



# Military Family Lifestyle Survey



## Spouse Employment and Child Care

**Comprehensive Report** | **2024**

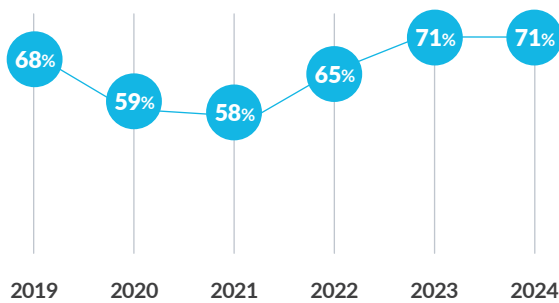
We are deeply grateful to our sponsors: The USAA Foundation, Lockheed Martin Corporation, Northrop Grumman Corporation, Macy's, Inc., AARP, and BAE Systems, Inc., for their generous support of the 2024 Military Family Lifestyle Survey (MFLS). We also want to extend our heartfelt thanks to Craig Newmark Philanthropies, CSX Transportation, TriWest Healthcare Alliance, the Patrick J. McGovern Foundation, Richmond Wholesale, and Pritzker Military Foundation on behalf of the Pritzker Military Museum & Library for their ongoing support of Blue Star Families as a whole. Your contributions enable us to continue serving military families with impactful programs and research year-round.

## Child care continues to be a top barrier to employment for active-duty spouse respondents; spouses take two or more months to find care following a relocation. Many are not aware of fee assistance programs or face barriers to using them.

The military spouse unemployment rate has been stagnant for decades.<sup>1</sup> However, the labor force participation rate for active-duty spouses<sup>a</sup> has slowly recovered to higher rates than before the COVID-19 pandemic (Figure 1). Yet, despite participating in the labor force at similar rates as their civilian counterparts (71% to 75%, respectively), 23% of active-duty spouse respondents are unemployed. For those who are employed, the majority (66%) report experiencing some level of underemployment, most commonly

**Figure 1: Active-Duty Spouse Labor Force Participation 2019-2024**

Active-duty spouse respondents



that “my pay level is lower than it should be given my work experience” (40%), “my pay is lower than it should be given my level of education” (39%), and “I am overqualified for my current position” (37%).

Due to stubborn unemployment rates and the prevalence of underemployment, “military spouse employment” continues to be the top issue of concern. Fifty-four percent of active-duty spouse respondents cited this as the most pressing challenge that their families faced.<sup>b</sup>

Emphasizing why spouse employment has been the top concern for military spouses for five years, 77% of active-duty spouse respondents report that two incomes are vital for their family’s well-being, an increase from 63% in 2019 (See *Financial Situation Finding for more information on financial well-being of active-duty families*). Furthermore, for those active-duty spouse respondents who are not currently employed but are searching for employment, the most commonly reported reason (51%) they are looking for employment is “my family needs the income” (Table 1).

**Table 1: Top Reasons Active-Duty Spouses are Searching for Employment**

Unemployed active-duty spouse respondents\* (n=309)

My family needs the income	51%
Working provides me with a sense of purpose outside of my role within my family	23%
I want to begin or continue a dedicated career path	9%
I want to use my education/skill set	8%
Other	6%
Working provides me with an opportunity to engage with other adults	4%

**Question text:** What is the top reason you are searching for employment? Select one.

\*“Unemployed” is defined as not currently employed and having actively sought work in the last four weeks.

<sup>a</sup> Unless otherwise noted, active-duty spouse respondents in this finding refers to those who indicated that they were not also an active-duty service member.

<sup>b</sup> Military spouse employment is also the fourth most commonly reported issue of concern for active-duty service member respondents (34%)

## Remote or Transferable Work

Remote or transferable work can be a solution for some spouses to maintain employment compatible with the military lifestyle. Nearly half of employed military spouses (47%) report they would be able to transfer their job with them if they relocated; 30% of active-duty spouses believe they could take their job with them to anywhere in the U.S., and more than 17% believe they can take their job anywhere in the world. The proportion of spouse respondents who were able to maintain their same job with the same employer before, during, and after relocation has decreased slightly from 20% in 2023<sup>2</sup> to 16% this year.

In the year preceding survey fielding, one-third (35%) of active-duty spouses completed all of their hours worked remotely, while 26% worked some remotely and some in person. However, while remote work is a great option for many, the ability to find remote work has become harder.<sup>3</sup> Even in areas that have been helpful to military spouses, like government work,<sup>4</sup> there have been calls to end the practice.<sup>5</sup> This is not limited to government positions or military spouses. “Return to office” policies are hitting many industries across the country.<sup>6</sup>

## Child Care as a Barrier to Employment

The role of child care availability and affordability as barriers to employment for military spouses are well documented.<sup>7-9</sup> The majority (81%) of active-duty spouse respondents have at least one child under the age of 20. Seven in 10 (70%) active-duty spouse respondents<sup>c</sup> indicate they need child care in order to work, regardless of their current employment status. Despite efforts being made to reduce child care related barriers, for active-duty spouse respondents who want or need to work and need child care in order to do so,<sup>10</sup> child care affordability, accessibility, and balancing the service member’s job demands continue to be top reasons spouses are not currently employed (Table 2).

<b>Table 2: Top Five Reasons Not Currently Employed</b> Active-duty spouse respondents who need child care in order to work (n=224)	
Child care is too expensive	64%
My service member’s daily work schedule is too unpredictable	51%
My service member’s daily work schedule is too long	44%
Child care is unavailable or the wait-list is too long	43%
My take-home pay would be so low that working does not seem worth the effort	40%

**Question text:** Why are you not employed currently? Please select your top five choices.

<sup>c</sup> Who have children ages 20 years or younger.

**Can you provide more detail about why you selected those as the reasons you are not currently employed?**

**“Child care: not available for interviews, expensive, long waiting list.”**

Active-Duty Coast Guard Spouse

**“It doesn’t make sense to work when all the money I make would go towards childcare.”**

Active-Duty Space Force Spouse

For active-duty spouse respondents who need child care in order to work, regardless of current employment status, “I hire an occasional babysitter when needed” is the most commonly used child care option/resource (39%) while military specific care options such as Child Development Centers and Family Care Centers are not as frequently used (Table 3). Many cities and states across the country are trying to address child care accessibility.<sup>11,12</sup> Congress and the DOD are also aware of the barrier of the cost of child care both for service members and for spouses seeking employment.<sup>13,14</sup>

**Table 3: Most Commonly Used Child Care Options/Resources**

Active-duty spouse respondents who need child care in order to work (n=712)

I hire an occasional babysitter when needed	<b>39%</b>
Off-base, private child care center	<b>35%</b>
I have a family member or friend that helps me	<b>29%</b>
I use before- and after-school care	<b>21%</b>
On-base/installation child care in a Child Development Center (CDC)	<b>21%</b>
Other	<b>10%</b>
Off-base, in-home child care	<b>9%</b>
I have a regular child care provider that comes to my home or who lives with me (e.g., a nanny or au pair)	<b>7%</b>
On-base/installation in-home child care (Family Child Care Center)	<b>6%</b>
I use drop-in child care centers when needed	<b>3%</b>

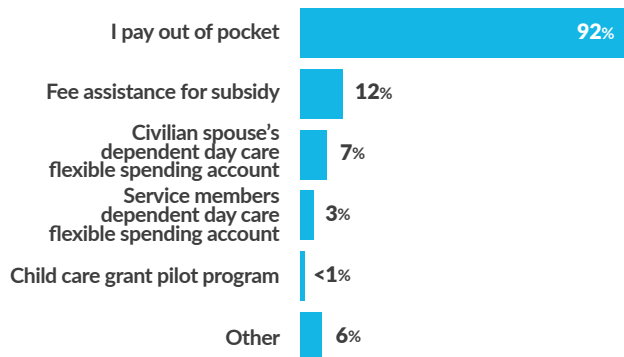
**Question text:** You indicated you need at least occasional child care. Please select the three child care options/resources that you use most commonly.

## Knowledge and Usage of Child Care Payment Resources

Despite child care costs at DOD facilities following a sliding scale as directed by law<sup>15</sup> and the availability of subsidy programs to assist with the cost of non-DOD provided child care,<sup>16</sup> only 12% (Figure 2) use fee

**Figure 2: Resources Used to Pay for Child Care**

Active-duty spouses who use resources to pay for child care (n=933)



assistance or subsidy, such as Military Child Care in Your Neighborhood (MCCYN), echoing findings from the 2023 MFLS.<sup>17</sup>

This low uptake on MCCYN usage may be due to a lack of knowledge of program availability and qualification requirements. For active-duty spouse respondents who need child care in order to work and report using resources to pay for that care, one-third (34%) report they do not know what fee assistance is and 30% do not believe they would qualify for assistance (Table 4).

**Table 4: Utilization of Fee Assistance (MCCYN) to Pay for Child Care in the Past Five Years**  
Active-duty spouse respondents who need child care in order to work and use resources to pay for that care (n=639)

Yes	17%
No, I do not know what fee assistance is	34%
No, I do not believe we would qualify for fee assistance	30%
No, I do not want to go through the application process	3%
No, my provider is not approved to receive fee assistance	6%
No, other reason	10%

**Question text:** Have you utilized fee assistance (Military Child Care in Your Neighborhood - MCCYN) to help pay for child care in the past five years?

## Fee Assistance User Experience

Active-duty spouse respondents who utilize fee assistance predominantly receive assistance through the “MCCYN program administered by Child Care Aware of America” (92%, n=145), 3% through the “Navy Child and Youth Programs” and 4% through “other.” The majority (64%) rate the process to receive fee assistance as “difficult” or “very difficult.” For these respondents, lowering the administrative burden, increasing the pool of eligible providers, and more expeditious communication on behalf of the fee assistance program are top ways to make the process to utilize fee assistance easier (Table 5).

**Table 5: Making the Fee Assistance Process Easier to Utilize**

Active-duty spouse respondents who report the utilization process is “neither difficult nor easy,” “difficult,” or “very difficult” (n=121)

Lower the administrative burden (less documentation required)	62%
More expedient communication from the fee assistance program	62%
Greater pool of eligible providers	62%
Faster reimbursement to provider once approved	52%
Increased eligibility limits	40%
Other, please specify	13%
None of these	2%

**Question text:** Which of the following would make the process to utilize fee assistance easier? (Select all that apply)

**Which of the following would make the process to utilize fee assistance easier?**

**“Time to approval is ridiculous. Calling is the only efficient way to check status and they won’t provide estimates of when a step will be completed.”**

Active-Duty Spouse Respondent

**“Clearer instructions ... and LOWER WAIT TIMES for program eligibility. We waited for over a year to get fee assistance for my 3-year-old after we applied.”**

Active-Duty Spouse Respondent

**Relocation Adds Additional Challenges**

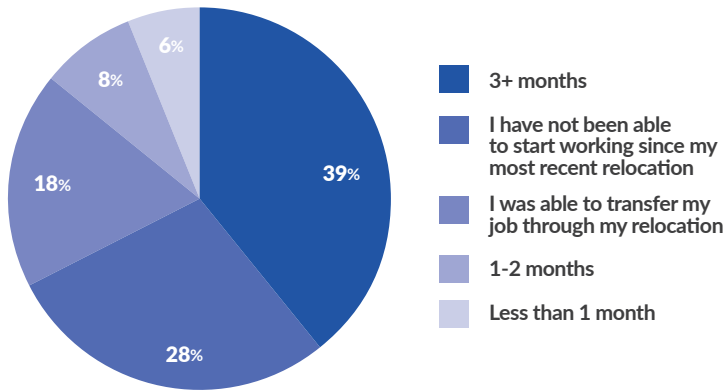
Frequent relocations often come with the need for new employment for those military spouses who had been able to find employment prior to the relocation, and continued searching for those who had not found employment previously. Twenty-eight percent of active-duty spouse respondents<sup>d</sup> indicate they had not yet been able to begin working following their most recent relocation with an additional 39% needing three months or longer to find employment (Figure 3).

Finding child care that works for employment needs further complicates the search for employment

<sup>d</sup> In the labor force.

**Figure 3: Number of Months it Took to Start Working After Most Recent Relocation**

Active-duty spouse respondents in the labor force (n=1,611)



during or post relocation. Over half (54%) of those who needed child care to work and were able to find care after their most relocation said it took two months or longer (Table 6).<sup>e</sup>

Among those who were able to find care quickly (in two weeks or less), spouse respondents most commonly did individual research (42%) to find their child care, followed by the use of MilitaryChildCare.com (18%), or referrals from local friends and family members (13%) (Figure 4).

**Table 6: Time to Find Child Care After Most Recent Relocation**

Active-duty spouse respondents who looked for child care in order to work (n=441\*)

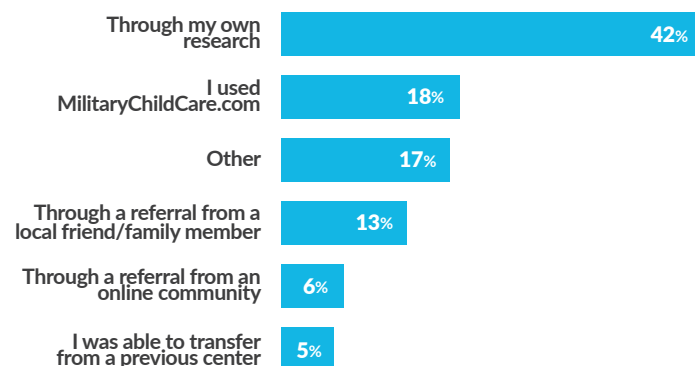
I had child care lined up before arrival	15%
Less than 2 weeks	7%
More than 2 weeks but less than a month	8%
Between 1 and 2 months	17%
More than 2 months	54%

**Question text:** Considering your most recent relocation, how long did it take you to find child care that met your needs in order to work?

\*Those who didn't look for or did not need child care at the time of their most recent relocation and those who selected "other" were removed from the calculation.

**Figure 4: How Child Care was Arranged Post-Relocation**

Active-duty spouse respondents who had child care lined up before arrival or within two weeks (n=96)



### Relocating Overseas

Overseas (outside the continental United States, OCONUS) moves make employment even more challenging. The unemployment rate for spouses located OCONUS is nearly double that of their CONUS counterparts (42%),<sup>f</sup> despite a similar labor force participation rate (78%). Seventy-two percent of spouses who have ever been stationed overseas looked for work while there, and child care is also one of the top five barriers to work for these

<sup>e</sup> Those who answered "I didn't look for or did not need child care at the time of my most recent relocation" were removed from the calculation.

<sup>f</sup> While Alaska and Hawaii are considered OCONUS locations, this calculation does not include those living in Alaska or Hawaii where SOFA regulations do not apply.

spouses. Those that have looked for employment overseas report the top five reasons they had difficulty in finding work overseas are: limited employment options on installation or in local area (62%), overqualified for positions on installation or in local area (39%), home/family obligations (e.g. child care) (34%), limited remote work opportunities (33%), and Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) restrictions (27%).

## Implications

Spouse employment and child care challenges have far-reaching impacts for military service. Nearly one-third (29%) of active-duty spouse respondents selected “civilian spouse encountered too many employment challenges” as a primary reason their service member would choose to leave the military and 15% selecting “child care issues” as a top reason. Spouse employment<sup>18,19</sup> and child care issues are well-known among the DOD and other organizations.<sup>20</sup> The federal government,<sup>21</sup> local governments, and communities<sup>22</sup> are all working to resolve these challenges before they have any further detrimental impact on force readiness.

## Recommendations



### Congress

- Commission a report on SOFA agreements and other employment barriers that exist and keep military spouses from finding employment OCONUS.
- Extend DOD authorization to quickly fill open positions with qualified military spouses for non-competitive appointment by federal agencies.
- Commission a report on military spouse security clearance, in addition to allowing for the ability of spouses to extend their security clearance or place on hold.
- Supporting Interstate Licensure Compacts by granting DOD permanent authority to enter into a cooperative agreement with the Council of State Governments to develop interstate licensure compacts on licensed occupations for military spouses who relocate to a new state in connection with PCS.
- **Explore ways to incentivize child care providers who serve military children through the tax codes.\***

**WIN!**  
Passed  
in FY25  
NDAA

- Expansion of child care access to military spouses seeking employment from 90 days to 180 days.
- Expand the Military Spouse Career Accelerator Pilot Program and strengthen relationships with Chambers of Commerce by making this a permanent program.
- Require the Secretary of Defense to redesign and modernize the child development program compensation and staffing models to allow for competitive market rates and incentive programs.



### Businesses & Organizations

- **Join the 4+1 Commitment: The Formula for Military Spouse Success.**
- Encourage companies to consider the negative repercussions of rolling back remote work policies on the military spouse population.

\*More information in Recommendations Chapter of Comprehensive Report



## Endnotes

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