



**BLUE STAR  
FAMILIES**

**MILITARY  
FAMILY  
LIFESTYLE  
SURVEY**



**Community and Social Context**

# **2021 Military Family Lifestyle Survey Comprehensive Report**

## **Resources/Military Quality of Life**

In collaboration with



**Syracuse University**

**D'Aniello Institute for  
Veterans & Military Families**



JPMorgan Chase & Co., Founding Partner

Funding for the 2021 Military Family Lifestyle Survey is provided through the generosity of our presenting sponsor USAA and from supporting sponsors Lockheed Martin, CSX, CVS Health, AARP, Starbucks, BAE Systems, Northrop Grumman, Walmart Foundation, Verizon, The Barry Robinson Center, and the USO.



## Nearly a quarter (24%) of active-duty family respondents cite ‘military family quality of life’ as a top-five concern. Families point to instability and inconsistency of daily life as the reason.

Nearly a quarter (24%) of active-duty family respondents chose “military family quality of life” as a top-five issue of concern. Quality of life has been among the top-five issues since its introduction to the Military Family Lifestyle Survey (MFLS) in 2016. Respondents who chose “military family quality of life” as a top-five issue of concern were then prompted to respond to the open-ended question, “Please describe your concerns related to military family quality of life.”

While “military family quality of life” can be defined differently by respondents, themes that emerged from open-ended responses include:

- **Time with Children and Family (24%):** “My active-duty spouses job is important but leaves little time for us as a family or support for me as a working spouse and our children.” — Active-Duty Army Spouse
- **Frequency and difficulties of relocating (17%):** “I am a nurse practitioner. Changing my license for each state is expensive and time consuming. I am unable to work in a job I enjoy because of constant moving. Childcare is tough as a military spouse with no support from the military. No regard for constantly moving families and causing stress and instability for my career and kids.” - Active-Duty Navy Spouse
- **OPTEMPO (16%):** “The high tempo of training, deployments, schools, etc. takes a toll on the family bonds and connections. Consistent disruptions cause distress among family members, especially children.” — Active-Duty Marine Corps Spouse
- **Time Away (14%):** “Quality of life is diminished for many military families. The service member is gone for long periods of time, sometimes with little to no notice. Family is far away and the military does not make it easy to plan trips or visits. The ‘tough’ mindset that the AD [active-duty] personnel are expected to have at work bleeds into family life and hinders communication and relationship building.” — Active-Duty Army Spouse
- **Unpredictable Schedules (10%):** “Shipboard Navy life is difficult on families. Not only with deployment time, but even time not on deployment is spent at sea away from families. The unpredictable schedules are also challenging.” — Navy Veteran
- **Spouse Employment (9%):** “Consistent disruptions cause distress among family members, especially children. Having children with special needs makes the chaotic back and forth schedule more difficult to adjust to. Not having the ability to rely on the service member to help with pick up, drop off, sick days while the spouse works and having to find multiple other options for childcare makes having a job difficult as a spouse.” — Active-Duty Marine Corps Spouse
- **Housing (9%):** “Quality of housing and the continued fluctuations in BAH are very difficult for families. Choosing communities outside of installations that have good school districts for our kids is becoming more and more difficult. Those living on base are dealing with subpar housing and often the worst school choices in the area for their kids.” — Active-Duty Army Spouse

“It’s difficult to get into a positive rhythm without being able to plan **more than a few days in advance.**”






Active-Duty Space Force Service Member

Communication from the unit/command is a top need of all currently-serving<sup>a</sup> family respondents in 2021. For active-duty family respondents, this was true regardless of service branch, where they live (on or off installation), or whether they

<sup>a</sup>“Currently”-serving family respondents includes active-duty, National Guard, and Reserve service member or spouse respondents.



Figure 1: Top 5 Resources Regularly Needed

Considering resources available to support military families, which of these do you feel you regularly need?	 Communication from unit/command	 Spouse group for unit/command	 Access to medical care	 Opportunity to exercise	 Resources for children's activities
<b>Active-Duty Families</b> (n=3098)	<b>52%</b>	<b>44%</b>	<b>42%</b>	<b>40%</b>	<b>40%</b>
<b>National Guard Families</b> (n=208)	<b>57%</b>	<b>34%</b>	<b>36%</b>	<b>34%</b>	<b>31%</b>
<b>Reserve Families</b> (n=188)	<b>51%</b>	<b>41%</b>	<b>36%</b>	<b>35%</b>	<b>35%</b>

were currently separated from their service member. In the 2020 MFLS, currently-serving family respondents in all groups, including active-duty, National Guard, and Reserve spouses and service members, reported their top needs during a deployment were communication, access to medical care, and the opportunity to exercise, often followed by access to mental health care. The 2021 MFLS expanded on this inquiry by asking about the top resources they regularly need, and the responses were similar. Currently-serving family respondents in all groups report their top needs are the same, regardless of deployment or activation status. Figure 1 shows the top resources identified by each currently-serving family respondent group.

Currently-serving family respondents have consistently reported these needs, and there have been many efforts to address them. Still, a surprising proportion of responses<sup>a</sup> (7%) to the open-ended question “Please describe your concerns related to military family quality of life” note “access to/lack of resources/support.” Access to/lack of resources/support is noted most often by respondents who report they are stationed in “remote” locations and by Coast Guard, National Guard, and Reserve families who may live far from the service member’s installation/command, or have less access to DOD programs that support military families. Additionally, while most currently-serving respondent groups cite a need for resources for children’s activities, there are differences among them. For example, nearly one-half of active-duty spouses (49%) also identify a need for resources for spouse groups.

Further, many responses to the open-ended qualitative question specifically note a lack of resources to support families with children. Nearly one-third of active-duty family respondents also note child care (32%) and mental health resources (32%) are regularly needed. In addition, over half of respondents who have at least one child between the ages of 0 and 12 years cite “resources for children’s activities” as a regular need, and 45% of respondents who have at least one child between the ages of 3-5 report the “opportunity to exercise.” However, the majority of resources offered for exercise to working mothers are often not conducive to hours of need.<sup>1</sup>

“There is a **lack of military resource support** as a [National] Guard family not living near a post.”

Army National Guard Spouse

“Access to facilities **when in a remote location.**”

Army Reserve Domestic Partner

“Difficulty finding access to the correct mental health provider. **Lack of family resources/support during deployments.**”

Active-Duty Air Force Spouse

“Coast Guard **does not receive the same resources** as the other branches.”

Active-Duty Coast Guard Spouse

“Some bases that we have been to **do not offer services or programs for children.**”

Active-Duty Navy Spouse

“Most military locations **do not have enough activities for children.**”

Active-Duty Marine Corps Spouse





There are many different resources available to military families on base, such as Airman and Family Support Programs,<sup>2</sup> Marine Corps Community Services (MCCS),<sup>3</sup> Navy Fleet and Family Support Programs,<sup>4</sup> and Soldier and Family Services,<sup>5</sup> along with military and Veterans service organizations that directly support military-connected families in their communities. However, many active-duty military family respondents rate the resources for community support (30%), behavioral health (29%), and housing (5%) as inadequate (needs improvement to meet a basic or minimal level of service).

“The top five issues are the same and have been for many years. There **does not appear to be a concerted effort to collectively tackle these five with clarity of purpose**, using both on and off base resources.”

Active-duty Air Force Spouse

**While the sample of Spanish-language<sup>c</sup> respondents is small, their needs differ from their English-language peers.<sup>d</sup> The top need for Spanish-language active-duty spouse respondents is “employment/job opportunities.”**

Reported Need	Spanish-Language Active-Duty Spouse Respondents (n=28)	English-Language Active-Duty Spouse Respondents (n=2622)
Employment/job opportunities	57%	30%
After-school care	39%	18%
Communication from the unit/command	36%	52%
Resources for children's activities	36%	43%

“Las familias no pueden pasar mucho tiempo juntos debido a los despliegues, patrullajes, etc. A su vez estar alejado del resto de la familia ya es sumamente difícil tanto para el militar como para los hijos y el resto de la familia.”

Active-Duty Navy Spouse

(“The families can't spend too much time together due to deployments, TDYs, etc. To be far from the rest of the family is already incredibly difficult, as much for the military service member as for the children and the rest of the family.”)



“La calidad de vida se ve afectada por el estrés laboral de mi esposo así como la discriminación racial que siente. También me preocupa personalmente la adquisición de empleo fijo para mí.”

Active-Duty Army Spouse

(“Quality of life is affected due to my spouse/husband's work stress like the racial discrimination he is experiencing. Also, I'm personally worried about finding stable work for myself.”)

Further, Spanish-language active-duty spouse respondents to the MFLS report spouse employment as a top issue of concern (48%), similar to their English-language active-duty spouse respondent peers (47%).

Similar to their English-language peers, Spanish-language respondents<sup>e</sup> report “military family quality of life” is most affected by the frequency of moves, time away from family, and work schedule. However, some respondents to the open-ended question note racism and racial discrimination in the workplace and community, similar to English-language military families of color respondents.

<sup>c</sup>The 2020 MFLS offered a Spanish-language survey option. Please refer to the methodology section in the full report for a detailed description of the Spanish-language survey.

<sup>d</sup>Note the total number of respondents differs greatly between Spanish language and English language respondents.

<sup>e</sup>Qualitative responses include all respondents.



## Limitations

While the survey has a robust sample of currently-serving military family respondents, the subsamples of National Guard (n=208) and Reserve (n=188) respondents who answered the resources question are small, compared to their active-duty peers (n=3098). COVID-19 may still be influencing the resources needed by respondents. Additionally, the total sample size of Spanish-language respondents is small (n=75) and even smaller when limited to active-duty spouses who answered the questions about needed resources. While these participants responded to the Spanish-language version of the MFLS, we currently do not have additional analysis on why they chose to take the survey in Spanish, or how this group may differ from their Spanish-language peers who chose to respond in English.

## Recommendations

\*More information in Recommendations Chapter of Comprehensive Report



### Military

- Continue to expand efforts to provide service members more control over their careers (including when and where they relocate) and day-to-day schedules.
- Diversify bi-directional communication methods that commands use when connecting with the families in their unit, especially with National Guard and Reserve families regarding information about eligibility and how to access available resources and services.
- In support of overall family mental health and wellness, increase support of in-home child care and increase child care capacity at both on-installation child care facilities and fitness centers.\*

- Increase offerings of resources, especially those targeting employment and child care in high-demand languages (e.g., Spanish).



### Congress

- Commission a report on the effects of nationwide housing shortages and rising costs on military families.



### Communities

- Actively recruit military families to participate in existing social and community programs to increase their connectedness and sense of belonging to the community.



- 1 Alicia G. Dugan & Janet L. Barnes-Farrell (2020) Working mothers' second shift, personal resources, and self-care, *Community, Work & Family*, 23:1, 62-79, DOI: 10.1080/13668803.2018.1449732
- 2 Air Force Personnel Center. (n.d.). Airman and Family Deployment Support. <https://www.afpc.af.mil/Airmanand-Family/Deployment-Support>
- 3 Marine Corps Unit, Personal and Family Readiness Program (n.d.). Marine Corps Community Services. <https://usmc-mccs.org/index.cfm/services/family/unit-personal-and-family-readiness>
- 4 Navy Fleet and Family Support Centers. (n.d.). Deployment Readiness Support. [https://www.cnic.navy.mil/ffr/family\\_readiness/fleet\\_and\\_family\\_support\\_program/work-and-family-life/deployment\\_readiness\\_support.htm](https://www.cnic.navy.mil/ffr/family_readiness/fleet_and_family_support_program/work-and-family-life/deployment_readiness_support.htm)
- 5 United States Army. (n.d.). Soldier and Family Services. <https://www.goarmy.com/benefits/soldier-and-family-services.html>