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SURVEY**

2020 Military Family Lifestyle Survey Comprehensive Report

Finding 13

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Despite military spouse hiring initiatives, military spouses still perceive employers as reluctant to hire and promote them; they identify work schedule flexibility, hiring through corporate employers with multiple locations, and reasonable accommodations from commands for service members to maintain work-life balance as potential solutions.

Spouse employment has been identified as one of the top concerns for active-duty families since the inception of the Blue Star Families annual Military Family Lifestyle Survey (aMFLS) in 2009. Challenges to military spouse employment remain the top contributor to financial stress for military families, and COVID-19 impacts, including limited child care availability, school closures, and the shift to hybrid/online learning, have further exacerbated existing employment barriers. This year, more than half (52%) of active-duty spouse respondents and a third (31%) of active-duty service member respondents listed military spouse employment as a top issue they are concerned about.

While nearly half of active-duty military spouse respondents are employed either full-time (30%) or part-time (17%), 35% reported they are not employed but need or want employment. Despite multiple efforts over the past decade, the current unemployment rate of our military spouse respondents is nearly seven times the rate of similar civilian peers (20% vs. 3%)¹ and has not appreciably improved since 2012.^{2,3} While active-duty spouse respondents of color are employed (both full-time and part-time) at similar rates as their white, non-Hispanic peers (46% vs. 47%, respectively), a higher proportion of respondents of color who are not employed reported they need or want paid employment. Forty-three percent of spouses of color reported they are not working but need or want paid employment, compared to 32% of white, non-Hispanic spouses. Further, the unemployment rate for spouse respondents of color (27%) is much higher than that of white, non-Hispanic respondents (17%). These

trends align with the DoD research finding that military spouses of color are unemployed at significantly higher rates than their white peers.⁴

Active-duty spouse respondents who are not in the labor force most often reported they are not working because of the difficulty of balancing household and work obligations, such as

Top 5 Reasons for Not Working Active-duty Spouse Respondents Who Need or Want to Work	
I homeschool/supervise virtual education for my child(ren)	35%
Child care is too expensive	34%
My service member's daily work schedule is too unpredictable	33%
My service member's daily work schedule is too long, making it too difficult for me to balance work and home demands	30%
I am recovering from a PCS move	22%

homeschooling or supervising children's education (35%), or that their service member's day-to-day work schedule is too unpredictable (33%) or too long to balance work and home demands (30%). An additional but related barrier is the cost of child care (34%), which may quickly overwhelm a spouse's take-home

pay, particularly if they are underemployed, resulting in a situation in which active-duty spouses can't afford to work. The lack of affordable, available child care is not new nor unique to active-duty families,⁵ but it is exacerbated by families' frequent relocation, which may disrupt both the spouse's employment and existing child care arrangements. Active-duty families' relocation and separation from extended family and friends may also remove the option for active-duty families to depend on relatives for care, as 26% of civilian families with children ages 3-5 in non-parental care do.⁶ Child care costs have been consistently cited as a barrier to spouse employment since the initial Military Family Lifestyle Survey.⁷

Spouses who seek work often perceive reluctance from employers. More than half of active-duty spouse respondents (51%) agreed their military affiliation prevented them from receiving a promotion at some point in their career, compared to only 16% of veterans (excluding veterans who were also active-duty-spouses). Active-duty spouse respondents were the least likely to disclose their military affiliation in an interview compared to other respondent groups; 23% of spouse respondents were "not at all likely" to disclose their affiliation, compared to 3% of veteran respondents. In an open-ended question, half of spouse respondents who had disclosed their military affiliation in an interview reported the employer expressed concerns about their ability to stay at the position long-term.

"I was explicitly told (when I was told that I had been passed over) that 'we see a future for you here, but not until you know for sure if you will stay in the area for more than a year. **Come back when your husband leaves the service.**'" — Army Spouse

While most employed spouse respondents reported being satisfied with their work, fewer than half (42%) are satisfied with their ability to advance their vocational goals in their current role. Employed military spouses may be gaining financially from their employment, but they may be missing other benefits often associated with employment, such as a sense of purpose and well-being.⁸ Furthermore, two-thirds of employed active-duty spouse respondents (67%) reported they are underemployed in some way, indicating their current employment does not match their desires, education, or experience.

EMPLOYMENT AND PERMANENT CHANGE OF STATION (PCS)

High mobility due to frequent moves has been a well-documented barrier to employment for active-duty spouses.^{9,10} The unemployment rate rises for respondents who recently experienced a PCS, compared to those who have not (31% vs. 16%), and only 18% of active-duty spouse respondents reported they were able to retain their employment through a PCS move. Relocation is such a barrier to employment that many families choose to live apart rather than follow their service member to a new duty station. Nearly a quarter (23%) of active-duty family respondents had chosen to geo-bach (or live separately voluntarily) in the last five years, and among those who did, the most common reason given was for the civilian spouse's career (41%). Overall, spouse employment opportunities weigh heavily in families' decision-making regarding duty station preferences and considering whether to leave military service. Nearly half (42%)

of all active-duty service member respondents reported spouse career opportunities are an important factor in their preferences for a new duty station, and nearly one in five (18%) active-duty service member respondents reported civilian spouse employment concerns as one of the prime reasons for potentially choosing to leave military service.

42% of all active-duty service members reported “spouse career opportunities” are a factor in their preferences for a new duty station; 18% reported “spouse employment concerns” **as a reason they would leave military service**

IMPACTS OF COVID-19

COVID-19 severely impacted active-duty spouse respondents’ ability to work and retain employment. Since March 2020, 42% of military spouse respondents who had been working prior to the pandemic reported they had stopped working at some point during it, with layoffs and furloughs as the top reported cause. Most (68%) of those who stopped work remained unemployed as of survey fielding (September–October 2020). The primary reasons cited for loss of jobs and reduction of work hours among active-duty spouse respondents after March 2020 included fear of COVID-19 exposure for themselves or their children, layoffs or furloughs, difficulty juggling work and children’s educational supports, lack of child care options, and employers who were unwilling or unable to support flexible work options or remote work.

Furthermore, the impact of COVID-19 on employment may be disproportionately experienced by those in a lower income bracket. Our preliminary finding showed that, like their civilian peers, a higher proportion of active-duty military spouse respondents with an income of \$29,000 or less in 2019 had to reduce their work hours (51%) or stop working altogether (42%) during COVID-19, compared to those who earned more than \$29,000 in 2019. Moreover, 71% of those respondents earning less than \$29,000 who had stopped working after March 2020 continued to be unemployed during the time of our survey fielding.

These exploratory results on the pandemic’s impact on the employment status of active-duty spouse respondents are troubling as current civilian research shows that low employment wages, paired with expensive or unavailable child care, keep female spouses out of the labor force, as the costs of child care or supervising virtual schooling for children exceed their wages.¹¹

SOLUTIONS

While COVID-19 brought challenges, it has shown many employers the possibility of allowing employees to telework, work remotely, or use flexible work hours to help care for their families.¹² When asked about what best helped active-duty spouses manage child care and virtual education issues during COVID-19, the top two responses were remote work and altering their work hours. These shifts have provided a silver lining for military spouses who would like to retain employment through a PCS. Spouse respondents who were able to retain employment with the same employer through a PCS most commonly cited the ability to work remotely/telework and/or transfer within the same company to another location as key.

Commands also have an opportunity to alleviate another barrier to spouse employment, which was first identified in the 2019 MFLS: service member’s day-to-day job demands.¹³ Sixty-eight percent of employed

active-duty spouse respondents with children at home who felt capable of managing competing home and work demands over the next six months also agreed their service member’s command makes “reasonable accommodations” for the service member to manage household obligations. While these solutions will not eliminate all of the barriers to spouse employment or address underemployment, they may help move the needle.

RECOMMENDATIONS



MILITARY

- Encourage commands to support reasonable accommodations for service members who need to manage home or family obligations.
- Explore opportunities for reducing the number of PCS relocations, especially for short duration assignments (e.g., satellite locations at high density installations¹⁴ and/or remote learning options for certain Professional Military Education courses).
- Continue and expand efforts, such as the Army Marketplace, to provide families more control over when and where they relocate.
- Explore innovative ways to expand military child care capacity (e.g., increase and expand the Military Child Care in Your Neighborhood (MCCYN) fee assistance program, invest in public-private partnerships such as commercial leasing and purchasing “slots” at local providers, and increase on-installation capacity).



EMPLOYERS

- Take steps to ensure military spouses are not inadvertently screened out during the hiring process due to a lack of understanding of military life issues (e.g., educate hiring managers on how to read a military spouse resume, ensure screening algorithms do not penalize military spouses for frequent job moves, etc.).
- Expand opportunities for flexible work, allowing for shifting hours or remote work when possible.



CONGRESS

- Commission a report on employment discrimination against military spouses as a result of their military affiliation.*
- Support a fixed period of federal student loan deferment for military spouses who leave a job to relocate due to military orders.
- Support incentives for employers to make retirement savings plans accessible and portable for military spouses.

*More information in Recommendations Chapter of Comprehensive Report

LIMITATIONS

The unemployment rate is the percentage of active-duty spouses who reported they want or need paid employment and have actively sought employment in the last four weeks at the time of our survey fielding (September-October 2020). The unemployment rate of active-duty spouse respondents (20%) is based on data from the 2020 MFLS, and the comparison unemployment rate (3%) of similar civilian peers in the same time frame (September 2020) included a population of married women between 18 and 45 years of age with children and a four-year degree or higher.¹⁵ Other organizations with an employment focus, such as Hiring Our Heroes, have found unemployment rates as high as 30% among active-duty military spouses.¹⁶

For our analysis, being “underemployed” is operationalized as a respondent reporting at least one type of underemployment situation, such as working fewer hours than desired, overqualification for current position, lower pay level than a previous position, or lower pay level than work experience or education would indicate. Underemployment statistics, therefore, are subject to self-reporting bias. Nonetheless, this concept helps illustrate the mismatch between military spouses’ desire for challenging, meaningful employment that reflects their education and experiences, and many of their employment realities.

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