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Child Care Spotlight

Child care continues to be both a necessity and barrier to military spouse employment. Affordable child care is elusive, particularly for spouses who are employed part time.

The need for affordable, quality child care is an ongoing challenge for parents and caregivers in the U.S., regardless of military affiliation.\(^1\)\(^2\) Child care is fundamental to the U.S. economy; many parents cannot work without it.\(^3\)\(^4\) The COVID-19 pandemic placed further pressure on an already failing national child care infrastructure, and rebuilding even to pre-pandemic levels may take years.\(^5\)\(^6\)\(^7\)

For military families who face the additional challenges of unpredictable and long service member day-to-day schedules and separations, child care is essential for spouse employment.\(^8\)\(^9\) For active-duty spouse respondents who are working,\(^a\) 72% indicated that they would need some form of child care,\(^b\) but only 38% said that they are able to find child care that works for their current situation.

Breaking it down to further illustrate the imperative need for child care demonstrated by military families; among employed active-duty spouse respondents\(^c\) who needed daily child care (n=348), 90% have one or two children in their family that requires child care in order for respondents to work; and only half (50%) of the respondents are able to find child care that works for their current situation. Fifteen percent said they were unable to find a child care situation that worked for them at the time of the survey fielding.

The need for child care eclipses affordability.

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, child care is considered affordable when it costs families no more than 7% of their household income.\(^10\) Despite this, the majority of U.S. households requiring

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\(^a\) Spouses who are not also active-duty service members and are working full time (35+ hours per week) or working part-time (<35 hours per week).

\(^b\) Respondents were asked "which of the following best describes your needs in terms of child care?" And those who need some form of child care are respondents who answered that they "occasionally need hourly child care," "need hourly child care on a pretty regular basis...," "need hourly or part-time child care on a daily basis," and "need full-time child care on a daily basis."

\(^c\) Spouses who are not also active-duty service members and are working full time (35+ hours per week) or working part-time (<35 hours per week).
child care report paying more than 20% of their household income on child care. The national average cost of child care in 2021 was $10,861 per child. The cost of child care, for those needing care in order to work, is a key factor in whether or not employment is worth it in the end. For military families, requirements for family care plans and the ability to react to often unpredictable work and deployment schedules are considerations, in addition to the financial cost of child care. When a service member is married and has dependent children, it is often assumed that their civilian spouse will be the primary caretaker for the children because the obligations of military service mean the service member is not always available. This assumption about caretaking responsibilities may mean that decisions about whether the spouse’s employment is worth the cost of child care are often based heavily on the spouse’s potential income. In fact “child care is too expensive” is the top reason given by spouse respondents who are not currently employed but want or need to work as to why they are not working (see Spouse Employment finding for more information), echoing similar findings among parents in civilian polls. Almost half of U.S. parents would consider leaving the workforce if child care costs were more than 25% of their paycheck, and military families are no different. For active-duty spouse respondents who are working full time and need daily child care (n=275), 85% would consider it “affordable” to spend up to 10%-25% of their personal income on child care in order to work. However, 39% are currently paying 0%-25% percent of their personal income, 24% are paying 26%-50%, and 25% are paying 51%-100% of their personal income on child care in order to work.

### Table 1: Child Care Costs as a Proportion of Personal Income

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Active-duty spouse respondents working full time with a need for daily child care</th>
<th>What proportion of your employment income, if spent on child care that you need in order to work, would you consider “affordable”? (n=275)</th>
<th>What proportion of your employment income are you currently spending on child care that your family needs in order for you to work? (n=277)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0%</td>
<td>None, I do not currently use child care</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Up to 10%</td>
<td>None, I use child care but at no cost (a friend or family member helps without payment)</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10%-25%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26%-50%</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51%-75%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>76%-100%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>101%-150%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>151%-200%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Part-Time Employment

Spouses with a need for daily child care who are employed part time have an even greater gap between what they consider affordable and what they are currently paying for child care in order to work. Similar to their counterparts who are working full-time hours, the most commonly reported range of income considered affordable is from 0% up to 10%-25% for spouses who are working part time (60%). However, only 28% of spouses employed part time and need daily child care are currently paying this percentage of their personal income toward child care. Nearly half of part-time employed spouses with the same child care needs (49%) are paying between 51%-100% of their income for child care, and 9% spend more than 100% of their income on child care costs.

The ability to work remotely may have child care advantages.

The ability to work remotely, a top solution for military spouse employment challenges (see Spouse Employment finding), does not negate the need for appropriate child care, though it may help active-duty spouse respondents find child care that meets their needs. A greater proportion of employed active-duty spouses who need full-time daily child care and completed all of their work remotely (57%) were able to find care that works for them in comparison to 56% of respondents who are working in a hybrid format, and their counterparts who completed all of their hours in person (50%).

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There are 10% of respondents in this group who are either not using child care or have a cost free child care option (e.g., a friend or family member that helps without payment).

Respondents were asked whether they have worked remotely in the month preceding survey completion.

Those respondents who are in “hybrid” are those who indicated that some of their work hours were completed remotely and some were completed in person in the month prior to survey fielding.
**Implications**

An employed spouse contributes to the overall military family financial security level (see Financial Stability finding) and may be the difference in food insecurity amongst many active-duty families (see Food Insecurity finding). Additionally, active-duty spouse respondents who are employed have significantly higher mean relationship satisfaction scores than those respondents who are not employed, but want or need paid work (see Relationship Satisfaction finding). While child care costs can be difficult for already tight budgets, stepping out of the workforce due to child care affordability barriers may have long-term financial impacts on the family, including the accumulation of retirement savings.\(^{16,17}\)

**Limitations**

Active-duty spouse respondents were asked about their remote work statuses during the month preceding survey completion. Reported child care costs were asked in proportion to military spouse respondents’ personal income instead of proportional to the overall. Furthermore, the distribution of remote opportunities may not be equal by industry, which may have implications on respondent income and child care needs.

**Recommendations**

*More information in Recommendations Chapter of Comprehensive Report*

### For Congress

- Continue to explore funding and support for flexible child care options including a nanny-sharing\(^*\) pilot program, 24-hour and non-traditional hour child care centers, and subsidies for other flexible options.
- Prioritize funding for child care. Most pandemic-era stimulus funding for child care has already ceased. These programs not only kept many child care centers open, but would also help grow a career field badly in need of well-paid and well-supported employees.

### For the Department of Defense

- Continue and expand incentive, apprenticeship, and other workforce development programs for child care providers.
- Consider ways to simplify and incentivize the licensing and opening process for home-based child care programs serving military children.
- Reduce burdensome bureaucratic processes associated with child care where possible while ensuring safety, continuity, and success.

### For States/Localities

- Maintain expanded eligibility and affordability from post-pandemic levels to ensure child care continues to be accessible for low-income families.*

  - Many states expanded eligibility and increased affordability following the pandemic to ensure parents had the opportunity to re-enter the workforce and restart the economy. Continuing these programs will not only support the civilian population, but will also ensure access and affordability for military families.
  - Consider opportunities to reduce licensing burdens on child care centers by aggregating state and federal licensing requirements for military child care providers where possible.
  - Consider adopting or expanding a state Earned Income Tax Credit to support low-income families.

* Nanny-sharing refers to an arrangement where two or more families share the costs and services of a nanny to reduce costs and increase flexibility.
Endnotes


14  Leonhardt, M. (2023, February 9). Childcare is so expensive that educated women are dropping out of the workforce because they refuse to put more than 25% of their paycheck toward the cost. Fortune. https://fortune.com/2023/02/09/how-much-would-you-pay-for-childcare-for-your-career/?showAdminBar=true

