

Finding 11

Postsecondary Education and Officer Accessions

Postsecondary education participation is more common among active-duty and Veteran family respondents of color than civilian counterparts, but it could be a barrier to diversifying the officer corps.

For over a century, service members and Veterans have had the opportunity to pursue postsecondary education as a benefit of their military service through programs like the Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC), Tuition Assistance, and/or the GI Bill.¹ Access to these benefits and military service generally increases the likelihood of service members and Veterans pursuing higher education, and respondents* are no different.² Despite increased participation in postsecondary education compared to civilian counterparts, racial/ethnic diversity is still sparse in the officer corps (see Finding 2), as a postsecondary degree is generally required to be commissioned.³

Postsecondary education is a top reason for joining military service among service members and Veterans of color.

While service members and Veterans of color report a myriad of reasons for joining the military, research from the Institute for Veterans and Military Families found two out of three Black, Hispanic/Latino/a/x, and Asian respondents report “educational benefits” as a motivator.⁴ Similarly, “educational benefits” was the most commonly cited reason for joining service among Black and Hispanic/Latino/a/x service member respondents to the 2018 Military Family Lifestyle Survey and a top-three reason among Asian service member respondents.⁵



*Unless otherwise noted, respondents indicated having at least one racial/ethnic identity other than white. The appearance of U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) visual information does not imply or constitute DoD endorsement.

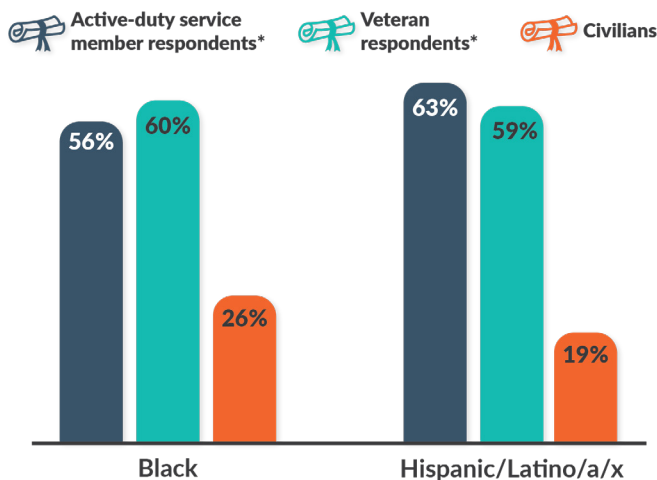
With access to education benefits, more than twice as many Black and Hispanic/Latino/a/x active-duty service members and Veteran respondents earn four-year degrees than their civilian counterparts.

Consistent with the literature,⁶ bachelor's and graduate degree attainment for Black and Hispanic/Latino/a/x active-duty service member and Veteran respondents* is notably higher than civilian counterparts (Figure 1). About six in 10 Black and Hispanic/Latino/a/x active-duty service member and Veteran respondents* (56-63%)⁷ hold a bachelor's degree or higher, compared to 26% of Black civilian counterparts and 19% of Hispanic civilian counterparts (as reported by the U.S. Census Bureau⁸). A small sample size limited the comparison of bachelor's or higher degree attainment for Asian service member and Veteran respondents* independently; however, the proportion of aggregated active-duty and Veteran *family* respondents (64%)⁹ reporting at least a bachelor's degree is slightly higher than their civilian counterparts¹⁰ (58%).

Figure 1: More than twice as many Black and Hispanic respondents who have served in the military attain a bachelor's or higher degree, compared to civilian counterparts

% of respondents*

Source (Civilian Data): U.S. Census Bureau, 2020



*Unless otherwise noted, respondents indicated having at least one racial/ethnic identity other than white.

Among military-affiliated subgroups, bachelor’s degree attainment is highest for active-duty spouse respondents.*

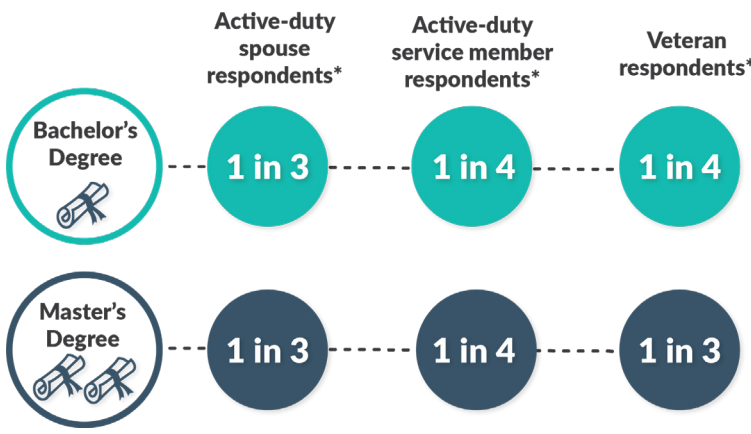
One in three active-duty spouse respondents* report holding bachelor’s degrees, compared to one in four active-duty service member and Veteran respondents.*¹¹ This is consistent with previous research,¹² and a variety of variables may contribute to this phenomenon, including, but not limited to: access to military spouse-specific upskilling and educational benefits¹³ and the gender gap¹⁴ in civilian higher education attainment (the majority of active-duty spouse respondents* identify as female¹⁵). Furthermore, as discussed in Finding 7, 33% of active-duty spouse respondents* perceive their “ability to pursue educational opportunities” to be better than that of their non-white family and friends not connected to the military. Consistent with previous Blue Star Families research that found many military families choose to live apart (“geo-bach”) so the civilian spouse could maintain or pursue a career,¹⁶ active-duty spouse respondents* to this survey further illustrate the variety of military life decisions they make in order to continue advancing in their postsecondary educational pursuits and career goals (e.g., determining how to rank installation preferences, whether to live apart from their service member, where to live upon arrival to a new installation, etc.).



I resided in a different location from my spouse due to schooling. I was at the cusp of completing my undergraduate degree and I wasn’t transferring before graduation.

- Hispanic/Latino/a/x Military Spouse

Figure 2: Respondents’* Bachelor’s and Master’s Degree Attainment by Military Affiliation¹⁷
 % of respondents*



Note: The response rate on this question was too low to report for spouses of Veterans/retirees.

*Unless otherwise noted, respondents indicated having at least one racial/ethnic identity other than white.

Access to dependent education benefits may facilitate degree attainment for Veteran family respondents,* though future research is needed.

75%¹⁸

of Veteran family respondents* with a parent, stepparent, or grandparent who served earned a postsecondary degree



vs.

64%¹⁹

of those who do not have a parent or grandparent history of service

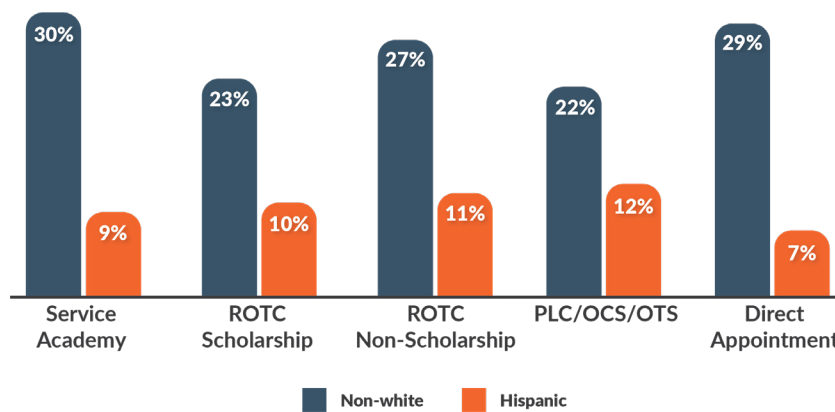
Fewer ROTC scholarship officer accessions are service members of color, compared to most other commissioning options.

Racial/ethnic diversity in the officer corps is low, compared to the enlisted corps, and it becomes even less diverse as rank increases (see Finding 2).²⁰ The bachelor's degree requirement for commissioning may be one barrier to officer corps' racial/ethnic diversity given that fewer young people of color hold bachelor's degrees than their white non-Hispanic peers.²¹ ROTC scholarships can expand access for racially/ethnically diverse prospective officer recruits by offering a funded pathway to bachelor's degree attainment and an officer career. However, in 2019, only 23% of officers commissioning through ROTC scholarships were non-white, and 10% were Hispanic.²² Future research should explore this in more depth: for example, are a disproportionate number of ROTC scholarships being awarded to white, non-Hispanic prospective officers? And/or are ROTC cadets/midshipmen of color not completing their ROTC scholarship program?

Figure 3: DoD Officer Accessions by Commissioning Source (2019)

% of total DoD officer accessions by commissioning source (2019)

Source: 2019 Population Representation in the Military Services report²³



*Unless otherwise noted, respondents indicated having at least one racial/ethnic identity other than white.

Finding 11 Endnotes

- ¹ Smoale & Loane, 2008, June 25; Masland & Lyons, 2015.
- ² Wang, Elder, & Spence, 2012; National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, 2017, March; Wenger & Ward, 2022.
- ³ Department of Defense, 2020, December 18.
- ⁴ 62% of Black/African American, 61% of Hispanic, and 71% of Asian respondents reported this. (Maury, et. al., 2020; Maury, Linsner, and Harvie, 2021; Maury, et. al., 2020, September; Zoli, Maury, & Fay, 2015, November).
- ⁵ n=34 Black, n=66 Hispanic/Latino/a/x, and n=37 Asian service member respondents.
- ⁶ Wenger, J. & Ward, J. (2022). The role of education benefits in supporting veterans as they transition to civilian life: Veterans' issues in focus. RAND Corporation. <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PEA1363-4.html>.
- ⁷ n=91 Black and n=51 Hispanic/Latino/a/x service member respondents; n=125 Black and n=71 Hispanic/Latino/a/x Veteran respondents.
- ⁸ Note: This data is derived from descriptive statistics provided by the U.S. Census Bureau: Table 3. Detailed Years of School Completed by People 25 Years and Over by Sex, Age Groups, Race, and Hispanic Origin: 2019. Analysis aggregated the percent of the civilian noninstitutionalized population who obtained a Bachelor's degree, Master's degree, professional degree, or a Doctorate degree.
- ⁹ n=132.
- ¹⁰ This data is derived from descriptive statistics provided by the U.S. Census Bureau: Table 3. Detailed Years of School Completed by People 25 Years and Over by Sex, Age Groups, Race, and Hispanic Origin: 2019. Analysis aggregated the percent of the civilian noninstitutionalized population who obtained a Bachelor's degree, Master's degree, professional degree, or a Doctorate degree.
- ¹¹ n=394 active-duty spouse respondents of color, n=191 active-duty service member respondents of color, n=254 Veteran respondents of color.
- ¹² Parker, 2021; Office of People Analytics, 2018.
- ¹³ Military OneSource, 2021; U.S. Chamber of Commerce, 2021; Institute for Veterans and Military Families, 2021.
- ¹⁴ National Center for Education Statistics, 2019.
- ¹⁵ 92% of active-duty spouses of color identify as female.
- ¹⁶ Blue Star Families, 2021.
- ¹⁷ n=394 active-duty spouse respondents of color, n=191 active-duty service member respondents of color, n=254 Veteran respondents of color.
- ¹⁸ n=198.
- ¹⁹ n=159.
- ²⁰ Department of Defense, 2020, December 18.
- ²¹ United States Census Bureau, 2020, March 30.
- ²² CNA, 2019 PopRep.
- ²³ Note: Figure constructed from 2019 Pop Rep: Table B-32. Active Component Commissioned Officer Gains, FY19: by Source of Commission, Service, Gender, and Race/Ethnicity

Finding 11 References

Unless otherwise noted, images are sourced from Blue Star Families Stock Photos, DVIDSHub.net, Unsplash.com. The appearance of U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) visual information does not imply or constitute DoD endorsement.

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