



Military Family Lifestyle Survey



Economic Stability

2022 Comprehensive Report

Spouse Employment

In collaboration with

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Veterans & Military Families

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Self-employment and remote work address military spouse needs for employment flexibility. Part-time work, despite the potential for underemployment, may have financial benefits for military families.

Despite continued Department of Defense efforts aimed at addressing military spouse employment challenges,¹ military spouse employment is once again a top-five military life issue for both active-duty spouses^a and service members in the 2022 Military Family Lifestyle Survey. While nearly two-thirds of employed^b active-duty spouse respondents (64%) are working full time^c with the remaining third (36%) working part time, the majority of employed active-duty spouse respondents report some levels of underemployment (62%).^d Furthermore, compared to similar civilian counterparts, active-duty spouse respondents are reporting lower participation rates in the labor force and experience unemployment levels three to four times greater.^e The unemployment rate disparity is even greater for active-duty spouse respondents of color (27%).^f

The bidirectional relationships between child care, service member job duties, and military spouse employment are longstanding^{2,3} and efforts to address challenges continue to be made.⁴ As such, remote work and flexible work have both previously been identified as solutions to these spouse employment concerns,^{5,6} and new evidence from this survey supports this as a solution.

Comparing Employment Statistics for Active-Duty Spouse Respondents in the MFLS and Women in the U.S. Population

	Active-Duty Spouse Respondents	Women, age 18-44, in the U.S. Population in 2021 ^g
Labor Force Participation Rate	65%	72%
Unemployment Rate	21%	6%

A Desire for Employment Flexibility

Employment flexibility, often characterized as a flexibility in work schedule and work location, is important to military spouses and possibly crucial for keeping military spouses employed.

For active-duty spouse respondents who are not currently working but want/need to, many cite service member job demands as a top barrier to their employment. Another challenge, the inability to maintain employment through a PCS/relocation, a well-documented employment challenge for military spouses,^{7,8,9} is demonstrated by

^a Unless otherwise noted, active-duty spouse respondents in this finding refers to those who indicated that they were not also an active-duty service member.

^b Working either part time (<35 hours per week) or full -time (35+ hours per week).

^c Full-time employment is defined as working 35 or more hours per week.

^d Underemployment is defined as one or more of the following option: I work fewer hours than I would like to, I am overqualified for my current position, My pay level is lower in my current position than in my previous position, My pay level is lower than it should be given my level of education, My pay level is lower than it should be given my work experience.

^e Civilian comparison group data come from statistics reported for women, age 18-44, in the Current Population Survey (CPS) 2021 Annual Average Employment Status (not seasonally adjusted).

^f Active-duty spouse 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.

^g Civilian comparison group data come from statistics reported for women, age 18-44, in the Current Population Survey (CPS) 2021 Annual Average Employment Status (not seasonally adjusted).

the two-thirds of active-duty spouse respondents who had been employed prior to their most recent relocation (68%) who also reported that they were not able to maintain their employment through that relocation.

Flexible work arrangements may act as a counterweight in helping military spouses maintain employment through PCS moves while balancing family responsibilities against their service member’s job demands and the requirements of their military lifestyle.

Impact of Flexible Work Schedule & Work Locations

More than half of employed active-duty spouse respondents (62%) agree that their work schedule is flexible, though the proportion of those in agreement increases for active-duty spouse respondents who completed all of their work hours remotely in the month preceding survey completion (82%). However, when it comes to flexible work locations, fewer active-duty spouse respondents indicate that this was available to them: only half (50%) agreed their work location was flexible.

As such, limited flexibility in work location may indicate a future lack of job portability that would allow spouses to maintain their employment through a relocation. Half of employed active-duty spouse respondents (50%) indicated they had some degree of portability with their job^h and 78% of those employed active-duty spouse

Table 1: Why Are You Not Employed Currently? Active-duty spouse respondents who are not currently working but want or need to work (n=643)	
Child care is too expensive	43%
My service member's daily work schedule is too long, making it difficult for me to balance work and home demands	39%
My service member's daily work schedule is too unpredictable	38%
Child care is unavailable or the waitlist is too long	33%

respondents with job portability agreed that their work location is flexible. Additionally, employed active-duty spouse respondents who indicated they completed all of their work hours remotely in the month preceding survey

“In order to work, I need full-time child care. **But child care was expensive and it didn’t make sense.** Next year both my kids will attend public school.”

Active-Duty Navy Spouse

completion (69%) reported job portability in contrast to only 18% of employed spouse respondents who completed all of their hours in person.

Limited job portability may contribute to additional family separation, beyond deployments and temporary duties that often separate military families. In fact, maintaining spouse employment is one of the reasons why half of active-duty family respondents who are geobatching (50%, n=109) have chosen to live separately.

Remote Work Among Military Spouses

Roughly two-thirds of employed active-duty spouse respondents (61%) had completed some of their work remotely in the month preceding survey completion. The majority (85%) of active-duty spouse respondents in career fields

^h Respondents answered “Yes, to any location in the world” or “Yes, but only in the United States” to the statement: I could take my job with me if my family relocated.

that offer remote opportunities but have not had the chance to work fully remote indicatedⁱ they would want to work remotely if given the opportunity.

While the demand for remote work remains high among both military spouses and working Americans,¹⁰ the availability for such positions continues to outpace the opportunity for job seekers and employed individuals. As a result, spouses may be turning to self-employment to attain the employment flexibility they need: a greater proportion of self-employed active-duty spouse respondents (54%) reported completing all of their hours remotely than their counterparts working only as paid employees for someone else (37%).

Turning to Self-Employment

Among employed active-duty spouse respondents, most (79%) are working as a paid employee for someone else while 11% are primarily self-employed/working for their own business. Interestingly, 10% are working both as a paid employee for someone else and working for their own business. The proportion of employed active-duty spouse respondents who are primarily self-employedⁱ is on par with the proportion of employed Americans who also reported to be self-employed according to the Current Population Survey (CPS) February 2022 data.¹¹ Self-employment may come with the benefits¹² of schedule flexibility, work/life balance, and self-fulfillment, in addition to providing opportunities for income. These benefits were also reflected by respondents' qualitative answers to the question "Can you share with us why you are currently self-employed or chose to operate your own business?" The most common responses were: flexibility/balance (29%), extra income (15%), portable career (15%), personal fulfillment/skills (13%), and child care challenges/ability to stay home with kids (10%).

"Can you share with us why you are currently self-employed or chose to operate your own business?"

"I couldn't find a stable career that allowed me to move around. **I couldn't get a job due to the unpredictability of our military life** and couldn't commit to long-term employment."

Active-Duty Army Spouse

"It's a way to make money while doing what I love and staying involved in my children's education."

Air Force Veteran and Active-Duty Spouse

"I like interacting with my customers on a personal level and when I initially began my business, **I needed employment that I could juggle around our kids' schedules.**"

Active-Duty Army Spouse

Possible Impact of Part-Time Work

A higher proportion of active-duty spouse respondents who work part time reported a sense of underemployment compared to those who are working full time. Nonetheless, an employed spouse, whether working full or part

ⁱ This includes active-duty spouse respondents who are working but have only been able to work in a hybrid or strictly in-person capacity and those who are currently not working but would like/need to.

^j Self-employed MFLS respondents are those who report they are working for their own business. The Bureau of Labor Statistics classifies self-employed workers as either incorporated or unincorporated. Incorporated workers, such as small-business owners, have established a legal corporation and typically employ others. Unincorporated workers, such as freelancers, have not established a corporation and often operate alone. The Current Population Survey (CPS) estimates of self-employment only include the unincorporated self-employed.

Spouse Employment

time, can provide financial benefits to their military family. The majority of active-duty spouse respondents who are employed full time (83%) report their family financial situation as “we are doing okay” or “we are living comfortably.” This rosy outlook declines slightly for respondents who are employed part time (74%).

Despite these differences, survey results suggest that there might be an overall financial benefit to families with a spouse working part time when compared to those who are not currently working but want or need to work. While the majority of active-duty spouses working part time report that their families are financially “doing okay” or “living comfortably”, fewer than half of active-duty spouse respondents who are not currently working but want or need to work (55%) report the same. Many of the inevitable facets of military life, such as frequent relocation, come with a financial cost for families,¹³ regardless of military spouses’ employment situation (see the Housing and Relocation finding for additional information). Families in stronger financial positions may be better equipped to handle the financial impacts of this military lifestyle without long-term consequences. Furthermore, spouses who are able to secure and sustain employment will also have an opportunity to build long-term wealth through retirement account or pension fund contributions.¹⁴

Overall, active-duty spouse respondents who are caught between glacially slow-moving progress to address the challenges that the military lifestyle poses to their immediate employment and family financial needs, are turning to part-time, remote, and/or self-employment opportunities to meet their needs for flexible employment.

Table 2: Underemployment by Hours Worked

Active-duty spouse respondents who are employed full-time or part-time

	Employed full time (35+ hours per week) (n=728)	Employed part time (<35 hours per week) (n=402)
I work fewer hours than I would like to	2%	37%
I am overqualified for my current position	24%	38%
My pay level is lower in my current position than in my previous position	18%	33%
My pay level is lower than it should be given my level of education	34%	40%
My pay level is lower than it should be given my work experience	35%	35%
None apply	45%	24%

Question Text: Do any of these circumstances describe your current employment? Please select all that apply.

Limitations

The status of remote work was only asked for “within the month prior” to survey fielding and cannot reflect the long-term remote work status of the respondent. Respondents were asked about their current financial situation, which may have changed in the time between survey fielding and report publication, especially given the complexity of the current economic environment.¹⁵ Even though this finding makes a distinction between those military spouses who work part time versus full time, we are not able to evaluate in the current survey why respondents chose part-time or full-time work. Furthermore, in the survey, we asked respondents about their family financial situation, which may or may not directly relate to a military spouse’s employment status.

Recommendations

For Employers

- Expand part-time employment opportunities, recruit military spouses, and provide flexible benefits to part-time employees.
- Consider programs that allow military spouses to transfer their employment to a new location when they are required to PCS.
- Remove barriers to remote work for military spouses and dependents by implementing the remote-work policies established in 2020-2022.

For Congress

- Expand on the progress of the Military Spouse Retirement provisions that passed as part of the Secure 2.0 Act in 2022 by encouraging employers and small business owners to provide benefits to military spouses working part time and more benefits to military spouses working full time.
- Encourage employers to offer Cafeteria Benefits Plans (IRS 125 plans or Flexible Benefits plans) to military spouses through tax credits and other incentives.
- Remove more barriers to sustaining a business during a PCS, such as more targeted reimbursement opportunities for military spouse entrepreneurs.

For the Department of Defense

- **Remove barriers to remote work for military spouses, especially those actively undergoing PCS moves.***
 - Prioritize pilot programs for flexible child care and funding for existing child care programs. (See also Child Care recommendations.)
 - Coordinate PCS orders and the remote work requests process for military spouses employed by the DOD.
 - Provide flexible hours and leave options to employees.
- Expand high-paying and career part-time employment opportunities for military spouses working for the DOD.
- Educate PCSing military families on the opportunities for military spouses employed by federal agencies to apply for remote work status.

For States/Localities

- Implement and enforce the Military Spouse Licensing Act to best serve military spouses (and personnel) who meet all of the requirements set forth in the provisions. Consider entering into licensing reciprocity compacts.
- Encourage Homeowners Associations (HOAs) to make an exception for military spouses to maintain or run a business from a residence.
- Create exceptions to remote work rules for military spouses based on best practices established during the remote-work era of 2020-2022. For example, military spouses in the state of Washington who work in state government can work remotely when they PCS.

*More information in Recommendations Chapter of Comprehensive Report

Endnotes

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