible as they operate on or near every military base in the U.S.¹⁵

Those who seek assistance, however, often do not qualify for federal programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) due to their Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH) being included as part of their income calculation.¹⁶

While 14% of active-duty enlisted family respondents reported some level of food insecurity in the past year, only 2% of active-duty enlisted family respondents reported utilizing SNAP benefits within the 12

Level of Food Security By Enlisted Rank

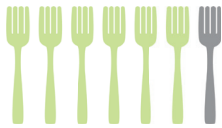
Active-duty Enlisted Family Respondents' Food Security Levels by Rank Grouping



months preceding the 2020 MFLS fielding. BAH allotment is included as income in SNAP eligibility determination, even if the service member's housing allotment is diverted to military housing and is not included in their paycheck to spend as their family needs.

Food insecurity in active-duty families has short-and long-term implications on overall mission readiness. Service members who are not able to maintain appropriate nutrition levels have an increased risk for stress, fatigue, and impaired ability to perform their duties in the short term, with more serious health complications possible in the long term.¹⁷ Financial readiness, including food security, is a critical component of mission readiness. Service members preoccupied with financial and food security concerns are less able to focus on mission readiness. Children from food-insecure households have higher risks of health and development problems,¹⁸ impacting both the currently-serving family as well as the

14%



or **1 in 7** Active-Duty Enlisted Family Respondents Reported Low or Very Low Food Security in the Past 12 Months

10% of enlisted active-duty spouse respondents who are employed are food insecure (with low or very low food security), compared to **20%** who are not working but need or want to work.

“My wife can barely work, due to people not traveling [due to COVID-19]. Because of that, our finances have been so much tighter, including food budgets. **We don’t qualify for food assistance by the state because they count the BAH into our income.**” – E4 Active-duty Service Member

children who may be potential future service candidates, as new service members are increasingly drawn from military and veteran families.¹⁹

RECOMMENDATIONS

Address child care, housing, and spouse employment as upstream prevention.



CONGRESS

- Support the inclusion of the Military Family Basic Needs Allowance provision in the FY22 NDAA to provide assistance to meet basic needs for military families living at or below 130% of the federal poverty line.
- Support legislation to exclude Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH) as counted income for the determination of eligibility and benefits for all federal nutrition assistance programs.*



MILITARY

- Create a Military Family Food Insecurity Task Force that includes stakeholders from military service and anti-hunger organizations to make recommendations for steps to address this issue.

*More information in Recommendations Chapter of Comprehensive Report

LIMITATIONS

Junior enlisted family respondents to the 2020 MFLS included active-duty service members and active-duty spouses in ranks E1-E4 (n=279), while mid-grade enlisted included ranks E5-E7 (n=1,945), and senior enlisted included E8-E9 (n=361). The sample of enlisted active-duty family respondents we are able to include in our food security calculations is 1,757 respondents. Forty-two percent of married women in the U.S. have a four-year degree or higher,²⁰ while 50% of active-duty spouses have a four-year degree or higher.²¹ Forty-six percent of this sample of enlisted active-duty service member spouses and 88% of officer active-duty service member spouses have a four-year degree or higher.

The long-term impacts of COVID-19 on military family food insecurity are unknown. While some active-duty military families may have been shielded from some pandemic financial impacts due to maintaining at least one stable income, the number of spouses who became unemployed or walked away from the workforce to manage family obligations may lead to long-term impacts on family financial security.

The survey was fielded very shortly after the termination of pandemic unemployment benefits, which may have resulted in lower levels of reported food insecurity than if the survey had been fielded even a few weeks later. The social security tax deferral was enacted at the beginning of survey fielding and may have impacted respondents’ reporting of food insecurity as well. The extension of summer food programs²² to allow for all children to receive meals, regardless of qualification requirements, has likely assisted many families with food needs that otherwise may not have been met. Additionally, respondents may have equated receipt of these meals as having received assistance from a food pantry.

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