

# HIRING OUR HEROES

U.S. CHAMBER OF COMMERCE  
FOUNDATION

## Military Spouses in the Workplace

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The impact of employment, unemployment, and underemployment  
on the mental health and wellbeing of today's military spouses

# 2020



Office of Rep. David Nelson



# PROJECT PARTNERS

## HIRING OUR HEROES

U.S. CHAMBER OF COMMERCE FOUNDATION

**Hiring Our Heroes (HOH)**, a program of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation, launched in March 2011 as a nationwide initiative to help veterans, transitioning service members, and military spouses find meaningful employment opportunities. Working with the U.S. Chamber of Commerce's vast network of state and local chambers and strategic partners from the public and private sectors, our goal is to connect America's veteran and military spouse talent with businesses of all sizes across the country.



**Syracuse University's Institute for Veterans and Military Families (IVMF)** is the first national institute in higher education singularly focused on advancing the lives of the nation's military, veterans, and their families. Through its professional staff and experts, and with the support of founding partner JPMorgan Chase Co., the IVMF delivers leading programs in career and entrepreneurship education and training, while also conducting actionable research, policy analysis, and program evaluations. The IVMF also supports veterans and their families, once they transition back into civilian life, as they navigate the maze of social services in their communities, enhancing access to this care working side-by-side with local providers across the country. The Institute is committed to advancing the post-service lives of those who have served in America's armed forces and their families.



**STARBUCKS®**

**Starbucks** recognizes that mental health needs are diverse, and in fact the mental health crisis is incredibly complex, with 1 in 5 adults experiencing some form of mental illness each year. Our partners (employees) and customers experience it firsthand every day – in their personal lives, in their stores, and in the neighborhoods we serve. In response to the reality of mental health needs and the clear ask of our partners, Starbucks laid out our commitment by declaring that at Starbucks, mental health matters. As a company, we aim to take a stand, help break the stigma around mental health, and provide even more partners and their families with the support they need.

## **AUTHORS**

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## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

HOH deeply appreciates our partnership with Starbucks and for the generous financial contributions from the Starbucks Foundation for this research. HOH also extend our gratitude to the following partner organizations for collaborating on our outreach efforts to reach a diverse military and veteran spouse sample:

**Armed Services YMCA**

**Association of Military Spouse Entrepreneurs**

**Blue Star Families**

**InDependent**

**Military Family Advisory Network**

**Military Officers Association of America**

**Military Spouse Advisory Network**

**MilSpouseFest**

**Modern Military Association of America**

**National Military Family Association**

**PsychArmor Institute**

**Team Red, White & Blue**

# Foreword

Starbucks has long recognized the value of our veterans, military spouses and active duty service members which comes to life in the important role they play in our communities as some of our most engaged citizens. We stand by our belief that Veterans and Military Spouses make our company better and communities stronger.

Our military commitment began in 2013 as we recognized that we could do more to support the military community and the severe levels of unemployment and underemployment in the U.S. We committed to hiring 25,000 veterans and military spouses by 2025 in partnership with Hiring Our Heroes and other military service organizations, and we reached that goal six years early. Now, with more than 30,000 veterans and military spouses that have worn the green apron at Starbucks, we continue honoring our commitment by hiring 5,000 veterans and military spouses each year, dedicating 68 Military Family Stores near military bases and offering specific partner benefits for our veterans and military spouses.

As we look toward building on our commitment to support the current needs of the military community, the focus of our efforts has evolved to their mental health and wellbeing. Part of our mental health initiative is focused on breaking the stigma around mental health through partnerships with key organizations like Hiring Our Heroes to promote research, advocacy and awareness.

We are proud to partner with Hiring Our Heroes in the development of this study that brings to light the unique challenges our military spouses face. We know this important research will guide HOH's future programs and resources and will inform critical campaigns to raise awareness on how we can better support the mental health and wellbeing of our military community.

*Virginia Tenpenny*

**Virginia Tenpenny**

*Vice President, Global Social Impact at Starbucks*



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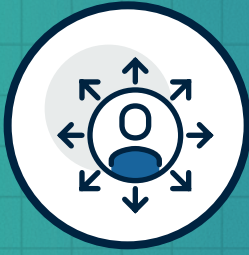


# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This project, by Hiring Our Heroes (HOH), in collaboration with the Institute for Veterans and Military Families (IVMF) at Syracuse University and in partnership with Starbucks and the support of the Starbucks Foundation, uses the results from an online survey to cultivate a holistic understanding of the military spouse employment experience. Drawing insight from over 3,300 military spouses, this report identifies how employment, unemployment, and underemployment impact military spouse mental health and wellbeing. The unique timing of this survey's fielding also allows for the collection of data on the impact of the global pandemic COVID-19 on military spouse employment.

The results from this survey suggest that obtaining and maintaining meaningful employment promotes positive mental health and emotional wellbeing outcomes for military spouses. However, with military spouses chronically experiencing unemployment and underemployment, even long before the COVID-19 pandemic, meaningful employment has not been easily attainable for many of them. To aid in meeting more positive outcomes, this report provides actionable recommendations for community providers, nonprofits, employers, and government organizations to help tackle some of the most pressing needs. Together, the nation can improve the mental health and wellbeing of military spouses, an essential component in strengthening the readiness of the All-Volunteer Force and in retaining talented service members and their spouses.

# Key Findings Overview



Employment positively  
impacts wellbeing



Duration of unemployment  
affects wellbeing



Employed respondents  
report higher aspects of  
self-esteem and flourishing



The type of employment  
matters



Employment enhances  
family relationships and  
quality of life



Maintaining steady  
employment is difficult

# Key Findings



**Employment positively impacts wellbeing.** Gaining a sense of purpose and having a positive impact on wellbeing were the most common ways employment affected military spouse respondents. They also cited that employment promoted confidence and pride and gave respondents an opportunity to feel valued by themselves and others. Furthermore, those who were employed tended to report a distinctly higher level of agreement to the statement, “I lead a purposeful and meaningful life” than those who were unemployed.



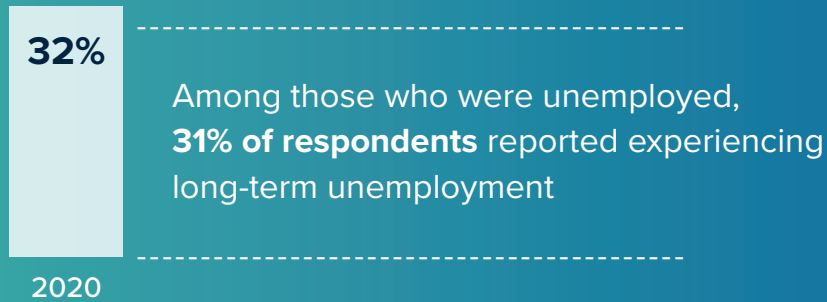
**Employed respondents report higher aspects of self-esteem and flourishing.** The ability to hold employment allowed respondents to reclaim their sense of self and be more than a spouse or parent. Respondents who were employed also tended to report higher levels of agreement with aspects of self-esteem and aspects related to flourishing (i.e. “I am engaged and interested in my daily activities,” “I am optimistic about my future,” and “people respect me”) in comparison to those who were unemployed.



**Employment enhances family relationships and quality of life.** Earning a paycheck gave respondents financial independence, the ability to financially contribute to their families, and improved their quality of life. Having a second income allowed respondents to plan for longer-term financial goals and gave them a sense of security. Furthermore, employment created equality in respondents’ marriages and the ability to serve as a positive role model to their children.



## Percentage of Unemployed Military Spouses



**Duration of unemployment affects wellbeing.** Thirty-two percent of respondents in the labor force were unemployed, a ten-percent increase from the 22% the Department of Defense reported in 2020<sup>1</sup> and three times the current national unemployment rate of 10%.<sup>2</sup> Among those who were unemployed, 31% of respondents reported experiencing long-term unemployment, which was three times higher than the civilian long-term unemployment rate.<sup>3</sup> Respondents tended to report negative impacts to aspects of their self-esteem the longer they were unemployed.



**The type of employment matters.** Many respondents made an important distinction between finding employment and finding meaningful employment. They frequently cited that meaningful employment allowed them to feel independent, satisfied, and that they had opportunities to grow. However, when they were underemployed, this tended to negatively affect aspects of their self-esteem.



**Maintaining steady employment is difficult.** Some respondents expressed frustration with having to “start over” with each new location and others indicated that the demands of the military sapped them of logistical support from their service member, adding to their difficulties in balancing employment with caregiving. For a few others, a new job appeared to draw into sharp focus the cumulative impact of multiple relocations or chronic underemployment.

1 Defense Manpower Data Center Office of People Analytics. (2020). The 2019 Survey of Active Duty Spouses. Office of People Analytics. [https://download.militaryonesource.mil/12038/MOS/Surveys/ADSS1901\\_MOS-Briefing-508-Revised.pdf](https://download.militaryonesource.mil/12038/MOS/Surveys/ADSS1901_MOS-Briefing-508-Revised.pdf)  
2 Bureau of Labor Statistics. U.S. Department of Labor. (2020). Employment Situation Summary Table A. Household Data, Seasonally Adjusted. <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/empstat.a.htm>  
3 Bureau of Labor Statistics. U.S. Department of Labor. (2020). Employment Situation Summary Table A. Household Data, Seasonally Adjusted. <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/empstat.a.htm>

# Recommendations

## Community Provider and Nonprofit Support

- **Improve access** to mental health care services
- **Audit and refine services** to better meet military spouse needs
- **Increase opportunities** for military spouses to build connections through peer support and professional networks

## Employer Support

- **Destigmatize mental health** and wellbeing in the workplace
- **Educate leaders** to be attuned to mental health symptoms
- **Make wellbeing a priority** within workplace culture
- **Increase opportunities** for military spouses to grow and advance professionally
- **Encourage employers** to actively cultivate empathy for the military spouse experience
- **Form Military Spouse Affinity Groups** connecting military spouses with others who understand their experiences

## Government Support

- **Improve access** to mental health care including TRICARE refinements
- **Reduce frequency** of relocations as able
- **Increase government** employment opportunities for military spouses





# INTRODUCTION & PROJECT OVERVIEW

Military spouse unemployment, and more recently underemployment, are long standing concerns within the military community. Most of the understanding around this issue is typically on the economic impact and the impact to national security. There is less awareness and understanding on the impact of employment on the mental health and emotional wellbeing of military spouses. Existing research not specific to military spouses, reports a strong linkage between employment, specifically unemployment and underemployment, and mental health and wellbeing. The implications from these studies suggest that if individuals do not receive support for their mental health and wellbeing during their employment journey, regardless of employment status, there can be major health and employment-related effects.

As military spouses face chronic unemployment and underemployment, and experience new and increasing challenges as a result of COVID-19 (a global pandemic which has resulted in a decrease in income and/or job loss), it's especially important to track how employment is impacting today's military spouses' mental health and emotional wellbeing. Equally important is how the nation can work together to better support military families and their quality of life.

The *Military Spouse Employment and Wellbeing Survey* by HOH, in collaboration with the IVMF at Syracuse University and with support from Starbucks, **draws insights from the responses of 3,358 military spouses**. This report details these survey results and:

1. Identifies how employment, unemployment, and underemployment impact military spouses' mental health and wellbeing
2. Provides actionable recommendations for community providers and nonprofits, employers, and government to best support military spouse employment and wellbeing

# Survey Methodology

**This section describes the data collection process and methodology that underpin this report. This research used a predominantly quantitative approach by conducting an online survey of military spouses, however qualitative data was also collected through open-ended questions within the survey instrument.**

This was the first iteration of this research project and results were based on responses to an online survey of 3,358 military spouses conducted between June 22 and July 10, 2020. Of the 3,358 individual responses, 1,505 completed the survey yielding a 45% completion rate. For the purpose of this survey, a military spouse was defined as a person who was currently married to an active duty service member, reservist, National Guard member, or a retired or recently separated (within the last three years) veteran.

The survey instrument was designed in collaboration with the IVMF at Syracuse University and received approval from the Syracuse University Institutional Review Board (IRB). In total, the survey included 43 items/questions, 12 of which were demographic questions and 6 of which were open-ended questions for qualitative analysis. Among the quantitative questions, select standardized, scientifically validated instruments were used to enable future comparison with other populations. Examples of these instruments included the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale,<sup>4</sup> the Patient Health Questionnaire-4 (PHQ-4), the 4-item Perceived Stress Scale,<sup>5</sup> and select items from the Flourishing Scale.<sup>6</sup>

This survey was administered using Qualtrics survey software. Participation in the survey was voluntary and responses remained confidential. Some questions found within this survey were only available to specific respondents based on a survey branching technique for specific follow on questions. Except for two questions necessary for eligibility and branching purposes, all remaining questions allowed respondents to select “prefer not to answer” or skip questions altogether and were excluded from calculations. Therefore, the actual number of responses analyzed per question varied throughout the survey.

4 Rosenberg. (1965). Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale. <https://www.yorku.ca/rokada/psyctest/rosenbrg.pdf>

5 Cohen, S., Kamarck, T., and Mermelstein, R. (1983). A Global Measure of Perceived Stress. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 24, 386-396.

6 Diener, E., Wirtz, D., Tov, W., Kim-Prieto, C., Choi, D., Oishi, S., & Biswas-Diener, R. (2009). New Measures of Well-Being: Flourishing and Positive and Negative Feelings. *Social Indicators Research*, 39, 247-266.





Data reflected within this report was analyzed primarily using quantitative descriptive research methodology and presented in the aggregate form. Some advanced quantitative data analysis was conducted to understand certain relationships between variables and provide further depth to findings. Content analysis methodology was used to identify key themes from the open-ended questions. Quotes from the open-ended questions were selected to support themes and quantitative findings and are reflected throughout the report.

Survey recruiting was done through social media and direct solicitation via e-mail using Hiring Our Heroes' international networks. Targeted advertisements on LinkedIn and Instagram were used throughout the fielding period to target military spouses across age ranges. Military spouses were also informed about the survey if they attended any Hiring Our Heroes Military Spouse Program events during the time of the fielding. To extend the survey's reach past those already familiar with Hiring Our Heroes, military and veteran service organizations with a military spouse stakeholder base were asked to partner by distributing the survey to their own communities. Twelve organizations shared social media posts across Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and Instagram. A \$200 Amazon gift card was offered through a lottery as an incentive to promote military spouses taking the survey.

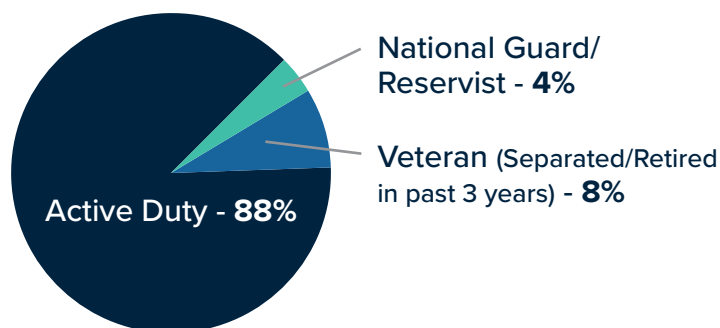
Due to possible sampling bias (e.g. most respondents were active duty military spouses) and survey instrument design limitations, respondents might over- or under-represent the broader military spouse population. For this reason, these survey results are not meant to represent the wider population of military spouses and are not to be generalized to describe every military spouse's experience. In addition, some of the results within this report may be related to the onset and impacts of COVID-19 (i.e. increasing stress felt by Americans; later than usual relocations due to military orders).

# Demographics of the Sample

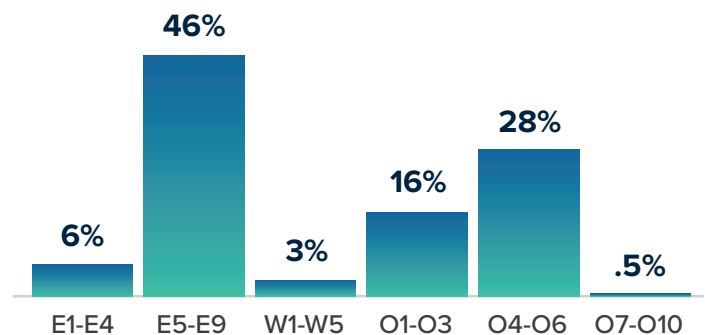
The survey asked several questions to determine how respondents are affiliated with the military.

The vast majority (88%) were married to active duty service members, with 4% married to reservists or National Guard members, and 8% married to veterans who retired or separated from the military within the past three years. More than half of respondents were married to enlisted personnel (52%) and 45% were married to an officer (3% to a Warrant Officer).

**Status of Service Member**

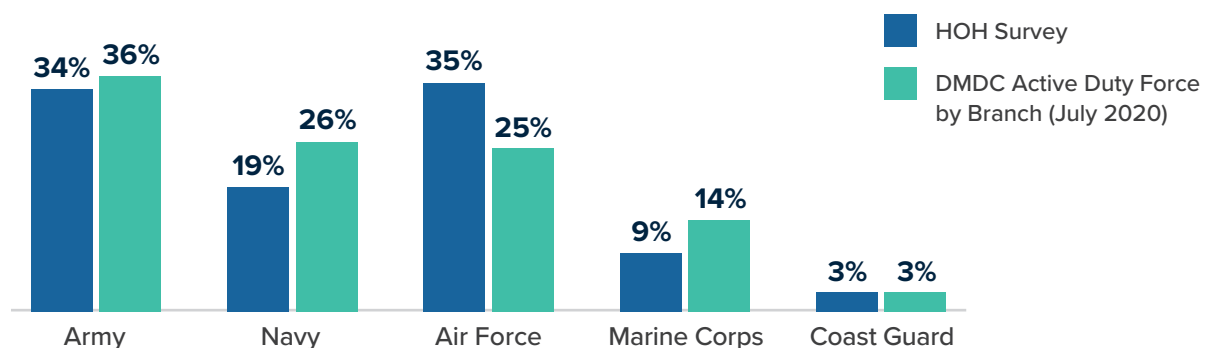


**Pay Grade**



Most respondents were affiliated with the Air Force (35%) followed by Army (34%), Navy (19%), Marine Corps (9%), and the Coast Guard (3%). Apart from the Coast Guard, all service branches represent at rates that range between two percentage points to ten percentage points of the total active duty force according to the Defense Manpower Data Center (July 2020).<sup>7</sup>

**Branch of Service**

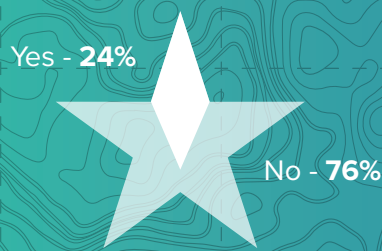


<sup>7</sup> Defense Manpower Data Center. (n.d.). Active Duty Military Personnel by Service by Rank/Grade - July 2020. <https://www.dmdc.osd.mil/appj/dwp/rest/download?fileName=rg2007.pdf&groupName=milRankGrade>

About 95% of respondents lived within the United States or a territory of the United States at the time of this survey fielding. Five percent of respondents lived outside of the country. Within the United States, the greatest percentage of respondents lived in Texas (13%), Florida (11%), Virginia (8%), California (7%), and North Carolina (6%). Twenty-four percent lived in military housing provided on a military installation and 76% lived in non-military housing, off-installation.

### Live on Installation

(Includes both in USA & outside of USA)

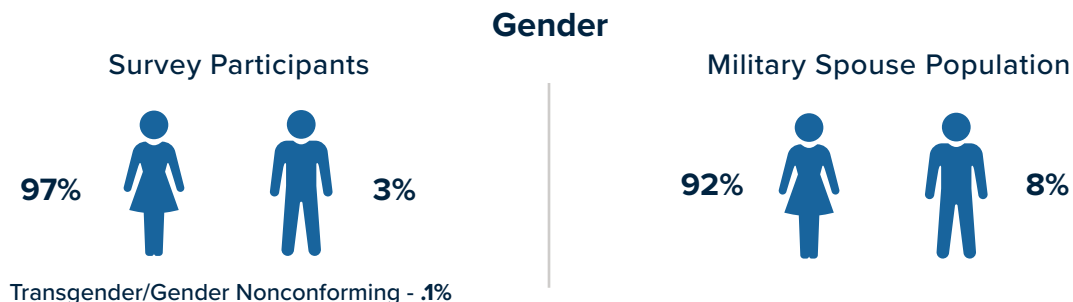


### Country of Residence



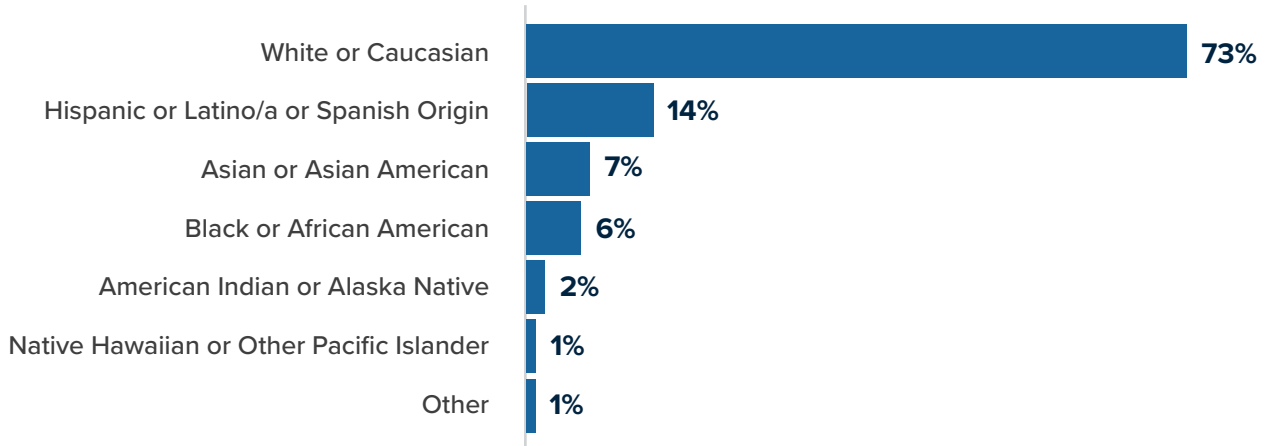
## ➔ Military Spouse Population

Virtually all of the military spouses sampled - 97% - were female. This was slightly higher than the military spouse population, which is 92% female.<sup>8</sup> Less than one percent of spouses identified as transgender/gender non-confirming. The mean age of respondents was 36 years old with the youngest respondent was 18 years old and the oldest respondent was 64 years old. Approximately three in four respondents were college-educated: 38% had a bachelor's degree and 38% had a graduate or professional degree. Seventy-three percent of respondents described themselves as Caucasian or White, 14% as Hispanic or Latino/a, or Spanish Origin, 7% as Asian or Asian American, 6% as African American or Black, 2% as American Indian or Alaska Native, and 1% as Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander. Over 74% of respondents had at least one child.



<sup>8</sup> The Council of Economic Advisers. The Executive Office of the President. (May 2018). Military Spouses in the Labor Market. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Military-Spouses-in-the-Labor-Market.pdf>

## Race/Ethnicity

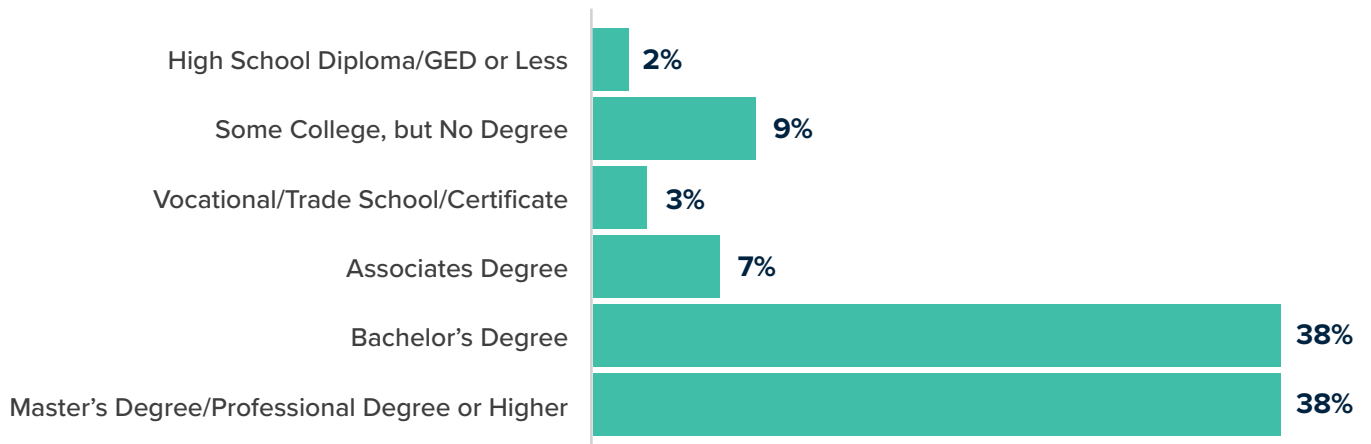


“

“Much of my identity comes from being employed and having my career. When I’m employed and in a steady job that truly utilizes my skills, my wellbeing is high. I feel like I bring value to my family and [I] am able to escape this (untrue) persona that dependents don’t work or they can’t keep jobs.”

- Army Spouse

## Education





## Employment Status

The majority of military spouse respondents from this survey reported participating in the labor force with only 17% indicating that they were not working and not actively seeking work. Among those in the labor force, 68% were either employed part-time or full-time.

### Underemployment

Of those who were employed part- or full-time, over half of employed respondents also reported experiencing at least one type of underemployment. For the purpose of this report, underemployment was measured using an expanded version of the Labor Utilization Framework which categorized underemployment by hours, by income, by skills, or by status.<sup>9</sup> Respondents most commonly cited they experienced underemployment “by status” or “by skills.”

### Common Types of Underemployment Experienced

Figure 1.0

<b>Underemployed by status:</b> I am employed in a position that does not match my educational background	<b>28%</b>
<b>Underemployed by skills:</b> I am employed in a position that does not match my skills or training	<b>21%</b>
<b>Underemployed by hours:</b> I am employed fewer than 35 hours but prefer full-time employment	<b>13%</b>
<b>Underemployed by income:</b> I am employed in a full-time position that does not provide a livable wage	<b>13%</b>
None	<b>49%</b>

\*Respondents were asked to select all that apply

9 Friedland, D.S. & Price, R.H. (2003). Underemployment: Consequences for the Health and Well-Being of Workers. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, (32)1-2. 33-45. [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/231585689\\_Underemployment\\_Consequences\\_for\\_the\\_Health\\_and\\_Well-Being\\_of\\_Workers/link/00b49534ee801bebd000000/download](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/231585689_Underemployment_Consequences_for_the_Health_and_Well-Being_of_Workers/link/00b49534ee801bebd000000/download)



**32% of respondents**

**in the labor force indicated they were unemployed**

## Unemployment

A staggering **32% of respondents in the labor force indicated they were unemployed** (not employed but actively sought work in the past four weeks, consisting of activities such as contacting employment opportunities, submitting resumes/filling out applications, etc.<sup>10</sup>). This is a ten-percent increase from the 22% reported by the DoD in 2020<sup>11</sup> and three times the national unemployment rate of 10%.<sup>12</sup> It is possible this increase was a result of COVID-19. This was further supported by two-thirds of respondents who indicated they had experienced employment challenges as a result of the pandemic. Of those who had experienced employment-related impacts as a result of COVID-19, 14% reported not being able to find work because of limited opportunities.

## Impacts of COVID-19 Related to Job Loss or Inability to Seek Employment

Figure 1.1

I am unable to find work because of limited opportunities	<b>14%</b>
I lost my job, have been laid off, or furloughed with no compensation/benefits	<b>8%</b>
I have not been able to apply or interview for jobs/internships	<b>8%</b>
My workplace/business closed	<b>4%</b>
I lost my job, have been laid off, or furlough with some compensation/benefits	<b>3%</b>

\*Respondents were asked to select all that apply

10 Bureau of Labor Statistics. U.S. Department of Labor. (2020). *Employment Situation Summary Table A. Household Data, Seasonally Adjusted*. <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/empsit.a.htm>.

11 Defense Manpower Data Center Office of People Analytics. (2020). The 2019 Survey of Active Duty Spouses. Office of People Analytics. [https://download.militaryonesource.mil/12038/MOS/Surveys/ADSS1901\\_MOS-Briefing-508-Revised.pdf](https://download.militaryonesource.mil/12038/MOS/Surveys/ADSS1901_MOS-Briefing-508-Revised.pdf)

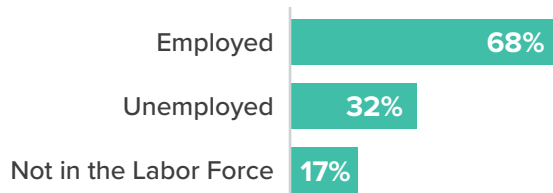
12 Bureau of Labor Statistics. U.S. Department of Labor. (2020). *Employment Situation Summary Table A. Household Data, Seasonally Adjusted*. <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/empsit.a.htm>.

# EMPLOYMENT & WELLBEING



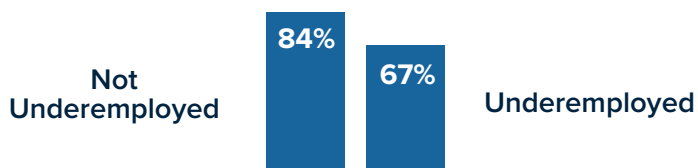
Military spouse respondents most cited employment had a positive impact on their wellbeing and gave them a sense of purpose. It also allowed for development of self, their family, and improved their quality of life. Yet, the pursuit for meaningful employment and maintaining it was challenging.

## Employment Status



## Type of Employment Matters

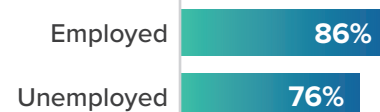
“On the whole I am satisfied with myself”



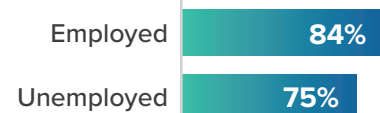
Military spouses felt independent, satisfied, and had opportunities to grow when meaningfully employed.

## Employment Positively Impacts Wellbeing

“I lead a purposeful and meaningful life”



“I am optimistic about my future”



## Duration of Unemployment



**31% of currently unemployed respondents** are long term unemployed (27 weeks or more)

## Major Reasons for Working

Financial/Benefits	
"You enjoy earning your own money"	74%
"You need the income"	48%
"To obtain benefits (i.e. health insurance, retirement benefits, etc.)"	15%
Social/Societal	
"You want to help people/society"	66%
"You enjoy the social aspects of working"	52%
"You feel societal pressure to work"	10%
Personal Growth	
"You want self-improvement and personal growth"	73%
"You enjoy the work you'd like to do/you are doing"	70%
"You want to utilize your education/skills"	68%
"You want to learn something new"	42%

## Employment Positively Impacts Wellbeing

The need for dual incomes is a norm for many Americans<sup>13</sup> and military families are no exception. In recent studies, military families reported two incomes as vitally important to the wellbeing of their families.<sup>14</sup> However, qualitative findings from this survey revealed that employment was more than a source for additional income. **When asked how being employed had impacted their wellbeing, respondents most cited it had positively impacted them and they had gained a sense of purpose from it.**



**"My career has been one of the most stabilizing forces in our military family's journey. Without question, it has positively impacted my own well-being and mental health. It's allowed me to maintain a sense of purpose and has often served as a much-needed lifeline, providing a sense of normalcy and familiarity with every curve ball military life throws at us."**

*- Marine Corps Spouse*

13 Fisher, J. & Johnson, N. (June 2019). The Two-Income Trap: Are Two-Earner Households More Financially Vulnerable? Center for Economic Studies. <https://www2.census.gov/ces/wp/2019/CES-WP-19-19.pdf>

14 U.S. Chamber of Commerce. (2017). Military spouses in the workplace. <https://www.uschamberfoundation.org/reports/military-spouses-workplace>





**Survey respondents said that being employed positively impacted them and they gained a sense of purpose from it.**

Existing psychological and public-health research echoed this strong association between unemployment, underemployment, and wellbeing. Studies suggested that a “typical reaction to unemployment is not only economic hardship but also a challenge to individuals’ wellbeing in the form of symptoms of anxiety and depression, low self-esteem and inability to enjoy life or to ‘flourish’.”<sup>15</sup>

The ability to *flourish* or thrive can be measured by one’s ability “to live within an optimal range of human functioning, one that connotes goodness, generativity, growth, and resilience.”<sup>16</sup> This is particularly important for military spouses because of the critical role they play in supporting their service member. One research study found that military spouses who were flourishing reported greater use of planning and positive reframing coping strategies than those who were languishing or depressed. This study further suggested that the ability for military spouses to successfully cope with the demands of the military lifestyle not only impacted their emotional and physical wellbeing but also their satisfaction with military life. Those who were able to cope well with the demands of military life were more supportive of their service member’s career and as a result, these service members were more committed to the military.<sup>17</sup> Simply put, when military spouses flourished, service members were more devoted to their military service.

15 Wood, A. “Unemployment and Well-Being”. (July 24, 2018). Wood A.J & Burchell B.J (2017) Unemployment in the 21st Century. In Lewis A (2018) Cambridge Handbook of Economics and Psychology 2nd Edition. Cambridge University Press. [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=3219324](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3219324)

16 Fredrickson, B. L., & Losada, M. F. (2005). Positive affect and the complex dynamics of human flourishing. *The American Psychologist*, 60(7). 678–686. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3126111/#R29>

17 Faulk, K.E., Gloria, C.T., & Steinhardt, M.A. (2013). Coping Profiles Characterize Individual Flourishing, Languishing, and Depression. *Anxiety, Stress & Coping*, 26(4). 378-390. <http://sites.edb.utexas.edu/uploads/sites/107/2016/11/Faulk-Gloria-Steinhardt-2013.pdf>

## ➡ Develops a Sense of Self

Compared to generations ago, the expectation that military spouses do not work and care for the household is, for the most part, a perception of the past. Yet, labels such as “dependent,” often presented in the context of service member’s pay and benefits, tend to fuel negative stereotypes of today’s military spouses. For these reasons, it’s unsurprising that respondents commonly expressed frustrations with such stereotypes and indicated **employment provided an opportunity to be more than a military spouse or parent**. The ability to hold employment allowed them to reclaim their sense of self and to exercise financial independence.

**Respondents commonly expressed frustrations with some stereotypes of military spouses and indicated that employment provided an opportunity to be more than a military spouse or parent.**



**The ability to hold employment allowed respondents to reclaim their sense of self and to exercise financial independence.**

This relationship between identity, or sense of self, and employment is believed to be strongly associated. For respondents, employment was cited as a source that promoted confidence and pride and gave them an opportunity to feel valued by others and themselves. This was also found when looking at the self-esteem related questions: “satisfaction with self,” “feelings that they are a person of worth,” and “taking a positive attitude towards self.” Those who were employed tended to report higher aspects of self-esteem compared to those who were unemployed.



**Employed Respondents Tended to Report Higher Aspects of Self-Esteem**

Figure 2.0

	Employed (Full-time & Part-time)	Unemployed
On the whole I am satisfied with myself	75%	66%
I feel that I’m a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others	87%	82%
I take a positive attitude toward myself	72%	68%

\*Percentages reflect those who agreed or strongly agreed with each survey question

“

**“Being employed as a military spouse builds confidence and a sense of purpose for me. Oftentimes, military spouses lose their sense of purpose as we follow our active duty spouses from duty station to duty station, constantly reinventing ourselves and finding our place in a new community...”**

*- Air Force Spouse*

More than confidence, pride, and value, the most cited way that employment impacted wellbeing was gaining a sense of purpose. Respondents highlighted this connection between employment and sense of purpose when looking at the question, “I lead a purposeful and meaningful life.” Eighty-six percent of those who were employed agreed or strongly agreed with that statement, compared with 76% of those who were unemployed.

Having a sense of purpose in life is an important human need. It is believed to be connected to several health benefits including serving as the cornerstone of happiness, optimal experiences, and a life well-lived.<sup>18</sup> Respondents who were employed were more likely to feel optimistic about their future (84%) than those who were unemployed (75%). Optimism is believed to be a common protective factor for mental health issues,<sup>19</sup> further suggesting that **employment plays such a crucial role when considering strategies to best support military spouses' overall mental health and wellbeing outcomes.**

### Employed Respondents Tended to Report Higher Aspects of Flourishing

Figure 2.1

	<b>Employed</b> (Full-time & Part-time)	<b>Unemployed</b>
I lead a purposeful and meaningful life	<b>86%</b> Full-time: 88% Part-time: 81%	<b>76%</b>
I am engaged and interested in my daily activities	<b>85%</b> Full-time: 87% Part-time: 82%	<b>75%</b>
<b>I am optimistic about my future</b>	<b>84%</b> Full-time: 85% Part-time: 82%	<b>75%</b>
People respect me	<b>88%</b> Full-time: 89% Part-time: 86%	<b>81%</b>

\*Percentages reflect those who agreed or strongly agreed with each survey question

18 Berns-Zare, I. (2019, June 4). The Importance of Having a Sense of Purpose. *Psychology Today*. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/flourish-and-thrive/201906/the-importance-having-sense-purpose>

19 The American Mental Wellness Association. (2020). Risks and Protective Factors. <https://www.americanmentalwellness.org/prevention/risk-and-protective-factors/>





Survey respondents said that earning a paycheck gave them:

- Financial independence
- The ability to financially contribute to their families
- Improved their quality of life

## ➔ Enhances Family Relationships & Quality of Life

For survey respondents, earning a paycheck represented something more than the concrete benefits of additional income. They indicated **earning a paycheck gave them financial independence, the ability to financially contribute to their families, and improved their quality of life.** This connection between working and financial independence was further represented when looking at the data on major reasons why respondents worked or wanted to work. Seventy-four percent reported they enjoyed earning their own money.

Perhaps tied to feeling valuable and a sense of purpose, when military spouses can earn their own paycheck, they may also find that this can enhance their family relationships. For example, respondents indicated a positive impact of employment was that it created equality in their marriages. Studies that examine the impact of working mothers found when partners are both employed, it enhanced mothers' ability to share the financial burdens of the family and increased common interests.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, respondents indicated a positive impact of employment was the ability to serve as a positive role model to their children. In one response, an Army Spouse said when she was working, she thoroughly enjoyed making money and showing her children that women can work. She did not want her children to feel women must stay home with children. Studies have found there are long-term benefits when a mother is employed such as more daughters joining the workforce and greater egalitarian gender attitudes between partners.<sup>21</sup>

Respondents also indicated having a second income allowed them to plan for longer-term financial goals and gave them a sense of security. This ability to build a financial safety net can help ease many of the burdens faced by military families given the unpredictability that often accompanies the lifestyle. It can also benefit military families in the longer-term when retiring from the workforce. When both partners have retirement savings to draw from, this can contribute to a greater quality of life.

20 Reynolds, T., Callender, C., & Edwards, R. (2003, July 25). The Impact of Mother's Employment on Family Relationships. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation. <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/impact-mothers-employment-family-relationships>

21 McGinn, K.L., Castro, M.R., & Lingo, E.L. (2018). Learning from Mum: Cross-National Evidence Linking Maternal Employment and Adult Children's Outcomes. *Work, Employment and Society*, (33)3. 374-400.



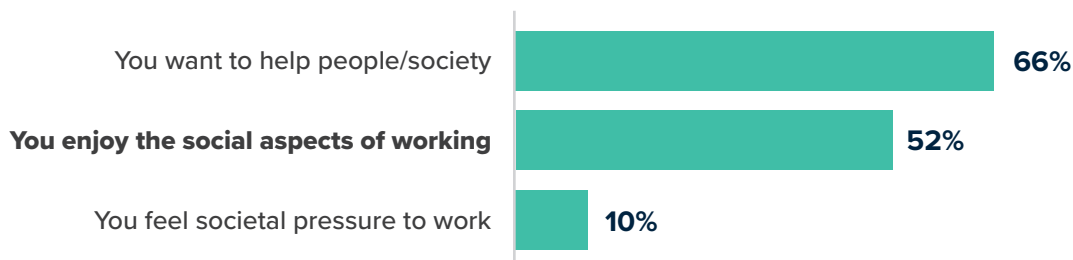
## ➡ Mechanism to Achieve Wellbeing

For some respondents, employment appeared to be a conduit, or pathway, to wellbeing. Employment was commonly cited to manage the stressors associated with life and more specifically, the stressors related to military life. For many respondents, employment served as “a reason to get out of bed in the morning” while for others it simply kept them busy or kept their mind off challenges at home. Employment provided a sense of normalcy and balance within the ever-changing landscape of the military lifestyle.

Respondents also associated employment with social benefits, specifically the ability to connect with their local communities. While it’s not clear whether respondents were referring to their local civilian or military community, because many respondents (76%) lived off-installation, it’s likely they were seeking connections within their civilian communities. Fifty-two percent of respondents selected “you enjoy social aspects of working” and 66% selected “you want to help people/society” as major reasons for working or wanting to work.

### Social/Societal Related Major Reasons for Working or Wanting Work

Figure 2.2



For military spouses, employment not only creates connections to other people but may help them build strong social capital, something that can often be difficult given the frequency at which their family may relocate. On the other hand, studies have found that an impact of unemployment is that it results in loss of connection to other people.<sup>22</sup> The ability to build connections and ultimately a sense of belonging is a deeply rooted human need. It's also one that is believed to be critical to seeing value in life and in coping with intensely painful emotions.<sup>23</sup> Employment is one-way military spouses can build vital social capital.

“

**“[...] if I don't work, I get very depressed. I don't feel like I have a reason to get out of bed. Work is a source of happiness in my life. It's my escape from [...] the uncertainty of military life. I can't imagine not working.”**

*- Navy Spouse*

22 Crabtree, S. (2014, June 9). In U.S., Depression Rates Higher for Long-Term Unemployed. Gallup. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/171044/depression-rates-higher-among-long-term-unemployed.aspx>

23 Hall, K. (2014, March 24). Creating a Sense of Belonging. *Psychology Today*. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/pieces-mind/201403/create-sense-belonging>



# Pursuing & Maintaining Employment is Challenging

Military spouses experience unemployment at much higher rates than their civilian counterparts and there are several factors that impact this. For example, studies found that if a spouse had experienced moves due to military orders (PCS moves), if they had children, and the length of time after a service member had returned from a deployment all contributed to higher odds of being unemployed than those who did not have these experiences. Other factors such as whether they had lived on or off-installation appeared to also play a factor.<sup>24</sup> As such, the pursuit of employment can be a long and challenging experience.

## Duration of Unemployment Affects Wellbeing

According to the DoD, the average length of unemployment among military spouses was 20 weeks.<sup>25</sup> Research not specific to military spouses showed that the effects of unemployment included financial stress, decreased physical health, and higher rates of depression the longer someone who was unemployed went without finding work.<sup>26</sup> Research also showed that people may experience a decrease in sense of wellbeing if they are still hunting for a job after 10 to 12 weeks.<sup>27</sup> To understand any trends related to duration of unemployment and its effects on military spouses' wellbeing, respondents who indicated they were employed were asked approximately how long they had actively sought work before obtaining their current employment.

24 Defense Manpower Data Center Office of People Analytics. (2018). The 2017 Survey of Active Duty Spouses. (DMDC Report No. 2018-006). Office of People Analytics. <https://download.militaryonesource.mil/12038/MOS/Surveys/Survey-Active-Duty-Spouses-2017-Overview-Briefing-MSO.pdf>

25 Defense Manpower Data Center Office of People Analytics. (2020). The 2019 Survey of Active Duty Spouses. Office of People Analytics. [https://download.militaryonesource.mil/12038/MOS/Surveys/ADSS1901\\_MOS-Briefing-508-Revised.pdf](https://download.militaryonesource.mil/12038/MOS/Surveys/ADSS1901_MOS-Briefing-508-Revised.pdf)

26 Crabtree, S. (2014, June 9). In U.S., Depression Rates Higher for Long-Term Unemployed. Gallup. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/171044/depression-rates-higher-among-long-term-unemployed.aspx>

27 Higgs, M.M. (2019, May 27). How to Deal with Job-Search Depression. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/27/smarter-living/how-to-deal-with-job-search-depression.html>



## Long-term Unemployment Rates



**This rate is 3x higher than the civilian long-term unemployment rate**

In addition, unemployed respondents were asked how long they had currently been actively seeking work. Among those employed, over half (56%) of respondents indicated they had been unemployed for 10 weeks or more before obtaining their current employment. Twenty percent reported experiencing long-term unemployment (unemployed for 27 weeks or longer). Even more concerning was the percent of respondents who indicated they were currently experiencing long-term unemployment. Among those who were unemployed, **31% of respondents reported experiencing long-term unemployment. This rate is three times higher than the civilian long-term unemployment rate.**<sup>28</sup>

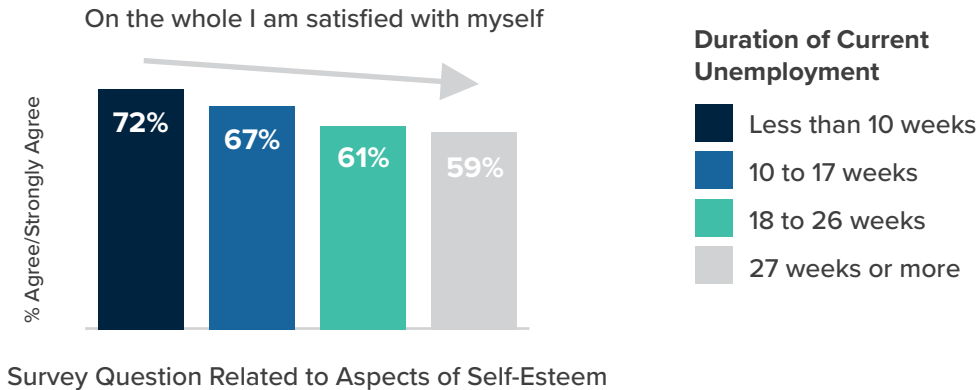
28 Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor. (2020). *Employment Situation Summary Table A. Household Data, Seasonally Adjusted*. <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/empst.a.htm>.



Respondents who were currently unemployed were asked questions related to aspects of self-esteem. Although over half of respondents tended to report high levels of satisfaction with themselves on the whole, their duration of unemployment was associated with a tendency to report less satisfaction with themselves.

**Duration of Unemployment Tended to Lower Feelings of Satisfaction with Self**

Figure 3.0



\*Percentages reflect those who agreed or strongly agreed with each survey question

Similar results were found when looking at other questions related to aspects of self-esteem such as, “I certainly feel useless at times”, and “all in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure”. In these circumstances, the longer respondents were unemployed, the greater they tended to agree with these statements.

Of note, there are some limitations in understanding the relationship between duration of unemployment and self-esteem due to small sample size. Therefore, more research is needed on this topic. Nevertheless, these findings suggest those who experienced unemployment for longer than 10 weeks appeared to see greater negative effects to aspects of their self-esteem.

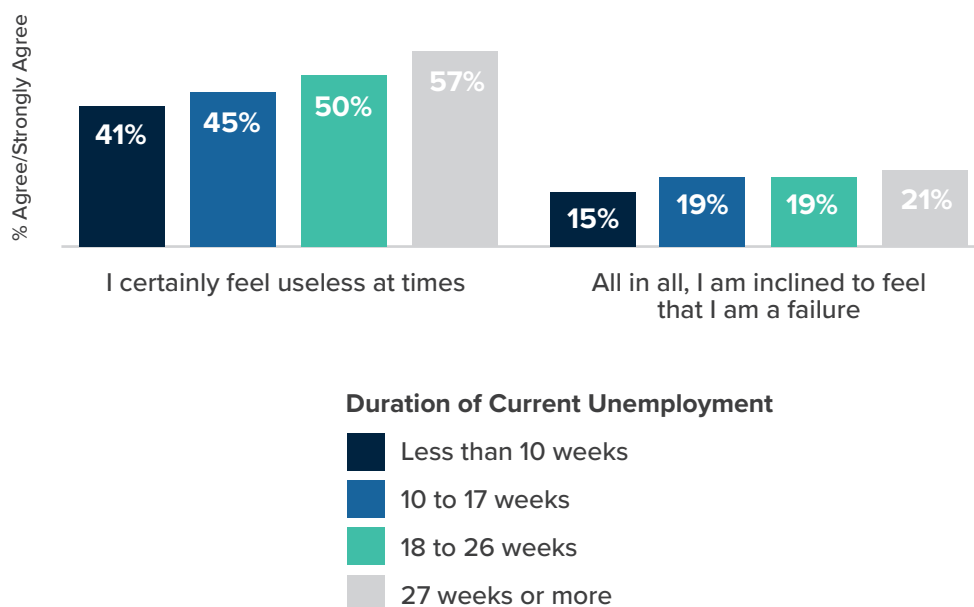


**As such, ensuring military spouses have access to resources and support around the 10-week mark of being unemployed may be key to keeping military spouses from experiencing a detrimental impact on their wellbeing.**



### Duration of Unemployment Tended to Effect Feelings of Uselessness and Inclination to Feel They Were a Failure

Figure 3.1





## Type of Employment Matters

Respondents made an important distinction between finding employment and finding meaningful employment. They frequently cited meaningful employment allowed them to feel independent, satisfied, and provided them with opportunities to grow. Additionally, reasons related to personal growth, financial independence, and helping society were commonly selected reasons for working or wanting to work.

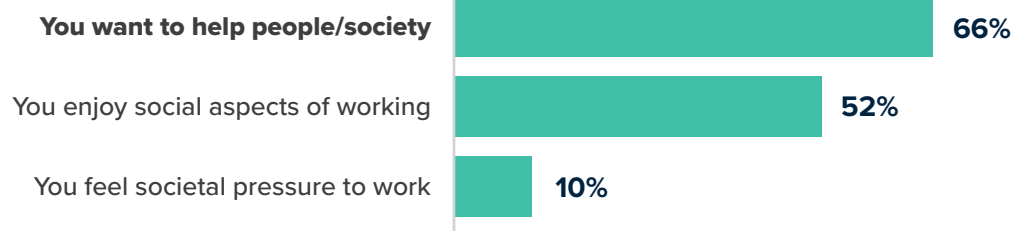
### Major Reasons for Working or Wanting to Work

Figure 3.2

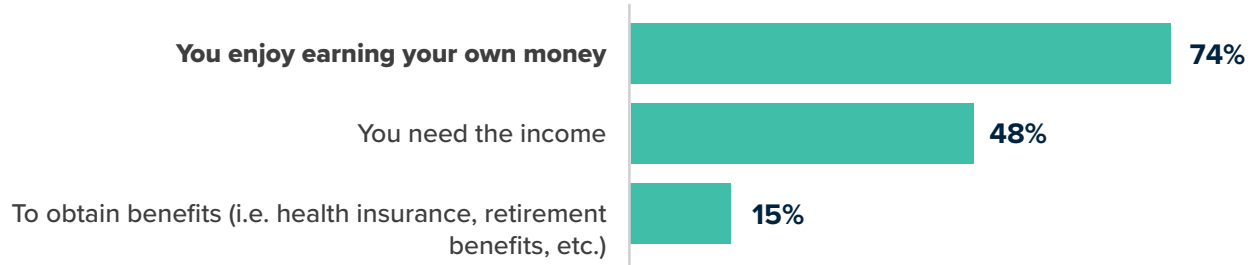
#### Personal Growth



#### Social/Societal



## Financial/Benefits



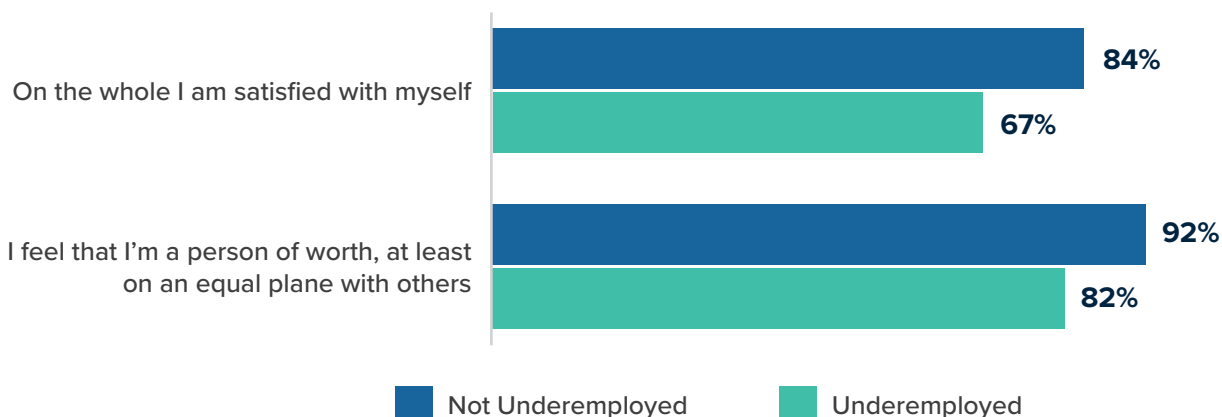
Respondents commonly cited employment enabled them to feel that they had found a “return on investment” for the hard work and money they had poured into their education, training, and efforts to maintain a career across multiple relocations. However, finding quality and meaningful work that feels like a “return on investment” may not always be possible and can lead to underemployment.

### Underemployment tended to impact aspects of respondents self-esteem.

For example, 84% of those who were not underemployed reported on the whole they were satisfied with themselves compared to 67% of respondents who were underemployed. Similarly, 92% of those who were not underemployed felt they were a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others compared to 82% of respondents who were underemployed.

### Underemployed Respondents Tended to Report Lower Aspects of Self-Esteem

Figure 3.3



\*Percentages reflect those who agreed or strongly agreed with each survey question



## ➡ **Maintaining Steady Employment is Difficult**

Respondents frequently reported challenges with navigating the logistics of maintaining steady employment. For some respondents, the difficulty of managing the competing priorities of employment and caring for families forced them to have to choose between one or the other. Quite a few respondents believed their work environment was overly stressful as well. Although these issues are not unique to military spouses, the military lifestyle exacerbates these situations. For example, some respondents highlighted the constant awareness that a military relocation was around the corner, which served as a barrier to being able to fully enjoy their employment. A new job also appeared to draw into sharp focus the cumulative impact of multiple relocations or chronic underemployment for a few respondents.

Some other respondents expressed frustration with having to “start over” with each new location. Others indicated that the demands of the military sap them of the logistical support that could be provided by their service member, adding to their difficulties in balancing employment with caregiving. For context, 62% of respondents had relocated at least three times due to military orders while married to their service member, and over a third had relocated five or more times due to military orders. Forty-five percent of respondents had relocated at least once within the past year.



These findings further suggest simply obtaining employment does not magically fix the mental health and emotional wellbeing challenges of those military spouses who were deeply impacted by their employment experiences. Supporting military spouses even after they have obtained employment is crucial. This is because researchers suggest the worse one's mental health is, the harder it can be to find a job.<sup>29</sup> Relocating due to military orders is inevitable and unless an employed military spouse is fortunate enough to have employment that meets their needs and moves with them, they will likely need to seek new employment at some point in time. At that time, a well-supported military spouse is likely to be better prepared to combat the constant adversity that may come with each relocation and avoid any negative health and employment effects in the future.

“

**“[...] I’m happier in the sense that I feel like I’m contributing to society and my family, I am financially independent, [...]. However, with how often my husband is deployed/TDY, working also stresses me out in that there is never enough time in the day to do all of the things. [...]”**

*- Air Force Spouse*

29 Higgs, M.M. (2019, May 27). How to Deal with Job-Search Depression. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/27/smarter-living/how-to-deal-with-job-search-depression.html>

# RESOURCE UTILIZATION & RECOMMENDATIONS



Military spouse respondents indicated community support services and resources had been helpful in supporting their mental health and emotional wellbeing for employment related challenges. However, they sought improvements to mental health services, wanted their employers to help them grow and advance professionally, and wanted the root of the problem addressed – creating more jobs.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COMMUNITY PROVIDER AND NONPROFIT SUPPORT

- Improve mental health services for military spouses including greater access to care
- Audit and refine services to better meet their needs
- Develop opportunities for military spouses to build connections through peer support and professional network

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EMPLOYER SUPPORT

- Destigmatize mental health and wellbeing in the workplace
- Educate leaders to be attuned to mental health symptoms
- Make wellbeing a priority within workplace culture
- Increase opportunities for military spouses to grow and advance professionally
- Encourage employers to actively cultivate empathy for the military spouse experience
- Form Military Spouse Affinity Groups, connecting military spouses with others who understand their experiences

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR GOVERNMENT SUPPORT

- Improve access to mental health care including TRICARE refinements
- Reduce frequency of relocations as able
- Increase government employment opportunities for military spouses
- Increase access to childcare

## Resources Used to Support Mental Health & Wellbeing During Employment-Related Challenges

Most respondents had never been diagnosed with a mental health condition (66%), however among those who had, 12% indicated they received a diagnosis while they were unemployed. Of those who had received a mental health diagnosis, one in four respondents indicated using resources to support their mental health and emotional wellbeing during employment-related challenges. Among those respondents, 48% reported that community support services and resources provided by national nonprofit organizations were very or extremely helpful.

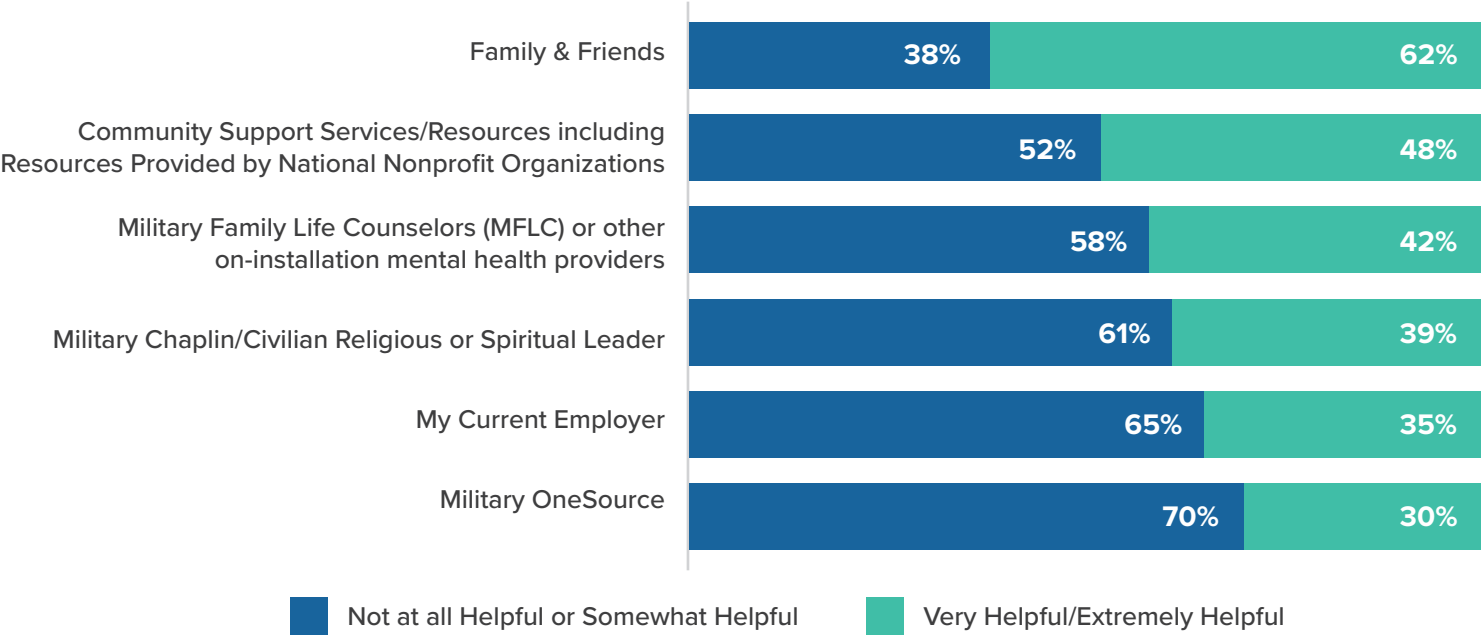


**48% of respondents said that community support services and resources provided by nonprofit organizations were very or extremely helpful.**



### The Helpfulness of Resources Used to Support Mental Health and Emotional Wellbeing for Employment-Related Challenges

Figure 4.0



The implications of not addressing wellness and wellbeing during one’s unemployment can have consequences. For example, research not related to military spouses found that the more one was drained by their job search experience, the more likely they were to compromise on re-employment in jobs. They were inclined to take jobs that were less than comparable to their previous roles.<sup>30</sup> This may be another reason why military spouses tend to be highly underemployed considering the length of time they dedicate to seeking employment.

30 Lim, V.K.G., Chen, D., Aw, S.S.Y., & Tan, M. (2016). Unemployed and Exhausted? Job-Search Fatigue and Reemployment Quality. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, (92). 68-78. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0001879115300087>

# Recommendations for Community Providers & Nonprofit Support

- **Improve access to mental health care services.** Respondents most frequently cited increased mental health care resources would be the best way to support their mental health and emotional wellbeing during employment-related challenges. Yet, they reported having difficulty finding and accessing mental health care services. Specifically, they reported a need for more service offerings, broader eligibility, and more service providers.
- **Audit and refine services to better meet their needs.** Many respondents reported that the mental health support services they received were a poor fit or poor quality. Respondents also wanted employment support services that better met their needs, specifically, follow up and follow through from support services and consistent services across installations and organizations.
- **Develop opportunities for military spouses to build connections through peer support and professional networking.** Respondents commonly expressed a desire for support groups to connect with other military spouses and opportunities for finding social connections in their communities. This may be in large part because peer support is believed to offer a level of acceptance, understanding, and validation not found in many other professional relationships.<sup>31</sup> Community providers and nonprofits that offer military spouse employment programming can look at their current offerings and assess whether there's an ability to form local peer support groups so spouses have a group they can turn to for emotional support. Similarly, respondents also called for professional networks composed of military spouses with either an in-person and virtual networking component to support them professionally.
- **Increase employment support services.** Beyond mental health and peer support resources, respondents cited a need for job search support services, job placement services, licensing support, and training and skill-building opportunities. Respondents also sought targeted job search support with a focus on career longevity rather than short-term job placement, and commonly cited mentoring and career coaching as services that would be helpful.

31 Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2017). Value of Peers, 2017 [PowerPoint slides]. [https://www.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/programs\\_campaigns/brss\\_tac/value-of-peers-2017.pdf#page=1&zoom=auto,-92,612](https://www.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/programs_campaigns/brss_tac/value-of-peers-2017.pdf#page=1&zoom=auto,-92,612)



# Recommendations for Employer Support

- **Destigmatize mental health and wellbeing in the workplace.** When working with military spouse employees, employers need to recognize that military spouses may have additional layers of complexities when it comes to overcoming the stigma associated with seeking help for their mental health and wellbeing. For one, military spouses' hesitation to seek mental health care may be compounded by the stigma commonly found within the military culture and the fear of harm to their service member's career. Military spouses may also be equally afraid of harm to their own careers if they seek mental health care, a career which may have taken them a substantial amount of time to grow.
- **Educate leaders to be attuned to mental health symptoms.** As a way for employers to best support the mental health and emotional wellbeing of military spouses, respondents indicated wanting their leadership to be educated and attuned to signs of mental health symptoms. This included undergoing inclusion training for best practices in communication and accommodating mental health concerns. When an employer can recognize signs, they are then able to encourage their military spouse employees to seek help when they need it.
- **Make wellbeing a priority within workplace culture.** Supporting a workplace culture of wellness and wellbeing has long term benefits for companies, particularly financial and productivity related benefits. Respondents echoed this and wanted employers to prioritize wellbeing by weaving it into the fabric of the company's daily operations. Respondents frequently cited a desire for employer-provided or employer-subsidized mental health services. Others mentioned more easily implementable changes such as supervisors ensuring their employees took regular breaks during the day and employees maintained healthy boundaries when the workday was complete. This also included more allocated time off for mental health days and for attending appointments as two frequently identified requests.



- **Increase opportunities for military spouses to grow and advance professionally.**

Perhaps a result of the challenges that accompany obtaining and maintaining a career for military spouses, respondents indicated that they wanted employers to see their value and demonstrated commitment to them. In other words, respondents wanted their employers to increase opportunities for them to grow and advance professionally within the organization. Furthermore, they wanted fair treatment and opportunities to gain longevity with their employers. Employers may consider offering some type of mentorship resource to military spouses if such a program does not already exist. In doing so, employers are not only facilitating the growth and development of the military spouse employee, but they are signaling to military spouses that they are committed to their development and continuous learning.<sup>32</sup>

- **Encourage employers to actively cultivate empathy for the military spouse experience.**

Respondents spoke of their desire for their employers to actively educate leadership teams on the experiences of the military lifestyle. In doing so, respondents hoped to facilitate their employer's ability to empathize with their challenges and understand the ways in which flexibility promotes positive outcomes from their employees. One-way employers can consider facilitating the development of empathy is through the incorporation of reverse mentoring. Reverse mentoring is based on the idea that it may be hard for employers to identify with the constraints felt by dual-career military connected employees because they have never faced those constraints themselves and/or they came from a different time. This bilateral relationship facilitates greater exposure of the other person's life and can foster a change of mindsets among leaders.<sup>33</sup> Respondents indicated another way employers could signal their understanding and empathy was by offering flexible schedules and opportunities for remote work to military spouse employees.

32 UC Davis. (n.d.). The Benefits of Mentoring. <https://hr.ucdavis.edu/departments/learning-dev/toolkits/mentoring/benefits>

33 Petriglieri, J. (2018, May-June). Talent Management and the Dual-Career Couple. *Harvard Business Review*. <https://hbr.org/2018/05/talent-management-and-the-dual-career-couple>

- **Form Military Spouse Affinity Groups, connecting military spouses with others who understand their experiences.** Several respondents indicated a desire for advocates to work on their behalf and assist them in balancing the sometimes-conflicting demands of employment and the military lifestyle. While it's not clear who these advocates are or where they would come from, one place spouses may find connection to those who understand what they're going through is their company's Military Spouse Affinity Groups. Military Spouse Affinity Groups are still an emerging concept, but they make a great resource for promoting awareness and understanding about military spouses within a company. Models formed at Amazon, Booz Allen Hamilton, and Capital One are leading the way in doing this and make for good examples to follow.<sup>34</sup>



## Recommendations for Government Support

- **Improve access to mental health care including TRICARE refinements.** Respondents commonly cited they had difficulty navigating the bureaucratic aspects of seeking services. In a number of cases, this entailed challenges navigating the TRICARE health care insurance system. Respondents commonly indicated needing more service offerings, broader eligibility, and more service providers.

<sup>34</sup> US Chamber of Commerce Foundation. (2020). A Collective Effort for Military Spouses. <https://online.fliphtml5.com/ugwgi/xnot/#p=1>

- **Reduce frequency of relocations as able.** Respondents commonly cited reducing frequency of relocations would help their mental health and wellbeing as it relates to employment. Reducing frequency of relocations may not be possible in all situations however as able, allowing military families the ability to choose whether they stay or move can support a military spouse's employment attainment and allow them more time to enjoy the employment they may have obtained. It also signals to military spouses that the DoD is committed to supporting military spouses' employment if service members and their families have more control over his/her military career.
- **Increase employment opportunities for military spouses.** Respondents most commonly cited increased job opportunities as a way the DoD and Department of Veterans Administration (VA) could improve the mental health and emotional wellbeing challenges related to employment. This call for more jobs was largely for government and federal sector jobs (i.e. GS level jobs) and mentioned mostly by senior enlisted and field grade officer spouses of the Army and Air Force. However, this may be in part due to this survey's sample leaning heavily toward these two subpopulations. Respondents also requested more support with the military spouse preference during their job search and help with navigating and using USAJobs.
- **Increase access to childcare.** Respondents frequently cited needing additional practical supports including childcare to best support their mental health and wellbeing during employment-related challenges. Specifically, childcare is not only needed once employment is secured but it is also needed to engage in job searching activities.





## Conclusion & Looking Forward

Military spouses want to obtain and maintain meaningful employment for many reasons, one of the most paramount being that it has a positive impact on their mental health and wellbeing. As the civilian workplace landscape continues to evolve, especially in reaction to COVID-19, military spouses' need to be employed in ways that promote greater flexibility. The desire to maintain a meaningful career alongside their service member is no longer an anomaly among today's workforce. In fact, research suggests that it has become commonplace for both partners in a relationship to seek promotions and fast-paced careers – and civilian partners are looking to each other to inform their next career decisions.<sup>35</sup> Similar trends are prevalent within the military as well with existing research recognizing the critical role military spouses play in the decision of whether service members choose to retain their military careers. The military spouses' employment is often a major discussion point in these decisions.<sup>36</sup>



35 Petriglieri, J. (2018, May-June). Talent Management and the Dual-Career Couple. Harvard Business Review. <https://hbr.org/2018/05/talent-management-and-the-dual-career-couple>

36 [1] US Chamber of Commerce Foundation and Grow with Google. (2020). Military Spouse Career Journeys: Examining Entrepreneurship, Remote Work, and Upskilling as Drivers of Economic Success for Military Spouses. <https://online.fliphtml5.com/ugwgi/dtzt/r/>





**Spouses in this survey consider employment to be transformative.** Employed respondents were more satisfied with themselves, more likely to feel they are a person of worth, more likely to believe they lead a purposeful and meaningful life, and were optimistic about their futures when employed. However, other respondents experienced a staggering 32% unemployment rate and 31% long-term unemployment rate -- both substantially higher than their civilian counterparts -- and a high underemployment rate. This places them at an increased risk of detrimental effects to their mental health and wellbeing, including impacts to aspects of their self-esteem and ability to flourish. Providing the right mental and emotional health care and support for military spouses arms them with the tools they need to effectively cope and adapt when navigating employment-related challenges.

The findings from this report underscore the need for the nation to work together to bolster the best possible health outcomes for military spouses. Beyond the mentioned recommendations, there are several actions that can be taken looking forward. These actions include commitments from community providers and nonprofits, employers, government, and others to: (1) conduct or fund research that further explores the relationship between military spouse employment and wellbeing including risk to suicide, (2) expand the national dialogue on military spouse employment to be more holistic and include its impact on health related outcomes, and (3) look internally at refining current operations and policies to ensure programs and resources are effectively meeting the employment, mental health, and wellbeing needs of this population. Using the results from this survey and its implications, Hiring Our Heroes will work with partners and policy makers to implement lasting solutions that promote military spouses' ability to thrive.

# HIRING OUR HEROES

U.S. CHAMBER OF COMMERCE  
F O U N D A T I O N

[HiringOurHeroes.org](http://HiringOurHeroes.org)

