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# Working Around the Military

## **Challenges to Military Spouse Employment and Education**

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# Summary

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## Background

Successful recruiting and retention of the active duty force relies in large part on the extent to which service members and their spouses experience both job satisfaction and contentment with life in the military. In his February 12, 2001, speech at Fort Stewart, Georgia, President Bush acknowledged the importance of caring not just for service members but their entire families, pledging, “We owe you and your families a decent quality of life. . . . [Service members] deserve a military that treats them and their families with respect.”

A major challenge to ensuring familywide quality of life is overcoming the hurdles to military spouse employment. Data indicate that the majority of military spouses are in the workforce; however, research indicates that they have difficulty finding jobs and that limited career opportunities for military spouses may be a factor in military personnel leaving the service.

Given its impact on service member contentment and retention, spouse employment and education is thus an area of significant concern to the military. This study seeks to (1) provide a richer and more detailed depiction of military spouse employment and earnings, (2) explore the degree to which employment is problematic for military spouses, and (3) identify policies to reconcile spouse employment issues with the military’s need to retain qualified personnel.

Perhaps most importantly, this study seeks to address the *ground truth*, or actual reality, of military spouse employment and education, based on the analysis of available data, as well as the *personal perceptions and experiences* of military spouses, based on a new quantitative and qualitative data set gathered from interviews with more than 1,100 military spouses.

## Who Are Military Spouses?

A question that has often emerged in past research of military spouses is whether military spouse employment difficulties can be traced to the demographic features of military spouses, such as the fact that they tend to be younger, thus affecting their earnings and employability. Or are their employment conditions a result of other, less-manifest factors, such as the challenges posed by the military lifestyle (e.g., frequent moves, often to locations with labor market limitations) or the possibility that military spouses have less of a “taste” for work and thus are self-selecting a lifestyle that is more conducive to staying at home to rear children.

To help answer these questions, this study sought to consider the impact of military spouses’ *observed* characteristics, such as age, educational level, and number and age of children, as well as *unobserved* factors, such as a spouse’s taste for work, employer biases against military spouses, and the impact of military demands on service member families.

In terms of the observed characteristics of military spouses, analyses of the existing quantitative data assembled for this study indicate that military spouses do have different characteristics than civilian spouses. Specifically, military spouses, compared with civilian spouses, are, on average:

- younger.

And are more likely to

- be racial or ethnic minorities
- have graduated from high school or have some college experience
- have young children at home
- experience frequent long-distance relocations
- live in metropolitan areas.

Some of these characteristics, such as the high likelihood that military spouses have some college and that they live in metropolitan areas, are counter to general perceptions or stereotypes of military spouses and the military lifestyle.

Given these demographic features, the researchers next turned to the issue of employment to consider whether military spouses do in fact fare less well in the workforce. Analysis of the existing data sets yielded the following findings.

### **Military Spouses Are Less Likely to Be Employed, and Those Who Do Have Jobs Earn Less**

An examination of employment status indicates that military spouses are less likely to be employed and more likely to be unemployed (i.e., seeking work) than the average civilian spouse. Military spouses who do work earn lower hourly wages than civilian spouses, both at a national level and when compared with their neighbors.

In light of these findings, the researchers approached the issue of whether these conditions are the result of the spouse's observed characteristics. That is, are they less likely to be employed, or do they earn lower wages simply because they are younger, move more frequently, and are more likely to have young children? Do these characteristics fully explain the employment differences between military and civilian spouses?

### **Civilians with Same Characteristics Fare Better in Workforce**

When the research team compared military spouses with civilian spouses who share their same observed characteristics, it found that these civilian "look-alikes" generally fared better than both the military spouses and the civilian average. In other words, the characteris-

tics of military spouses suggest that they should have *better* outcomes than the average civilian spouse. Instead, however, they are employed at much lower rates due to some combination of effects from unobserved factors.

The same is true for wages. Military wives who are employed make less than do civilian wives. This is true when compared with the national average as well as when military wives are compared with their civilian neighbors. This finding is important, because it addresses the prior assertion that the discrepancy could be explained by residence, in that military wives may tend to live in areas with lower wages. Instead, we find that military wives make less than civilian wives who live in the same areas. Further, these income disparities cannot be explained by the characteristics of military spouses, which would suggest that Army, Air Force, and Marine Corps spouses should earn approximately \$2 per hour more than they do and that Navy wives should earn \$1 more per hour. Thus, unobserved factors are costing military spouses \$1–2 an hour.

So what are these unobserved factors, and are there steps that the military can take to improve? To answer these questions, the researchers sought a closer look at the interaction of those less manifest, quantifiable features. To do so, they turned to the perceptions and experiences of military spouses themselves. Specifically, the team conducted interviews with more than 1,100 military spouses to explore in-depth what previously existing data could not show, such as reasons for working or staying at home, experiences in or out of the labor market, and what the spouses themselves believe about the impact of military life on their employment and educational opportunities.

## **What Do Military Spouses Do? Why Do They Work? Why Do They Choose to Stay Home?**

Past research (e.g., Hosek et al., 2002) has posed various hypotheses regarding why military spouses' labor force participation and earnings differ from their civilian peers, such as the view that military spouses

(1) prefer not to work, (2) have difficulty reconciling the schedule and demands of the military lifestyle with work, (3) are unable to work while satisfying volunteer and other role demands, and (4) are hampered by their frequent moves. The findings from the interviews address these hypotheses.

### **Occupational Choices Mirror Those of Civilian Spouses**

The researchers found that military spouses' occupational choices are, in general, very similar to those of civilian spouses, suggesting that, in terms of occupational choice at least, military spouses are not being deterred from their desired careers. For example, the jobs held most commonly by both military and civilian spouses are lower-paid administrative jobs. Still, there are differences, primary among them the fact that military spouses appear more inclined to accept or seek retail positions and are much more likely to work in child care. Military spouses also have less of a grip on the higher-paid administrative positions that rank second among civilian spouses and are less prone to work in male-dominated blue-collar occupations than are civilian wives. However, teaching and health care, occupations that are generally perceived to require certification or licensing, are similarly ranked among both military and civilian wives. Of those occupations, teaching is notable, as it ranks as the fourth most common job for both comparison groups (and first among senior officer spouses and military spouses with graduate degrees).

### **Education, Financial Status, and Service Member's Pay Grade Contribute to Motivations for Working**

In our sample, about 75 percent of spouses who were either employed or seeking work mentioned financial reasons for working, with working to pay bills and cover basic expenses as the most widely cited primary reason for working. Additional financial motives were working for long-term savings and for extra spending money. The majority of spouses also discussed nonmonetary motives: Working to avoid boredom and keep busy was the most frequently cited nonmonetary reason. Other motives included personal fulfillment and

independence, maintain their skills and career status, and to obtain a return on their education.

Spouses' motivation for working varied based on the pay grade of the service member, the family's financial situation, and the education and occupation of the military spouse. For instance, spouses in clerical or retail positions were more inclined to mention working to pay the bills, as were spouses of junior enlisted and mid-grade enlisted personnel. Spouses with less education and in more-challenging financial circumstances also tended to cite financial necessity as a reason to work. In contrast, working for personal fulfillment and independence was a nonfinancial reason that was widely cited by better-educated spouses and those in higher pay grade categories. Almost 40 percent of spouses with graduate degrees regarded personal fulfillment as their most important reason for working, making it the only education category in which financial necessity was not the most frequently cited primary incentive.

Since pay grade, education level, and family finances are often intertwined, it can be difficult to tell which factors, when considered in isolation, truly explain the type of spouses that provided a specific work motive. To address this concern, we conducted more-sophisticated statistical analyses to assess their effects simultaneously. In the case of the financial necessity motive, this type of analysis revealed that education does not have an independent effect when considered in conjunction with pay grade and financial situation. This finding suggests that an investment in spouse education without a change in the service member's pay grade or otherwise improving family finance may not lessen a spouse's need to work to cover basic expenses.

The variety of motives for working suggests that future policies addressing military spouse employment need to be cognizant of the different reasons different types of spouses work. Thus, for example, cash compensation for work lost may effectively address the needs of less-educated wives or those married to more-junior service members, but it would not effectively deal with the needs of more-educated spouses or those married to more-senior service members, because

these latter spouses tend to work for reasons other than to cover their basic expenses.

### **Spouses Out of the Workforce Point First to Parenting Demands**

The majority of spouses interviewed who were neither employed nor seeking employment mentioned parenting responsibilities as their reason for not working. Another one-tenth of spouses cited volunteering or attending school as reasons for not working. However, the data suggest that as many as one-third of stay-at-home spouses were reluctantly out of the workforce, because they mentioned at least one barrier to their working. These spouses tended to cite moves, local labor market conditions, demands of the military lifestyle, or day care problems, with the rates varying depending on pay grade, financial situation, location, and education level. Even one-third of the spouses at home for parenting reasons cited a barrier to their working, suggesting that full-time parenting may not have been the preferred outcome of all the military's stay-at-home parents. While day care and local labor market conditions are issues that large numbers of civilian spouses also face, many military spouses perceived these conditions as the result of their military lifestyle, either because they were removed from extended family that could help with the parenting demands, because they would not have chosen the location to which the military sent them, or because they believed many aspects of the military workplace such as long hours, TDYs,<sup>1</sup> and the general inability of service members to accommodate sudden family needs (such as picking up a sick child from school) precluded their service member spouse from assisting them.

Given this wide array of factors and conditions, it is clear that all military spouses out of the labor force do not necessarily lack a "taste" for working. Indeed, military spouses thwarted in their quest for employment by local labor market conditions cannot change their residence as easily as civilian spouses might, nor can they exert much control over the nature and frequency of family moves. In addition,

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<sup>1</sup> TDY and TAD refer to military-related travel away from home station.

the level of involvement the military requires from its personnel differs from and often far exceeds that expected from even the most demanding civilian employers. These conditions call into question whether spouses truly “choose” to leave the labor force or whether the demands of the military life are the largest obstacles to employment for those spouses reluctantly out of the labor force.

## **Majority Believe Military Life Negatively Affected Their Employment**

Almost two-thirds of spouses interviewed felt that being a military spouse had negatively affected their work opportunities. About one-third believed that their circumstance had no effect on their work opportunities, and a small number of spouses actually perceived a positive effect. These findings are roughly consistent across locations and services, but they differ some by the service member’s pay grade. The more senior the service member, the more likely the spouse is to perceive a negative impact, ranging from slightly fewer than half of those married to junior enlisted personnel to more than three-quarters of senior officer spouses. The most frequently cited cause for negative effect was frequent and disruptive moves. The findings show that the longer you have been a military spouse (and thus, the more moves undertaken), the more likely you are to attribute any perceived negative impact on your work opportunity to the frequent or disruptive moves that are a part of the military lifestyle. Thus, consistent with prior research, the belief that the frequent moving demands of military life is damaging to spouse work opportunity was pervasive among the sample of military spouses.

Many spouses cited the negative impact of such unobserved factors as service member absence (including deployment, TDYs, and extended work hours), expressing a consistent frustration in having to carry the brunt of their family’s parenting responsibilities. These spouses referred to the inflexibility of the military workplace to satisfy family demands and an unwillingness on the part of the military to help accommodate the needs of military parents. Finally, some

spouses cited an employer bias against or stigmatization of military spouses, often driven by the employer's concern that the spouse will be forced to leave abruptly. Fewer spouses cited this as a problem than frequent moves or service member absence, but it is an unobserved factor that is uniquely military.

## **Many Spouses Also See a Negative Impact on Their Education**

As part of the analyses, the researchers also looked at the impact of the military life on spouse education. Slightly fewer than one-tenth of those interviewed believed that they had educationally benefited from being a military spouse. The remaining majority of spouses were split, with approximately half of them believing that their educational opportunities had suffered negatively and half perceiving no effect on their education. Service member absence and military work schedules were the most commonly cited negative factors affecting spouses' educational opportunities, with frequent moves also mentioned as detrimental. The frequent moves delayed completion of degree programs, as spouses struggled to transfer credits and satisfy multiple programs' degree criteria. Further, spouses often faced the choice of either paying higher out-of-state tuition rates or further delaying their studies while they waited for residency status. The educational programs available for spouses, the perceived financial stability of military life, and the academic programs available on or near the base were the most common positive factors mentioned.

## **Spouses Suggest Ways for the Military to Improve Their Employment or Educational Opportunities**

We provided the spouses interviewed the opportunity to suggest ways in which the military could improve the educational or employment opportunities of military spouses. Their suggestions for improvement focused most frequently on the following areas:

- *Increasing affordability and accessibility of education.* When asked how the military might help spouses pursue their educational or employment aspirations, the interviewees offered numerous suggestions, the most common (approximately one-third of spouses) being for the Department of Defense (DoD) to provide financial assistance for spouse education. Related ideas were to decrease the cost of education (such as by securing in-state tuition for military spouses), increase the accessibility of education, or reduce administrative problems with applying for school and transferring credits between schools.
- *Improving military child care programs.* Many spouses mentioned child care as requiring improvements in order to address hurdles to both employment and education. These suggestions included reducing the cost of child care and improving its limited availability, especially part-time or evening child care, both of which are perceived as necessary for many spouses to pursue their education.

Other suggestions for change included increasing spouse awareness of the current employment programs, improving the civil service system hiring process, lessening the number of moves, and addressing licensure and certification constraints on spouse employment. Approximately one-quarter of spouses felt that the existing spouse employment and educational programs were already sufficient; that the military did as much as it could, given the limitations of the military lifestyle; or that the military should not become involved in issues related to spouse employment or education.

## **Recommendations Addressing Military Spouse Employment Opportunities**

Given these suggestions and the findings gained from the quantitative and qualitative assessment of both existing and new data, the researchers generated the following recommendations for DoD to

consider in addressing the problems that military spouse face pursuing their employment or educational opportunities.

### **Continue to Address Military Child Care Availability and Affordability**

Child care remains an extremely important issue to military families. DoD efforts to address availability (including extended-hours care) and affordability should continue, and spouses should be made aware of future plans to address shortcomings.

### **Pursue Relationships with Local Employers**

DoD should continue to explore relationships with large, nationally prevalent employers and with local employers to improve hiring conditions for military spouses, recognizing that such programs are more likely to benefit spouses of enlisted personnel, who are more likely to occupy retail, administrative, and restaurant jobs (which are industries commonly represented among nationally prevalent employers).

### **Pursue Spouse Employment Incentives with Military Contractors**

DoD should consider incentives or other programs to encourage military contractors to hire qualified military spouses.

### **Reexamine the Priority System for Civil Service Jobs**

DoD should reexamine the priority system for civil service jobs, including whether military spouses should receive higher priority than they do currently.

### **Address Licensing and Certification Hurdles**

DoD needs to pursue ways to address licensing and certification issues for spouses who relocate, such as making it easier for them to learn the professional requirements for different states. At a minimum, the department should consider compensating spouses for the costs of transferring or re-obtaining professional certification and licensure.

### **Tailor Spouse Employment Programs and Policies to Appropriate Audience**

When designing spouse programs or policies related to spouse employment, DoD should recognize that different groups of spouses are motivated to work for different reasons, which may include financial needs or nonfinancial motivations. For example, spouses of enlisted personnel are more likely to work for financial reasons, whereas officers' spouses are more likely to cite personal fulfillment and career aspirations.

### **Raise Awareness About Existing Spouse Employment Programs**

DoD should continue to explore ways to inform military spouses about current programs to aid them with their education or with their employment search.

### **Become a More Family-Friendly Employer**

The military leadership needs to acknowledge the value of being perceived of as a family-friendly employer, to pursue such opportunities whenever possible, and to acknowledge and reward the leadership of those units that do accommodate families. Given the stresses of today's environment, the military's mission can obviously make difficult or impossible many features enjoyed by the civilian workplace. However, if the military could better inform families about their service member's schedule, better accommodate a spouse's desire to work or attend schools regularly in the evening, and create more ways for service members to share in the "crises" of parenthood (e.g., calls from schools to pick up sick children), it could gain added respect as a family-friendly employer. Moreover, given the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs' recent assertion to Congress that quality-of-life concerns are inseparable from combat readiness (Myers, 2004), there are real operational reasons to respect and pursue the family's well-being.

## **Recommendations Addressing Military Spouse Educational Opportunities**

### **Develop a Policy Statement on Spouse Education**

DoD needs to establish officially that it believes it is to the department's benefit for military spouses to acquire advanced education. Further, a fuller consideration of the value of extending financial benefits for spouse education, while extremely costly, will address the complaints and suggestions of many military spouses.

### **Pursue Opportunities to Gain In-State Tuition Rates for Military Spouses**

DoD should explore ways in which it can influence states to provide in-state tuition arrangements for military families in order to reduce educational costs.

### **Strengthen Relationships Between DoD and Education Providers**

There are also less-costly ways to improve military spouses' opportunities to gain an education. DoD could work to strengthen its relationship with universities to maximize the number of classes offered on military bases, encourage such universities to offer a wider range of coursework, and increase the ease with which military spouses (and military members) can transfer credits.

### **Support and Facilitate Online Education or Distance Learning**

DoD should investigate ways to support online education, such as providing or loaning computers, or subsidizing the cost of home computers or online access. Additional support may include distance-learning facilities on post, arrangements with an increased number of universities, or providing spouses access to programs such as eArmyU.