



Finding 7

Military Spouse Employment

Military spouses of color report a greater need for two household incomes than their white, non-Hispanic peers, and they experience substantially higher unemployment rates and lower earnings than their civilian counterparts.

Despite robust research on active-duty military spouse unemployment and underemployment, limited research exists regarding employment outcomes for active-duty military spouses of color.¹ Exploratory analysis of preexisting datasets as part of this study find that active-duty military spouses of color are three times more likely to be unemployed, compared to civilian counterparts; they are unemployed at higher rates than white, non-Hispanic military spouses; they earn about 37% less than the total population; female active-duty military spouses of color experience even worse employment outcomes (with median earnings 54-66% lower than the total population) (Figure 3).²



While my spouse was stationed [at a military base in the South], I attempted to gain employment as a teacher. I had education, experience, and references. At one of the interviews, the principal told me that even though I was highly qualified for the job, he was looking for a more 'hometown' teacher, one that looked like the children in his school as opposed to me. There were very few if any African American children at the school. I was not hired due to my race. Now, after I shared this with the school district's superintendent, I did receive a job at another school, but I will never forget that and the pain it caused me.

- Black Military Spouse

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

Military families of color report a greater need for two household incomes for overall financial stability; this increased reliance on a second income means that career disruptions for military spouses of color can have a disproportionate impact on overall household financial stability.

The number of dual-income households has been increasing since the 1970s due to the need for families to meet or exceed a minimum standard of living.³ With the increasing costs of goods, housing prices, education, child care, etc., millennial military family respondents to the 2018 Military Family Lifestyle Survey (MFLS) reported a greater need for two incomes to support their family, compared to their older counterparts.⁴ Exploratory analysis of existing data conducted as part of this study suggests the need for two incomes is even more salient for military families of color.

The 2017 Survey of Active Duty Spouses (ADSS) reported that 66% of employed minority military spouses' income contributed to more than half of their family's total household income, while only 41% of white, non-Hispanic military spouses reported the same.⁵ Previously unpublished data from Blue Star Families' 2018 and 2019 MFLS found a similar trend: 74% of military spouse respondents of color reported that two incomes were vital, compared to 63% of white, non-Hispanic respondents; a notably greater proportion of Black military spouse respondents reported this to be the case (81%).⁶



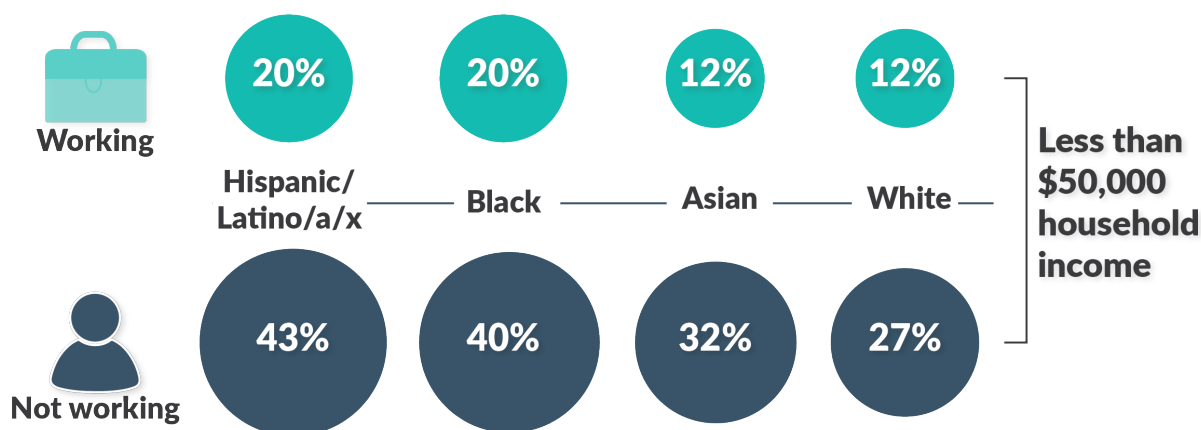
This greater reliance on a second income means that disruptions to the career paths of military spouses of color can have a disproportionate impact on their family's overall household income, compared to their white, non-Hispanic peers (Figure 1). For example, a greater proportion of military spouse respondents of color to the 2018 and 2019 MFLS who were not working reported their family's household income to be \$50,000 per year or less (40%), while just 27% of white, non-Hispanic spouse respondents reported the same.⁷ Additionally, when military spouse respondents of color reported they were working, it reduced the percentage reporting household incomes of less than \$50,000 per year by at least 20 percentage points, with Hispanic/Latino/a/x spouses reporting the greatest improvement (23 points); comparatively, white, non-Hispanic military spouse respondents only report a 15-point improvement.

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Figure 1: Gaining employment cuts poverty in half, but one in five employed Black and Hispanic/Latino/a/x active-duty spouse report household income of \$50,000 or less per year⁷

% of active-duty spouse respondents reporting household income of less than \$50,000 per year by employment status and race/ethnicity

Source: Aggregated data from 2018 and 2019 MFLS

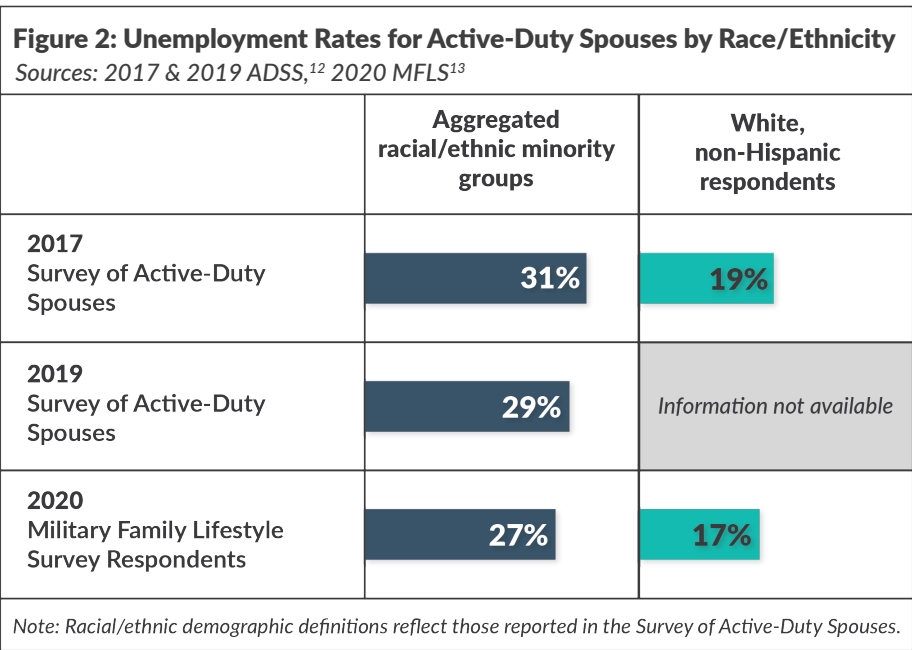


Active-duty spouses of color, like their civilian counterparts, experience poorer employment outcomes associated with their gender and race/ethnicity, but these employment challenges are exacerbated by their military affiliation.

Existing research regarding active-duty spouse unemployment and underemployment has explored a wide range of topics, including, but not limited to, the effects of gender, permanent change of station (PCS) moves, average amount of time to obtain employment following a PCS move, state licensure, and presence of children, among many others.⁸ Previous research has also explored unemployment rates based on military affiliation and, to a limited extent, race/ethnicity (existing research aggregates all respondents of color): active-duty military spouses are two to four times as likely to be unemployed than their non-military counterparts, and active-duty military spouses of color have higher unemployment rates than white, non-Hispanic active-duty spouses (Figure 2).⁹ Furthermore, unemployment rates, which require the respondent to have been actively seeking employment in the previous four weeks, do not tell the full story: results from the 2020 MFLS indicated that 43% of spouses of color reported they are not working but need or want paid employment, compared to 32% of white, non-Hispanic spouses.¹⁰

⁷Unless otherwise noted, respondents indicated having at least one racial/ethnic identity other than white.

Despite significant differences in unemployment rates, previously unpublished results from the 2019 MFLS suggest there is only a minimal difference based on race/ethnicity in aggregated underemployment data: 77% of white, non-Hispanic active-duty spouse respondents who were employed full- or part-time reported at least one circumstance of underemployment, and 79% of active-duty spouse respondents of color reported the same.¹¹



Previous research, however, has not disaggregated military spouse employment data by racial/ethnic group or analyzed it within the broader context of compounding intersectional challenges, including gender and military affiliation. While military service provides many service members of color, regardless of gender, better financial security than civilians of color both during service and after they transition into Veteran life (see Findings 6 and 8), female military spouses of color experience the opposite: all racial/ethnic groups have lower median earnings than their civilian counterparts, and Black and Hispanic female military spouses have substantially lower earnings (Figure 3). According to an analysis of the 2019 American Community Survey data, spouses of a service member on active-duty orders earn



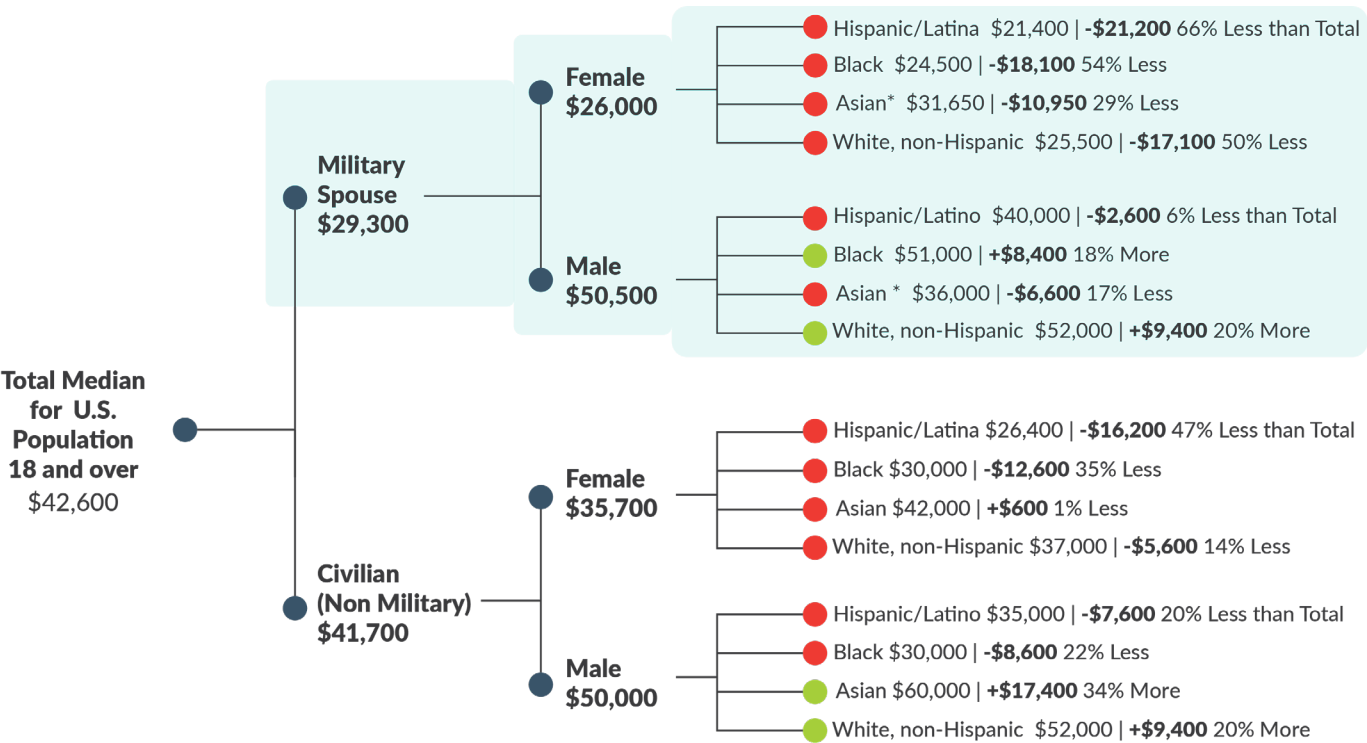
roughly 37% less than the total population (\$29,300, compared to \$42,600). Furthermore, in general, female military spouses earn less than male military spouses, and the gap in these earnings increases for Black and Hispanic female military spouses, who earn roughly 54% and 66% less than the total population, respectively (Figure 3).

¹¹Unless otherwise noted, respondents indicated having at least one racial/ethnic identity other than white.
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Figure 3: Median Earnings by Military Spouse Status, Gender, and Race/Ethnicity³²

Median Earnings U.S. Population, 18 and older and in the labor force: \$42,600;
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2019 earnings using 2015-2019 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

*small sample sizes



Active-duty spouse respondents* report their employment outcomes are worse when compared to civilian counterparts and that they do not receive the same military service-connected career benefits as uniformed service members and Veterans.

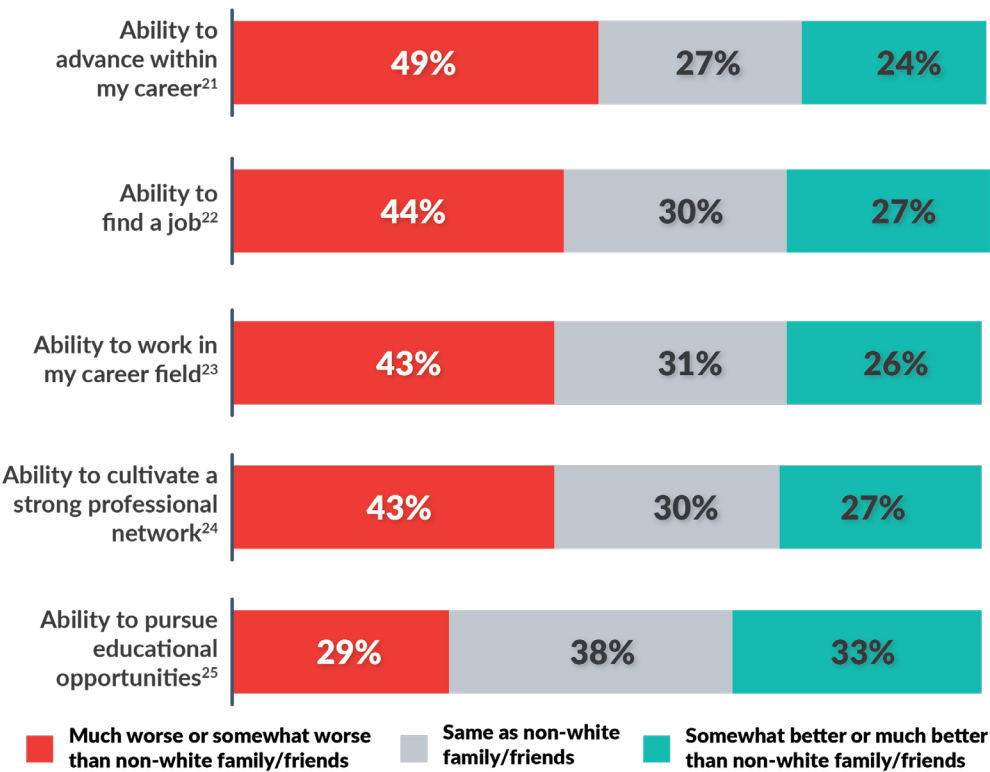
Career progression challenges for military spouses stem from a variety of factors, including, but not limited to, service member day-to-day job demands,¹⁴ lack of affordable child care,¹⁵ frequent PCS moves,¹⁶ and difficulty pursuing further education.¹⁷ These issues impact all military spouses, regardless of race/ethnicity, and it is reasonable to assume that white, non-Hispanic military spouses may also report they fare worse than their white, non-Hispanic family and friends. This survey, which specifically recruited respondents of color, sought to understand the degree to which military family members of color receive (or do not receive) the same benefits of service as service members of color often do. For this reason, there is no white, non-Hispanic comparison group at this time for the following employment-oriented perception-based questions, and this should be an area for future research.

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

Nearly half (43-49%)¹⁸ of active-duty spouse respondents* report a variety of employment outcomes to be “somewhat” or “much” worse than their non-white friends and family who are not connected to the military, and their responses (Figure 4) provide useful context for the unemployment and earnings data discussed above. As discussed in Finding 3, these numbers are substantially higher than the proportion of Veteran respondents* (about 1 in 4) who report elements of their employment situation to be “somewhat” or “much” worse than their non-white family and friends. Nevertheless, a smaller proportion of active-duty spouse respondents* (29%)¹⁹ report their ability to pursue educational opportunities as “somewhat” or “much” worse than non-white family and friends who are not connected to the military, suggesting that the wide array of educational support programs and scholarships available to military spouses may be helping to alleviate some of these challenges.

Figure 4: Nearly half of active-duty spouse respondents of color report experiencing worse employment-related outcomes than non-white family and friends²⁰

% of active-duty spouse respondents*



Impact of COVID-19

37%²⁶ of active-duty spouse respondents* report that since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, **their employment situation is better than that of their civilian family/friends** (of a similar racial/ethnic background).



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Active-duty spouse respondents* report similar barriers to accessing needed employment and career support resources as discussed in other areas of the report, but they place greater emphasis on the lack of child care as a hurdle.

Twelve percent²⁷ of active-duty spouse respondents* report not working, but wanting or needing paid employment, and actively seeking work in the last four weeks. Nearly half (46%)²⁸ of active-duty spouse respondents* report they have needed employment and career development resources (e.g., job training, job placement services, resume writing, starting a business) since January 2020; among those with a need, 39%²⁹ indicate that need is unmet. Of those with an unmet need, lack of knowledge about how to access the service, lack of child care, and uncertainty about eligibility are the top-three barriers.

Increasing mentorship opportunities is a way to support military spouses in their careers, and 41%³⁰ of active-duty spouse respondents* indicate that they want a mentor for employment, career exploration, professional development, and/or leadership development. Of those spouses who indicate wanting mentorship in any area, 62% report wanting a mentor who has similar professional interests, 59% report wanting a mentor of the same race/ethnicity, and 46% report wanting a mentor who is the same gender.³¹



Programs [need to be] inclusive and experienced with culture and our diverse heritage. Programs like [...] finding employment opportunities as an immigrant spouse, [and] access to grants or programs to help further education.

- Hispanic Military Spouse

*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.

Finding 7 Endnotes

- ¹ Bradbard, Maury, & Armstrong, 2016, July; Maury & Stone, 2014; Hiring Our Heroes, 2017. 2017, July; Blue Star Families, 2020.
- ² Earnings for military spouses is data analyzed using Steven Ruggles, Sarah Flood, Sophia Foster, Ronald Goeken, Jose Pacas, Megan Schouweiler, and Matthew Sobek. IPUMS USA: Version 11.0 [U.S. Census Bureau 2019 American Community Survey]. Minneapolis, MN: IPUMS, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.18128/D010.V11.0>. Notes: The variables created for military spouse and civilian for the above come from U.S. Census Bureau, 2015-2019 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates for 2019 only. Military spouses are identified as being in the armed forces family/household, but dual military families are excluded from this analysis. A Veteran can be identified as a military spouse if they are not in the active-duty component but are a Veteran. A civilian can be identified as neither being in the armed forces family/household as well as Veteran family/household. The variables used in the labor force are from calculated employment status variables and only include those that are employed and unemployed and exclude those not in the labor force. The variable for income calculations is "inctot" – total personal income. In all calculations, (1) values of 9999999 are excluded, (2) all negative values are excluded, and (3) all values of zero (0) are excluded. Thus, values presented are all positive income values with no inflation adjustment. In addition, the calculations for all groups are of those in the labor force only and population 18 and over.
- ³ Leonce, 2020.
- ⁴ Blue Star Families, 2019.
- ⁵ Office of People Analytics, 2019.
- ⁶ Unpublished results from Blue Star Families' 2018 and 2019 MFLS. Respondents from the 2018 and 2019 data sets were aggregated to increase the response rate in the analysis; the primary limitation from this approach is that it is possible that individual respondents took both surveys and are counted twice in the analysis. Race/ethnicity was asked as a select-all question in both surveys, and respondents who selected more than one identity of color may also be counted more than once. Analysis regarding "white, non-Hispanic" respondents excludes respondents who identified at least one racial/ethnic identity other than white. Frequencies of respondents by race/ethnicity: Aggregated "military spouse respondents of color" (n=1,218; includes "other" and all other racial/ethnic groups), including Black (n=313), Hispanic (n=835), Asian (n=315), and white, non-Hispanic (n=6,101).
- ⁷ Respondents from the 2018 and 2019 MFLS data sets were aggregated for the purposes of this analysis, a choice made to increase the overall response rate, but this also has limitations. Limitations are as follows: (1) respondents may have taken both the 2018 and 2019 surveys, and because identifying information was not obtained in both years, there was no way to de-duplicate responses; (2) race/ethnicity was asked as a select-all question in both surveys, meaning that overlap is a possibility, aside from the "white, non-Hispanic" group, which excluded any respondents identifying with at least one identity other than white; (3) "active-duty spouses" were defined to include activated National Guard and Reserve spouses in the 2018 and 2019 surveys, whereas in Blue Star Families' research conducted in 2020 or later, only spouses of non-National Guard or Reserve-active-duty spouses-are defined as "active-duty"; (4) employment status was inquired about in a slightly different fashion in the 2018 vs. 2019 MFLS: In 2018, respondents were asked, "Are you currently employed outside the home, including work from home, online, or contract work?" (answer choices: yes, full time; yes, part time; no, active duty; does not apply; prefer not to answer). In this analysis, those responding "yes, full time," "yes, part time," or "active duty" were considered to be "working." In the 2019 survey, respondents were asked, "Are you currently employed, including work from home, online, or contract work?" (answer choices: Yes, I am an active-duty service member; Yes, full-time work [35 or more hours per week]; Yes, part-time work [fewer than 35 hours per week]; No, but I want or need to work; No, and I don't want or need to work; Retired; Does not apply; and Prefer not to answer). In this analysis, those responding to "yes, full-time work," "yes, part-time work," and "yes, I am an active-duty service member" were considered to be "working." When asked about household income in the 2018 and 2019 surveys, respondents were asked to select an income range for the years prior (2017 and 2018) in lieu of reporting a whole number, which constrained analysis. For the purposes of this study, responses were broken into a dichotomous variable: Under \$50,000 and over \$50,000. This income level was selected because it was the closest income level to 130% of the national poverty level in 2019, which also had a response rate sufficient for analysis. Frequencies of active-duty spouses included in analysis by race/ethnicity: all active-duty spouse respondents of color (n=1564), including Hispanic (n=799), Black (n=301), and Asian (n=285), and white, non-Hispanic (n=5,834).

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

- ⁸ Office of People Analytics, 2020; Blue Star Families, 2018; Blue Star Families, 2019; Blue Star Families, 2020; Blue Star Families, 2021; Hiring Our Heroes, 2017.
- ⁹ Office of People Analytics, 2020.
- ¹⁰ Blue Star Families, 2021.
- ¹¹ Unpublished results from the 2019 Military Family Lifestyle Survey. Respondents who were employed were asked to identify whether or not several criteria often associated with underemployment were associated with their employment status. White, non-Hispanic active-duty spouse respondents (n=1,365) and active-duty spouse respondents of color (n=332). Contact survey@bluestarfam.org for additional information.
- ¹² Office of People Analytics, 2018, May; Office of People Analytics, 2020.
- ¹³ Blue Star Families, 2021. Race/ethnicity was asked as a single-select question in the 2020 MFLS.
- ¹⁴ Blue Star Families, 2020. Blue Star Families, 2021.
- ¹⁵ *ibid.*
- ¹⁶ Blue Star Families, 2019; Office of People Analytics, 2020.
- ¹⁷ Borah & Fina, 2017.
- ¹⁸ Frequencies: "ability to find a job" (n=362), "ability to work in my career field" (n=353); "ability to advance within my career" (n=349), "ability to pursue educational opportunities" (n=368); "ability to cultivate a strong professional network" (n=360); respondents who indicated "I don't know" are excluded from the analysis.
- ¹⁹ n=368.
- ²⁰ Question: In general, how do you feel about each of the following aspects of your employment situation, compared to your non-white friends and family who are not connected to the military? For the purposes of analysis, "much worse" and "somewhat worse" were aggregated to "worse"; "much better" and "somewhat better" were aggregated to "better." Respondents who indicated they "did not know" are excluded from the analysis.
- ²¹ n=349; respondents who indicated "I don't know" are excluded from the analysis.
- ²² n=362; respondents who indicated "I don't know" are excluded from the analysis.
- ²³ n=353; respondents who indicated "I don't know" are excluded from the analysis.
- ²⁴ n=360; respondents who indicated "I don't know" are excluded from the analysis.
- ²⁵ n=368; respondents who indicated "I don't know" are excluded from the analysis.
- ²⁶ n=392; excludes respondents who selected "I don't know."
- ²⁷ n=368.
- ²⁸ n=211.
- ²⁹ n=211.
- ³⁰ n=261.
- ³¹ n=261.
- ³² Earnings for military spouses is data analyzed using Steven Ruggles, Sarah Flood, Sophia Foster, Ronald Goeken, Jose Pacas, Megan Schouweiler, and Matthew Sobek. IPUMS USA: Version 11.0 [U.S. Census Bureau 2019 American Community Survey]. Minneapolis, MN: IPUMS, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.18128/D010.V11.0>. Notes: The variables created for military spouse and civilian for the above come from the U.S. Census Bureau, 2015-2019 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates for 2019 only. Military spouses are identified as being in the armed forces family/household, but dual military families are excluded from this analysis. A Veteran can be identified as a military spouse if they are not in the active-duty component but are a Veteran. A civilian can be identified as neither being in the armed forces family/household as well as Veteran family/household. The variables used in the labor force are from calculated employment status variables and only include those employed and unemployed and exclude those not in the labor force. The variable for income calculations is "inctot" – total personal income. In all calculations, (1) values of 9999999 are excluded, (2) all negative values are excluded, and (3) all values of zero (0) are excluded. Thus, values presented are all positive income values with no inflation adjustment. In addition, the calculations for all groups are of those in the labor force only and population 18 and over.

Finding 7 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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