

JUNE
2017

MILITARY SPOUSES IN THE WORKPLACE

— UNDERSTANDING THE IMPACTS OF
SPOUSE UNEMPLOYMENT ON MILITARY —
RECRUITMENT, RETENTION, AND READINESS

HIRING OUR HEROES

U.S. CHAMBER OF COMMERCE FOUNDATION

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F O U N D A T I O N

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.

SPECIAL THANKS

HOH thanks La Quinta Inns & Suites for their commitment to military families and for their financial contributions to this study. La Quinta strives to be "not just military friendly" but "military *family* friendly," with a focus on hiring veterans, military spouses, and caregivers into portable, flexible careers with the potential for advancement. This study not only highlights existing military spouse employment challenges, but paves the way for companies to follow La Quinta's lead to empower military spouses in their careers and lives.



INTRODUCTION

Military spouses are the unsung heroes of our nation's defense. Sixteen years into America's longest-running war and in the face of millions of service member deployments, military spouses have met the challenges that confront them head-on, demonstrating an unwavering commitment to our country and our service members.

Their service, however, comes at great personal sacrifice and stress. Deployments, frequent moves, and ever-changing family needs make it difficult to maintain or advance a career. With military spouse unemployment rates ranging from 20% to 25% in the last decade¹, many military families rely upon the single income of the service member at a time when 60% of American family households now have two incomes.²

Underemployment relative to education or experience also impacts the professional lives of many military spouses. Research by military-focused nonprofit organizations, including Blue Star Families and the Military Officers Association of America, estimates that underemployment may be as high 35% to 40% among military spouses.³

The subsequent stress and frustration create significant challenges for military families. The lack of equal economic opportunity for military spouses creates financial challenges and influences a family's decision to stay in or leave the military. Ultimately, the issue of military spouse employment profoundly impacts military readiness and our nation's ability to recruit and retain an all-volunteer force.

As our military leaders work to reshape the fighting force of the future, we must better understand the nature of military spouse unemployment as well as underemployment, its impact on military families, and the best practices for the private and public sectors as they work together to successfully address these challenges. These efforts should be viewed as a critical component of recruiting and retaining America's best and brightest for our national defense.

¹United States Department of Defense, "Military Spouse Employment Initiative." Accessed June 2017 from: <http://www.ncsl.org/documents/wln/ekringer.pdf>

²Pew Research Center, "The Rise in Dual Income Households," 2015. Accessed June 2017 from: http://www.pewresearch.org/ft_dual-income-households-1960-2012-2/

³Blue Star Families footnote to: *Blue Star Families, Challenges Facing Our Military Spouses*, 2016. Accessed June 2017 from: https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/BSF_final_Milspouse_Unemployment_infographic.pdf



METHODOLOGY

Working with **Public Opinion Strategies**,⁴ we surveyed 1,273 spouses of active duty military service members or veterans who retired or left the military within the last three years. Respondents were selected from two primary sources: an HOH database of past event attendees (N=264 respondents) and a consumer panel (N=1,009 respondents).

Because the survey used an opt-in panel sample rather than a random probability sample, we used a Credibility Interval for determining the accuracy of the data. The Credibility Interval for a sample size of N=1,273 is between +2.8% and +3.3%. Credibility Intervals are analogous to a margin of error with a 95% confidence level for a random probability sample.

KEY FINDINGS

To better understand the military spouse employment landscape, HOH surveyed 1,273 spouses of active duty military service members and recent veterans to discover the challenges they face and the effects of military spouse unemployment and underemployment on military recruitment and retention.

- **Unemployment and underemployment continue to be significant challenges** for most military spouses. Many are in part time or seasonal positions when they would prefer full time or permanent work.
- **Military spouses with degrees face the greatest challenges** in nearly every measurable employment category. They face the highest rates of unemployment and the most difficulty finding meaningful work.
- **Moves between duty stations play havoc on careers.** Not only do most military spouses have to quit jobs because of a move, they face long periods of unemployment after the move.
- Like most American families, **military families want and need two incomes**—something that is much harder for military families to achieve.
- **The lack of employment opportunities creates stress and influences a family's decision to stay in or leave the military**—factors that ultimately hurt military readiness, retention and recruiting.

Unless Americans come to realize that **military families face the same struggles as civilians**, employment opportunities are not going to progress.

- 2017 Survey Comment

GENDER OF SPOUSES



92%

THE BASICS

According to the most recent Department of Defense (DoD) data, there are 641,639 spouses of active duty service members.⁵ Thirteen percent of those spouses also serve in the military (dual-military families), while the remaining 87% of active duty spouses are civilians.

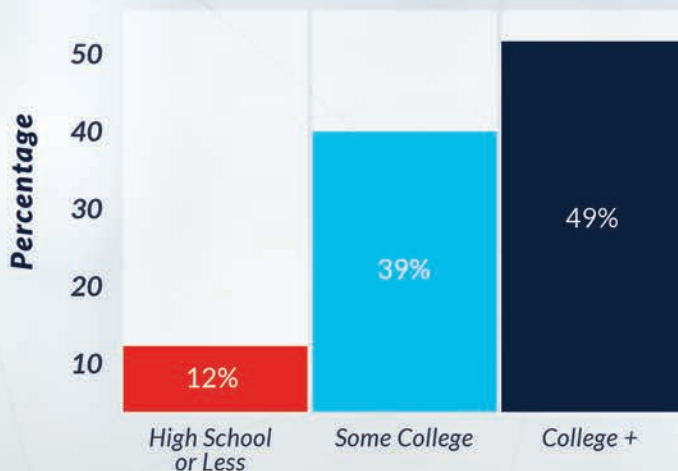
The military spouse demographic slants overwhelmingly female (92%). Approximately half (49%) of military spouses are 30 years of age or older; the average age of a military spouse is 31.5 years old. Forty-one percent of military spouses have dependent children. Over 70% of those children are 11 years of age or younger, according to the same DoD statistics.

Military spouses are also more highly educated than most working Americans. Our survey results show that 88% of military spouses have some post-high school education, 34% have a college degree, and 15% have a postgraduate degree.

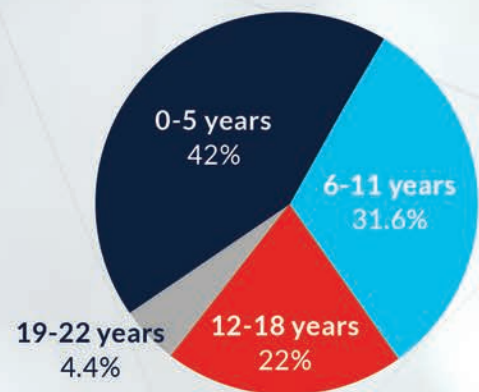
31.5

AVERAGE AGE OF MILITARY SPOUSES

Education Level of Spouses



Age of Dependent Children



⁵ Department of Defense, 2015 Demographics: Profile of the Military Community, Pg 126. Accessed June 2017 from: <http://download.militaryonesource.mil/12038/MOS/Reports/2015-Demographics-Report.pdf>

UNIQUE ASPECTS OF MILITARY LIFE

While military spouses face many of the same employment challenges as the rest of America's civilian workforce, especially working women, they also face unique challenges due to the transient nature of military life.

Since 9/11, many military families have faced multiple deployments and significant periods of separation as a result of those deployments. According to the DoD, approximately 81% of military spouses have experienced a deployment during their service member's career,⁶ and recent data shows an average deployment length of 7.7 months.⁷

Frequent moves also are common. The vast majority of survey respondents (90%) moved at least 50 miles on one or more occasions due to their spouse's career in the military. More than half moved at least three times, while 34% moved four or more times.

Further complicating this challenge is the fact that these military moves often come with little or no notice. Nearly half (49%) of the survey respondents who relocated had less than 3 months to prepare for and execute their most recent move. Eleven percent of military spouses had less than a month's notice.

Finally, military spouses face additional career challenges specific to the rural or remote location of many military bases. Many military bases are located more than 50 miles from major urban locations, effectively limiting the both the quantity and types of jobs available to military spouses residing in those locations.

Everywhere we go I am forced to start from the beginning. I was an Assistant Director in Virginia. Then a part-time cook in Rhode Island. Now a Records Clerk in California. I feel like I'm going backwards in my career with no help.

- 2017 Survey Comment

⁶Department of Defense, 2012 Survey of Active Duty Spouses. Accessed June 2017 from: <http://download.militaryonesource.mil/12038/MOS/Surveys/ADSS1201-Briefing-Support-Deployment-Reintegration-PCS-WellBeing-Education-Employment.pdf>

⁷Bonds TM, Baiocchi D, McDonald LL. "Army Deployments of OIF and OEF." RAND Corporation; 2010. Accessed June 2017 from: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK206861/>

UNEMPLOYMENT & UNDEREMPLOYMENT

Our survey showed a decline in the overall military spouse unemployment rate in recent years, from 23% in 2015⁸ to 16% in 2017. Currently, 52% of military spouses told us they are in the labor force, with 39% in full time positions and 14% in part time positions. Only 10% of respondents stated that they are unemployed and actively looking for work.

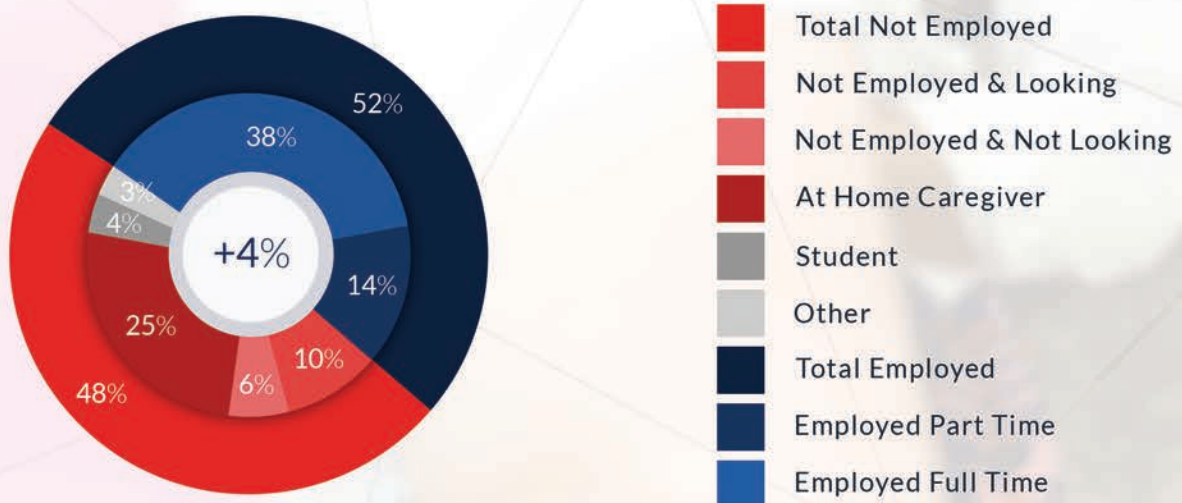
While significant, the decline in the military spouse unemployment rate does not close the gap between military spouse unemployment and the rate experienced by most Americans. At 16%, the military spouse unemployment rate remains four times the current rate for all adult women (4.0% in May 2017) and three times higher than the rate for women between the ages of 20 and 25.⁹

Further, the clear signs of underemployment in the survey results cannot be overlooked.

- Of the employed spouses surveyed, more than a quarter (14% of all respondents) are working part time, but half (50%) of those part time workers would prefer a full time position.
- More than eighteen percent of employed spouses surveyed have seasonal or temporary jobs; 82% of those spouses would prefer a permanent position.
- Twenty-five percent of employed spouses are working more than one job for pay.
- Approximately 70% of employed spouses do not believe that their education or past work experience is being fully utilized in their current job.
- Nearly two-thirds (63%) of employed military spouses indicated that they held previous positions that required greater skills or responsibilities.

About half of spouses are employed with one-in-ten actively looking for employment.

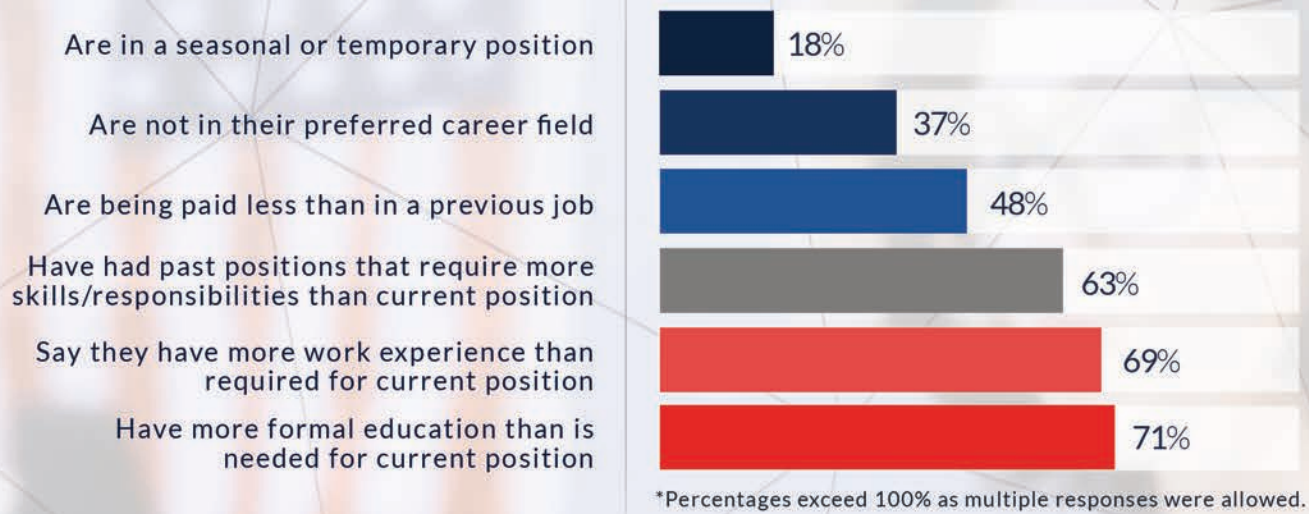
What phrase best describes your current employment status?



⁸Department of Defense, 2015 Demographics: Profile of the Military Community, Pg 126. Accessed June 2017 from: <http://download.militaryonesource.mil/12038/MOS/Reports/2015-Demographics-Report.pdf>

⁹Bureau of Labor Statistics, Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey, 2017. Accessed in June 2017 from: <https://www.bls.gov/web/emp/sit/cpseea10.htm>

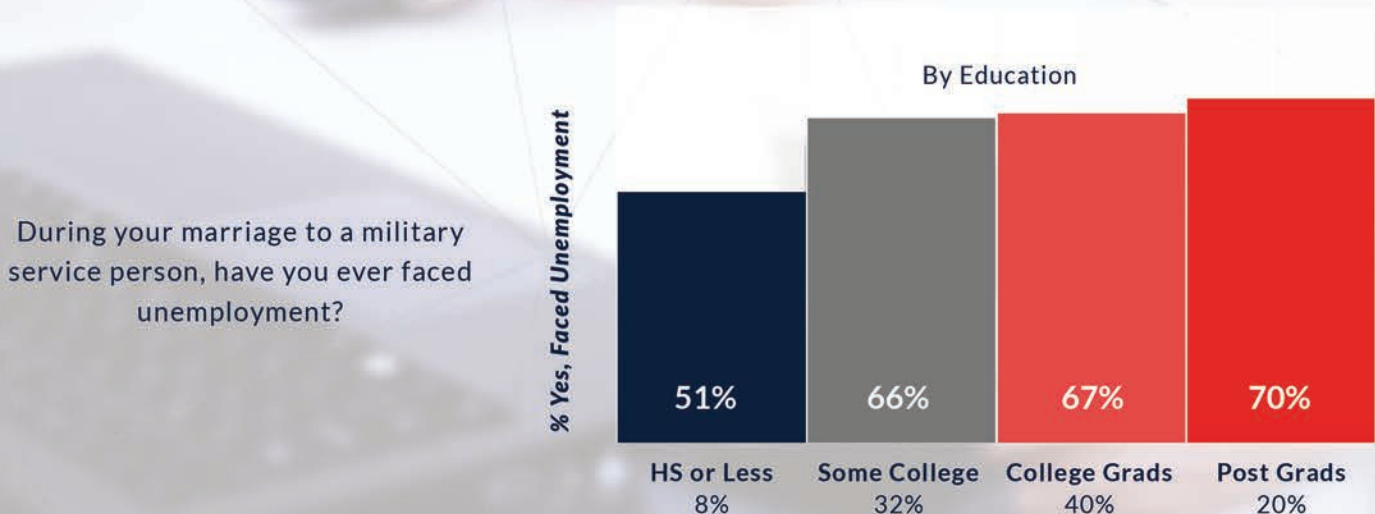
The survey indicates that many working spouses appear to be underemployed or not fully utilizing their skillsets.



Increased Challenges for Spouses with Degrees

Spouses with a college or postgraduate degree appear to be most impacted by the transient nature of military life. In nearly every category, spouses with greater educational attainment appear to struggle more than spouses with a high school degree or some college. Not only are they more likely to be unemployed, they also face longer periods of unemployment and are more likely to be underemployed.

Almost all employed spouses say they have faced periods of unemployment, with the proportion increasing based on education.



IMPACT OF MOVES

The employment challenges created by frequent moves cannot be overstated. Most spouses who have been relocated (67%) have quit at least one job as a result of a move. Similarly, 66% employed spouses have faced a period of unemployment during their marriage to a member of the military. Two-thirds (66%) of those spouses who had to leave their jobs had two or more periods of unemployment during their spouses' time in service. Thirty-nine percent (39%) have been unemployed three or more times.

For spouses forced to quite a job due to relocation, the prospects of finding a new job in a short period of time are not good. Nearly two-thirds (65%) of respondents who had to quit a job due to relocation needed four or more months to find a new employer with 29% taking four to six months, 12% taking seven to twelve months, and 25% taking more than a year.

Among those who moved, two-thirds say they had to quit a job; only 9% were accommodated by their current employer.

Did you ever have to quit a job due to a move because of your spouse's military service?



If you had to look for employment following your recent move, how long did it take you to find work?



ADDITIONAL FACTORS

A host of unique factors impact both a military spouse's new job prospects and their perceptions of their marketability to potential employers. Forty-one percent of military spouses say the greatest employment challenge for spouses like them is employers not wanting to hire them because they may move in the future. Twenty-eight percent of our respondents reported declining to identify themselves as a military spouse to prospective employers.

Other factors impacting a spouse's ability to find a job include lack of flexible work schedules (34%), often a crucial factor during a service member's deployment; finding affordable child care (32%), which can include navigating childcare wait lists following a move without extended family nearby; insufficient pay (29%); difficulty explaining gaps in their resume (28%); and the lack of jobs on or near the military base (26%). Respondents also indicated that state licensing laws were a challenge, especially among spouses with more significant educational attainment.

Spouses say the greatest challenge in seeking employment as a military spouse is companies not wanting to hire someone who may be moved.

What would you say are the two or three greatest challenges for spouses of military service members in finding good employment opportunities?

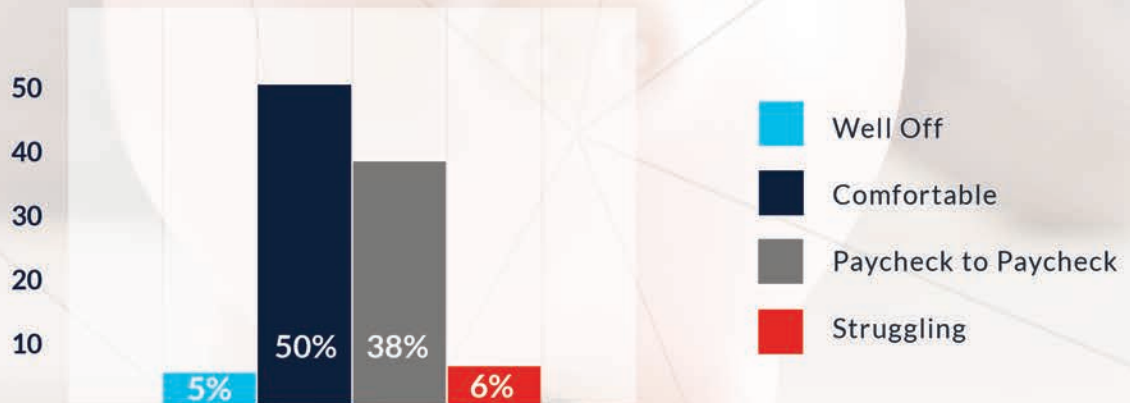
41%	The company doesn't want to hire a military spouse because they may move
34%	Lack of flexible work schedules
32%	Finding affordable childcare
29%	Jobs do not pay enough
28%	Difficulty explaining time gaps on resume
26%	No meaningful jobs on or near the military base
22%	Unable to transfer professional licenses from one state to another
20%	Overqualified for most jobs
19%	Fewer connections/social networks in the area

FINANCIAL WELL-BEING

Significant steps have been undertaken to increase military pay and benefits over the last decade; these efforts are critical to recruiting and maintaining a high-quality all-volunteer force. But has it been enough?

Five percent of survey respondents rated their financial well-being as well off, while 50% reported being comfortable. Thirty-eight percent of respondents reported that they were living paycheck to paycheck and 6% said they were struggling financially.

Military Spouses Rate Their Financial Well-Being



44% of military spouses
state that they are living paycheck to paycheck or struggling financially.

NEED FOR DUAL INCOMES

Military families' comparative lack of dual incomes appears to be an important part of the financial challenges they face. Three-quarters (77%) of employed military spouses agree that having two incomes is vitally important to their family.

Notwithstanding the perceived importance of dual incomes, military families continue to lag behind most dual-income American families in maintaining dual-income status.¹⁰ While 60% of married civilians with children bring in two incomes,¹¹ that percentage drops to 50% for military families with children, according to our survey.

Military spouses, as a whole, are split on whether a military lifestyle supports career opportunities for both spouses, with 51% disagreeing and 49% agreeing. Responses from spouses with higher education were less optimistic. Fifty-seven percent of spouses with college degrees and 63% of spouses with postgraduate degrees disagreed with the statement "A military lifestyle supports career opportunities for both spouses."

¹⁰Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Employment Characteristics of Families—2016," Accessed June 2017 from: <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/famee.pdf>

¹¹Pew Research Center, "The Rise in Dual Income Households," 2015. Accessed June 2017 from: http://www.pewresearch.org/ft_dual-income-households-1960-2012-2/

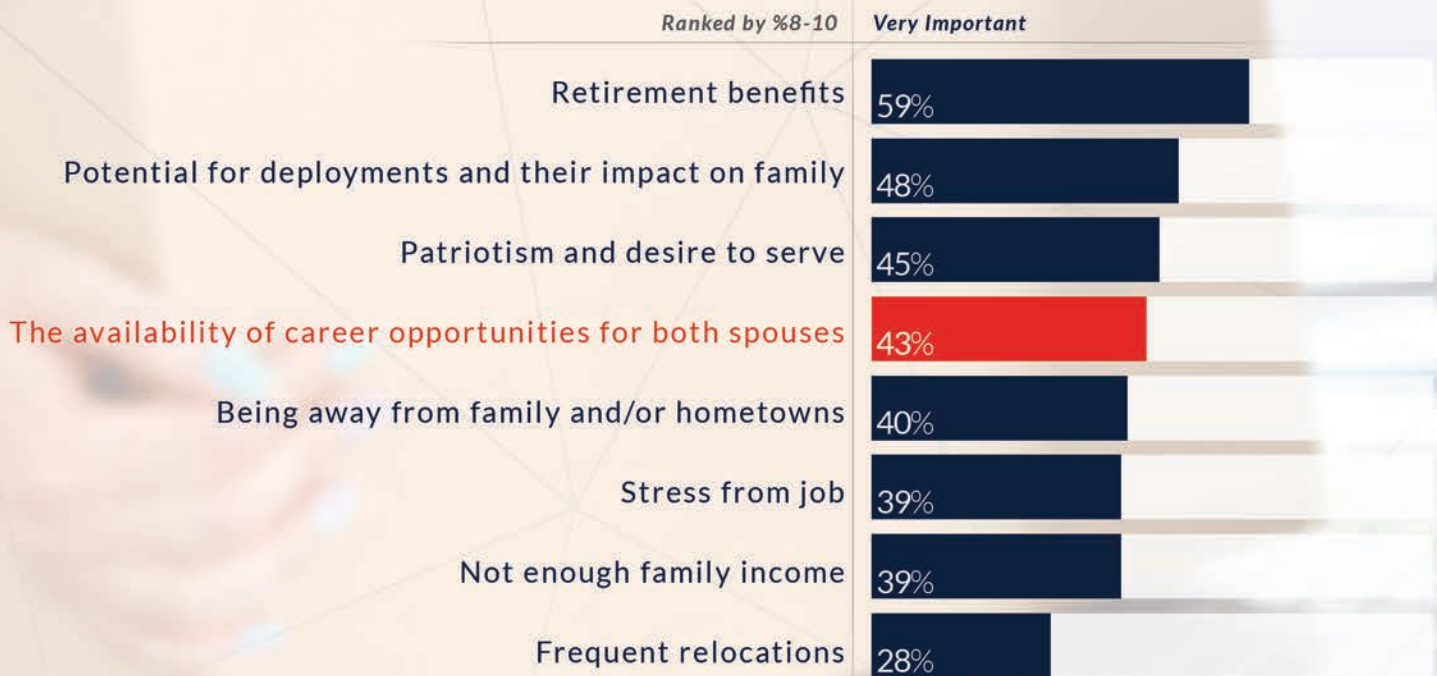
STAY OR GO

Military spouse employment opportunity plays a significant role in a military family's decision to stay in or leave the military. Eighty-one percent of military spouses and their service member have discussed the possibility of leaving the service, with the availability of career opportunities for both spouses cited as one of the top deciding factors. On a scale of 1 to 10, 43% of military spouses ranked equal employment opportunity between 8 and 10 (or very important) as a factor in the decision-making process.

Other very important factors include military retirement benefits (59%), potential for deployments (48%), and patriotism (45%). It is possible that with the adjustments to the military retirement system, i.e. blended retirement, retention may be impacted.¹²

Career opportunities for both spouses are in the mix of issues that affect a military family's decision for the service member to remain on active service.

Thinking about some factors that people have told us affected whether or not their spouse stayed in the military, please rate the following on a scale of 1 to 10 with 1 being NOT IMPORTANT and 10 being VERY IMPORTANT.



STRESS

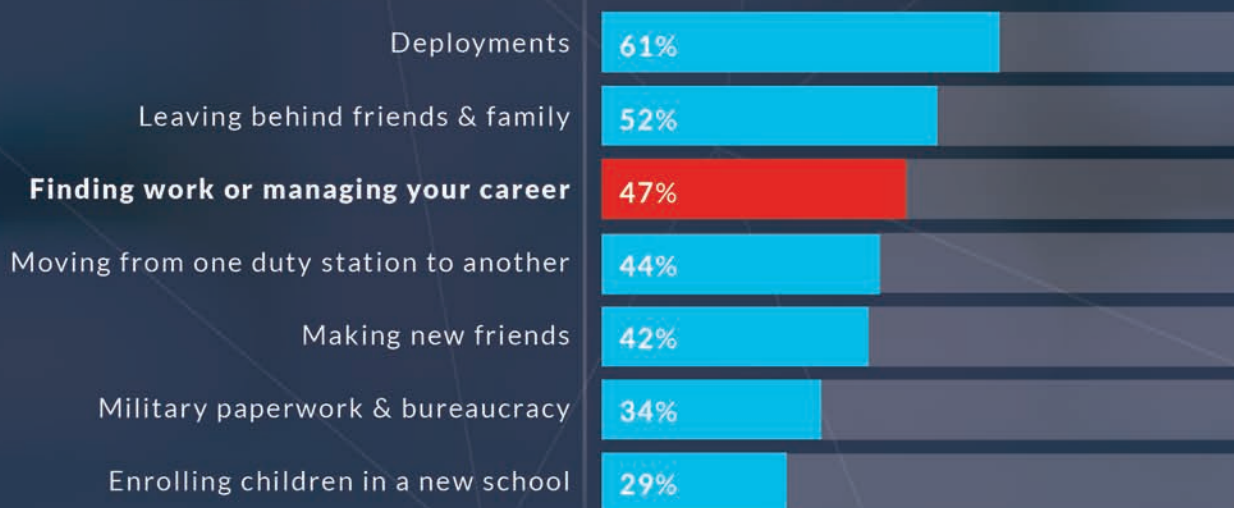
Military spouses face a number of day-to-day challenges related to potential deployments, managing family responsibilities, balancing budgets, and the lack of job opportunities. These challenges can cause significant stress.

Sixty-one percent of respondents identified deployments as the greatest source of stress, followed by leaving behind friends and loved ones when moving (52%) and finding work or managing a career (47%).

The stress is particularly acute for those spouses seeking employment. Eighty percent of our respondents stated that the employment search process created stress between them and their service member spouse. Not surprisingly, the more frequently a military spouse faced unemployment, the more likely they were to report stress based on the employment search.

Nearly half of the survey respondents say that finding work and managing their career creates stress for their family.

Please indicate whether any of the following create stress for your family.



80%

The percentage of military spouses report that the employment search process has created stress between them and their active duty spouse.

RESILIENCY

Notwithstanding the challenges and stress, military spouses demonstrate an impressive sense of strength and resiliency. When asked, "What advice would you offer a younger person who is marrying a military service member?" their responses showed intense commitment and resolve.

BE FLEXIBLE
BE BRAVE
NEVER QUIT
BE OPEN MINDED
KEEP YOUR CHIN UP
BE CONFIDENT
NEVER SURRENDER
STAY STRONG
NEVER GIVE UP
HOLD ON
TIGHT
STAY FOCUSED
BE PATIENT
ENJOY IT
BE PERSISTENT

"Military spouses have to get it done or we fail. And we refuse to fail."

- Bonnie Amos, Former First Lady of the U.S. Marine Corps and Hiring Our Heroes Senior Advisor

CONCLUSION

Despite some unique challenges, military families are still ultimately that—families. Like other married adults, military spouses struggle to balance work and family, find affordable child care, and push their careers to their full potential. However, military spouses carry the additional weight of their service member's military service: they must pick up and move their lives every few years and shoulder the burden of being a single parent during deployments.

The majority of military spouses have had to quit a job because of their partner's service. When they reach their new location, it can take spouses months to find the next opportunity. Often, these spouses ultimately settle into underemployment, working seasonal, temporary, or part time jobs. Even when they secure a full time job, military spouses frequently must accept positions below their qualifications, thereby taking a step backward in their career progression, and as a result, almost half of military spouses who are employed full time make less in their current positions than they did in a previous role.

These employment challenges not only affect military spouses' careers, but the health and stability of military families and therefore the military's ability to recruit and retain an all-volunteer force. Together, the public and private sectors must leverage the employment potential of military spouses to drive military families into the 21st century world of economic opportunity.



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