



Military Family Lifestyle Survey



Female Service Members

Comprehensive Report | **2024**

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Female service members are significantly more likely to recommend military service than their male peers; 1 in 2 agree that being part of the military community is an important part of their self-image, notably higher than their male counterparts.

With the growing number of women joining the All-Volunteer Force,¹ and the largest portion of currently recruitable people being women,² the perspective of female service members is more important than ever. While women currently make up just 18% of the active-duty force,³ equal proportions of female and male service members^a responded to this

year's survey (49% female and 49% male), allowing for comparison across their responses. In this sample, the majority of female service members are married (75%), though at slightly lower rates than their male peers (82%), and 8% are dual military (married to another service member), compared to just 3% of male service members. A majority of female service members (70%) report having one or more children under 20 years of age who live with them, similar to 66% of their male peers.

Female service members are proud of their military service, and consider it an important part of their identity, notably more than their male peers.

Female service members are also significantly more likely to recommend service to a young family member than their male counterparts (M=5.4 versus M=4.5; Figure 1).

However, female service members report greater concerns with child care, housing challenges, and family building concerns. A notably greater proportion of female active-duty service member

respondents report BAH/off-base housing and child care challenges as a top issue (Figure 2). Half (49%) of female service members report BAH/off-base housing as a top concern, compared to 40% of male service members. Consistent with previous findings that female service members face challenges balancing military and family life, particularly around child care,⁴⁻⁷ 34% of female service members report child care is

Figure 1: Mean Likelihood to Recommend Military Service to a Young Family Member, by Gender

Active-duty service member respondents



Scale 0-10: 0 = Very unlikely; 10 = Very likely

Feel pride in their accomplishments during their military service



Agree that being part of the military community is an important part of their self-image^b

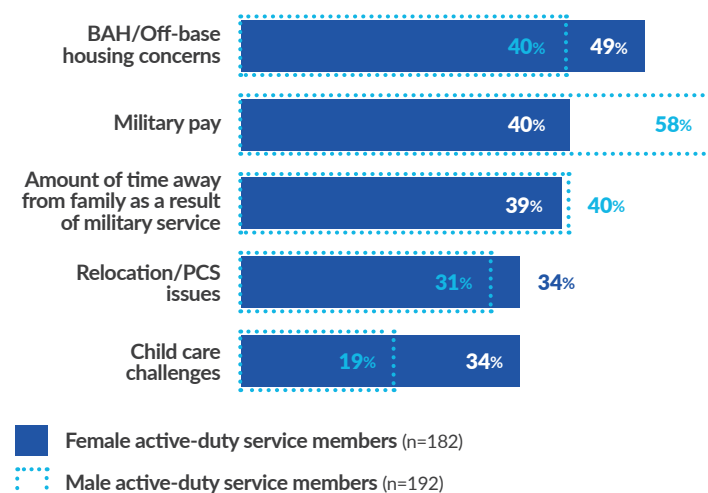


^a Those selecting "transgender woman" were combined with those who selected "woman" and those who selected "transgender man" were combined with those who selected "man." Two percent of respondents selected "non-binary/genderfluid/genderqueer" or "gender identity not listed" and were not included in this analysis.

^b Respondents were asked to scale their level of agreement (Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly Agree) with the following statement: "Being a part of the military community is an important part of my self-image."

Figure 2: Top Military Life Issues, by Gender

Active-duty service member respondents



Question text: Please select up to five military life issues that most concern you right now.

a top concern, compared to 19% of their male peers, even though the proportion of service members with children is similar (70% for females and 66% for males).

While many of the reasons for leaving service are similar for male and female service members, there are some notable differences (Table 1). Twice as many female service members (26%) note child care challenges as a primary reason they would leave military service, compared to male service members (12%), and nearly twice as many note family building challenges (16% versus 9%).

1 in 4 female service members (26%) report that “child care challenges” are a primary reason they would leave military service **(compared to 12% of male service members)**.

Table 1: Reasons for Leaving Military Service, by Gender
Active-duty service member respondents

	Female Active-Duty Service Members (n=189)	Male Active-Duty Service Members (n=194)
Military retirement	47%	52%
The military lifestyle did not allow me sufficient time with my family	38%	41%
Feel more valued and/or able to earn more money in the private sector	35%	44%
Lost faith or trust in unit/command leadership	31%	27%
Concerns about the impact of military life on my child(ren)'s education	28%	30%
Child care challenges	26%	12%
Lost faith or trust in political leadership	23%	25%
Concerns about the mental health of my family	22%	24%
Lack of military career advancement opportunities	19%	21%
Challenges in building my family	16%	9%

Question text: What would be the primary reason(s) for you/your service member choosing to leave the military? Please select your top five choices.

Limited availability at Child Development Centers (CDCs) may disproportionately impact female service members. Women often suffer professionally due to being the main caregiver in the home.⁸ For female service members who have children, the ability to find and maintain child care can impact their ability to continue military service.⁹ A greater proportion of female service members who need child care report they need that child care in order to work, compared to their male counterparts (59% versus 41%).

Female service members who need child care at least occasionally more commonly use CDCs, compared to their male peers (42% versus 28%),^c so staffing shortages¹⁰ or limitations in scheduled availability at these child care centers may disproportionately impact female service members (Table 2). Female service members are less likely than their male peers to use off-base child care (28% versus 37% of male peers), or use more informal resources, such as hiring a private babysitter (28% versus 40% of male peers) or having a friend or family member help with child care when needed (25% versus 34% of male peers). The DOD and Congress are continuing to work on ways to improve child care on installations and overall for military families.^{11,12}

Table 2: Most Commonly Used Child Care Option/Resources

Active-duty service member respondents with a need for child care

	Female Active-Duty Service Members (n=79)	Male Active-Duty Service Members (n=65)
On-base/installation child care in a Child Development Center (CDC)	42%	28%
Off-base, private child care center	28%	37%
I hire an occasional babysitter when needed.	28%	40%
I use before and after school care.	28%	22%
I have a family member or a friend that helps me.	25%	34%
Other ^d	8%	2%
I have a regular child care provider that comes to my home or who lives with me (e.g., a nanny or au pair).	8%	9%
On-base/installation in-home child care (Family Child Care Center)	5%	12%
I use drop-in child care centers when needed.	4%	5%
Off-base, in-home child care	3%	7%

Question text: You indicated you need at least occasional child care. Please select the three child care options/resources that you use most commonly.

^c Respondents chose the top three child care options/resources they use most commonly.

^d The main takeaways for active-duty service members who answered "other" were they take their children to work with them, they cannot afford child care and make do without, or their children are in preschool.

Concerns about balancing military service and family obligations may also impact female service members before they become parents. Over the past several years, we have seen several initiatives implemented allowing female service members to better balance family needs with their service to their country. These positive changes include 12 weeks of flexible parental leave,¹³ reimbursement for up to \$1,000 of expenses for service members who are breastfeeding,¹⁴ allowing women a full year to recover body composition standards after pregnancy, including those who experience perinatal loss.¹⁵ Yet, even with these breakthrough initiatives, three-quarters (76%) of female service members who do not currently have children (20 years or younger) said they have **intentionally delayed** having children due to their military lifestyle. For those who have chosen to serve and have children, child care availability and affordability challenges, low satisfaction with military obstetrics,¹⁶ ongoing staffing shortages at Military Treatment Facilities and off installations,¹⁷ and many other issues have yet to be resolved.



76% of female service members who desire to have a child but do not currently, have **intentionally delayed having children** due to their military lifestyle (n=25).

Understanding and addressing the specific needs of female service members is key to maintaining women's military service participation in the future. This is crucial considering female service members were more likely to continue military service for the next five years than their male counterparts; 31% of female service members said they are unlikely to leave service in the next five years compared to male service members (24%). Nearly half (48%) of female service members also said if they were given the opportunity to terminate their service without repercussions that they would be unlikely to do so, compared to 42% of male service members.

Knowing how important it is to retain and recruit female service members, the individual branches have begun to take a holistic look at the experiences of female service members with respect to menstruation, child bearing, physical fitness, and uniforms. Programs like the Navy's Women's Initiatives Team (WIT) "... aims to foster more inclusive warfighting teams while improving recruitment and retention across the fleet."¹⁸ Navy-WIT has worked to successfully address undue burdens for female sailors including the

removal of the postpartum “wellness” physical fitness assessment requirement¹⁹ and updating female uniform policies.²⁰ Additionally, Navy researchers²¹ are looking for innovative ways to address menstruation-related supply needs for sailors at sea, where storage space for personal items is severely limited. Continued acknowledgement of the female service member experience, including championing their involvement in efforts to address their challenges, is likely to produce positive returns in both the short and long term.

Limitations

Female service member respondents were oversampled and represent 49% of the active-duty service member respondents, although women make up 18% of the military.²² Those who selected “Non-binary/Gender Fluid/Genderqueer” or “gender identity not listed” were removed from calculations to respect their gender identity. While we use “female” and “male” interchangeably with “woman” and “man,” we recognize they are distinct and separate descriptions. This finding does not cover all issues that impact female service members, such as military sexual trauma, sexual assault, and harassment, which are critical issues for many female service members, but outside the scope of this finding.

Recommendations



Congress

- Authorize service women and dependents to switch their TRICARE health plans at pregnancy to allow for choice and flexibility of care in the community instead of only accessing care at Military Treatment Facilities.
- Pass the Improving Access to Maternal Health for Military and Dependent Moms Act to require the U.S. Department of Defense to provide Congress with a comprehensive study on access to maternal health care within the Military Health Service for service members and their dependents.²³



DOD

- Inform, expedite, and expand the Career Intermission Program (CIP) application process for service members to allow a pause in service to meet their needs, whether it is personal, professional, or educational.
- Ensure recruitment messaging and tactics are inclusive of females.
- **Ensure that female service members have the proper fitting uniforms, personal protective equipment (PPE), and combat gear.***
- **Allow for the expansion of nontraditional care at CDCs for dual active-duty or single parent active-duty families.***

*More information in Recommendations Chapter of Comprehensive Report

Female service members often bear the primary responsibility for obtaining child care. Please see the Spouse Employment and Child Care Finding for recommendations.

Endnotes

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