



Military Family Lifestyle Survey

2023 Comprehensive Report

Spouse Employment and Child Care

Job portability shows positive gains for those active-duty spouses who recently relocated, though overall spouse employment rates continue to be hampered by child care challenges and service member schedules. Spouse respondents estimate thousands of dollars in income lost while waiting to obtain a new or have a current professional license honored after relocation.

Despite overall U.S. unemployment rates being at or near the lowest levels since the inception of the All-Volunteer Force,^{1,2} 22% of active-duty spouse respondents are unemployed, five to six times the rate of their counterparts^a without a military connection.^b Record-high U.S. inflation rates in the past two years^{3,4} have increased the need for two incomes for most American families, but military families still face tough barriers to obtaining two incomes. Nearly 1 in 3 (31%) active-duty families report they are “just getting by” or are “finding it difficult to get by.”⁵ For active-duty family respondents experiencing financial stress, 30% reported “underemployment or unemployment” as a contributor, second only to “housing costs” as a contributor to their financial stress.

Child Care

Child care as a primary barrier to military spouse employment has been well established.^{6,7} While 68% of active-duty spouse respondents report needing child care in order to work, one-third (35%) cannot find child care that works for their employment needs. The most frequently reported barriers to employment for active-duty spouse respondents continues to revolve around child care and length and predictability of service member schedule.

The high cost and lack of available child care is not unique to military families,⁸⁻¹⁰ though active-duty families have access to fee subsidies and care options that are not available to their civilian counterparts,^{11,12} including Child Development Centers (CDCs) or in Family Care Centers (FCCs) and fee assistance for child care.^c While fees at CDCs or FCCs are often more affordable than community-based care,¹³ among those active-duty

Spouse Employment by the Numbers

Top Military Family Life Issue:

Active-duty spouse respondents
53%

Active-duty service member respondents
31%

Spouse Employment at a Glance:

Military spouse labor force participation
70%

Civilian labor force participation
73%

Unemployed
22%

Employed full time
65%

Employed part time
35%

Report some level of underemployment
63%

^a Women, age 18-44, in the Current Population Survey (CPS) 2022 Annual Average Employment Status (not seasonally adjusted).

^b Civilian unemployment rate, women, age 18-44 is 4%.

^c Currently managed by Child Care Aware of America. <https://www.childcareaware.org/fee-assistancerespite>

Table 1: Top Reasons Not Currently Employed

Active-duty spouse respondents who are not also an active-duty service member who are **not** employed but want/need paid employment and need child care in order to work (n=247)

Child care is too expensive	58%
My service member's daily work schedule is too unpredictable	49%
Child care is unavailable or the waitlist is too long	47%
My service member's daily work schedule is too long, making it too difficult for me to balance work and home demands	41%

Question text: Why are you not employed currently?

spouses^d who indicated that they need at least occasional child care in order to work, only 20% stated that they commonly use a CDC, while 5% commonly use a FCC (See Table 2). More commonly, spouses report hiring a babysitter occasionally (39%), asking friends or family for help (31%), or using an off base, private child care center (31%). Just 11% report they receive fee assistance. These responses may indicate there are other barriers to using these child care options, such as lack of availability, long wait lists, difficulty negotiating the fee assistance process, or geographic proximity to the base or installation child care options.¹⁴

Table 2: Child Care Options/Resources Most Commonly Used in Order to Work

Active-duty spouse respondents who are not also an active-duty service member (n=1,038)

I hire an occasional babysitter when needed	39%
I have a family member or a friend that helps me	31%
Off base, private child care center	31%
I use before and after school care	23%
On base/installation child care in a Child Development Center (CDC)	20%

Question text: You indicated you need at least occasional child care in order to work. Please select the 3 child care options/resources that you use most commonly.

Despite military families having access to child care fee assistance and subsidies, active-duty family respondents report similar child care costs as their civilian peers,¹⁵ averaging \$758.26 per month. However, a child care challenge that is unique to military families is the frequent disruption of spouse employment and child care arrangements by military relocations. Active-duty spouses who need child care in order to work must reset the waitlist clock each time their service member is relocated, creating an additional challenge to securing new employment in the new location. More than one-third (37%) of active-duty spouse respondents who PCSed in the last year are unable to find child care that works for their employment needs, compared to 33% who did not PCS in the last year. Finding employment each time a spouse relocates is difficult, but adding in the need for child care as well makes the process harder.

^d Who are not also active-duty service members.

Solutions

Military Spouse-Friendly Employment Policies

Many employers are already committed to helping military spouses maintain their employment during relocation. Blue Star Families and Hiring Our Heroes announced the **4+1 Commitment: The Formula for Military Spouse Success** to encourage employers to commit to helping military spouses maintain their employment despite the unique challenges of military life. Employers are encouraged to voluntarily adopt at least one of four policies that support military spouse employment¹⁶ — facilitate job transferability, offer remote or telework, offer flexible work hours, or provide paid or permissive Permanent Change of Station (PCS) leave.

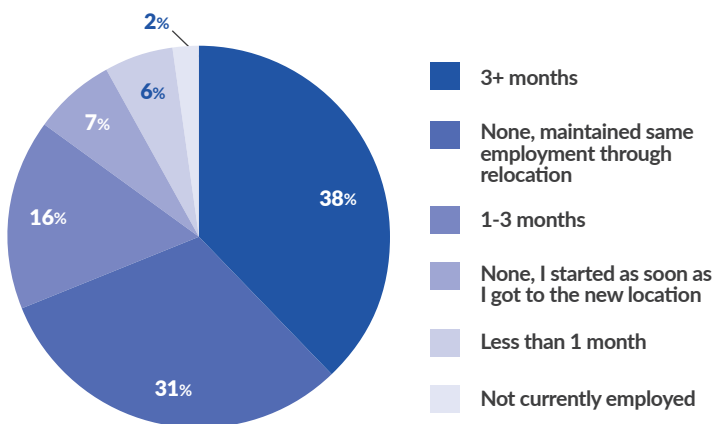


Portable Employment

Military spouses may be increasingly able to take their work with them when they move; 31% of employed active-duty spouse respondents reported that they were able to maintain their employment during their most recent PCS.

Figure 1: Length of Time to Start Employment After Most Recent Relocation

Active-duty spouse respondents (n=1,106)



Question text: How many months after your most recent relocation did it take you to start employment (either self-employed or for an employer)? Please consider the time from when you arrived at the new location to the day you began work.

The federal government is also working to combat spouse unemployment and underemployment by allowing military spouses to continue working in their same position after a relocation through the Executive Order on Advancing Economic Security for Military and Veteran Spouses, Military Caregivers, and Survivors (June 2023).^{17,18} While important progress, federal employment alone is not a solution for all spouses as most do not work in the federal government, but in private/public sectors of education, health care, financial services, social services, and/or nonprofit organizations.¹⁹

24% of active-duty spouse respondents who relocated within the last year reported they worked 100% remotely, compared to just 14% of those whose most recent relocation was between one and four years ago.

Remote and Flexible Work

The shift to remote and flexible work during the COVID-19 pandemic was hoped by many to be a victory for military spouses, reducing or eliminating the disruption to employment caused by military relocations. In fact, more than half (64%) of active-duty spouse respondents employed at least part time^e worked some portion of their hours remotely during the past 12 months. Furthermore, two-thirds (66%) of active-duty spouse respondents who completed all of their hours remotely were able to maintain their employment with the same organization, though not necessarily their same position, through a relocation. Only 7% of those who completed all of their hours in person, reported the same. The ability to retain remote employment reduces the financial vulnerability that often accompanies relocation.²⁰ However, many companies have committed to implementing return-to-office policies by the end of 2024, so the remote work among military spouses should continue to be monitored.²¹

A majority (81%) of active-duty spouses whose license/certification was honored at their new duty station report that they were able to start working as soon as they arrived.

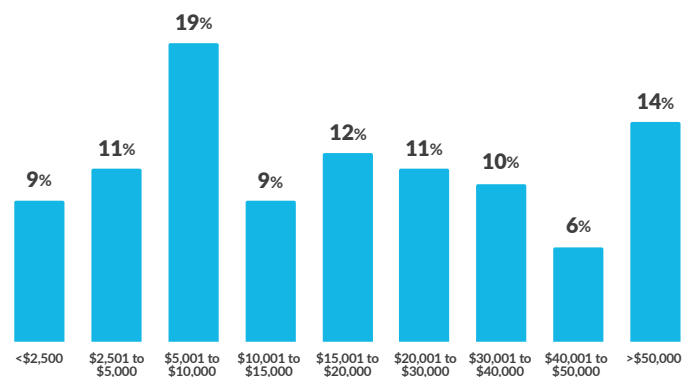
License Portability

The ability to transfer professional work license/certifications during relocations has been a key focus of advocacy for many years.²² Recent court cases²³ and reminders from the Department of Justice to follow the employment-related federal protections for military families have reinforced this progress.²⁴⁻²⁷

A majority (81%) of active-duty spouses whose license/certification was honored at their new duty station report that they were able to start working as soon as they arrived. However, for those active-duty spouse respondents who needed a new license/certification, nearly two-thirds (61%) report it took two or more months for them to obtain their new license/certification and start working, with 20% reporting waiting nine months or longer. During this time, active-duty spouse respondents estimate losing substantial income (Figure 2), with the greatest proportion reporting they lost between \$5,001 and \$10,000, further adding to the financial stress that comes with military relocations.

Figure 2: Estimated Income Loss While Waiting for License/Certification to be Honored or Waiting to Obtain a New License/Certification

Active-duty spouse respondents** (n=253)



Question text: Please estimate the income your family lost as a result of waiting for your license/certification to be honored or waiting to obtain a new license/certification.

*Chart includes only responses with non-zero approximate income lost

**Active-duty spouse respondents who PCSed less than four years ago, and who sought a new license or certification or had their current license or certification honored after their most recent relocation

^e Who are not also active-duty service members.

“Between the cost of testing, application fees, and only getting substitute teacher pay while waiting for my certification I would say \$7,000.”

Active-Duty Army Spouse

Relocation, whether for military permanent change of station orders, or other reasons, is stressful on families and can require time to ensure that the family's needs are met following arrival. One in 6 (16%) active-duty spouse respondents who need or want paid employment report “I am recovering from a PCS move” as a reason they are not currently employed. Ensuring that military spouses have access to portable and flexible employment opportunities, including the child care they need to maintain that employment, is necessary to ensure military family quality of life and financial security. Active-duty spouse respondents who were able to retain employment through their recent relocation report family financial situations of “doing okay” or “living comfortably” in greater proportions than their counterparts who were employed prior to relocation but left their position due to relocating (83% and 66% respectively). In addition to supportive policies including flexible schedules and remote work when appropriate, providing paid time to allow a military spouse to complete the relocation without using any accrued paid time off (PTO) is a step employers can take to support military spouses and their families.



Limitations

Estimates for the amount spent on child care were not analyzed by the number or ages of children requiring care, or the geographic location, though those factors can greatly influence the cost of child care. Further research should explore not only these factors, but also the number of hours care is required, to provide a fuller picture of gaps in child care accessibility and affordability. Further, we did not distinguish the number of hours that families required care in order to work, so some families may only require occasional care for a sick child, or other circumstance, while others report the costs for full-time daily care. This finding also explored spouse employment, but did not distinguish between spouses employed full time or part time, though previous research has shown that spouses may take part-time work in order to provide the flexibility to accommodate child and household needs.

Recommendations



- **GI Bill for Child Care:** an innovative public-private partnership pilot program to address the initial barriers to employment for military spouses — unaffordable or inaccessible child care — through providing care scholarships to unemployed military spouses.*
- Support the READINESS Act²⁸ which allows federally employed military spouses to seek an individual determination about whether their job can be done remotely on a temporary basis, relocated to an area within commuting-distance, or transferred to a comparable job in-grade.
- Increase dependent care Flexible Spending Accounts (FSA) from \$5,000 to \$10,500 due to rising costs of child care and the rate not being adjusted in over 35 years.²⁹



- Encourage other federal agencies to follow the Department of Veterans Affairs' lead in hiring and retaining military spouses, replicating programs like the Veteran and Military Spouse Talent Engagement Program.³⁰



- Consider ways to simplify and incentivize the licensing and opening process for home-based child care programs serving military children, while maintaining quality standards.



- Create a dedicated Military Spouse Liaison position to advocate for military spouses that will conduct outreach and provide support to families in order for them to thrive in their state and community, as shown in the states of Virginia³¹ and Washington.³²
- Compensate providers who receive state assistance for child care based on enrollment, not attendance.³³
- Encourage states to become a Military Spouse Economic Empowerment Zone (MSEEZ) through Hiring Our Heroes, U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation,³⁴ that develops workforce solutions for military spouses through collaborative partnerships.



- **Join the 4+1 Commitment: The Formula for Military Spouse Success.***

*More information in Recommendations Chapter of Comprehensive Report

Endnotes

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