



RESEARCH  
BRIEF

# Meeting the Changing Needs of Veterans

Insights from Student Veterans  
Who Are Single Parents





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My older children can hang out. I'll put a movie on for them while I'm in class. It's the six-month-old who needs my attention. She needs to be changed and talked to, which is difficult to do while taking notes.

★ Student veteran single parent

**F**inancial strain, schedule overload, and psychological stress are just some of the struggles single parents can face when returning to school. But what do those challenges look like if the single-parent student is also a veteran?

To date, many studies on higher education access have focused on challenges faced by the civilian population. Indeed, there are many obstacles that people face when seeking to enter certificate- and degree-granting programs, including affordability, inequitable admission standards, and family and work demands on their time. Veterans, however, have access to G.I. Bill benefits, which are aimed at supporting veterans interested in attaining education and training after service. In previous decades, many veterans could depend on a partner—typically a wife—to care for their children while they attended school after service. However, gendered opportunities and constraints are changing; in fact, women are the fastest-growing population in the veteran community. Because women are more likely than men are to raise children without the support of a partner, the number of veteran single parents will likely rise as veteran demographics change. The G.I. Bill has historically succeeded in helping many veterans train for new vocations, but can the

G.I. Bill continue to support veterans as family structures change?

To find out, RAND researchers partnered with the Student Veterans of America and conducted semi-structured interviews with ten veteran single parents who are enrolled in higher education and one nonveteran school administrator who is dedicated to supporting student veterans. The interview questions were designed to help the research team investigate barriers and facilitators to veteran single parents' pursuit of higher education; the research team also examined how such policies as the G.I. Bill supported the educational goals of veteran single parents while they parented young children. The findings from this study can help veteran and education policy decisionmakers develop or refine education and training programs in ways that attune with the unique circumstances of veteran single parents.

### **How the Study Was Conducted**

The interviews with student veterans who are single parents were part of a larger study that examined the demographic characteristics, financial stability, mental and physical health status, and health care access of individuals who served after September 11, 2001 (post-9/11

veterans), and are single parents. The study sample was limited to veteran parents and civilian parents (who served as a comparison group) aged 18 to 59 who had children under the age of 17 living with them full time. The team gathered and analyzed 2016–2020 data from multiple sources, including the American Community Survey (ACS), Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement (CPS-FSS), and Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS), which provides information on health-related risk behaviors, conditions, services, and care.

To better understand the circumstances specific to student veterans who are single parents, the research team also conducted interviews with five men and six women who were raising between one and five children and were attending or had attended college in the past five years. Those interviewed typically started pursuing higher education a few years after having left the military. The interview questions were open-ended in that they were designed to elicit descriptions of interviewees' experiences.

## Study Findings

### Who Are Veteran Single Parents and Student Veteran Single Parents?

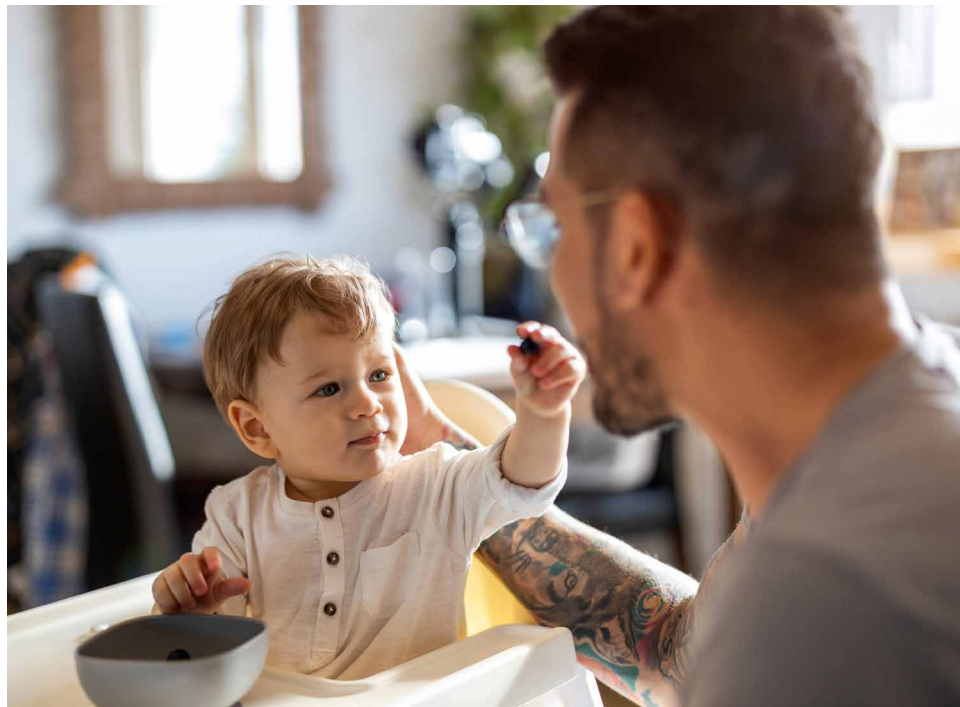
For the first part of the study, the research team analyzed quantitative data from various sources to create a picture of veteran single parents' backgrounds, challenges, and interest in education.

**Almost 300,000 veteran parents identify as single.** Between 2016 and 2018, there were more than 2.5 million veterans between the ages of 18 and 59 who identified as a parent

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Because of [the coronavirus disease 2019], I'm parenting my kids, so I withdrew. I made a choice to parent my kids better, but I had to pay back the VA because I didn't get the grades.

★ Student veteran single parent





I really don't get to see my daughter much. I go to class from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m., and then I go to work from 2 p.m. to 8:30 p.m., Monday through Friday. But if I didn't have help from family, I probably wouldn't be able to do it, or I wouldn't be able to work.

★ Student veteran single parent



of a child under 18 years of age. Of those 2.5 million veterans, about 12 percent (294,677 veterans) identified as a single parent. For comparison, nearly 11 million nonveterans, or about 18 percent of nonveteran parents, identified as a single parent during the same span of time.

**Veteran single parents are three times more likely than veteran coupled parents to identify as female and two times more likely than veteran coupled parents to identify as Black.** Of veteran single parents,

42.8 percent identified as female, compared with only 13.9 percent of veteran coupled parents. Demographic data also showed that 24.0 percent of veteran single parents identified as Black, compared with only 11.9 percent of veteran coupled parents.

**Veteran single parents have a median personal income that is \$18,000 less than that of veteran coupled parents.** Median

personal income of veteran single parents was \$42,000, compared with that of veteran coupled parents, which was \$60,000. In

addition, median household income of veteran coupled parents was \$102,000, which is significantly greater than that of veteran single parents, which was \$58,580. Veteran single parents were also more likely than veteran coupled parents to experience food insecurity and less likely than veteran coupled parents to own a home.

**Veteran single parents are more likely than veteran coupled parents to be enrolled in higher education.**

Among veteran single parents, 13.1 percent reported being enrolled in higher education, compared with 10.7 percent of veteran coupled parents. In addition, veteran single parents were more likely than veteran coupled parents to be both currently employed and enrolled in school

(8.7 percent versus 7.9 percent, respectively).

**Black female veteran single parents are more likely than veteran single parents of any other race and gender intersection to be enrolled in higher education.** Female

veteran single parents were more than twice as likely as their male counterparts to be enrolled in higher education (19.1 percent versus 8.6 percent, respectively). Analysis of race and gender intersections shows that Black female veteran single parents were most

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You cannot live on the basic allowance for housing. You have to work. With children, it's even worse. If I didn't have my disability benefits, I would not have been able to afford childcare. Last year, I paid \$19,000 for daycare for two children, so it's a lot. My disability benefit was \$39,000 for the year.

★ Student veteran single parent

likely to be enrolled in higher education (24.1 percent), followed by 20.1 percent of Hispanic female veteran single parents, 17.8 percent of Other Race female veteran single parents, and 15.2 percent of White female veteran single parents.

### What Do Student Veteran Single Parents Say About Their Goals and Challenges?

The interview group was relatively small, but their discussions brought nuance to the data described previously by offering more-precise insight on what is facilitating or impeding veteran single parents' pursuit of higher education.

**Interviewees were enthusiastic about the ability to pursue education.** Each veteran single parent used words like passion, interest, and love to describe choosing their field of study. They all described a desire to improve the quality of life for themselves and their children through their education and expected their education to lead to jobs that are higher paying, more stable, and personally fulfilling. Indeed, some interviewees noted that their desire to obtain a postsecondary degree led them to consider entering the military.

**Child care posed a significant challenge, especially for those with very young children.** Lack of child care support was by far the greatest and most frequently mentioned challenge. Veterans who are

students and single parents have a lot to balance, especially when their children are between zero and three years old. Child care is both time-consuming and expensive, and student veterans noted that they often have neither the time nor the money required for adequate child care.

Those interviewed described how they often found themselves in a catch-22: Not spending on child care means that learning time is lost and their learning suffers, and spending money on child care means spending more hours working to pay for that care and consequently limiting learning hours as well.

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To be honest, I don't really know how the G.I. Bill works. There really should be a place where you could call and directly talk to someone. The information is not as accessible as people would like it to be.

★ Student veteran single parent

## Some G.I. Bill education benefits do not meet the needs of veteran single parents who want to pursue education.

The G.I. Bill makes higher education possible for many veterans who would not have access otherwise. Currently, the bill provides funding for tuition, fees, books, supplies, moving, and housing while enrolled in higher education. However, interviewees noted that the G.I. Bill benefits have requirements that often do not account for the time constraints and financial realities of single parents. These include the following:

- ***G.I. Bill beneficiaries must attend at least one in-person class to be eligible for their full housing allowance.*** Three of the 11 interviewees identified the in-person class requirement as a challenge. Attending an in-person class requires single parents to find and pay for local housing, transportation, and child care. The G.I. Bill does allow for students to take online-only classes, but this option only offers a housing allowance that is half the average military housing allowance in the country. Consequently, most veterans attend one class in person to receive their full housing benefit or seek lower-cost housing that is generally found farther away from school campuses, which puts additional strain on time and finances.
- ***G.I. Bill beneficiaries must pay tuition back for classes from which they withdraw.*** Life with young children can be unpredictable.

Interviewees spoke of their fear of child illness: If they needed to miss classes to care for sick children during a particularly bad flu season, for example, they might be forced to withdraw from a class or two and, thus, would be required to pay back the tuition for that class. Doing so would put further strain on already stretched family finances.

- ***The housing allowance is helpful but often not enough for single parents.*** Although adjusted for costs related to the area of residence, the housing allowance is also directly tied to the number of credits in which a student is enrolled. Thus, a single parent whose life constraints require part-time student status is further disadvantaged by a reduced housing allowance. Moreover, students do not receive allowance during summer, winter, and spring breaks. This inconsistent income can be especially prohibitive for single parents.

**Family provided a chief source of child care.** The interviewees spoke often about the importance of family support. Without it, most noted, they had very few options.

**Veterans Resource Centers (VRCs) and veterans' representatives can make a big difference but only when they are consistent in service.** VRCs are designed to assist student veterans with needs related to their educational benefits and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). VRCs provide different services depending on the

institutions in which they are located, but staff at VRCs seek to provide support for accessing VA educational benefits and help veterans fill out forms, navigate bureaucracy, access community resources, and find employment opportunities. VRCs can also provide spaces for studying, holding meetings, or connecting with other student veterans. VRCs might be staffed by professional administrators or veterans.

It was clear from the interviews that the effectiveness—and even existence—of VRCs

and representatives is inconsistent across colleges and universities. This leads to highly variable experiences and outcomes.

### Recommendations

The interviews with veteran single parents who are pursuing higher education suggest that this population faces significant barriers to fully benefiting from G.I. Bill assistance. These insights, along with a better understanding of the challenges that veteran single parents face more generally, suggest the following recommendations be considered to improve the quality of life and prospects for this population.

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In-person class requires them to leave their house twice a week for an hour and a half, plus travel time. So with parents, especially single parents, they have to find someone to watch their child. That's a big issue.

★ School administrator





**Improve financial support for student veteran child care.** Improving assistance to veterans with young children would be especially helpful to this population. This support can be provided indirectly through vouchers and child care reimbursement or more directly by providing child care in the learning institutions that veterans attend.

**Invest in the existence and robustness of VRCs and veteran representatives at colleges and universities.** VRCs and campus veteran representatives were noted as helpful by interviewees but only when they existed and were well staffed. This program could be

improved by ensuring that resources and people are available where veterans go to school.

**Consider providing extra support for single parents through the G.I. Bill.** Going to classes, handling bills, and taking care of kids full time all at once makes it difficult to finish the kind of education needed to move ahead in a new career. Changes to the G.I. Bill—such as reducing in-person obligations, removing penalties for stopping classes, and making part-time degrees more affordable—could allow single parents the same access to the benefits of higher education that can be accessed by veteran coupled parents and nonparent veterans.

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I will not go to any school that doesn't have a vet center. Not anymore. It's helped me so much. . . . They had an advisor walking me through the process. He's like, "Here's a checklist of what you need to get me. Do this, do that." It worked out pretty well.

★ Student veteran single parent



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This brief describes work done in RAND Education and Labor and documented in *The Financial, Physical, and Mental Health of Veteran Single Parents: Surviving but Not Thriving*, by Sierra Smucker, Teague Ruder, Stacey Yi, and Coreen Farris, RR-A1363-6, 2023 (available at [www.rand.org/t/RR-A1363-6](http://www.rand.org/t/RR-A1363-6)). To view this brief online, visit [www.rand.org/t/RBA1363-2](http://www.rand.org/t/RBA1363-2). 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.

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