

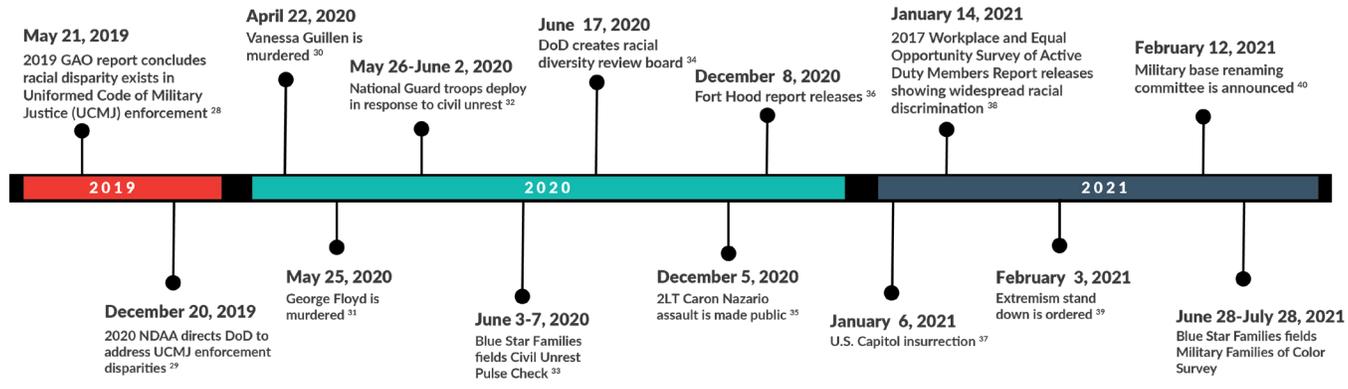
Finding 13

Current Cultural Environment

Most respondents of color view the military’s “colorblind” mentality as inaccurate and potentially corrosive and recognize racial equity work is both necessary and divisive.

Many people of color in the United States have historically endured long-lasting hardship, specifically physical violence and discrimination. However, the high-profile murder of George Floyd, increased hate crimes towards and harassment of Asian Americans during the pandemic, the immigrant crisis at the border, and hate crimes against people of Middle Eastern descent have created an especially challenging cultural environment over the past two years. While the military is often regarded as an exemplar institution for racial integration, the cultural environment of U.S. society spills over into the military, impacting military families of color.¹ The emotional toll this violence has taken, particularly on Black families, has been well-documented.² In addition to contemplating the weight of these incidents during an ongoing pandemic, military families of color have also been at the center of controversial conversations about racial/ethnic equity in the military.³ Veterans and service members of color have come forward to share experiences of hostility and racism in their military careers, advocating for greater emphasis on diversity, equity, and inclusion in the ranks.⁴ Respondents* to this survey echo many of these challenges and want their military leaders and communities to recognize and address their unique needs. Indeed, 64% of active-duty family respondents* agree that racial equity research/initiatives are “necessary to improve life for military-connected families of color.”⁵

Figure 1: Racial Equity and the Military Today (Selected Events: 2019 - 2021)



*Unless otherwise noted, respondents indicated having at least one racial/ethnic identity other than white.
 **Unless otherwise noted, “white respondents” refers to individuals who did not identify a racial/ethnic identity other than white, and who also did not identify themselves as being a member of a multiracial/ethnic family.

The majority of respondents of color do not perceive the military is blind to race/ethnicity and report negative consequences of adopting a “colorblind” mentality.

The military is recognized for being a cohesive group, in which every person is sworn to uphold the same oaths, and is trained not to view peers by the color of their skin but by the color of their uniform.⁶ This “colorblind” mentality has historically been implemented as a strategy to promote racial/ethnic equality and increase unit cohesion.⁷ However, fewer than one in three (30%) active-duty and Veteran family respondents* to this survey agree that the military is indeed “blind to race/ethnicity,” citing numerous ways that families of color experience the military differently than their white, non-Hispanic counterparts.⁸ When these experiences are rejected on the principle that the military is or should be blind to race/ethnicity, the voices of military families of color are systematically ignored.



Like their civilian peers, most active-duty family respondents* believe this “colorblind” mentality is not only invalid but actively harmful⁹: half (51%) believe that this “colorblind” mentality “erases a piece of [their] identity.”¹⁰ This sentiment was most commonly reported by Black active-duty family respondents (63%), followed by Hispanic/Latino/a/x (48%), then Asian (44%) respondents.¹¹

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Respondents of color, particularly Black respondents, report hearing racist comments from military-connected peers.

A 2019 *Military Times* poll reported that more than half of racial/ethnic minority service members said they have personally witnessed examples of white nationalism or ideological-driven racism within the ranks.¹² Consistent with these findings, over half of active-duty family respondents* (57%) to this survey report they have heard their military-connected peers make racist comments or jokes about other peers (e.g., other military spouses, other military service members, etc.).¹³ Black active-duty family respondents most commonly report hearing these comments (65%), followed by Hispanic/Latino/a/x (55%), then Asian (51%) respondents.¹⁴ This issue does not appear to be restricted to the enlisted ranks, with similar proportions of active-duty family officer (49%) and enlisted (51%) respondents* reporting they have heard their military-connected peers make racist comments or jokes.

Focus group participants frequently noted that they did not often recognize or respond to these racist comments early in their career, suggesting they either became more attuned to them with age, or greater time in service provided more opportunities to experience them. The quantitative data is consistent with these stories, and a higher proportion of mid-level non-commissioned officer (NCO) (54%) and field grade officer (52%) family respondents* report this, compared to their junior enlisted (34%) and company grade (46%) counterparts. However, fewer senior NCO family respondents* report this (34%) than mid-level, which may be an indication that those having experienced these remarks may leave service at higher rates. While more data is needed to understand this phenomenon within the officer corps, the premise is further supported by Finding 2, which explores retention of service members of color.



White spouses say things to me that are race insensitive. [...] They are unaware of their biases, but think they are not racist. Recent attacks (DEI messaging meant well) on racist behavior are not working because it makes the divide wider when people don't even understand their decades of bias enough to be open to the conversation. Spouses who think they are 'colorblind' are the most dangerous in my opinion [...].

- Hispanic/Latino/a/x Military Spouse

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Figure 2: Perceptions of the Military’s “Colorblind” Mentality⁴¹

% of active-duty family (ADF) respondents*

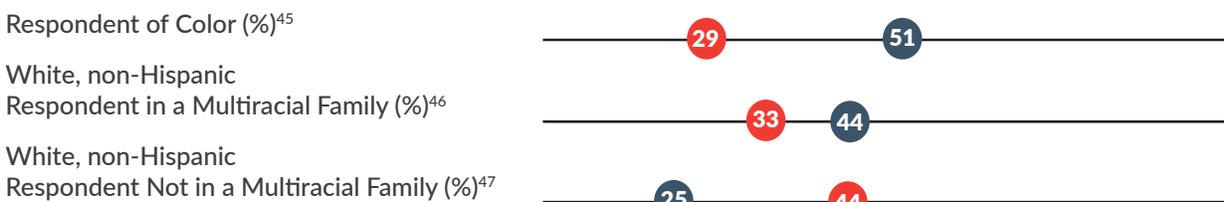
Agree

Disagree

Military is blind to race/ethnicity



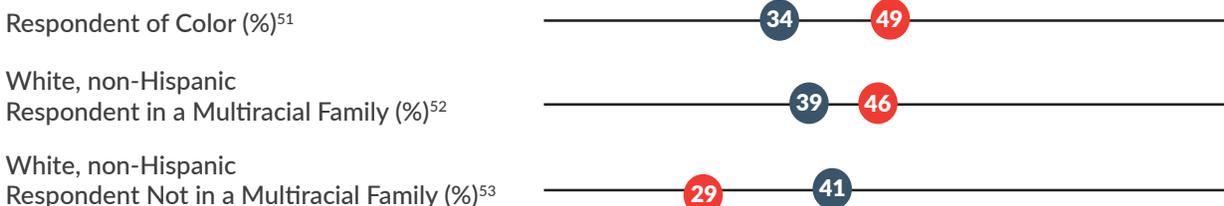
“Colorblind” mentality erases piece of identity



“Colorblind” mentality increases unit cohesion



Efforts to improve racial equity diverts resources needed for mission readiness



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White, non-Hispanic active-duty family respondents who are not members of a multiracial family see value in a “colorblind” mentality and report hesitation about engaging in racial equity initiatives.

Although this survey was marketed to families of color, 304 white, non-Hispanic active-duty family respondents who are not members of a multiracial family (“white respondents**” henceforth) also responded.¹⁵ Their responses, in comparison to their peers of color, are notable. A similar proportion of both white** active-duty family respondents and active-duty family respondents of color perceive the military to be blind to race/ethnicity (about one in three). However, while 57% of active-duty family respondents of color report hearing peers make racist comments, a much smaller proportion (28%) of white** active-duty family respondents say the same.¹⁶ White** active-duty family respondents are also more prone to perceiving benefits of the military possessing a “colorblind” mentality, such as increased unit cohesion (35%), compared to 29% of active-duty family respondents of color who report the same.¹⁷



Consequently, a notably higher proportion of white** active-duty family respondents feel equity research studies/initiatives have the potential to worsen racial/ethnic divisions/tensions (38%), compared to active-duty family respondents of color (23%).¹⁸ Similarly, 41% of white** active-duty family respondents report that current efforts to improve racial equity within the military diverts resources needed for mission readiness, compared to 34% of active-duty family respondents of color who say the same.¹⁹ These perspectives are not dissimilar from those held by white members of civilian communities who have been found to favor colorblindness when talking with children about race, even more often since the death of George Floyd.²⁰ Dissenting opinions from white service members about racial equity initiatives in the military are also well-documented on social media, in political activism, and in open-ended responses to this survey and previous unpublished Blue Star Families research.²¹



We don't see color in the military or otherwise. Our brothers and sisters are just that. We bleed green! We honor green! And those that have done the same are the same as me!

- White Veteran and Spouse of a Veteran

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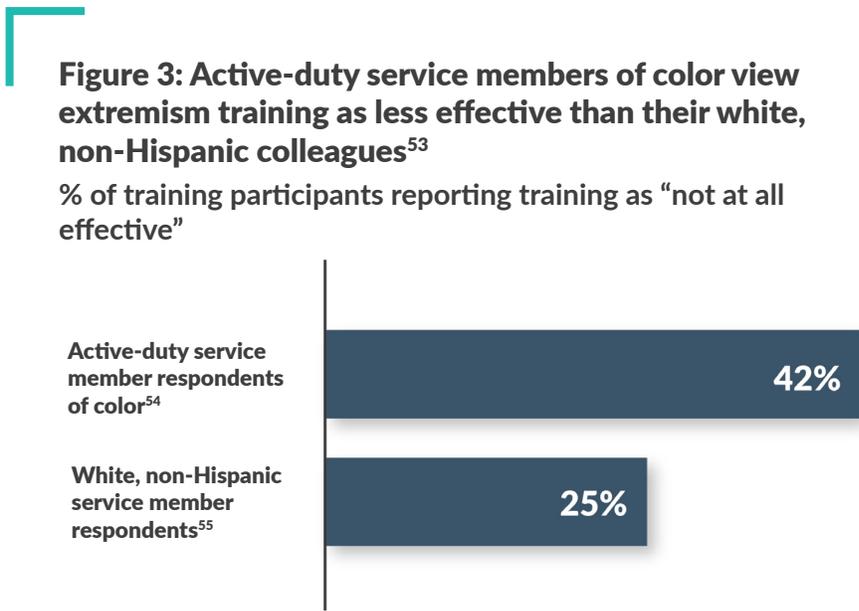
**Unless otherwise noted, “white respondents” refers to individuals who did not identify a racial/ethnic identity other than white, and who also did not identify themselves as being a member of a multiracial/ethnic family.

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Extremism training receives mixed reviews from all respondent groups; respondents report “increased participant interaction” as the top way to improve training.

In spring 2021, Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin ordered a “stand down” to address concerns about extremism in the ranks following broad civil unrest and reports of military-connected individuals’ participation in the January 6th, 2021, insurrection.²² The training reviewed the meaning of the Oath of Office, prohibited extremist activities and outlined service members’ responsibility to report if they observe peers participating in groups that “advance, encourage, or advocate illegal discrimination based on race, creed, color, sex, religion, ethnicity, or national origin, or those that advance, encourage, or advocate the use of force, violence, or criminal activity or otherwise advance efforts to deprive individuals of their civil rights” (DoDI 1325.06, Encl. 3, para 8.b.).²³

Although the training was mandatory, **12% of all active-duty service member respondents report not participating** in it.²⁴ Among those who did participate, perceptions about the training’s efficacy are mixed. Over one-third (42%) of active-duty service member respondents* feel the training was “not at all effective,” 32% feel it was “somewhat effective,” and 26% feel it was “very or extremely effective.”²⁵ Consistent with publicly-reported coverage²⁶ of the stand down, nearly half (45%) of open-ended respondents report that more participant interaction is needed to increase effectiveness.²⁷



Note: Excluding those who did not participate in extremism training

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Finding 13 Endnotes

- ¹ Burk, J. (2007)
- ² Bor, J., Venkataramani, A. S., Williams, D. R., & Tsai, A. C. (2018)
- ³ Stafford, K., Laporta, J., Morrison, A., Wieffering, H. (2021, May 27)
- ⁴ Glenn, H. (2020, July 6); Cooper, H. (2020, May 25); CBS News. (2020, August 10)
- ⁵ n=875
- ⁶ Dorman, J. (2021, June 26); Cotton, T. (2021, April 1); Maucione, S. (2020, August 31)
- ⁷ Ray, V. E. (2018); Johnson, T. (2021, June); Babbitt, L. G., Toosi, N. R., & Sommers, S. R. (2016); Bonilla-Silva, E. (2014)
- ⁸ Discussed in open-ended responses, n=1370
- ⁹ Neville, H. A., Gallardo, M. E., & Sue, D. W. (Eds.). (2016)
- ¹⁰ n=863
- ¹¹ n=387 Black, 279 Hispanic/Latino/a/x, and 155 Asian active-duty family respondents
- ¹² Our research partner, the Institute for Veterans and Military Families, conducted this poll on behalf of Military Times. Shane III, L. (2020, September 3)
- ¹³ n=862
- ¹⁴ n=388 Black, 276 Hispanic/Latino/a/x, and 153 Asian active-duty family respondents
- ¹⁵ While findings from this sample cannot be generalized to the entire population of white military members due to recruitment strategies, their perspectives illustrate some of the opposing views held by members of the racial/ethnic majority in the military cultural context. n=299 white non-Hispanic family respondents who are not members of a multi-racial family
- ¹⁶ n=299 white non-Hispanic family respondents who are not members of a multiracial family; n=862 active-duty family respondents of color
- ¹⁷ n=299 white non-Hispanic family respondents who are not members of a multiracial family; n=860 active-duty family respondents of color
- ¹⁸ n=299 white non-Hispanic family respondents who are not members of a multiracial family; n=875 active-duty family respondents of color
- ¹⁹ n=299 white non-Hispanic family respondents who are not members of a multiracial family; n=864 active-duty family respondents of color
- ²⁰ Vittrup, B. (2018); Sullivan, J. N., Eberhardt, J. L., & Roberts, S. O. (2021)
- ²¹ Losey, S. (2021, September 16); Feldscher, J. (2021, June 11).
- ²² Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin. (2021, February 5); Jackson, J. (2021, June 16).
- ²³ Office of the Secretary of Defense (2021, February)
- ²⁴ n=327
- ²⁵ n=175
- ²⁶ Myers, Meghann (2021, March 22).
- ²⁷ n=107
- ²⁸ Government Accountability Office. (2019)
- ²⁹ United States Senate Armed Services Committee. (2019, December 20)
- ³⁰ Diaz, J., Cramer, M., Morales, C. (2021, April 30).
- ³¹ History.com Editors. (2021, March 24).
- ³² Sternlight, A. (2020, June 2).
- ³³ Blue Star Families. (2020, June 3).
- ³⁴ Maucione, S. (2020, June 18).
- ³⁵ Ives, M., Cramer, M. (2021, April 10).
- ³⁶ United States Army. (2020, December 8).
- ³⁷ Tan, S., Shin, Y., Rindler, D. (2021, January 9).
- ³⁸ Stewart, P. (2021, January 14).
- ³⁹ Secretary of Defense. (2021, February 5).
- ⁴⁰ Vergun, D. (2021, February 12).
- ⁴¹ Question Text - "It is sometimes said that the military is blind to race/ethnicity (e.g., "We only see green/blue," etc.). With this in mind, do you disagree or agree with the following statements." A neutral response option was provided.
- ⁴² n=878
- ⁴³ Refers to white, non-Hispanic active-duty family respondents who are members of a multiracial/ethnic family; n=137

⁴⁴ n=299

⁴⁵ n=863

⁴⁶ Refers to white, non-Hispanic active-duty family respondents who are members of a multiracial/ethnic family; n=136

⁴⁷ n=299

⁴⁸ n=860

⁴⁹ Refers to white, non-Hispanic active-duty family respondents who are members of a multiracial/ethnic family; n=134

⁵⁰ n=299

⁵¹ n=864

⁵² Refers to white, non-Hispanic active-duty family respondents who are members of a multiracial/ethnic family, n=137

⁵³ n=299

⁵⁴ Question Text: "How effective was the 'extremism' stand down training you participated in earlier this year?"

⁵⁵ n=175

⁵⁶ n=112

Finding 13 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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