



**BLUE STAR  
FAMILIES**

**MILITARY  
FAMILY  
LIFESTYLE  
SURVEY**

# **2020 Military Family Lifestyle Survey Comprehensive Report**

## **Finding 2**

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## A positive command climate, including good communication, leadership, and flexibility, contributes to service members' sense of belonging to their unit, impacting readiness and retention.

The impact of command climate on overall unit cohesion and individual service member well-being has been thrust into the spotlight after highly publicized events, such as the outbreak of COVID-19 aboard the USS Theodore Roosevelt<sup>1</sup> and the release of the Report of the Fort Hood Independent Review Committee.<sup>2</sup> Command climate comprises many factors, including shared values, morale and motivation, confidence in leadership, job satisfaction, and unit cohesion (belonging).<sup>3</sup> Despite being essential to the achievement of mission success,<sup>4</sup> fewer than half (46%) of active-duty service member respondents agreed they felt a sense of belonging to their unit/command. In contrast, 92% of civilian adults felt like they belong within their current workplace.<sup>5</sup> A sense of belonging is not only a fundamental human need,<sup>6</sup> but it is also an important factor in building resilience, lowering stress,<sup>7</sup> and reducing suicidal ideation.<sup>8</sup> In line with this research, on average, active-duty service member respondents who agreed they felt a “sense of belonging to their unit/command” reported less stress than those who did not. Consistent with literature suggesting that lacking a sense of belonging to or acceptance by the unit is a risk factor for suicide,<sup>9</sup> of those active-duty respondents who reported suicidal ideation in the past twelve months, 67% disagreed they felt a sense of belonging to their unit/command, although the sample size was small (n=21). Comparatively, only 28% of their counterparts who did not report suicidal ideation responded similarly.

Only **46%** of active-duty service member respondents agreed that they **felt a sense of belonging** to their unit/command

Demonstrating effective communication and leadership and offering flexibility are areas where employers can bolster belonging in the workforce.<sup>10</sup> Of these three characteristics, most active-duty service member respondents (60%) agreed their unit/command offered “reasonable accommodations to manage home or family obligations,” indicating some level of flexibility. Fewer than half, however, agreed their “leadership makes good decisions” (49%) or “communicates well” (45%). However, a greater percentage agreed their command communicated well about COVID-19-related issues (53%), indicating there may be lessons learned during that time, which can be incorporated into day-to-day and deployment communications.

“...The communication needs to be put out in a timely manner... There needs to be short and long range calendars that need to be adhered to. **Everything seems reactive and off the cuff.**” — Army Service Member

While a sense of belonging may look different for each individual,<sup>11</sup> there were similarities noted amongst active-duty service member respondents.

## Sense of Belonging to the Unit/Command

Similarities Between Active-duty Service Member Respondents on Unit Communications and Reasonable Accommodations

Active-duty Service Member Respondents Who **Reported** a “Sense of Belonging” to Their Unit/Command



**75% agreed** that their unit/command communicates well



**88% agreed** that reasonable accommodations were made when needed

Active-duty Service Member Respondents Who **Did Not Report** a “Sense of Belonging” to Their Unit/Command



**69% disagreed** that their unit/command communicates well



**58% disagreed** that reasonable accommodations were made when needed

Notable differences by gender were seen on every aspect related to overall command climate, with male active-duty service member respondents reporting higher levels of positive command climate attributes than their female colleagues. This disparity is in line with previous research where female service members indicated that having leaders who were not supportive or understanding of family needs was a contributing factor in the creation of a negative work environment.<sup>12</sup>

Although there was no difference in the level of stress generated by the operational tempo (OPTEMPO) between active-duty service member respondents serving in conventional units and those assigned to the United States Special Operations Command (SOCOM), SOCOM-affiliated respondents reported significantly stronger indicators of a positive command climate and expressed greater levels of belonging to their unit/command. A greater percentage (65%) of those active-duty service member respondents assigned to SOCOM agreed they felt a sense of belonging to their unit/command, compared to 46% of their non-SOCOM peers. This higher level of agreement was found in each area of

## Positive Command Climate Attributes

Active-duty Service Member Responses By Gender

I feel a sense of belonging to my unit/command:



52%



41%

Overall my unit/command communicates well:



51%



41%

My unit/command leadership makes good decisions:



55%



47%

My leadership makes reasonable accommodations for needed home/family obligations:



65%



56%

command climate: “leadership makes good decisions” (62% SOCOM vs. 50% non-SOCOM), “good communication from unit/command” (60% of SOCOM vs. 45% of non-SOCOM), and “reasonable accommodations from unit/command” (79% SOCOM vs. 59% non-SOCOM). While there are many variables unaccounted for in this analysis (e.g., longer time in SOCOM units, self-selection, mission type, etc.), these vast differences suggest there are lessons conventional forces can learn from SOCOM. For example, to what extent does additional funding, such as that provided through the Preservation of the Force and Family (POTFF) program, support these outcomes?<sup>13</sup> Given the small sample size of active-duty SOCOM-assigned service members (n=77), these findings are exploratory, and additional research is warranted.

The effects of a unit’s overall command climate extend well beyond the unit, impacting individual well-being and military readiness. Poor communication, in particular, can also impact military retention. While the data collected does not allow for causal analysis, more than one in 10 (12%) of active-duty service member respondents who disagreed that their command communicated well also reported a “loss of

**14%** of veteran respondents, *excluding those who left due to retirement*, reported **“loss of faith/trust in unit leadership”** as a reason they chose to leave military service

faith/trust in unit/command leadership” as one of the top three reasons, other than retirement, they would leave military service, compared to just 4% of their peers who agreed. This was echoed by veteran respondents: 14% of veterans, excluding veterans who left military service due to retirement, also cited “loss of faith or trust in

unit/command leadership” as a reason they left military service. Because communication is a prominent factor in a positive command climate, and there is potential for leaders to be overconfident in their communication abilities,<sup>14</sup> it is imperative that military leaders at all levels understand this relationship and seek external advice regarding the efficacy of their communication patterns.

## RECOMMENDATIONS



### CONGRESS

- Instruct the Services to review training requirements and consider options for reducing activities that are not critical to maintaining essential operational readiness to allow for greater flexibility at the unit level.<sup>15</sup>
- Instruct the Services to conduct routine exit interviews and/or surveys when a service member voluntarily separates from service for reasons other than retirement, medical, or administrative discharge.



### MILITARY

- Include training on communication best practices in curricula across the professional military education system.
- Expand broadening assignments to include civilian leadership training for mid-career service members.\*

\*More information in Recommendations Chapter of Comprehensive Report

## LIMITATIONS

The term “command climate” does not have a standard definition, though it generally refers to unit morale — a shared sense of the culture of the unit;<sup>16</sup> the definition provided here includes communication, leadership, and flexibility. “Stress” was measured using the Perceived Stress Scale.<sup>17</sup>

Additional analysis with statistical tests was provided when possible and appropriate. For example, while the association between perceived stress and belonging to the unit/command was statistically significant, the directionality and causality of this association could not be tested. Gender differences on responses related to unit/command climate were also not tested for statistical significance or strength of association.

Responses from several small sample groups are reported in this finding. For example, the sample size for active-duty service members who reported suicidal ideation is 21; the SOCOM-affiliated service member sample is 77. While these sample sizes are not robust enough for additional statistical analysis, the responses themselves provide important context and a preliminary understanding of the challenges, trends, and implications of how active-duty service members perceive their unit/command.

Although the overall respondent sample was largely proportionate to the military as a whole in terms of race and ethnicity, female service member respondents are oversampled and represent 50% of the service member respondents while they make up 17% of the military.<sup>18</sup> Additionally, the active-duty sample is not reflective of the military as a whole in terms of rank; senior enlisted and officer ranks are oversampled, which may influence the aggregated findings on command climate presented in our findings report.

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