

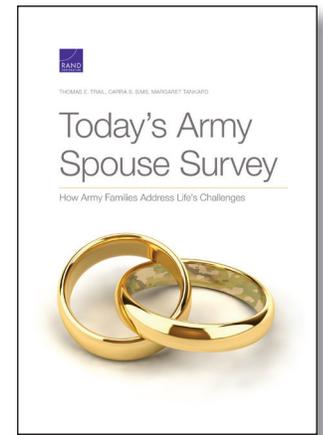


Today's Army Spouse Survey

How Army Families Address Life's Challenges

Thomas E. Trail, Carra S. Sims, Margaret Tankard

www.rand.org/t/RR3224



This report identifies the challenges that Army families face, and the resources they need to address those challenges, directly from the perspectives of more than 8,500 Army spouses who completed a survey. The results show how spouses prioritize needs, the implications of unmet needs for spouses' attitudes toward military service, and how the Army can best address spouses' most-pressing unmet needs through adjustments to Army support services.



RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- What were the most-common types of problems and needs Army spouses faced and prioritized?
- What were the resources most used by spouses, and were they satisfactory?
- What barriers or facilitators were most prevalent that might explain the resource use?
- Were there differences in responses among sociodemographic subgroups of Army spouses?
- Did any sociodemographic characteristics of spouses or their soldiers affect how they interacted with resources, either within or outside the military?
- Are differences in problem-solving experiences—specifically, having unmet needs—related to important indicators of spousal well-being and satisfaction with the Army, including favoring their soldiers staying in the Army?



KEY FINDINGS

Spouses most frequently chose *work-life balance*, *military practices and culture*, and *own well-being* as their top problem domains

- Feeling stressed, overwhelmed, or tired—both the spouse and the soldier—was spouses' most frequently selected issue, followed by feelings of loneliness or boredom.

continued on back

Among spouses who had needs for help, the most frequently prioritized type of help was emotional or social support

- Spouses of junior enlisted soldiers were more likely to indicate a need for general information, particularly for problems with *military practices and culture*.

The most commonly contacted types of resources were spouses' personal networks outside the military, other military spouses they knew in person, a military-covered medical provider, and civilian and military internet resources or social media

- The most commonly reported reason for not using resources to help with needs was that respondents did not know whom to contact for help.

If spouses used resources to help with their needs, most had their needs met

- However, among all spouses, some indicated having one or more unmet needs.
- The two problem domains with higher rates of unmet needs were *military practices and culture* and *health care system problems*.
- The two domains with lowest rates of unmet needs were *own well-being* and *household management*.

For each outcome—perceived stress, general attitudes toward the military, and support for their soldiers staying in the military—those who had their needs unmet reported the most stress and the least-positive attitudes

- Spouses who were unemployed and looking for work, lived farther from their soldiers' posts, or were married to junior enlisted soldiers were particularly vulnerable.



RECOMMENDATIONS

- To improve communication with spouses and provide additional opportunities for social support and information sharing between spouses, the Army should consider ways to boost the effectiveness of Army Family Readiness Groups and increase participation in them, especially by spouses of junior enlisted soldiers and those who live far from their soldiers' military posts. This will likely require a complete rethinking or reboot of Army Family Readiness Groups as a family support resource.
- The Army should explore outreach to spouses through systematic collection or provision of email addresses for spouses.
- A “no wrong door” policy would help spouses find the resources they need—any program or service that a spouse goes to for help should be able offer direction to the best resource to address a problem, even if the resource is in another program office.
- The Army should encourage spouses to use helplines (e.g., Military OneSource) as a tool for negotiating resources.
- The Army should build systematically solicited “customer” feedback into ongoing program evaluation and monitoring systems.
- The Army should consider targeting vulnerable groups of spouses for outreach, perhaps through existing well-used resources.