Finding 3
Transitioning and Veterans

Black and Hispanic/Latino/a/x active-duty families transitioning out of service face greater challenges than their white, non-Hispanic peers and report accessing available benefits, resources, and services at greater rates.

For many Veterans and their families, military transition experiences can be marked by stress and a substantial amount of change in a short period of time; exploration of previously unpublished MFLS data (2016-2018) reveals that challenges also vary by race/ethnicity (Figure 1) and gender. At least half of Hispanic or Latino/a (56%) and Black (50%), Veteran respondents characterized their overall transition as “difficult” or “very difficult” (compared to 43% of white/non-Hispanic Veteran respondents). Although a smaller proportion of Veteran respondents identifying as Asian indicated this to be the case (37%), this group did report a greater level of difficulty in some areas of transition. Because of documented long-term impacts of transition experiences, it is important to understand how these experiences and challenges vary across racial and ethnic groups.

Figure 1: Most Black and Hispanic or Latino/a/x Veterans characterize their overall transition as “difficult” or “very difficult”

% of Veteran respondents to annual Military Family Lifestyle Survey (2016-2018)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic or Latino/a/x</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black/African American</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White/non-Hispanic</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Demographic references are drawn from original source

*Unless otherwise noted, respondents indicated having at least one racial/ethnic identity other than white.
Greater challenges with employment and finances during transition may contribute to why employment and career-related support are a salient need for respondents of color who are either Veterans or spouses of Veterans.

Despite substantial improvements to the transition process and expansion of services and resources in recent years, accessing resources during the early transition period continues to be a barrier for Veteran respondents. Of those Veteran respondents who reported needing employment and career development resources since January 2020, 43% did not get them; among those with an unmet need lack of knowledge (27%) and stigma (16%) were cited as the top reasons for not using employment and career development services.

Similarly, spouses of Veterans must also navigate their own changing employment needs during transition. As discussed in Finding 7, female active-duty spouses of color (especially Hispanic/Latino/a/x and Black spouses) experience far worse employment outcomes, including higher unemployment rates and lower median incomes; therefore, military spouses of color transitioning out of active-duty service have more salient employment and career development support needs. This is supported by responses to this survey: When asked about service or resource utilization, “employment and career development” was the top service needed and not received among respondents who are spouses of Veterans (25%). Like their Veteran counterparts, “not knowing how to access these services” was the top reason for not doing so, with nearly half of Veteran spouse respondents reporting this is the case (48%). These findings underscore the importance of ensuring that Veterans and their spouses are aware of available resources and understand their eligibility for various benefits and programs.

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Figure 2: Aspects of Transition Difficulty by Race/Ethnicity

% of Veteran respondents* to annual Military Family Lifestyle Survey (2016-2018) characterizing each aspect of their transition as “difficult” or “very difficult”

FINANCIAL DIFFICULTY

- 61% Hispanic or Latino/a/x
- 55% Black/African American
- 48% White/non-Hispanic
- 33% Asian

EMPLOYMENT DIFFICULTY

- 63% Hispanic or Latino/a/x
- 59% Black/African American
- 49% White/non-Hispanic
- 54% Asian

HEALTHCARE DIFFICULTY

- 46% Hispanic or Latino/a/x
- 37% Black/African American
- 49% White/non-Hispanic
- 25% Asian

Note: Demographic references are drawn from original source

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Post-military career trajectories, transition experiences, and decisions regarding where to reside all influence Veteran families’ post-service experiences. More research is needed to fully understand the role of race/ethnicity in these experiences.

Many Veteran respondents to this survey identify barriers and challenges to resource utilization and employment (see Findings 8 and 5), and Veterans of color utilize some benefits, services, and resources at higher rates than their white, non-Hispanic counterparts. Findings from The Veterans Metrics Initiative (TVMI)\(^9\) reveal that:

- Non-Hispanic Black and Asian, Native Hawaiian, and other Pacific Islander Veterans are more likely to use Veterans Affairs benefits compared to white, non-Hispanic Veterans.\(^10\)
- Hispanic and Asian, Native Hawaiian, and other Pacific Islander Veterans are more likely to utilize counseling services compared to white, non-Hispanic Veterans.\(^11\)
- Veterans of color are more likely to utilize employment programs compared to white, non-Hispanic Veterans.\(^12\)

Recently-transitioned Hispanic and non-Hispanic multiracial Veterans were twice as likely to utilize legal aid programs compared to white, non-Hispanic Veterans.\(^13\) Furthermore, resource utilization among minority Veterans steadily increased from 35% to 44% from 2005-2014, with minority Veterans enrolling in and/or utilizing a variety of services at higher rates than their non-minority counterparts, including both health care and educational benefits.\(^14\)

> With the VA we haven’t had any issues at all. [We have] the main hospital and then we have a lot of satellites, you know throughout, and I even have one like five minutes from the house, it’s amazing.

-Hispanic/Latino/a/x Veteran

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Deciding where to relocate after service emerged as an important consideration for Veteran focus group participants, consistent with survey results among active-duty family respondents. As highlighted in Finding 1, the residential demographics of Veterans of color (who have control over where they live) mirror those of the broader U.S. population: the majority of Black Veterans live predominantly in the South and along the Eastern Seaboard, while most Hispanic/Latino/a and Asian Veterans reside throughout the West. Nevertheless, one in five Veteran family respondents* (19%) report feeling uncomfortable in their local civilian community.

Focus group participants provided additional insight into the rationale behind these decisions. As one participant shared, “diversity” in their new neighborhood “was one of the main reasons” they chose to move where they did. Another Veteran participant added that they chose to relocate to an area where they believed they would have better VA care. This participant went on to explain that they believe the timely VA care they receive is partly owed to the fact that they live in a predominantly white community. Available evidence to support this individual’s belief (that VA facilities prioritize care or administer financial resources based on a community’s racial composition) is mixed, however racial health disparities do exist among Veterans.

Further research is needed to fully understand intersectional differences resulting from gender, rank, race/ethnicity, and/or geography, and how they shape the diverse needs of transitioning Veterans.

Most of these demographic variables have been studied in isolation and raise as many questions as they do answers regarding resource access, utilization, and quality available to Veterans with multiple historically-disadvantaged demographic identities. Future studies should explore the relationships between these intersectional identities in tandem with desired direct (e.g., good health) and indirect outcomes (knowledge and utilization of other available resources).

“I think the military does a good job supporting families of color while in service. They need to do a better job at the transition part.”

- Middle Eastern Veteran

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Veteran needs during their transition may vary by gender. For example, women veterans have been found to be twice as likely to use healthcare early in their transition compared to male veterans, but they are equally as likely to utilize VHA care (Copeland LA, Finley EP, Vogt D, Perkins DF, Nilnii YI., 2020, March). This suggests that female veterans are underutilizing VHA services. This could have a negative impact on their utilization of other programs, such as housing, that the VHA can connect them to. A Veteran's rank and discharge status also play a large role in determining the unique challenges that a veteran faces during their transition back to civilian life. A recent study of newly transitioned post-9/11 veterans found that those from junior enlisted ranks were three to five times more likely to use programs that enhance access to healthcare. In addition to differences in healthcare utilization, studies have shown that junior enlisted ranks are less likely to use employment programs compared to those in the senior enlisted and officer ranks (Aronson, K.R., Perkins, D.F., Morgan, N.R., Bleser, J.A., Vogt, D., Copeland, L.A., Finley, E.P., & Gilman, C.L., 2019)
Finding 3 References

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