



**BLUE STAR  
FAMILIES**

**MILITARY  
FAMILY  
LIFESTYLE  
SURVEY**

# **2021 Military Family Lifestyle Survey Comprehensive Report**

## **Spotlight: National Guard and Reserve Families**

In collaboration with

**S** **Syracuse University**

**D'Aniello Institute for  
Veterans & Military Families**

JPMorgan Chase & Co., Founding Partner

Funding for the 2021 Military Family Lifestyle Survey is provided through the generosity of our presenting sponsor USAA and from supporting sponsors Lockheed Martin, CSX, CVS Health, AARP, Starbucks, BAE Systems, Northrop Grumman, Walmart Foundation, Verizon, The Barry Robinson Center, and the USO.



## National Guard and Reserve family respondents report high levels of deployment activities in the last year; many report they would recommend military service to young men and women.

National Guard and Reserve service members and their families note experiences and challenges that differ both from each other and from those of their active-duty peers in many ways. For example, these families usually do not experience frequent relocations, and therefore may have access to a more stable social network than active-duty families. However, they do not typically live near a military installation, and therefore may not have the same access to military resources. The disparate sample sizes of active-duty, National Guard, and Reserve respondents to the survey limit the ability to compare them directly, but this spotlight profiles these two important groups.

### National Guard Family Respondents

Total number of respondents = 287

**32%** Service member (n=93)

**68%** Spouse of service member (n=194)

**20%** Male **80%** Female

Mean age = 39

#### Race/Ethnicity<sup>a</sup>

<b>75%</b> White	<b>3%</b> Other
<b>13%</b> Hispanic/Latino/a/x	<b>2%</b> American Indian/Alaska Native
<b>8%</b> Asian	<b>1%</b> Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander
<b>6%</b> Black/African American	

**7%** identify as LGBTQ+

**23%** member of a multi-racial/multi-ethnic family<sup>b</sup>

**17%** use a language other than English in their home

**8%** U.S. citizen by naturalization

**9%** from a recently-immigrated family<sup>c</sup>

### Reserve Family Respondents

Total number of respondents = 252

**37%** Service member (n=92)

**64%** Spouse of service member (n=160)

Mean age = 40

**16%** Male **83%** Female

#### Race/Ethnicity<sup>a</sup>

<b>75%</b> White	<b>4%</b> Other
<b>13%</b> Hispanic/Latino/a/x	<b>3%</b> American Indian/Alaska Native
<b>8%</b> Black/African American	<b>1%</b> Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander
<b>6%</b> Asian	

**4%** identify as LGBTQ+

**27%** member of a multi-racial/multi-ethnic family<sup>b</sup>

**19%** use a language other than English in their home

**5%** U.S. citizen by naturalization

**12%** from a recently-immigrated family<sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Respondents were able to select all the race/ethnic groups they identify with; percentages will not total 100%.

<sup>b</sup>Those who responded "yes" to the question "Are you a member of a multi-racial/multi-ethnic family (e.g., do you have a spouse or child of a different race/ethnicity)?" Families who identify as multi-ethnic may have different experiences than families who identify as multi-racial.

<sup>c</sup>Those who responded "yes, one or both of my parents was born in another country and immigrated, but I am U.S.-born" or "yes, I was born in another country and immigrated to the U.S." to the question "Are you from a recently-immigrated family?"

Top Issues

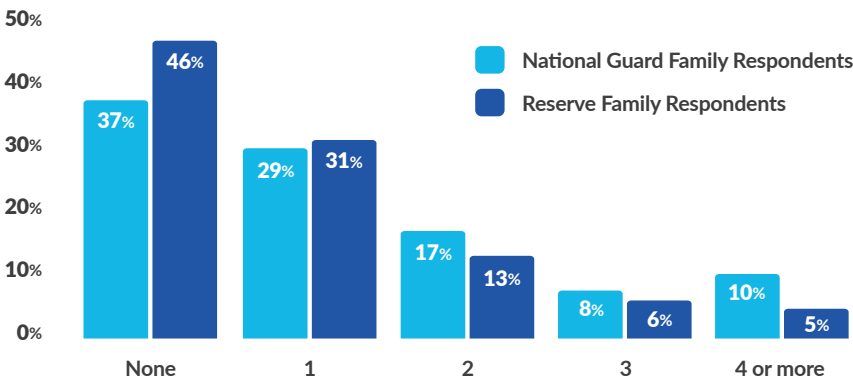
More than half of National Guard family respondents (55%) and 40% of Reserve family respondents report they or their service member were activated during survey fielding, from April to June 2021. The unprecedented activation and deployment of our Reserve Component<sup>1,2</sup> in 2020 and continuing into 2021 is reflected in the top two issues of concern for both National Guard and Reserve family respondents — “amount of time away from family as a result of military service” and “impact of deployment on family,” consistent with last year’s top issues for both groups.<sup>3</sup>

Table 1. Top 5 Issues National Guard and Reserve Family Respondents “Please select up to 5 military life issues that most concern you.”		
	National Guard Family Respondents (n=259)	Reserve Family Respondents (n=228)
Amount of time away from family	42%	41%
Impact of deployment on family	34%	34%
Military pay	25%	15%
Military benefits	25%	22%
Understanding of military/Veteran issues among civilians	23%	22%
Military spouse employment	13%	27%

Most (63% of National Guard family respondents and 54% of Reserve family respondents) had experienced at least one military-connected separation lasting a month or longer in the past 18 months. One-third of National Guard family respondents (34%) and nearly a quarter of Reserve family respondents (23%) had experienced two or more separations. While the number of separations in the past 18 months is often greater for National Guard and Reserve

Number of Separations from Service Member in the last 18 Months

National Guard and Reserve Family Respondents



“In the past 18 months, how many military-related separations longer than 1 month (deployment, TDY, training, work-ups, etc.) has your family experienced?”

(59%) and Reserve family respondents (56%) characterize the OPTEMPO (daily workload, deployment load, and training load) the service member has experienced since January 1st, 2020, as “stressful” or “very stressful” for a healthy work/family life. However, many National Guard and Reserve family respondents report they are likely to recommend service to a young man or a young woman, indicating they are probably satisfied with the Reserve Component lifestyle. That said, there are National Guard and Reserve family respondents who are discontented with military or command leadership.<sup>4,5</sup> Following “military retirement” (59%), the most common reason National Guard family respondents would

families, they spent nearly as much total time separated as their active-duty family counterparts. Nearly a third of both National Guard (30%) and Reserve (28%) family respondents had been separated from their service member for six or more total months in the past 18 months, similar to their active-duty family peers (31%). These activations may be ongoing or continue into the future; given the fact that since survey fielding took place from April-June 2021, the COVID-19 pandemic persists with new health care challenges and other national crises continue to emerge.

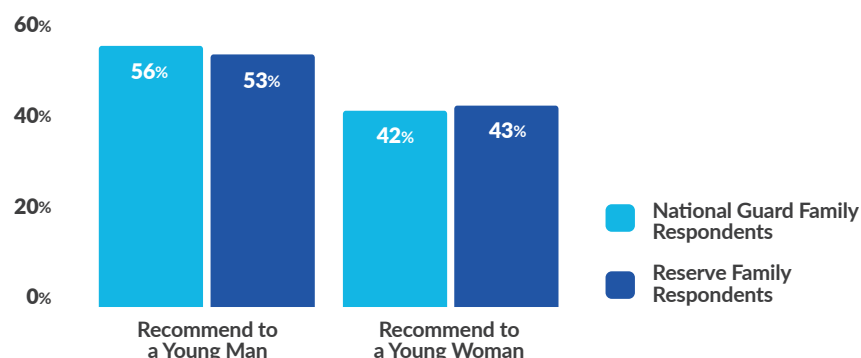
The majority of both National Guard





## Likely to Recommend a Young Man or Young Woman Join the Military

National Guard and Reserve Family Respondents



"How likely are you to recommend a [young woman] or [young man] close to you to join the military?"

service members, 82% of Reserve service members) and their civilian job (70% of National Guard service members, 82% of Reserve service members). Despite their overall satisfaction, one area that lags behind in satisfaction is career advancement opportunities, aligning with the 2020 Military Family Lifestyle Survey in which many Reserve and National Guard respondents reported they had experienced negative employment repercussions (including missing training or promotion opportunities)<sup>d</sup> after a deployment or activation.<sup>7</sup> A much lower proportion — only 50% of Reserve service members and 46% of National Guard service members — are satisfied with the career advancement opportunities that their civilian employer offers. Four in 10 Reserve service members (39%) and National Guard service members (42%) are likely or very likely to look for a job outside their current organization within the next 12 months, most commonly for higher pay, better fit for skills and abilities, better benefits, and job satisfaction.

choose to leave the military is "loss of faith or trust in unit/command leadership" (26%), compared to 19% of Reserve family respondents.

## Civilian Employment

Most National Guard (89%, n=56) and Reserve (75%, n=64) service member respondents are employed full- or part-time in addition to their military service. Although this survey was fielded during "the Great Resignation,"<sup>6</sup> the majority of National Guard and Reserve service member respondents are satisfied with both their civilian employer (74% of National Guard

## Resources and Military Family Quality of Life



A common concern for National Guard and Reserve family respondents is the limited support and resources available to them due to their distance from military installations. While the top

resources needed for National Guard and Reserve family respondents are the same as active-duty family respondents (See Resources Finding), National Guard and Reserve families often have the additional challenge of not being co-located with military-focused resources. The shift to virtual service provision as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic may have alleviated some of these access issues, but many services may remain unavailable for those not in close proximity to a military installation.

"I am an out of townervist. My family stays behind when I go to work in uniform and have zero support from any military resources. **We rely on family and friends to help when I'm away.** We try to keep the kids' schedules stable regardless of who is caring for them."

Air Force Reserve Service Member

<sup>d</sup>Negative repercussions after a deployment or activation could have occurred at any point in their military service, so they may not have occurred with their current or most recent employer.



## Caregiving Among National Guard and Reserve Families

One in 5 National Guard and 1 in 4 Reserve family respondents identify as an unpaid caregiver. Of those, a greater proportion, more than 4 in 10 are caring for a parent or grandparent (40% of Reserve and 44% of National Guard family respondents). Managing care provision for a loved one may be complicated during deployment or activation, requiring greater support for these caregiving families.



---

---

**20%** of National Guard family respondents and **25%** of Reserve family respondents **identify as an unpaid caregiver.**

---

---

## Limitations

Disparate sample sizes and demographic differences between active-duty and National Guard or Reserve family respondents limit comparisons that can be made between the two groups. Furthermore, “family respondents” refers to a combined sample of service member and spouse respondents, and service member respondents and spouse respondents may have differing perspectives. Sample sizes of exclusively National Guard and Reserve service members are small, and while their responses provide some insight into their civilian employment concerns, samples cannot be considered representative of all National Guard and Reserve service members. Finally, the 2021 Military Family Lifestyle Survey was fielded between April and June 2021, during a timeframe when many respondents (and the general American public) may have had a hopeful perspective on the trajectory of COVID-19 as vaccines were becoming widely available and new infection caseloads fell.<sup>8</sup> These perspectives may have shifted since survey fielding, as the COVID-19 pandemic is evolving and ongoing.



## Recommendations

\*More information in Recommendations Chapter of Comprehensive Report



### Military (DoD)

- Ensure provision of universally accessible military-sponsored support (i.e., Soldier and Family Readiness Group, Family Readiness Program, Key Spouse Program, Ombudsman Program) for National Guard and Reserve families.
- Diversify bi-directional communication methods that National Guard and Reserve commands use when connecting with the families in their unit, especially regarding information about eligibility for, and access to, available resources and services.\*
- Identify what caregiving, childcare, and other resources and support exist for National Guard and Reserve families in communities where they are drilling or performing military duties.
- Educate National Guard and Reserve families on available resources, their eligibility, and how to access them.
- Address concerns identified in command climate surveys. Focus on clear, consistent, and constant communication with National Guard and Reserve families.



### Community

- Ensure local Veteran- and military-serving organizations are aware of and can connect National Guard and Reserve families to local, available resources.



### Congress

- Commission a report on the impact of activation and deployment on civilian career progression of National Guard and Reserve members.

## Acknowledgments

Blue Star Families' Applied Research team would like to thank the National Guard Bureau for their insight and review of this finding.



- 1 Siripurapu, A. (2021, January 15). What is the US National Guard? Council on Foreign Relations. <https://www.cfr.org/background/unique-military-force-us-national-guard>
- 2 Winkie, D. (2020, December 13). 2020 saw the Guard used the most since World War II. Is a retention crisis looming? Army Times. <https://www.armytimes.com/home/left-column/2020/12/13/2020-saw-the-guard-used-the-most-since-world-war-ii-is-a-retention-crisis-looming/>
- 3 Blue Star Families. (2021). 2020 Military Family Lifestyle Survey Comprehensive Report. [https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/BSF\\_MFLS\\_CompReport\\_FULL.pdf](https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/BSF_MFLS_CompReport_FULL.pdf)
- 4 Wagner, D. (2021, November 25). National Guard scandals in these 13 states raise questions about culture and accountability. USA Today. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2021/11/25/national-guard-scandals-by-state/6093566001/>
- 5 Wagner, D. (2021, November 19). Despite decades of corrupt conduct, state National Guards have resisted reforms. Can they be fixed? USA Today. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2021/11/19/national-guard-despite-decade-corrupt-conduct-racist-hazing-sexual-harassment/8277029002/?gnt-cfr=1>
- 6 Rosalsky, G. (2021, October 19). Why are so many Americans quitting their jobs? NPR Planet Money. <https://www.npr.org/sections/money/2021/10/19/1047032996/why-are-so-many-americans-quitting-their-jobs>
- 7 Blue Star Families. (2021). 2020 Military Family Lifestyle Survey Comprehensive Report. [https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/BSF\\_MFLS\\_CompReport\\_FINDING\\_5.pdf](https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/BSF_MFLS_CompReport_FINDING_5.pdf)
- 8 Brenan, M. (2021, November 3). Americans More Optimistic About Pandemic's Trajectory. Gallup News. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/356921/americans-optimistic-pandemic-trajectory.aspx>