



# Campaign for Inclusion Research 2022: Building Bridges to Belonging for Military Families of Color

Funding for the Campaign for Inclusion Research 2022: Building Bridges to Belonging for Military Families of Color Report is provided through the generosity of our sponsors JP Morgan Chase & Co., Lockheed Martin, Booz Allen, CSX, Major League Baseball, AARP, and Leidos.

Data for this special report is drawn from the 2022 Military Family Lifestyle Survey, which was generously funded by our presenting sponsor The USAA Foundation, Inc.

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 **BLUE STAR FAMILIES**

In collaboration with

 **Syracuse University**

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

JP Morgan Chase & Co., Founding Partner

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Blue Star Families was founded with the mission to strengthen military families by building robust communities of support. Through our research and data, we identify the greatest needs within the military family community and create programs and solutions that will empower military families to thrive, such as career development tools, local community events, and caregiver support. Since its inception in 2009, Blue Star Families has engaged tens of thousands of volunteers and served more than 1.5 million military family members. With Blue Star Families, military families can find answers to their challenges anywhere they are.

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### Acknowledgments

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This report and the insights therein are made possible by many contributors, and Blue Star Families' Applied Research team remains deeply grateful for their support. The most important contributors to this research are **the military- and Veteran-connected family members who provided their voices by completing the Military Family Lifestyle Survey**. Thank you for the time spent sharing your stories and experiences, and for the service you and your families have provided to our nation.

This report would also not be possible without the support of partner organizations and others in the military community who shared and encouraged participation in the survey fielding. For more information on survey partners, please see the 2022 Military Family Lifestyle Survey Comprehensive Report.<sup>1</sup> Many of these same partner organizations and other subject matter experts also generously provided insight, guidance, feedback, and direction over the development, execution, analysis, and writing of this survey report. Blue Star Families is grateful for their support.

### Introduction

As the annual Military Family Lifestyle Survey signals, supporting military families is essential to sustaining a healthy All-Volunteer Force. Military families of color, in particular, face additional challenges related to racism and discrimination which can further impact their sense of belonging, likelihood to recommend service, and likelihood to recommend certain civilian communities. Increasing recruiting challenges along with generational and demographic shifts will require the armed forces to further address issues related to racial and ethnic discrimination as it seeks to recruit service members. More importantly, the increasing civilian-military gap will also require intentional engagement between the military and civilian communities to ensure all military families feel accepted and included, wherever they serve.

Last year, Blue Star Families launched the groundbreaking Blue Star Families' Social Impact Research 2021: The Diverse Experiences of Military & Veteran Families of Color report. This comprehensive report described the varied experiences of currently serving and Veteran families of color. While several findings pointed to positive economic, educational, and health benefits of serving in the military, another point was also clear: military and Veteran families of color were experiencing racially and ethnically motivated discrimination across the country, across the lifespan, and in both military and civilian communities, and these experiences could impact their military career decisions. In fact, active-duty family respondents of color make decisions about military life based on perceptions of racism and fear for their family's safety in communities.

To gain further understanding of how these experiences impact military families and how to set the conditions for families to feel a sense of belonging, a series of questions was embedded in the 2022 Military Family Lifestyle Survey. Data collected in that survey effort provided the basis for this report, which has three aims:

- To explore the extent to which exposure to racially/ethnically motivated discriminatory behaviors impact belonging, willingness to recommend local civilian communities, and willingness to recommend military service.
- To highlight community climate attributes that contribute to and/or undermine military families' sense of belonging to and willingness to recommend local civilian communities.
- To offer action-oriented solutions to local community and installation leaders to help increase defense community cohesion.

Unraveling some of the attributes that support military families' sense of belonging can inform both policy and programming that will build resilience for all military families, and benefit the civilian communities in which they live. While solutions are complex and varied as the experiences of our survey participants, they are vital to the sustainability of the All-Volunteer Force and the well-being of service members and their families.



### Experiences of racial/ethnic discrimination appear to impact military family well-being, civilian communities, and military recruitment and readiness.

Military families of color continue to experience incidents of racial/ethnic discrimination in military and civilian communities. Fewer families experience it in military communities, indicating that the military community may have lessons to share with their civilian counterparts. Those who experience discrimination in the civilian community are likely to experience it in the military community as well. Most importantly, most do not disclose these incidents to either military or civilian officials. Furthermore, these experiences of discrimination impact families' sense of belonging to the local civilian community, the likelihood to recommend the community to other families like theirs, and the likelihood to recommend military service to their young family members. It is crucial to address discrimination and encourage inclusivity in civilian communities to support the well-being of active-duty families and the potential future All-Volunteer Force. Furthermore, doing so may provide economic benefits to communities. In an open-ended response, nearly 1 in 10 respondents of color reported that having a sense of belonging to the community made them want to stay or return to the area for their next assignment or after military retirement — an opportunity for economic growth for the community and state.<sup>2</sup>



### Understanding of the military lifestyle, friendship, and safety are key contributors for all families, but for military families of color, a community that embraces diversity is also important — more so than for their white peers.

Developing a sense of belonging to the community is complex and influenced by multiple variables. An exploration of state-level data revealed that there was no single state characteristic — such as racial/ethnic diversity, racial equity in the state, the proportion of service members in the state, or number of military installations, etc., — that was clearly associated with a sense of belonging to the civilian community. However, one critical variable was connected — the perception that local civilian community members have understanding, awareness, appreciation, support, and respect for military and Veteran families (called “military family lifestyle cultural competence” or MFLCC in this report).<sup>a</sup>

For most military families of color, feeling the local civilian community understands, appreciates, and respects their military community is an important contributor to a sense of belonging to the local civilian community.

<sup>a</sup> On a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The mean score was calculated for the five items. Respondents who skipped and/or selected “I don’t know” for any of the five items were excluded from these analyses. A higher score indicates greater perceived military family lifestyle cultural competency in their current civilian community. Blue Star Families’ [2019 Military Family Lifestyle Survey Comprehensive Report](#)

The top contributors to belonging cited by military families of color were: “Most people understood, were aware of, appreciated, respected, and were supportive of local military and Veteran families,” followed by having “friends and people to ask for a favor,” a “safe community,” and “my children had friends.” However, for families



of color, another important contributor was that “community members embraced diversity.” The opposite was also true; the top attributes that undermined a sense of belonging for military families of color were: “I did not have friends and people to ask for a favor,” “community members did not embrace diversity,” and “community members did not hold similar beliefs and values as me.”

Where families choose to live may also impact their sense of belonging to the community. Most military families prefer civilian housing over military housing, but preferences vary by income and race/ethnicity. Military families who live in civilian housing have a significantly higher sense of belonging to the community than their peers who live in military housing.

### Building bridges to belonging requires collaboration “across the fence line” with local communities.

People build belonging through shared connections with others — belonging and social connections protect against social isolation, particularly for multiply marginalized groups.<sup>3</sup> When military family members have shared interests or experiences, that may help them build those connections to belonging. For some military families, having others in the community who have a shared military experience or appreciation can help them feel a sense of belonging. Some military families may connect with civilians in their communities through parenthood — having children the same age or in the same schools may bolster belonging.<sup>4</sup> Service members may connect to others through their military service, and military spouses may connect to others through their employment. Family members may connect with others in the community through shared interests or hobbies. These commonalities can serve as bridges connecting military families to the civilians in their community when the military lifestyle is a small and unique part of the American social fabric.

For military families of color, diversity and military family lifestyle cultural competence in the local civilian community are two important connections that may, together, support the development of a sense of belonging and increase their willingness to recommend that community to other families like theirs. In communities that lack diversity, the military connection (perceiving that the community members understand, respect, and appreciate the sacrifices military and Veteran families make) may be enough to support belonging. Conversely, in communities that lack a strong military presence or cultural competence, diversity in the community may



help military families of color feel belonging. However, when there is little diversity and little military cultural competence, the other commonalities may be too weak to support feeling a sense of belonging.

To continue building a sense of belonging and resilience between military families and their local civilian communities, communities should continue to build bridges connecting military and civilians, engaging both to build connections and understanding. Localities and regions — including Northern Virginia and the Greater San Antonio Region — have stepped up to support their military communities. States have not only engaged in efforts to diversify and expand opportunities to state government, but have also worked to offer resources to military families. The federal government — through military- and Veteran-oriented agencies and others — has also made strides forward to serve our nation’s military, Veterans, and their families. The answer to building belonging for military families of color may lie in creating multiple connections. Military installations and communities can continue to build bridges “over the fence line” to increase military cultural competence in the community and create opportunities for military families to find and connect with others who share some of their important commonalities — whether those commonalities are military service, race/ethnicity, cultural identity, parenthood, shared interests or hobbies, or another commonality. All communities can build these bridges to belonging. The Recommendations chapter of this report includes resources for all of the groups mentioned here, as well as best practices and innovative solutions for moving forward together.



**Active-duty family respondents of color experienced racial/ethnic discrimination in both civilian and military communities, but a greater proportion experienced it in their current civilian community; most do not disclose incidents to military or civilian officials.**

**Most respondents say they have not experienced racial discrimination in their current military/Veteran community.**

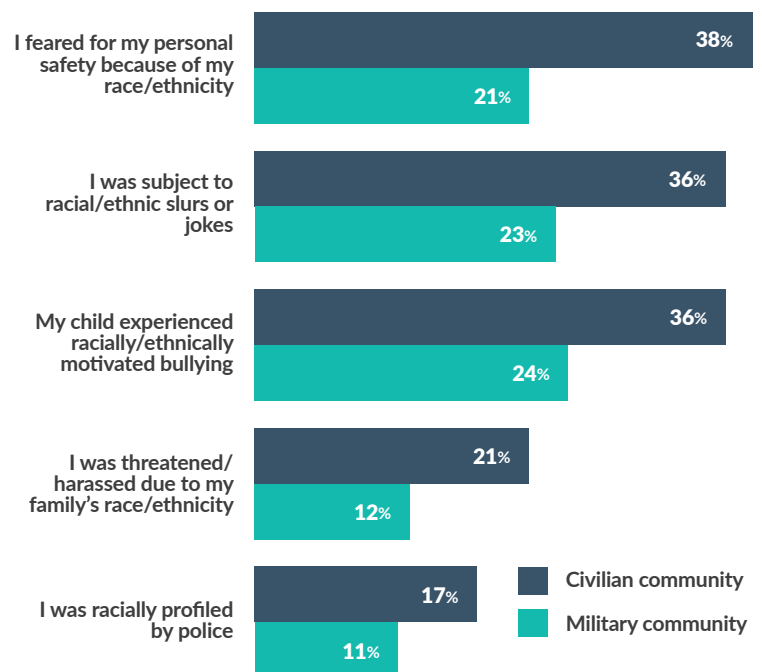
Consistent with findings from previous Blue Star Families' research,<sup>5,b</sup> half of all active-duty family respondents of color indicated they had not experienced any of the five incidents of racial discrimination mentioned (child experienced racially/ethnically motivated bullying, being racially profiled by police, subject to racial/ethnic slurs or jokes, feared for personal safety, threatened or harassed) in their *current* civilian community;<sup>c</sup> 70% said the same of their *current* military/Veteran community. However, reported rates of discrimination in this survey may be understated due to sample demographics and question wording. Nearly half (45%) of active-duty family respondents of color reported PCSing within the year prior to survey fielding, limiting the time they had to experience discrimination at their "current location." Recent military racial equity interventions<sup>6-12</sup> may also be contributing to the fewer reported instances of discrimination in military than civilian communities — future research is needed to confirm whether or not this is a trend.

**Nearly twice as many active-duty family respondents of color reported they feared for their personal safety due to their race/ethnicity in the civilian community (38%) than in their military community (21%).**

A greater proportion of active-duty family respondents of color report all forms of racial discrimination surveyed in civilian than military communities, echoing findings from the 2021 Military Family Lifestyle Survey (Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Experiences of Racial/Ethnic Discrimination in Civilian Community**

Active-duty family respondents of color



Question text: "Considering interactions in your military OR civilian community, about how often have you experienced each of the following at your current location?" Respondents reported experiencing the selected incident at least once or twice per year. Percentages exclude "I don't know" and "does not apply" responses.

<sup>b</sup> In the 2021 MFLS, respondents were asked a different set of questions than in the present report, "Have you experienced racial discrimination in the military community?" and "Have you experienced racial discrimination in the civilian community?"

<sup>c</sup> In this survey, respondents were asked about specific experiences in both their current civilian and military/Veteran communities. Responses were collapsed into a dichotomous variable with having ever experienced (selecting at least "once or twice a year") any type of discrimination listed, or never. Respondents who selected "does not apply" or "I don't know" to any of the five items were excluded from analyses. See Methodology section for more details.

Active-duty family respondents of color who experienced multiple and/or frequent racially/ethnically motivated incidents in either their current civilian or military community were highly likely to experience racial discrimination in the other community. In the civilian community, the most commonly reported experiences were fearing for their personal safety due to their race/ethnicity (38%), followed by being subject to racial/ethnic slurs or jokes (36%), and reporting that their child experienced racially/ethnically motivated bullying (36%). In the military community, the most commonly reported experiences were reporting their child(ren) had experienced racially/ethnically motivated bullying (24%), being subject to racial/ethnic slurs or jokes (23%), or fearing for their personal safety due to their race/ethnicity (21%).

### Police profiling may contribute to safety concerns, particularly in civilian communities.

About 1 in 5 active-duty family respondents of color (17%) report being racially profiled by police in their civilian communities, while 1 in 10 (11%) say the same of their military community. Though police profiling was the least often reported experience of racial discrimination in civilian and military communities, it has wide-ranging effects on personal and community health.<sup>13</sup> Community distrust of the police hinders public safety and — in the context of the military — can harm national security.

### Active-duty family respondents of color report their children are experiencing racially/ethnically motivated bullying, both in military and civilian communities.

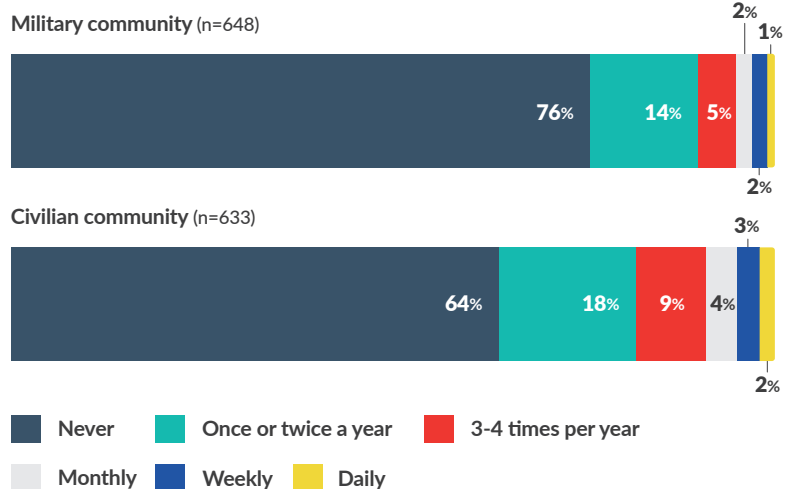
Experiences of discrimination are not limited to the service member or spouse but also directly and indirectly impact their children. Research suggests that military children may experience bullying at higher rates than their nonmilitary peers. Those who experience deployments and relocations — common military life experiences — may be at greater risk for bullying.<sup>14,15</sup>

Additionally, bias-based bullying — including racially/ethnically motivated bullying — may cause more harmful impacts on children than general bullying.<sup>16,17</sup> The confluence of these factors for military children of color and military children from multiracial/multiethnic families may result in higher rates of racially/ethnically motivated bullying.

In response to the item, “My child experienced racially/ethnically motivated bullying,” one-third (36%) of active-duty family respondents of color selected any option from “once or a twice a year” to “daily” in reference to their current civilian community, and 24% said the same referencing their military community at

### Figure 2: Child(ren)’s Experiences of Racially/Ethnically Motivated Bullying

Active-duty family respondents of color



Question text: “Considering interactions in your military OR civilian community, about how often have you experienced each of the following at your current location?” — My child experienced racially/ethnically motivated bullying.”<sup>d</sup> Percentages exclude “I don’t know” and “does not apply” responses.

<sup>d</sup> See Methodology section for more details.

their current location.<sup>d</sup> These proportions varied across racial/ethnic groups — with nearly half (48%) of Black active-duty family respondents and one-third of Asian (35%) and Hispanic/Latino/a/x (32%) active-duty family respondents indicating their child has experienced racially/ethnically motivated bullying in their current civilian community.<sup>e</sup> These proportions may still be underreported as children may not know or tell their parents when they experience racially/ethnically motivated bullying.

### A greater proportion of Black/African American active-duty family respondents, service member respondents of color, and active-duty family respondents of color in the Northeast and Midwest regions report experiencing racial discrimination.

In line with previous DOD research,<sup>18</sup> more Black/African American active-duty family respondents report experiencing all forms of racial discrimination surveyed in their civilian communities, followed by American Indian/Alaskan Native respondents, than the other racial/ethnic groups. These challenges are infrequently reported by white active-duty family respondents not in multiracial/multiethnic families, with 8 in 10 selecting “never” for all of the surveyed forms of racial discrimination in their current civilian community and 9 in 10 saying the same of their current military community. A greater proportion of active-duty service members of color report experiencing all types of racial discrimination in both their military and civilian communities than active-duty spouses of color.<sup>f</sup> However, differences in experiences of discrimination in the civilian and military communities may be influenced by whether the respondent primarily resided in military-provided or civilian housing.

**Table 1: Reported Racial Discrimination in Current Civilian Community, by Race/Ethnicity\*\***  
Active-duty family respondents

	Black/African American	American Indian/Alaskan Native	Asian	Hispanic/Latino/a/x	White Respondents Not in Multiracial/Multiethnic Families
I was subject to racial/ethnic slurs or jokes.	<b>44%</b> (n=189)	<b>40%</b> (n=85)	<b>43%</b> (n=203)	<b>34%</b> (n=350)	<b>10%</b> (n=1,605)
My child experienced racially/ethnically motivated bullying.	<b>48%</b> (n=164)	<b>47%</b> (n=70)	<b>35%</b> (n=161)	<b>32%</b> (n=281)	<b>13%</b> (n=1,372)
I was threatened or harassed due to my/my family's race/ethnicity.	<b>29%</b> (n=194)	<b>28%</b> (n=86)	<b>23%</b> (n=202)	<b>18%</b> (n=343)	<b>7%</b> (n=1,627)
I was racially profiled by police.	<b>30%</b> (n=183)	<b>19%</b> (n=77)	<b>12%</b> (n=185)	<b>16%</b> (n=323)	<b>2%</b> (n=1,582)
I feared for my personal safety because of my race/ethnicity.	<b>53%</b> (n=200)	<b>45%</b> (n=88)	<b>41%</b> (n=210)	<b>32%</b> (n=356)	<b>14%</b> (n=1,647)

Question text: “Considering interactions in your military OR civilian community, about how often have you experienced each of the following at your current location?”<sup>g</sup>

\*Reported experiencing the selected incident at least once or twice per year. Percentages exclude “I don’t know” and “does not apply” responses.

<sup>g</sup>See Methodology for how racial/ethnic groups were defined and aggregated.

Experiences of discrimination also varied by region of the country, with greater proportions of active-duty family respondents of color in the Midwest and Northeast reporting instances of discrimination at least once or twice a year,

<sup>e</sup> Respondents of color in this report 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.

<sup>f</sup> Among active-duty service member of color respondents, 61% answered all five items and reported experiencing at least one surveyed form of racial discrimination at least once or twice a year in their civilian community (n=95) and 45% in their military community (n=101). Active-duty spouse respondents of color said the same, 48% (n=457) and 27% (n=488), respectively.

though these samples are smaller and may be more easily skewed than the samples in the South and West. Previous Blue Star Families' research found that 20% of active-duty family of color respondents were "not at all comfortable" with the idea of being stationed in the South, compared to just 3% who were uncomfortable being stationed in the West.<sup>g</sup> However, in this year's survey and sample, active-duty family members of color who currently live in the South and West report similar proportions of racial discrimination instances surveyed in their military and civilian communities,<sup>h</sup> and proportions in both regions were lower than the proportion of those who experienced instances of discrimination in the Midwest and Northeast regions. Experiences of discrimination vary within communities, states, and regions, and perceptions of a region, state, or community may not align with respondents' experiences. Communities in the South region may benefit from publicizing community resources and positive stories from resident military families of color to reduce the perception of disproportionately unwelcoming environments.

**Table 2: Reported Racial Discrimination in Civilian Community, by Region\*\***

Active-duty family respondents of color

	Northeast	Midwest	South	West
I was subject to racial/ethnic slurs or jokes.	<b>39%</b> (n=76)	<b>42%</b> (n=62)	<b>34%</b> (n=334)	<b>34%</b> (n=235)
My child experienced racially/ethnically motivated bullying.	<b>52%</b> (n=61)	<b>37%</b> (n=51)	<b>35%</b> (n=272)	<b>29%</b> (n=187)
I was threatened or harassed due to my/my family's race/ethnicity.	<b>34%</b> (n=74)	<b>22%</b> (n=65)	<b>18%</b> (n=332)	<b>19%</b> (n=230)
I was racially profiled by police.	<b>21%</b> (n=72)	<b>16%</b> (n=56)	<b>14%</b> (n=311)	<b>18%</b> (n=217)
I feared for my personal safety because of my race/ethnicity.	<b>44%</b> (n=80)	<b>41%</b> (n=64)	<b>39%</b> (n=340)	<b>36%</b> (n=241)

Question text: "Considering interactions in your CIVILIAN community, about how often have you experienced each of the following at your current location?"

\*Reported experiencing the selected incident at least once or twice per year. Percentages exclude "I don't know" and "does not apply" responses.

\*\*Northeast Region included: CT, DE, ME, MD, MA, NH, NJ, NY, PA, RI, and VT. Midwest Region included: IL, IN, IA, KS, MI, MN, MO, NE, ND, OH, SD, and WI. South Region included: AL, AR, DC, FL, GA, KY, LA, MS, NC, OK, SC, TN, TX, VA, and WV. West Region included: AK, AZ, CA, CO, HI, ID, MT, NV, NM, OR, UT, WA, and WY. Other regions included: Outside the Country, American Samoa, Guam, Puerto Rico, and Other U.S. territories.

## Regardless of who experiences racial discrimination, most respondents do not disclose it to military or civilian officials.

Despite considerable racial discrimination experienced by active-duty family respondents of color, only 16% of those who had experienced at least one incident in their current civilian community said they shared information about the instance (or instances) with civilian and/or military officials. Of those who had experienced at least one incident in their current military community, 18% said they had disclosed the instance (or instances) to civilian and/or military officials. One-third of service members of color respondents to the 2021 Diverse Experiences of Military & Veteran Families of Color report<sup>19</sup> indicated they experienced retaliation after speaking out about discrimination, which may be one reason for respondents' lack of reporting. A greater proportion of active-duty service member respondents of color shared information about instances of racial/ethnic discrimination in both their civilian and military communities with civilian and/or military officials than spouse respondents of color.

<sup>g</sup> Respondents were not asked why they were not comfortable being stationed in the South. Additionally, the sample in this survey report is not the same sample as previous research.

<sup>h</sup> There was no more than a 6% difference between experiences of all surveyed forms of racial discrimination for respondents living in the South and West.



## Active-duty family respondents of color who experienced racial/ethnic discrimination in their current civilian and military communities have significantly less belonging to their civilian communities than those who reported they had never experienced any of the surveyed incidents of racial/ethnic discrimination.

While many active-duty family respondents of color did not experience instances of racial/ethnic discrimination in their current civilian or military communities, those who did report experiences of racial/ethnic discrimination had significantly lower mean belonging scores. A sense of belonging is critical for military families, as it is inversely correlated with social isolation, and is tied to various positive health outcomes.<sup>20</sup> Active-duty family respondents who experienced at least one incident of racial/ethnic discrimination in their civilian community (at least once or twice per year) have significantly lower levels of belonging to their civilian community than their counterparts who had never experienced such incidents in their current civilian community (see Table 3).

Additionally, experiences of discrimination may have broader impacts on belonging — outside of the context in which they occurred. Experiencing discrimination in the military context may be related to respondents' general sense of belonging, including the civilian community. Active-duty family respondents of color who experienced at least one incident of racial/ethnic discrimination (at least once or twice per year) in their military community had significantly lower levels of belonging<sup>i</sup> to their current civilian community than their counterparts who never experienced such incidents in their current military community (see Table 3).

**Table 3: Mean Sense of Belonging to the Local Civilian Community, by Experience of Racial/Ethnic Discrimination\***

Mean of four items, range: 1 (Strongly disagree) — 7 (Strongly agree)  
Active-duty family respondents of color

Military Community**		Civilian Community**	
Never experienced any of the five instances in current <u>military</u> community	Experienced <b>at least one instance</b> of discrimination in current <u>military</u> community	Never experienced any of the five instances in current <u>civilian</u> community	Experienced <b>at least one instance</b> of discrimination in current <u>civilian</u> community
4.1 SD=1.6 (n=397)	3.4 SD=1.7 (n=169)	4.1 SD=1.5 (n=267)	3.6 SD=1.6 (n=268)

\*\*Denotes statistically significant difference.

\*\*Denotes statistically significant difference, but may be the result of unequal variances or disparate sample sizes.

<sup>i</sup> Belonging to current civilian community was measured using four items (such as "I feel welcome in my local civilian community") on a seven-point Likert scale with 1 being "Strongly disagree" and 7 being "Strongly agree." A mean score was calculated for the four items. Respondents who skipped any of the four items and/or selected "I don't know" or "does not apply" were excluded from these analyses. A higher score indicates greater belonging to their current civilian community.

## Impacts on Community Experience

Across almost every type of discriminatory experience surveyed, respondents who had experienced at least one instance of racial/ethnic discrimination in military and civilian communities had *significantly* lower belonging to civilian communities (see Table 4).

**Table 4: Mean Belonging to the Local Civilian Community, by Type of Discrimination Experience**

Mean of four items, range: 1 (Strongly disagree) – 7 (Strongly agree)  
Active-duty family respondents of color

Military Community		Civilian Community	
Did not experience in current <u>military</u> community	Experienced at least one instance in current <u>military</u> community	Did not experience in current <u>civilian</u> community	Experienced at least one instance in current <u>civilian</u> community
My child experienced racially/ethnically motivated bullying.			
4.0 SD=1.6 (n=477)*	3.3 SD=1.6 (n=146)*	4.0 SD=1.6 (n=390)*	3.5 SD=1.6 (n=221)*
I was racially profiled by the police.			
3.8 SD=1.6 (n=621)^	3.5 SD=1.6 (n=75)^	3.9 SD=1.6 (n=573)*	3.5 SD=1.6 (n=122)*
I was subject to racial/ethnic slurs or jokes.			
3.9 SD=1.6 (n=553)*	3.5 SD=1.6 (n=170)*	4.0 SD=1.5 (n=471)**	3.4 SD=1.6 (n=277)**
I feared for my personal safety because of my race/ethnicity.			
3.9 SD=1.6 (n=581)*	3.3 SD=1.6 (n=152)*	5.0 SD=1.6 (n=474)*	3.4 SD=1.6 (n=293)*
I was threatened or harassed due to my/my family's race/ethnicity.			
3.9 SD=1.6 (n=629)**	3.3 SD=1.6 (n=85)**	3.9 SD=1.6 (n=583)*	3.5 SD=1.5 (n=160)*

Notes: 1) For these analyses, the five incidents were summed and dichotomized to categorize respondents who either had or had not experienced racial discrimination in each community. To do so, all respondents who selected "never" for all five listed incidents were re-coded as "never experienced racial discrimination in their community." Respondents who selected an answer choice ranging from "once or twice a year" to "daily" for any one of the five items were re-coded as "have experienced." Respondents who selected "I don't know" or "does not apply" to any of the items were excluded from these analyses. 2) Belonging to current civilian community was measured using four items (such as "I feel welcome in my local civilian community") on a seven-point Likert scale with 1 being "Strongly disagree" and 7 being "Strongly agree." A mean score was calculated for the four items. Respondents who skipped any of the four items and/or selected "I don't know" or "does not apply" were excluded from these analyses. A higher score indicates greater belonging to their current civilian community."

\*Denotes statistically significant difference.

\*\*Denotes statistically significant difference, but may be the result of unequal variances or disparate sample sizes.

^Not statistically significant.

As these findings demonstrate and are consistent with other literature,<sup>21-24</sup> including literature specific to military service academy students,<sup>25</sup> racially/ethnically charged negative interactions and experiences can have a significant impact on developing a critically important sense of belonging for military families of color.

### Military families of color who experience racial/ethnic discrimination in their current civilian and military communities were less likely to recommend their current community to another family similar to theirs.

Like belonging, experiencing racial/ethnic discrimination may diminish active-duty families' propensity to recommend their current community to other families. Active-duty family respondents of color who experienced at least one incident of racial/ethnic discrimination (at least once or twice per year), whether in their current civilian or in their military community, were significantly less likely to recommend their current community to another family similar to theirs than their counterparts who never experienced such incidents in their current community (see Table 5).

**Table 5: Likelihood to Recommend Current Community to a Similar Family\* by Experience of Racial/Ethnic Discrimination<sup>+</sup>**

Mean of single item, range: 0 (not at all likely to recommend) – 10 (extremely likely to recommend)  
Active-duty family respondents of color

Military Community**		Civilian Community**	
Never experienced any of the five instances in current <u>military</u> community	Experienced <b>at least one instance</b> of discrimination in current <u>military</u> community	Never experienced any of the five instances in current <u>civilian</u> community	Experienced <b>at least one instance</b> of discrimination in current <u>civilian</u> community
6.7 SD=2.8 (n=414)	5.3 SD=3.1 (n=175)	6.9 SD=2.7 (n=277)	5.6 SD=3.0 (n=275)

\*Respondents were asked to rate their likelihood to recommend (from 0 "not at all likely to recommend" to 10 "extremely likely to recommend") in response to the question "Considering your family's overall experience, how likely are you to recommend living in this community to another family similar to yours?" The question did not specify a reference to a "military" or "civilian" community, but referenced the community in which the respondent currently lived.

\*\*Denotes statistically significant difference.

+For these analyses, the five incidents were summed and dichotomized to categorize respondents who either had or had not experienced racial discrimination in each community. To do so, all respondents who selected "never" for all five listed incidents were re-coded as "never experienced racial discrimination in their community." Respondents who selected an answer choice ranging from "once or twice a year" to "daily" for any one of the five items were re-coded as "have experienced." Respondents who selected "I don't know" or "does not apply" to any of the items were excluded from these analyses.

++Denotes statistically significant difference, but may be the result of unequal variances or disparate sample sizes.

In nearly every type of instance examined, active-duty family respondents of color who had experienced discrimination in their current community, whether it was in their civilian or military communities, were less likely to recommend their current community to a family like theirs. As noted in previous research,<sup>26</sup> perceptions of discrimination can influence military families' decisions about their military career, which can, in turn, jeopardize their military service career progression, ultimately putting military readiness at stake.

## **Active-duty family respondents of color who experienced racial discrimination in their current civilian and military communities were less likely to recommend a young family member join the military than those who reported they had never experienced any of the surveyed incidents of racial/ethnic discrimination.**

The armed forces are facing the most significant recruiting challenge since the inception of the All-Volunteer Force nearly 50 years ago. In fiscal year 2022, every branch struggled to fulfill its recruitment goals, with the Army falling short by nearly 25%.<sup>27</sup> The military is facing a storm of recruiting challenges: low civilian unemployment rates, the ease of finding a job in the civilian labor market, transitioning to virtual outreach during COVID-19 shutdowns,<sup>28</sup> and a smaller pool of potential recruits due to increasing rates of obesity, education deficits, criminal records, and drug use among youth.<sup>29</sup>

Research shows that “the best predictor [of military service] is a person’s familiarity with the military.”<sup>30</sup> With less than 1%<sup>31</sup> of the population serving on active-duty, and Veterans making up only 6.4% of the total adult population in 2021,<sup>32</sup> most youth have little exposure to military service. Even with exposure, a poor recommendation or even some discouragement from a military-connected family member may diminish a young person’s desire to serve in the military. Moreover, recent research suggests that social-emotional well-being is a key factor youth look to when making career and educational decisions.<sup>33</sup> Critical to maintaining readiness, therefore, is ensuring that military- and Veteran-connected family members are willing to recommend a career in the military, which is driven by the value and experience of their own service.

In addition to these challenges, the armed services face generational and demographic changes that will require greater attention to diversity, equity, and inclusion. Generation Z (born 1997-2012, ages 11 to 26 in 2023<sup>34</sup>) — a more racially/ethnically diverse cohort than previous generations<sup>35</sup> — now makes up nearly all recruitable youth and about 90% of the Army active-duty junior enlisted service members.<sup>36</sup> Incidents of sexual harassment, assault, suicide, racism, and other types of discrimination in the military may be harming the services’ ability to recruit.

According to the most recent Propensity to Serve report published by the Department of Defense, Black and Hispanic youth are more likely than their white peers to serve in the next few years: 13% of Black youth indicated they were “Definitely” or “Probably” going to serve in the military in the next few years, the same was true for 12% of Hispanic youth, and only 8% of white youth.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, evidence suggests that both Black women and Black men are overrepresented in Army, Navy, and Air Force recruits compared to the civilian labor force, and Black women are overrepresented to a significantly greater degree.<sup>38</sup> This is not a trend that is likely to change: by 2027, white people will make up less than 50% of Americans under age 29,<sup>39</sup> meaning that the military will be recruiting from an increasingly non-white population within the next five years. Positive experiences of service and in the communities wherein military and Veteran families of color live are possible drivers in the likelihood to recommend service; attention to improving those experiences can help the Department of Defense achieve its recruitment goals and maintain readiness.



As reported above, half of all active-duty family respondents of color indicated they had experienced at least one of the listed incidents of racial discrimination<sup>j</sup> in their current civilian community, and nearly one-third (30%) experienced at least one incident of racial discrimination in the military community.

Addressing experiences of racial/ethnic discrimination in the military and civilian communities where military families of color live may be an opportunity to strengthen currently serving families' likelihood to recommend military service. Active-duty family respondents of color who experienced at least one incident of racial discrimination (at least once or twice per year), whether in their current civilian community or in the military community, were significantly less likely to recommend service to younger family members than their peers who had never experienced such incidents in their current community.<sup>k</sup>

**Table 6: Likelihood to Recommend Military Service, by Experience of Racial/Ethnic Discrimination<sup>k</sup>**

Likelihood of recommendation mean scores, range: 0 (very unlikely to recommend) — 10 (very likely to recommend)  
Active-duty family respondents of color



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."

\*Denotes statistically significant difference.

Furthermore, for almost all types of discriminatory experiences, survey respondents indicated significantly less willingness to recommend military service when experienced in either civilian or military communities, compared to those who did not (see Table 7).

<sup>j</sup> Incidents included "My child experienced racially/ethnically motivated bullying," "I was racially profiled by police," "I was subject to racial/ethnic slurs or jokes," "I feared for my personal safety because of my race/ethnicity," "I was threatened or harassed due to my/my family's race/ethnicity." Respondents who experienced racial discrimination could have selected any option from "once or twice a year" to "daily" to any of the five items. Respondents who selected "does not apply" or "I don't know" to any of the five items were excluded from analyses.

<sup>k</sup> For these analyses, the five incidents were summed and dichotomized to categorize respondents who either had or had not experienced racial discrimination in each community. To do so, all respondents who selected "never" for all five listed incidents were re-coded as "never experienced racial discrimination in their community." Respondents who selected an answer choice ranging from "once or twice a year" to "daily" for any one of the five items were re-coded as "have experienced." Respondents who selected "I don't know" or "does not apply" to any of the items were excluded from these analyses.

**Table 7: Likelihood to Recommend Military Service, by Type of Discrimination Experience**

Likelihood of recommendation mean scores, range: 0 (very unlikely to recommend) — 10 (very likely to recommend)  
Active-duty family respondents of color

Military Community		Civilian Community	
Did not experience in current <u>military</u> community	Experienced <b>at least one instance</b> in current <u>military</u> community	Did not experience in current <u>civilian</u> community	Experienced <b>at least one instance</b> in current <u>civilian</u> community
My child experienced racially/ethnically motivated bullying.			
5.5 SD=3.1 (n=492)*	4.7 SD=2.9 (n=151)*	5.5 SD=3.1 (n=402)*	4.8 SD=2.9 (n=225)*
I was racially profiled by the police.			
5.5 SD=3.0 (n=644)**	4.1 SD=3.2 (n=77)**	5.5 SD=3.0 (n=593)*	4.7 SD=3.0 (n=123)*
I was subject to racial/ethnic slurs or jokes.			
5.6 SD=3.0 (n=575)*	4.4 SD=3.0 (n=174)*	5.6 SD=3.1 (n=491)*	4.6 SD=3.0 (n=279)*
I feared for my personal safety because of my race/ethnicity.			
5.5 SD=3.0 (n=600)*	4.3 SD=3.1 (n=159)*	5.6 SD=3.0 (n=490)*	4.6 SD=3.1 (n=302)*
I was threatened or harassed due to my/my family's race/ethnicity.			
5.4 SD=3.0 (n=651)**	4.5 SD=3.2 (n=89)**	5.5 SD=3.0 (n=602)*	4.4 SD=3.0 (n=164)*

Notes: Responses were collapsed into a dichotomous variable with “never” and “experienced at least one instance” which included selecting any option ranging from “once or twice a year” to “daily.” Respondents who selected “does not apply” or “I don’t know” to any of the five items were excluded from analyses.

\* Denotes statistically significant difference.

++ Denotes statistically significant difference, but likely as a result of disparate sample sizes.

A recommendation of military service may be the deciding factor for millions of potential service members of color, who are quickly becoming the majority of recruitable young people in the United States. Experiences of racial and ethnic discrimination in civilian and military communities are related to a lower likelihood of recommending service and may be hurting the services’ ability to recruit. Addressing such incidences may help the recruiting crisis and support long-term readiness.

## Increasing military cultural competence, opportunities for diverse friendships, and culturally relevant goods/services in the community may improve sense of belonging for military families of color.

**Active-duty family respondents across all racial/ethnic backgrounds cite awareness and understanding of the military lifestyle and friends as top attributes that most contributed to their sense of belonging in the civilian community where they felt the greatest sense of belonging.**

Respondents were asked to reflect on all of their duty assignments and think of the civilian communities in which their families felt the greatest and least sense of belonging.<sup>l</sup> With those communities in mind, respondents selected from a list of attributes that contributed most to their sense of belonging and which undermined their sense of belonging.<sup>m</sup> Roughly half of active-duty family respondents of color and white active-duty family respondents selected “Most people understood, were aware of, appreciated, respected, and were supportive of local military and Veteran families” as a top five contributor to their greatest sense of belonging. Having friends to ask for a favor (41%), a safe community (40%), and friends for their children (38%) were the next most commonly reported community attributes that contribute most to the sense of belonging for active-duty family respondents’ of color. All four of these community attributes were also the most commonly reported by white active-duty family respondents.

**Table 8: Top Five Community Attributes that Contributed Most to Respondents’ Sense of Belonging by Race/Ethnicity of Respondent and Family\***

Active-duty family respondents

	Respondents of Color (n=727)	White Respondents Not in Multiracial/Multiethnic Families** (n=1,746)
Most people understood, were aware of, appreciated, respected, and were supportive of local military and Veteran families.	51%	50%
I had friends and people to ask for a favor.	41%	53%
Community was safe.	40%	45%
My children had friends.	38%	39%
Community members embraced diversity.	34%	16%
The community welcomed my family.	26%	32%

**Community members embraced diversity:**

42%

Black/African American

37%

Asian

31%

Hispanic/Latino/a/x

\*Question text: “Which of the following community attributes contributed most to your sense of belonging [in the civilian community in which their family felt the least sense of belonging]?”

\*\*Respondents who selected white and no other racial/ethnic category and did not identify as a member of a multiracial/multiethnic family.

<sup>l</sup> Excluding their experience with the military unit itself.

<sup>m</sup> Respondents were asked to answer two multiselect questions and select their top five attributes for each.

"We enjoyed our time living there **because of both military and civilian friends**. This was also a time when my husband's job was very stressful and he worked long hours, but we had much to keep us busy and friends to be with who were supportive and inclusive."

Hispanic/Latino/a/x Active-Duty Marine Corps Spouse

**One-third of active-duty family respondents of color reported that community members embracing diversity was a top contributor to their greatest sense of belonging, but finding like-minded people and culturally relevant goods/services are common challenges where they felt the least sense of belonging.**

One in three active-duty family respondents of color report that embracing diversity is a top five contributor to their sense of belonging, twice the proportion of white active-duty family respondents (16%). A greater proportion of Black/African American respondents (42%) selected this attribute than Asian (37%) and Hispanic/Latino/a/x respondents (31%), which may be related to their comparatively higher frequencies of all surveyed forms of racial discrimination. Consequently, when asked which top community attributes most undermined their sense of belonging in the community where their family had the least sense of belonging, lack of friends and people to ask for a favor (35%), community members did **not** embrace diversity (29%), the inability to find people with similar beliefs (28%), and lack of safety (26%) were also top barriers for all active-duty family respondents of color.

**Table 9: Top Five Community Attributes that Undermined Respondents' Sense of Belonging by Race/Ethnicity of Respondent and Family**

Active-duty family respondents

	Respondents of Color (n=590)	White Respondents Not in Multiracial/Multiethnic Families (n=1,467)
I did not have friends and people to ask for a favor.	35%	43%
Community members did not embrace diversity.	29%	17%
Community members did not hold similar beliefs and values as me.	28%	26%
Community was unsafe.	26%	28%
Unable to find goods, foods, and services that support my cultural identity/family heritage.	24%	9%
Most people were not aware of and did not understand, appreciate, respect, or support local military and Veteran families.	23%	26%

**Community members did not embrace diversity:**

41%

Black/African American

24%

Asian

26%

Hispanic/Latino/a/x

\*Question text: "Which of the following community attributes undermined your sense of belonging [in the civilian community in which their family felt the least sense of belonging]?"



## **Active-duty family respondents of color seek strong community support networks, but one-third say they currently have no civilian friends to lean on.**

The most commonly selected attribute that undermined belonging in the community where respondents felt the least sense of belonging is a lack of friends or people to ask for a favor. Hispanic/Latino/a/x active-duty family respondents report this at the greatest proportion (40%), followed by Asian (35%) and Black (30%) respondents.

Despite the need for community, 1 in 3 (36%) active-duty family respondents of color say they have no civilian friends in their current local civilian community with whom they feel at ease. This was also the case for white active-duty family respondents not in multiracial families (33%). A smaller proportion (27%) of active-duty service members of color report having no civilian friends slightly less often (27%) than active-duty spouses of color (36%).

Respondents of color who say they have no close civilian friends in their civilian community report lower mean belonging<sup>i</sup> scores for their current civilian community ( $M=2.9$ ,  $SD=1.3$ ,  $n=308$ ) and were less likely to recommend living in their current community to another family similar to theirs<sup>n</sup> ( $M=5.3$ ,  $SD=3.0$ ,  $n=325$ ) than those who do have at least one friend in their civilian community ( $M=4.2$ ,  $SD=1.5$ ,  $n=569$  for belonging, and  $M=6.5$ ,  $SD=2.8$ ,  $n=586$  for likelihood to recommend current community).

Racial/ethnic diversity within the community may increase social connections for people of color,<sup>40</sup> but the degree to which this applies to military families remains to be seen. For example, a slightly lower proportion (31%) of active-duty family respondents of color living in California, the second most racially/ethnically diverse state in the United States, report having no close civilian friends in their current civilian community. Further research could disentangle the relative influence of military or Veteran identity and/or community racial and ethnic diversity on building social connections and a sense of belonging among military families of color.

## **When respondents feel they belong, there appears to be long-term benefits for military families and the communities where they live.**

Respondents were asked to reflect on all of their duty assignments and think of the civilian communities in which their families felt the greatest sense of belonging.<sup>o</sup> When asked to describe the effect of that community on their family's overall well-being, respondents described a myriad of direct and indirect benefits. Open-ended responses from active-duty family respondents of color respondents revealed that having a sense of belonging to the community made respondents of color feel welcomed (13%), safe (9%), and contributed to the development of lifelong friends (9%). One-third of active-duty family respondents of color respondents reported these impacts positively influenced their overall sense of belonging. These benefits extended to the community also, with nearly 1 in 10 respondents of color (7%) reporting that having a sense of belonging made them want to stay or return to the area for their next assignment or after military retirement.

<sup>i</sup> Respondents were asked to rate their likelihood to recommend (from 0 "not at all likely to recommend" to 10 "extremely likely to recommend") in response to the question "Considering your family's overall experience, how likely are you to recommend living in this community to another family similar to yours?" The question did not specify a reference to a "military" or "civilian" community, but referenced the community in which the respondent currently lived.

<sup>o</sup> Excluding their experience with the military unit itself.

### Every community has the potential to create conditions for belonging for military families of color.

When asked to identify the communities in which respondents felt their family had the greatest sense of belonging, California, Texas, Colorado, Virginia, and Florida, were the most commonly identified states. These states are also home to the communities where respondents reported their families felt the least sense of belonging, indicating that no single community is the best fit for every active-duty family of color. A variety of resources and initiatives are needed to foster a sense of belonging among diverse military families.

**Table 10: Top Five Communities Where Respondents Report the Greatest and Least Sense of Belonging (of All Prior Duty Assignments)**

Frequency of all active-duty family respondents	
Greatest Sense of Belonging	Least Sense of Belonging
San Diego, California (n=186)	Norfolk, Virginia (n=119)
Norfolk, Virginia (n=132)	San Diego, California (n=91)
San Antonio, Texas (n=94)	Washington, D.C. (n=52)
Colorado Springs, Colorado (n=90)	Fort Hood, Texas (n=49)
Jacksonville, Florida (n=58)	Honolulu, Hawaii (n=45)
Frequency of active-duty family respondents of color	
Greatest Sense of Belonging	Least Sense of Belonging
San Diego, California (n=60)	Norfolk, Virginia (n=38)
San Antonio, Texas (n=34)	San Diego, California (n=25)
Honolulu, Hawaii (n=27)	Fayetteville, North Carolina (n=16)
Okinawa, Japan (n=25)	Fort Hood, Texas (n=14)
Norfolk, Virginia (n=23)	Fort Polk, Louisiana (n=12)

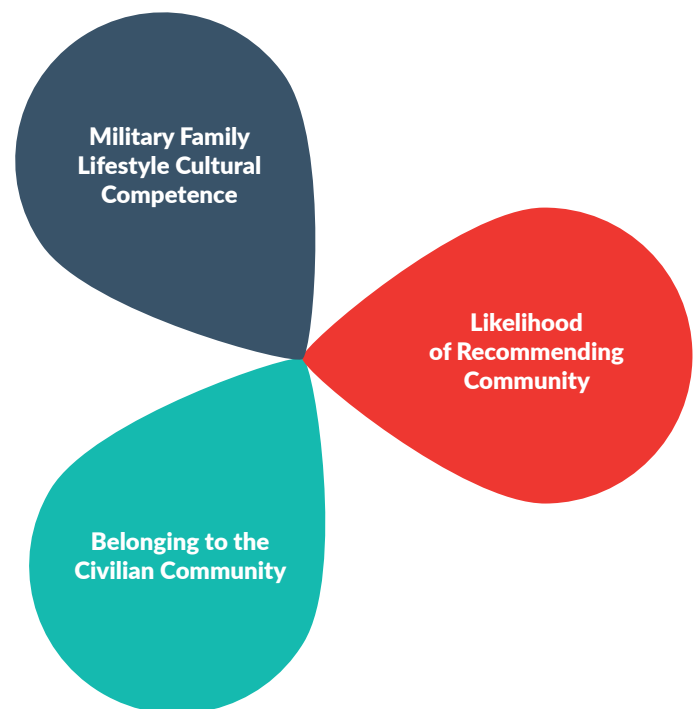
Respondents were asked two open-ended questions: "Reflecting on all of your duty assignments, think of the civilian community in which your family felt the greatest/least sense of belonging (exclude your experience with the military unit itself)." Responses were coded by calculating how many times a community was given as an answer to the previous questions. Communities that overlapped would be represented as the same community. Since this was a free response question, responses would range from cities to country names leading to variation in community sizes.

## Military family lifestyle cultural competence was significantly associated with belonging and community recommendation.

### Developing a sense of belonging to the community may begin at the intersection of multiple identities, including both military and racial/ethnic identity.

A military family member's sense of belonging to the civilian community and their willingness to recommend the local community to families like theirs are influenced by a wide variety of factors, which could include diversity in the community and the presence of other military community members, as well as local economic conditions, and opportunities for employment and education for family members, among many others. In this research, however, one factor that was significantly, moderately, and positively correlated with belonging to the community was military family lifestyle cultural competence (MFLCC). Furthermore, for active-duty family respondents of color, a sense of belonging to the civilian community and the likelihood of recommending their community to a family similar to theirs were also significantly, positively correlated,<sup>p</sup> indicating that respondents who felt a greater sense of belonging were more likely to recommend that community to a family like theirs, and vice versa. This indicates that for active-duty family respondents of color, feeling a sense of belonging to the local civilian community, being willing to recommend that civilian community to other similar families, and the perception that the local civilian community understands and appreciates military and Veteran families are all connected factors.

Social identity theory explains that social identity is derived from an individual's sense of belonging to particular groups.<sup>41</sup> Social identity is multifaceted and includes several levels of collective identity,<sup>42</sup> which could include both military/Veteran identity and race/ethnicity identity. Military/Veteran identity may be a particularly strong identity, derived from a sense of belonging to the military culture, which is associated with social connectedness. Because identity is derived from a sense of belonging to a group, when those groups are not represented in the individual's environment, the identity does not shift, but opportunities for social connection<sup>43</sup> and their sense of belonging to the community may diminish. This may be the case for military families of color, when they find neither of two key identities — either military connection or race/ethnicity identity — reflected in the civilian community.



<sup>p</sup> MFLCC and belonging:  $r=0.499^{**}$  Belonging and likelihood to recommend community to a similar family:  $r=0.542^{**}$  MFLCC and likelihood to recommend community to a similar family:  $r=0.332^{**}$   $p<0.01$ .

However, no individual states stood out as locations where respondents reported significantly more belonging to the community, greater military family lifestyle cultural competence, or greater likelihood to recommend the community to other families like theirs.

At the state level, there was naturally some variation in the mean for MFLCC,<sup>q</sup> recommendation of the current community to a similar family,<sup>r</sup> and mean sense of belonging to the current civilian community. These characteristics also varied between groups (active-duty family members of color compared to white, non-Hispanic respondents in multiracial/multiethnic families). However, there were no outliers — states in which the mean MFLCC score, mean belonging score or likelihood of recommendation for the current community was significantly different from the mean.<sup>s</sup> Furthermore, when looking at all states, mean MFLCC, mean community recommendation, and mean sense of belonging were not significantly different between active-duty family respondents of color and their white counterparts (see Table 11).

**Table 11: Perceived MFLCC, Community Recommendation, and Sense of Belonging in Five Selected States by State and Race/Ethnicity**

Active-duty family respondents

Selected State	Military Family Lifestyle Cultural Competence Mean of five items, range 1 (Strongly disagree) – 5 (Strongly agree)		Community Recommendations* Mean of single item, range 0 (Not at all likely to recommend) – 10 (Extremely likely to recommend)		Sense of Belonging Mean of four items, range 1 (Strongly disagree) – 7 (Strongly agree)	
	Respondents of Color	White Respondents*	Respondents of Color	White Respondents*	Respondents of Color	White Respondents*
California	<b>3.0</b> (n=125, SD=1.0)	<b>2.9</b> (n=193, SD=0.8)	<b>6.2</b> (n=128, SD=2.9)	<b>6.0</b> (n=197, SD=2.9)	<b>4.0</b> (n=128, SD=1.7)	<b>3.8</b> (n=199, SD=1.6)
Virginia	<b>3.1</b> (n=110, SD=0.9)	<b>2.9</b> (n=328, SD=0.9)	<b>6.8</b> (n=109, SD=2.6)	<b>6.3</b> (n=334, SD=2.7)	<b>4.0</b> (n=104, SD=1.6)	<b>4.0</b> (n=329, SD=1.7)
Texas	<b>3.1</b> (n=66, SD=1.0)	<b>3.0</b> (n=113, SD=1.0)	<b>6.3</b> (n=64, SD=2.5)	<b>5.4</b> (n=113, SD=2.9)	<b>3.9</b> (n=62, SD=1.6)	<b>3.6</b> (n=113, SD=1.6)
Florida	<b>3.2</b> (n=68, SD=0.9)	<b>3.0</b> (n=164, SD=0.8)	<b>6.8</b> (n=74, SD=2.6)	<b>6.4</b> (n=172, SD=2.7)	<b>4.2</b> (n=70, SD=1.3)	<b>4.2</b> (n=166, SD=1.6)
Hawaii	<b>2.9</b> (n=37, SD=0.8)	<b>2.5</b> (n=83, SD=0.8)	<b>6.6</b> (n=40, SD=2.7)	<b>5.8</b> (n=84, SD=3.0)	<b>3.8</b> (n=39, SD=1.5)	<b>3.4</b> (n=82, SD=1.7)
All States**	<b>3.1</b> (n=759, SD=0.9)	<b>3.0</b> (n=1,817, SD=0.9)	<b>6.2</b> (n=795, SD=2.8)	<b>6.0</b> (n=1,882, SD=2.8)	<b>3.8</b> (n=767, SD=1.6)	<b>3.9</b> (n=1,840, SD=1.6)

\*Not in multiracial/multiethnic families.

\*\*With a sample size greater than 5.

\*Respondents were asked to rate their likelihood to recommend (from 0 “not at all likely to recommend” to 10 “extremely likely to recommend”) in response to the question “Considering your family’s overall experience, how likely are you to recommend living in this community to another family similar to yours?”

<sup>q</sup> On a scale of 1 “strongly disagree” to 5 “strongly agree” MFLCC aims to measure the degree to which respondents feel their local civilian community members have understanding, awareness, appreciation, support, and respect for military and Veteran families. The mean score was calculated for the five items. Respondents who skipped and/or selected “I don’t know” for any of the five items were excluded from these analyses. A higher score indicates greater perceived MFLCC in their current civilian community. MFLCC is correlated with a sense of belonging.

<sup>r</sup> Respondents were asked to rate their likelihood to recommend, from 0 “not at all likely to recommend” to 10 “extremely likely to recommend” in response to the question “Considering your family’s overall experience, how likely are you to recommend living in this community to another family similar to yours?”

<sup>s</sup> Analyses were limited to states with a sample size greater than five respondents. Sample sizes ranged from 5 to 128 active-duty family respondents of color, and 5 to 334 for white, non-Hispanic active-duty respondents not in multiracial/multiethnic families.

In addition to exploring data captured in the 2022 Military Family Lifestyle Study,<sup>44</sup> relevant external data points by state were collected for comparison. The following state profiles illustrate those comparisons for selected states.

**Table 12: Selected State Profiles**

Selected State	Sample Demographics	Data from 2022 MFLS Active-Duty Family Respondents of Color	Additional Data Points
<b>California</b> (n=156)	Active-Duty Spouses: <b>81%</b> Active-Duty Service Members: <b>19%</b> Enlisted: <b>81%</b> Officer: <b>19%</b> American Indian/Alaska Native: <b>5%</b> Asian: <b>31%</b> Black/African American: <b>18%</b> Hispanic/Latino/a/x: <b>50%</b> Middle Eastern or North African: <b>3%</b> Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander: <b>4%</b> White: <b>21%</b>	MFLCC: <b>3.0<sup>a</sup></b> Mean Community Recommendation: <b>6.2*</b> Mean Belonging: <b>4.0**</b>	Diversity Index: <b>+ 70%, ranked 2 of 51 states and D.C.</b> Racial Equity Index: <b>** 44.4 of 100, ranked 34 of 50 states</b> Number of Military Installations: <b>32</b> Active-Duty Service Members as a Proportion of State Population: <b>0.4%</b>
<b>Virginia</b> (n=128)	Active-Duty Spouses: <b>84%</b> Active-Duty Service Members: <b>16%</b> Enlisted: <b>53%</b> Officer: <b>44%</b> Warrant Officer: <b>3%</b> American Indian/Alaska Native: <b>10%</b> Asian: <b>33%</b> Black/African American: <b>27%</b> Hispanic/Latino/a/x: <b>40%</b> Middle Eastern or North African: <b>2%</b> Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander: <b>4%</b> White: <b>27%</b>	MFLCC: <b>3.1</b> Mean Community Recommendation: <b>6.8</b> Mean Belonging: <b>4.0</b>	Diversity Index: <b>61%, ranked 14 of 51</b> Racial Equity Index: <b>65.3, ranked 3 of 50 states</b> Number of Military Installations: <b>27</b> Active-Duty Service Members as a Proportion of State Population: <b>1.5%</b>
<b>Texas</b> (n=79)	Active-Duty Spouses: <b>85%</b> Active-Duty Service Members: <b>15%</b> Enlisted: <b>72%</b> Officer: <b>26%</b> Warrant Officer: <b>3%</b> American Indian/Alaska Native: <b>11%</b> Asian: <b>14%</b> Black/African American: <b>24%</b> Hispanic/Latino/a/x: <b>56%</b> Middle Eastern or North African: <b>4%</b> Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander: <b>3%</b> White: <b>30%</b>	MFLCC: <b>3.1</b> Mean Community Recommendation: <b>6.3</b> Mean Belonging: <b>3.9</b>	Diversity Index: <b>67%, ranked 6 of 51</b> Racial Equity Index: <b>51.1, ranked 25 of 50 states</b> Number of Military Installations: <b>15</b> Active-Duty Service Members as a Proportion of State Population: <b>0.4%</b>
<b>Florida</b> (n=87)	Active-Duty Spouses: <b>64%</b> Active-Duty Service Members: <b>36%</b> Enlisted: <b>75%</b> Officer: <b>25%</b> American Indian/Alaska Native: <b>9%</b> Asian: <b>24%</b> Black/African American: <b>22%</b> Hispanic/Latino/a/x: <b>52%</b> Middle Eastern or North African: <b>5%</b> Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander: <b>5%</b> White: <b>26%</b>	MFLCC: <b>3.2</b> Mean Community Recommendation: <b>6.8</b> Mean Belonging: <b>4.2</b>	Diversity Index: <b>64%, ranked 10 of 51</b> Racial Equity Index: <b>65.3, ranked 43 of 50 states</b> Number of Military Installations: <b>21</b> Active-Duty Service Members as a Proportion of State Population: <b>0.3%</b>

**Table 12: Selected State Profiles**

<b>Hawaii</b> (n=52)	Active-Duty Spouses: <b>87%</b> Active-Duty Service Members: <b>13%</b> Enlisted: <b>57%</b> Officer: <b>35%</b> Warrant Officer: <b>8%</b> American Indian/Alaska Native: <b>12%</b> Asian: <b>27%</b> Black/African American: <b>27%</b> Hispanic/Latino/a/x: <b>44%</b> Middle Eastern or North African: <b>2%</b> Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander: <b>4%</b> White: <b>29%</b>	MFLCC: <b>2.9</b> Mean Community Recommendation: <b>6.6</b> Mean Belonging: <b>3.8</b>	Diversity Index: <b>76%, ranked 1 of 51</b> Racial Equity Index: <b>65.3, ranked 8 of 50 states</b> Number of Military Installations: <b>11</b> Active-Duty Service Members as a Proportion of State Population: <b>3%</b>
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Notes: 1) Race/ethnicity was a select-all question so respondents could select multiple options and therefore, percentages do not equal 100%. 2) White respondents in this grouping have selected "white" and at least one racial/ethnic group in addition to "white."

\*On a scale of 0 "not at all likely to recommend" — 10 "extremely likely to recommend." Average for all active-duty respondents of color: 6.06. Average for all white, non-Hispanic respondents not in multiracial, multiethnic families: 6.02.

\*\*On a scale of 1 "strongly disagree" — 7 "strongly agree." Average for all active-duty respondents of color: 3.76. Average for all white, non-Hispanic respondents not in multiracial, multiethnic families: 3.84.

## Case Study: Virginia

Active-duty family respondents of color in Virginia have roughly the same perceived MFLCC mean scores, a greater likelihood to recommend their current community to a family similar to theirs and higher mean belonging scores, when compared to the averages for all locations. While mean belonging is similar to the mean for white active-duty family respondents in Virginia, active-duty family respondents of color report higher mean community recommendation and MFLCC than white respondents. Virginia has an average Diversity Index of 61%,<sup>45</sup> meaning there is a 61% chance that two randomly selected people will be from different racial and ethnic groups, and a higher-than-average Racial Equity Index<sup>46</sup> score (65.3 out of 100). With 27 military installations in the state, active-duty service members make up 1.5% of the state population, more than most states. Taken together, these statistics indicate that Virginia has average diversity in its communities, but an above-average military presence, which may explain the slightly above-average sense of belonging and willingness to recommend the local community.

Additionally, many stakeholders in Virginia have made concerted efforts to address diversity, equity, and inclusion, such as the Northern Virginia Regional Commission's Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Roadmap,<sup>47</sup> intended "to provide a framework for coordinating efforts in the Northern Virginia region to create more equitable and welcoming environments for all service members and their families to call home." Virginia is also the first state in the U.S. to launch a strategic plan for diversity, equity, and inclusion, the Strategic Plan for Inclusive Excellence.<sup>48</sup> These efforts may also help to explain the above-average sense of belonging and willingness to recommend the local community reported by active-duty family respondents of color in Virginia.



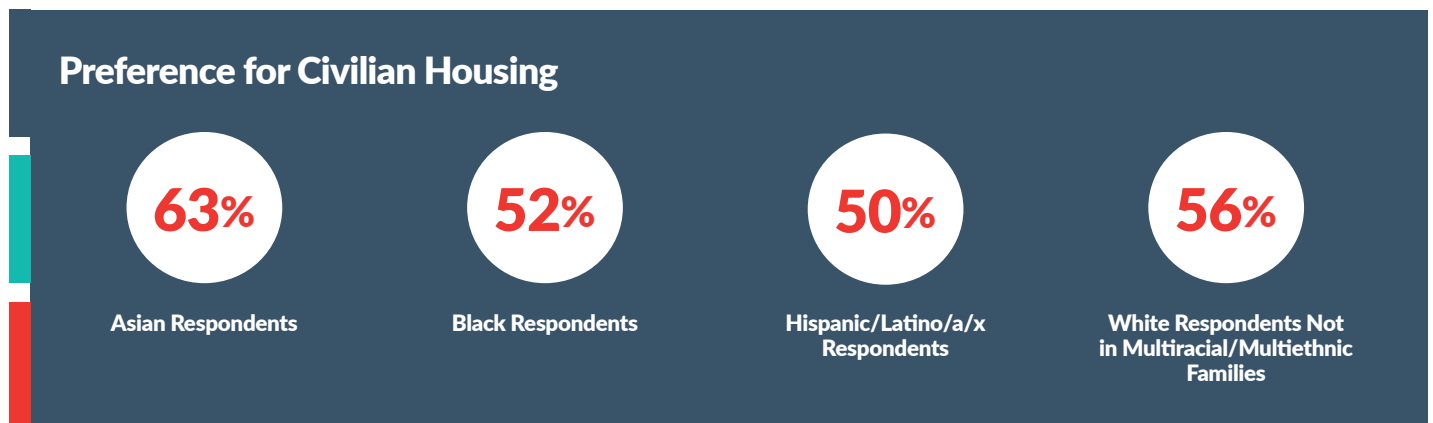
## Preferences for military or civilian housing vary by race/ethnicity and income, but where families live may impact belonging to the community.

In most cases, military families have the option to live in military-provided (“privatized”) housing or in housing available in the local civilian community — though most live in the civilian community.<sup>49</sup> These options are constrained by several factors, including service member rank and military occupational specialty, the local housing market and availability,<sup>50</sup> and perceived

quality of military-provided housing<sup>51</sup> at their duty station. Military families of color may have added considerations, as people of color have historically faced systemic discrimination in housing markets.<sup>52</sup> Most active-duty family respondents of color (53%) prefer to live in civilian housing.<sup>t</sup> However, preference for civilian housing differs by race/ethnicity, with Asian respondents reporting the greatest preference for civilian housing (63%), compared to just 52% of Black active-duty family respondents and 50% of Hispanic/Latino/a/x respondents.<sup>u</sup> Preference



for civilian housing also increased with income, with just 33% of active-duty family respondents of color with a household income in 2021 of \$50,000 or less per year reporting a preference for civilian housing (n=145), compared to 55% of those with income between \$51,000-\$100,000 (n=256), and 63% of those with an income over \$100,000 per year (n=200).



Question text: “In general, which of the following best characterizes your sentiments towards living in military housing?”

Answer options: “strongly prefer military housing,” “slightly prefer military housing,” “no strong preference,” “slightly prefer civilian housing,” “strongly prefer civilian housing.” Reported proportions indicate the proportion who indicated they “slightly prefer” or “strongly prefer” civilian housing.

<sup>t</sup> Respondents were asked: “In general, which of the following best characterizes your sentiments towards living in military housing?” with answer options: “strongly prefer military housing,” “slightly prefer military housing,” “no strong preference,” “slightly prefer civilian housing,” “strongly prefer civilian housing.” Reported proportions indicate the proportion who indicated they “slightly prefer” or “strongly prefer” civilian housing.

<sup>u</sup> Other race/ethnicity subgroups (American Indian/Alaska Native, Middle Eastern or North African, Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander) were too small to report. Asian respondents’ preference for civilian housing may be due to multigenerational living where family members may not qualify for installation access, though multigenerational living is also common among Hispanic/Latino/a/x families.

A slightly greater proportion of active-duty family respondents of color (36%) report living in military housing than their white peers not in multiracial/multiethnic families (32%), but it varies by race/ethnicity, consistent with previous reports.<sup>53</sup>

“At this assignment, we were reluctant to explore outside the base due to racial aggressions. **Feeling unsafe because of your family’s skin color is detrimental to overall well-being.**”

Multiracial Active-Duty Army Spouse

The variation may be due to financial constraints due to rank and spouse income or perceived safety in the community. Just 30% of Asian respondents reported living in military housing, but a slightly higher proportion of Black and Hispanic active-duty

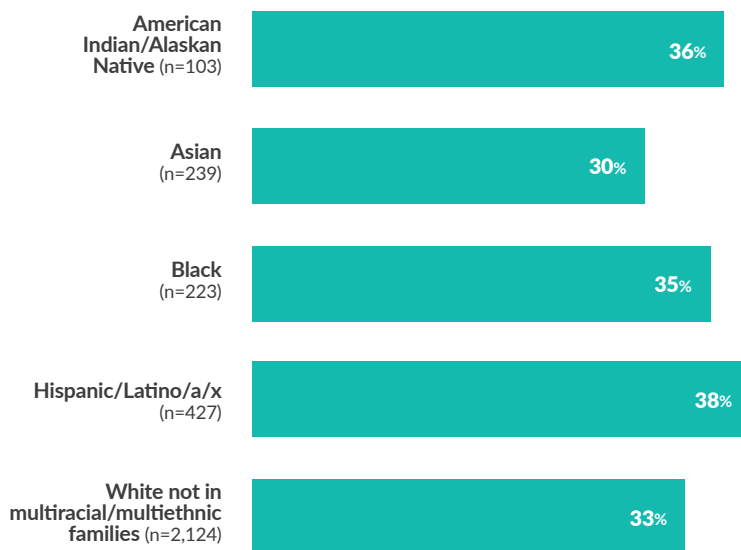
family respondents (36% for each group) reported living in military housing compared to white respondents.

### Respondents’ race/ethnicity, region, and living in military housing may interact, impacting respondents’ connections to their local civilian community.

One-third (33%) of white active-duty family respondents not in multiracial/multiethnic families reported having no friends (who are not military-connected) with whom they feel at ease in their local civilian community, compared to 36% of active-duty family respondents of color.

**Figure 3: Proportion Reporting Having No Friends in the Local Community, by Race/Ethnicity**

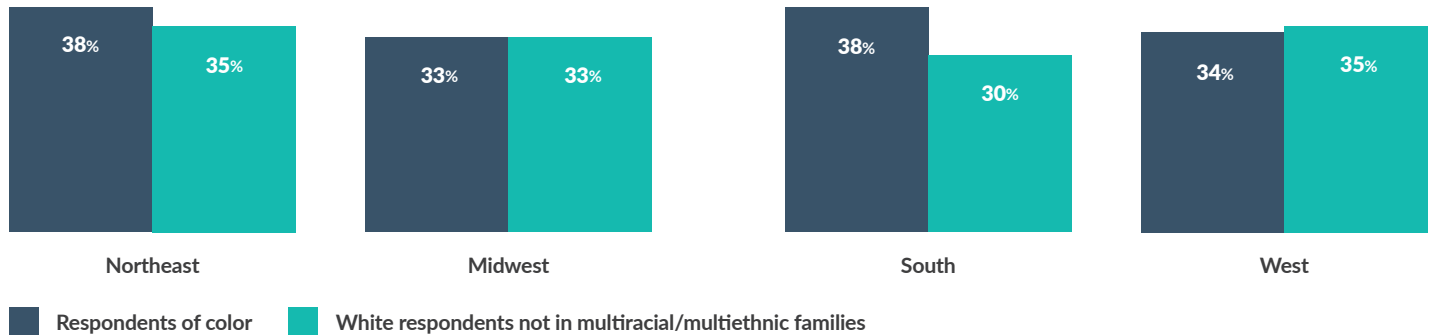
Active-duty family respondents



Question text: “In your local civilian community, how many friends (not military-connected) do you have with whom you feel at ease?”

For respondents living in military housing, the proportion with no local community connections increased. Of those who live in military housing on or off installation, nearly half (48%) of active-duty family respondents of color and 54% of white active-duty family respondents not in a multiracial/multiethnic family report having no (not military-connected) friends with whom they feel at ease in their local civilian community. A greater difference is seen when looking at the region, with a much greater proportion of active-duty family respondents of color who lived in the South reporting no friends in their civilian community (38%) than white respondents who were not part of a multiracial/multiethnic family (30%).

**Figure 4: Proportion Reporting Having No Friends in the Local Community, by Region and Race/Ethnicity**  
Active-duty family respondents



Question text: "In your local civilian community, how many friends (not military-connected) do you have with whom you feel at ease?"

Respondents of color: Northeast, n=87; Midwest, n=78; South, n=400; West, n=278; White respondents not in multiracial/multiethnic families: Northeast, n=199; Midwest, n=184; South, n=1006; West, n=548

## Military families are more likely to feel a sense of belonging to the civilian community if they live in the civilian community.

For both active-duty family respondents of color and white active-duty respondents not in multiracial/multiethnic families, the mean belonging scores of those who rent or own civilian housing were significantly higher<sup>i,v</sup> than those who live in military housing (on or off installation). Because where families choose to live — whether on the installation or in the civilian community — is at least partially driven by affordability and cost,<sup>54</sup> addressing Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH) calculations that make living in the civilian community unaffordable for families of color may also help encourage community-building and increase a sense of belonging to the civilian community.

<sup>v</sup> There was a statistically significant difference in civilian belonging between respondents living in civilian housing and those living in military housing, for both respondents of color and white respondents not in multiracial/multiethnic families, but equal variances were not assumed for the comparisons for white respondents not in multiracial/multiethnic families.

## Addressing Incidences of Discrimination

### Addressing Racially/Ethnically Motivated Bullying

**For Parents:** Understanding your school and school district's requirements for reporting bullying and other concerning incidents is a key factor for protecting your child and ensuring accountability through the school system. In addition, we recommend being familiar with the state and federal organizations that can step in when incidents escalate or schools/school districts are not responsive: the state Department of Education, the U.S. Department of Education and their Office for Civil Rights, and the U.S. Department of Justice's Civil Rights Division.

Trusted resources and experts, such as those below, offer evidence-based solutions to supporting your child(ren) if they are the victim of bullying, as well as if they are the bully. Military OneSource<sup>55</sup> regularly updates recommendations about recognizing bullying and resources for supporting a child who is being bullied. Other resources include:

- Sesame Street in Communities<sup>56</sup> and Sesame Street for Military Families<sup>57</sup>
- The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry's resources on bullying and bullying prevention for school-aged children<sup>58</sup>
- **For students:**
  - The ACLU of California's website for public school students in California to know their rights regarding bullying and harassment<sup>59</sup>
  - The Pacer Center's Teens Against Bullying website for student self-advocacy<sup>60</sup>

**For Schools:** Building a welcoming and inclusive community within schools is a key aspect of pedagogy in American educational systems. We urge schools and school districts to establish robust and effective reporting and implementation structures and strategies for supporting military-connected children, and all children in their schools. Ensuring that administrators, educators, and support staff understand the experiences of military children and are able to serve their particular needs — for example, how to work with parents to fill educational gaps that arise due to relocations<sup>61</sup> — is critical to making students feel supported and welcomed to their school communities. Just over half of active-duty family respondents to the 2022 Military Family Lifestyle Survey (52%) report their oldest child's school understands the unique challenges of military families, but there remains room for schools to continue to improve.<sup>62</sup> The Military Interstate Children's Compact Commission (MIC3) has introduced a new online training course that informs public school systems of their obligations under the Interstate Compact on Educational Opportunity for Military Children, which is a good first step to understand how best to support military children in the school system.

We also recommend educators consider how to incorporate culturally responsive lessons into their classrooms. In addition to ensuring that the cultural experiences of children of color are reflected in lessons, we recommend educators — particularly those teaching in schools that serve a high proportion of military-connected students

— consider incorporating lessons that acknowledge the experiences of military children. Below is a list of trusted resources for educators to better serve military children.

- The Educators page from Military Kids Connect<sup>63</sup>
- The Helping MilKids Soar page from Military Child Education Coalition (MCEC)<sup>64</sup>

**For States:** States also have a role to play in supporting military children during their school years. In particular, we encourage states to explore innovative ways to provide resources to military families who use public schools. In one example of an innovative approach to providing support for military-connected students in public schools, the state of Utah funded the Military Advocate program for the Davis School District in the 2022-2023 school year.<sup>65</sup> These dedicated in-school experts support all military- and Veteran-connected youth in the district and ensure that care and support in line with military cultural competence is available to students and families alike. Other states can use this model to fund positions within school districts that enhance the efforts already underway by the Department of Defense, including School Liaison Officers (SLOs).

## Addressing Concerns for Safety Due to Race/Ethnicity

Respondents' reported experiences of racial profiling by the police exists in a larger context of building trust between law enforcement and the broader community. We urge police departments and local governments to continue building relationships across the fence line with military leadership as well as service members and military families living in the civilian community. Evidence shows that community policing — ensuring that partnerships and existing relationships are at the core of preventing crime and other harms to public safety<sup>66</sup> — improves attitudes toward police<sup>67</sup> and reduces crime.<sup>68</sup> We urge public safety organizations to actively include military communities and military families in their community-engagement strategies. Ensuring strong levels of trust between civilian and military leadership, as well as between law enforcement officers and military families, is key to reducing experiences of racial profiling, and may also encourage feelings of belonging, likelihood to recommend a community, and likelihood to recommend military service for military families of color.

## Addressing Racial/Ethnic Slurs or Jokes

While many recommendations are targeted at larger systems, individuals also have a role to play in building inclusive communities of mutual understanding. Race-based slurs and “jokes” are “linked to low self-esteem, increased stress levels, anxiety, depression, and suicidal thoughts”<sup>69</sup> among underrepresented groups. Even when the speaker does not intend to hurt another, these expressions “harm the psychological and physical well-being of minorities.”<sup>70</sup> As described in *The Diverse Experiences of Military and Veteran Families of Color*,<sup>71</sup> speaking up against racial/ethnic slurs and jokes is a powerful way to support military families of color. It is critical that authority figures — including members of the chain of command, senior spouses, and civilian leadership — clearly articulate the behaviors and language that are not acceptable, including racial/ethnic slurs or jokes.

## Building Bridges to Belonging

### States

Each of the states has an opportunity to acknowledge and work toward greater support of all residents, including those of color and those connected to the military. Few states have a statewide strategic plan for addressing disparities, but Oregon<sup>72</sup> and Virginia<sup>73</sup> have stepped forward with strategic plans for addressing discrimination, disparities, and access to opportunities within state government. Other states can develop and implement similar plans to highlight existing efforts and set goals for building strong communities. States should actively seek out and include military and Veteran voices when building these plans. Not only do the military services have valuable insight that can be applied at the state level, but they can also represent the diversity of the armed forces.

We also encourage states to continue supporting military families through programs and offices that focus on building community and welcoming military families. For example, Virginia<sup>74</sup> and Washington<sup>75</sup> both have state Military Spouse Liaisons, who support military families during their time living in the state. Not only do such positions highlight a state's military friendliness, they also ensure military families — and military spouses in particular — are able to access resources and build relationships in the communities in which they live.

### Localities

Localities — including cities and regions — have also taken the lead on building inclusive communities that address the needs of all residents. The Northern Virginia Regional Commission for their Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Roadmap<sup>76</sup> is a clear example of a community-level plan specifically directed toward military- and Veteran-connected communities of color. Their hands-on, solution-oriented approach not only highlights the attention they are paying to the issues of their residents, but is also an example of how to move from understanding the problem to addressing the problem. Key features of this roadmap that could be replicated in other communities include:

- Seeking input from local residents to identify problems and solutions, through surveys and listening sessions
- Identifying areas that are most important to address in the local community
- Bringing together a variety of stakeholders in the community who can share in creating innovative solutions
- Sharing resources at a variety of levels to inform policy decisions

While not specifically addressing military and Veteran families of color, the Greater San Antonio Military and Veteran Family Needs Assessment<sup>77</sup> also provides an example of a community-level effort with recommendations to enhance community-building and sense of belonging among military and Veteran families. This work focuses on civil-military relations and building military cultural competency, which may be associated with a sense of belonging for military families, as demonstrated in this report.



For localities with smaller active-duty military populations, the Minneapolis 2040 plan<sup>78</sup> provides an example for addressing the myriad community aspects that ensure residents are able to thrive where they live, work, and play. Built on hundreds of hours of engagement with community members and public feedback, this work offers a roadmap for using community input to build a vision for the future. Even localities with smaller military populations can work to include service members and their families, as well as Veterans in any similar efforts to ensure their voices are heard and influence the future of their communities.

## Federal Solutions

While this report primarily focuses on the role of local communities, the federal government — through the Department of Veterans Affairs, Department of Defense, and others — have done important work addressing the concerns of military families of color and military families from other marginalized groups. For example, as the nation's Veteran population becomes increasingly more diverse,<sup>79</sup> the VA has instituted a number of policies to create a diverse and inclusive workforce,<sup>80</sup> encourage research on minority health and health disparities,<sup>81</sup> and provide high-quality care for all Veterans. Ensuring that their care not only addresses an individual's military background, but also their other identities is key to enhancing care and ensuring our nation's Veterans and their families are well cared for.

The armed forces have also developed comprehensive personnel plans, which often include strategies for enhancing one of the military's greatest strengths: diversity. We urge the services to consider merging their personnel and diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility plans to ensure that personnel and readiness decisions are informed by the experiences of military personnel from marginalized groups. Moreover, these plans should include the perspectives of military families to ensure a comprehensive approach to the lives of service members and their families.

Finally, Congress can also support community connection from a federal level by appropriating funds for conducting community needs assessments around military installations and in Veteran-heavy population centers. These needs assessments, such as the Greater San Antonio Military and Veteran Family Needs Assessment<sup>82</sup> can provide insight to better understand the gaps in care and resources that exist and provide a guide for states and localities to step in. Additionally, this will ensure that local communities and installation commanders are able to build relationships to address the concerns highlighted by accurate and up-to-date data.

## Next Steps

The military — more than almost any other American institution — reflects the rest of the nation. Americans from every background come together to serve our nation and keep us safe. Ensuring that service members and their families are taken care of during this time is not only our obligation to them, but is also critical to national security. These recommendations explore how individuals, communities, and governments can come together to support our military families, no matter their background. The good news stories show us that we cannot improve the situation in silos. Instead, these examples reveal that every group, organization, and individual has a role to play in ensuring service members of color and their families are able to perform at the highest level.

Data from this report is drawn from Blue Star Families' 2022 Military Family Lifestyle Survey (MFLS). The survey instrument was designed by BSF in collaboration with Syracuse University's D'Aniello Institute for Veterans and Military Families (IVMF) with extensive input from military family members and advocates, subject matter experts, and policymakers who work with military families. The survey was conducted online with approval from Syracuse University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) and administered using Qualtrics' survey system (Qualtrics, Inc., Provo, UT) from May 23 to July 10, 2022. The survey uses a convenience sampling method and therefore is not generalizable to the entire military family population, but nonetheless provides valuable insights and highlights areas for further exploration.

### Recruitment

To recruit respondents for this survey, Blue Star Families utilized several snowball sampling strategies to maximize participation among racially/ethnically diverse survey participants outside of Blue Star Families' membership. These strategies included recruiting and deploying a team of volunteer survey ambassadors, partnering with several racially/ethnically diverse social media influencers to share about the survey on popular social media sites, and connecting with diverse survey outreach partners who shared about the survey within their networks of military service members, Veterans, and family members of color. Social media advertising on Instagram and Facebook and organic sharing of the survey by participants also increased engagement among target audiences.

Respondents could access the survey from a computer or mobile device via several possible links shared via email, websites, social media pages, etc. The survey began with a consent form that explained the study's objective, risks, and benefits. Consent was required to participate. All questions except for the consent and primary military identity were voluntary, and respondents could skip any questions they did not feel comfortable answering. Survey branching and skip logic techniques allowed survey respondents to avoid questions that were not pertinent to them. Therefore, including missing data considerations, the actual number of respondents per question varied throughout the survey.



## Data Cleaning

After survey closing, researchers conducted a rigorous, multistep data cleaning protocol, including removing invalid responses. For removal, responses had to meet several criteria agreed upon by researchers, including, but not limited to, completion of the survey in less than five minutes, nonsensical phrases repeated across respondents or across multiple answers for the same response, and duplicate responses. For additional information regarding this protocol, please contact [survey@bluestarfam.org](mailto:survey@bluestarfam.org).

## Data Analysis

This study utilized a mixed-methods approach. The majority of quantitative survey questions were single-answer, multiple choice (including Likert Scale options) questions, but select-all questions were also included. In most cases, responses of “does not apply,” “not applicable,” and/or “I don’t know” were excluded from analyses, but in several cases, “I don’t know” was kept in the analyses; these choices are noted in the accompanying footnotes within the report. Analyses primarily included frequencies and cross-tabulations. Additional tests were conducted and statistical significance was assessed for specific analyses, and are indicated where appropriate in this report.

The current study explored community attributes that contributed to or undermined respondents’ sense of belonging to the community. To explore these variables, respondents were asked a series of questions about their experiences in their current community. Respondents were then asked the same series of questions about their experiences in previous locations where they lived, within the past five years. The majority of the findings focus on respondents’ current location and experiences.

Additionally, several open-ended questions were included for qualitative analysis. The analyst used a content analysis methodology to identify key themes from the data. The content analysis process is as follows: first, the data was reviewed for emergent themes; second, each response was categorized by relevant theme(s); third, a final tabulation of responses by theme was created. After each question was analyzed, quotes were identified to illustrate each theme. The Applied Research team intentionally selected quotes to share throughout the report that reflect the diversity of respondent backgrounds across racial and ethnic groups, branch of service, gender, etc. Two open-ended questions were also included to identify in which communities respondents felt the most belonging or the least belonging in the five years prior to survey fielding. These responses were coded and collapsed according to location. For example, responses such as “Jax Beach,” “Jacksonville Beach,” and “Jacksonville, FL,” were all combined to be “Jacksonville, FL,” since they refer to the same area. This was also done to certain military bases and their surrounding community so “Dyess Air Force Base,” “Dyess AFB,” and “Abilene, TX,” were all recorded as “Abilene, TX.”

## Community Experiences of Discrimination

Several of the findings in this report use two matrices of questions: one about experiences of racial/ethnic discrimination in respondents’ current civilian community and another about the same discrimination experiences in

their current military community (see below). There were several analytical choices made regarding these matrices that should be outlined here.

**Considering interactions in your  
CIVILIAN community, about how often have  
you experienced each of the following at your  
current location?**

**Considering interactions in your  
MILITARY/VETERAN community, about  
how often have you experienced each of the  
following at your current location?**

- My child experienced racially/ethnically motivated bullying.
- I was racially profiled by police.
- I was subject to racial/ethnic slurs or jokes.
- I feared for my personal safety because of my race/ethnicity.
- I was threatened or harassed due to my/my family's race/ethnicity.

Answer options: "Never," "Once or twice a year," "3-4 times a year," "Monthly," "Weekly," "Daily," "I don't know," or "Does not apply."

Several analyses called for these items to be dichotomized to categorize respondents who either had or had not experienced an instance of discrimination (for example, racial profiling by the police in their local civilian community). To recalculate these variables, all of the respondents who indicated they had "never" experienced that incident in their current community were re-coded as "never experienced." Respondents who selected an answer choice ranging from "once or twice a year" to "daily" were re-coded as "have experienced." Respondents who selected "I don't know" or "does not apply" were excluded from these analyses to be as clear as possible in these comparisons. Further transformation was required to compare respondents who had not experienced any of the five discrimination experiences in comparison to those who had experienced at least one instance, at least once or twice a year.

### Definitions

The survey utilized a select-all, combination race/ethnicity question as recommended by the U.S. Census Bureau.<sup>83</sup> 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. As a result, respondents of color in this report 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. For example, respondents identifying both as “Black” and “Asian” are counted in both analyses, but only once when aggregated “respondents of color” are reported.

Most analyses in this report refer to “active-duty family respondents of color,” but researchers also aimed to learn more about respondents who have family members (e.g., spouse and/or children) in multiple racial/ethnic groups. White respondents with multiracial/multiethnic family members may have different experiences from respondents of color and/or white respondents who do not have multiracial/multiethnic families. For example, a white respondent with a child who identifies as Black may report their child having experienced racially/ethnically motivated bullying. Those respondents who are categorized in this report as “white, 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 multiracial/multiethnic family. When appropriate (e.g., when survey questions focus on family experiences), these respondents have been added as a comparison group, but this is limited, in part due to small sample sizes.

“White respondents not in multiracial/multiethnic families” are defined in this report 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 multiracial/multiethnic family (e.g., “Do you have a spouse or child of a different race/ethnicity?”). This group serves as the main comparison group in several analyses throughout the report.



Military affiliation was captured differently in this survey than in Blue Star Families’ previous survey on military families of color (The Diverse Experiences of Military and Veteran Families of Color). Respondents were asked first to identify all their current affiliations with the military. For example, respondents could identify themselves as a “spouse/domestic partner of an active-duty service member,” “National Guard service member,” and/or “Veteran/retired service member.” A second question then asked participants to select their primary military

affiliation with the instructions that respondents would use this perspective to answer the survey. “Active-duty family” respondents include those respondents who selected “active-duty service member” or “active-duty spouse” as their primary military affiliation and do not refer to a service member-spouse dyad. This report focuses on active-duty family respondents due to the frequent relocation and the potential subsequent impacts on families’ sense of belonging. Due to the nature of the survey and recruitment methods, there is a robust sample



of active-duty spouse respondents, which impacts the presented active-duty family responses. It is important to note that “family” responses do not refer to paired dyads.

## Respondents

There were 4,111 active-duty family respondents who started the survey. Of those who answered the race/ethnicity question (n=4,035), 28% were active-duty family respondents of color. Another 60% were white active-duty family respondents not in a multiracial/multiethnic family, and 10% were categorized as white active-duty family respondents in a multiracial/multiethnic family. The remaining 2% of active-duty family respondents selected the write-in option only or did not answer the question about multiracial/multiethnic family, etc.

Please see the tables below for more information on the sample groups.

**Table 13: Respondent Military Affiliation, by Individual and Family Race/Ethnicity**  
Active-duty family respondents

Family Race/Ethnicity Groups	Service Member		Spouse		Total
	Count	%	Count	%	Count
Respondents of color	207	18%	926	82%	1,133
White respondents not in a multiracial/multiethnic family	240	10%	2,173	90%	2,413
White respondents in a multiracial/multiethnic family	59	14%	350	86%	409
Total	506	13%	3,449	87%	3,955



**Table 14: Respondent Race/Ethnicity, by Primary Military Affiliation**

Active-duty family respondents of color

Race/Ethnicity	Service Members of Color		Spouses of Color		Families of Color	
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%
American Indian/Alaska Native (for example, Navajo Nation, Blackfeet Tribe, Mayan, etc.)	30	14%	94	10%	124	11%
Asian (for example, Chinese, Vietnamese, Filipino, Korean, Asian Indian, Japanese)	49	24%	246	27%	295	26%
Black/African American (for example, African American, Nigerian, Jamaican, Ethiopian, Haitian, Somali)	61	29%	213	23%	274	24%
Hispanic or Latino/a/x or of Spanish origin (for example, Mexican or Mexican American, Salvadoran, Puerto Rican, Dominican, Cuban, Colombian)	84	41%	430	46%	514	45%
Middle Eastern or Northern African (for example, Lebanese, Syrian, Iranian, Moroccan, Egyptian, Israeli)	8	4%	19	2%	27	2%
Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander (for example, Native Hawaiian, Tongan, Samoan, Fijian, Chamorro, Marshallese)	6	3%	41	4%	47	4%
Some other race or ethnicity	2	1%	7	1%	9	1%
White (for example, German, Italian, Irish, Polish, English, French)	49	24%	246	27%	295	26%
Total	207	18%	926	82%	1,133	100%

Note: 1) Race/ethnicity was a select-all question so respondents could select multiple options and therefore, percentages do not equal 100%. 2) White respondents in this grouping have selected "white" and at least one racial/ethnic group in addition to "white."

**Table 15: Respondent Age, by Individual and Family Race/Ethnicity**

Active-duty family respondents

Age	Respondents of Color		White Respondents in Multiracial/Multiethnic Families		White Respondents Not in Multiracial/Multiethnic Families	
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%
18-30	270	24%	88	22%	484	20%
31-40	584	52%	224	55%	1,278	53%
41-50	241	22%	79	20%	558	23%
51-60	21	2%	14	3%	67	3%
Over 60	1	0%	0	0%	6	0%
Total	1,117	100%	405	100%	2,393	100%

Question text: "What is your age?"

**Table 16: Rank, by Individual and Family Race/Ethnicity**

Active-duty family respondents

Respondents of Color			White Respondents in Multiracial/Multiethnic Families		White Respondents Not in Multiracial/Multiethnic Families	
Rank	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%
E1-E4	134	13%	26	7%	123	5%
E5-E7	543	52%	197	50%	869	38%
E8-E9	73	7%	28	7%	160	7%
O1-O3	89	8%	45	11%	284	12%
O4-O6	179	17%	85	22%	766	34%
O7-O10	1	0%	1	0%	10	0%
W1-W5	33	3%	12	3%	73	3%
Total	1,052	100%	394	100%	2,285	100%

Question text: "What is your or your service member's rank?"

**Figure 5: Geographic Region of Respondents, by Race/Ethnicity**

Active-duty family respondents



Northeast Region included: CT, DE, ME, MD, MA, NH, NJ, NY, PA, RI, and VT. Midwest Region included: IL, IN, IA, KS, MI, MN, MO, NE, ND, OH, SD, and WI. South Region included: AL, AR, DC, FL, GA, KY, LA, MS, NC, OK, SC, TN, TX, VA, and WV. West Region included: AK, AZ, CA, CO, HI, ID, MT, NV, NM, OR, UT, WA, and WY. Other Regions included: Outside the Country, American Samoa, Guam, Puerto Rico, and Other U.S. territories.

## Limitations

This survey is not intended to be statistically representative of the experiences of all active-duty families of color. The intention of using a convenience sampling method was so the survey could have a robust representation of respondents of color — whose voices are often diluted in surveys without a conscious plan — to broaden and strengthen their ethnic and racial composition. No weights are used in the data cleaning or analyses. Because of this strategy to maximize participation by respondents of color, the team also cannot guarantee that the views of the respondents are statistically representative of all active-duty families of color. Some of the findings may be influenced by survey recruitment methods and sample demographics, so it is important to consider these findings carefully, as a signal for future research and exploration, rather than a complete picture of all military families of color.

While there was an intentional effort and outreach to ensure that the survey would be able to focus on respondents of color, the proportional differences in terms of active-duty service member or spouse and racial/ethnic identities vary across the board, as described in the earlier “Respondents” section. The overall results from the survey can be more or less influenced by the proportion of different groups of respondents. Specifically, military affiliation, racial/ethnic identity, and/or the intersection of those elements may all contribute to different opinions and life experiences.

These analyses are limited in comparisons across different cross-sectional surveys and data sources, due to both the wording of survey questions and the survey sample. As an example, prior BSF surveys have asked about experiences of discrimination in different ways. In the 2021 Military Family Lifestyle Survey, respondents were asked if they had ever experienced racial discrimination in the military community and again in the civilian community. These were multiselect questions with several options ranging from “on the installation/base” to “in my children’s school,” and there was also a write-in option. These items are quite different from the questions used for this report to capture experiences of discrimination and therefore, comparisons are limited. Similarly, measurement of respondent race/ethnicity has varied over different iterations of the Military Family Lifestyle Survey and other Blue Star Families’ reports. Ultimately, for consistency, clarity, and legibility, detailed information about relevant statistics from this survey are included in footnotes (e.g., frequencies, question response rate, any differences in definitions, etc.).

Whenever comparisons are made between active-duty family respondents of color and white respondents who are not part of multiracial/multiethnic families, it is important to note that differences may exist between racial/ethnic subgroups. For example, Hispanic/Latino/a/x respondents may be more comfortable in certain states in the South, such as Texas or Florida that have a greater proportion of Hispanic/Latino/a/x residents, than in other states. Military families of color may feel a greater sense of belonging when a community is diverse, but also when the community includes representation of their own race/ethnicity. Furthermore, comparisons are sometimes made between three groups — respondents of color, white respondents in multiracial/multiethnic families, and white respondents not in multiracial/multiethnic families. For some analyses, the race/ethnicity of

the respondents' immediate family is salient, and are therefore included in the analysis. For example, when the family makes decisions about duty station preferences, perceptions of racism at the potential duty station are likely to include considerations of the racial/ethnic identity of all family members. Therefore, white respondents in multiracial/multiethnic families are also included in the analyses to explore potential differences.

Some analyses are limited by small and/or disparate sample sizes or unequal variances in the data; these are included in the footnotes within the finding. Additionally, some answer options, such as "I don't know" or "does not apply" were included in the survey to allow respondents an answer choice that reflected their perceptions or experiences. However, sometimes it is not possible to determine respondent intent and the results are therefore limited. For example, respondents who do not have children may have selected "never" rather than "does not apply." Some respondents who have very young children may have selected "does not apply" and others may have selected "never." To clarify interpretation of the findings, these responses were excluded from the analyses where appropriate; these choices are footnoted within the finding.

When looking at questions of belonging to the civilian community, a central focus of this research, it is important to note that the survey was focused on military family experiences, and included a variety of questions about those unique experiences. Respondents may have, therefore, been primed to consider their military identity as the most prominent in their community experiences, which may impact the identified correlation between a sense of belonging to the civilian community and the perception of Military Family Lifestyle Cultural Competence, and potentially limit the influence of race/ethnic identity on that sense of belonging.

This research examines patterns of relationships between a handful of variables, all of which are also influenced by many other factors. Respondents' choice of duty station, preference for civilian versus military housing, as well as their likelihood to recommend both their civilian community and military service are influenced by many factors beyond what is explored in this analysis. Respondents' branch, rank, military occupational specialty, the presence of children, spouse employment and/or income, and previous life experiences and perceptions are a few of many factors that may influence the perceptions, opinions, and choices explored in this research. This investigation is intended to explore whether a pattern exists between a few selected variables and, therefore, does not control for the many other factors that may influence. Furthermore, this survey research is cross-sectional, and therefore cannot determine causality. This research alone cannot directly support the argument that experiencing racial discrimination causes decreased likelihood to recommend military service, or even that it impacts overall satisfaction with military service, but it signals a need for further research.

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