Finding 1
Military Life Decision-Making

Some active-duty family respondents make military life decisions based on their family’s racial/ethnic composition that directly impact the retention of service members of color.

“Recruit the service member, retain the family” is a common and well-founded military aphorism\(^1\); however a review of literature and publicly-available military diversity, equity, and inclusion plans\(^2\) did not reveal any specific efforts to integrate the unique experiences of military families of color into broader understandings of readiness. In line with civilian literature that finds race impacts decisions about where to reside and which jobs to pursue\(^3\), this study reveals that many active-duty family respondents* and white respondents who are members of multiracial/ethnic families* (henceforth “white multiracial/ethnic family respondents”) often evaluate their military life decisions through a racial/ethnic lens. These decisions, made throughout a family’s time in service (Figure 1) have direct implications for recruitment and retention (additional details in Finding 2).

“We try to do family activities like farmers’ markets or festivals. But we always feel unwanted. We even thought at first, ‘maybe it’s us,’ so we would continue to try to have small talk or even a ‘hi, how are you?’ in passing, and still no one responds. It makes me feel as if I’m disgusting.”

- Black Military Spouse

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*Unless otherwise noted, respondents indicated having at least one racial/ethnic identity other than white.
\(^1\) Unless otherwise noted, respondents indicate being either an active-duty service member or the spouse of an active-duty service member, being white (with no other racial/ethnic identity), being a member of a member of a multiracial/ethnic family, and report that at least one member of their family has a racial/ethnic identity other than white.

The appearance of U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) visual information does not imply or constitute DoD endorsement.
Active-duty family respondents of color, particularly Black active-duty respondents, report their race/ethnicity has impacted their experience in civilian communities and influenced their base/installation preferences.

Nearly half (46%) of active-duty family and 40% of white multiracial/ethnic family respondents** report having experienced difficulty developing a sense of belonging to their local civilian community due to their family’s race/ethnicity. Furthermore, 16% of active-duty family respondents* report feeling “uncomfortable” or “very uncomfortable” in their local civilian community. When asked about the source of their discomfort, “racism in the local community” was the most common write-in response.

These community-based challenges likely contribute to why, when asked about base/installation preferences, nearly half of active-duty (46%) and white multiracial/ethnic family respondents** (43%) report they have “considered racial/ethnic discrimination” in their ranking decisions. Concerns extend beyond racial/ethnic discrimination: More than 4 in 10 active-duty (42%) and white multiracial/ethnic family respondents** (47%) reported they consider “concerns about safety due to [their] (or [their] family member’s) racial/ethnic identity.” (See “Spotlight on Belonging and Geography” for additional details).

Figure 1: Influence of Race/Ethnicity When Ranking Base/Installation Preferences

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

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Differences exist by race, with a notably greater proportion of Black (53%) and Asian (49%) active-duty family respondents reporting “difficulty developing a sense of belonging to my local civilian community due to [their] (or [their] family’s) race/ethnicity.” A substantially higher proportion of Black active-duty family respondents, however, report incorporating this into their decision-making when submitting base/installation preferences (Figure 1).

Over half of Black active-duty respondents report having considered “racial/ethnic discrimination” (56%) and “concerns about safety regarding base/installation preferences due to my (or my family member’s) racial/ethnic identity” (53%) in their decision-making process. This was the only racial/ethnic group analyzed in which the majority of respondents reported both discrimination and safety to be considerations, aligning with unpublished 2020 MFLS data: “Issues relating to racial discrimination (e.g., avoiding areas that are known for racial discrimination)” was the most commonly-selected response for Black active-duty service member respondents when asked “which of the following factors are/were most important in submitting preferences.”

Active-duty family respondents’ perceptions of racism at a potential duty assignment are one of the top reasons for turning down military orders; these decisions can undermine service member career progression.

Fourteen of the 47 (30%) active-duty service member respondents* who answered the question report “never” being able to obtain preferred assignments. This could help explain why some active-duty (30%), Veteran (28%), and white multiracial/ethnic (29%) family respondents* report having “made the decision not to accept an assignment (PCS orders or job) knowing that it may negatively impact the service member’s career” at some point during their time in service. When asked why their family made the decision, “perception of racism in the local community” was the third most commonly reported answer (34%) among active-duty family respondents*, following “to stabilize my family” (49%), and perception of “low quality of life in the local community.”

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Four in ten active-duty service member respondents* (42%) report deciding not to accept an assignment (PCS orders or job) knowing that it may negatively impact their career opportunities. Of those, 36% indicated they had anticipated negative impacts but didn’t experience them, and 64% reported at least one negative impact. Of those that indicated a negative consequence, 49% report receiving a less attractive assignment, 36% indicate the decision hindered their promotability, 32% believe they received a poorer evaluation, and 15% say the decision ended their career. (See Finding 2 for more details on service member career progression).

“[A]fter living in some of the places we’ve lived, I know I don’t want to go back to some of them. [...] my service member] didn’t understand for a while. [We argued] about it once because he was like, ‘well, that takes some stuff off my career list, you know, and I might have to go back here if I want to keep moving forward [...]’ [H]e comes from a different world a complete white person world where he never even thought about people of color or what people go through, so I’ve had to explain to him ‘you know I was called this at the store’ or ‘I was made to feel this way’ or ‘someone said this to me when we lived in this town, and so now I say I don’t want my son growing up around these people if we can help it.’

- Hispanic/Latino/a/x Military Spouse

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1 Unless otherwise noted, respondents indicate being either an active-duty service member or the spouse of an active-duty service member, being white (with no other racial/ethnic identity), being a member of a member of a multiracial/ethnic family, and report that at least one member of their family has a racial/ethnic identity other than white.

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Racial/ethnic discrimination is a contributing factor when deciding to leave service, particularly among Black active-duty family respondents.

About one in three active-duty (33%), Veteran (34%), and white multiracial/ethnic (34%) family respondents* report having “considered racial/ethnic discrimination in family conversations regarding whether or not to remain in service.” This is supported by Army exit survey data, which found that 17% of service members “reported mistreatment in the workplace was an ‘Extremely Important’ reason to LEAVE the Army.” When asked to elaborate on what the respondent meant by “mistreatment in the workplace,” “race,” “gender,” and “color” were the top three sources of mistreatment identified.

1 in 3 active-duty, Veteran, and family respondents* have considered racial/ethnic discrimination in family conversations regarding whether or not to remain in service.

The 2020 MFLS found that 8% of Veteran respondents of color cited racial discrimination as one of the reasons they left the service, and more than twice as many Black Veteran respondents (18%) reported this to be the case. Consistent with this research and other statistics discussed in this finding, a greater proportion of Black active-duty (39%) and Veteran (41%) family respondents to this survey also report having “considered racial/ethnic discrimination in family conversations regarding whether or not to remain in service.”

"Not taking the career-enhancing assignment due to racial tensions at the location hurt my chances for promotion."

- Black Veteran

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More research is needed to understand better the influence of perceived racial/ethnic discrimination on other military life decisions, such as neighborhood selection and whether or not to geo-bach.

The perception that on-installation housing is more diverse, and therefore more attractive to racially and ethnically diverse families was a common theme among focus group participants, however, additional research is needed to determine whether or not military families of color prefer military housing to a greater extent than their white, non-Hispanic peers. An exploratory analysis of available data suggests that a proportionally greater number of Hispanic/Latino/a/x active-duty families and a proportionally lower number of white, non-Hispanic families may live in military housing compared to other racial/ethnic groups analyzed, but this survey did not inquire about neighborhood choice preferences.22

Similarly, comparative data suggests that military families of color, generally, do not appear to geo-bach at notably higher levels than their white, non-Hispanic peers.23 In this survey, 38% of active-duty family respondents* report they have geo-bached, but when asked in an open-ended question their reasons for doing so, issues related to disliking the community’s environment was not among the most commonly-cited responses. Notably, a greater percentage of American Indian or Alaska Native respondents reported geo-baching (52%) compared to other racial/ethnic groups analyzed (35% - 37%).24 Further research is warranted to understand if this holds true in other datasets and if so, to explore the reasons underlying these decisions.

People of color enlist in the U.S. military at high rates, but there is reason to believe that these trends may not continue long-term.25

Research has found that a “person's familiarity with the military,” and not race or socioeconomic background, is the best predictor of joining the armed forces.26 However, experiencing racial/ethnic discrimination while in uniform (prevalence discussed in Finding 2) may substantially decrease one's likelihood of recommending service to a young person.27 Furthermore, the Fall 2020 Propensity Update suggests broader U.S. cultural flashpoints may also impede Black service member recruitment: Following the murder of George Floyd and conversations regarding the use of troops to quell civil unrest, Black youth propensity to serve reached its lowest since 9/11 (8%), dropping to below white youth propensity to serve for the first time since November 2004, and down from 20% just two years prior.28 Similarly, in summer 2020, Hispanic propensity to serve reached its lowest rate (11%) since June 2009, following months of sustained discourse regarding the disappearance and murder of Vanessa Guillen (to include prominent Hispanic organizations cautioning Latinas against joining the military).29 While it has since rebounded, the long-term effects of her murder on Hispanic/Latino/a/x enlistments remain to be seen. Monitoring year-over-year propensity to serve and accessions data through a racial/ethnic representation lens is therefore critical to ensuring the long-term viability of a racially and ethnically diverse force.

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SPOTLIGHT: REGION MATTERS

1 in 5 Active-duty family respondents* report being “not at all comfortable” being stationed in the Midwest, Alaska, or South.

We moved to [town in the south] because the area is beautiful and the commute is less than 15 minutes to the base. However, while living here [...] we have experienced racism first hand and deal with prejudice often. We are not welcomed here and the local community is sure to let us know.”

- Black Military Spouse

*Unless otherwise noted, respondents indicated having at least one racial/ethnic identity other than white.
Residential data among Veterans of color mirror that of the broader U.S. population, with Black Veterans residing heavily in the south and Hispanic/Latino Veterans residing heavily in the west.41

Data Source: US Census, ACS 2018, NHGIS; Created by the EarthTime team, CREATE Lab, Carnegie Mellon University https://earthtime.org/

**UNCOMFORTABLE**

More than 1 in 10 active-duty family respondents* report feeling uncomfortable in both their military and civilian communities

19% in my military/civilian community

16% in local civilian community

Top reasons for discomfort:

1. Racial discrimination
2. Lack of diversity
3. Don’t fit in
4. Lack of connection
5. Gender discrimination

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Finding 1 Endnotes

1 Association of the U.S. Army (2019); Suits (2018); Vergun (2019); Zielinski & Beyer (2019)
2 Department of Defense (2020); Secretary of the Air Force (2019); United States Army (2020); United States Coast Guard (2020); United States Navy (2021)
3 Krysan & Bader (2009); Badger (2015); Krysan, Couper, Farley et al. (2009); Pager & Pedulla (2015)
4 n=770 active-duty family respondents of color; n=123 white multiracial/ethnic family respondents
5 n=825
6 n=771 active-duty family respondents of color; n=124 white multiracial/ethnic family respondents
7 n=772 active-duty family respondents of color; n=124 white multiracial/ethnic family respondents
8 Black (53%; n=356), Asian (49%; n=142), Hispanic/Latino/a/x (40%; n=247)
9 Racial/ethnic groups with at least 75 respondents to these questions were analyzed. When asked whether the respondent “considered discrimination regarding base/installation preferences,” the majority of both Black (n=357; 56%) and American Indian/Alaska Native (n=83; 51%) respondents reported this to be the case. Forty-one percent of Asian respondents (n=143) and 38% of Hispanic/Latino/a/x respondents (n=246) indicated the same. When asked whether the respondent “considered concerns about safety regarding base/installation preferences due to my (or my family member’s) racial/ethnic identity,” the majority of Black respondents reported this to be the case (n=356; 53%). Forty-one percent of Asian respondents (n=143), 31% of Hispanic/Latino/a/x respondents (n=247), and 38% of American Indian/Alaska Native respondents (n=84) indicated the same.
10 When providing race/ethnicity in the 2020 MFLS, the question was posed as a single-select question instead of a multi-select question.
11 This answer choice was not the most commonly-selected for all other racial/ethnic groups, however, a greater proportion of these respondents selected it than their white, non-Hispanic counterparts.
12 Sixteen active-duty service member respondents* reported this was "sometimes" the case and 14 reported it to be "often" the case; 3 did not know. Inclusion of this statistic is to provide context for the perceived level of agency in their assignment and is not intended to be an indictment of personnel decisions made for the purposes of military readiness.
13 n=621 active-duty, 383 Veteran and 104 white multiracial/ethnic family respondents*; No notable variation among the racial/ethnic groups with at least 100 active-duty family respondents was identified, with 26-29% of Asian, Black, and Hispanic respondents reporting having made the decision “not to accept an assignment (PCS orders or job) knowing that it may negatively impact the service member’s career.” However, although samples were smaller than 100 respondents, close to half of respondents from American Indian (49%) and Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (48%) groups reported this to be the case, suggesting an area for future research.
14 When asked which option best describes where the respondent lived, 39% of 2019 and 34% of 2018 MFLS active-duty family respondents of color (aggregated data) reported living in military housing on or off of the installation compared to 36% of white, non-Hispanic respondents in 2019 and 30% in 2018. Of all racial/ethnic groups analyzed, the greatest proportion of Hispanic/Latino/a/x respondents (43% in 2019 and 36% in 2018) reported living on the installation. These findings are consistent with the 2017 Survey of Active Duty Spouses (pg. 24), which found 32% of white and 37% of non-white, non-Hispanic, and 39% of Hispanic military spouses living in military housing either on or off the installation. (pg. 24)
15 n=209
16 n=83
17 n=775 active-duty, 473 Veteran and 124 white multiracial/ethnic family respondents*;
18 Department of the Army (2021)
19 Department of the Army (2021)
20 Blue Star Families (2020)
21 n=359 Black active-duty family and 261 Black Veteran family respondents; All racial/ethnic groups with at least 100 respondents were analyzed. Among active-duty family respondents, 25% Hispanic/Latino/a/x (n=246) and 28% of Asian (n=145) report the same.
22 When asked which option best describes where the respondent lived, 39% of 2019 and 34% of 2018 MFLS active-duty family respondents of color (aggregated data) reported living in military housing on or off of the installation compared to 36% of white, non-Hispanic respondents in 2019 and 30% in 2018. Of all racial/ethnic groups analyzed, the greatest proportion of Hispanic/Latino/a/x respondents (43% in 2019 and 36% in 2018) reported living on the installation. These findings are consistent with the 2017 Survey of Active Duty Spouses (pg. 24), which found 32% of white and 37% of non-white, non-Hispanic, and 39% of Hispanic military spouses living in military housing either on or off the installation. (pg. 24)
23 When asked if their family had geo-bached in the previous five years, grouped responses from the 2018 and 2019 MFLS show no demonstrable difference by race/ethnicity. In 2019 MFLS data only, a slightly greater proportion of Black ADF respondents than white, non-Hispanic respondents, however the same does not hold true in 2018 MFLS data. Analysis only included Asian, Black, Hispanic/Latino, and white respondents.
24 Percent of active-duty family respondents answering “yes” to having geo-bached while married and during their
family's time in service: 52% American Indian or Alaska Native (n=85), 36% Asian (n=139), 35% Black (n=341), 37% Hispanic/Latino/a/x (n=232).

United States Census 2019 population estimates: 76% White alone, 13% Black, 1.3% American Indian and Alaska Native alone, 6% Asian alone, >1% Native American or other Pacific Islander alone, 19% Hispanic (United States Census, 2019). Active-duty demographics: 69% White, 17% Black or African American, 1.1% American Indian or Alaska Native, 5% Asian, 1.2% Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, 17% Hispanic; Military OneSource (n.d.)

Goldberg et al. (2018); Phillips & Arango (2020)

Forty-three percent of 2020 MFLS respondents who have experienced military-connected racial discrimination would recommend military service to a young person compared to 63% of those who have not experienced racial discrimination; Blue Star Families (2020)

Office of People Analytics (2021)

Active-duty family respondents* (n=771), Veteran family respondents* (n=469), and active-duty white, non-Hispanic multiracial/ethnic family respondents* (n=124)

Active-duty family respondents* (n=772), Veteran family respondents* (n=469), and active-duty white, non-Hispanic multiracial/ethnic family respondents (n=124)*

33% (n=775) active-duty family, 34% (n=473) Veteran family and 31% (n=124) white multiracial/ethnic family respondents*

n=770 active-duty family respondents*

Question text: “Considering your and/or your family’s racial/ethnic identity only, how comfortable would you feel being stationed in the following areas.” Little variation exists among racial/ethnic groups analyzed, however, Black respondents are proportionally less comfortable in Alaska and Asian respondents are proportionally less comfortable in the South. Respondents who reported “I don’t know” were excluded from analysis.

n=607

A proportionally greater number of Black respondents report not feeling at all comfortable being stationed in Alaska (25% w/IDK or 29% w/o IDK) compared to other racial/ethnic groups analyzed (< 17%)

n=679; A proportionally greater number of Asian respondents report not feeling at all comfortable being stationed in the south (25% w/IDK or 27% w/o IDK) compared to other racial/ethnic groups analyzed (20%)

n=647

n=658

n=669

CREATE Lab (n.d.)

n=825 (local civilian community); n=820 (military/civilian community)

Finding 1 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.


