



# Executive Summary

**Blue Star Families' annual Military Family Lifestyle Survey (aMFLS)** provides a comprehensive understanding of the experiences and challenges encountered by military families. The survey is a **yearly "snapshot" of the state of military families**, offering crucial insight and data to help inform national leaders, local communities, and philanthropic actors. Most critically, the survey is an opportunity to increase dialogue between the military community and broader American society, **minimizing the civilian-military divide and supporting the health and sustainability of the All-Volunteer Force.**

Blue Star Families conducted its 9th annual Military Family Lifestyle Survey in April-June, 2018 with **over 10,000 respondents**, including active duty service members, veterans, and their immediate family members. The annual Military Family Lifestyle Survey's response rate makes it the **largest and most comprehensive survey of active duty service members, veterans, and their families.**



**2018**  
**BLUE STAR FAMILIES**  
**MILITARY FAMILY LIFESTYLE SURVEY**

## TOP MILITARY FAMILY ISSUES

- Amount of time away was the top concern for military families for the second year
- Quality of life and well-being concerns related to amount of time away, military child education, and impact of deployment on children are three of the five top issues for military families
- Financial concerns related to military spouse employment and pay and benefits are two additional top five issues for military families

TOP ISSUES	Active Duty Spouses	Active Duty Members	Veterans
<b>Time away from family</b>	<b>51%</b>	<b>52%</b>	<b>34%</b>
<b>Military spouse employment</b>	<b>45%</b>	28%	19%
<b>Military child education</b>	<b>42%</b>	<b>34%</b>	22%
<b>Impact of deployment on children</b>	<b>39%</b>	<b>35%</b>	<b>28%</b>
<b>Military pay &amp; benefits</b>	<b>35%</b>	<b>33%</b>	<b>37%</b>
Military family quality of life	33%	<b>35%</b>	21%
Change in retirement benefits	19%	22%	26%
Veteran employment	10%	14%	<b>36%</b>
PTSD/combat stress/TBI	14%	10%	<b>33%</b>
Service member & veteran suicide	11%	9%	26%





## SUPPORTING MILITARY FAMILIES STRENGTHENS NATIONAL SECURITY AND LOCAL COMMUNITIES

Military families are assets to national defense and their local communities, and their health and well-being are central to sustaining the future of American defense and the All-Volunteer Force. With decreasing understanding of military service and sacrifice within the broader American society, there are significant challenges for how to best meet the needs of today's military family. While military families want to serve, responses suggest the majority of military families are closely examining the impact of service on their family's quality of life and well-being. Amount of time away was the top concern for the second year, and issues related to children and economic stability were additional concerns.

One human need critical to health and well-being remains unmet for many military families: belonging. While they feel connected to institutions and networks within their communities, many still do not feel they belong in them. Length of time in a community and the physical and emotional barriers military families face arising from their unique lifestyle can impact this feeling. There are ways that the Department of Defense (DoD) and local communities can help.

The DoD has made efforts to adapt to the evolution of military families since the inauguration of the All-Volunteer Force. However, there continue to be policy prescriptions, specifically surrounding quality of life and personnel issues, that are not aligned with what military families need or want. The DoD must carefully consider how to incorporate military families into its current thinking and future planning as it increases its lethality, fortifies partnerships and alliances, and reforms its business practices.

The DoD is not alone in providing strong family support. The majority of military families live in their local communities, not on military installations. Communities play a joint role in ensuring the building blocks of community health and well-being are firmly in place for all military families.

The 2018's Comprehensive Report identifies three key topics central to building healthy and resilient military communities: assessing the impact of military service on military family well-being; community connectedness and sense of belonging to withstand military lifestyle challenges; and the evolution of military service in society. It is designed to provide a deeper understanding of today's military families and promote improvements to their quality of military life.



## TOP TRENDS AND FINDINGS FOR 2018

**Financial issues/stress was the top lifestyle stressor for the first time among military family respondents.** Millennial military family respondents (70%) were significantly more likely to report having two incomes as vital to their family's well-being than older military family respondents (63%), regardless of rank. Military family respondents reported higher rates of difficulty making ends meet than civilian families (13% vs. 7%), suggesting the need for two incomes is not just an expectation but a need for financial security.

**Relocation stress was the top stressor for service member respondents for the first time.** Nearly a third (31%) of military family respondents spent over \$1,000 in unreimbursed expenses during their last military move. Relocating means having to adjust to a new location which can be especially challenging for female service members with children. 79% of female service members who relocated in the last year could not obtain reliable childcare.

**Diverse health care and mental health care improvements are top ways to increase satisfaction with this highly valued benefit.** 32% of service member respondents cited obtaining timely appointments as their top solution to improve their health care satisfaction and veterans and service member respondents indicated improving appointment availability would make seeking mental health care more comfortable. Military spouse (32%), veteran (25%), and veteran spouse (37%) respondents identified having fully covered alternative care options as a top improvement. Roughly a third (32%) of military family respondents who identified as LGBT indicated improving health care was the most important change for their quality of life.

**A majority of respondents reported they feel connected to institutions and networks within their communities, yet many do not feel they belong in them.** 48% of military family respondents indicated that they did not feel a sense of belonging to their local civilian community and 43% felt the same about their military community. Military family respondents identified increasing the availability of military spouse jobs as their top recommendation for improving a sense of belonging to their local civilian community.

**Military spouse respondents were significantly less connected to and had a significantly lower sense of belonging within their military and local civilian communities out of all groups surveyed.** Military spouse respondents felt a greater sense of belonging to their local civilian community the longer they resided there; however, the inverse was true with regard to their military community. Military spouse respondents residing at their current location for more than two years were significantly less likely to feel a sense of belonging to their military community than those who lived there for less than two years.

**Designing flexible employment opportunities that work with the demands of the military lifestyle is a top improvement for military spouse un/underemployment.** Military spouse un/underemployment remained the top obstacle to financial security among military family respondents with the percentage of military spouse respondents who indicated they were unemployed (not employed but actively seeking work in the past four weeks) increasing to 30% in 2018. 56% of working spouse respondents reported they were underemployed. Frequent relocation was cited as the cause for underemployment.

**Employment in early transition positively impacts veteran families' community connections and belonging.** The longer it took veteran respondents to find employment after transitioning, the lower their feelings of connectedness to their local civilian community. For veteran spouse respondents, feelings of connectedness and belonging were significantly higher for those who were employed full- or part-time than those who were not employed but were looking for work at the time of transition.

**Military family respondents recommended quality of life improvements as the top way to recruit more eligible recruits and improve their current quality of life.** The top three ways military family respondents recommend the DoD can improve their current quality of life: offer better housing/increase BAH; maintain adequate Manning Levels/Reduce high operational tempo; allow more control over service member's career.

**Female service member respondents may decide earlier in their careers that they do not see military service as a viable long-term career.** A third of female service member respondents selected retirement benefits as their primary reason for joining compared to 43% of male respondents. There was a significant difference in the age of separation for male and female veteran respondents, with female veterans reporting they separated at a younger average age (32 years) than their male counterparts (37 years). Unlike their male counterparts, female service member respondents identified military family quality of life as a top issue of concern (their second top concern following time away from family), and a quarter of female veteran respondents cited lack of childcare during time in the military as their biggest stressor, compared to 5% of male veteran respondents.

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**Caregiver respondents seek improvements to support resources, particularly access to childcare and financial assistance.** Fewer than one-third of caregiver respondents felt the support services provided by the nonprofit community were adequate to support caregivers. Military spouse caregiver respondents identified improving access to childcare as their top improvement; 78% indicated needing some form of childcare. Caregivers also identified access to health care and mental health services and help finding financial assistance resources as top recommendations.

**Honest messaging about military family realities and sacrifices was the top identified strategy to increase the general public's understanding of military service.** 18% of military family respondents felt the general public truly understands their sacrifice and 19% felt the general public was aware of the significant challenges military service places on families. Respondents sought increased messaging that military sacrifice is borne by all members of the family.

**Proclivity to recommend service was related to gender; survey respondents indicated changes to cultural norms were needed to increase their willingness to recommend service to their daughters.** 51% of respondents were likely to recommend service to their sons, yet 39% indicated the same for daughters. In order to recommend service to daughters, respondents noted these top changes were needed: ending sexual assault, harassment, and sexism in military culture; improving the quality of life; and improving work-life balance.

