

# COVID-19

## MILITARY SUPPORT INITIATIVE

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# Pain Points Poll Deep Dive: UNDERSTANDING THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON MILITARY SPOUSE EMPLOYMENT

## THE MILITARY SPOUSE UNEMPLOYMENT RATE MAY EXCEED 30% IN THE WAKE OF THE PANDEMIC

*"I'm an esthetician, already licensed as a profession. [...] My industry will be greatly impacted and changed due to this. I may not be able to find a job due to the limitations placed upon estheticians, as we work very closely on a person. I honestly don't know if I'll have a career field to work in at this point."*

- Navy Spouse

According to the [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#), the unemployment rate in the United States is 13.3% as of May 2020. Although unemployment has reached a historic level for the general population, military spouses were [unemployed at nearly twice that rate \(24%\)](#) before COVID-19. While there is some uncertainty about how much the military spouse unemployment rate changed due to the pandemic, there is no doubt it has increased.

On average, **6% of military spouse respondents on the COVID-19 Military Support Initiative's (CMSI) Pain Points Poll indicated they had applied for unemployment benefits, and 17% of those who had been employed prior to the pandemic reported they had lost their job or were unable to work.** When we asked respondents in an open-ended format about the financial impact of the pandemic, about **one-fifth said they had lost income.**

Taken together, there is reason to believe that the increase in the military spouse unemployment rate will mirror that of the civilian population (up to a [ten percentage point increase](#)), suggesting that military spouses may be facing an unemployment rate of 30-35% after the pandemic.

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## IF NONTRADITIONAL SCHOOLING AND CHILD CARE CLOSURES PERSIST, MILITARY SPOUSES' LABOR FORCE PARTICIPATION WILL LIKELY DECREASE, AND THEIR UNDEREMPLOYMENT WILL INCREASE

*"I tried to work from home but have 3 kids under 6 so it was pretty much impossible. My work required you to work from home between 8am-5pm so I couldn't work after kids go to bed. They put me on unpaid leave until May 8, but now that schools and daycares are cancelled I have asked if I can stay on leave, which was denied. I asked if I can work alternate hours and that was denied. So I really do not know what my situation is or will be." - Marine Corps Spouse*

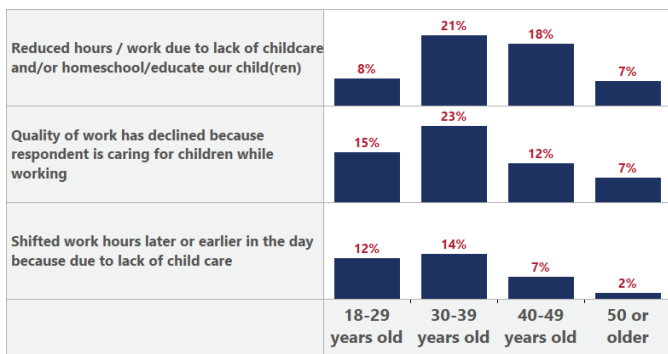
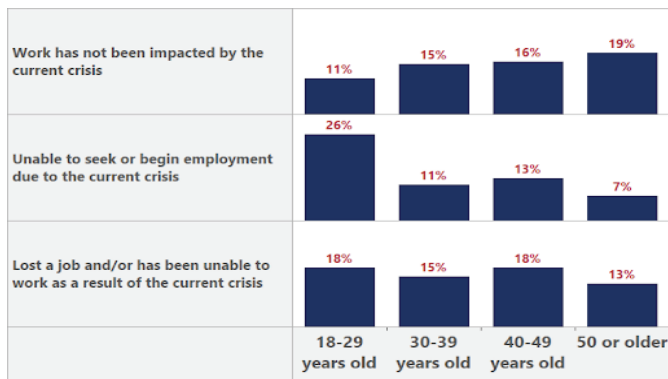
According to recent job [reports](#), the loss of hours and income was more prevalent than layoffs in April. One [analysis](#) of the April jobs report illustrated that, among people who said they wanted to work more hours per week, the reasons for not being able to work full-time differed by gender. Women were more likely to say they were unable to work more hours due to child care obligations (12% compared to 6%). As discussed in a previous [Pain Points Poll Deep Dive](#), the burden of caring for children is more likely to fall on women nationwide and within our own polling sample. This may be one explanation for why the seasonally-adjusted labor force participation [decreased sharply](#) during the pandemic. The decision to withdraw from the labor force is complex; however, child care challenges associated with COVID-related school and daycare closures may increase this likelihood, especially among women.

There is no doubt that the decision to voluntarily or involuntarily decrease working hours or withdraw from the labor force to care for children is impacting women nationwide; however, this dynamic might disproportionately impact military spouses. **When we asked respondents in an open-ended format about how they expected COVID-19 to impact their employment in the next six months, the most prevalent theme was "uncertainty," and the most commonly-cited reason for employment uncertainty was "unclear service member work schedules."** This aligns with Blue Star Families' pre-COVID research findings. According to the 2019 Military Family Lifestyle Survey, the [top reason for not working](#) among unemployed military spouses was service members' day-to-day job demands did not allow them to balance work and home demands.

There is evidence to suggest that this issue, which predates the pandemic, has already worsened. On average, across the Pain Points Poll polling period, **[13% of military spouse respondents who were working prior to the pandemic reported they were taking paid time off or unpaid leave in order to support child care or education needs; only 6% said the same of their service member spouse.](#)** This same dynamic existed in regards to reducing work hours; while 17% of military spouse respondents reported they had themselves reduced work hours to educate or care for their children, only 3% said the same of their service member spouse.

Prior to the pandemic, 38% of military spouse respondents on Blue Star Families' 2019 Military Family Lifestyle Survey reported they were not participating in the labor force. Of the 76% of military spouse respondents in the labor force who were employed before the pandemic, [77% reported at least one instance of underemployment](#). If nontraditional schooling and child care closures persist, finding a healthy work-life balance could become untenable for many dual-career military families. In that case, we should expect to see military spouse's labor force participation decrease and the percentage of those working part-time increase.

## YOUNGER MILITARY SPOUSES ARE MOST LIKELY TO FACE SUSTAINED EMPLOYMENT DIFFICULTIES DUE TO ECONOMIC CONDITIONS, WHILE OLDER MILITARY SPOUSES ARE MOST LIKELY TO ENCOUNTER CHALLENGES RELATED TO CARING FOR CHILDREN



While economists are still seeking to fully understand and forecast the [long-term effects](#) of the COVID-19 pandemic on employment in the United States, there is already evidence that the [hospitality/leisure and service sectors](#) have been disproportionately impacted. These industries employ a higher proportion of minority women, young adults, and people with less education. As a result, those groups are [more likely to have experienced a decrease in their employment](#). Spouses of junior enlisted service members are also employed in these sectors at greater rates<sup>1</sup>, and Pain Points Poll findings suggest that younger military spouse respondents experienced some employment-related challenges differently than their older counterparts.

Although there is little difference by age among military spouse respondents who say they have lost their job or been unable to work, **those ages 18-29 are the least likely, on average, to report their work has NOT been impacted by the crisis (11%), and the most likely to report they are unable to seek or begin employment due to the crisis (26%).**

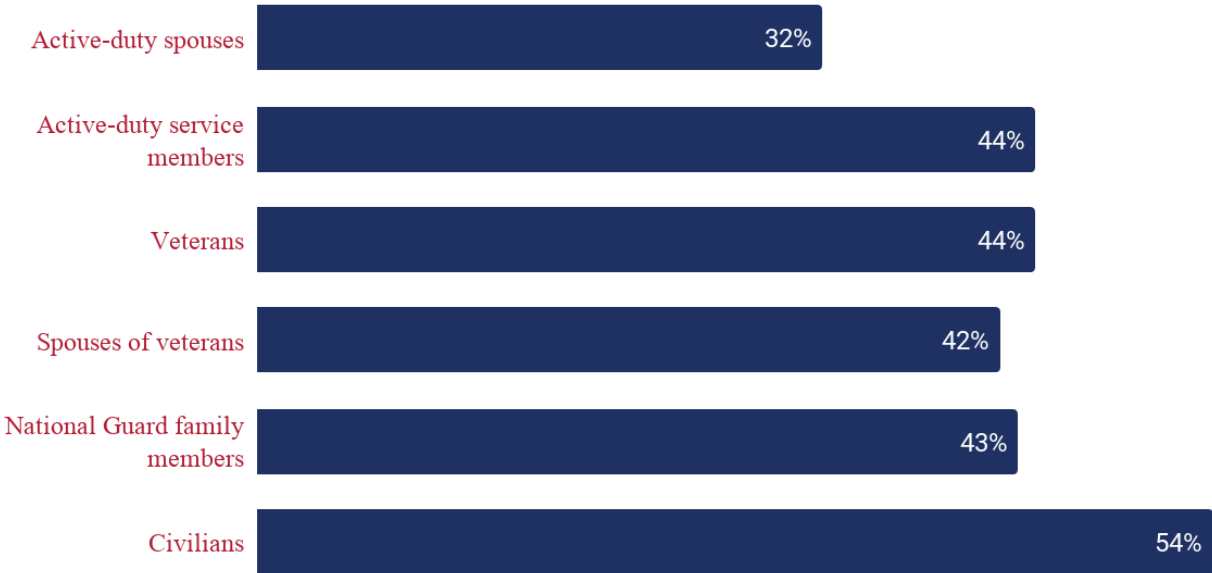
While younger military spouse respondents may be more likely to be impacted by COVID-related business closures and reduced work opportunities, military spouses ages 30-39 reported greater impacts of child care and school closures. On average, they reported reducing their hours (21%) or shifting work hours later or earlier in the day (14%) at a higher rate than other age groups, and nearly one-fourth (23%) reported the quality of their work has declined because they are caring for children while working.

<sup>1</sup>Office of People Analytics (2017). 2017 Survey of Active Duty Spouses.

# MILITARY SPOUSES REPORTED THE LOWEST LEVELS OF TELEWORK OF ALL POPULATIONS DURING THE PANDEMIC

Despite national efforts in recent years to increase military spouse telework opportunities, these efforts do not appear to have translated into a higher rate of teleworking during the pandemic. Among all Pain Points Poll respondents, **a smaller proportion of active-duty spouses who were working prior to the pandemic reported they continued to work via telework during the crisis than all other subpopulations.** While, on average, only 32% of active-duty spouses who were working prior to the pandemic said they were continuing to work via telework, at least 42% of every other subpopulation said the same. Although military spouses reported the lowest incidence of continuing work via telecommute/remote opportunities, when asked in an open-ended format about successful strategies used to navigate child care needs, “the opportunity to telework” was the most commonly-cited response among both military spouse and service member respondents.

Percent of respondents who were employed before the pandemic who report they continued working through telecommute/remote work (average across weeks 5-10 of polling)



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# Recommendations to Mitigate the Impact of COVID-19 on Military Spouse Employment

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## Ensure military spouses are included in economic recovery efforts

From February to May, the U.S. unemployment rate soared to [13.3%](#); the military spouse unemployment rate was nearly twice that ([24%](#)) **before** the pandemic. Prioritizing military spouses as part of economic recovery efforts must be viewed as an upstream, root cause solution to other issues such as successful [transition into veteran life](#), reducing [food insecurity](#), and facilitating community integration and [belonging](#).

Like their civilian counterparts, many military spouses, particularly those employed (or formerly employed) in hospitality/leisure, retail, and educational services, will need to reskill and/or upskill and transition into different sectors, especially those which have emerged as critical. Given their pre-pandemic levels of unemployment and underemployment, coupled with their frequent moves, military spouses must be able to adapt to this new environment as quickly as possible to mitigate further backslides.

Furthermore, considerations for recommended reforms should also seek to assess the benefits of including spouses of National Guard personnel who may not otherwise be eligible for them in light of the recent increase in the use of National Guard personnel, many of whom were activated on Title 32 rather than Title 10 orders.

### **Include military spouses as a named population in legislative initiatives aimed at upskilling the workforce in the wake of the pandemic**

As Congress and state legislatures consider a myriad of proposals to help the workforce adapt to a post-COVID environment, military spouses should be named as a priority group to promote an equitable recovery. Examples include:

- proposed initiatives seeking to support veterans in the wake of the pandemic should be extended to include military spouses;
- current and proposed apprenticeship-style programs and pilot programs should consider military spouses as high-priority program participants; and
- use the Department of Labor Workforce Opportunity Grant program to integrate military spouses into strategic economic recovery plans. Priority should be given to those in career fields disproportionately impacted due to COVID-19, facilitating the transition into other high-demand sectors.

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## **Expand MyCAA eligibility to include higher-level degree programs and spouses from additional ranks**

COVID-19 underscored the importance of critical fields such as nursing, mental health, and social work. Now is the time to expand the MyCAA program eligibility to include the higher-level degrees necessary to do this type of work. The Department of Defense should also consider re-expanding the program to include more ranks. The second- and third-order effects of the pandemic, such as the inability for degree programs to re-open in the 2020-2021 school year and the inability for military spouses to participate in them due to child care challenges, are only now starting to become clear and will almost certainly disrupt the post-secondary education pipeline for years to come. This disruption may render the program untenable for some military spouses until they have “ranked out” of their program eligibility.

## **Expand the Work Opportunity Tax Credit (WOTC) eligibility to include employers who hire military spouses**

Amending the Internal Revenue Service Code to make employers of military spouses eligible for the WOTC, would encourage employers to prioritize military spouse hiring as part of the recovery effort by allowing them to claim a tax credit equal to a portion of the wages paid to said spouses. The WOTC has been useful in reducing veteran unemployment rates and could be a vital solution to addressing the high military spouse unemployment rate. We would encourage employers to use this tax credit strategically by investing in portable work options, which would allow them to retain their military spouse employees if/when they relocate due to a PCS. For example, small and midsize businesses that might not otherwise have sufficient financial resources to invest in telework programs might use the WOTC to invest in such programs for military spouse talent retention.

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## **Continue to take steps to improve military spouse access to flexible and telework opportunities and capabilities**

*“I was able to telework until the birth of my daughter on 4/9. I was planning on returning to work after 12 weeks, but due to the pandemic our place on the waitlist for childcare has been affected and I’m unsure if I will be able to return to work due to lack of childcare.” - Navy Spouse*

## **Ensure all military installations and their communities have access to high-speed Internet services**

Over [half of Americans say](#) the Internet has been essential to them during the pandemic, yet some Internet deserts continue to exist<sup>2</sup>, even near military installations. The COVID-19 pandemic illuminated preexisting [socioeconomic and geographic disparities](#) in Internet access and broadband speeds nationwide. Although military spouses reported lower levels of teleworking during the pandemic than other groups, the abrupt shift to virtual schooling and work highlighted the importance of residential broadband speeds capable of supporting entire families videoconferencing simultaneously. To ensure military families have access to this utility, Congress should direct appropriations for increasing broadband speeds and access at military installations located in Internet deserts. Doing so will remove this unnecessary barrier to military spouses seeking telework opportunities and to military children trying to complete their school assignments.

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<sup>2</sup>Additional analysis, conducted in conjunction with the Military Family Research Institute, is forthcoming



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## **Improve employers' ability to retain military spouses following a permanent change of station (PCS) move**

In the wake of the pandemic and the emergence of a more competitive job market, it is more important than ever that currently-employed military spouses retain their positions following a PCS move if able. Examples of policies to support this desire include:

- removal of federal contract language requiring work be performed “on-site” unless it is required by the nature of the work (e.g., for reasons of national security);
- removal and/or reduction of state laws and policies, which dissuade employers from retaining military spouses when they move to another state; and
- reforms to some Status of Forces Agreements, which prevent employers from retaining military spouses to move to certain overseas installations.

## **Diversify telework opportunities to attract military spouses across career fields and levels**

The low levels of military spouses' usage of telework during the pandemic raises concerns regarding the degree to which military spouses have been able to take advantage of telework opportunities prior to COVID-19. This suggests there is a need to assess how employers adapted during the pandemic to increase the usage of telework, especially in critical need occupations, and to make these opportunities available to military spouses. Particular attention should be paid to diversifying the types and levels of available telework opportunities.

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## **Close unemployment ineligibility loopholes and take steps to reduce confusion regarding unemployment eligibility and application processes**

*“Getting unemployment as a military spouse is hard. We are stationed in Guam but maintain Washington residency. I'm not sure that I can get unemployment for that reason although I would otherwise be covered under current unemployment rules for independent contractors.” - Air Force Spouse*

A surprising number of military spouse respondents on the Pain Points Poll indicated in open-ended responses that they were uncertain about their eligibility for Unemployment Insurance (UI), that they had trouble obtaining it, and/or that they encountered significant delays in processing payments. When researching the circumstances surrounding each of these cases, the Blue Star Families team determined that, in most cases, these spouses were, in fact, eligible for UI either through pre-pandemic legislation or through the CARES Act. These findings highlight the need for improved communication with military spouses to reduce confusion and increase perceived access to needed financial support. State employment agencies and local organizations seeking to help improve information dissemination might consider the following actions:

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- states can include an information page for military spouses on the state unemployment website to clarify eligibility and application processes, to include CARES Act eligibility;
  - local military support organizations can proactively disseminate information within its membership to increase awareness and usage of available benefits; and
  - the Department of Defense can improve the information provided through Military OneSource to make it easier for military spouses to determine eligibility for unemployment benefits.
  - Although most military spouses qualify for some form of unemployment benefit, there are still loopholes in existing state legislation, particularly in Louisiana, Idaho, and North Dakota. There is an opportunity for these states to reform their legislation to ensure that military spouses who resign their position due to a PCS move are not disqualified from receiving state unemployment benefits.
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## **Invest in regularly monitoring the military spouse unemployment and labor force participation rates, and the effectiveness of existing programs designed to address them**

Much of the uncertainty regarding the impact of COVID-19 on the military spouse unemployment rate could have been removed if there had been a regular monitoring system in place to track it prior to the pandemic. Although the bi-annual Survey of Active Duty Spouses and independent surveys (such as the annual Military Family Lifestyle Survey) provide some insight into the military spouse unemployment rate, there is a critical need for a robust monitoring system that captures this data. **Congress should direct funds to implement the routine (at least quarterly) interagency monitoring necessary to ensure that efforts to include military spouses in economic recovery are effective.**

Additionally, there is interest in understanding the effectiveness of federal programs designed to increase federal opportunities for military spouses. For example, reports on the degree to which the [2018 Executive Order “Enhancing Noncompetitive Civil Service Appointments of Military Spouses”](#) has been effective would be helpful in informing other organizations interested in implementing similar programs within their organizations to increase military spouse employment.

Individual states can also explore ways to improve the military spouse employment situation at the local level, to include routine monitoring military hiring within their state workforce.



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## Address root causes of chronic military spouse unemployment and underemployment

*“We will continue with our current plan of reducing my hours, where I work as an essential personnel at a hospital, so that I can come home 1/2 day and my husband (Guard member) can telework from home. This plan will work until my husband is required to return to his civilian job or until our daycare requires us to resume payments (which they are currently not doing).”* - National Guard Spouse

While the above reforms would help improve employment outcomes for military spouses, to create the conditions for long-term, sustained improvement, there must be fundamental, systemic reforms that address the twin root causes of military spouse unemployment: service member job demands and child care affordability.

These two issues have been at the heart of military spouse unemployment for years, and according to Blue Star Families’ [2019 Military Family Lifestyle Survey](#), service members’ day-to-day job demands are the top barrier to employment for unemployed military spouse respondents, followed by child care affordability<sup>3</sup>. Both of these challenges are poised to be exacerbated in the coming months as military units seek to return to pre-pandemic operational readiness levels while military families simultaneously seek to balance home and work life when schools and child care facilities operate at reduced capacity and/or virtual settings.

Several applicable opportunities for consideration were discussed in the [Pain Points Poll Deep Dive: Impact of Child Care and School Closures on Military Personnel and Readiness](#), including the need for senior leaders to explore ways to offer greater opportunities for work and training predictability and flexibility in the 2020-2021 school year.

Furthermore, as families attempt to balance their need for child care with considerations for the health and safety of their own families and others, they may determine they have nontraditional child care needs. The Department of Defense has the statutory authority to allow families to establish Flexible Spending Accounts for child care, which would help provide financial relief if they determine that the child care option that best suits their family’s needs is not among those currently eligible for the fee assistance program.

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<sup>3</sup>These issues differ for military spouse respondents with and without children.

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# Methodology

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The Pain Points Poll is a program of the COVID-19 Military Support Initiative. It is presented by Booz Allen Hamilton with additional support from USAA. Analysis is conducted by Blue Star Families' Applied Research Team; analysis and survey instrumentation is informed by input from military family members, advocates, subject matter experts, and policymakers who work with military families.

Polling began on March 18, and analysis is conducted on a weekly basis. With the exception of week one, when polling was conducted using a different survey platform, the response rate includes the

aggregate number of individuals who began the survey, and the completion rate represents those who completed the entire questionnaire. Week one of polling includes only those respondents who completed the entire questionnaire. The number of respondents varies by question due to skip logic that removed questions that were not applicable to the respondent (i.e., questions about child care and children's education were removed for respondents who indicated they did not have children). Participants were able to skip questions that they preferred not to answer.

<b>POLLING WEEK</b>	<b>POLLING PERIOD</b>	<b>TOTAL RESPONSES</b>
1	March 18 - 24	1,321
2	March 25 - 31	1,234
3	April 1 - 7	690
4	April 8 - 14	668
5	April 15 - 21	749
6	April 22 - 28	560
7	April 29 - May 5	822
8	May 6 - 12	562
9	May 13 - 19	160
10	May 20 - 26	655
11*	May 27 - June 2	

*\*Week 11 yielded an abnormally low response rate and is excluded from the quantitative dataset. Qualitative responses were, however, included in qualitative reports and analysis.*

A survey branching technique was introduced in week four of polling, whereby the answers to certain questions were a gateway to specific follow-on questions (detailed branching is available upon request). Prior to that, respondents who left the question blank or indicated it was not applicable to their experience were excluded from the analysis for that question.

Polling also included several open-ended questions; new qualitative questions were introduced at several time points. The responses to these open-ended questions were analyzed daily and coded into themes. These responses provided context for the quantitative findings and guided the development of new polling questions and policy initiatives.

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## Sampling

It should be noted that the sample population for this poll is not representative of the military or veteran community as a whole, due to a non-probability sampling method. The sample demographics varied from week to week, and therefore the representativeness of the sample also varied. These findings guide inquiry and can highlight trends, but are not intended to be generalized to the entire military and veteran-affiliated community. Possible biases introduced due to the utilization of a non-probability sampling method include over- or under-representation, particularly the case when looking at race/ethnicity among all respondents. Additionally,

## Recruitment

Polling participation was voluntary, and information provided was kept confidential unless respondents provided permission to share their information. Participants were recruited through multiple efforts, including social media outreach, announcements at virtual town halls, and meetings held by the CMSI.

References to “family respondents” indicate that those who selected they are the service member or veteran are grouped with those who selected they are the spouse of a service member or veteran; those who selected both are only counted once based on a unique respondent identifier.

representativeness by service branch differs weekly. The majority of the sample, in all weeks, is spouses of active-duty service members. This polling does allow respondents to select more than one military affiliation, so there is overlap among respondents reporting they are spouses of active-duty service members, that they are themselves service members, or that they are themselves veterans. With the exception of week one of polling, which utilized the survey functionality in Form Assembly, polling was conducted online using GetFeedback, a product of Survey Monkey, generating a self-selected, convenience sample.

Any comparisons that are made from week to week are subject to sample bias, and identified trends are most reliable for active-duty spouses and active-duty families due to the sample size of those populations. This is not a panel data set, and there is no way to distinguish whether the same individuals have taken the poll multiple times over the course of the polling period. This introduces the opportunity for dual-counting when analysis groups polling weeks to increase the response rate on a question for analysis or to look at an average descriptive statistic.

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## Acknowledgements

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- The Association for Defense Communities
- Enlisted Association of the National Guard of the United States
- The Institute for Veterans and Military Families
- Military Child Education Coalition

- Military Family Research Institute
- Military Interstate Children's Compact Commission
- Military Officer Association of America
- The National Guard Bureau
- Our Military Children
- RAND
- The Retired Enlisted Association

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***This deep dive was prepared by Jennifer Akin, MPA (Senior Evaluation Manager, Blue Star Families), with support from Jessica Strong, Ph.D. (Senior Research Manager, Blue Star Families), and Drew Brazer (Government Relations Manager, Blue Star Families).***