

# 2010 Military Family Lifestyle Survey

## Comprehensive Report

*Sharing the Pride of Service*



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*Funding for the Military Life Issues survey and launch event was provided by  
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## Foreword

*September 22, 2010*

For nearly four years, I have had the honor of traveling around the world to visit our troops and our military families. I have seen firsthand that the past nine years of war have been *incredibly* difficult on our military. Our service members are stretched and stressed. The parents, spouses and children of these troops are *also* feeling the strain. Yet, they are amazingly resilient—coming together in support of each other in the face of repeated deployments. But, they could not continue to sacrifice day-in and day-out were it not for the unwavering support of the American people, Congress, and partnerships with organizations like Blue Star Families that afford us a voice through surveys like this one and those we will conduct in the future.

As you will see from the details inside, our military families face significant challenges—many of which are only beginning to manifest themselves and will become more apparent as dwell time increases and families have more time to fully integrate. I encourage you to read this report and use the data to help continue the drumbeat of support for our military. It is also important—as we discuss the findings—that we work together to identify the true nature of the problems burdening our military families, and act with urgency to make improvements. As a support network that has the ability to effect change, we must continue to keep our finger on the pulse of our military families so that we can stay out in front of the challenges they face.

Thank you, Blue Star Families and your partnering organizations, for conducting this survey that will not only help shape the discussion but serve as a road map for the way ahead.

**Sheila Casey**  
Blue Star Mother and Army Spouse

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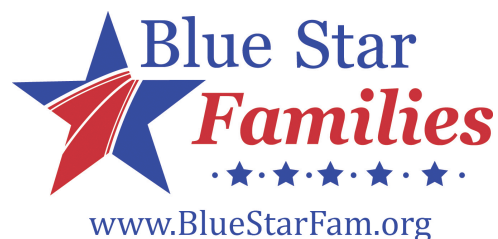
Blue Star Families, Office of Research and Policy.

2010 Military Family Lifestyle Survey: Findings and Analysis. Washington, DC. September 2010.

**Blue Star Families** is a non-profit organization, created by real military families. We are committed to *supporting* one another through the unique challenges of military service and asking the larger civilian population to help; *connecting* military families regardless of rank, branch of service or physical location; and *empowering* military family members to create the best possible personal and family life for themselves.

**Blue Star Families** provides both online and physical chapter-based communities. It serves as a bridge between families and various support and service organizations that are striving to help make military life more sustainable. Through outreach and involvement with national and local organizations, civilian communities and government entities, **Blue Star Families** works hand in hand to share pride of service, promote healthier families, aid military readiness, and contribute to our country's strength.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The men and women who serve in the military and the families who support them are an integral part of America's national security. Every day military families are serving on their own front lines at home. They are sustaining themselves and their service members who are preparing, deploying, returning, or reintegrating after combat. These families are the backbone of a strong and able United States military. Therefore, we must listen carefully and address the concerns of the military families. They play a central and critical role in supporting United States forces while ensuring readiness for current and future national security needs.

## **BACKGROUND AND INTENT**

In May 2010, Blue Star Families conducted an online survey of 3,634 military family members. Blue Star Families' 2010 Military Lifestyle Survey was designed to reveal key trends in military family relationships, family life and careers by examining, among other things, feelings of stress, levels of communication and engagement. The following results will help educate military family members, the general public, policy makers, and other organizations about the challenges and stressors modern day military families are experiencing as we approach nearly a decade of continuous war.

Through an extensive series of questions that examined many different aspects of military family life, the 2010 Military Lifestyle Survey demonstrates that, on the whole, military families are experiencing high levels of stress but are coping. And while many military families feel more support from their civilian counterparts than a year ago, there is still more work to be done to support military families and to bridge the gap of understanding between the military and civilian communities. Of note, military families identified several key areas of concern, including the current high operational tempo, the effect of deployments on children, children's education, spousal employment, and financial stress. Blue Star Families' 2010 Military Lifestyle Survey also revealed interesting trends in how military families support each other and stay connected to the military community and to their service members.

For this survey, Blue Star Families was honored to have the assistance of the following partner organizations: the American Red Cross, the United Service Organizations (USO), the Armed Forces YMCA, Military.com, Military Spouse Magazine, Association of the United States Army (AUSA), Be The Change, the Military Child Education Coalition (MCEC), the Military Spouse Corporate Career Network (MSCCN), Military Officer's Association of America (MOAA), National Guard Association of the United States (NGAUS), Operation Homefront, the Reserve Officers Association (ROA), National Military Family Association (NMFA), the Veterans Innovation Center, and Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW). Additionally, dozens of websites, blogs, military family advocates, and organizations promoted the survey through their memberships and networks. The wide distribution of this survey through our partners and others in the military community greatly contributed to the high level of response, and helped this survey reach a thoroughly representative sample of military personnel and their families.

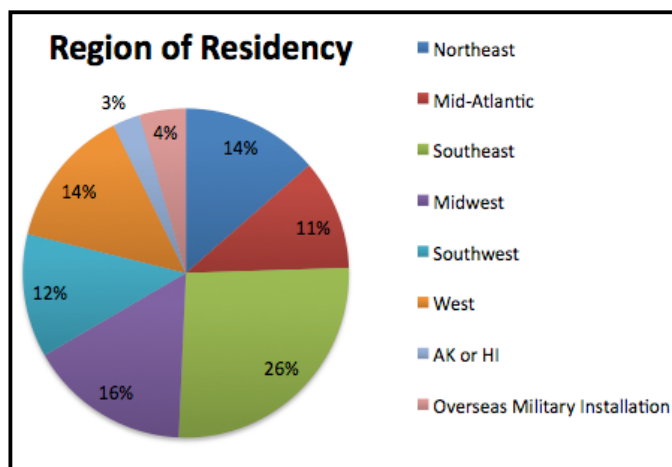
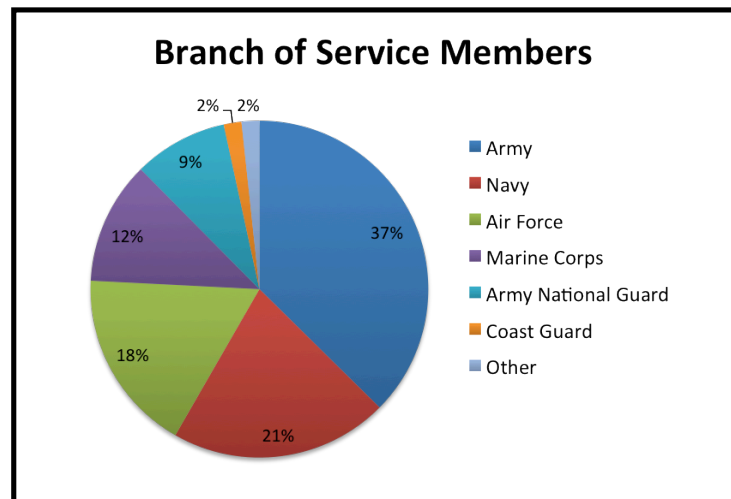
## SURVEY RESPONDENTS

The 3,634 respondents represent a diverse cross section of military family members from all branches of services, ranks, and regions, both within the United States and overseas military installations.

Survey respondents were asked to identify their primary relationship with the military based on the service member through whom they receive Department of Defense dependent benefits, if applicable. Almost half of the survey's respondents had more than one immediate family member affiliated with the military and seventy-three percent were spouses. Fourteen percent of the respondents were service members, six percent were parents, and four percent were children of service members.

More than eighty percent of the survey respondents were affiliated with active-duty military personnel, three percent were affiliated with the Reserve, another three percent with the Drilling Guard, Drilling Reserve or the Inactive Drilling Guard, and ten percent with retired military. Sixty-eight percent of respondents were affiliated with enlisted service personnel, and four percent of survey respondents reside in overseas military installations. Survey respondents residing in the United States were fairly evenly distributed across the country.

Eighty-four percent of respondents were female, and sixty-seven percent of respondents had minor children living at home with them. Sixty-three percent of survey respondents were between the ages of twenty-five and forty-four.



This demographic background sets the framework for the story of military families, a diverse group of individuals from all walks of life. Military families are drawn together by their commitment to service and the experiences they share of loving someone in the military.

## SURVEY OVERVIEW

Military service penetrates what is generally considered the private sphere of family to an extent unmatched by civilian employment. Both the military and the family have been described as “greedy institutions” (Segal, 1986) and there is an emerging area of research dedicated to uncovering the intersection of these two predominant influences in the lives of our service members and their families. Concern about family issues due to multiple deployments has become a primary focus as a result of the increased reliance on the military since the attacks of September 11, 2001. This reliance necessitates new approaches to maintain and increase the appeal of military service to current and new service members and their families, to ensure and maintain a sustainable U.S. national defense (Drummet, et al, 2003).

While military families have the same life experiences common to many families, including balancing work and family, struggling with parenting issues (such as childcare and education concerns), and maintaining healthy relationships, they also have unique stressors relating to the requirements of their service member’s employment. Frequent separation, the subsequent reintegration processes from both traditional deployment and combat settings, and an increased amount of relocation produce stressors that need to be addressed in order to maintain satisfaction within both the military and family environments.

The five issues identified by respondents as top concerns for military families are the currently high operational tempo, spousal employment, service member pay and benefits, children’s education, and the effects of deployment on children. Additionally, it’s clear that military families are experiencing high levels of stress. After almost a decade of war, it is understandable that nearly all respondents reported that their stress level increases during their service member’s deployments.

Supporting military families is integral to our national security. The work has begun, as evidenced from one of the promising findings of the survey - military families are beginning to feel more support from the civilian community. In the Blue Star Families’ 2009 survey, ninety-four percent of respondents either agreed completely or somewhat with the statement: *“The general public does not truly understand or appreciate the sacrifices made by service members and their families.”*

While in the 2010 survey, ninety-two percent of respondents still stated that there was a lack of understanding and appreciation of the sacrifices being made, there was a **seven-point decline in respondents who agreed completely**. Since the 2009 survey was fielded, the challenges and sacrifices of military family life have received wide spread attention, ranging from local community outreach to the federal government and the White House. This increased public attention to military family life has undoubtedly helped families feel more appreciated by their civilian neighbors, and is an important beginning to bridging the gap between military and civilian communities.

## **SURVEY HIGHLIGHTS**

The five issues identified by respondents as top concerns for military families are the currently operational tempo (OPTEMPO), spousal employment, the effects of deployment on children, children's education and service member pay and benefits. Blue Star Families' 2010 Military Life Survey also yielded unique insights into the importance of volunteerism for military families, and the way families utilize social and traditional media.

**OP TEMPO:** Fourteen percent of respondents listed the operational tempo of the military as their top concern. Since September 11, 2001, seventy-two percent reported that their spouse had been away from home for more than twenty-five months. Fourteen percent of respondents listed the operational tempo of the military as their top concern.

**Spouse Employment:** Forty-nine percent of spouses felt that being a military spouse had a negative impact on their ability to pursue a career. Of the sixty-one percent of spouses not employed outside the home, forty-eight percent wanted to be employed. Of those spouses whose careers have been negatively impacted by active-duty military activities, more than thirteen percent believe they have experienced some type of discrimination due to their status as a military spouse.

**MyCAA:** Fifty-five percent of respondents would like to use the program My Career Advancement Accounts (MyCAA) in the future. Across all ranks, more than half of the survey respondents indicated a desire for financial assistance with bachelors or graduate degrees.

**Effects of Deployments on Children:** Seventy-one percent of respondents with children indicated that they would like more support for their children during a deployment.

**Children's Education:** Between frequent moves and service member time away from home, many parents worry about their children receiving a good education. A full thirty-four percent are "least or not confident" that their children's school is responsive to the unique military family life.

**Pay/Benefits:** Eighteen percent of respondents listed pay/benefits as their top military family life issues. Additionally, in response to later open-ended questions, of respondents who mentioned pay/benefits, eighty-four percent said that they were having trouble making ends meets, or that they felt their service members' military pay was low.

**Volunteerism:** Military family members are connected to the bigger picture of community and giving. Survey participants report a sixty-eight percent volunteer rate in the past year, compared to a national average of less than twenty-seven percent. Of note, the majority of volunteerism was through informal efforts, such as assisting friends and neighbors with meals, childcare, or similar activities. This type of informal support is clearly an important area for military families, and one in which the civilian community can easily participate.

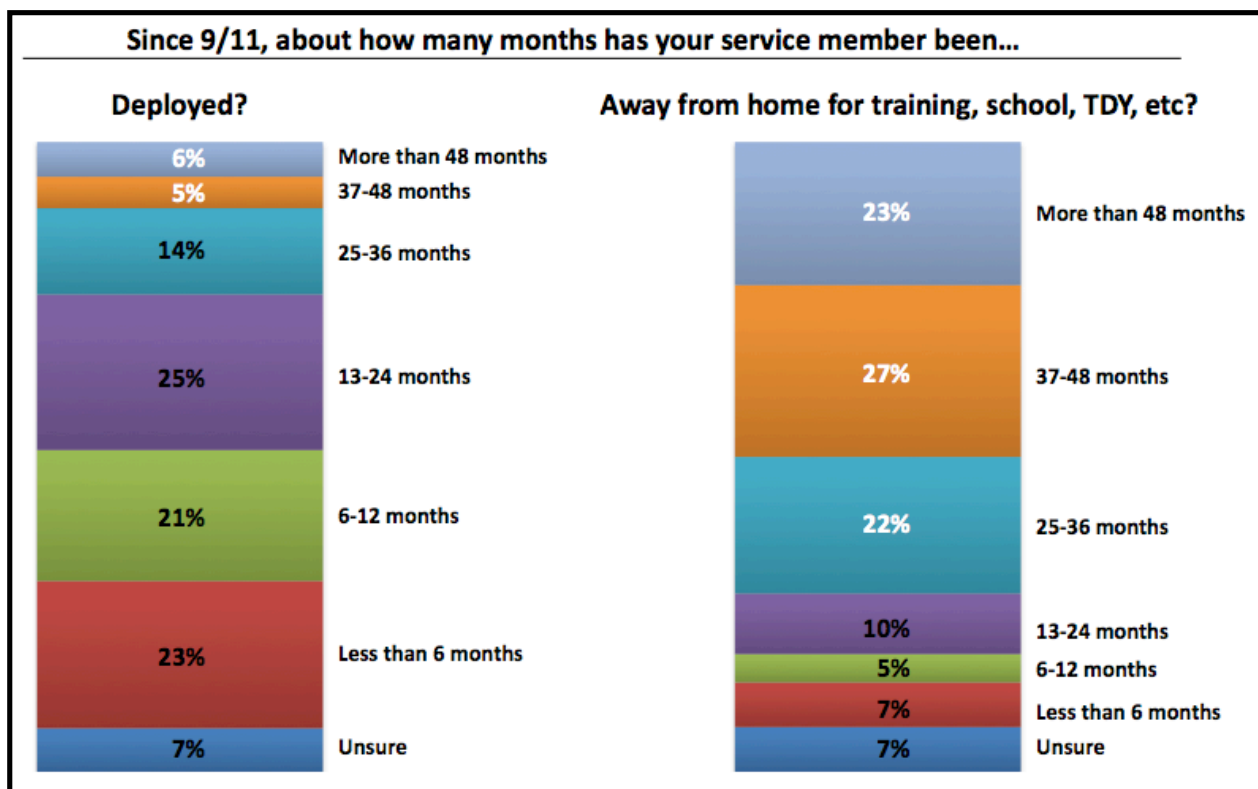
**Social Media:** As with the civilian community, social media use is prevalent throughout military families, with nearly ninety percent of respondents reporting some type of use. Of those who use social media, eighty-eight percent do so at least once a week. Military families rely heavily on social and online media during deployments, with eighty-nine percent using email to communicate with their service member.

## OPTEMPO

Twenty-six percent of respondents listed the OPTEMPO as one of their top three military life issues, and thirty-eight percent said that deployments are the most important issue facing military families today. Of those respondents who mentioned deployment, reducing the number of deployments (36%), reducing the length of deployments (30%), and increasing dwell time (20%) were the top three mentions.

Of all the respondents who were spouses, eighty-two percent reported that their spouse had been deployed during their marriage. Since September 11, 2001, seventy-two percent reported that their spouse had been away from home for more than twenty-five months, with twenty-three percent saying their spouse had been away from home for more than forty-eight months.

It is important to note that deployments do not occur in a vacuum. Looking at other time the service member is away from home (e.g., training/field time, schooling, workups, temporary duty assignments (TDY), etc.), illustrates the true magnitude of separations military families are facing today. Since September 11, 2001, twenty-seven percent have had their service member away for thirty-seven to forty-eight months, and twenty-three percent have had their service member away for more than forty-eight months for TDY, schools, training, and workups.





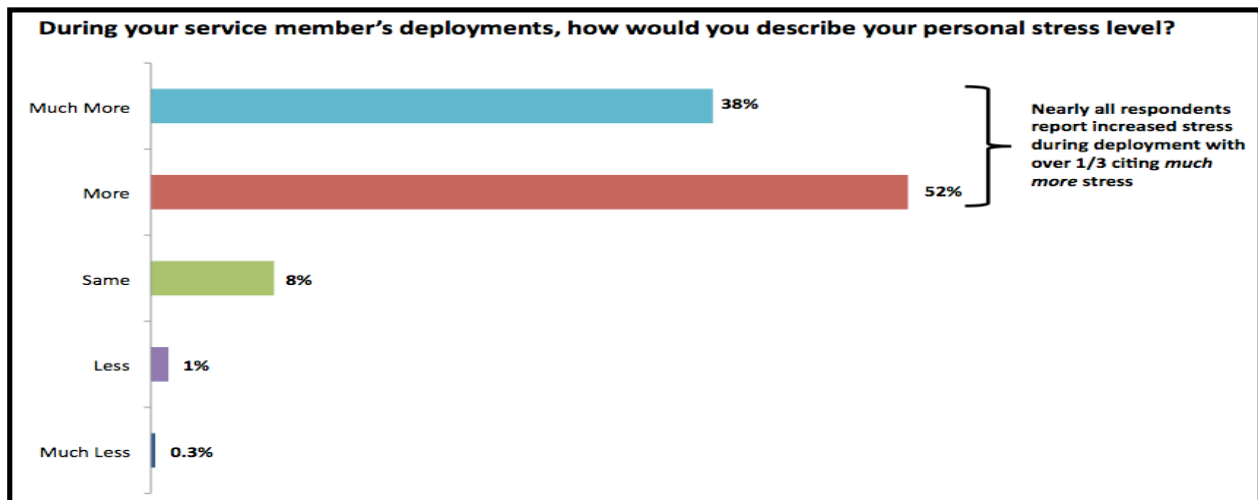
### ***OPTEMPO and Spouse Stress***

After nearly a decade of war, it is understandable that military families are experiencing high levels of stress. In fact, nearly all respondents reported that their stress level increases during their service member's deployments.

Despite the fact that most feel more stress, nearly half indicate no problems with overall mental health. Even though deployment stress is widespread, reported mental health problems are limited.

It is no surprise that deployments lead to increased stress for family members. However, it is notable that more than one-third of respondents say they are under *much more* stress than usual.

Over seventy percent of respondents describe their spousal relationship as having little to no tension—this is consistent with the fact that approximately seventy percent also cited their ability to work out marital arguments with little to no difficulty.



With the reported increase in stress levels, it is unsurprising that only seventeen percent of respondents said they sought no support during their service member's deployment(s). However, it is important to note that seventy percent of respondents sought informal help from family or friends. The next most common types of support sought were online forums or social media (39%) and written information (32%) (e.g., brochures/online.) It is interesting that more formalized types of support—chaplain services (6%), classes (6%), and installation based support groups (14%), were much less likely to be used. Future research could focus on explaining why formalized types of support were less likely to be utilized by military families.

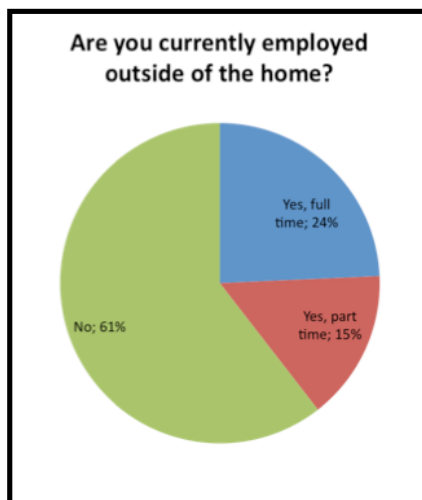
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## SPOUSE EMPLOYMENT

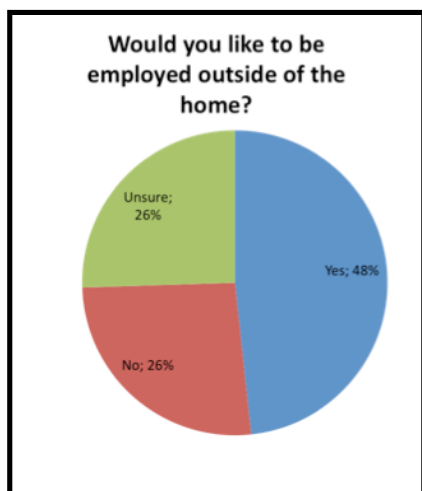
In this survey and other research, spouse employment challenges are becoming a much more visible and reported issue for military families.

Research on military families has shown that if spouses are dissatisfied with the demands imposed on service members, they may encourage their service member to leave the military (Bourg and Segal, 1995). Furthermore, researchers also suggest that the spousal support for a service member's reenlistment depends on the degree to which the military is supportive of families (Segal and Harris, 1993). Therefore, successful recruiting and retention of the active duty force relies in large part on the extent to which service members and their spouses experience both job satisfaction and contentment with life in the military.

Since 2004, various studies on military spouse employment have shown that:



- Military spouses make an average of \$10,500 less per year than civilians even though they are better educated on average (DoD, 2008; Hosek, 2007).
- There is an average \$12,000 gap between college-educated civilians and military spouses.
- The unemployment rate for military spouses is three times higher than civilian spouses (DoD, 2008).
- Military spouses are less likely to work in any given year and are less likely to work full time. They also tend to work fewer weeks, and earn lower salaries (DoD, 2008).

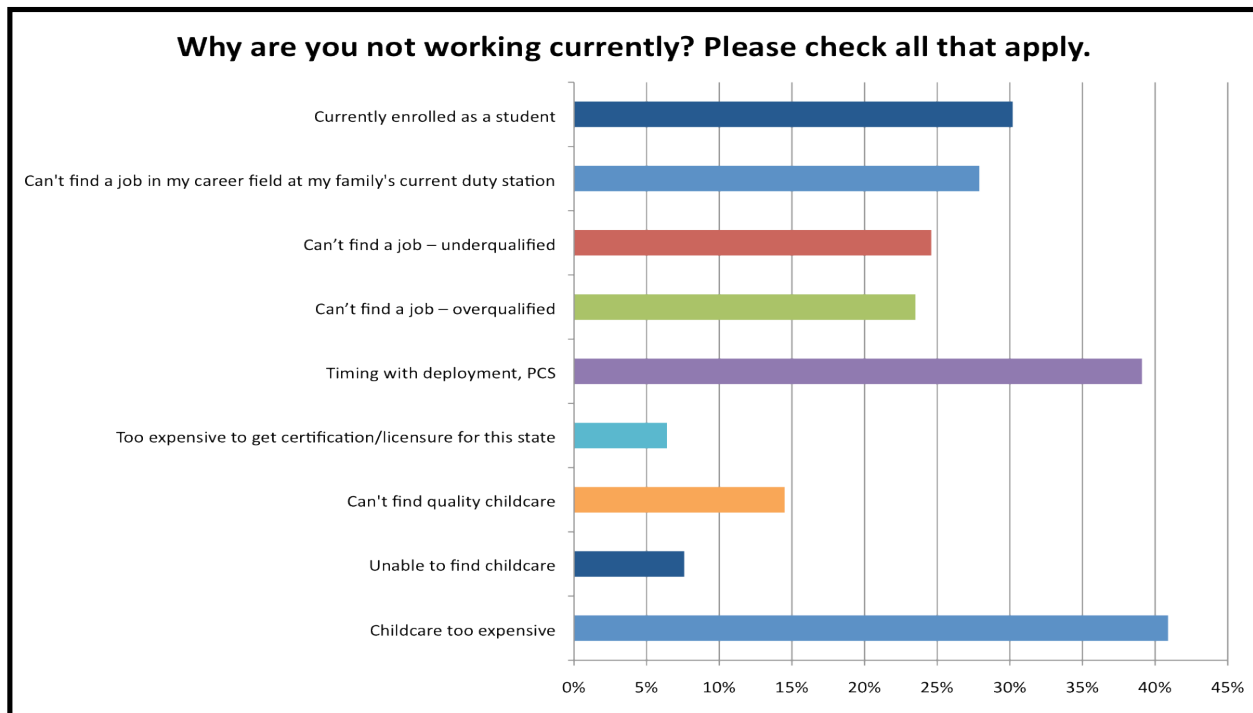


While many studies chart the facts of military spouse employment, there is little understanding of why military spouse employment is this way. In their 2004 study on military spouse employment, the RAND Corporation noted that neither the Department of Defense nor other organizations, such as military family advocacy groups, understand which occupations military spouses pursue, what their motivations for work, or what their perceptions are of how the military lifestyle has affected their employment or education (Harrell, et al, 2004).

In the 2010 Military Lifestyle Survey, Blue Star Families aimed to parse out these questions of employment. Of the respondents, only thirty-nine percent of spouses are employed outside the home, yet nearly half said that they would like to be.

The questions that Blue Star Families selected to address were: Why are spouses not employed? By choice or other reasons? What hurdles do military spouses face in securing employment and establishing a career? A parsing out of answers to these questions, and attempting to answer why nearly forty percent are unemployed is important, as it indicates the confounding factors that work together to create challenges for military spouses finding employment.

Forty-nine percent of respondents said that being a military spouse had a negative effect on their ability to pursue a career. As illustrated with this chart, the top two reasons cited for not working were childcare costs and deployments or permanent change of station moves (PCS).



Military moves, including those overseas and to remote bases, have negatively impacted spouse careers according to almost fifty-three percent of respondents.

Of those spouses whose careers have been negatively impacted by active-duty military activities, more than thirteen percent believe that they have experienced some type of discrimination due to their status as a military spouse. Frequently this discrimination was experienced as an unwillingness to hire a military spouse due to potential employers' anticipating a military move.

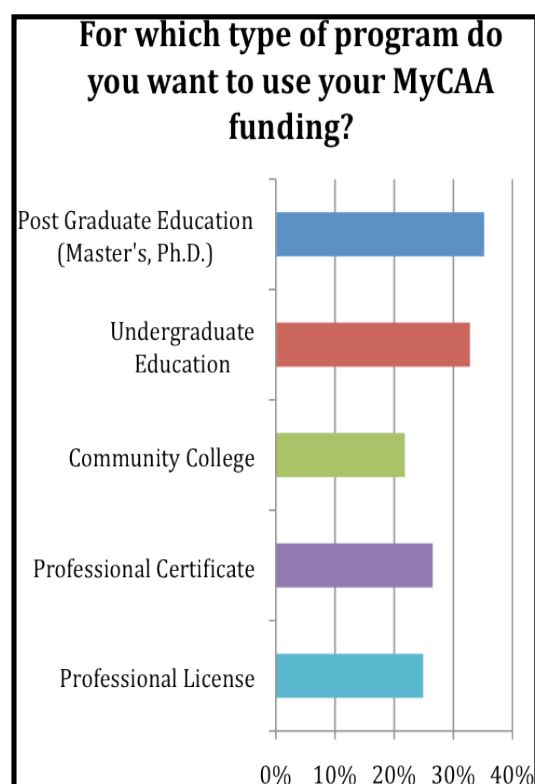
Nearly twenty percent of respondents have had challenges with maintaining their licenses across state lines.

In contrast, spouses with successful careers or businesses have typically identified employers or business opportunities that enable 'virtual' work, such as employers who allow employees to work from home and/or remote locations).

### ***MyCAA***

The My Career Advancement Accounts (MyCAA) program, initiated by the Department of Defense, is a resource for military spouses to pursue their education. The program is designed to mitigate some of the challenges military spouses face, such as increased costs because of a loss of credit due to a PCS move.

Fifty-five percent of respondents would like to use MyCAA in the future. Among those spouses interested in using MyCAA in the future, attending a community college was the least preferred choice. In contrast, more than half (across all ranks) indicated a desire for financial assistance with bachelors or graduate degrees. However, as of October 25, 2010, the new guidelines of the MyCAA program limit spouses' degree programs to Associates Degrees and certain professional licenses and certificates.



### ***Suggested Action Items***

Efforts to alleviate the stressor associated with spousal employment issue should focus on encouraging civilian leaders like politicians, employers and educators to remove barriers that make career advancement difficult for spouses. The federal government could grant priority to military spouses for federal and civil service employment. Colleges and universities could expand online and distance learning programs. Congress could pass the Military Spouse Job Opportunity Act, giving tax credits to working spouses who have expenses associated with military transfers, or expand the Work Opportunity Tax Credit to include spouses of service members), or expand childcare subsidies for military families. State governments could allow military spouses pay in-state tuition rates. Colleges and universities could be encouraged to accept more transferred credits from military spouses. State governments and licensing organizations, such as the Bar or state Boards Education, could ease licensing requirements for professional spouses.

## **MILITARY CHILDREN**

There are nearly two million military-connected children worldwide across all branches of service, including the National Guard and Reserve (MCEC, 2009). Nearly one million children have seen a parent deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan. Of the children with parents on active duty, forty percent are under five years old. Thirty-two percent are between the ages of six and eleven. Twenty-four percent are twelve to eighteen years old, while only four percent are nineteen or older (DMDC, 2008).

Of our survey respondents, ninety-eight percent of spouse respondents had children under the age of 18 living with them. Of these, sixty percent of respondents had children ages five and under, fifty-eight

percent had school age children, and twenty-seven percent teenagers. Eight-six percent of respondents reported that their child had experienced at least one deployment of their military parent(s).

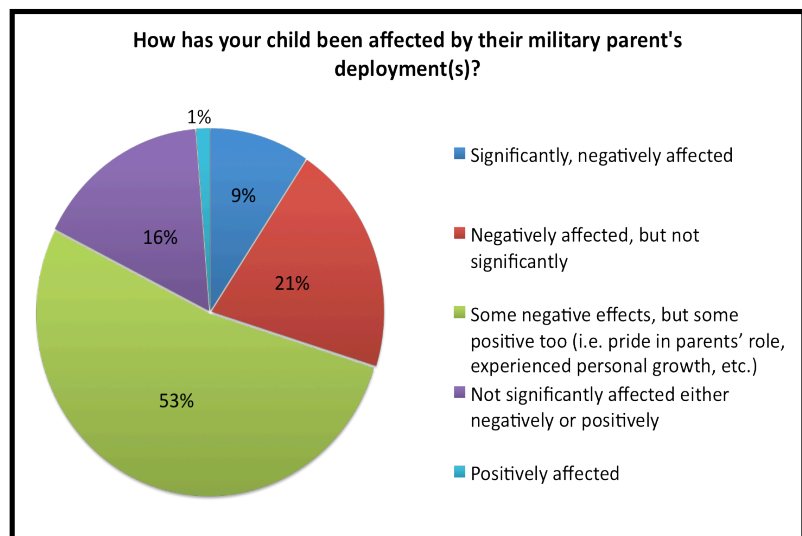
For survey respondent concerns about military children centered around two main issues – the effects of deployment and the effects of mobility on their educational progress.

### ***Effects of Deployments on Children***

Thirty-three percent of those who responded to the question, “Do you feel that you have the resources to deal with the impact of deployment on your children?” reported that they had sought counseling for themselves or at least one child to help deal with negative emotional impacts of deployment.

While military spouses feel that they are capable of caring for military children during deployment and the absence of the military parent, most still feel that more assistance and resources are needed to help children manage the stresses of a deployment.

The resiliency of children who experience deployments was a pressing concern for survey respondents. In the open-ended questions, many expressed fears related to such extended separations. However, respondents also mentioned the possibility personal strength and growth in their children as a result of military life.



Resilience has its limits, however, especially as the deployments mount. RAND scholars have found that the total number of months apart, rather than the number of separations and reunions, correlates most closely with children's stress level (Chandra, et al, 2010). For example, the twelve-month long deployments of the Army and of the Navy Individual Augmentee assignments might be more stressful on a child than several shorter separations, typical of the Air Force or Marine Corps.

### ***Children's Education***

Twenty-six percent of respondents listed children's education as one of their top three concerns. Between frequent moves and the service member's time away from home, many parents worry about their children receiving a good education. A full thirty-four percent are “least or not confident” that their children's school is responsive to the unique military family life.

Based on the survey, most spouses are confident that they can make decisions regarding their child's future, education and extracurricular school activities during the absence of a military parent, yet still seventy-one percent indicated that they would like more support for their children during a deployment.

Additionally, there was a high saturation of references to transitions and school related topics. For example, for the questions relating to military children, including open ended questions, “school” was mentioned 1,008 times and transitions or moving was mentioned 1,458 times. Academics, grades, extra-curricular, classes, teachers, and education were all prevalent concerns.

These concerns are well founded. On average, a military student transfers to different school divisions more than twice during high school (Council of State Governments, 2010). Most military children attend schools in six to nine different school divisions from kindergarten to twelfth grade (CSG, 2010). A need for standardization across the states was a common theme in open-ended questions. Many parents expressed sadness, concern and anger that their military children could be penalized or delayed in achieving their educational goals because of inflexible and conflicting curricula from state to state.

The Council of State Governments (CSG), in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Defense, worked with a variety of stakeholders and drafted a model compact, The Interstate Compact on Educational Opportunity for Military Children.

*“The education system in all the states we have lived in or moved to...have different curriculum, which means my children miss out on some aspects of their education and sometimes they repeat things that were taught in one state the following year in a new state.”*

### ***Suggested Action Items***

Efforts to address this issue should focus on asking states to provide more consistency in curriculum and training for all students, and increase awareness among educators about the challenges facing military children.

- Ask state officials to include military children in Subsidized State Pre-K Programs.
- Ask the Department of Education to increase training to educators about military children.
- Support The Interstate Compact on Educational Opportunity for Military Children at the state level through both additional state sign-ons as well as implementation at the state level through formations of state commissions and allocation of state funds.

*“There are a huge lack of children’s programs that help military parents initiate dialogue with their kids to prepare them for deployment and reunion. There needs to be a greater emphasis on developmentally appropriate and fun programs that help equip our kids for deployment success. When my kids do better I do better and my marine does better while deployed.”*

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*“I don't think there are many services or support opportunities offered for families in our situation. My children do not receive the support or counseling they need to make it through a deployment. They know no other kids that have been in our situation and most people in their lives have no idea that their father is deployed. I think all services should be available to all family members if your spouse/family member is deployed--no matter where you live or with what branch they deploy with.”*

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*“We really don't know what the outcome of these year on, year off indefinite, extensive deployments will be, do we? I hope my son will be even more self-sufficient, brave, and compassionate, but I fear resentment, anger, sadness, and etc.”*

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*“I'm afraid that the separation my kids have to endure and the stress will cripple their ability to make good relationship decisions in the future, and leave them with no sense of stability.”*

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*“More time at home in-between assignments/deployments! My twins are 8 and their Dad has deployed overseas 3 times, attended 1-3month long training 4 times, and has attended 1-4 month schools 3 times...all by their 8th Birthday!”*

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*“I promote long term emotional well being for my children, by instilling in them how much more prepared they are for the real world because of the strength and resiliency they have acquired by being a military child. If more parents would accentuate the positive and focus less on the negative aspects, these children would be more secure and would have less problems. “*

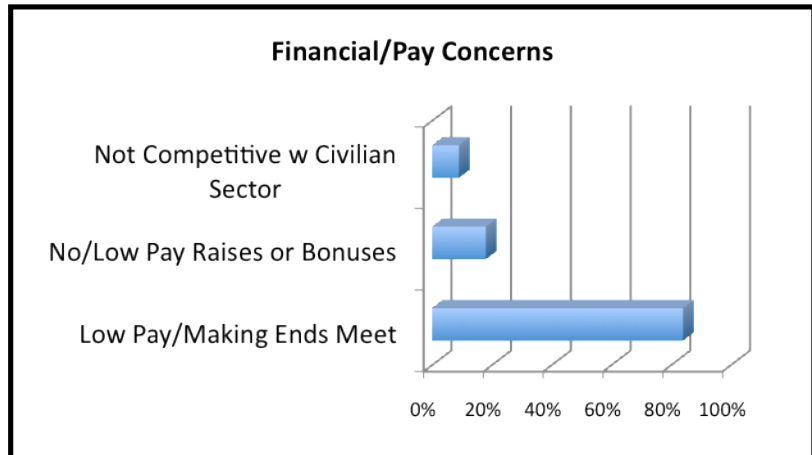
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*“I would have to say that if there is one thing that our child will learn from back to back deployments is that she will discover personal strength that she was not aware of having. She will also gain a better understanding of choices and decisions that need to be made while her soldier is deployed that affect the family. Deployments will make her an independent person at a far younger age then she should become and miss out on a lot of activities that are father/daughter.”*

## PAY AND BENEFITS

Forty-one percent of respondents listed pay/benefits as one of their top three military family life issues, with eighteen percent listing it as the number one issue.

Additionally, in response to open-ended questions later on in the survey, of respondents who mentioned pay/benefits, eighty-four percent said that they were having trouble making ends meets, or that they felt their service members' military pay was low.



Service members who participated in the survey cited concerns about covering expenses that are specific to military members in addition to those that are experienced by many families in the U.S., such as paying for college, child care, and housing expenses. Expenses that are specific to military families and result in additional financial burdens include a variety of issues such as:

- Non-reimbursed moving expenses, particularly for large families or those with unusually frequent or OCONUS PCSs;
- Additional child care expenses due to service member's deployment;
- Loss of spouse income due to PCS or service member's deployment;
- Oft-cited large monthly charges for Internet access in deployed locations so troops can speak with family;
- Additional state taxes owed on non-residential homes (which cannot be sold in a declining economy, yet due to a PCS, state taxes increase).

Additionally, junior enlisted troops' salaries are below the national poverty level. Many junior enlisted families who participated in the survey would like to see pay increases to help eliminate the need for either food stamps or WIC. Military families used more food stamps in 2008 than in previous years, "redeeming them last year at nearly twice the civilian rate" (Mitchell, 2009).

In the open-ended questions, some spouses expressed a desire to change the dialog about military pay and cease comparing it to the civilian sector. The respondents wrote that because the demands on service members are far greater than those placed on individuals in typical civilian occupations and should result in base pay increases – primarily due to the frequent PCSs and deployments to combat zones. One survey respondent explained, "The pay a military member receives during a deployment is worth nothing in comparison to their lives. That \$250-500 extra a month does not pay for the time my husband and children lose together and it will not replace my husband if something happens to him." Other respondents commented on the fact that if military members were paid by the hour, their wage would be incredibly low and simply not worthy of military members' skills and educations.



## VOLUNTEERISM

Military families are connected to the bigger picture of community and giving, but there is scant data on the particulars of volunteerism in the military community. A recent survey conducted with OIF/OEF veterans highlighted several findings that indicated a strong desire among veterans to volunteer in their communities (Yonkman and Bridgeland, 2009). Ninety-two percent of respondents in the survey strongly agreed or agreed that serving their community was important to them and ninety percent strongly agreed or agreed that service was a basic responsibility of every American. Additionally, of those veterans interested in volunteering, ninety percent wanted to serve other veterans or military families.

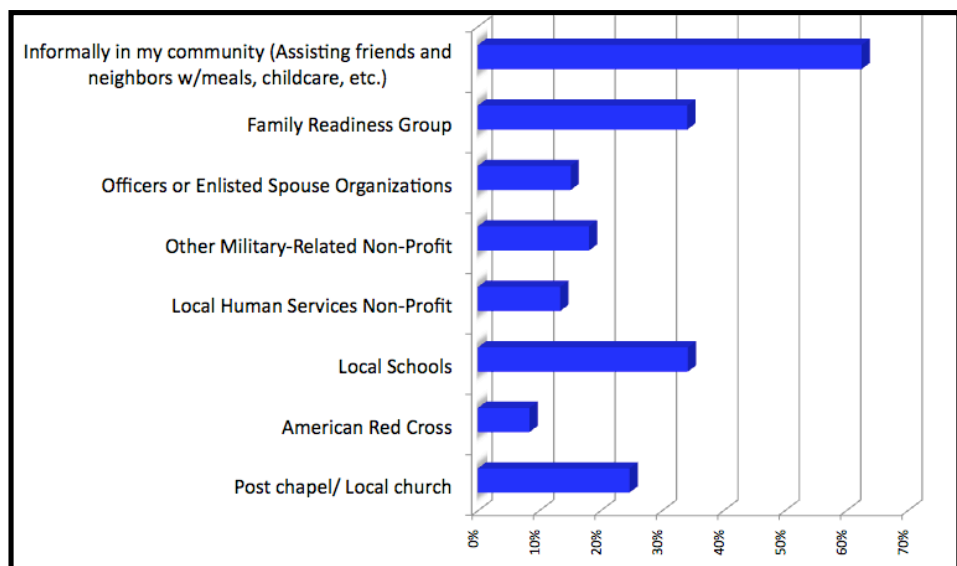
Respondents to the Blue Star Families 2010 Military Family Lifestyle Survey reported a sixty-eight percent volunteer rate in the past year. For comparison purposes, according to the Corporation for National and Community Service, in 2009 the national volunteer rate was 26.8 percent, the highest since 2005 (Volunteering in America, 2010).

In every category, across demographics of employment or child rearing, survey respondents showed a clear preference for informal volunteerism, with sixty-one percent listing activities such as assisting friends and neighbors with meals or childcare, as their primary volunteer commitments. This type of informal support is clearly an important area for military families, and one that the civilian community can easily participate in.

After informal volunteerism, thirty-four percent of survey respondents volunteered at local schools, thirty-three percent participated in family readiness groups, and twenty-three percent volunteer at religious institutions. All of these activities create the ties that bind military family members to the community around them.

Seventy-one percent of respondents with children affirm that they volunteer. Of this sub-group, sixty percent have children under five; seventy-five percent have children age five to twelve; and seventy-nine percent have children from thirteen to eighteen.

Of note, although the majority of volunteers carve out under ten hours in any grouping in donating time, nine percent of the respondents who declared volunteer hours offered over thirty hours per month or the equivalent of a part-time job.

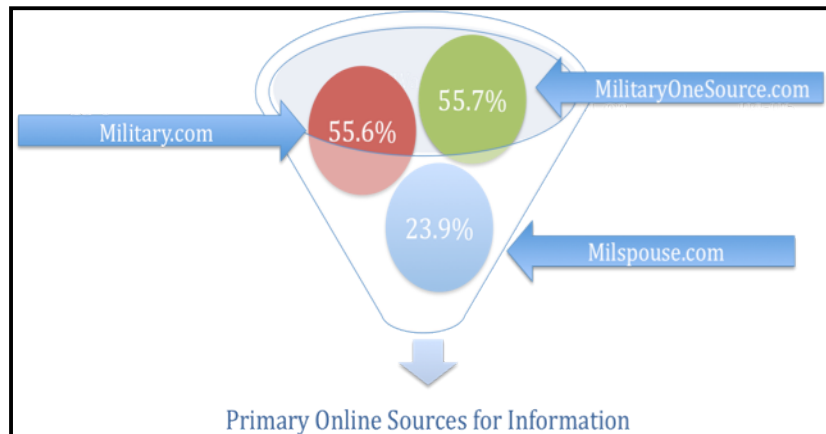


Research shows that veterans who volunteer have more successful transitions home than those who do not (Volunteering in America, 2010). The same therapeutic qualities could apply to military spouses and parents going through a deployment of a loved one.

## SOCIAL MEDIA

As with the civilian community, social media use is prevalent throughout military families, with nearly ninety percent of respondents reporting some type of use. Of those who use social media, eighty-eight percent do so at least once a week.

For news media, MilitaryOneSource.com, Military.com, and Military Spouse Magazine (Milspouse.com) are the top three preferred, regularly visited online information locations across all respondents. These three represent the primary online sites military family members go to for information about the military.



Of all those participating in the survey, eighty-eight percent of all respondents use some type of social media. Eighty percent of those who use social media use Facebook. The next most popular outlet is message boards, all message boards, with ten percent of social media users engaging. Twitter is the next most utilized branded social media site, with six percent of respondents tweeting. Less than 1 percent of users "Never" visit Facebook, versus twenty percent of users who "Never" visit Twitter.

The frequent uses of social media sites qualify these activities as established routines for thousands of military family members. Eighty-three percent of survey participants in this category report daily use of social media. Above this average, more than ninety percent of military family members of the Junior Enlisted (E1-E4) log in, as do eighty-five percent of Company Grade Officers (O1-O3) families. Beyond Facebook, established military-specific websites attract frequent visits as well. MilitaryOneSource.com and Military.com are within one percent of each other as the preferred, regularly visited information location across all surveyed groups. MilitarySpouse.com rounds out the top three primary sites military family members go to for information about the military. It should be noted however, twenty-nine percent of survey respondents who use social media do not seek out military information on these or other ancillary informational sites of similar type.

Fifty percent of users reported using social media for communication during deployment. Of these respondents, email access is most utilized at eighty-two percent. Facebook is used by forty-nine percent of military family members with their overseas service members, as is Skype (43%) and Instant Messaging (42%). This represents a major communication shift for military family members during a time of war; perhaps reaping both benefits and consequences on technology access and morale.

## MENTAL HEALTH

### *Post Traumatic Stress Disorder*

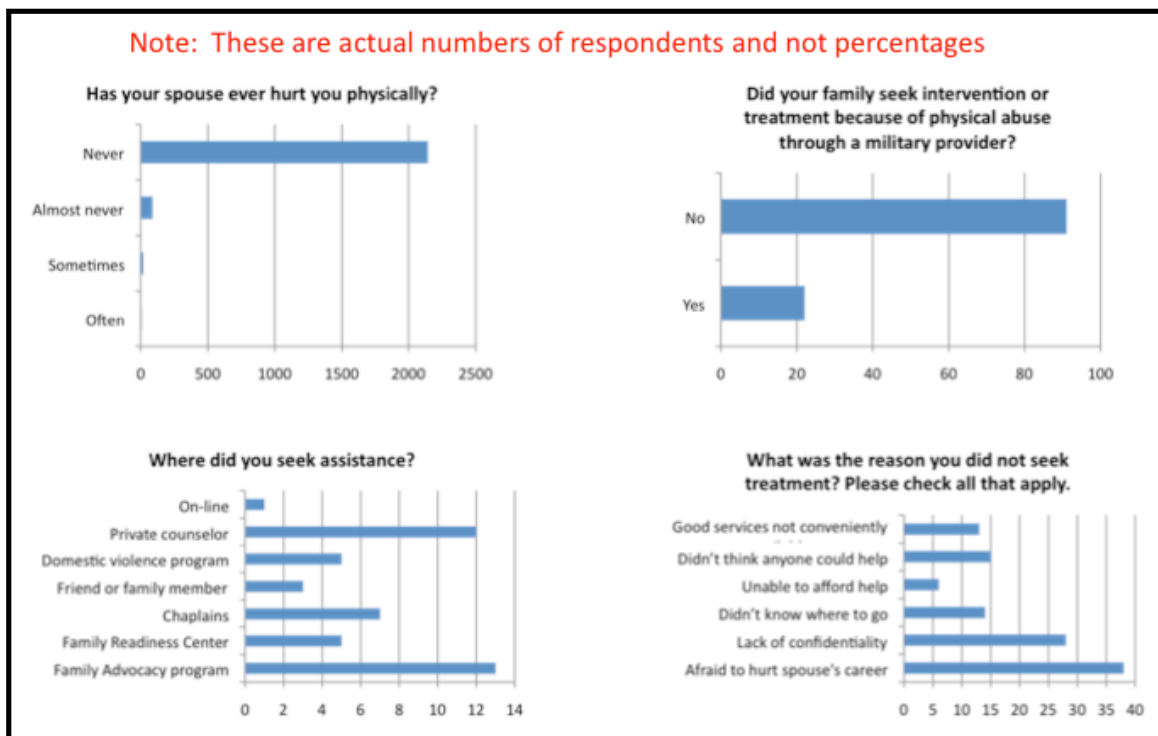
Of those who reported that their service member had been diagnosed with PTSD, almost sixty percent sought intervention or treatment. Of those that did not seek treatment, sixty-two percent cited lack of confidentiality as the reason for not doing so. Thirty-four percent did not seek treatment because services were not convenient, while thirty-one percent were unable to find private counseling.

### *Intimate Partner Violence (IPV)*

This very important, and often difficult to discuss, topic was also addressed in this survey. While only four percent of respondents feel that intimate partner violence (IPV) is an issue in their relationship, the data is included here, as a foundation of knowledge about the topic.

Of the four percent of respondents that identify IPV as an issue for them and their partner, very few have sought assistance in dealing with it. The most commonly cited reasons for not seeking help were a fear of negative repercussions for the service member's career and lack of confidentiality in available services. Several responses cited not seeking help because of a lack of confidence that anyone could help.

Based on this small group of respondents, no conclusions can be made in this area. However, for those who are affected by it, more can be done to increase the availability of confidential support services, particularly outside the chain of command.



## NEW AND EMERGENT THEMES

### *Parental Responses*

The number of respondents who are the parents of service members doubled compared to the 2009 survey. In open-ended questions, many parents expressed a desire for better communication and information about their child's military unit, deployment and responsibilities. For example, one parent commented, "As a parent POC for my son's FRG, I found that so many of the parents of these young heroes have no clue what their children are doing, or how they are doing it. I had one mom ask me when her son said that he may be PCSing after their return, "What will he do there?" because she doesn't even know what he does here. He is an MP by the way. For many parents, all they know is that their child went to basic, then on to a school, and then on to a duty station. We need to have some educational tool for them also, some sort of program like Army 101 for parents."

Access to information was another theme for the parents of service members, whose solution could be as simple as an informational campaign directed at service members. Additionally, when the service member is single, the parents are the only family members who are seeking information; in other cases, the parents believe themselves to be more stable than spouses. This lack of confidence in marriages or other romantic entanglements is illustrated through the words of this Marine parent, "Many [parents] are picking up the pieces of their sons' and daughters' lives after their service in Iraq and Afghanistan. After injuries and/or PTSD, it's often the parents who deal with the medical care, try to talk their child into counseling, go with them to navigate signing up for college classes, pay their legal bills (after they act out due to their PTSD), and hold their hands when their spouses leave them because they aren't the "same" anymore."

### *EFMP/Special Needs/Autism*

While the survey did not ask any questions specifically about the Exceptional Family Member Program (EFMP) or the challenges that military families with special needs children face, a number of respondents brought up these issues in *Question 48: Do you have any additional comments or suggestions regarding military family issues that you feel haven't been addressed in this survey?*

During the analysis of this open-ended survey question Blue Star Families took note of the number and thoughtfulness of responses to this question regarding EFMP and special needs military children. The issues can be divided into four main categories of concern: Daycare and school needs, Deployment and Respite Care, Autism, and Improving the Provision of EFMP Services.

*"I think there should be more emphasis on the issues facing military families with special needs, e.g. access to accessible housing, playgrounds, youth programs, after school programs etc. and especially their inability to access Federal and State safety net programs such as Medicaid because they move so much that waiver waiting lists are too long. Military families with special needs also need help with the immense out of pocket costs that they have because of the therapies, medical supplies etc that TRICARE doesn't cover. We also need to look at the stress on the service member and family members and collect data on the number of EFMP families (or potential) that are also FAP cases because this would be a good indicator of high stress."*

## **CONCLUSION**

Understandably, concern about family issues has become increasingly central for the Department of Defense and our civilian leadership as a result of the increased reliance on the military since the attacks on September 11, 2001. This reliance necessitates new approaches to maintain and increase the appeal of military service to current and new service members, as well as their families, to ensure strong and sustainable military readiness.

Though there are continuous efforts being made to streamline and transform military family support and readiness programs and emphasis on initiatives that promote more effective coordination and implementation, there are still gaps that need to be addressed. Because dynamics continue to change, there will always be a need for a continual process of education and preparedness. We are all charged with maintaining a focus on preparing our military families and equipping them with the best knowledge and skills to assure their success.

Since the 2009 survey was fielded, the challenges and sacrifices of military family life have received wide spread attention. Community organizations, members of Congress and the White House, including First Lady Michelle Obama, and Dr. Jill Biden, have worked to highlight the unique military family lifestyle. This mission to encourage the civilian community to reach out to military families appears to have already had a measurable impact. An apparent increase in focus on the stressors of military families and the resulting survey reports of a perceived increased feeling of understanding from the civilian community is very encouraging.

This perception is important in many ways. For example, a recent study by the Strategic Studies Institute aimed at examining the effects of multiple deployments on children, showed that the best predictors of an adolescent's overall ability to cope with a life of deployments are a strong non-deployed parent, the child's belief that America supports the war, a strong family, and the adolescent's belief that the deployed service member is making a difference. Of note, the strongest of these predictors is the child's perception that their deployed parent is making a difference.

Blue Star Families hopes this report prompts more dialogue about the experiences of military families during this increased operational tempo for our nation's service members, and by extension, their families. To better support our nation's military families, we need policies that adapt to their changing needs and a strengthening of the networks, both military and civilian, that support them in order to make the military lifestyle not only sustainable, but also desirable.

## METHODOLOGY

The 2010 Military Family Lifestyle Survey was designed by **Blue Star Families** with extensive inputs from military family members, practitioners, advocates, and policymakers who work with military families. This survey is intended to facilitate a better understanding of military families' experiences so that communities and policymakers can better serve their unique needs, thereby making military service more sustainable.

The survey was administered online, using a self-selected, convenience sample. Of the 3,634 military family members that started the survey, seventy-nine percent (2,891) completed the entire questionnaire. The survey was available from May 1, 2010 to June 15, 2010.

**Blue Star Families** worked with more than fifteen notable organizations that helped to distribute the survey through their own readership and membership. A possible bias, introduced through this method of sampling, is over or under representation, which means that this sample cannot be considered a comprehensive representation of the entire military family population. However, our breakdown of the active duty force, age, and geographical location are comparable to actual representation of our military community according to the DoD's 2008 Demographic Report.

Many sections of this survey, specifically the sections on children's deployment experiences, military child education, the Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA) schools, spousal relationship and deployment stress, traumatic brain injury and post-traumatic stress disorder, spouse employment and Military Spouse Career Advancement Accounts (MyCAA), were only available to spouse respondents. Questions on top three military life issues and services to military families were available only for military spouse, military children and service member self-respondents. All other questions on the survey were available to all survey respondents, including those that identified as parents and siblings of service members.

It should be noted that the majority of questions on the survey were optional, allowing respondents the choice to skip any question that they were uncomfortable with or that did not apply to them. Therefore, the actual number of responses per question varies throughout the survey.

**The Military Child Education Coalition** assisted Blue Star Families in analysis for certain portions of the survey relating to military children.

*Comments or suggestions may be directed to the Blue Star Families Research Team:*

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