



# **Military Family Lifestyle Survey**

**2023 Comprehensive Report**

# **Supporting Military Families: A Long-Term Strategy to Sustain the All-Volunteer Force**

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# Military Families are a Key Solution to the Recruiting Crisis

The military is in the midst of a well-publicized recruiting crisis,<sup>1</sup> with a diminishing military end-strength<sup>2</sup> as a result of missed recruiting targets, all while maintaining a consistently high operations tempo.<sup>3</sup> With an increasing civil-military gap,<sup>4,5</sup> most new recruits are from families that have a tradition of military service,<sup>6</sup> resulting in an ever-shrinking pool of potential recruits.<sup>7</sup>

Of all respondents to the 2023 Military Family Lifestyle Survey (MFLS), 7% reported they had a parent who served in the military. When asked if they also considered military service, the majority (70%) reported they had also considered military service in an open-ended question, most commonly due to family legacy or encouragement (11%), a duty to serve or patriotism (5%), or money or benefits (4%).

**You indicated you have a parent who served in the military. Did you consider military service? Why or why not?**

**“For the longest time I did not because my father was always gone with the Air Force or working Reserve weekends as part of the active Reserves. Then he encouraged me to take JROTC in high school and the [camaraderie] made me want to try and apply for any ROTC scholarship. Navy happened to choose me, and I am thankful for the opportunities it gave me.”**

Active-Duty Navy Service Member

**“No. The struggles I saw both of my parents go through while serving their country had me realize I did not want that for my children. I, as a dependent, did not have support.”**

Adult Child of a Service Member

## Ambassadors of the Military Lifestyle

Military and Veteran families are critical influencers for young adults' decisions to join the military. Among new recruits, the most common sources of information about military service — outside of a recruiter — is from a friend or family member who served or is serving.<sup>8</sup> Military and Veteran families have the ability to expand the pool of potential recruits by exposing civilian acquaintances to military life, promoting their positive experiences, and countering negative narratives about the military lifestyle. Conversely, they

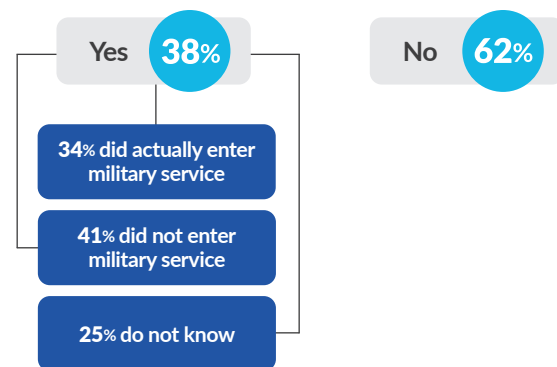
also can deter potential recruits from service. Many are already having these conversations; two-thirds of active-duty family respondents (65%) had shared their military experiences with a civilian at least once in the past month.

## 2 in 3 active-duty family respondents had shared their military experiences with a civilian at least once in the past month.

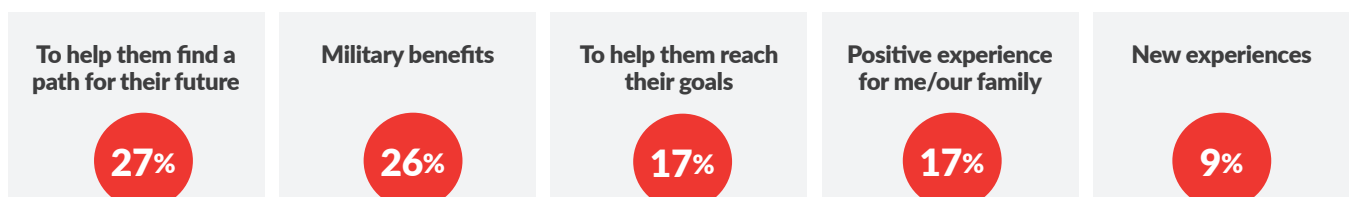
More than one-third of active-duty family respondents (38%) had encouraged an acquaintance to join the military in the past five years. Of those who did encourage an acquaintance to join, one-third (34%) report that person did enter military service, 40% reported the person they encouraged did not enter military service, and one-quarter (25%) did not know the result.

In an open-ended question, respondents were asked to share more about the person they encouraged to join. Almost half of these open-ended responses (46%) indicated that the person was not connected to the military before being encouraged to join.

**Figure 1: Did You Encourage an Acquaintance to Enter Military Service?** (n=3,009)



**Figure 2: Top Reasons Respondents Encouraged an Acquaintance to Enter Military Service** (n=525)



Please tell us more about the person who joined most recently. Why did you encourage them to enter military service? Was this person connected to the military before you encouraged them to join?

**“It’s a great opportunity to learn skills and develop as a person, whether you stay four years or 20 plus. They wanted a change in their life so I suggested the Navy, they joined, did six years and decided to move on. They were not connected to the military prior.”**

Active-Duty Navy Service Member

**“The military is a great way to start a career. They weren’t connected to the military but I helped them understand it and destigmatize it (elite college undergrad).”**

Active-Duty Army Service Member

**“The person was not connected to the military prior to me. They did not know it was an option or the real benefits. I encouraged them to enter military service because they were not enthused with their job market choices and wanted to gain real experience doing something rather than going back to school.”**

Active-Duty Army Service Member

**“A friend’s child who didn’t have any motivation to go to school or leave a job working at fast food establishments. Once we discussed what the military has to offer and the variety of training available for a career they wanted without tons of schooling they were excited to join. No connection to the military besides being friends with us.”**

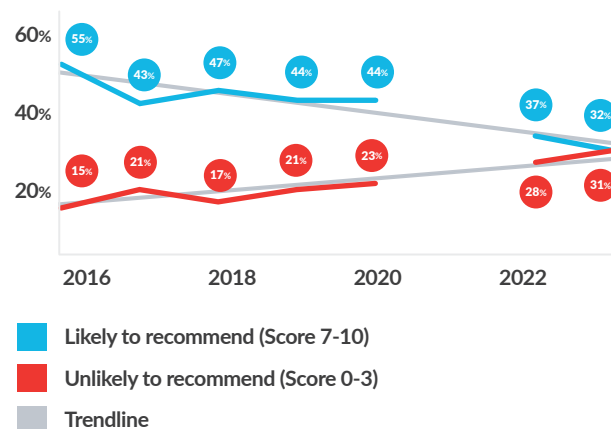
Active-Duty Army Spouse

## Likelihood to Recommend Military Service Continues to Decline

To maintain and expand military families as an asset for the sustainment of the All-Volunteer Force, it is critical to address declining likelihood to recommend military service. The proportion of active-duty family respondents who were likely to recommend military service<sup>a</sup> has dropped by nearly half from 2016, when it was 55% to just 32% in 2023. Furthermore, the proportion who were unlikely to recommend service<sup>b</sup> has more than doubled from 15% in 2016 to 31% in 2023.

**Figure 3: Likelihood to Recommend Military Service (2016-2023)<sup>c</sup>**

Active-duty family respondents



<sup>a</sup> Provided a response of 7-10 on a scale of 0-10.

<sup>b</sup> Provided a response of 0-3 on a scale of 0-10.

<sup>c</sup> In 2016-2020, the question was worded “How likely are you to recommend a young person close to you to join the military?” In 2021 the question was separated into two questions: “How likely are you to recommend a young woman close to you join the military?” and “How likely are you to recommend a young man close to you join the military?” so data from this year was not included in the analysis. In 2022-2023, the question was worded “How likely are you to recommend that a young family member (child, niece, nephew, etc.) join the military? On a scale of 0 to 10 where 0 = “very unlikely” and 10 = “very likely”?”

## Sustaining the All-Volunteer Force will Require all Sectors – Communities, Business, Government, and Military – to Do Your Part.

To reverse the declining trend of recommending military service, it is critical to ensure military families have what they need to thrive. Sustaining the All-Volunteer Force requires support from all sectors – communities and individuals, businesses, government, and military.

### Communities and Individuals: Support Military Families’ Sense of Belonging

Military recruitment, performance, readiness, and retention are tied to families’ well-being – and all military families need informal support to sustain their duties.<sup>9</sup> Organic, informal support – family and friends who step in to help, from a neighbor who mows the lawn during a deployment or friends who connect through FaceTime across multiple time zones – is the most common resource that families rely on<sup>10</sup> and can never be fully replaced by formal systems.

## Military families’ sense of belonging to the civilian community is tied to recommending military service, well-being.

This year’s research found that active-duty family respondents who agree that they feel a sense of belonging to their local civilian community also report greater well-being than those who disagree (48 versus 39),

<b>Table 1: Average Well-Being and Likelihood to Recommend Military Service Scores, by Sense of Belonging to Civilian Community</b> Active-duty family respondents (n=2,691)		
<b>I feel a sense of belonging to my local civilian community.</b>	<b>Mental Health Continuum Score (Range: 0-70)<sup>d</sup></b>	<b>Likelihood to Recommend Military Service (Range: 0-10)</b>
<b>Disagree*</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>4.36</b>
<b>Neutral</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>5.07</b>
<b>Agree*</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>5.34</b>

\*Includes response options “Strongly Disagree,” “Disagree,” and “Somewhat Disagree”

\*Includes response options “Strongly Agree,” “Agree,” and “Somewhat Agree”

and are more likely to recommend military service to a young family member (4.36 versus 5.34). Individuals, communities, and military- and Veteran-serving organizations all have the opportunity to support this key component of resilience

by creating opportunities for military families to connect with others and develop new relationships that build a sense of belonging to the community.

### Businesses and Employers: Address Military Spouse Employment

Military spouse unemployment remains five to six times the national unemployment rate and a top issue for military families for over a decade. This year, “military spouse employment” is the top issue for active-

<sup>d</sup> A higher score indicates more positive well-being.

duty family respondents for the fourth year in a row; 49% of active-duty family respondents report it is one of their top issues. Critically, employed military spouses are more likely to recommend military service than their unemployed peers.

Businesses and employers have a key opportunity to solve this intransigent problem in ways military and community-based supportive programming cannot, by hiring and retaining military spouses. Efforts like the *4+1 Commitment* encourage employers to take simple but powerful steps to retain military spouses.

**Table 2: Likelihood to Recommend Military Service Scores, by Spouse Employment Status**

Active-duty spouse respondents (n=1,386)

Employment Status	Likelihood to Recommend Military Service (Range: 0-10)
Employed Full Time (n=706)	4.8
Employed Part Time (n=376)	4.8
Unemployed* (n=304)	4.2

\*Not working but want/need paid employment AND have actively sought work in the last four weeks

### Government and Military: Address Quality-of-Life Issues

Military families cite quality-of-life issues as their reasons for not recommending military service.<sup>12,13</sup>

Sustaining the All-Volunteer Force requires immediate attention to military family quality-of-life issues, such as health care access, spouse employment and child care, and food insecurity. The rest of this report explores the key quality-of-life issues that impact military families' belonging to their communities, well-being, and consequently impact their likelihood to recommend military service, and provides recommendations on how stakeholders at every level can **Do Their Part to support the All-Volunteer Force**.



## Endnotes

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