



STAND SMART FOR HEROES

Food Insecurity Among Military Families: Contributing Factors and Solutions

SPOTLIGHT PARTNERS:



ISSUE/CHALLENGE

A growing body of research shows that military families experience food insecurity—in which households have limited or uncertain access to adequate food—at a higher rate than the national average. Moreover, certain challenges specific to military life are associated with a higher risk of food insecurity. Between 2019 and 2021, the share of military families experiencing food insecurity ranged from 13 percent to 20 percent, according to surveys by the Military Family Advisory Network (MFAN).¹ The Department of Defense reported an even higher estimate, 24 percent.² In comparison, the share of all Americans experiencing food insecurity remained constant during that period at roughly 10 percent.³

The prevalence of food insecurity varies by military rank, race or ethnicity, and spousal employment. For example, 23 percent of families of enlisted personnel experienced food insecurity or hunger in 2021, compared to 4 percent of families of officers.⁴ Among active-duty personnel, families of color were at least twice as likely to report food insecurity as their white, non-Hispanic counterparts.⁵ In addition, 41 percent of military spouses who were unemployed were food insecure in 2019, compared to 22 percent of employed military spouses.⁶

Despite high levels of need, only an estimated 1 percent to 2 percent of active-duty military families received Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits (formerly known as Food Stamps) in 2019, compared to 11 percent of all Americans in that year.⁷ Military benefits present a barrier to military families who are trying to access SNAP benefits because the Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH) is counted as income in assessments of SNAP eligibility. In contrast, civilians who receive Section 8 housing benefits do not have those benefits counted as income in assessments of SNAP eligibility. Additionally, military families who experience food insecurity have reported feeling embarrassed by their situation and may even face professional repercussions for their perceived inability to manage their finances.⁸

KEY FINDINGS

Military families experience a variety of common factors that contribute to food insecurity and hunger.⁹ Many of those issues exacerbate one another, compounding military families' risk of food insecurity. They include the following factors:

- **Spousal unemployment.** In 2020, military spouses were unemployed at nearly seven times the rate of their similar civilian peers (20 percent versus 3 percent).¹⁰ Military spouses' ability to secure and maintain employment is adversely affected by frequent geographic moves and lack of access to affordable childcare. In 2019, spouses who had undergone a move within the past year were twice as likely as other military spouses to be unemployed, and 35 percent of active-duty spouses who experienced a move indicated that it took seven or more months to find a new job.¹¹ Some military spouses indicated that the high cost of childcare outweighed the financial benefits of earning a second income.¹²
- **Recent permanent change of station.** PCS moves have an adverse impact on military families' finances beyond spousal unemployment. For example, in 2021, two-thirds of active-duty families who responded to a Blue Star Families survey reported having unreimbursed out-of-pocket expenses related to their last PCS. For more than half of those respondents, the unreimbursed expenses exceeded \$1,000.¹³
- **Family size.** Between April 2020 and February 2022, 23 percent of surveyed active-duty personnel with children reported that their families sometimes or often did not have enough to eat, compared to 16 percent of all active-duty respondents and 12 percent of all U.S. households with children.¹⁴ Childcare costs, spousal unemployment, and barriers to accessing federal aid all affect the ability of military families with children to achieve long-term food security.¹⁵
- **Unexpected expenses.** In 2021, 22 percent of surveyed active-duty military families indicated that they had less than \$500 in emergency savings or none at all. Families of enlisted personnel were the most likely to have little or no savings.¹⁶ That lack of savings puts military families at risk of becoming food insecure when they are faced with unexpected expenses, such as bills related to medical emergencies, vehicle repairs, or natural disasters.¹⁷

IMPLICATIONS

Food insecurity among military families affects the health and well-being of those families, as well as military readiness, retention, and future recruitment.¹⁸ By understanding the interconnected factors that contribute to military families' food insecurity, funders, service providers, and other stakeholders can tailor their services to provide targeted support to military families before they experience food insecurity and hunger.



RESOURCES

- ¹ Gabby L'Esperance, Shanna Smith, and Jackie Trent, *Military Family Support Programming Survey: 2021 Results* (Military Family Advisory Network, 2022), p. 59, <https://tinyurl.com/yc36j69m>.
- ² Department of Defense, *Strengthening Food Security in the Force: Strategy and Roadmap* (July 2022), p. 3, <https://tinyurl.com/h8rjak8w>.
- ³ U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, "Food Security in the U.S.: Key Graphics and Statistics" (October 17, 2022), <https://tinyurl.com/bdf6z6fe>.
- ⁴ L'Esperance, Smith, and Trent, *Military Family Support Programming Survey: 2021 Results*, p. 55.
- ⁵ Ibid., and Blue Star Families, *The Diverse Experiences of Military and Veteran Families of Color* (February 2, 2022), Chap. 3, <https://tinyurl.com/3z9adt2>.
- ⁶ Department of Defense, *Strengthening Food Security in the Force*, p. 6.
- ⁷ Department of Defense, *Report of the Thirteenth Quadrennial Review of Military Compensation: Volume IV. Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program* (December 2020), <https://tinyurl.com/5abw62td>; USDA, Food and Nutrition Service, "Military and Veteran Families," <https://tinyurl.com/3sr3752z>; and Laura Tiehen, *The Food Assistance Landscape: Fiscal Year 2019 Annual Report* (USDA, July 2020), p. 6, <https://tinyurl.com/5n776he3>.
- ⁸ Abby J. Liebman and Josh Protas, *Hungry in the Military: Food Insecurity Among Military Families in the U.S.* (MAZON, April 2021), pp. 5 and 9, <https://tinyurl.com/2fe72ts8>; and L'Esperance, Smith, and Trent, *Military Family Support Programming Survey: 2021 Results*, pp. 57–58.
- ⁹ Jamie Lutz and Caitlin Welsh, *Solving Food Insecurity Among U.S. Veterans and Military Families* (CSIS, June 2022), <https://tinyurl.com/4rk4fk7t>; and Military Family Advisory Network, *Causal Factors of Military and Veteran Family Food Insecurity* (2022), <https://tinyurl.com/4nrs24ys>.
- ¹⁰ Blue Star Families, *2020 Military Family Lifestyle Survey Comprehensive Report* (March 2021), p. 62, <https://tinyurl.com/3wwymc49>.
- ¹¹ Department of Defense, Office of People Analytics, "2019 Survey of Active Duty Spouses" (December 2, 2020), p. 24, <https://tinyurl.com/2p935thp>.
- ¹² Military Family Advisory Network, *Causal Factors of Military and Veteran Family Food Insecurity*.
- ¹³ Blue Star Families, *2021 Military Family Lifestyle Survey Comprehensive Report* (March 2022), p. 63, <https://tinyurl.com/dndxf844>.
- ¹⁴ Lutz and Welsh, *Solving Food Insecurity Among U.S. Veterans and Military Families*, p. 3.
- ¹⁵ Military Family Advisory Network, *Causal Factors of Military and Veteran Family Food Insecurity*; and Lutz and Welsh, *Solving Food Insecurity Among U.S. Veterans and Military Families*.
- ¹⁶ L'Esperance, Smith, and Trent, *Military Family Support Programming Survey: 2021 Results*, pp. 44–45.
- ¹⁷ Military Family Advisory Network, *Causal Factors of Military and Veteran Family Food Insecurity*.
- ¹⁸ Liebman and Protas, *Hungry in the Military*, p. 10.

RESEARCH CONDUCTED

In 2021, the Bob Woodruff Foundation funded two research projects focused on food insecurity among military personnel and veterans.

The Global Food Security Program at the Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS) reviewed current data and convened stakeholders across the public, private, and nonprofit sectors to examine policy solutions to food insecurity in the U.S. military and veteran communities. CSIS published the [resulting policy brief](#) and recommendations in June 2022.

MFAN and research partners at the University of Texas at Austin's Institute for Military and Veteran Family Wellness conducted 312 qualitative interviews with members of military and veteran families in Texas and Tidewater, Virginia, who had recently experienced food insecurity. MFAN analyzed and distilled the interviews into five "personas" of food insecurity among such families—each describing a contributing factor to food insecurity—and [published those findings](#) in June 2022.

GOALS FOR THE FUTURE

Service providers and funders should collaborate to fill gaps in services and improve military families' well-being by taking the following actions:

■ Reduce barriers to earning dual incomes

- Develop and support programs that help military spouses access flexible, sustainable employment opportunities
- Increase access to affordable childcare
- Expand professional licensing reciprocity for military spouses who move to a new state

■ Help military families prepare for and navigate financial challenges

- Provide increased reimbursement or complementary financial support during and after PCS moves
- Promote the importance of emergency savings and increase awareness of disaster-related resources
- Strengthen the infrastructure for emergency relief

■ Reduce stigma and encourage families in need to seek help

- Increase SNAP enrollment among eligible military families
 - Educate military families about available resources and benefits
 - Exclude BAH from income calculations for SNAP eligibility
- Leverage understanding of the causes of food insecurity to address upstream areas of need
- In locations near military installations, increase service providers' outreach to identify active-duty families in need

About Stand SMART For Heroes

The Bob Woodruff Foundation is proud to partner with best-in-class scientific organizations to provide important research findings to the community of organizations that represent and serve post-9/11 veterans, service members, families, and caregivers. For more information on the Bob Woodruff Foundation and Stand SMART For Heroes, please see bobwoodrufffoundation.org.

About the Center for Strategic & International Studies and its Global Food Security Program

The CSIS Global Food Security Program is committed to reinvigorating U.S. leadership on food security, using the latest data to define the nature of current challenges, and proposing policy solutions that maximize the impact of U.S. investments at home and abroad. Learn more at www.csis.org/programs/-global-food-security-program.

About the Military Family Advisory Network

MFAN is the voice of the modern military family and the bridge that connects military families to the resources, people, and information they depend on to successfully navigate all phases of military life. Get involved at www.mfan.org.

