In collaboration with

2022 Comprehensive Report
Family Relationships

Funding for the 2022 Military Family Lifestyle Survey is provided through the generosity of our presenting sponsor The USAA Foundation, Inc. Supporting sponsors include JP Morgan Chase & Co., Lockheed Martin, CSX, AARP, Craig Newmark Philanthropies, Macy’s Inc., BAE Systems, Northrop Grumman, American Council of Life Insurers, and Pratt & Whitney.
While military life experiences such as PCS and family separation may be stressful, everyday life stressors of spouse employment, access to child care, and financial security have significant ties to relationship satisfaction.

There is a common concern that military marriages are at greater risk for divorce and other negative outcomes than civilian marriages. While existing data makes it difficult to compare these two groups’ divorce rates, most reports show that across the U.S. military divorce rates have stayed at 3% since 2014, which is close to the U.S. civilian population when demographic differences are controlled. Of this year’s married or partnered active-duty spouse respondents, 86% had high satisfaction with their current relationship, further showing the status of military marriages is more stable than perceived.

Relationship satisfaction is a key component in overall well-being and mission readiness. Current research shows that greater relationship satisfaction can decrease PTSD symptoms, depressive symptoms, comorbidity with hazardous drinking, and overall risk for suicide. However, some life events and circumstances place more stress on relationships. The cycle of deployment and its impact on family well-being is well documented, but there is room for further research on the impact of separations due to military service, relocations, financial stress, spouse employment, and access to child care on relationship satisfaction for military families.

Among active-duty spouse respondents to the 2022 MFLS, there were only statistically significant differences in relationship satisfaction in subgroups related to spouse employment, access to child care, and financial security. There were no statistically significant differences in mean relationship satisfaction scores for married or partnered active-duty spouse respondents who have been separated (due to military service, including deployments, travel, etc.) for six months or more in the year prior to survey fielding compared to those who had been apart five months or fewer, or between those who have PCSed in the 12 months before survey fielding and those who had not PCSed.

Family Relationships

Military Family Lifestyle Survey

*Relationship satisfaction was measured using the Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS), which asks respondents 7 questions about their relationship on a scale from 1 to 5, with varying accompanying written choices (e.g., poorly to extremely well, never to very often). Two items are reverse scored and then all seven items are summed (only for respondents who answered all items). The sum scores can be categorized into low satisfaction (7-14), average satisfaction (15-21), and high satisfaction (22-35).
Employment

Military spouse unemployment and underemployment have been consistent challenges faced by military families. In response to this year’s question about employment status, 29% of active-duty spouse respondents reported they were not employed, but wanted or needed paid employment (see Spouse Employment finding for additional information). Active-duty spouse respondents who are employed (either part time or full time) have statistically significantly higher mean relationship satisfaction scores ($M=28.9$, $SD=5.9$) than those who are not employed but want or need paid work ($M=27.8$, $SD=6.1$).

Child Care

Access to child care has also been an ongoing challenge faced by military families. This year, 69% of active-duty spouse respondents stated that they need child care with varying levels of frequency. Of those respondents who need child care, 33% are not able to find child care that works for their current situation (see Child Care Spotlight for additional information). Active-duty spouse respondents who need child care and are always or sometimes able to find care that meets their needs have statistically significantly higher mean relationship satisfaction scores ($M=28.6$, $SD=5.9$) compared to those who cannot find child care that meets their needs ($M=27.2$, $SD=6.5$).

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Table 1: Mean Relationship Satisfaction Score by Life Event

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Life Event</th>
<th>Yes (part or full time)</th>
<th>No, but want or need paid employment</th>
<th>Yes (always or sometimes)</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Are you currently employed?c</td>
<td>28.9, $SD=5.9$ (n=1,044)</td>
<td>27.8, $SD=6.1$ (n=782)</td>
<td>28.6, $SD=5.9$ (n=782)</td>
<td>27.2, $SD=6.5$ (n=398)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am able to find child care that works for my current situation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How is your family doing financially?</td>
<td>29.5, $SD=5.6$ (n=1,574)</td>
<td>26.7, $SD=6.6$ (n=607)</td>
<td>28.9, $SD=5.6$ (n=941)</td>
<td>28.5, $SD=6.2$ (n=1,289)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did you complete a PCS move in the past 12 months?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In the past 12 months, how many total months have you or your family been separated from the family members you typically live with due to military service (include deployments, travel, etc.)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 months apart or less</td>
<td>28.8, $SD=5.9$ (n=1,827)</td>
<td>28.5, $SD=6.3$ (n=399)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-12 months apart</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Relationship satisfaction was measured using the Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS), which asks respondents 7 questions about their relationship on a scale from 1 to 5, with varying accompanying written choices (e.g., poorly to extremely well, never to very often). Two items are reverse scored and then all seven items are summed (only for respondents who answered all items). The sum scores can be categorized into low satisfaction (7-14), average satisfaction (15-21), and high satisfaction (22-35).

Statistically significant difference but equal variances not assumed.

This excludes active-duty spouse respondents who indicated they were also active-duty service members.

Statistically significant difference but equal variances not assumed.
Financial Security

Lastly, some military families are experiencing financial stress. This year, 72% of active-duty spouse respondents stated that they were “living comfortably” or “doing okay” when asked how their family was doing financially (see Financial Security finding for more information). Those spouse respondents who reported their family was “living comfortably” or “doing okay” financially have statistically significantly higher mean relationship satisfaction scores ($M=29.5$, $SD=5.6$) than those who selected “we are just getting by” or “we are finding it difficult to get by,” ($M=26.7$, $SD=6.6$).

Relationship satisfaction is an important component of the overall well-being and mission readiness of military families. While military life experiences such as a PCS and family separation are often viewed as potential challenges for a relationship, in this year’s sample of active-duty spouse respondents, it is the everyday stressors of spouse employment, access to child care, and financial security that are significantly connected to relationship satisfaction. In order to better support military families and further mitigate other negative outcomes, it is imperative to provide child care and career support for military spouses as well.

Blended Families Spotlight

Fifteen percent of active-duty family respondents with children under age 20 are blended families, here defined as families where one or both spouses/partners have children from a previous relationship. Blended families have unique life experiences that can impact a relationship. When asked, “What are some of the challenges or advantages you’ve experienced as a blended family in the military?” active-duty blended family respondents listed the following top challenges: visitation challenges (19%), ability to create/maintain relationship (16%), and parenting style differences (13%). However, 16% stated there were few or no challenges at all. Similar to other active-duty families, blended active-duty families also face challenges with spouse employment, child care, and financial well-being with 37% of active-duty spouse respondents in a blended family reporting not being employed, but wanting or needing paid employment; 42% of active-duty blended family respondents report needing child care and not being able to find care that works for their current situation; 59% of active-duty blended family respondents report their financial situation as “living comfortably or “doing okay.”
Limitations

Literature on the impacts of relationship satisfaction on mental health and other outcomes does not utilize the same tool for measuring relationship satisfaction as this survey. This data can only demonstrate that there are differences in the reported relationship satisfaction of married or partnered active-duty spouse respondents across subgroups defined by employment status, access to child care, or perceived family financial situation. These data do not demonstrate any causation or directionality. The comparison groups for each of the variables of interest were often recalculated into groups defined by the researchers. There could be differences between other potential groupings of the comparison variables than those used here. For example, when looking at relationship satisfaction and separation due to military service there may be a difference between respondents who reported no time apart and those with any time apart from their service member, but for this finding, the response options were grouped into six or more months apart and less than five months apart. Respondents who indicated they needed child care were asked to select one of the following options of “always,” “sometimes,” and “no” for the survey question: “I am able to find child care that works for my current situation.” Since these options were not defined, some respondents living in the same situation may have selected different answers. For example, someone who cannot always find child care may have selected “sometimes” while others may have selected “no.” The Blended Families spotlight respondent group is a subset of all active-duty family respondents and cannot be compared to the active-duty spouse respondent data referenced throughout the finding.

Recommendations

For Congress

- Set consistent national standards regarding the inclusion/exclusion of benefits as income for the purposes of calculating child support payments to clarify policies for blended families.

For the Department of Defense

- Encourage service members and their families to use DOD-affiliated programs — including Military Family Life Consultants (MFLCs), Chaplain programs, etc. — that include lessons, tips, and best practices for having difficult conversations, including about finances, spouse employment, child care, and more.*

- Conduct a regular, centralized communications campaign to educate military families on the services available to support strong family relationships, learn more about improving family relationships, and understand how to address unhealthy behaviors. Canada’s "Healthy Relationships" campaign9 for Canadian Armed Forces members, Veterans, and their families is a proven program that DoD can build upon.

For Nonprofits/Communities

- Build military cultural competency training and practices into programming to ensure resources are not only available, but also useful to military- and Veteran-connected families.

- Include family readiness officers/assistants across the DOD in informal military spouse groups to ensure accurate dissemination of information and resources.

*More information in Recommendations Chapter of Comprehensive Report
Endnotes


