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2020 Military Family Lifestyle Survey Comprehensive Report

Finding 5

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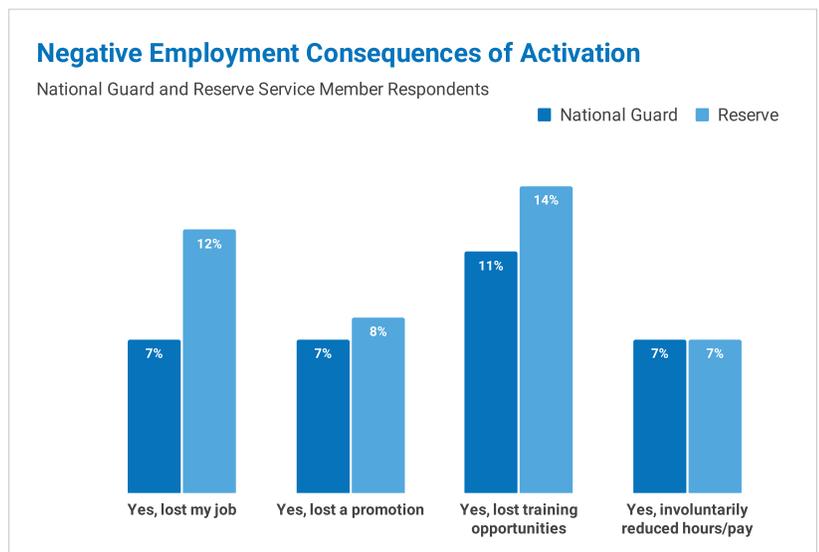
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During COVID-19, National Guard families reported higher rates of activation and less time to prepare than their active-duty and Reserve peers. Despite protection by federal labor laws, both National Guard and Reserve service members reported negative employment consequences after an activation or mobilization.

The events of 2020 – from the global COVID-19 pandemic to the destructive wildfires in the western states to civil disturbances across the nation – resulted in the activation of National Guard service members at historic levels.^{1,2} As of September-October 2020, when the 2020 MFLS was fielded, over half of National Guard family respondents (55%) reported they or their service member were deployed or activated since March 2020, compared to about a quarter of their active-duty family (24%) and Reserve family respondent peers (27%). National Guard service members are called upon to respond to national disasters and other crises; however, they often do so on shorter notice than their counterparts in other components.³ In line with this research, a greater percentage (40%) of National Guard family respondents reported they received less than a month’s notice for their most recent activation, compared to 27% of Reserve family respondents. Further, a third (30%) of activated National Guard family respondents reported their activation was extended. Activation is often stressful for a family under normal conditions; however, extended activations during COVID-19, coupled with virus exposure concerns, school and child care closures, civil unrest, and other events of 2020, may have intensified the stress of mobilizations in 2020. In fact, the average stress levels for National Guard service members who were activated during COVID-19 were higher than those who were not.

The overwhelming majority of National Guard (85%) and Reserve (89%) service member respondents reported they are employed either full- or part-time. Although the Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act (USERRA)⁴ protects uniformed service members from retaliation or discrimination in their employment and their right to re-employment after their service, many of these respondents reported negative employment impacts. While most (68% of National Guard and 58% of Reserve service member respondents) reported no negative employment consequences of activation, nearly a quarter (23%) of National Guard and a third (34%) of Reserve service



*Have you ever experienced negative employment consequences after returning from activation/mobilization?

“I got laid off from my job because I had three consecutive deployments with about 4-6 months interval between them and had exhausted my five year military leave allowance.” — Army Reserve Service Member

member respondents reported they had faced some sort of negative consequences with their civilian employer after returning from an activation. Examples of negative consequences included the loss of a job, promotion, or training opportunities, as well as involuntarily reduced hours and/or pay. Perhaps consequently, one in five (21%) National Guard and one in four (27%) Reserve service member respondents reported their military affiliation has prevented them from receiving a promotion in their civilian job.

Increased activations, deployment and training extensions, and potential consequences to civilian employment as a result of activations has the potential to impact recruitment and retention. Like their active-duty counterparts, among the top five reasons for leaving military service as cited by National Guard family respondents were “concerns about the impact of military service on family” (26%), “insufficient time with family” (22%), and “too many deployments/operational tempo too high” (22%). While most National Guard and Reserve family respondents reported they would recommend service to a young person, the percentage who would recommend service has decreased for both groups since 2019 (71% to 63% among National Guard family respondents, and 75% to 71% among Reserve family respondents). These responses could indicate a future challenge to recruitment and retention for National Guard and Reserves.

RECOMMENDATIONS



EMPLOYERS

- Learn about employer rights and responsibilities under the Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act (USERRA).
- Signal support of National Guard and Reserve service member employees by signing the “Statement of Support”⁵ hosted by the DoD’s Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve (ESGR) program.



CONGRESS

- Commission a report on the civilian employment ramifications of activation for National Guard and Reserve members. The report should include an assessment of the extent to which arbitration clauses in employee contracts undercut USERRA protections.*



MILITARY

- Provide continuous information to National Guard and Reserve members regarding their employment-related rights, and how to seek redress if they feel those rights have been violated.

LIMITATIONS

Grouped family respondents (spouses plus service members) are not evenly split for either the National Guard family or the Reserve family group; spouses comprise over half of the National Guard family respondent group, and service members make up over half of the Reserve family respondent group. Changes in the likelihood to recommend military service to a young person from 2019 to 2020 were not tested for statistical significance, and may be influenced by differences in the samples from year to year.

*More information in Recommendations Chapter of Comprehensive Report

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3. Ross, A. M., DeVoe, E. R., Steketee, G., Spencer, R. & Richter, M. (2020). "This is not your Life...and it becomes your Life": A Qualitative Exploration of Deployment-related Stress and Support needs in National Guard and Reserve spouses who are Mothers of Young Children. *Family Process*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/famp.12622>
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5. Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve Program. (n.d.). Statement of Support Program. <https://esgr.mil/Employers/Statement-of-Support>