

Finding 2

Service Member Career Progression

Active-duty service member respondents of color report challenges to their career progression and perceive racially/ethnically-based discrimination in evaluation and promotion.

The military has sought to address racial and ethnic inequities within the force over the past 60 years.¹ Despite some progress (see Historical Context), this needs assessment reveals that upward mobility remains a challenge for service members of color and female service members. Challenges present themselves in several ways: differences in racial/ethnic representation exist among service branches and in enlisted versus officer ranks (Figures 1 and 2); active-duty service member survey respondents* report their racial/ethnic background negatively impacts their career and impedes their professional experience; and focus group participants describe the impacts of perceived ethnic/racial discrimination on their own career and those of their peers. These real and perceived inequities in assignments, opportunities, and evaluations collectively work to undermine military efforts to recruit, retain, and promote service members of color, particularly within the officer corps.

While the racial/ethnic composition of the United States military as a whole is more diverse than the population of the United States, differences exist by race/ethnicity, service branch, and rank.

Although most racial/ethnic minority groups are underrepresented in the armed forces, active-duty Black service members are overrepresented (17%)² — a trend dating back to the Korean and Vietnam Wars³ — as are Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islanders.⁴ Racial/ethnic diversity varies amongst service branches. Black service members are overrepresented in the Army, Navy, and Air Force; however, they are underrepresented in the Marine Corps and Coast Guard.⁵ Hispanic service members are overrepresented in the Marine Corps.⁶ Additionally, racial/ethnic minorities are underrepresented in the Coast Guard.⁷



*Unless otherwise noted, respondents indicated having at least one racial/ethnic identity other than white.
The appearance of U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) visual information does not imply or constitute DoD endorsement.

Government data reveals the enlisted corps is more racially diverse than the officer corps⁸ in every service branch, and it maintains more diversity at each pay grade.⁹ In contrast, diversity in the officer corps is low and diminishes as rank increases.¹⁰ Black and Hispanic service members are overrepresented in the enlisted corps and underrepresented in the officer corps¹¹ (Figures 1 & 2), with Hispanic service member retention decreasing with rank in both the officer and enlisted corps. These population representation statistics are foundational to interpreting other findings discussed throughout the report and suggest there is room for improvement in recruiting and retaining racially and ethnically diverse officers, and retaining Hispanic enlisted personnel.

Figure 1: Enlisted Racial/Ethnic Diversity by Service Branch

% of enlisted service members of color (2019)
 Source: 2019 Population Representation in the Military Services report²⁹

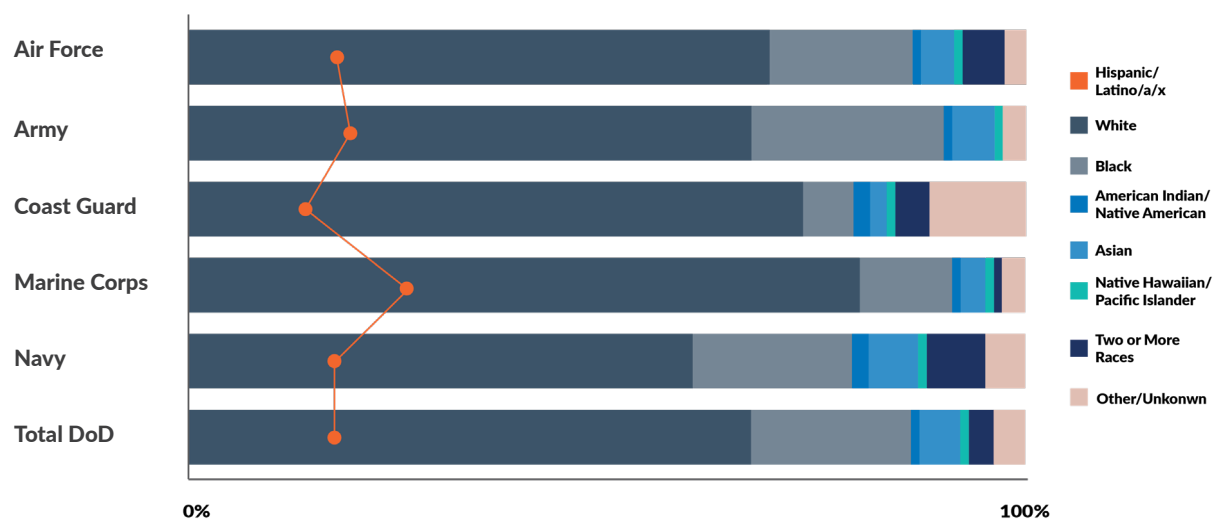
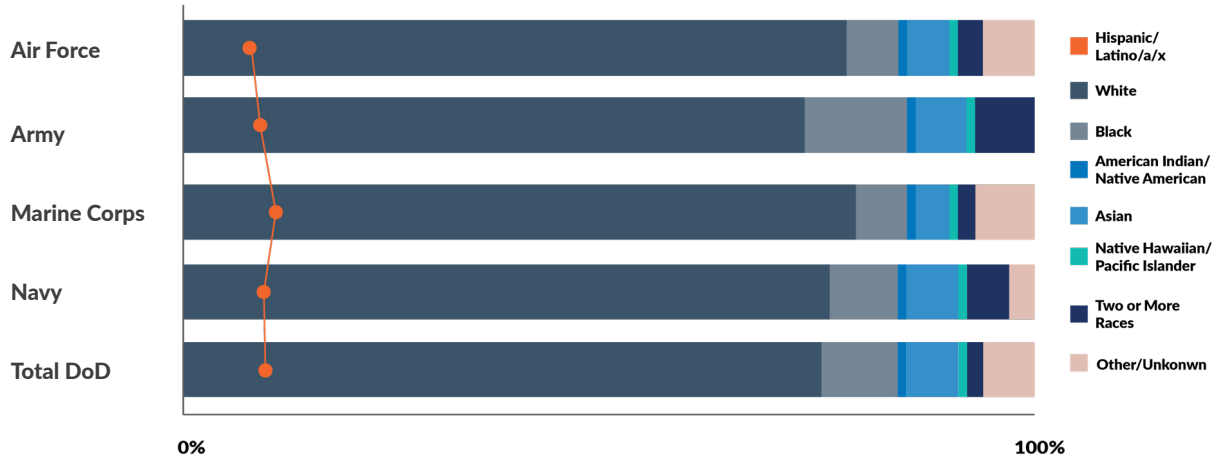


Figure 2: Officer Racial/Ethnic Diversity by Service Branch

% of officers of color (2019)
 Source: 2019 Population Representation in the Military Services report³⁰



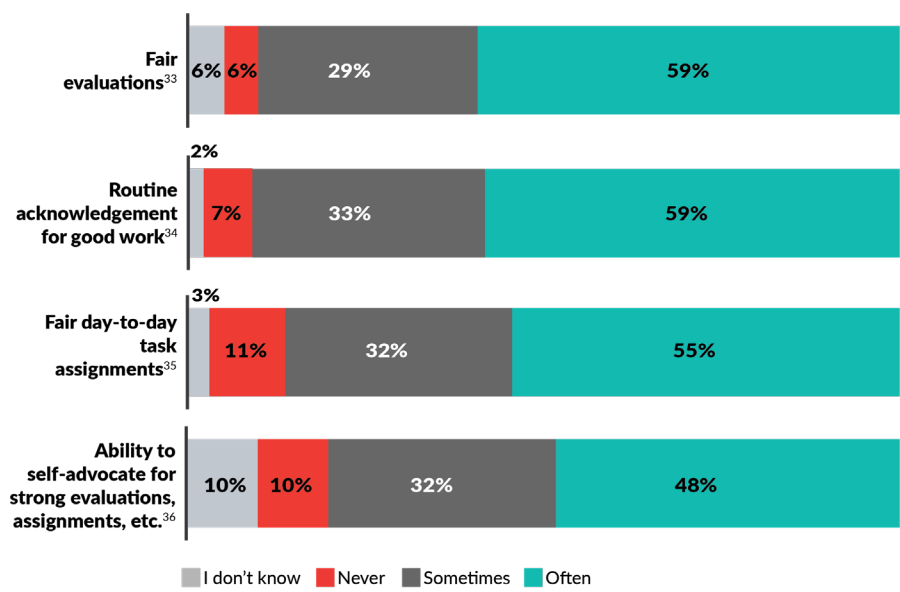
*Unless otherwise noted, respondents indicated having at least one racial/ethnic identity other than white.

Active-duty service members of color, particularly Black service members, perceive their race or ethnicity impacts their ability to advance at work.

Among respondents to the 2020 Military Family Lifestyle Survey,¹² 26% of active-duty service member respondents of color* reported experiencing racial/ethnic discrimination in their unit or command compared to 4% of their white, non-Hispanic colleagues; 21% reported experiencing it in promotion or career advancement opportunities compared to 6% of their white, non-Hispanic colleagues.¹³ This is consistent with findings from this survey: 39% of active-duty service member respondents* report their race/ethnicity “significantly” or “slightly” hurt their ability to get ahead at work.¹⁴ Among the racial/ethnic groups analyzed, a notably higher proportion of Black active-duty service member respondents (48%) indicate this to be the case.¹⁵ More than twice as many Hispanic active-duty service member respondents (11%) report not knowing whether or not their race/ethnicity had influenced their ability to get ahead at work, compared to other racial/ethnic groups.¹⁶ As discussed in Finding 2, this uncertainty can cause additional stress.

While the majority of service member respondents* report they “often” received fair evaluations, fair day-to-day task assignments, and routine acknowledgment for good work, some report that they “never” or only “sometimes” believed this to be the case (Figure 3). More than one in 10 active-duty service member respondents* report that, considering their current immediate supervisor (or whomever administers each of the following), they “never” obtain preferred assignments (13%). Nearly the same proportion say the same of their ability to self-advocate for strong evaluations, assignments, etc. (10%).¹⁷ This dynamic is often described by focus group participants and in open-ended responses as feeling they do not have equal access to a network granting them the same opportunities that others receive without exerting extra effort, compared to their white, non-Hispanic (and often male) colleagues.¹⁸

Figure 3: Frequency of Career-Enhancing Opportunities Under Current Supervisor
% of active-duty service member respondents*



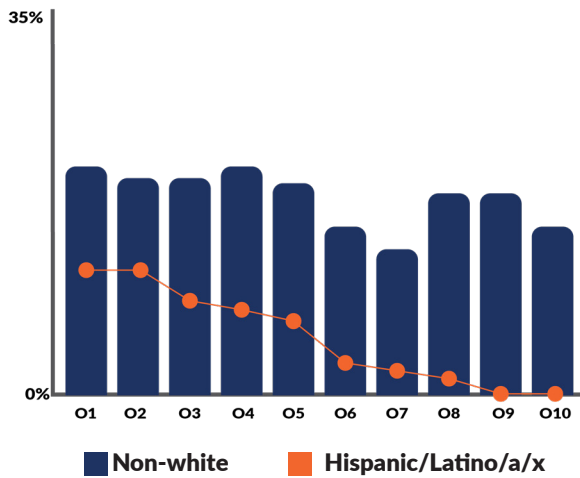
*Unless otherwise noted, respondents indicated having at least one racial/ethnic identity other than white.

Retaining service members of color is paramount to diversifying military leadership, especially within the officer corps (Figure 4). This study did not reveal perceptions of blatant racial/ethnic discrimination in promotion. However, the literature review revealed one study that found among Army officers, “a correlation exists between racial bias and negative impacts on Black U.S. Army officers' performance evaluations, promotions, and their careers.”¹⁹ While promotion is only one component of retaining racially/ethnically-diverse service members, addressing promotion disparities has been the focus of recent reform efforts within the Department of Defense.²⁰ The long-term efficacy of practices such as removing photos from promotion board packets²¹ designed to promote diversity remains unclear,²² and efforts to improve retention for service members of color continue.

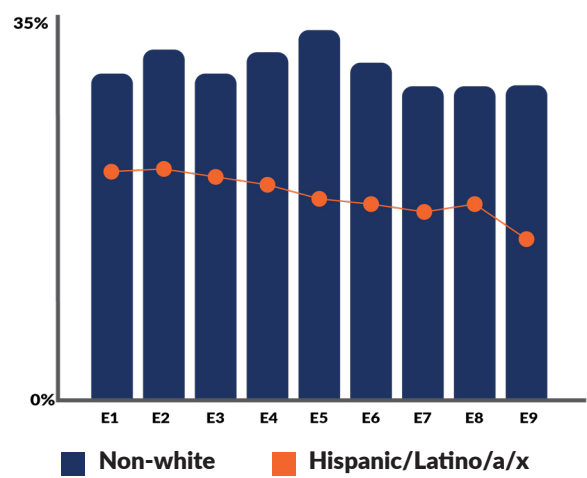
Figure 4: Retention is stronger among enlisted than the officer corps

Source: 2019 Population Representation in the Military Services report

% of DOD officer corps (2019)³¹



% of DOD enlisted corps (2019)³²



Retention of racially and ethnically diverse officers generally **decreases with rank**.

Racial diversity is relatively stable across ranks in the enlisted corps, but **Hispanic/Latino/a/x retention decreases with rank**.



I had to fight to stay in or get opportunities that often the good old boys got.

-Hispanic/Latino/a/x Veteran

*Unless otherwise noted, respondents indicated having at least one racial/ethnic identity other than white.

Active-duty service member respondents desire mentorship that includes, but is not limited to, professional development

DoD diversity plans reveal varying levels of “mentorship” as a strategy the service branches intend to use to improve diversity throughout the force.²³ Mentorship opportunities currently exist, and the large majority (77%) of active-duty survey respondents* report they have had a formal or informal mentor that supported their career progression.²⁴ However, survey results highlight areas where they can be improved and institutionalized to better meet the needs of this population. Most (64%) active-duty service member respondents* report desiring some form of mentorship,²⁵ including but not limited to professional development.

Among those active-duty service member respondents* who desire a mentor, the majority (58%) state they would like a mentor in the area of “employment, career exploration, professional development, or leadership development,” followed by “family, life/social skills” (48%)²⁶. Furthermore, 60% would find having one with the same professional interest valuable, 49% seek a person of the same racial/ethnic identity, and 38% would like a mentor of the same gender.²⁷ Substantial differences exist among active-duty family respondents²⁸ based on racial/ethnic identity, providing additional insight into mentorship program implementation priorities.



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SPOTLIGHT ON:

MILITARY CULTURE

Active-duty service member respondents of color report having a strong sense of belonging to the military and other positive career experiences



8 in 10 Active-duty service member respondents*

Say being in the military has had a positive influence on their professional growth³⁷

7 in 10



I am treated with respect by colleagues³⁸

7 in 10



I feel a sense of belonging³⁹

7 in 10



I am a valued member⁴⁰

6 in 10

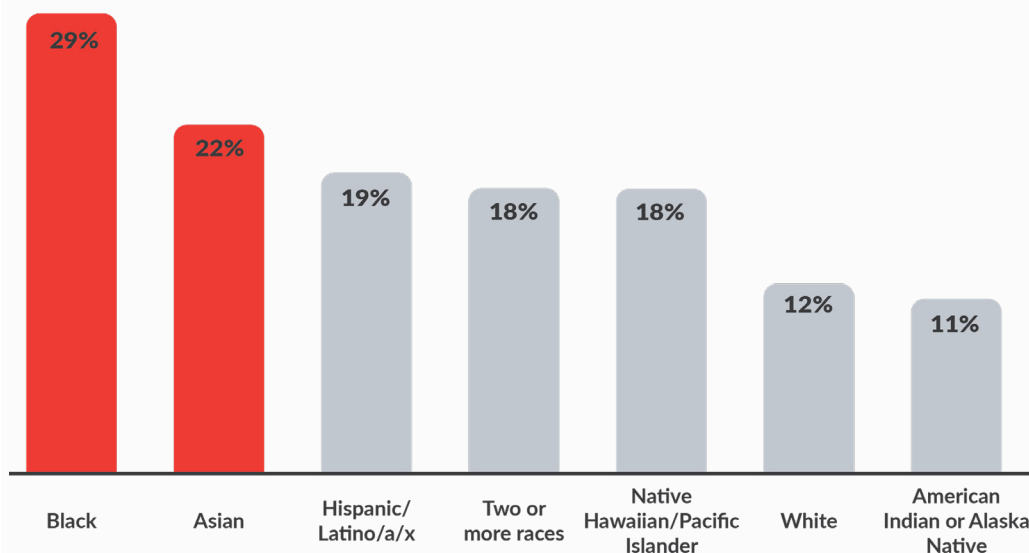


I am able to perform to my full potential⁴¹

Despite positive experiences of service, Veterans and active-duty service members of color also experience high levels of discrimination

Black and Asian service members report discrimination most frequently⁴³

Source: 2017 DOD Workplace and Equal Opportunity Survey of Active-Duty Members

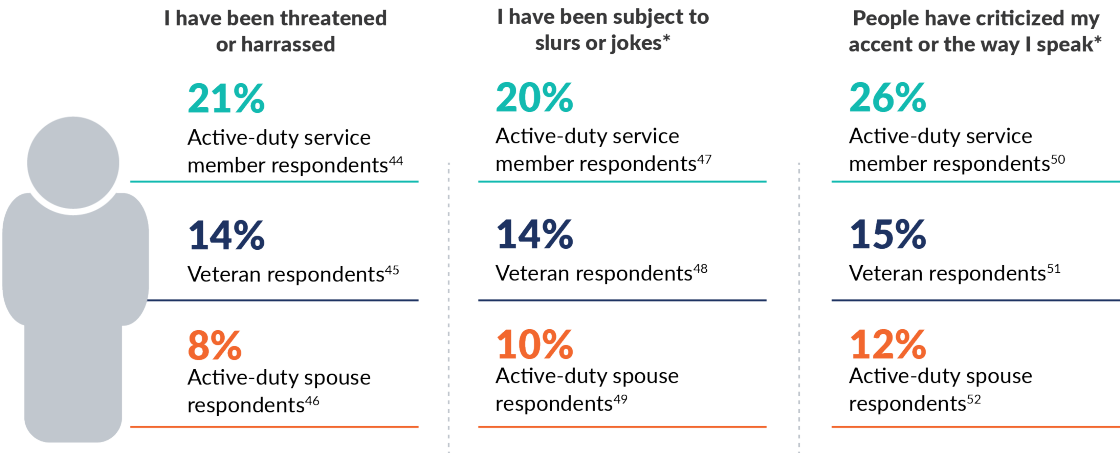


Half of Veteran respondents* and **41%** of active-duty service member respondents* experienced **racially/ethnically-based discrimination or harassment by peers during their military service.**⁴²

*Unless otherwise noted, respondents indicated having at least one racial/ethnic identity other than white.

Off-color jokes, racial slurs, and discriminatory comments that are (erroneously) used to build a sense of camaraderie negatively affect active-duty service members of color.

Experienced in military/Veteran community 5+ times since January 2020



“ At first [being called derogatory nicknames] was funny you know, but then when it just drags on and on and on and the jokes keep coming and it just gets really, really old and after a while you start to really question.

-Hispanic/Latino/a/x Veteran⁵³

Active-duty service members of color experience racial/ethnic discrimination at work, sometimes perceiving it to affect their career.

Source: 2020 MFLS



*Unless otherwise noted, respondents indicated having at least one racial/ethnic identity other than white.

Active-duty service member and Veteran respondents* report negative outcomes from reporting and/or speaking out

Retaliation is common for respondents* who do speak up

30% of active-duty service member respondents*
43% Veteran respondents* Report they were **retaliated against for standing up for something**.⁵⁶

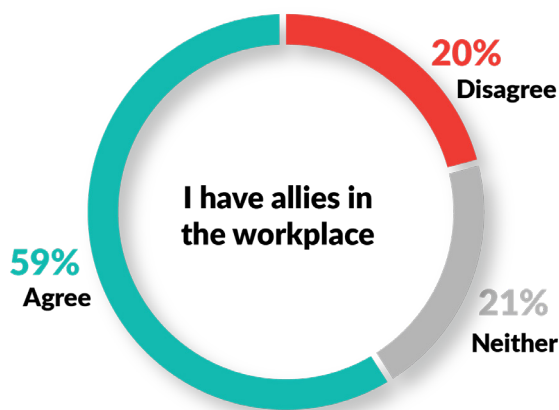
Top three reported consequences of “standing up for something”:⁵⁷

- 1 Reassigned or relocated
- 2 Unfair treatment or discrimination
- 3 Verbal harassment or punitive taskings

ALLIES in the workplace

While perceptions of allyship in the workplace are high among active-duty service member respondents*...

% of active-duty member respondents* who report having allies in the workplace⁵⁸



SPEAK UP

...the majority would like to see more of their white, non-Hispanic colleagues, friends, and acquaintances⁵⁹

- 1 Call out inappropriate comments or behavior **57%**
- 2 Get involved with diversity and inclusion efforts **53%**
- 3 Advocate to fix issues caused by structural/systemic racism **49%**

*Unless otherwise noted, respondents indicated having at least one racial/ethnic identity other than white.

Finding 2 Endnotes

- ¹ Department of Defense (2020)
- ² Seventeen percent of service members are Black compared to the Black population in the United States (13%); United States Census Bureau (2019); Military OneSource. (n.d.)
- ³ Military OneSource. (n.d.)
- ⁴ United States Census 2019 population estimates: 76% White alone, 13% Black, 1.3% American Indian and Alaska Native alone, 6% Asian alone, >1% Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander alone, 19% Hispanic (United States Census, 2019). Active-Duty demographics: 69% White, 17% Black or African American, 1.1% American Indian or Alaska Native, 5% Asian, 1.2% Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, 17% Hispanic; Military OneSource. (n.d.)
- ⁵ Council on Foreign Relations (2020); The Space Force was not included in this analysis.
- ⁶ Council on Foreign Relations (2020)
- ⁷ Nelson (2021)
- ⁸ Department of Defense (2020)
- ⁹ Department of Defense (2020)
- ¹⁰ Notable underrepresentation in Black E5 and E6 promotions, Asian American E8-E9 promotions, and Native American E5-E7 promotions. Asian American promoted below the average to all ranks. Black promoted below average rate to E5-E7, but above average E8-E9. Hispanic/Latino promoted below average for all ranks except E7. Pacific Islander promoted below the average to E5-E6. Native American promoted below the average rate to E5-E8 and above average to E9. Black, Hispanic/Latino and Asian American officers underrepresented for O5 and O6 promotions; (The Inspector General Department of the Air Force (2021).
- ¹¹ Department of Defense (2020)
- ¹² When providing race/ethnicity in the 2020 MFLS, the question was posed as a single-select question instead of a multi-select question.
- ¹³ Blue Star Families (2020). Comparisons to white, non-Hispanic active-duty service members was not published in the 2020 MFLS report. Contact survey@bluestarfam.org for further information.
- ¹⁴ n=290
- ¹⁵ Percentage of active-duty service member respondents reporting "My racial/ethnic identity has 'significantly' or 'slightly' hurt my ability to get ahead at work": 48% Black (n=145), 28% Hispanic (n=80), 38% American Indian or Alaskan Native (n=48), 36% Asian (n=45). Analyzed racial/ethnic groups with at least 45 respondents to this question.
- ¹⁶ Percentage of active-duty service member respondents reporting "I don't know" when asked whether their racial/ethnic identity has impacted their ability to get ahead at work: 11% Hispanic (n=80), compared to 5% of Black (n=145), 4% of Asian (n=45), and 2% of American Indian / Alaska Native (n=48) respondents.
- ¹⁷ When asked "Considering your current immediate supervisor (or whomever administers each of the following), to what extent do you believe you receive ..." ("preferred assignments" n=240; "ability to self-advocate strong evaluations, assignments, etc." n=239)
- ¹⁸ Research by McDonald and Day underscores continued gender and race based inequality in the labor market is influenced by social connections (social capital) which provide individuals with resources and which further their careers.
- ¹⁹ McClellan (2020)
- ²⁰ Department of Defense (2020); Secretary of the Air Force (2019); United States Army (2020); United States Coast Guard (2020); United States Navy (2021); Additionally, the Department of the Army Career Engagement Survey First Annual Report revealed "fairness of Army promotions" was not a top reason to leave overall, but it was a top reason to leave for four of the demographic subgroups examined: junior enlisted (#1 reason to leave), senior enlisted (#3 reason to leave), Black/African American SMs (#5 reason to leave), and American Indian/Alaskan Native and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander (AI/AN|NH|PI) SMs (#5 reason to leave); Vie, Trivette, & Lathrop (2021)
- ²¹ In 2020, then Secretary of Defense Mark Esper ordered the removal of all photos from promotion board packets; Sisk (2020)
- ²² As of this writing, no official reports have been made publicly available regarding whether or not these efforts are succeeding, and public statements suggest conflicting data across the service branches. For example, during a roundtable in 2021, Chief of Naval Personnel Vice Admiral John Nowell Jr. stated, "we can show you where, as you look at diversity, it went down with photos removed" (Toropin, 2021); U.S. Army commented on a public Facebook post on October 7, 2021, stating the following: "When we removed photos and names from promotion packets it did two things--it allowed for the merits of the candidates to be the focus and coincidentally made the

group chosen more diverse. These things are first identified and coordinated from events like these listening sessions." U.S. Army (2021)

²³ Department of Defense (2020); Secretary of the Air Force (2019); United States Army (2020); United States Coast Guard (2020); United States Navy (2021)

²⁴ n=253

²⁵ n=245

²⁶ n=156

²⁷ n=150

²⁸ Response rates were too low to analyze data for active-duty service members only.

²⁹ Figures derived from the 2020 Demographics Interactive Profile of the Military Community: Active Duty Members. Space Force does not have demographic information available and is not included. This report is produced by Military OneSource, data source is the DMDC Active Duty Military Personnel Master File (September 2020). Coast Guard figures derived from the Fiscal Year 2019 Population Representation in the Military Services (Pop Rep): Table E-13 Coast Guard Active Component Enlisted Members, FY19: by Gender and Race/Ethnicity.

³⁰ Figures derived from the 2020 Demographics Interactive Profile of the Military Community: Active Duty Members. Space Force does not have demographic information available and is not included. This report is produced by Military OneSource, data source is the DMDC Active Duty Military Personnel Master File (September 2020).

³¹ Figure derived from the Fiscal Year 2019 Population Representation in the Military Services (Pop Rep): Table B-39. Active Component Commissioned Officer Corps, FY19: by Paygrade, Service, Gender, and Race/Ethnicity, using the figures for Males/Females. All non-white racial groups were aggregated to simplify analysis. This report is produced by the Office of the Undersecretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness, Resources and Force Readiness division.

³² Figure derived from 2019 Pop Rep: Table B-37. Active Component Enlisted Members, FY19: by Pay Grade, Service, Gender, and Race/Ethnicity, using the figures for Males/Females. All non-white racial groups were aggregated to simplify analysis.

³³ n=242

³⁴ n=240

³⁵ n=238

³⁶ n=239

³⁷ n=224

³⁸ n=224

³⁹ n=226

⁴⁰ n=224

⁴¹ n=225

⁴² n=347 Veteran of color respondents; n=258 active-duty service member of colors respondents

⁴³ The 2017 Workplace and Equal Opportunity Survey of Active Duty Members reports Black (31.2%) and Asian (23.3%) members were more likely to indicate experiencing Racial/Ethnic Harassment/ Discrimination than White members (12.7%). Of members who indicated experiencing racial/ethnic harassment/discrimination within the past 12 months, 34% of members indicated they thought about getting out of their Service and 7% indicated they requested a transfer. Black (14%) members were more likely to indicate they requested a transfer than other active duty members, whereas White (3%) members were less likely. Overall Total Minority (10%) members were also more likely to indicate they requested a transfer than White members. Additionally, 10% indicated experiencing professional retaliation and 14% indicated experiencing social retaliation as a result of the one situation. Collectively, 18% indicated experiencing at least one type of retaliation as a result of the one situation. Finally, 42% indicated that one situation was corrected regardless of whether or not they reported it.

⁴⁴ n=183

⁴⁵ n=218

⁴⁶ n=351

⁴⁷ n=186

⁴⁸ n=224

⁴⁹ n=367

⁵⁰ n=182

⁵¹ n=219

⁵² n=343

⁵³ This experience highlights how this form of camaraderie-building may create a culture permissive of racial/ethnic

discrimination, as has been found in the Army with regard to the relationship between exposure to repeated sexual jokes and sexual harassment. While camaraderie is critical to unit cohesion and mission success, this permissive culture may also be impacting discrimination incident reporting, perceptions of retaliation, and important military family life decisions (see Finding 4); Brooks (2018); A recent Army study on sexual harassment and gender discrimination found that soldiers who experienced harassment typically also experienced repeated sexual jokes and offensive or persistent discussions of sex (Calkins, et. al, 2021).

⁵⁴ When providing race/ethnicity in the 2020 MFLS, the question was posed as a single-select question instead of a multi-select question.

⁵⁵ Blue Star Families (2020). Comparisons to white, non-Hispanic active-duty service members was not published in the 2020 MFLS report. Contact survey@bluestarfam.org for further information.

⁵⁶ n=236 active-duty service member of color respondents; n=317 Veteran of color respondents

⁵⁷ Respondents who reported they had experienced retaliation for standing up for something were asked to describe the situation in open-ended responses (n=125).

⁵⁸ n=284

⁵⁹ n=284; Question text: Which of the following "allyship" actions would you like to see more of your white, non-Hispanic colleagues, friends, and acquaintances take to support you? Select all that apply.

Finding 2 References

Unless otherwise noted, images are sourced from Blue Star Families Stock Photos, DVIDSHub.net, Unsplash.com. The appearance of U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) visual information does not imply or constitute DoD endorsement.

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