

Blue Star Families' Social Impact Research 2021:

The Diverse Experiences of Military & Veteran Families of Color

Executive Summary

Addressing disparities affecting military families of color is a matter of national security and necessary to ensure long-term military readiness.

Blue Star Families conducted this study in consonance with our mission to help military families thrive in order to strengthen the All Volunteer Force. Three in ten service members identify as a racial/ethnic minority and this number is expected to grow in the coming years: by 2027 most recruitable U.S. adults will be people of color. Their experiences within the military and the communities where they might serve affect the resilience, readiness, retention and recruiting of our All Volunteer Force. When considering the decrease in those eligible for military service among the U.S. population, the military must take significant steps to recruit service members of color and retain them and their families.

The findings from this groundbreaking study offer insights into how to improve experiences for family members of color and offer new ideas to increase the retention of service members of color.

Active-duty family respondents of color make decisions about military life based on perceptions of racism and fear for their family's safety in communities. Nearly half of active-duty (46%) family respondents of color report they have considered racial/ethnic discrimination in their installation ranking decisions and 42% consider concerns about safety due to their (or their family's) racial/ethnic identity. One in three active-duty (33%) and Veteran (34%) family respondents of color report they consider(ed) racial/ethnic discrimination in family conversations regarding whether or not to remain in service.

Active-duty family respondents of color report experiencing harassment and police profiling across all U.S. regions, both on and off installation, since January 2020. One in three active-duty family respondents of color report experiencing at least one incident of being threatened or harassed in their local civilian (33%) or military (29%) community since January 2020.

Active-duty family respondents report higher levels of trust in military law enforcement than civilian law enforcement, despite similar levels of reported police profiling across all racial/ethnic groups. More than half of active-duty family respondents residing in the Midwest, West, and South report fearing for their safety in their civilian community, due to their race or ethnicity at least once since January 2020, and more than four in 10 (43%) living in the Northeast say the same. One in three Black active-duty family respondents report being profiled by military or civilian law enforcement at least once since January 2020.

Military service provides many benefits to active-duty and Veteran families of color compared to civilians of color, however they often fall short of the benefits their white, non-Hispanic colleagues experience. Half (51%) of active-duty family respondents of color report that, in general, their family's financial stability is better than friends and family of the same racial/ethnic background who



are not serving in the military. Similarly, 41% of Veteran respondents of color indicate they are better able to find a job, compared to their non-white family/friends who are not connected to the military—a sentiment that is supported by national unemployment and earnings data. Racial/ethnic minority Veterans have lower unemployment rates and higher earnings than their non-Veteran peers, however they lag behind their white, non-Hispanic Veteran counterparts. Active-duty and Veteran family respondents of color also perceive better health care quality and overall health than their civilian counterparts, but encounter difficulty obtaining culturally competent health and mental health care providers. With access to education benefits, more than twice as many Black and Hispanic/Latino/a/x active-duty service members and Veteran respondents earn four-year degrees than their civilian counterparts.

Military spouses of color report a greater need for two household incomes than their white, non-Hispanic peers, and they experience substantially higher unemployment rates and lower earnings than their civilian counterparts. Exploratory analysis of preexisting datasets as part of this study find that active-duty military spouses of color are three times more likely to be unemployed, compared to civilian counterparts; they are unemployed at higher rates than white, non-Hispanic military spouses; they earn about 37% less than the total population; and female active-duty military spouses of color experience even worse employment outcomes (with median earnings 54-66% lower than the total population). Female, Hispanic/Latina military spouses experience the worst employment outcomes, earning \$21,200 less than the median earnings of the broader adult U.S. population.

The long-term implications of the COVID-19 pandemic are yet to be known, however this study suggests that many active-duty and Veteran respondents benefited from the health care available to them. When respondents were asked about the perception of their overall health since COVID-19 started, about four in

10 respondents of color from all military- and Veteran-connected subgroups (active-duty spouse, active-duty service member, Veteran, and spouse of a Veteran) report their overall health as being better than their non-military peers (36-41%). About the same proportion of all groups report the quality of their health care since the pandemic as better than their non-military affiliated peers (38-42%). On both measures, a greater proportion of Veteran respondents* indicate this to be the case.

Active-duty families of color report generally favorable attitudes and outcomes regarding their children's child care and education; however, some challenges remain. Active-duty family respondents of color report that a diverse staff is an important consideration when selecting child care providers and schools, but safety, staff quality, curriculum, and distance from home are more frequently cited as top attributes. Furthermore, while the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on children of color remain inconclusive, analysis of previously unpublished 2020 Military Family Lifestyle Survey data suggests few racial/ethnic disparities in children's education and child care situations among active-duty family respondents of color. Despite many positive indicators, open-ended responses reflect frustration and perceptions of discrimination within schools and child care settings for some parents of color. When asked to describe "policies or practices that are not culturally appropriate/do not feel culturally appropriate for [their] family," in their child care provider or school, the top three themes relate to disagreements with curriculum, perceived racial/ethnic discrimination, and lack of cultural awareness or acknowledgment of cultural differences.

A greater proportion of Veteran family respondents of color report needing resources than their active-duty counterparts; variation exists by race/ethnicity, and uncertainty about eligibility and access are top barriers. Among those with a need since January 2020, at least one in three active-duty and Veteran family respondents of color report not accessing food and nutrition assistance resources, employment and career development services, caregiving resources, and housing services or assistance despite needing them. The most salient needs (over half of respondents of color who needed them did not receive them) are food and nutrition assistance for Veteran family respondents of color, caregiving resources for Veteran family respondents of color, housing services or assistance for Veteran family respondents of color, and caregiving resources for Hispanic/Latino/a/x active-duty family respondents. Furthermore, a greater proportion of active-duty family respondents identifying as American Indian or Alaska Native report needing nearly every resource or service inquired about, compared to respondents from the other racial/ethnic groups

analyzed, which aligns with external research describing a historical general lack of availability of resources for these groups in the civilian population.

Military culture may exacerbate efforts to combat racial/ethnic discrimination in the workplace. Off-color jokes, racial slurs, and discriminatory comments that are (erroneously) used to build a sense of camaraderie negatively affect active-duty service members, spouses, and Veteran respondents of color. One in five active-duty service member, 14% of Veteran, and 10% of active-duty spouse respondents of color report having been subject to slurs or jokes at least five times since January 2020 in their military or Veteran community. Historically, to combat race-related issues that undermine unit cohesion, the military has embraced the concept that it is “colorblind” (e.g., “we all bleed blue”). However, most respondents of color view the military’s “colorblind” mentality as inaccurate and potentially corrosive and recognize racial equity work is both necessary and divisive.

Limitations: 2,731 respondents weighed in on this survey. For full demographic tables, please see the Methodology section of the full report. Interpretations of these findings should consider that analysis was often constrained by sample size, and this survey did not include a white, non-Hispanic comparison group. All comparisons to white, non-Hispanic active-duty or Veteran subgroups and/or civilians are drawn from separate data sources. For consistency, clarity, and legibility, detailed information about each statistic in this report is included in the relevant Finding’s endnotes within the main report (e.g., frequencies, question response rate, etc.). For additional information not answered in the endnotes or Methodology section, please contact survey@bluestarfam.org.

The military alone cannot solve the challenges this study reveals.

The challenges revealed by the study are reflective of challenges in American society, and in fact there are a number of areas in which the military out-performs society at-large in terms of positive outcomes for service members and families of color. Every organization, community, and individual which desires to support military and Veteran families will be less effective if they fail to consider the unique experiences of military and Veteran families of color in their efforts. To that end, the Blue Star Families team interviewed over 100 government, non-profit, and community stakeholders to identify and prioritize viable recommendations and best practices to begin moving forward. These are intended to help leaders prioritize action and start new conversations about how to create sustainable change.

Recommendations

Build Stronger Relationships and More Inclusive Military and Veteran Communities

1. **Be an Ally:** Speak up against racism and racist comments.
2. **Actively pursue** inclusive mentorship opportunities and integrate them into existing job requirements and programs to support all military- and Veteran-connected groups, including spouses and military children.
3. **Provide** military and Veteran service members and families opportunities to engage in difficult but productive conversations about race, ethnicity, and more.

Empower Civilian Communities to Support Military and Veteran Families of Color & Encourage Military Installations to Continually Engage Their Local Communities

1. **Allocate** additional resources to strengthen civil-military relationships at the local level and bolster support systems on installations.
2. **Collaborate** at the local level and proactively include military- and Veteran-connected families of color in local community conversations about diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI).
3. **Infuse** local civilian organizations with diverse talent and knowledge about military and Veteran communities by hiring more military spouses, Veterans, and spouses of Veterans of color.

Strengthen and Diversify the All-Volunteer Force

1. **Update** diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) plans to address challenges military dependents of color face and identify best practices for working with local civilian communities to solve them.
2. **Apply** best practices from other industries and sectors to support service members of color throughout their time in service.
3. **Assess** existing military entry paths and remove barriers to entry for prospective service members of color.
4. **Continue to diversify** ROTC scholarship recipients through broader recruitment, and assess program completion and commissioning rates among those enrolled in the program.

Improve Data Collection and Understanding

1. **Improve** existing data collection to identify and address disparities for service members, Veterans, and family members of color in a more reliable and timely fashion.
2. **Explore** how to use existing data to improve experiences for military and Veteran families of color.
3. **Deepen understanding** of issues identified in this report and others.

Best Practices

White Oak Collaborative Subcommittee on Racial Equity and Inclusion: Recommended Practices for Military and Veteran Serving Organizations

Detailed in depth and at

bluestarfam.org/racial-equity-initiative/collaboration

1. **Be intentional**
2. **Gather data**
3. **Implement** equitable and inclusive policies and practices
4. **Train** managers and staff
5. **Engage more and better:** Diversity brings diversity
6. **Review** progress and develop new goals

How the Private Sector & Philanthropic Foundations Can Support Military and Veteran Families of Color

1. **Highlight the importance** of serving military and Veteran families of color among existing grantees.
2. **Invest in organizations** that support and have a strong staff and board representation from military and/or Veteran families of color.
3. **Consider supplier diversity.**
4. **Break down walls** between existing initiatives within your company. Initiatives that support military or Veteran families, and initiatives that support DEI work should not be mutually exclusive or operate in silos.

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