

How Army Families Address Life's Challenges

Army families must face all the challenges that other families face—as well as those related to military service, such as those that come from permanent change of station (PCS) moves that require families to relocate every few years. Also, each of these aspects of Army life can create new problems (e.g., spouses having to find a new job with each PCS move) or exacerbate existing problems (e.g., adding stress to fragile marital relationships). The Army has recognized these unique military service challenges and implemented programs and services to help Army families—and Army spouses in particular—cope with them.

The Army uses surveys to gauge Army family members' satisfaction with such programs and services, but these surveys do not address the problems and associated needs that led individuals to seek out the programs in the first place or ask whether the programs or some other resources helped them resolve their problems.

This brief summarizes research that takes a different approach to understanding the use of programs and services by using a model of help-seeking and problem resolution to examine the match between the resources available and challenges faced by Army spouses.

Applying the Model of Help-Seeking and Problem Resolution

This model, which is shown in the figure, was put forward as an alternative approach to understanding program use through the lens of the problem-solving process—the most pressing problems that spouses and their families experienced in the past year (if any), the types of help they needed to deal with those problems, the resources they contacted to try to meet those needs, and whether those resources helped them resolve their problems.

RAND researchers applied the model using a survey completed by more than 8,500 Army spouses. On the survey, the Army spouses received a list of specific **challenges** experienced within nine **problem domains**:

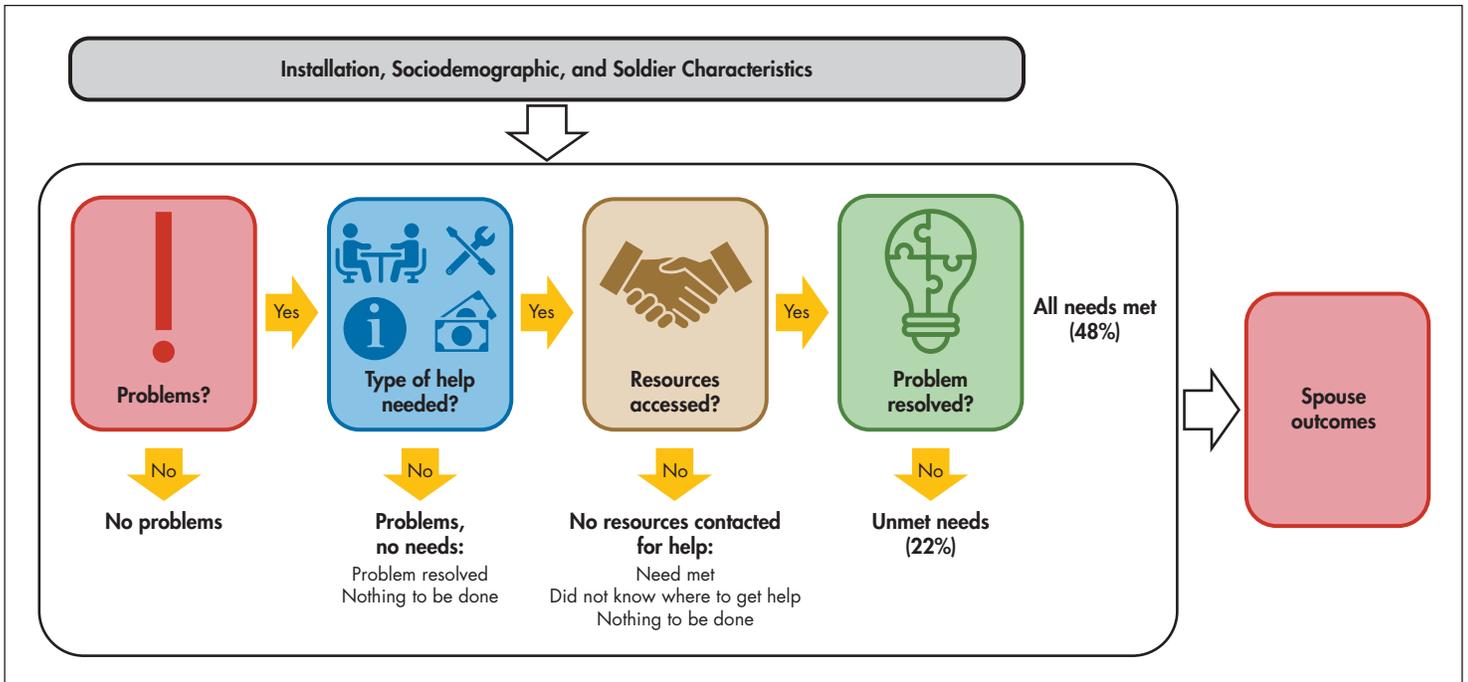
1. **military practices and culture** (e.g., adjusting to military language, organization, or culture; getting your spouse's chain of command to take you seriously)

Key findings:

- A survey of more than 8,500 Army spouses examining their problem-solving processes found that the most common problems involved work-life balance, military practices and culture, and spouses' own well-being.
- Spouses most often wanted social support for their problems and commonly reached out to their social networks for help, including to other military spouses.
- Most spouses who used resources to help with their needs had their needs met. However, 22 percent of all spouses had one or more unmet need, which was associated with higher levels of stress and worse attitudes toward the military.
- Vulnerable groups included those unemployed and looking for work.

2. **work-life balance** (e.g., finding time for sleep, healthy diet, and physical exercise; work not being challenging or not using your skills or education)
3. **household management** (e.g., finding suitable housing or encountering poor housing quality)
4. **financial or legal problems** (e.g., trouble servicing debt or paying bills; finding a job that pays enough or offers enough hours)
5. **health care system problems** (e.g., difficulty finding a physician who takes TRICARE)
6. **relationship problems** (e.g., trouble reuniting or reconnecting after a deployment)
7. **child well-being** (e.g., lack of affordable or quality military child care)
8. **own well-being** (e.g., feeling stressed, overwhelmed, or tired)
9. **soldier's well-being** (same issues as "own well-being," but with the soldier as the frame of reference).

Figure 1. Model of the Help-Seeking and Problem-Resolution Process for Army Spouses



Respondents could choose between 8 and 14 specific issues that they had experienced in the past year within each problem domain, for a total of up to 96 listed specific issues. If respondents chose issues from more than two domains, they were asked to prioritize which two problem domains contained “the most significant problems” they had faced in the past 12 months.

For each of their top two problems, the respondent was asked to indicate what types of help—**needs**, if any—they required to deal with the specific problems in that domain. Needs included, for example, social or emotional support, general or specific information, or an advocate. If respondents chose more than two needs for a problem, they were asked to prioritize two types of needs.

For the top two needs identified by respondents, they were asked to indicate which **resources**, if any, they had “used or tried to use to meet [the] need.” This included military resources—e.g., the spouse’s chain of command (squad leaders, noncommissioned officers, or officers) or the Army Family Readiness Group (FRG)—and nonmilitary resources—e.g., other military spouses or internet resources (such as WebMD or Google). All participants were also asked more-general questions about their perceptions of military resources and barriers to using them.

Finally, respondents were asked about three specific **outcomes**—perceived stress, general attitudes toward the Army, and support for the soldier spouse remaining in the Army.

In analyzing the results in terms of the problem-solving process, respondents were separated out by a number of characteristics: their employment status, whether the families had dependent children, housing location (distance from the military installation where the soldier was posted and urbanicity), and the soldier’s service characteristics (pay grade and whether the soldier was deployed in the past year).

What the Authors Found Using the Problem-Solving Process

The table highlights both the general findings from using the process and those specific to the characteristics examined.

Recommendations

Based on the findings in the table, the authors recommend that the Army take the following actions:

- **Consider ways to boost the effectiveness of Army FRGs and to increase participation in FRGs**, especially for spouses of junior enlisted soldiers and those who live far from their soldier’s military post. Army FRGs are intended to provide support for spouses, particularly during deployments, but survey results suggest that FRGs are not well used for obtaining help with problems; as such, the resource may need a reboot.
- **Explore outreach to spouses by systematically collecting and/or providing email addresses for spouses** to tackle the general lack of program awareness. Doing so would facilitate low-cost email communication with

Table 1. General and Specific Findings

Questions by Problem-Solving Process Area	General Findings	Findings Broken Out by Demographic Characteristics
What problems did Army spouses have?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 5 percent of Army spouses indicated that they had no issues or problems in the past year. • Of those who did have issues, feeling stressed, overwhelmed, or tired—either the respondent or the respondent’s spouse—were the most frequently selected issues from among the 96 presented, followed by feelings of loneliness or boredom. • Spouses most frequently chose work-life balance, military practices and culture, and own well-being as their top problem domains. • Relationship problems were rated as the most severe, among those who chose this top problem. • Military practices and culture had lower severity ratings, although this issue was chosen as a top-two problem by a quarter of respondents. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spouses who were unemployed and looking for work were more likely to prioritize problems in the financial or legal problems domain, while those who were unemployed and not looking for work were more likely to prioritize problems with their own well-being. • Spouses who were employed full time were more likely to prioritize problems in the work-life balance domain. • Spouses of junior enlisted soldiers were more likely to prioritize financial or legal problems. • Spouses of both junior enlisted and junior officers were more likely to prioritize problems with military practices and culture.
What types of help did spouses need to address their problems?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Among spouses with reported problems, 18 percent indicated that they had no needs for any of their problems. This equates to 17 percent of the entire Army spouse population (i.e., including those with no reported problems). • Of those who did have needs for help, the most frequently prioritized type of help was emotional/social support, with about one-third of spouses reporting this need. • Activities, professional counseling, general information, and advice were only somewhat less frequently prioritized. • The most frequent need for work-life balance was activities; the most frequently prioritized needs for military practices and culture problems were general and/or specific information; and the most frequent choice for own well-being problems was emotional/social support, although some also chose activities and/or counseling. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spouses with dependent children were more likely to indicate that they needed a helping hand but <i>less</i> likely than those without dependent children to indicate a need for either general or specific information. • Junior enlisted spouses were more likely to indicate a need for general information, particularly for problems with military practices and culture, and they were much more likely to indicate a need for a helping hand.
What types of resources, if any, did spouses use to try to meet their needs?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Among Army spouses who reported having problems and needs, 90 percent reported using one or more resources for help, suggesting that they are willing to seek help to resolve their problems. This equates to 70 percent of the entire Army spouse population (i.e., including those with no problems and no needs). • The most commonly reported reason for not using resources to help: Spouses did not know whom to contact, suggesting that potentially solvable problems could be persisting because of a lack of awareness of programs and services and how to access them. • The most commonly used military resources were a military-covered medical provider, followed by military internet resources or official Army social media; only 15 percent of spouses contacted an FRG. • The most commonly contacted types of nonmilitary resources were spouses’ personal networks outside the military and other military spouses they knew in person. • Among the most frequently used resources for help with each of the problem domains were spouses’ social networks and nonmilitary internet resources. • Spouses reported reaching out to more than four resources per problem. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spouses of junior officers in particular were more likely to have used resources to help meet their needs. • Spouses of junior officers reported using almost five resources per problem. • Spouses who lived farther away from the military post where their soldier was posted tended to use fewer resources and fewer military resources in particular.
How well, and easily, were their needs met?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If spouses used resources to help with their needs, most had their needs met, but 32 percent indicated having unmet needs even after using resources. This equates to 22 percent of the entire population of Army spouses (i.e., including those with no problems, those with no needs, and those who did not use resources for their needs). • The two problem domains with higher rates of unmet needs were military practices and culture and health care system problems. • Overall, spouses tended to rate military resources as meeting their needs “all right” or “well/very well.” • Postcards or other informative mailings may be viable for outreach, with about 60 percent of spouses selecting this method; other preferred avenues included Facebook (selected by 54 percent) and email (selected by about 45 percent). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spouses who were unemployed and looking for work were less satisfied with both military and nonmilitary resources. • Spouses who lived farther away from the military post where their soldier was posted were less satisfied with military resources than spouses who lived closer to post. • Generally, the farther spouses lived from post, the less comfortable they were using military resources, the less likely they were to know whom to contact when military resources were not meeting their needs, and the less easy they found it to find out about military resources. • Spouses of junior enlisted soldiers were also significantly less comfortable using military resources and navigating the system. • Spouses with dependent children found it easier to access and navigate military resources.

Table 1—Continued

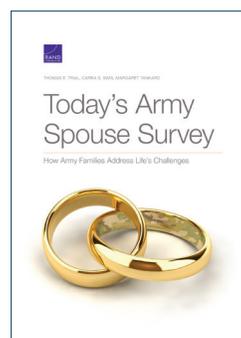
Questions by Problem-Solving Process Area	General Findings	Findings Broken Out by Demographic Characteristics
How are problems, needs, and resource use related to outcomes—stress and attitudes about the Army?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For each outcome—perceived stress, general attitudes toward the military, and support for their soldier staying in the military—those who had their needs unmet had the most stress and the least positive attitudes, suggesting that, while not having a problem in the first place is best, a problem solved is a far better outcome than a need that goes unmet. • Spouses with needs who did not reach out to resources and those who reached out to resources and had their needs met were not statistically different; further exploration revealed that spouses who did not seek help because they solved their problem on their own experienced less stress and had more positive general attitudes toward the military than spouses who used resources and had their needs met. • In contrast, spouses who had difficulty finding resources because they did not know whom to turn to for help experienced more stress and less positive attitudes toward the military than those who used resources and had their needs met. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spouses who lived farther from post experienced higher levels of stress, less positive attitudes toward the military, and less support for their soldier staying in the military. • Spouses with dependent children had significantly more positive general attitudes toward the military and specific attitudes toward staying in the military than those without children. • Spouses of junior enlisted soldiers reported significantly higher levels of stress than spouses from any other pay grade group and had less positive general attitudes toward the military and less favorable attitudes toward their soldiers staying in the military than any of the other pay grade groups.

spouses and allow for targeted outreach for installation-specific events or resources (e.g., FRG meetings).

- **Consider implementing a “no wrong door” policy to help spouses find the resources they need.** Even when spouses know about resources, they have difficulty accessing and navigating the Army system.
- **Encourage spouses to use helplines as a tool for negotiating resources (e.g., Military OneSource).** Because spouses have difficulty accessing Army resources in the first place, encouraging spouses to use helplines to assist them in finding the best resources for their needs would serve as the “best” door for making Army services work better for spouses.
- **Consider building systematic customer feedback into ongoing program evaluation and monitoring systems.**

Results show that even when spouses used resources to help them with their problems, many still experienced unmet needs. Feedback should be systematically solicited rather than relying on automated comment systems.

- **Consider targeting vulnerable groups of spouses for outreach, perhaps through existing well-used resources.** Spouses of junior enlisted soldiers and spouses who live farther away from their soldiers’ military posts indicated that they needed more information about resources to help them with their problems, but they also felt less comfortable using military resources. These groups also had higher rates of unmet needs. Based on this finding, one potentially fruitful avenue would be to provide such information through resources they might already use, such as the military health care system.



This brief describes research conducted in the RAND Arroyo Center and documented in *Today's Army Spouse Survey: How Army Families Address Life's Challenges*, by Thomas E. Trail, Carra S. Sims, and Margaret Tankard, RR-3224-A, 2019 (available at www.rand.org/t/RR3224). To view this brief online, visit www.rand.org/t/RB10081. The RAND Corporation is a research organization that develops solutions to public policy challenges to help make communities throughout the world safer and more secure, healthier and more prosperous. RAND is nonprofit, nonpartisan, and committed to the public interest. RAND's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. RAND® is a registered trademark. © RAND 2019

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