



Military Family Lifestyle Survey

2023 Comprehensive Report Respondents and Methodology

Respondents

The widespread distribution of the 2023 survey through Blue Star Families’ networks and partners in the military community has allowed it to remain the largest and most comprehensive survey of active-duty service members, Veterans, and their families, reaching over 100,000 cumulative responses since its inception in 2009. After cleaning the data to remove duplicates and invalid responses (see Methodology for full details), 7,431 responses remained for the 2023 survey. Of the 7,431 respondents who started the survey, 72% (5,340) completed the entire questionnaire. The respondents represent a cross-section of active-duty service members, National Guard and Reserve service members, Veterans, and their immediate family members from all branches of service, ranks, and regions – both within the United States and serving on orders overseas. While recruitment efforts focused on obtaining a diverse and representative sample, the survey samples of active-duty,

Figure 1: Primary Relationship to Service

All respondents (n=7,431)

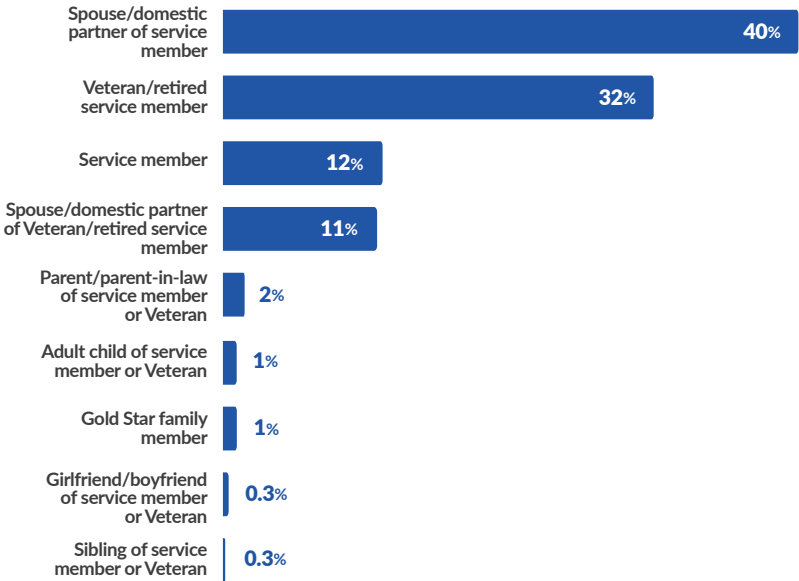
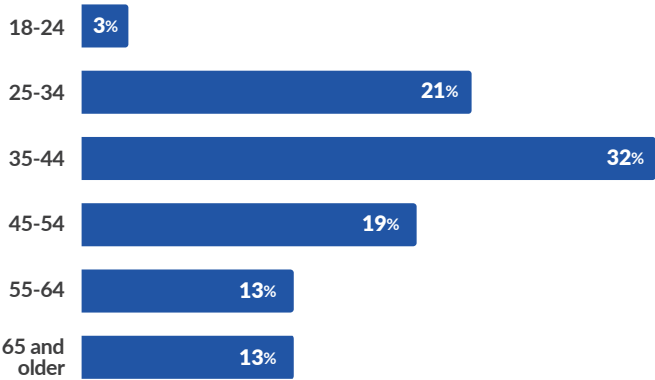


Figure 2: Age

All respondents (n=7,322)



National Guard, Reserve, and Veteran families differ from those populations in several important ways, and cannot be considered representative of the entire population.

Definitions

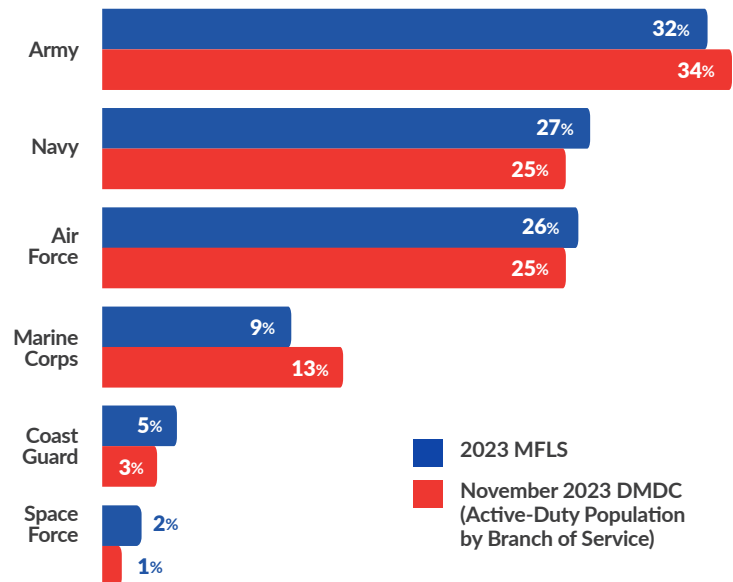
Many members of the military community have multiple military affiliations, such as a Veteran who is also a current spouse of an active-duty service member. To account for this, survey respondents were asked **first** to identify *all* their current

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. For the purpose of this report, “primary military affiliation” is defined as the affiliation a respondent chose as their primary identity. “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. 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.

Figure 3: Branch of Service

Active-duty family respondents (n=3,074)

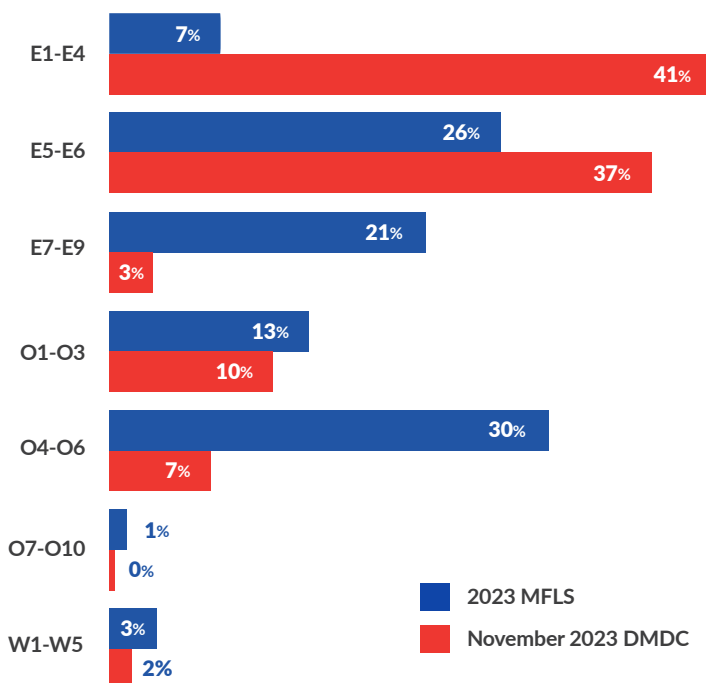


Demographics of All Respondents

Of all survey respondents, the most commonly selected primary identity is spouse/domestic partner of a service member including National Guard and Reserve (40%), followed by Veteran/retired service

Figure 4: Service Member Rank

Active-duty family respondents (n=3,136)

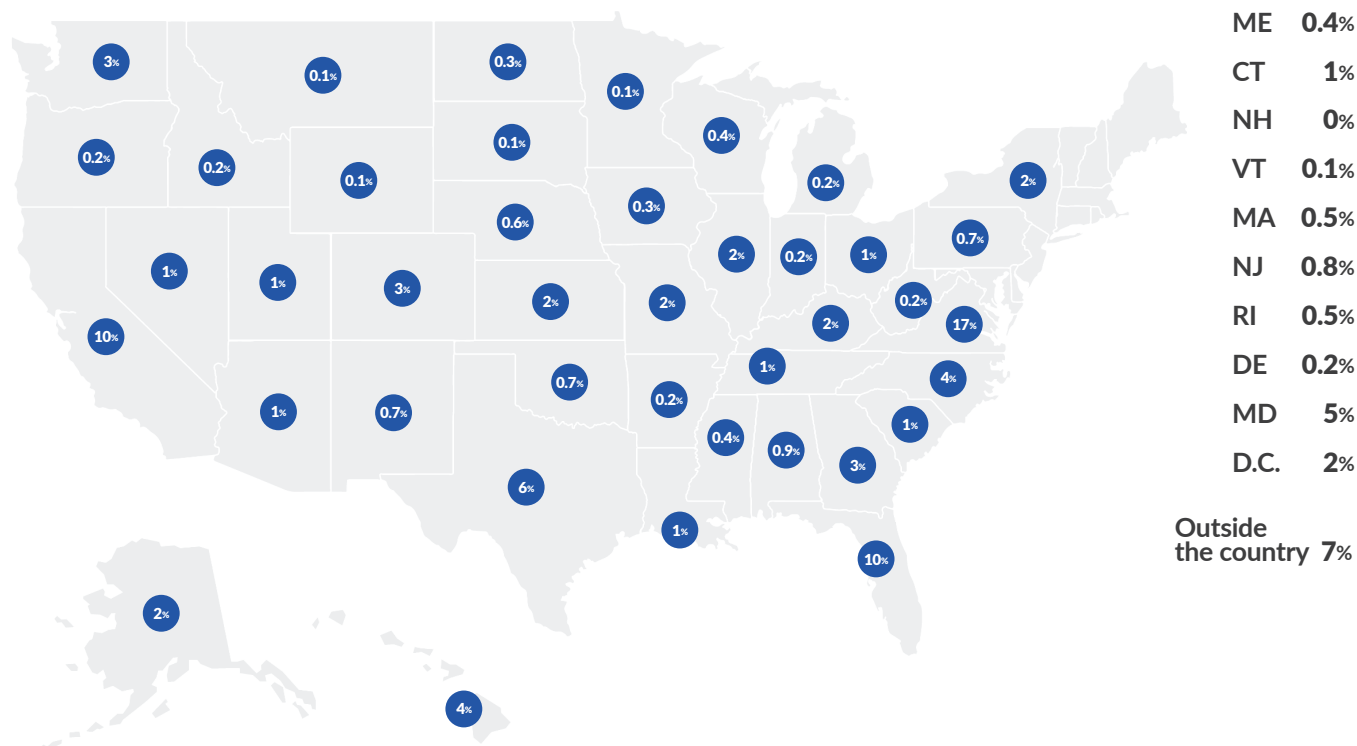


member (32%), service member including National Guard and Reserve (12%), spouse/domestic partner of Veteran/retired service member (11%), parent/parent-in-law of a service member/Veteran (2%), adult child of a service member/Veteran (1%), Gold Star family member (0.8%), girlfriend/boyfriend of a service member/Veteran (0.3%), and sibling of a service member/Veteran (0.3%).

Of all respondents, the single largest age group was ages 35-44 (32%), followed by those who are 25-34 (21%), 45-54 (19%), 55-64 (13%), 65 and older (13%), and 18-24 (3%).

Approximately 93% of all respondents lived within the U.S., and 7% lived outside the U.S. Within the U.S., the largest groups of respondents lived in Virginia (17%), Florida (10%), California (10%), and Texas (6%).

Figure 5: Geographic Location of Active-Duty Family Respondents (n=3,229)



Active-Duty Family Respondents

“Active-duty family respondents” in this report includes active-duty service members and active-duty spouse respondents. This sample of active-duty family respondents represents a greater percentage of married, older, and senior-ranking respondents than in the active-duty population as a whole. The sample also obtained a larger proportion of female service members (45%) than present in the active-duty population (18%¹).

In response to the select-all question for race/ethnicity, 79% of active-duty family respondents selected white, followed by Hispanic or Latino/a/x or of Spanish origin (13%), Asian (7%), Black/African-American (7%), American Indian/Alaska Native (3%), Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander (1%), and 1% selected a write-in option.

Most services were represented at rates within a few percentage points of the active-duty force,² except for the Marine Corps, which was undersampled. Army respondents were sampled at 32% compared to 34% of the total active-duty force; Navy respondents were sampled at 27% compared to 25% of the total active-duty force; Air Force respondents were sampled at 26% compared to 25% of the total active-duty force; Marine Corps respondents were sampled at 9% compared to 13% of the total active-duty force; Coast Guard respondents were sampled at 5% compared to 3% of the total active-duty military force; and Space Force represented 2% compared to 1% of the total active-duty force.

Because the focus of this report is military families, representation of the sample by rank is compared to the proportion of the active-duty force with spouses or dependents. Over one-half of active-duty members have spouses or dependents,³ and these service members often differ demographically from service members without dependents, often being older or higher ranked. The active-duty family respondent sample included a greater proportion of senior enlisted, junior and mid-grade officers than is reflected in the active-duty population with dependents, while the junior enlisted population is undersampled.

The largest group of active-duty family respondents represented were field/mid-grade officer ranks (O4-O6, 30%), followed by mid-grade enlisted (E5-E6, 26%), and senior enlisted (21%). Company/junior grade officers (O1-O3) represented 13%, junior enlisted (E1-E4) family respondents represented 7%, warrant officers (W1-W5) represented 3%, and general/flag grade officers (O7-O10) was the smallest group at 0.6% of the overall active-duty respondents.



Military Service

Among currently serving service member respondents, 78% were serving on active duty, 12% were serving with the Reserve, and 10% were serving with the National Guard. Of Veteran respondents, 46% reported that they served September 2001 or later.

Methodology

The 2023 Military Family Lifestyle Survey instrument was designed by Blue Star Families with extensive input from Syracuse University's D'Aniello Institute for Veterans and Military Families (IVMF), military family members and advocates, subject matter experts, and policymakers who work with military families. The survey was conducted from May 24, 2023, to July 17, 2023, using Qualtrics online survey software.

This survey uses a convenience sampling method. Respondent recruitment and outreach channels included awareness-building with a focus on military families via email distribution from the Blue Star Families mailing lists and social media dissemination (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, blog posts, and partner websites) in both English and Spanish, and outreach from a myriad of military family, military, and Veteran service nonprofits, supportive service and professional organizations, as well as individual volunteers, for both the English and Spanish language versions of the MFLS.

Blue Star Families began to offer the MFLS in Spanish in 2020. This year, after the creation of the English language survey instrument, the full survey was translated into Spanish. The Spanish-language version of the survey was entered into Qualtrics and then beta-tested by volunteers fluent in Spanish. Feedback from beta testing was incorporated into the final Spanish language survey instrument. The Spanish-language survey collected 49 responses, but due to the low sample size was not included in analyses.

Recruitment and outreach were designed to enhance representation from historically underrepresented groups, such as Black and Hispanic/Latinx respondents, junior enlisted families, and National Guard and Reserve families. Sampling was not stratified, nor were results weighted to be representative. Possible biases were introduced through the utilization of a nonprobability sampling method, particularly dealing with gender, marital status, age, rank, and/or race/ethnicity representation among service member and family member respondents. For example, approximately 11% of the Veteran population is female, compared to the 28% of Veteran respondents in this survey.⁴ Without reweighting, overrepresentation or underrepresentation means this sample cannot be generalized to the entire military and Veteran-affiliated communities. Nevertheless, this sample provides both directions for research and exploration and perspectives of subpopulations such as female service members that would be marginalized in more representative samples.

Respondents could access the survey from a computer or mobile device through several links shared via email, websites, social media pages, etc. The survey began with a consent form which 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 were used to allow survey respondents to avoid questions that were not pertinent to them. For example, sections related to the needs of military children were only shown to those who reported they had children. Therefore, including missing data, the actual number of respondents per question varies throughout the survey.

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 such as duplicate responses or the repetition of nonsensical phrases across respondents or across multiple answers for the same respondent. For additional information regarding this protocol, please contact survey@bluestarfam.org. After cleaning the data, the total sample was 7,431 English-language respondents and 49 Spanish-language respondents.

The survey questions were a combination of multiple-choice and open-ended questions to allow for qualitative responses from participants. Responses of “Does not apply” were usually excluded from analyses. In addition to original questions, this survey also includes a scientifically validated measure, the Mental Health Continuum, Short Form.⁵ Analyses primarily included frequencies and cross-tabulations. When applicable, additional tests were conducted and statistical significance was assessed for specific analyses, and is indicated where appropriate in this report.

For this report, 15 open-ended questions were chosen for qualitative analysis from the English-language survey. These questions are related to focus areas of the survey, such as connecting with new and close friends after relocating, time away, child care, and outdoor activities. The analysts used a content analysis methodology to identify key themes from the data. 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 survey team used these themes and quotations to complement and illustrate the findings. Quotations are used throughout this report to bring depth and context to understanding the numbers behind this survey.

Spanish language translation of the 2023 MFLS involved multiple steps. After creation of the English language survey instrument, the full survey was translated into Spanish. The Spanish-language version of the survey was entered into Qualtrics and then beta-tested by volunteers fluent in Spanish. Feedback from beta testing was incorporated into the final Spanish language survey instrument.

Any comparisons made between the 2023 data and previous years’ data are intended only as comparisons of absolute percentages, and changes were not tested for statistical significance. It is important to note that the wording of questions and answer options may differ from year to year to better reflect changing military family experiences, and this, in addition to the potential shift in demographics of the convenience sample each year, limits the comparability of the survey results from year to year.

Endnotes

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Community and Social Context

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.

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Veteran experiences in the transition from military to civilian life have implications for whether they recommend military service, regardless of retirement status. Furthermore, preparedness may ease the transition process and improve recruitment and retention outcomes.

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Health Care Access and Quality

Access to timely specialty health care can be a challenge for military families, often exceeding average wait times in the overall U.S. Four in 10 active-duty family respondents report their family member needing specialty care waited more than two months from the time they sought an appointment to the date of the appointment.

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