



TODAY'S ARMY SPOUSE PANEL

Survey Results

IMPACT OF COVID-19

August 2020 to May 2021

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This publication describes work done in the RAND Arroyo Center and documented in *The Today's Army Spouse Panel Proof-of-Concept Study: Methodological Report*, by Thomas E. Trail, Carra S. Sims, Michael S. Pollard, and Owen Hall, RR-A1850-1, 2023.

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Introduction

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has had a tremendous impact on American society. For many, the COVID-19 pandemic has been not only a period of social isolation but also one of considerable economic hardship. Unemployment skyrocketed in the early months. Although nearly half of lost jobs had been recovered by fall 2020, the job market has shifted in rather dramatic ways, in part because of school closures and the loss of many child care options (Long, 2020). And the impact of this shift has most acutely affected women in the workforce who have had to assume child care and schooling tasks; many of these women have left the job market as a result (Long, 2020).

Military spouses and families are not immune to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. An understanding of how the pandemic has affected Army families can give U.S. Army leadership the information needed to provide targeted support. RAND researchers used the Today's Army Spouse Panel, a demonstration project for the U.S. Army, as a means to gather insight into how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected Army spouses with respect to employment, child care, financial, and other concerns, providing a glimpse into the issues that affect their ability to navigate this challenging period.

The three panel surveys were fielded during the initial year of the pandemic: Survey 1 was fielded in August 2020, Survey 2 in January 2021, and Survey 3 in May 2021. Survey data from the resulting panel were used to provide the Army with focused, timely answers to questions regarding time-sensitive issues, such as the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Army spouse employment. This report contains highlights of results on the impact of the pandemic from the three surveys fielded. All results are weighted to be representative of the Army spouse cohort who were eligible to participate in the 2018 Today's Army Spouse Survey (TASS; Trail, Sims, and Tankard, 2019) and who remained affiliated with the Army in 2020. Details on the methodology used to design and field the surveys, as well as the population weights, are discussed in Trail et al., 2023.

Sources of Information About COVID-19

As with any uncertain situation, people sought out information about COVID-19 from the media, government, and other sources. In August 2020, when Army spouses were asked about who they trusted for information about COVID-19, the highest reported trust was for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, in which over 70 percent of spouses said they had “a great deal” or “a fair amount of” trust. Army spouses had the least amount of trust—“not very much” or “none at all”—in the federal government (59 percent), network TV news (73 percent), and social media (88 percent). Interestingly, perceptions of whether the Army was a trusted source of accurate COVID-19 information were split, with 49 percent reporting “a great deal” or “a fair amount” of trust in the Army and 51 percent responding that they had “not very much” or “none at all” (Table 1).

TABLE 1
Perceptions About Trust in Information Sources

Trust in Each of the Following to Provide You with Accurate COVID-19 Information	A Great Deal (%)	A Fair Amount (%)	Not Very Much (%)	None at All (%)
The federal government	6	35	42	17
Network TV news	3	24	41	32
Social media	1	12	42	46
The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention	30	41	19	11
Your local garrison leadership	10	40	32	18
The Army	9	40	34	17

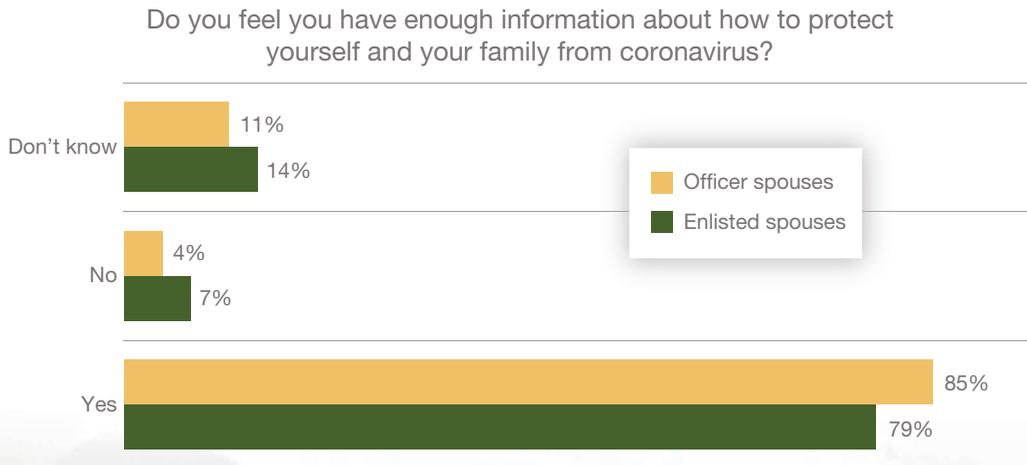
SOURCE: Survey 1 (August 2020).

NOTE: $n = 1,571$. Survey percentages are weighted to be representative of the Army spouse cohort who were eligible to participate in the 2018 TASS and who remained affiliated with the Army in 2020.

INFORMATION ABOUT COVID-19

In August 2020, when asked whether they had enough information about how to protect themselves and their families from COVID-19, the majority of both officer (85 percent) and enlisted (79 percent) spouses said yes. However, a substantial minority (11 percent of officer spouses and 14 percent of enlisted spouses) indicated that they may not have enough information to protect themselves and their family from COVID-19 (Figure 1).

FIGURE 1
Information About COVID-19



SOURCE: Survey 1 (August 2020).

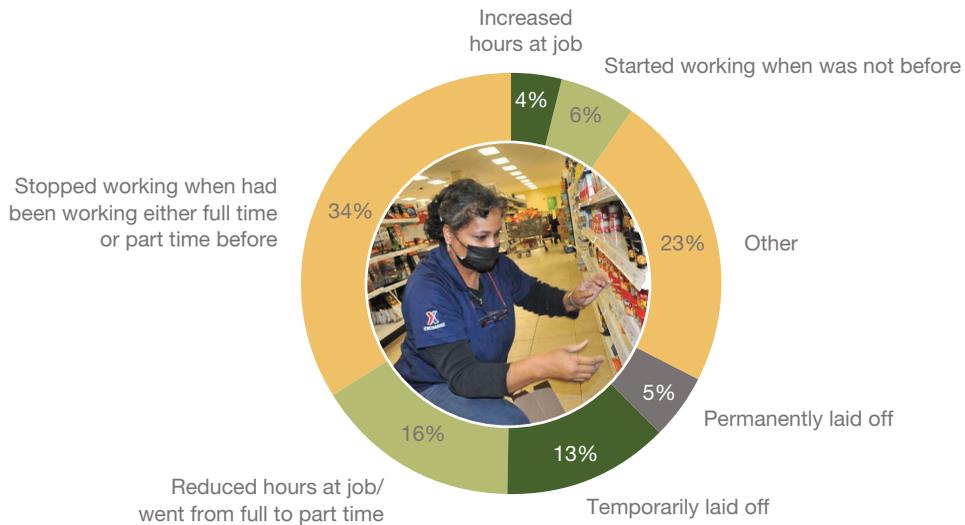
NOTE: $n = 1,576$. Survey percentages are weighted to be representative of the Army spouse cohort who were eligible to participate in the 2018 TASS and who remained affiliated with the Army in 2020.

Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Army Spouse Employment

As of August 2020, 24 percent of all respondents, including those not previously working, experienced an employment change because of the COVID-19 pandemic. As shown in Figure 2, of those respondents, the largest share (34 percent) had been working either full or part time prior to the pandemic and subsequently stopped working. While 10 percent started working more, either increasing the hours at their job (4 percent) or starting to work when they were not before (6 percent), 16 percent experienced reduced hours at their job or went from full-time to part-time employment, and 18 percent were either temporarily or permanently laid off. A change in employment status may be associated with a loss of or change in child care service. Among respondents with children, 42 percent experienced a change in child care because of the COVID-19 pandemic, and 74 percent of those started providing more care at home.

FIGURE 2

Employment-Related Changes Reported by Army Spouses



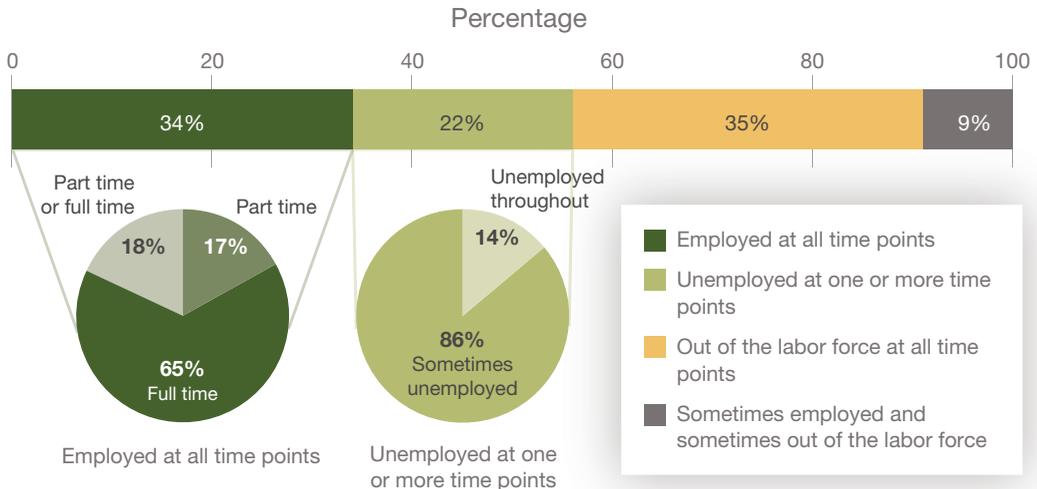
SOURCE: Survey 1 (August 2020).

NOTE: Figure displays COVID-19 pandemic-related employment changes among the 34 percent of spouses reporting such changes on the August 2020 survey ($n = 375$). Percentages are weighted to be representative of the Army spouse cohort who were eligible to participate in the 2018 TASS and who remained affiliated with the Army in 2020.

CHANGES IN EMPLOYMENT STATUS ACROSS THE THREE SURVEYS

We also collected data to understand how spouse employment changed over time (and as the winter 2020 COVID-19 surge came and went). In each survey, we asked about employment status, and we analyzed data across all three surveys, from August 2020 to May 2021, to see how employment status changed over this period. Although this time frame does not include an assessment of pre-pandemic employment, the results can speak to spouses' movements from various employed states and various unemployed states. For example, for those who were employed, did many move to part-time employment during the period, or did they stay in their original employment status? For those who were unemployed during the period, were they able to gain employment at any point? Figure 3 shows that those who were employed at all time points during the study period generally maintained the same full-time (65 percent) or part-time (17 percent) employment status, while 18 percent transitioned between part- and full-time status. It also shows that among those who were not employed and looking for a job at one or more time points during the study, 14 percent reported that they did not have a job at any of the survey time points (August 2020, January 2021, and May 2021).

FIGURE 3
Changes in Army Spouse Employment Across the Three Surveys



SOURCES: Survey 1 (August 2020), Survey 2 (January 2021), and Survey 3 (May 2021).

NOTE: $n = 920$ who responded to all three surveys. Respondents could check all that apply, so percentages total to more than 100. Survey percentages are weighted to be representative of the Army spouse cohort who were eligible to participate in the 2018 TASS and who remained affiliated with the Army in 2020.

USE OF EMPLOYMENT RESOURCES

We also asked participants in May 2021 whether they had any employment issues and what resources they used to help them with those issues in the *last 12 months*, if any. Overall, 68 percent had experienced an employment issue ($n = 1,027$). Of those who experienced an employment issue, 41 percent did not use any employment resources, and more than half (54 percent) used civilian rather than military resources (16 percent). As shown in Table 2, the Military Spouse Employment Partnership was the most commonly used military resource, and almost 80 percent of users considered it at least somewhat helpful. Finally, we asked spouses who experienced employment issues whether their employment needs were met or unmet. Those who did not use any resources were much more likely (63 percent) to say their needs were unmet than those who used military or civilian resources (approximately 40 percent).



TABLE 2

Use of Employment Resources by Military Spouses

Resource Used for Help (May 2021 survey, <i>n</i> = 1,027)	Used Resource ^a (%)	Perceived Helpfulness of Resource		
		Very Helpful (%)	Somewhat Helpful (%)	Not at All Helpful (%)
Military Resources				
Military Spouse Employment Partnership	6.3	18.9	58.0	23.1
Army Employment Readiness Program	5.7	33.8	55.0	11.1
Spouse Employment Career Opportunities	4.2	31.2	62.5	6.3
MyCAA Scholarship	3.5	65.1	29.2	5.7
Other military education loans or grants through the Army or DoD	1.5	42.6	49.6	7.8
Soldier and Family Readiness Group	2.0	45.9	44.9	9.2
Civilian Resources				
USAJobs website (federal jobs)	33.1	27.6	51.1	21.3
Civilian job search websites (e.g., LinkedIn, Indeed, Monster)	31.5	34.6	55.1	10.3
Personal networks (e.g., friends or family)	25.7	38.9	53.8	7.4
Other local resources (e.g., job bulletins, newspapers)	15.7	19.9	65.4	14.8

SOURCE: Survey 3 (May 2021).

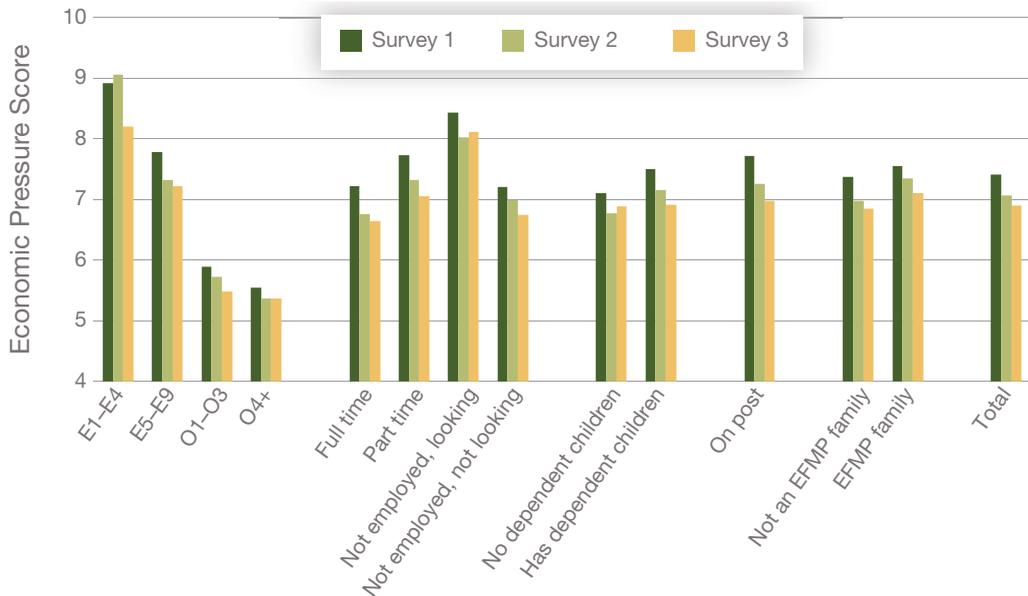
NOTE: Survey percentages are weighted to be representative of the Army spouse cohort who were eligible to participate in the 2018 TASS and who remained affiliated with the Army in 2020. DoD = U.S. Department of Defense; MyCAA = My Career Advancement Account.

^a Respondents could check all that apply, so percentages total to more than 100.

EXPERIENCE OF HOUSEHOLD FINANCIAL STRAIN

On all three surveys, we asked spouses to indicate their experience of household financial strain (e.g., difficulty paying bills, worry about finances) in the four months prior to the survey. Across all surveys, respondents who reported the highest level of household financial strain included spouses of enlisted soldiers and those who were unemployed and looking for work. Although many groups reported a large decline in financial strain from August 2020 to January 2021, most groups reported a slight decrease or maintained essentially the same level of financial strain in May 2021 as in January 2021. Although there are not many spouses of junior enlisted soldiers who completed all three waves of the panel ($n = 28$), those who remained in the sample reported a relatively large decrease in financial strain from January 2021 to May 2021 (Figure 4).

FIGURE 4
Change in Household Financial Strain from August 2020 to May 2021



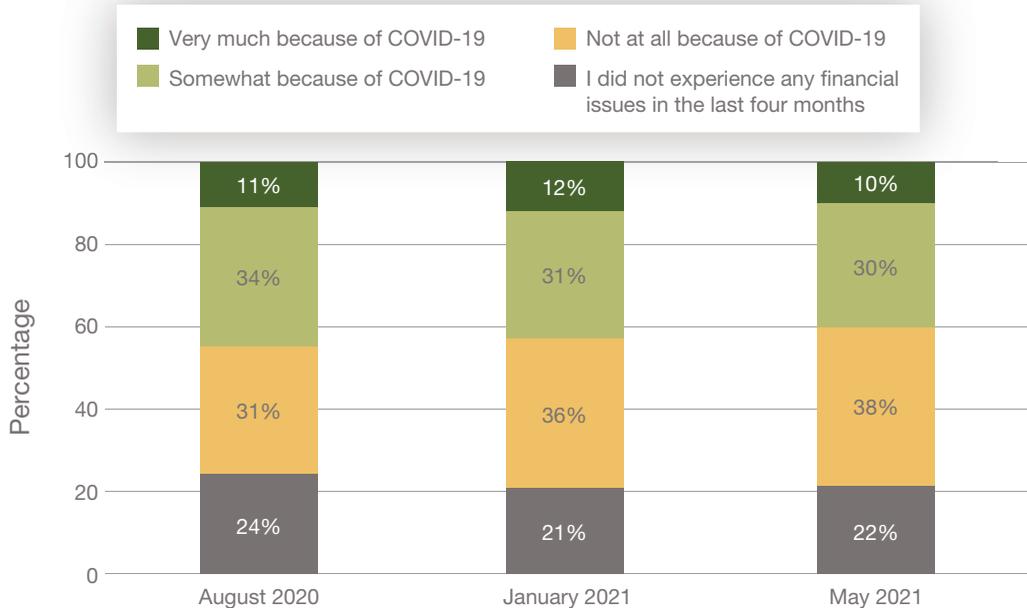
SOURCES: Survey 1 (August 2020), Survey 2 (January 2021), and Survey 3 (May 2021).

NOTE: $n = 920$ who responded to all three surveys. Economic pressure scores could range from 4 to 17. Higher scores indicate more pressure. Responses are weighted to be representative of the Army spouse cohort who were eligible to participate in the 2018 TASS and who remained affiliated with the Army in 2020. EFMP = Exceptional Family Member Program.

PERCEPTION THAT FINANCIAL PROBLEMS REPORTEDLY WERE CAUSED BY THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC REMAINED STABLE OVER TIME

We additionally asked spouses to estimate the extent to which any financial issues experienced were caused by the COVID-19 pandemic at each survey. Across the study period, about 10 percent indicated that the COVID-19 pandemic was very much a cause of financial issues, with a further 30 percent (approximately) indicating the pandemic was a contributor. This reported share of financial challenges attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic remained relatively stable from August 2020 to May 2021 (Figure 5).

FIGURE 5
Report of Financial Problems Caused by the COVID-19 Pandemic from August 2020 to May 2021



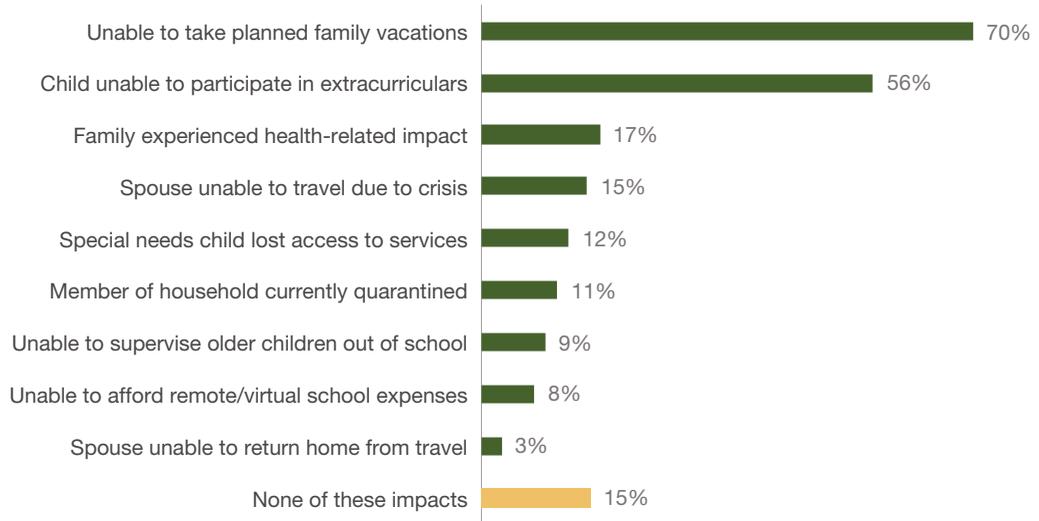
SOURCES: Survey 1 (August 2020), Survey 2 (January 2021), and Survey 3 (May 2021).

NOTE: n = 920 who responded to all three surveys. Responses are weighted to be representative of the Army spouse cohort who were eligible to participate in the 2018 TASS and who remained affiliated with the Army in 2020.

Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Family Life

The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on family life varied and affected most military families. In our initial August 2020 survey, we wanted to get a sense of what form these impacts had taken. In fact, only 15 percent of spouses reported that they had not experienced at least one of several COVID-19 pandemic impacts. The top two impacts reported by survey respondents were that the family was unable to take a planned vacation (70 percent) and a child was unable to participate in extracurricular activities (56 percent). Other impacts ranged from health-related effects, including a member of the household being quarantined, to impacts on children, such as inability of a special needs child to access services, inability to supervise older children out of school, or being unable to afford remote or virtual school expenses (Figure 6).

FIGURE 6
Other COVID-19 Pandemic–Related Impacts Reported by Army Spouses



SOURCE: Survey 1 (August 2020).

NOTE: $n = 1,576$. Respondents could check all that apply, so percentages total to more than 100. Survey percentages are weighted to be representative of the Army spouse cohort who were eligible to participate in the 2018 TASS and who remained affiliated with the Army in 2020.

Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Child Care

As of the January 2021 survey, 81 percent of respondents with children experienced a change in child care because of the COVID-19 pandemic. As shown in Table 3, of those respondents ($n = 1,022$), 74 percent had one or more children who were no longer able to attend school because of the pandemic, and about one-quarter (24.4 percent) could no longer use Army resources, such as the Child Development Center (CDC) or School Age Center (SAC), the Youth Center, or Army Family Child Care providers.

TABLE 3

Type of Child Care Changes Reported Among Spouses Reporting a Change in Child Care

Type of Change Among Those Reporting a Change ($n = 1,022$)

Type of Change Among Those Reporting a Change ($n = 1,022$)	Percentage	95% CI (%)
My children were no longer able to attend school	74.0	(70.9, 76.8)
I was no longer able to use the installation CDC or SAC	15.0	(12.8, 17.6)
I was no longer able to use family or friends for child care	14.3	(12.1, 16.8)
Other	13.8	(11.7, 16.3)
My child was no longer able to attend Youth Center or middle school/teen activities	11.5	(9.6, 13.8)
I was no longer able to use off-post civilian child care centers	11.3	(9.4, 13.4)
I was no longer able to provide as much child care for my children on my own	3.0	(2.0, 4.4)
I was no longer able to use an Army Family Child Care provider	1.6	(0.9, 2.6)
I was no longer able to use a nanny or au pair	1.1	(0.6, 1.9)

SOURCE: Survey 2 (January 2021).

NOTE: Respondents could check all that apply, so percentages total to more than 100. Survey percentages are weighted to be representative of the Army spouse cohort who were eligible to participate in the 2018 TASS and who remained affiliated with the Army in 2020. CI = confidence interval.

ADAPTING TO CHANGES IN CHILD CARE

As shown in Table 4, among spouses who reported a change in child care because of the COVID-19 pandemic, almost 57 percent reported that they adapted to the change by starting to provide more care at home. Twenty-two percent reported that their children were old enough to supervise themselves, so the spouses did not need to provide additional care themselves or find other sources of child care.

TABLE 4
Types of Adaptations Spouses Reported Making to Adjust to a Change in Child Care

Adaptations Among Those Reporting a Change (n = 1,022)	Percentage	95% CI (%)
I started providing more child care or youth supervision at home	56.5	(53.2, 59.8)
Other	27.5	(24.7, 30.6)
My child was old enough to supervise him/herself	21.9	(19.3, 24.7)
Started receiving care or supervision from babysitter or relative	8.2	(6.5, 10.3)
Found an off-post child care center	3.0	(2.0, 4.5)
Found an Army Family Child Care provider	—	—

SOURCE: Survey 2 (January 2021).

NOTE: Respondents could check all that apply, so percentages total to more than 100. Rows marked “—” had too few respondents to report. Survey percentages are weighted to be representative of the Army spouse cohort who were eligible to participate in the 2018 TASS and who remained affiliated with the Army in 2020.



TYPES OF SUPERVISION RECEIVED BY CHILDREN UNDER THE AGE OF 18

We asked all respondents who indicated they had a child under the age of 18 who lived with them more than half the time in the past year what types of supervision their child(ren) received *at any point* in 2020 and the types of supervision they were receiving in January 2021. As shown in Table 5, as of January 2021, 58 percent of respondents were providing all the child care for one or more children, compared with 42 percent in 2020, and 40 percent reported that one or more children were attending school in January 2021, compared with 64 percent in 2020. Less than 5 percent of spouses with children reported that their child attended a CDC or SAC in January 2021, compared with 13 percent in 2020. Among respondents who had used a CDC or SAC in 2020, we asked why they had not reenrolled their child. The two most common reasons were that the spouse was able to provide child care themselves or that the spouse believed that their child was not eligible to attend the CDC/SAC because of Army Health Protection Condition restrictions.

TABLE 5

Child Care Situation Reported by Spouses at Any Point During 2020 Compared with January 2021

Child Care Situation (n = 1,240)	2020 (%)	2020 95% CI (%)	January 2021 (%)	January 2021 95% CI (%)
Receives all of their care and supervision from you (no other child care or military youth programs)	41.8	(38.8, 44.8)	57.6	(54.6, 60.5)
Attends school	64.2	(61.2, 67.1)	40.0	(37.1, 43.0)
Receives care from babysitter or relative	26.5	(24.0, 29.3)	10.3	(8.6, 12.3)
Other	4.6	(3.5, 6.0)	8.3	(6.8, 10.0)
Attends off-post child care center/in-home child care provider you chose on your own (no fee assistance)	10.2	(8.6, 12.1)	6.0	(4.7, 7.5)
Attends the Installation CDC/SAC full or part time	12.9	(11.0, 15.1)	4.6	(3.5, 6.0)
Attends off-post child care center that is part of the Army Fee Assistance Program	3.7	(2.7, 4.9)	3.0	(2.1, 4.1)
Has a nanny or au pair	1.6	(1.1, 2.5)	0.9	(0.5, 1.6)
Receives care from Army Family Child Care provider on post	2.2	(1.5, 3.2)	0.6	(0.3, 1.2)

SOURCE: Survey 2 (January 2021).

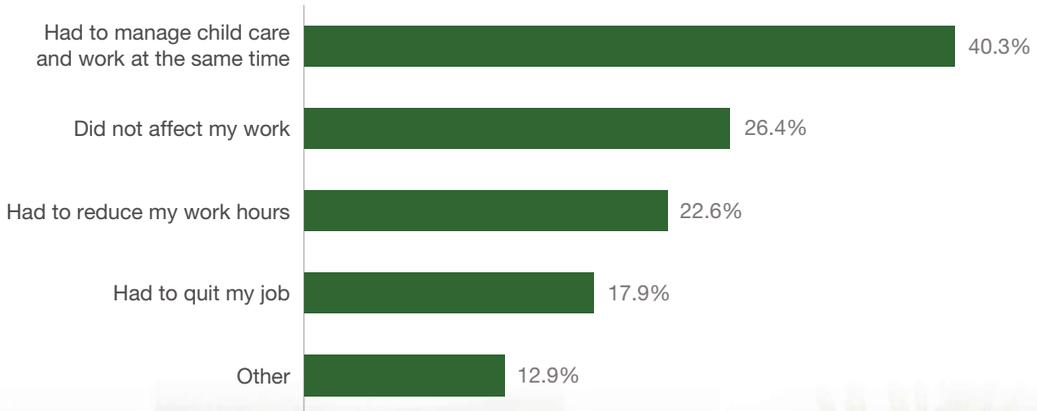
NOTE: Respondents could check all that apply, so percentages total to more than 100. Survey percentages are weighted to be representative of the Army spouse cohort who were eligible to participate in the 2018 TASS and who remained affiliated with the Army in 2020.

Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic Child Care Changes on Employment

As noted earlier, the availability of child care likely had an impact on spouse employment. In January 2021, we specifically asked spouses how the change in their child care situation affected their work. Among those who had been working in 2020, about one-quarter said that the changes did not affect their work, but 40 percent said that they had to quit their job or reduce their work hours (Figure 7). About 40 percent said that they were having to manage child care and work at the same time. In addition, about 44 percent of spouses of senior enlisted soldiers said they had to quit or reduce work hours, compared with 30–34 percent of the other pay grade groups (not shown in Figure 7).

FIGURE 7

Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic Child Care–Related Changes on Army Spouse Employment



SOURCE: Survey 2 (January 2021).

NOTE: Figure displays results among respondents who had worked in 2020 and reported a change in their child care situation on the January 2021 survey, $n = 602$. Respondents could check all that apply, so percentages total to more than 100. Survey percentages are weighted to be representative of the Army spouse cohort who were eligible to participate in the 2018 TASS and who remained affiliated with the Army in 2020.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic had a broad and continuing impact across society in 2020 and 2021, including an effect on military families. Using a new data collection opportunity, we surveyed the same Army spouses at multiple time points and assessed their experiences and perspectives. Even in August 2020, at the beginning of our data collection, the vast majority of spouses reported that the pandemic had a considerable impact on their lives. Some of the responses we received indicated promising outcomes for these spouses as the pandemic wore on. For example, levels of financial strain decreased for many over the nearly yearlong survey period. However, other information painted a less promising picture; for example, of those seeking a job at one or more time points, 14 percent were still seeking a job across all three survey time points. Overall, our proof of concept for the Today's Army Spouse Panel proved to be a useful tool for Army leadership to gather timely information from spouses, track important spouse outcomes over time, and inform Army senior leader decisionmaking.



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<https://www.rand.org/t/RRA1850-1>



About This Report

This report documents research and analysis conducted as part of a project entitled *Army Spouse Panel*, sponsored by the Deputy Chief of Staff, G-9, U.S. Army. The purpose of the project was to provide an operational proof of concept of a panel of Army spouses for short, on-demand survey requests as a mechanism for G-9 and the Army to get focused, timely answers to questions regarding the efficacy of programs and services. If the survey mechanism proves effective, future iterations may be expanded to a panel of soldiers and made available to additional Army headquarters offices for Army decisionmaking.

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IMAGE CREDITS

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The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic had a broad and continuing impact across society in 2020 and 2021, including an effect on military families. The Today's Army Spouse Panel, an operational proof-of-concept panel, surveyed U.S. Army spouses to assess their experiences and perspectives during the pandemic, focusing on issues related to finances, employment, and child care, and provided a glimpse into how Army families navigated this challenging period.

The panel proved to be a useful tool for Army leadership to gather timely information from spouses, track important spouse outcomes over time, and inform Army senior leader decisionmaking.



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