**Blue Star Families**

# Military Family
# Lifestyle Survey

## 2023 Comprehensive Report
# Social Ties

# Frequent relocation and separation from friends and family makes in-person connection a challenge. Most active-duty family respondents report they engage with their closest friends virtually rather than in-person, but those that do report lower mean well-being scores.

Military families' frequent relocations[1] create challenges to build and maintain strong support networks. However, strong support networks are a critical component of military family resilience, and social connectedness and support are correlated with positive mental health outcomes.[2-9]

## 60% of active-duty family respondents stated they had moved four or more times due to their service member's orders, and 36% had a permanent change of station move in the 12 months prior to survey fielding.

Military families must re-establish these support networks with each relocation. When asked, "Considering your most recent relocation, how did you meet and connect with new friends after relocating?" the top four methods reported by active-duty family respondents were through 1) Their child(ren)'s activities (22%), 2) Their neighbors/neighborhood (21%), 3) Their work (16%), and 4) Their religious community (14%).

**Figure 1: How Active-Duty Family Respondents Meet and Connect with New Friends After Relocating**

**Active-duty family respondents** (n=1,650)

| | |
|---|---|
| Their child(ren)'s activities **22%** | Their neighbors or neighborhood **21%** |
| Their work **16%** | Their religious community **14%** |

However, not all active-duty family respondents established new relationships after moving, with 18% indicating that they had not made new friends since their most recent relocation, and 7% reporting they reconnected with old friends.

> **"I didn't really. After 10 moves, with the eleventh coming up this month, I've given up making anything more than acquaintances."**
>
> **Active-Duty Army Spouse**

With the availability of online communities and virtual means of communications, individuals often choose to maintain existing social networks virtually instead of establishing new in-person connections upon relocating. Three-quarters of active-duty family respondents (76%) reported engaging entirely or mostly virtually when considering their three closest relationships outside of their spouse or children.

> "Ugh, I still don't feel like I have connected and found "my people" yet after living here for nearly two years. Still searching for those relationships unfortunately."
>
> **Active-Duty Air Force Spouse**

Studies have found benefits to online (versus in-person) social interactions, including: anonymity, accessibility, and opportunities to find people with uncommon shared experiences.[10,11] The accessibility of established networks may be a key benefit for military families who relocate frequently. When asked an open-ended follow up question about why they engaged more virtually or in-person with their closest relationships, most active-duty family respondents mentioned geographic distance, whether they engaged virtually due to the distance from their friends or in person because their friends lived close by. Active-duty family respondents also reported time/schedule challenges (11%), family commitments (7%), and work commitments (6%) as reasons they engaged entirely or mostly virtually.

> "Most of my close relationships live nowhere near us, we move too often to have an actual support system where we live. By the time we find and make maybe a handful of close friends we are moving again."
>
> **Active-Duty Air Force Spouse**

While a large number of military families are turning toward virtual options for staying connected to others, there is no clear understanding of whether virtual relationships provide the same benefits as in-person social support.[12-16] In our sample, active-duty family respondents who engaged entirely or mostly virtually had a lower mean well-being score[17,a] (*M=43.3*, range 0-70, n=1602) than those who engaged entirely or mostly in person (*M=46.9*, n=487).

The frequency of respondents' interactions with their closest relationships is an important factor to consider. Over two-thirds of active-duty family respondents (69%) engaged one or more times a week with at least one of their three closest relationships in the month prior to survey fielding. Active-duty family respondents who engaged one or more times a week with one of their closest relationships had a higher mean well-being score (*M=45.29*, n=1532) than those who engaged less than once a week (*M=40.95*, n=545) with one of their closest relationships.

Engaging virtually may allow military families to interact with others more frequently, but active-duty family respondents who engaged entirely or mostly in person with their closest relationship had a higher

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ª Well-being was measured using the Mental Health Continuum-Short Form (MHC-SF), capturing three dimensions of mental health: emotional, social, and psychological well-being.

**Table 1: Mean Well-Being Score by Type & Frequency of Interactions with One's Closest Relationships**
Active-duty family respondents

| | Total (virtual or in person) | Entirely or mostly virtually | Entirely or mostly in person |
|---|---|---|---|
| Frequency | | MHC Score (Range: 0-70) | |
| One or more times a week | 45.3 (n=1,525) | 44.6 (n=1,166) | 47.5 (n=359) |
| Less than once a week | 40.9 (n=544) | 39.9 (n=436) | 45.2 (n=108) |

Well-being was measured using the Mental Health Continuum-Short Form (MHC-SF), capturing three dimensions of mental health: emotional, social, and psychological well-being.

mean well-being score than those who engaged entirely or mostly virtually, regardless of how often they interacted (see Table 1).

Three-quarters of active-duty family respondents (77%) reported being separated from their family or service member due to military service for at least one month, in the 12 months prior to survey fielding. On average, active-duty family respondents estimated being separated from their service member for a total of three months in the past year. Service members' frequent separations from their family can create a variety of challenges for military families, and "time away from family" was reported as one of the top five military family lifestyle concerns by active-duty family respondents for more than a decade.

## In-person social networks are even more important for families who are frequently separated from their service members due to military service.

Military families report many areas of their lives are impacted when they are separated from their service member. When asked "What are the three areas of your family's life that are most impacted when you or your service member is away (for longer than two weeks)?" the top five areas identified by active-duty family respondents were: 1) Parenting responsibilities (53%), 2) Household responsibilities (46%), 3) My mental health (41%), 4) child care challenges (25%), and 5) my child's mental health (25%). These concerns are well supported in the literature on impact of deployment on military family members, which highlight disruptions in family routines, and mental and behavioral health changes in children and spouses of deployed soldiers.[18-24]

**Figure 2: Top Five Areas of Family Life Impacted When You or Your Service Member is Away for Longer Than Two Weeks**
Active-duty family respondents (n=2,777)

| Parenting responsibilities 53% | Household responsibilities 46% | My mental health 41% |
|---|---|---|

| Child care challenges 25% | My child's mental health 25% |
|---|---|
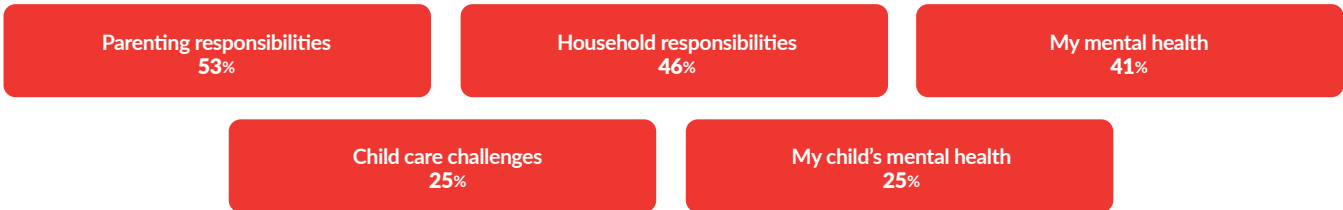
> **"The last time my spouse was deployed, my mother came to live with us to help with our son. It was such a lifesaver. I don't know how that deployment would have gone without her being here."**
>
> Active-Duty Army Spouse

Military families find many different ways to cope with these challenges, including relying on their in-person social network, if they have an established in-person support system. When asked "What does your family do differently when you or your service member is away to address [the above] challenges?" active-duty family respondents reported these common themes: 1) Communication/phone calls (17%), 2) Obtain help from their social network (13%), 3) Stay busy/distracted (12%), 4) Spouse picks up the slack (12%), 5) Relocate to be with family (10%), and 6) Pay for additional services (10%).



While further research is needed on the benefits of virtual versus in-person interactions, this data suggests that having close relationships with people in person has the most positive relationship to one's well-being and is a critical form of support during separations due to military service. However, active-duty

> **"We try to lean on support but it's hard when we're always moving and don't have local support systems that we're integrated into yet, as a dual military family. We try our best to make it work but it takes a big toll on our family. Our kids and our marriage."**
>
> Active-Duty Air Force Service Member

families may need help connecting and engaging in person upon relocating to a new community. There are opportunities for schools, community-based organizations, religious organizations, and employers to perform outreach and engage newcomers to assist them in making new social connections.

> **"I had to relocate my family away from the installation during my deployment due to a severe lack of quality of life resources to ensure that my dependents are taken care of."**
>
> Active-Duty Air Force Service Member

## Limitations

There are disparate sample sizes between those who engaged entirely/mostly virtually versus those who engaged entirely/mostly in-person, which may exaggerate differences between these two groups. Furthermore, the survey question focused on the "three closest relationships," so it is possible that individuals who have regular in person interactions — with others outside of their three closest relationships — could achieve the positive impacts of social connectedness in person.

## Recommendations

**Department of Defense**

- **Maintain and expand the Defense Health Administration funding to promote the health and well-being of our nation's service members and their families through inclusive outdoor activities on public lands and waterways.***

**Schools**

- Create a new buddy program that connects new students with existing students to make them feel welcome, such as the Military Child Education Coalition's Student 2 Student program.[25]
- Ensure that military children have an opportunity to meet within the school to socialize with other military children with the assistance and guidance of the School Liaison Officer or school counselor.

**Community Organizations**

- Military- and Veteran-serving organizations should utilize both in-person and virtual formats for helping military families build social connections, such as Blue Star Chapters. Understanding that virtual spaces — such as the **Blue Star Neighborhood** — are still helpful and necessary, prioritizing in-person meeting opportunities may provide greater benefit for participants.
- Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) should include messaging around welcoming military families and how they can engage online, with specific guidance for kids transfering into activities like sports, music, etc., midyear. Creating low-bar entry, commitment-free, family-oriented activities with limited requirements can provide opportunities for families to rebuild critical social support networks.

*More information in Recommendations Chapter of Comprehensive Report

## Endnotes

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