PSYCHEDELICS AND VETERAN HEALTH CARE

FOOD INSECURITY in the U.S. armed forces

Making room for MORE HOUSING in New York City
Preparing the Federal Response to Advanced Technologies

“Unless society puts in effective guardrails, broadly capable AI systems could hasten the design and proliferation of bioweapons, cyberweapons, nuclear weapons …, and other threats not yet conceived,” warned senior information scientist Jeff Alstott in testimony presented before the U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, Subcommittee on Emerging Threats and Spending Oversight in September 2023.

Ensuring That Government Use of Technology Serves the Public

The U.S. government frequently deploys emerging technologies that directly affect Americans. But government use of emerging technologies to keep Americans safe is subject to several important considerations, including an accurate assessment of the benefits and risks of the technology and the public’s trust that these rapidly advancing technologies are used responsibly.

Food Insecurity and Wildfire Risk Are Connected

The recent wildfires in Maui highlight the link between food insecurity and wildfire prevention. A significant decrease in the amount of active farming and ranching land has contributed to the fragility of the island’s food supply. This shift has also increased wildfire risk by propelling the unchecked growth of invasive, fire-prone grasses. But there are ways to address this.

Preventing the Federal Response to Advanced Technologies

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Climate Adaptation Strategies for National Critical Functions

National critical functions are government and private-sector functions so vital that their disruption, corruption, or dysfunction would have a debilitating effect on security, the economy, public health, and safety. The Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency asked the Homeland Security Operational Analysis Center—a federally funded research and development center operated by RAND—to develop a risk management framework and to assess the risk of climate change to the nation’s most vulnerable critical functions.
Food Insecurity
A problem with no simple answers for service members and their families

Psychedelics and Mental Health Care
What policymakers need to know as interest in therapeutic uses grows

Making Housing More Affordable
What New York City can do to create 300,000 new homes

Research Briefly
School police, Russian escalation, and more

Commentary
The failure of Israel’s Gaza strategy

Giving
A $1 million gift creates a RAND chair in gun policy

U.S. Army SFC Ulisses Bautista helps deliver food at a food pantry for service members at MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa, Florida. Bautista and his family experienced food insecurity when they moved to Tampa and had to pay for a hotel for several months before they found housing. Their nonprofit organization, the Bautista Project, now helps people experiencing homelessness in the Tampa area and provides a monthly food pantry for military families.
Improving Behavioral Health Care for Veterans and Service Members

U.S. military veterans and service members deserve effective, high-quality health care—and not just from the nearest VA hospital or on-post clinic. In a recent report, RAND researchers looked at what health care providers in the community can do to assess and improve their care.

The report focused on organizations that provide behavioral health care for conditions like depression or post-traumatic stress disorder. Researchers identified two approaches those organizations can take to ensure they are providing high-quality care to service members, veterans, and their families.

- They should consider establishing a set of quality measures to track and improve patient care. Those could include average wait times, whether patients get timely access to therapy, and whether their symptoms improve. Such quality measures are the foundation of a “learning health system,” the researchers wrote—one that is always looking for opportunities to improve.

- They should also consider transitioning to measurement-based care. That means using short, standardized questionnaires to assess every patient at every visit; going over the results with the patient; and then working with the patient to revise the treatment plan as needed. The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs has become a leader in measurement-based care. But some community-based organizations and providers have been slow to adopt it, possibly because they lack training or are worried about administrative burdens.

RAND’s report provides an introduction to how quality measures and measurement-based care can help community-based health care providers better serve their patients. But it also provides a guide to implementing those approaches, with a set of ready-made quality measures and step-by-step instructions for providing measurement-based care. Its purpose, researchers wrote, is to ensure veterans, service members, and their families continue to receive high-quality behavioral health care, regardless of where they go to get it.
Support for Extremist Groups and Ideologies Among Veterans

Military veterans in a recent RAND survey were much less likely to support extremist groups than Americans in general. But nearly one in five said political violence may be necessary for “true American patriots” to save the country. Media reports and some past studies have highlighted the risk that radicalized veterans could pose if they joined extremist groups. The Pentagon has warned in recent years that such groups are working to pull veterans into their ranks. But little research had looked closely at whether veterans are really any more likely than other Americans to align themselves with extremists.

Researchers surveyed nearly 1,000 veterans to put some actual numbers to the issue. They phrased their questions to match those asked in previous surveys of nonveterans. Less than 1 percent of the veterans said they had a somewhat or favorable view of White supremacist groups. By comparison, one 2021 poll found that around 3 percent of all registered voters have a very favorable view of such groups, and 4 percent have a somewhat favorable view of them.

The veterans were also less likely to support the right-wing Proud Boys (4.2 percent versus 9 percent in the public at large) or the left-wing Antifa movement (5.5 percent versus 10 percent).

The veterans were more similar to the American public at large when the researchers asked about specific extremist ideologies. Just under 18 percent said they completely or mostly believe that political violence might be justified to save the country. A 2022 survey estimated that 19 percent of American adults completely or mostly agree.

Around 29 percent of the veterans said they believe powerful people are trying to replace native-born Americans with immigrants and people of color who share their political views. Around 34 percent of Americans at large say they completely or mostly believe that idea, often known as the Great Replacement theory.

And around 13.5 percent of the veterans said they completely or mostly agree that the government, media, and financial worlds are controlled by Satan-worshiping pedophiles. Around 17 percent of the American public voices complete or partial support for that idea, a hallmark of the QAnon conspiracy theory.

The findings should undermine fears that the veteran community poses a higher-than-average risk of radicalization, researchers wrote. But RAND’s study also underscores the need for more research and better understanding of what drives radicalization, both in and out of the ranks.

A majority of the veterans who said they were open to political violence did not align with any specific extremist group, the researchers noted. That could mean they are more resistant to being recruited by militant groups—or more vulnerable to recruitment in the future.

Funding for this study was made possible by a gift from Daniel J. Epstein through the Epstein Family Foundation, which established the RAND Epstein Family Veterans Policy Research Institute in 2021, and the Pritzker Military Foundation on behalf of the Pritzker Military Museum & Library.
New Evidence on School-Based Policing in the U.S.

Police patrolling the halls of American schools can reduce fights and other kinds of non-gun violence, RAND researchers have found. But their presence also drives up the use of suspensions, expulsions, and arrests—and not equally. Black students and students with disabilities are much more likely to face heightened discipline after a police officer arrives on campus.

Researchers used a Freedom of Information Act request to get all applications to a federal grant program for school resource officers, or SROs, from 2015, 2016, and 2017. Those applications often spell out in which districts, or even in which schools, the officers would work. The researchers then looked at disciplinary data from those schools and districts, before and after they got SRO funding.

They found steep increases in firearm-related reports at the schools that brought in an SRO. That may be because SROs are more likely to detect, or get reports from students about, weapons at school. The presence of an officer also reduced non-gun violence—mostly fights and threats—by around 30 percent.

But those reductions “come at a very high cost to students,” the researchers wrote. They estimated that out-of-school suspensions increased by at least 35 percent above average in schools with SROs. Expulsions were at least 25 percent higher, and student arrests and referrals to police were at least 10 percent higher.

Black students faced increases in suspensions, expulsions, and arrests that were two or three times higher than those for White students. In fact, for every 100 Black students, the arrival of an SRO meant that five would be suspended who wouldn’t otherwise have been. One would be expelled or arrested.

Students with disabilities also saw increases in discipline rates that were at least double those for students without disabilities. Male students saw sharper increases than female students.

The researchers could not tell from the data what exactly was driving those increases. It could be that having an SRO on school grounds increases the detection of misconduct. But the increases could also reflect pressure on principals and other administrators to punish students more harshly in the presence of an SRO. Districts that are considering investing in school-based police need to take those trade-offs into account, the researchers wrote.
Russian Escalation Decisions in the War in Ukraine

Under what circumstances would Russia consider launching a nuclear attack on Ukraine? In a recent study, experts convened by RAND considered several scenarios. There was one that worried them the most.

Russian President Vladimir Putin and his inner circle have settled in for a long, grinding war of attrition in Ukraine. They believe time is on their side, that the West will eventually blink and Ukraine will eventually buckle. They therefore see no reason right now to escalate to the use of nuclear weapons, especially since doing so could bring NATO into the war.

A sudden collapse of their forces in Ukraine could change that. Russia might consider a nuclear response if it suffers catastrophic losses on the battlefield that could threaten the very survival of the Putin regime. More gradual losses, even if they accumulate, present no such moment of decision, and give Russian leaders time to consider other, less risky options.

There are other ways that Russia might escalate. The 15 experts RAND brought together—from government and nongovernmental organizations, as well as RAND itself—identified several plausible scenarios. Russia could, for example, decide to use chemical weapons, or carry out an underground nuclear test as a warning. It could gamble that a limited strike on a NATO target might weaken the resolve of some members. Or it could inadvertently trigger escalation—if, for example, a Russian missile strike in Ukraine kills a visiting official from a NATO country.

But Russia also has good reasons to avoid such escalation. It has shown that it does not want a head-to-head fight with NATO if it can avoid one. It also does not want to turn away its own allies—especially China—or risk its economic and diplomatic standing in the developing world. For now, the Kremlin appears to think its prospects for winning the war are still high, despite setbacks, and that risking a significant escalation may not be necessary. How long those conditions will hold in a shifting conflict is uncertain.

NATO leaders need to think through how they would respond if events in Ukraine begin to spiral toward a significant escalation. A top priority for reducing escalation risks should be maintaining the cohesion of the alliance, so that Russia doesn’t think it can split off some members and reduce support for Ukraine by escalating the war.
The Inevitable, Ongoing Failure of Israel’s Gaza Strategy

By Raphael S. Cohen

“Mowing the grass”—a term of art among Israeli analysts—has been the bumper sticker version of Israeli strategy in Gaza for the last decade and a half.

It plays out in the following way: Palestinians, frustrated by the state of the enclave, turn to the likes of Hamas for, if nothing else, vengeance against Israel; Israel imposes restrictions such as the blockade on Gaza, citing security concerns; living conditions in Gaza deteriorate further, and discontent builds; Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and others capitalize on the discontent and attack Israel;
and Israel responds by “mowing the grass”—killing the perpetrators along with some number of civilians, buying at best a few years of relative peace and fueling further long-term radicalization. And so the cycle continues ad infinitum.

“Mowing the grass” embodies more than just strategic fatalism; it also reflects a large measure of hubris. At its core lies the assumption that Israel can control the rheostat in Gaza, hitting Hamas just hard enough to deter it from attacking Israel but not so hard that Gaza implodes into chaos or explodes into a regional war. As one Israeli defense analyst said of the 2014 Gaza war, “We want to break their bones without putting them in the hospital.”

That is a hard if not impossible balance to strike year after year, especially as Gaza’s internal pressures mount. Its two million inhabitants are packed into an area roughly the size of Philadelphia, 80 percent of them impoverished and 46 percent unemployed. Some 108,000 cubic meters of untreated sewage flow daily from the Gaza Strip into the Mediterranean Sea, and potable water can be hard to come by.

Against this backdrop and absent any path to something better for Gazans, no military strategy to contain the violence can succeed in the long run. Without a safety valve, Gaza was bound to explode.

Israel’s mowing-the-grass strategy finally failed spectacularly on October 7. The Hamas attack underscored just how little control Israel has over Gaza. It was not just an intelligence failure and an operational failure but also a more sweeping strategic failure. The core premise behind Israel’s entire approach was proved catastrophically wrong in one morning.

Whether Israel has internalized this strategic failure remains a separate, open question. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has promised “to restore deterrence” to Israel’s borders, and the country is mobilizing some 360,000 reservists, functionally tripling the Israel Defense Forces. This all points to a doubling down: more mowing of the grass.

From a purely military perspective, Israel’s hardest days are still ahead. Hamas’s extensive tunnel network underneath Gaza and threat to execute scores of hostages made a large-scale ground invasion inevitable. The last time Israel fought a ground war in Gaza, in 2014, it lasted 50 days, flattened large swaths of the strip, and left more than 70 Israelis and 2,000 Palestinians dead. The current Gaza war’s toll had already surpassed that in just a few days, before any ground incursion had begun.

Once all the killing is done, Israel will have to do something even harder if it’s to have any hope of preventing the next war and the one after that: It will need to rebuild Gaza into something better than it was. That means ensuring Gaza’s inhabitants have a chance at economic prosperity, potentially even at the risk of loosening the blockade. That means ensuring Gaza’s inhabitants have political options apart from Hamas and the corrupt and pliant Palestinian Authority. And it means rebuilding the social fabric of Gaza, which will likely be even more tattered after what could be a devastating war that could leave the enclave that much more hostile to Israel.

That is not only a costly proposition of the sort that militaries are not particularly adept at. It would also be difficult for the Israeli public to stomach, particularly given the size and scale of Hamas’s recent atrocities.

It is nevertheless what’s necessary to end the cycle of mowing the grass only to watch it grow back.

A version of this commentary originally appeared in the Los Angeles Times in October 2023. Commentary gives RAND researchers a platform to convey insights based on their professional expertise and often on their peer-reviewed research and analysis.
The Therapeutic Use of Psychedelics in Treating PTSD and Depression Among Veterans

By Doug Irving, Staff Writer
Barbara Rothbaum helps traumatized veterans relive and recover from the memories that haunt them. She’s a pioneer in the treatment of post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD. She sometimes uses virtual reality to take veterans back to the most difficult moments of their lives, right down to the crowded streets, the crash of explosions, and the smell of gunpowder.

But recently, she’s been testing another approach that she hopes will help them confront those memories with less fear. Instead of virtual reality, it uses MDMA—better known as the feel-good party drug Ecstasy.

Psychedelics like MDMA have seen a resurgence of interest in recent years from researchers like Rothbaum. Clinical trials have shown that, under the right conditions, they can have a positive effect on mental health conditions like PTSD or depression for some people. Veterans have responded by calling for greater access to psychedelic-assisted therapy for some patients.

Yet, as a recent RAND paper noted, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs has provided no official guidance to help its doctors even talk to their patients about psychedelics. With some psychedelic compounds now legal in two states—and under discussion in several more—it needs to answer basic questions about what the path forward looks like. If those conversations aren’t already happening, researchers wrote, they should start.

“MDMA could represent a breakthrough in our ability to treat PTSD,” Rothbaum said, with the emphasis on “could.” As the director of the Trauma and Anxiety Recovery Program at Emory University, she is overseeing a clinical trial that will test whether MDMA can help traumatized veterans overcome their memories as an adjunct to therapy. “If they can talk about these bad experiences without a high level of fear or anxiety, it might be a more efficient treatment to help them take their lives back,” she said. “But—we’ll see. That’s why we’re doing the study.”
Psilocybin was once considered the next frontier in psychiatric medicine. Clinical experiments showed they could be effective in treating everything from combat stress to depression to alcohol use disorder. Even RAND contributed. In a small experiment in the 1960s, several researchers and staff members volunteered to take LSD. They reported short-term reductions in anxiety and in what the study author described as “dogmatism.”

But psilocybin’s close association with the “turn on, tune in, drop out” counterculture doomed them. The federal government essentially outlawed them in the early 1970s, labeling them as drugs of abuse with no accepted medical purpose. It made exceptions for research—but funding for that research all but vanished.

In the past 20 years, though, psilocybin have started to get another look. Several clinical trials are investigating MDMA for the treatment of PTSD and mood disorders. One pivotal study showed that psilocybin, the active compound in “magic mushrooms,” could help ease the anxiety of cancer patients. Two-thirds of the people who took psilocybin in a 2006 study described it as one of the most meaningful experiences of their lives.

It’s still not entirely clear how psilocybin produce those effects. Experts suspect they might work by helping patients go deeper and gain greater insights into their own mental health conditions, without getting trapped by fear. But for veterans groups that have been fighting for years for more effective treatments, especially for PTSD, it’s the outcomes that matter most.

“We’re seeing a groundswell of enthusiasm for these treatments right now, especially from veterans, but also among providers who work with military populations,” said Rajeev Ramchand, who codirects the RAND Epstein Family Veterans Policy Research Institute. “It’s exciting, but it’s a little bit concerning, too. There’s a danger that the policy might move quicker than the science.”

Oregon became the first state to pass a law legalizing psilocybin for supervised use in 2020. Colorado followed in 2022—and also allowed any adult to grow and share certain natural psychedelics. At least ten other states are now considering their own proposals to lower or eliminate the legal barriers to psychedelics.

More than 20 cities and counties have made enforcement of some psychedelic laws a low priority for law enforcement.

In the world of drug policy, that is a seismic shift in just a few years. Researchers at RAND who study veterans issues teamed up with researchers who specialize in drug policy to help the VA—and the government more broadly—start thinking through the policy issues it raises. For Beau Kilmer, the codirector of the RAND Drug
Policy Research Center, what’s happening now with psychedelics has a familiar echo in what happened with cannabis.

Like most psychedelics, cannabis remains a prohibited substance at the federal level. But roughly two dozen states have legalized the supply and possession of it for any reason, and some others allow it to be used for medical purposes. This has created a patchwork of laws and regulations under which possession of cannabis might be entirely legal or grounds for an arrest, depending on which state you happen to be in.

Doctors at the VA, following the federal law, have never been able to recommend cannabis for their patients. But the VA didn’t explicitly authorize them to even discuss cannabis use with their patients until 2017, nearly 20 years after states began legalizing it for medical purposes. That same directive also clarified for the first time that patients would not lose their benefits or access to VA programs if they tested positive for cannabis.

“We know there are veterans who are using psychedelics,” said Kilmer, who coauthored the 2016 Oxford University Press book Marijuana Legalization: What Everyone Needs to Know. “If vets are using these substances to treat mental health conditions, it would make sense for them to tell their medical providers about it. But at the same time, these substances are not approved at the federal level, so it really creates some tough questions.”

The VA should not wait another 20 years to provide guidance on psychedelics, researchers wrote. It should be clear about the rules and consequences for veterans who use them in places like Oregon or Colorado. It should also consider what training its providers will need to better understand psychedelics and how they interact with conventional treatment.

Federal agencies, including the VA, should continue to invest in psychedelic research. And, if evidence accumulates that psychedelics can help treat disorders like PTSD—and the U.S. Food and Drug Administration approves—the VA might need to start thinking about how to incorporate them into its own treatment protocols. As Ramchand said in recent testimony prepared for Congress, psychedelics could be part of a menu of treatment options, especially for those who have tried more-conventional treatments and are still struggling.

The VA cannot afford to take a wait-and-see approach this time, he added. Psychedelic-assisted therapy sessions can take eight hours and require two therapists as guides. Slotting that into VA schedules, without disrupting other mental health care for veterans, is going to require some careful planning.

“Now is the time for the federal government and federal agencies like the VA to decide: Do they want this to roll out the way cannabis did, or do they want this to be something different?” Kilmer said. “And if they want this to be something different, they need to figure out what that’s going to be and start shaping it.”

The pace of clinical trials is only accelerating. Researchers at the VA itself are now working on at least five, testing MDMA and synthetic psilocybin. Earlier this year, a company that has been testing MDMA as a treatment for PTSD said it plans to request federal approval to market it for medical use.

At Emory University, Barbara Rothbaum sees the need for more-effective PTSD treatments every day. She leads a two-week program of intense exposure therapy for traumatized veterans as part of the Emory Healthcare Veterans Program, guiding them back through their memories, over and over again. “They learn that it gets a little bit easier and they can stay with it over time, and then they can really look at it a little more objectively.”

Existing treatments can help the majority of traumatized veterans, she said—but none works for everyone. That’s why she’s testing MDMA. She hopes it will help those who need it break through the fear and confront their memories.

She doesn’t buy into the hype, the media headlines about miracle cures. “I wish I believed in miracles,” she said. “I see some patients who are trying so hard, doing all the right things, and it’s just not working for them, and I think maybe MDMA would help them open up this process. But we just don’t know yet, and that’s what we have to find out. I don’t believe in miracles. I believe in clinical trials.”

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A FOCUS ON THE RESEARCH OF
Beth J. Asch, Stephanie Rennane, Thomas E. Trail,
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Catria Gadwah-Meaden, and Jonas Kempf

Food Insecurity Among Active-Duty Service Members

By Doug Irving, Staff Writer
Suzy Malloy stood in her kitchen and wondered how this was possible: How, after so many years, she still could not afford to put enough food on the table. Her husband, after all, was a Navy SEAL. But the constant moves, the loss of her jobs, the housing expenses piling up—she knew she was going to have to go back to the food bank.

Around a quarter of active-duty service members qualify as “food insecure,” a recent RAND study found. But what’s causing that, how to fix it—even what it means—is not at all clear. The lead author of the study, senior economist Beth Asch, summed up the findings as “just a whole slew of conundrums.” But they outline a major concern for the U.S. military: potentially tens of thousands of service members and their families struggling to get enough healthy food.

Malloy and her family are now settled in Tampa, Florida. She works as the director of the local chapter of Blue Star Families, the largest chapter-based organization serving military and veteran families. Her husband, now a captain with the SEALs, expressed shock recently when he heard her say their family had once relied on food banks. That couldn’t be true … was it?

“No, sweetheart, you never went to a food bank,” she told him. “We definitely, as a family, went to a food bank, regularly, and that’s how we ended up making ends meet. Food banks for us were a blessing. I’m forever grateful for them.”

Food insecurity is not a new problem for the military. Sen. John McCain railed against having “soldiers on food stamps” during his presidential campaign—in 2000. More recently, Congress ordered the Pentagon to study how prevalent food insecurity is in the military, and to report back with solutions. The Pentagon turned to RAND.

Researchers interviewed experts nationally and at local military installations, and reviewed administrative pay and personnel data. They also analyzed results from annual surveys given to active-duty members of the military service branches and the Coast Guard.

The surveys included a series of six questions that the U.S. Department of Agriculture uses to assess food insecurity. They asked, for example, whether service members had cut or skipped meals in the past 12 months, and whether they had been hungry but did not eat.

The USDA considers anyone who endorses two or more of those six questions to be food insecure. Around 25.8 percent of the service members met that definition. In fact, 10 percent of them endorsed five or six of the questions, which means they have very low food security under the USDA guidelines.

RAND’s main findings come from surveys completed in 2018. But researchers also looked back at an earlier survey, from 2016. It gave service members another option for their answers: “almost never.” Based on the results of that survey, the researchers estimated that as many as 40 percent of the service members who qualify as food insecure might “almost never” experience food difficulties.

Then came the conundrums. Service members generally make more in total compensation than similar civilians—yet they were nearly three times more likely to be food insecure. Service members who live on-post have access to military dining facilities, but those who reported food difficulties were less likely to use them. And more than two-thirds of the service members who said they were struggling to afford food also said they have emergency savings they could fall back on.

The Army had the largest share of food-insecure members. But Army retention rates have been, according to the Army Times, “sky-high” this year.

“We can’t tell from the data what’s really going on, or how people interpreted the survey questions,” Asch said. “My father often talked about growing up in the Depression and having empty cupboards. Is it that kind of food insecurity? Is it that, at the end of the month, you’re eating ramen all week? Before we can get to effective solutions, we need to better understand what this really looks like.”

For Marla Bautista, it looked like a massive housing bill and some limp pork chops. Her family couldn’t find a home right away when the Army transferred her husband, a geospatial engineer, to MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa a few years ago. They had to stay in an extended-stay hotel for several months—long after their Army-issued hotel vouchers ran out. She started visiting food pantries and cutting corners at the grocery store as her family sank deeper and deeper into debt.
Her husband came home one night as she was cooking dinner. “What kind of meat is that?” he asked.

“These are pork chops,” she informed him. “Those are the thinnest pork chops I have ever seen.”

“I was like, look, this is what we can afford,” she says now. “We could not make ends meet. We were juggling bills, we were getting food from food pantries, we were doing whatever we could to be okay.”

Bautista had to leave her job in New York when the Army told her husband he was moving to Tampa. In interviews with the researchers, family advocates pointed to frequent moves and the loss of spousal income as major factors in military food insecurity. The survey data backed them up. Service members who reported food difficulties were 10 percentage points less likely than others to have a spouse’s second income coming in.

The military provides service members who live off-post with basic allowances for food and housing. But the food allowance only covers their meals, not meals for their families. And the housing allowance does not cover some expenses, such as traffic tolls, that come with living off-post.

And, in an expensive city like Tampa, they don’t always reflect the true cost of housing. The last time Suzy Malloy stood in her kitchen, wondering how she would make ends meet, it was because her family was paying much more than its allowance to live in a decent school district.

The researchers found a few other puzzle pieces as they reviewed the survey data and interviews. Nearly a quarter of food-insecure service members said they had recently provided unplanned financial support to a family member. People who work with military families said child care expenses—or the lack of child care—could also strain family budgets. So could big, unexpected expenses like a car repair bill.

Military officials said predatory lenders might target young service members with little experience managing money.

“Food insecurity is a multifaceted problem, which means it needs multifaceted solutions,” Asch said. “There’s not going to be a one-size-fits-all way to fix this. The worst thing is if we roll out a policy, spend millions of dollars—and then it doesn’t help the people who are really in crisis.”

She is now studying whether paycheck volatility—all of these special and incentive pays getting turned on and off—might worsen the problem by making it hard for families to plan their budgets. Other researchers are convening focus groups with families to better understand their experiences with food insecurity. Asch and other researchers are also merging survey data with pay and personnel data to analyze the relationship between military compensation, financial literacy, and food insecurity to see if that clears up any of the conundrums.

The Pentagon issued a plan last year to strengthen food security in the military, saying RAND’s findings would inform its efforts. It pledged to increase access to healthy food on-post, to review pay and benefits, and to start collecting more data. It also committed to helping more military spouses stay in the workforce. It is working, for example, on interstate agreements that would allow those in some professions—such as teachers or dental hygienists—to transfer their licenses when they move.

Marla Bautista and her husband can laugh about those sad pork chops now. “We’re making ends meet,” she said. “We don’t have savings, but at this point, our bills are paid.”

She runs a nonprofit, the Bautista Project, that provides services and support to people experiencing homelessness in Tampa. It also runs a food pantry for service members at MacDill Air Force Base. Most months, it serves at least 100 families.

Suzy Malloy also helps distribute food to families at MacDill. “I’m so grateful,” she said. “I’m grateful for food, for having access to food banks—and now, being on the other side, I am so grateful that I can give back to those who are walking in the same steps I did. It just makes me sad that we haven’t figured this out.”

She and Bautista have plenty of ideas for how the military could make life easier for military families. Improve access to federal food benefits. Review housing allowances to make sure they cover the actual costs of living off-post. Make sure service members—especially those in the junior ranks—make enough money to live a healthy life.

And one more, from Malloy: “It should be mandatory,” she said, “for every military installation to have space for a food bank.”

“We could not make ends meet. We were juggling bills, we were getting food from food pantries, we were doing whatever we could to be okay.”

Marla Bautista and family
What We Know About Food-Insecure Veterans

Around 1.4 million U.S. military veterans struggle to get the food they need to live an active, healthy life. Yet more than a third of them are not covered by the government’s main food-assistance program, RAND researchers found.

In fact, food-insecure veterans are much less likely than nonveterans to get help from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP. The program, formerly known as the Food Stamp Program, provides monthly funds to help low-income families, elderly people, and people with disabilities afford food.

But researchers found that some of the most vulnerable veterans are falling through the cracks. The oldest veterans, those 70 years old or older, were 10 percentage points less likely than similar nonveterans to get SNAP benefits. Veterans who can’t work because of a physical or mental illness were also much less likely to have accessed SNAP.

The researchers found a possible clue when they looked at other benefits those veterans receive. Those who were not in the SNAP program received disability payments and other benefits from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs at higher rates than those who were in the program. Those benefits count as income and may push some veterans just over the eligibility line for SNAP.

Most states—but not all of them—consider low-income households that qualify for other kinds of government assistance to automatically be eligible for SNAP. That, in effect, raises the income limit. Veterans in those states were more likely to be enrolled in the program.

RAND’s findings point to a “critical need” to reduce barriers to SNAP assistance, researchers wrote. Federal policymakers should reconsider income eligibility rules, especially for older and disabled veterans. States should consider policies that encourage more low-income veteran households to sign up.

Some veterans might not know that they qualify for SNAP. Others might stay away because of the stigma of receiving government assistance. Because of that, health care providers in and out of the VA should also screen all patients for signs of food insecurity.

Funding for this research was made possible by a generous gift from Daniel J. Epstein through the Epstein Family Foundation, which established the RAND Epstein Family Veterans Policy Research Institute in 2021.

Food Insecurity Among Veterans: Examining the Discrepancy Between Veteran Food Insecurity and Use of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is available for free download.
Expanding the Supply of Housing to Make Housing More Affordable

By Doug Irving, Staff Writer

or generations in old New York, May 1 was always Moving Day. By a quirk of custom and law, all leases in the city ended on that one day. Perplexed visitors described gridlocked streets, carts tipping with sofas and bed frames, as the entire population seemed to change address at once.

The New York Times wrote the obituary for Moving Day in 1945. Nobody could afford to move anymore. Veterans coming home from the war were even asking if they could pitch tents in Central Park. The city’s acute housing shortage, the Times lamented, had turned Moving Day “into a myth.”

That housing shortage has since calcified into a crisis. With few vacancies, rents in New York have become some of the most unaffordable in the world. People with subsidized housing vouchers often have nowhere to go to use them. “We have reached full capacity,” Mayor Eric Adams said earlier this year. “We have no more room in the city.”

A recent RAND study looked at what New York could do to make more room. It identified six policy reforms that, taken together, would clear a path for nearly 300,000 new homes. That alone might not be enough to make New York affordable—but housing prices are not going to budge until the city can get people moving again.

New York is unique here only in the details. By one estimate, America needs around 3.8 million more housing units than it has. That shortage has helped drive up home prices, and not just in big, coastal cities. Around half of the people who answered a Pew Research Center survey in late 2021 said the lack of affordable housing was a major problem where they live.

“The cost of housing affects almost everything about daily quality of life,” said Jason Ward, an economist at RAND. “It determines where people live, how well they live, if they even have someplace to live. Trying to bend the upward curve of housing prices, let alone drive it down, is one of the great challenges of our time.”

In New York, that challenge is only getting more difficult as the demand for homes far outruns the supply. The city added around 200,000 new homes between 2010 and 2020. That would be a victory—except that its population increased by around 630,000.
The city added around 200,000 new homes between 2010 and 2020. Its population increased by around 630,000.
New Yorkers have been debating solutions to the housing crisis for so long that they have dug themselves into what Chloe Sarnoff calls policy entrenchment. She’s a housing policy advisor for the nonprofit Robin Hood Foundation, which describes itself as the largest poverty-fighting organization in the city. And what she means is that the same ideas, championed by the same groups, keep coming around, year after year. The foundation brought in RAND for a new perspective.

“We needed a new player in the policy discussion,” she said. “We thought we would benefit, and New York would benefit, from having an institution like RAND come in and look at what might move the supply needle.”

Ward and a small team of researchers interviewed experts, reviewed previous housing plans and proposals, and analyzed the city’s existing housing stock. They searched through academic studies to calculate how many new homes the most promising strategies might yield. They were looking for policies that met three requirements: They had to be at least conceptually feasible. They had to work without direct government funding. And they had to produce a lot of new homes.

In the end, the researchers had six ideas on their list. Increasing building limits near transit stops: 122,000 new homes. Using tax incentives to encourage office-to-housing building conversions: 53,000 more. Up-zoning areas for more intense housing development when their housing prices get too high: another 30,000. (See the sidebar for the full list.)

The researchers estimated that the six ideas together could prompt a building boom of around 293,000 homes over the next ten years. But that hinges on the success of RAND’s top-priority recommendation: reforming and reinstating a tax-relief program for housing developments that include some low-income units. The program expired last year. Without it, the other five ideas would likely need significant government financing to pencil out.

“The biggest barriers in New York are political,” said Ward, the associate director of the RAND Center on Housing and Homelessness in Los Angeles. “Some of the ideas we focus on, we first found in a report from 1999. All these years later, virtually none of them have been made in any way, shape, or form. The hard part in New York isn’t coming up with good ideas. It’s finding the political path to implement them.”

In fact, the researchers highlighted a number of other ideas that could contribute to New York’s housing supply and affordability. Those include legalizing “accessory dwelling units”—often called granny flats—and reining in some restrictive historical-preservation designations. Those ideas didn’t make RAND’s list—not because they wouldn’t work, but because there’s not enough evidence to say how well they would work.

The Robin Hood Foundation has been sharing RAND’s findings with fellow advocacy groups fighting for housing reform throughout the city. It also plans to take the report to Albany when the state legislature convenes early next year.

Mayor Adams, like many New York mayors before him, has made housing a top priority. He has pushed for a moonshot effort to add 500,000 homes in the next decade, and released a wish-list of zoning reforms earlier this year. It would, among other things, make it easier to convert office buildings to housing and to build apartments near transit stations.

RAND’s study was written for New York. But there are lessons in it that could apply to other cities struggling to meet the demand for homes: Consider reducing some regulatory hurdles. Consider up-zoning some areas to allow for denser development. “These should be in the toolkit across the nation, anywhere housing reform is being discussed,” Ward said.

“The central point,” he and the other researchers wrote, “is that housing production is a critical part of any solution to housing affordability—in New York and elsewhere.” For an example of that, they pointed to the largest city on the planet: Tokyo, Japan.

Tokyo’s rules—or lack of rules—on density, development, green space, and historical preservation would almost certainly not fly in an American city. Construction crews are constantly tearing down and building up—and up, and up. But as a result, Tokyo, with nearly twice the population of New York, has a housing surplus.

It doesn’t have a Moving Day like New York once did. It has a moving season—one that has become so hectic it has generated a new term: hik-koshi nanmin, or “moving refugees,” for people who want to move but can’t find a moving truck.

And why not? The average rent for a two-bedroom apartment in Tokyo is around $1,300 a month. For a two-bedroom apartment in Brooklyn? Around $4,250. ■

Support for this research was provided by the Robin Hood Foundation, a charitable organization that fights poverty in New York City.
# Six Promising Policy Reforms to Unlock Housing Production in New York City

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<th>Policy</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Housing Units Created</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Policy 1</strong></td>
<td><strong>Establish a tax relief program for new multifamily development</strong>&lt;br&gt;Most of the multifamily housing developments built in New York City in recent years needed a tax exemption known as 421-a to pencil out. It expired last year and has not been replaced. The state should adopt a modified version that would provide tax relief for housing developments that set aside at least 20 percent of their units for low-income tenants.</td>
<td>N/A&lt;br&gt;The researchers assumed the program would not directly lead to increased housing production but would lead to the conditions necessary for the other reforms to have the estimated impacts.</td>
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<td><strong>Policy 2</strong></td>
<td><strong>Increase allowable building sizes near subway and rail stops</strong>&lt;br&gt;Two million housing units outside of Manhattan are within walking distance of a subway stop. Existing zoning regulations essentially constrain them to be one- to three-family homes. The city should relax those regulations to allow more intense development in areas within 1 km of a subway or rail stop.</td>
<td>122,000</td>
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<td><strong>Policy 3</strong></td>
<td><strong>Incentivize mixed affordability office-to-residential conversions</strong>&lt;br&gt;Researchers from Columbia University and NYU have warned of an “office real estate apocalypse” as workers stay home even after the COVID-19 pandemic. The city should develop a tax-relief program to encourage building owners to convert their offices to homes. It could provide a 14-year schedule of tax abatements and exemptions for projects that set aside at least 20 percent of their units for low-income tenants.</td>
<td>53,000</td>
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<td><strong>Policy 4</strong></td>
<td><strong>Eliminate inefficiencies in environmental review, land use approval, and permitting</strong>&lt;br&gt;A 2022 task force report identified 111 ways the city could simplify and streamline its development review and building permitting processes. Those include revising traffic analyses that can take up to a year and switching city planning maps from paper to digital. The city should consider making all 111 changes.</td>
<td>50,000</td>
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<td><strong>Policy 5</strong></td>
<td><strong>Reform the scaffold law to fall in line with nationwide standards</strong>&lt;br&gt;The city’s scaffold law holds property owners and contractors liable for any “gravity-related injuries” to a construction worker, regardless of that worker’s own negligence. By some estimates, it increases overall construction costs by 10 percent. One paper found it might increase construction accidents because workers take fewer precautions. The city should consider revising the law to establish liability based on actual fault.</td>
<td>38,000</td>
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<td><strong>Policy 6</strong></td>
<td><strong>Establish automatic triggers for up-zoning</strong>&lt;br&gt;In recent years, many rezoning requests have significantly down-zoned properties, especially in more-affluent areas, resulting in fewer homes. The city should develop a data-driven program that would automatically up-zone properties. It could use a measure of the housing cost burden for both owner- and renter-occupied homes. That would trigger zoning increases in areas with demonstrated low supply and high demand.</td>
<td>30,000</td>
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When Gerald Greenwald served as a car manufacturer executive in the 1980s, controversy raged over the installation of air bags in automobiles. Air bags were available as an option and laws requiring either air bags or automatic seat belts were in the works, but auto executives, including Chrysler Corporation’s CEO Lee Iacocca, resisted. Greenwald, who was Chrysler’s vice chairman, met with Iacocca and, based upon evidence that air bags saved lives, helped convince him to make air bags a standard feature in all Chrysler cars in the U.S., beginning in 1989. It was a precedent-setting move that helped pave the way for the inclusion of air bags in all new vehicles.

The decision received validation in 1990, when a story appeared in The Washington Post detailing the head-on collision of two air bag–equipped 1990 Chrysler LeBarons on a Virginia highway. Fire trucks and ambulances arrived on the scene expecting to remove dead bodies. Instead, the drivers were standing at the side of the road, bruised but otherwise unhurt, which helped convince other automakers to either get on board or face a competitive disadvantage.

“For years, car companies used emotional arguments to avoid or deflect from having the government involved in auto safety regulations,” said Greenwald. “There was no objectivity. But once the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration started investigating and evaluating auto deaths, data became available to make evidence-based decisions that saved lives.”

When it comes to gun violence, Greenwald likewise believes that amassing data and evidence will help save lives.

“When it comes to gun violence, Greenwald believes that amassing data and evidence will help save lives. This year, The Greenwald Family Foundation is donating $1 million to establish the Greenwald Family Gun Policy Chair at RAND. This gift will expand upon research conducted by RAND’s Gun Policy in America initiative, which launched in 2016.

“We are grateful to The Greenwald Family Foundation for establishing this chair to strengthen RAND’s research in this critical area,” said Jason Matheny, RAND’s president and CEO. “This gift will advance the goal of establishing a shared set of facts that will improve public discussions and support the development of fair and effective gun policies.”

Greenwald has held numerous executive roles in the auto, airline, and investment worlds. In addition to his role at Chrysler, he served as an executive for the Ford Motor Company, chairman and CEO of United Airlines, and, most recently, co-founder and managing partner of the Greenbriar Equity Group. He and his wife, Glenda, lead The Greenwald Family Foundation, founded in 1985 to tackle tough social and environmental problems with the mission of empowering people and driving community change worldwide.

“We chose RAND,” Greenwald said, “because its mission—to help improve policy and decisionmaking through research and analysis—aligns with our foundation’s focus on making improvements today that benefit future generations.”

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