



Military Family Lifestyle Survey



Community and Social Context

2022 Comprehensive Report

Recommending Military Service

In collaboration with

S Syracuse University

D'Aniello Institute for
Veterans & Military Families

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“Good benefits” and “economic stability” are top reasons for recommending military service, but “poor military leadership,” “challenges for families,” and “financial sacrifice” are cited by active-duty family respondents as top reasons they were unlikely to recommend military service.

In view of the current challenges with recruitment in the armed forces,^{1,2,3} respondents to the 2022 MFLS were asked to rate “How likely are you to recommend that a young family member (child, niece, nephew, etc.) join the military?” on a scale of 0 to 10.^a The mean rating for likelihood of recommending service fell between 5.1 to 6.7, based on respondent’s primary military affiliation^b (see Table 1 for a breakdown of responses by respondent primary military affiliation).

Among active-duty service member, active-duty spouses, Veteran, Veteran spouse, National Guard family, and Reserve family respondents, active-duty spouse respondents were the least likely to recommend service to a young family member ($M=5.1$, $SD=3.0$), while Veteran respondents were the most likely to recommend ($M=6.7$, $SD=3.2$). Despite an increase in activation over the past two years,^{4,5} both National Guard family and Reserve family respondents have a higher likelihood of recommendation mean score compared to their active-duty counterparts.

All military-connected^c family respondents who answered the question about their likelihood to recommend service were then asked: “Can you tell us why you would recommend or not recommend service to a young family member?”^d Challenges to families were most often cited by military-connected family respondents as a reason to not recommend military service. A common reason to recommend service noted by respondents in all groups was the benefits that come from serving: education, health care, and housing-related benefits.

Table 1: Mean Likelihood to Recommend Military Service to a Young Family Member, by Primary Military Affiliation	
Military-connected respondents	
Primary Military Affiliation	Likelihood to Recommend Service Mean and Standard Deviation
Active-Duty Service Members (n=471)	5.6 (SD=2.9)
Active-Duty Spouses (n=3,170)	5.1 (SD=3.0)
National Guard Families (n=295)	5.9 (SD=2.9)
Reserve Families (n=218)	6.1 (SD=3.0)
Veterans (n=2,483)	6.7 (SD=3.2)
Veteran Spouses (n=898)	6.2 (SD=3.2)

Question Text: “How likely are you to recommend that a young family member (child, niece, nephew, etc.) join the military?” Range: 0 = very unlikely to recommend, – 10 = very likely to recommend.

^a On a scale of 0 to 10, 0 being “very unlikely to recommend” and 10 being “very likely to recommend.”
^b Respondents were asked to select one “primary military affiliation” (out of one or many) and use that perspective to answer the survey.
^c Military-connected family respondents include active-duty, Veteran, National Guard, and Reserve family respondents.
^d Data was read and coded into emergent themes that were common among multiple respondents.

Active-Duty Family Respondents

While the largest group of active-duty family respondents were likely to recommend military service (37% selected a rating between 7 and 10), over a quarter of active-duty family respondents (28%) were unlikely to recommend (selected a rating between 0 and 3), and one-third were neutral (35% selected a rating between 4 and 6)^e (see Table 2). Both active-duty service member and spouse respondents cited “good benefits” and “economic stability” as a reason for recommending service (see Table 3), but some differences emerged between active-duty service members and active-duty spouse respondents when grouped by the rating they selected. The most common reasons for “unlikely to recommend,” for both service member and spouse respondents were similar, citing “challenges for families” and “poor military leadership.” Further, just over one-third of active-duty service members and spouses provided a mixture of positive and negative reasons for their likelihood to recommend service (neutral rating of 4-6).

Table 2: Proportion Likely to Recommend Military Service to a Young Family Member, by Rating and Primary Military Affiliation
Active-duty service member and spouse respondents

Primary Military Affiliation	Unlikely to Recommend (0-3)	Neutral (4-6)	Likely to Recommend (7-10)
Active-Duty Service Member Respondents (n=471)	23%	36%	42%
Active-Duty Spouse Respondents (n=3,170)	29%	34%	37%

Question Text: “How likely are you to recommend that a young family member (child, niece, nephew, etc.) join the military?”
Range: 0 = very unlikely to recommend, – 10 = very likely to recommend.

Table 3: Top Codes for Reasons to Recommend or Not Recommend Military Service to a Young Family Member, by Rating Group and Primary Military Affiliation
Active-duty service member and spouse respondents

Primary Military Affiliation	Unlikely to Recommend (0-3)	Neutral (4-6)	Likely to Recommend (7-10)
Active-Duty Service Member Respondents (n=471)	Poor military leadership Challenges/difficulties for families Changes in the military aren't good	Good benefits Depends on the individual Challenges/difficulties for families	Good benefits Economic stability Job skill building
Active-Duty Spouse Respondents (n=3,170)	Challenges/difficulties for families Poor military leadership Financial sacrifices	Challenges/difficulties for families Depends on the individual Good benefits	Good benefits Economic stability Positive opportunities

Open-ended Question Text: “Can you tell us why you would recommend or not recommend service to a young family member?”

^e Responses were broken down into three categories: 0-3 = unlikely to recommend, 4-6 = neither likely nor unlikely (or neutral) (a mixture of positive and negative comments or a focus on “dependent on individual”), and 7-10 = likely to recommend. Responses to the open-ended question informed the parameters of these categories. See Methodology for a description of how these categories were determined.

Recommending Military Service

“Can you tell us why you would recommend or not recommend service to a young family member?”

Active-Duty Family Respondents

| Good Benefits (education, health care, housing, etc.)

“Education benefits, health care, gives direction to life.”

Active-Duty Army Service Member (rating: 8)

| Challenges to Families

“The military continues to say this is a ‘family business’ but has yet to make any real changes that would support that. Reducing the number of PCSes over time, removing barriers to spouse employment like SOFA and lack of child care, fostering an environment that allows SMs [service member] to feel comfortable asking for time to support their family.”

Active-Duty Army Spouse (rating: 5)

| Depends on the Individual

“Really depends on the person. I think it’s great for the right type of person but wouldn’t recommend it to everyone.”

Active-Duty Air Force Spouse (rating: 6)

| Challenges to Families

“The chain of command is corrupted and very toxic. They don’t care about families or your work ethic, they just care about getting everyone qualified. It’s also very disorganized.”

Active-Duty Navy Spouse (rating: 0)

Active-duty family respondents of color had similar likelihood of recommendation scores when compared to their white counterparts (see Table 4).

Table 4: Mean Likelihood to Recommend Military Service to a Young Family Member, by Race/Ethnicity

Active-duty family respondents

Respondent Subgroup	Likelihood to Recommend Service Mean and Standard Deviation
Active-Duty Family Respondents of Color^f (n=983)	5.3 (SD=3.0)
Black/African American Active-Duty Family Respondents (n=231)	5.1 (SD=2.9)
American Indian/Alaskan Native Active-Duty Family Respondents (n=109)	4.6 (SD=3.2)
Asian Active-Duty Family Respondents (n=255)	5.3 (SD=3.0)
Hispanic/Latino/a/x Active-duty Family Respondents (n=445)	5.4 (SD=3.0)
White, Non-Hispanic Active-Duty Family Respondents in Multiracial/Multiethnic Families ^g (n=375)	5.0 (SD=2.9)
White, Non-Hispanic Active-Duty Family Respondents Not in Multiracial/Multiethnic Families ^h (n=2,189)	5.1 (SD=2.9)

^f Active-duty family respondents of color include those who selected American Indian/Alaska Native, Asian, Black/African American, Hispanic or Latino/a/x or of Spanish origin, Middle Eastern or North African, or Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander. They could also select white and/or a write-in option, but not as the only option. Respondents could select multiple racial/ethnic identities and their responses may therefore be reflected in multiple comparison groups when racial and ethnic groups are analyzed separately.

^g Those respondents who are categorized as “white, non-Hispanic respondents in a multiracial/multiethnic family” only selected white (and no other answer choices) to the race/ethnicity select-all question and also reported they are a member of a multi-racial/ethnic family (e.g., “Do you have a spouse or child of a different race/ethnicity?”).

^h White, non-Hispanic active-duty family respondents not in multiracial/multiethnic families are defined as respondents who only selected white (and no other answer choices) to the race/ethnicity select-all question and answered they are not a member of a multi-racial/ethnic family.



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As a group, both femaleⁱ currently-serving respondents and female Veteran respondents are less likely than their male peers to recommend service; however, both male and female Veterans are more likely to recommend service than their currently-serving peers (see Table 5).

Table 5: Mean Likelihood to Recommend Military Service to a Young Family Member, by Gender
Active-duty service member and Veteran/retired service member respondents

Respondent Subgroup	Likelihood to Recommend Service Mean and Standard Deviation
Female Active-Duty Service Members ⁱ (n=212)	5.3 (SD=2.8)
Male Active-Duty Service Members (n=257)	5.6 (SD=3.0)
Female Veterans (n=698)	6.3 (SD=3.4)
Male Veterans (n=1,757)	6.9 (SD=3.2)

Female active-duty service member respondents who were likely to recommend service for reasons such as good benefits, positive opportunities, and job skill acquisition, while those who were unlikely to recommend service focused on challenges to families, poor leadership, and both racial and gender discrimination. Male active-duty service member

respondents who were unlikely to recommend service noted a lack of leadership and politics (both past and present), as well as a general need for improvement, while those who were more likely to recommend service mentioned reasons similar to their female counterparts such as good benefits and economic/job stability. However, as a group, male active-duty service member respondents also noted the importance of service and the value of serving the country. For female Veteran respondents, sexual assault, mental health concerns, and the lack of service and quality of service for VA benefits were the most commonly cited reasons for those unlikely to recommend service, compared to their male counterparts, who most often mentioned poor military leadership and politics. Personal development, good benefits, and job skills were the top reasons cited for both male and female Veteran respondents who were likely to recommend service. Further, aging Veteran respondents^j ($M=7.1$, $SD=3.1$) were more likely to recommend service compared to their working-age peers^k ($M=6.4$, $SD=3.3$)



ⁱ For the purpose of reporting, "female" respondents include those respondents who selected "woman" or "trans woman" and "male" respondents include those who selected "man" or "trans man" in response to the question "What is your gender?"

^j Aging Veteran respondents are ages 65-96.

^k Working-age Veteran respondents are ages 21-64.

National Guard/Reserve Family Respondents

Both National Guard and Reserve family respondents were more likely to recommend service than their active-duty peers, with Reserve family respondents slightly more likely to recommend service than their National Guard peers (see Table 1 and Table 6). Similar to their active-duty peers, challenges to families was the most common theme among National Guard and Reserve family respondents who were unlikely to recommend service. Benefits were the most common reason to recommend service by those likely to recommend. However, for both National Guard and Reserve family respondents, unlike their active-duty peers, politics was one of the top reasons cited by those unlikely to recommend service (see Table 7).

Table 6: Proportion Likely to Recommend Military Service to a Young Family Member, by Rating Group and Primary Military Affiliation
National Guard and Reserve family respondents

Primary Military Affiliation	Unlikely to Recommend (0-3)	Neutral (4-6)	Likely to Recommend (7-10)
National Guard Family Respondents (n=295)	22%	31%	47%
Reserve Family Respondents (n=218)	19%	29%	52%

Question Text: "How likely are you to recommend that a young family member (child, niece, nephew, etc.) join the military?"
Range: 0 = very unlikely to recommend, — 10 = very likely to recommend.

Table 7: Top Codes for Reasons to Recommend or Not Recommend Military Service to a Young Family Member, by Rating Group and Primary Military Affiliation
National Guard and Reserve family respondents

Primary Military Affiliation	Unlikely to Recommend (0-3)	Neutral (4-6)	Likely to Recommend (7-10)
National Guard Family Respondents (n=295)	Poor military leadership Challenges/difficulties for families Politics	Good benefits Challenges/difficulties for families Poor military leadership	Good benefits Job skill building Positive opportunities
Reserve Family Respondents (n=218)	Challenges/difficulties for families Politics Financial sacrifice	Depends on the individual Good benefits Challenges/difficulties for families	Good benefits Personal development Economic stability

Open-ended Question Text: "Can you tell us why you would recommend or not recommend service to a young family member?"

Recommending Military Service

“Can you tell us why you would recommend or not recommend service to a young family member?”

National Guard and Reserve Family Respondents

“It **provides a good foundation for young people** going forward into their future.”

National Guard Service Member (rating: 8)

“It provides **maturity and leadership opportunities** at a young age.”

Army Reserve Service Member (rating: 10)

“The military has made great strides in the last several years when it comes to social issues, **but they still treat women as second class**. There is too many rules-based leaders, and not enough people willing to do what’s right versus what is ‘supposed to happen.’”

Marine Corps Reserve Service Member (rating: 2)

“Recommendation is dependent on the context of the person’s experience and background. **For example, the guidance I would give a straight white male may be different than a queer Black individual.**”

Navy Reserve Spouse (rating: 6)

While there were various reasons for the likelihood to recommend service ratings among respondent groups, benefits (including education, health care, and housing) were mentioned most often by nearly every respondent group as a reason for likely to recommend service, while challenges for families and poor military leadership were mentioned most often by those unlikely to recommend service. Additionally, discrimination (racial and gender) and politics were also mentioned often by different respondent groups who were unlikely to recommend service. These responses from military-connected respondents suggest that a focus on retaining and/or enhancing benefits, policies to support families, and strengthening the leadership qualities of those who reach the upper enlisted and officer ranks are the best path to increasing the likelihood of recommending service to a young family member.

Limitations

Some of the sample sizes for various respondent subgroups are small (e.g., American Indian/Alaskan Native active-duty family respondents), and some sample sizes were too small to be analyzed (e.g., Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander active-duty family respondents). Additionally, this is a very complex topic, and there are multiple factors and subgroups that would need to be addressed: families with or without children, recent relocation, specific personal experiences, etc., to form a more comprehensive analysis.



Recommendations



For Congress

- Commission a report on how military family policies affect recruitment, retention, and likelihood to recommend service.*



For the Department of Defense

- Continue to highlight the benefits of military service to maintain and increase recruiting.
- Enhance recruitment and officer commissioning by continuing to expand ROTC scholarship opportunities at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs).
- Stop automatically merging military children's medical records into the new service member record so as to not put military children at a disadvantage compared to their civilian peers.

*More information in Recommendations Chapter of Comprehensive Report

Endnotes

- 1 Kube, C., & Boigon, M. (2022, June 27). *Why is the U.S. military struggling to recruit young Americans?* NBC News. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/military/every-branch-us-military-struggling-meet-2022-recruiting-goals-official-rcna35078>
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- 5 Blue Star Families. (2022). *2021 Military Family Lifestyle Survey Comprehensive Report*. https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/BSF_MFLS_Results2021_ComprehensiveReport_3_22.pdf