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# Gauging What Employers Think

## Lessons Learned from Fielding the 2022 Department of Defense National Survey of Employers

**S**urveys are widely used in policy research to gather information about individuals and institutions, gain perspectives on timely topics and trends, and inform policy development and implementation. As part of a research project designed to shed light on the state of the relationship between members of the U.S. reserve component (RC) and their civilian employers, researchers at the RAND Corporation developed and administered the 2022 Department of Defense (DoD) National Survey of Employers (the 2022 employer survey). This survey, a modified version of the 2011 DoD National Survey of Employers (the 2011 employer survey), was sent to private-sector employers of varying sizes, DoD and non-DoD federal agencies, and state and local governments. The survey asked about employer experiences with RC employees—both rewards and challenges—with an emphasis on the implications of military duty–related absences.

The process of developing and administering the survey yielded lessons learned beyond the substantive findings presented in our main research report (Werber et al., 2024). These lessons could inform future efforts to survey employers of RC personnel. Some lessons could apply in other contexts as well. In this companion report, we catalog survey lessons learned related to (1) selecting a sample, (2) developing survey content, (3) obtaining required approvals, and (4) encouraging survey response. For each set of lessons, we describe the implications of the lessons and make recommendations for researchers and research sponsors. The primary audience for this report is DoD and other federal agencies that have an interest in RC member civilian employment, although portions of this report might be of interest to researchers more broadly.

### **The 2022 Department of Defense National Survey of Employers**

In 2019, the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Manpower and Reserve Affairs asked RAND to update a 2013 RAND study that analyzed data from the 2011 employer survey admin-

## KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- Department of Defense (DoD) data on civilian employers of reserve component (RC) members have deteriorated in quality since the previous DoD National Employer Survey was fielded in 2011, limiting their usefulness as a frame from which to draw a representative sample to yield generalizable insights about this population.
- Alternative approaches to surveying employers of RC personnel, including those used in conducting the 2022 DoD National Survey of Employers, have limitations because of the low likelihood that small employers that are selected using probabilistic methods employ an RC member and because of the challenges associated with obtaining contact information for employers.
- To support future surveys of RC employers, the RCs should better position themselves to meet the reporting requirements described in DoD Manual 7730.54, reinvigorating the civilian employment information database maintained by the Defense Manpower Data Center. The Office of the Secretary of Defense should facilitate RC compliance with these reporting requirements or develop an alternative approach to collecting and maintaining civilian employer information.
- DoD should consider splitting future employer surveys into multiple, shorter surveys, each targeted more narrowly to the organizational level (e.g., individual establishment or umbrella firm) and role (e.g., human resources official or direct supervisor) that is best positioned to answer the survey questions.
- Surveying employers in an era of low response rates, remote work, and data security concerns can be costly and entail additional effort to convince potential respondents of the survey's legitimacy and merit. DoD should experiment with additional approaches to encourage survey response, such as nonmonetary incentives that highlight the DoD brand, and build in mechanisms to measure whether these incentives are effective.

istered by the Defense Manpower Data Center (DMDC) (Gates et al., 2013a). In response to this request, we developed and fielded the 2022 employer survey. The overarching objective of this survey was to gather perspectives from employers of various sizes across the public and private sectors on questions related to employing RC members: the benefits and drawbacks, problems posed by duty-related absences, approaches that employers take to addressing these problems, and views on policy options or incentives. The full survey instrument is provided as an appendix to the main report (Werber et al., 2024).

### Sampling Approach

Our sampling approach derived from three key factors. First, we faced an underlying limitation: High-quality, regularly updated data on where RC members are employed in a civilian capacity do not exist. In 2011, data in DoD's civilian employment information (CEI) database on where members of the guard and reserve work were of sufficient quality that DMDC was able to use these data to define

a sampling frame from which it selected a stratified random sample of RC employers to survey (Gates et al., 2013a). Probabilistic random sampling is the "gold standard" approach to selecting a sample (van Hoeven et al., 2015). However, deterioration in the quality of the CEI data since 2011 prevented us from repeating this approach.

The second factor that influenced our sampling approach is that employing a member of the RCs is relatively rare, especially if one were to replicate the approach from the 2011 employer survey of surveying individual *establishments*, which are defined as "a single physical location where business is conducted or where services or industrial operations are performed" (e.g., one of RAND's U.S.-based offices) (U.S. Census Bureau, undated). Data from the 2011 employer survey show that, at that time, only about 2 percent of establishments employed RC members (Gates et al., 2013b, Table B.1). Therefore, we anticipated that selecting a probabilistic random sample from the overall population of establishments to learn about experiences with RC employees would be

very inefficient. This contributed to our decision to conduct the 2022 employer survey at the level of the *firm*, which is defined as “a business organization or entity consisting of one or more domestic establishment locations under common ownership or control” (e.g., RAND’s U.S.-based offices in the aggregate) (U.S. Census Bureau, undated).

Although individual establishments might be unlikely to employ an RC member, we expected that this would become relatively more common when viewed across all locations of a large firm. Specifically, using Status of Forces Survey of Reserve Component Members (SOFS-R) data and U.S. Census Bureau data available to us at the time (Office of People Analytics [OPA], 2019; U.S. Census Bureau, 2016), we developed our sampling plan. We estimated that if every RC member–employing private sector firm were to employ five reservists, then every large private firm (500 or more employees) and one of every five medium-sized firms (100 to 499 employees) would employ a reservist. For small firms, we might need to send surveys to dozens or even hundreds of employers to find one that employs a reservist (depending on whether the firm employs 50 to 99 or one to 49 people). These numbers are rough estimates and depend on assumptions about how many RC members each firm employs, but the general point holds: A probabilistic random sample of large firms could be expected to yield an appreciable number of responses from RC employers, whereas a probabilistic random sample of small firms would not.

The third factor that motivated our sampling approach was a policy interest in gathering perspectives from a variety of types of RC employers: private sector and federal, state, and local governments, including small organizations for which the absence of one employee could be relatively more impactful. This aim meant that it would be insufficient to limit the survey collection to large private organizations that we estimated would be more likely to employ an RC member. Our approach, therefore, entailed dividing the employer universe into segments, each constituting a separate population of interest, and varying our sampling approach by segment. In doing so, we attempted to balance competing interests by both creating a representative sample using probabilistic random sampling methods when feasible and using

Abbreviations	
AAPOR	American Association for Public Opinion Research
ASPEP	Annual Survey of Public Employment and Payroll
BLS	U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics
CEI	civilian employment information
COVID-19	coronavirus disease 2019
DMDC	Defense Manpower Data Center
DoD	Department of Defense
DoDM	Department of Defense Manual
D&B	Dun and Bradstreet
ESGR	Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve
FEVS	Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey
HR	human resources
IRB	institutional review board
NORC	National Opinion Research Center
OMB	Office of Management and Budget
OPA	Office of People Analytics
OPM	Office of Personnel Management
OSD	Office of the Secretary of Defense
RC	reserve component
SOFS-R	Status of Forces Survey of Reserve Component Members

targeted nonprobability sampling techniques that leveraged incomplete DoD data on likely RC employers to gather views from smaller firms. We also developed separate approaches to surveying public sector organizations.

Table 1 summarizes the sample construction process by employer segment, including how we defined each population, the source we used to identify the sample, the sampling size, and the response rate. We selected a probabilistic random sample of large private firms (500 or more employees across all locations) from the Dun & Bradstreet (D&B) Hoovers database of employers (Dun & Bradstreet, undated). We drew on lists of likely RC employers provided to us by Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve (ESGR) to select nonprobability samples (or “convenience” samples) of small private firms (fewer than 100 employees) by randomizing the order of the employers on the ESGR lists and merging them against D&B data. We blended these two approaches for medium-sized private firms (100 to 499 employees), drawing both probability and non-

TABLE 1

## Employer Survey Sample and Response Rates, by Employer Segment

Employer Sector	Selection Method	Data Source	Sample Size	Response Rate (%)
Large private firm (500 or more employees)	Probabilistic random	D&B Hoovers	6,000	3.2
Medium private firm (100 to 499 employees) (probabilistic random sample)	Probabilistic random	D&B Hoovers	6,250	5.3
Medium private firm (100 to 499 employees) (convenience sample)	Nonprobability/convenience	ESGR lists	3,747	9.3
Small private firm (50 to 99 employees)	Nonprobability/convenience	ESGR lists	1,248	11.7
Very small private firm (<50 employees)	Nonprobability/convenience	ESGR lists	3,736	7.3
Local government (large)	Other	Census of Governments	3,657	10.4
Local government (convenience sample)	Nonprobability/convenience	ESGR lists	1,756	8.9
State government	Other	Various	270	10.7
Federal government (DoD)	Other	FEVS	60	23.3
Federal government (other)	Other	FEVS	137	11.7
Total	N/A	N/A	26,861	7.0

SOURCE: Authors' analysis of data from the 2022 DoD National Survey of Employers.

NOTE: FEVS refers to the Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey; the "Level 1" agencies used in stratifying this survey formed the basis of our federal employer sample. State government agencies contained in the sample included a central point of contact for the state and agencies corresponding to the functions of corrections, judicial and legal, financial administration, and police protection. We determined the target sampling sizes by estimating the share of organizations in each employer sector that employ an RC member and then estimating the share that would respond to the survey by revising downward the 17-percent response rate of RC employers for the 2011 employer survey to an estimated 12-percent response rate. The response rate reported is calculated according to the "Response Rate 1" formula from the American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR), which is defined as the number of completions as a share of all surveys, including completions and partial completions, refusals, and non-contacts (AAPOR, 2016, p. 61).

probability samples, and weighting the combined sample such that it aligned with the population from which the probability sample was drawn on descriptive characteristics available to us from the D&B data. This blended approach allowed us to leverage the larger number of RC employer responses from the nonprobability sample while providing estimates that were representative of the larger population of medium-sized firms (Robbins, Ghosh-Dastidar, and Ramchand, 2021).<sup>1</sup>

We also surveyed governments, defining universes for federal and state agencies and sampling those universes and building a local government sample using information from the Census of Governments (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019), the Annual Survey of Public Employment and Payroll (ASPEP) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022b), and ESGR lists.

## Survey Content

The content of the 2022 employer survey was designed to reflect an interest in replicating the content of the 2011 employer survey to the extent possible to allow for comparisons over time. Although the differences in the sampling approaches used in the two surveys mean that any comparisons are necessarily limited to overarching, thematic patterns, we nonetheless used the 2011 employer survey instrument as the starting point for developing the 2022 instrument. This means that, as in 2011, the 2022 survey is wide-ranging—asking about organizations' views on hiring and employing RC members, the benefits that employers offer to their employees, employer perspectives on policies and incentives that could affect the organization's bottom line, and specific questions about experiences with individual RC member employees and whether these employees

returned from duty-related absences with certain professional or personal traits.

We anticipated that the shift to a firm-level survey could yield benefits in terms of respondents' ability to answer some of these questions at the cost of an ability to answer others. For example, our experiences analyzing data from the 2011 employer survey suggested that respondents at individual establishments might not be well-suited to answer questions related to companywide policies on hiring and employing RC members. In fact, many establishments forwarded the survey along to corporate offices instead of completing it. Although respondents at corporate offices (or umbrella government agencies) might be less knowledgeable about experiences with individual RC member employees, we proceeded under an expectation that any notable challenges or concerns with these employees could get elevated to their level.

## Survey Administration and Response

RAND contracted with the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago to administer the employer survey. After obtaining the requisite DoD internal and Office of Management and Budget (OMB) approvals, invitations to the web-based survey were sent by both U.S. mail and email, when available. The survey was in the field from February 16, 2022, to June 6, 2022. The overall response rate was 7.0 percent, calculated using the Response Rate 1 formula from the AAPOR (AAPOR, 2016, p. 61). Table 1 provides response rates by employer segment. In the main report, we combined several of these employer segments and reported survey results for six groups: large, medium, and small private firms and local, state, and federal governments (Werber et al., 2024).<sup>2</sup>

## Survey Lessons Learned

In the remainder of this report, we describe the lessons we learned from developing and fielding the 2022 employer survey and provide our recommendations for future survey efforts. We summarize these lessons and recommendations in Table 2. The lessons

apply most directly to DoD-sponsored surveys of RC employers because that was the focus of our research project, although some lessons might also apply in other contexts within DoD or beyond.

## Population and Sampling

A primary lesson learned is that reliable data on where RC members work do not exist in a form that would support their use as a sampling frame for a probabilistic random sample. This is despite the reporting requirements described in DoD Manual (DoDM) 7730.54, *Reserve Components Common Personnel Data System (RCCPDS): Reporting Procedures*, which task the RCs with collecting CEI program data from RC members, ensuring that RC members verify their CEI data each year, and regularly submitting this information to DMDC for inclusion in the CEI database (DoD, 2013).<sup>3</sup> Moreover, other lists provided to us by ESGR of employers expected to have recently employed RC members (by virtue of their inclusion on those lists) also were of inconsistent quality.<sup>4</sup> Among respondents in samples selected from these ESGR sources, 14 percent of medium-sized businesses, 22 percent of small businesses, and 17 percent of local government organizations reported that they had not employed an RC member in the past three years. This limits the usefulness of these lists as a source for drawing a nonprobability sample.

If employing an RC member were common, the lack of good data from DoD on where RC members work would not be a serious limitation because we could sample from the full population using probabilistic sampling methods. However, this is not the case, as described in the "Sampling Approach" section. Sampling rare populations is not a novel challenge in research (Kalton and Anderson, 1986; Christman, 2009; Wagner and Lee, 2014). In our case, anticipated variation by employer size in just how rare it is to employ an RC member contributed to our decision to survey at the level of the firm and mix probabilistic and nonprobability sampling methods. We encountered several obstacles to executing this approach, described in the following sections. Should DoD seek to replicate this approach, these issues could arise again.

TABLE 2  
Survey Lessons Learned and Recommendations

Domain	Lesson	Recommendation
Population and sampling	DoD data on civilian employers of RC members have deteriorated in quality, preventing their use as a valid sampling frame for a probability sample and limiting their usefulness as a source for selecting a nonprobability sample. Alternative approaches to surveying this relatively rare population have limitations.	To support fielding periodic surveys of RC employers, DoD should enhance the quality of information on where RC members work. RCs should better position themselves to comply with CEI program data reporting requirements. The Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) should support the RCs in complying with these requirements or should develop an alternative approach to collecting CEI data. Data should include the name and directory-level information for employers. OSD also should capture contact information for points of contact to receive these surveys.
Survey content and targeting	Different levels of organizations are better suited for different types of survey questions. For example, human resources (HR) officials at a corporate headquarters (or an umbrella agency) might be better positioned to answer questions on the organization’s stance on policy matters, whereas individual supervisors of RC members at branch locations (or field offices) might be more knowledgeable about the implications of duty-related absences.	DoD should consider splitting future surveys into multiple, shorter surveys, each targeted more narrowly to the organizational level and individual role best positioned to answer the survey questions. Improving data quality on where RC members work would facilitate this approach by identifying the specific locations within large organizations where RC members are employed.
Approval procedures	Surveys conducted or sponsored by DoD or other federal agencies involve substantial logistical obstacles and delays. Extensive documentation of survey methods, the survey instrument, and materials sent to respondents is required to be submitted upfront.	DoD should plan and budget appropriately for the time it will take to get surveys in the field. Researchers should be mindful of this timeline and the limitations it may pose for surveying on timely topics or pivoting approaches on the fly.
Encouraging survey response	Surveying in an era of low response rates, remote work, and data security concerns can be costly and entail additional effort to convince respondents of the survey’s legitimacy and merit. However, DoD can leverage approaches to establish survey credibility and use nonmonetary incentives to encourage response.	DoD should consider approaches to prescreening respondents, establishing survey legitimacy, and using nonmonetary incentives that highlight the DoD brand or draw on patriotic sentiments. To enable identification of promising practices, future efforts should build in mechanisms to track the impacts of these approaches.

### Population of Firms Is Not Clearly Defined Across Sectors

RC members are employed in all types of organizations: small and large, private sector and federal, state, and local governments (OPA, 2021). RC members are disproportionately likely to work as civilians in the federal government (in addition to their RC positions) relative to members of the U.S. workforce overall (Werber et al., 2024). A goal of our survey, therefore, was to gather views from employers of all sizes in the public and private sectors. However, unlike at the establishment level, there simply is no clearly defined universe of employers spanning the public and private sectors at the firm level, and there is no count of firms

broken out by size and sector to use to inform sample allocation across types of employers.

Federal agencies—specifically, the U.S. Census Bureau and the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS)—offer an array of data products that capture aspects of the population of employers nationwide. But none of them met our needs. The BLS Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages data on employers include private employers and most federal, state, and local government organizations (BLS, 2023a). However, these data are only reported at the individual establishment level, without a way to aggregate them to the firm level, and the distribution of establishments by size is reported for private industry only. These data could offer researchers conducting establishment sur-

veys a useful means for defining the population (albeit without an ability to know the distribution across size classes for government establishments).

The U.S. Census Bureau's Statistics of U.S. Businesses and County Business Patterns datasets offer the advantage of tabulating firms in addition to establishments, but these data exclude most government organizations (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022a; U.S. Census Bureau, 2022c). For researchers focused on the private sector, these data would suffice to define the universe. For those also seeking to understand perspectives of government employers, these sources are insufficient. In Box 1, we describe how we defined universes of government employers at the federal, state, and local levels, as well as other lessons learned that were especially pronounced in the public sector context.

## Data Sources Available to Researchers Have Limitations

By segmenting employers into groups, we were able to define the employer populations described earlier. Selecting a sample for each population required access to data sources containing information on employers that included firm names and contact information, and we faced challenges obtaining such data. We relied on D&B data to develop our private sector samples (Dun & Bradstreet, 2023). These were the most comprehensive publicly available data on individual employers we could identify and are often used by researchers fielding employer surveys (Mattke et al., 2013; Claxton et al., 2021).

However, the D&B data are an imperfect proxy of the underlying population of firms and have limitations for researchers who seek to use the data as a sampling frame for employer surveys. First, to access the data, users must buy a subscription and then purchase credits to download contact information. We engaged with D&B to determine the subscription package that struck the best balance between cost

and functionality for our needs. The option that we selected fit our budget but had trade-offs, including some limitations in our ability to systematically analyze the data.<sup>5</sup> Other, more customized options might have offered greater flexibility but at greater cost. We also experienced some difficulties parsing the organizational hierarchies (e.g., parent and subsidiary companies) in the data to implement our firm-level approach.<sup>6</sup> Finally, we encountered some duplicates, firms that had gone out of business, and incongruities between firm size as reported by survey respondents and the information contained in the D&B data. Among private firms who answered a survey question on firm size, about 25 percent reported being in a different firm size class (small, medium, or large) than we expected.

Limitations of available data sources for employer surveys extend to the public sector as well. In some ways, these limitations were more pronounced for the purposes of our research. For example, we found the D&B data to be structured and oriented more around private sector business organizations than around governments. We ended up triangulating information from a variety of sources to build our federal, state, and local government samples, as described in Box 1.

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## Box 1. Surveying Public Sector Employers

Many of the challenges we faced were especially acute for governments. First and foremost, when surveying at the level of the firm, it is not clear how to conceptualize a firm for federal, state, and local governments. An annual firm-level survey conducted by the Kaiser Family Foundation uses the U.S. Census Bureau's Census of Governments to define the universe of government firms (Claxton et al., 2021). However, doing so is not a straightforward exercise: As the Census Bureau describes, “[g]overnmental services in the United States are provided through a complex structure made up of numerous public bodies and agencies,” with considerable state-level variation in how government entities are structured and their characteristics (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021).

Moreover, in the Census of Governments, the federal government and each of the 50 state governments are considered singular government entities. Although perhaps true from an organizational standpoint, considering the federal government as one employer did not offer us a meaningful level of analysis at which to design and carry out an employer survey. Therefore, while we used the Census of Governments to identify local governments, we needed to define a firm for federal and state governments at a level of aggregation higher than an establishment (e.g., a field office of a federal agency) but more granular than the federal government or the state of Texas, for example. Ideally, this would be a level at which individuals receiving the survey would be able to speak to organization-wide policy on hiring and employing RC members and have some degree of line of sight to the day-to-day experiences of RC member employees, at least indirectly as issues rise to their attention.

For the federal government, the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) maintains a list of executive branch agencies, but it is not clear which levels of agencies are most analogous to a private firm. We opted to define our universe as the set of “Level 1” agencies used to stratify OPM's FEVS (U.S. Office of Personnel Management, 2019). Level 1 agencies are one level below the parent agency; for example, DoD is an agency, and the Defense Contract Management Agency is a Level 1 agency. Our sample consisted of 60 Level 1 agencies across DoD and the military services and 151 non-DoD Level 1 agencies. This approach omitted smaller sub-agencies that were not listed as Level 1 agencies, as well as the legislative and judicial branches. For state governments, we defined the universe as consisting of a central point of contact for each state overall (e.g., an HR director), in addition to a central point of contact for agencies corresponding to each of the following four state-level government functions: corrections, judicial and legal, financial administration, and police protection. We chose these four functions because they are among the ten functions employing the most people at the state level according to ASPEP data (among functions supported by all states) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022b), and they fall predominantly within the industry code corresponding to public administration (92 in the North American Industry Classification System scheme), which we excluded when constructing our private-sector firm samples. Other researchers could have different priorities or approaches to defining federal and state government sampling universes.

Other logistical obstacles we faced in carrying out the employer survey also were pronounced for the public sector. Even after defining the analog of a private-sector firm, we faced difficulties getting usable lists of government entities that would facilitate building a sample and conducting outreach. For local governments, the Census of Governments provided the universe of governments, but we needed to take additional steps. First, we wanted to aim at larger governments with more employees (and therefore that were more likely to employ an RC member), so we paired the Census of Governments data (which included population) with ASPEP data (which included population and employment for a subset of governments) to estimate employment for all governments in our data. Second, we needed to systematically identify individual points of contact for the local governments by merging the government names and locations into the D&B Hoovers database. In general, we found this database to be oriented more toward private-sector entities in its structure and nomenclature.

For state governments, we undertook a labor-intensive process to manually review state websites to identify the relevant state agencies, their mailing addresses, and, when available, a point of contact with an email address in an HR function. For the federal government sample, we began with a similar approach but had very limited



success identifying individual points of contact. We then worked through the project sponsor to reach out to Veterans Program officials at OPM, who contacted the Veterans Employment Program offices and HR personnel (including chief human capital officers, HR managers, and HR supervisors) across non-DoD federal agencies to seek relevant points of contact. We used this information when provided. In a few instances, an agency provided one point of contact on behalf of the overall agency as opposed to providing points of contact for each Level 1 agency; in those cases, we trimmed the sample size to reflect the information received. For Level 1 agencies within DoD, the project sponsor sought names and email contact information for chiefs of staff at each agency. These methods might be replicable in the future by DoD or other federal agencies.

## Employers Might Not Know the Reserve Component Status of Employees

An additional impediment to surveying employers of RC members—and a likely contributor to there being a lower reported rate of employing an RC member than we anticipated among the organizations on the ESGR lists—is that employers might not know whether their employees are serving in the RCs. In fact, about one in three large firms selected “don’t know/not sure” when asked whether the organization has employed an RC member in the past 36 months (Werber et al., 2024). These “don’t know” rates varied by employer segment: Respondents at larger organizations selected “don’t know” at higher rates than those at smaller organizations (in which the respondent might be more familiar with the employees at the organization and be able to select “yes” or “no”).

To some extent, lack of employer knowledge about employees who are RC members connects to a lesson discussed later about survey content: Individuals at corporate offices for large organizations might be less connected to experiences that are closer to the ground level. This disconnect also has implications for whether RC member employees and duty-related absences are posing problems for organizations: If employers do not even know whether their employees are serving in the RCs, it suggests that issues are either limited or well under the radar. If nothing else, it suggests a limitation of surveying employers to gain their views on RC employees.

## Recommendations

Surveying employers of RC members in the absence of high-quality data on where they work is not straightforward. Surveying smaller organizations using probabilistic sampling methods is likely to require outreach to a substantial number of potential respondents to get enough responses from RC employers to characterize their views. Using non-probability sampling methods drawing on partial lists of RC employers is only as effective as the underlying data in the lists. And because some employers are not even aware of the RC status of their employees, surveying employers about the characteristics of RC employees has inherent limitations.

Our recommendations related to sampling for future employer surveys are as follows:

- **Improve data on RC employers.** Should DoD seek to field periodic surveys of RC employers using probabilistic sampling methods, DoD should enhance the quality of information on where RC members work. This could be done by the RCs enhancing their compliance with CEI reporting requirements or by OSD developing an alternative approach to collecting and maintaining CEI.<sup>7</sup> Minimally, the data collected should include the name and directory-level information for employers. To the extent feasible, data systems also should capture contact information for points of contact at the organizational level(s) relevant for the anticipated surveys, whether they be direct supervisors of RC member employees,

HR or other managers at individual establishments, or HR or other officials at corporate or umbrella organizations. This could be done on a voluntary basis, such as in the context of developing a panel of employers to participate in regular pulse surveys on timely topics of interest to DoD.

- **Absent an improvement in data quality, DoD should limit the use of probabilistic random sample surveys to questions that are relevant to all employers.** Probability sampling yields results that are statistically representative of all employers nationwide. But employing an RC member is rare, especially among small organizations. Until data quality is improved to the point that a valid sampling frame of RC employers exists, we recommend that DoD use probability sampling sparingly when surveying employers about experiences with RC members and be mindful that employers selected using probabilistic methods might have little to no relevant experience with RC employees.

## Survey Content and Targeting

The 2022 employer survey used the 2011 employer survey instrument as its starting point, including sections with background questions on RC member employees, questions about RC member employee absences for military-related duties, questions on the policy environment facing RC employers, and background questions about the organization and survey respondent. The survey consisted of 39 questions in total, more than half of which were multipart questions (e.g., asking how helpful a series of measures would be to the organization). For our target survey respondents, we sought points of contact for HR executives first and foremost, considering them to be the most likely to be able to answer the largest number of questions on behalf of the organization, and the “most senior contact” when contact information for an HR executive was not available. The landing page for the web survey offered a brief background on the purpose of the survey and offered the potential respondents an opportunity to indicate

whether someone else should take the survey for the organization.

For small organizations, the most suitable respondent for the survey questions might well be the same for all the topics. In fact, the most reported role among survey respondents in our small private firm sample was CEO/president/owner (41 percent). For larger organizations, however, the individuals most knowledgeable about organization-wide policies and views and those with deep knowledge of individual workers’ experiences are unlikely to be the same. About three-quarters of respondents in our large and medium private firm samples and our state government sample (as well as more than half of respondents at federal and local government organizations) indicated that their role was as an HR or personnel manager. Many respondents in these samples indicated that they did not know whether RC members returned to their jobs after absences with certain positive or negative behaviors.<sup>8</sup> Survey instructions clarified that respondents could seek input from others to provide a more precise or complete answer, and although we do not know whether respondents did so, the prevalence of “don’t know” responses suggests that either respondents did not consult those with more direct line of sight (e.g., direct supervisors of RC employees) or that the information was unknown even by those closer to the ground level.

## Recommendations

The 2011 and 2022 employer surveys likely asked questions about too diverse a range of topics for any one person to be well-positioned to answer them all, especially in larger organizations with numerous establishment locations within the firm.

Our recommendations related to survey content and targeting for future employer surveys are as follows:

- **Structure survey content to the employer level surveyed, and keep the survey short.** The 2011 and 2022 DoD employer surveys were expansive in the ground they covered and included numerous multipart questions. Future surveys could benefit from a narrower focus, such as having a streamlined set of

questions asked of individuals at the level of the organization best suited to answer them. Potential respondents at corporate offices or umbrella government agencies could speak to the organization’s policies and views on potential incentives. Potential respondents at establishments would have more-informed views on the day-to-day experiences of individual workers. In some cases, surveying supervisors could be more effective than surveying HR officials.

- **Consider conducting firm-level and establishment-level surveys, depending on the topic.** Although some questions might be better-suited for respondents at establishments with more clear line of sight to the experiences of individual RC employees, in the absence of improved data on the specific locations within large organizations at which RC members are employed, surveying at the establishment level is in tension with the ability to conduct a probabilistic random sample. Improving data quality (as recommended above) could facilitate probabilistic sampling. However, there might still be topics for which firm-level surveys are more appropriate—for example, questions on HR policies when potential respondents at establishments might not be able to speak for the firm.

## Approval Procedures

DoD-sponsored employer surveys must clear several regulatory hurdles that are both internal and external to DoD prior to going into the field. Requirements for DoD public information collections are described in DoD Manual 8910.01, *DoD Information Collections Manual: Procedures for DoD Public Information Collections*, Volume 2 (DoD, 2022a). These requirements, including those laid out in the Paperwork Reduction Act (U.S. Code, Title 44, Subchapter I), are designed to guard against excessive or inappropriate federal information collections from members of the public, whether they be individuals or businesses.

However, these requirements can introduce delays and financial costs to survey projects. In our

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# DoD-sponsored employer surveys must clear several regulatory hurdles prior to going into the field.

case, after developing a survey instrument, survey approach, and submission package in collaboration with our project sponsor, it took about eight months to (1) coordinate through Washington Headquarters Services within DoD, (2) be reviewed by DoD’s OPA, and (3) receive reviews and ultimately approval to field the survey from OMB. The process included the publication of two notices seeking public comment in the *Federal Register* (DoD, 2021a; DoD, 2021b).

Because DoD agencies were in-scope for our employer survey, under the guidance in place at the time we were preparing to field the 2022 employer survey, we also needed to obtain a Report Control Symbol through DoD’s internal collections approval process managed by the Office of Information Management (DoD, 2022c).<sup>9</sup> This process entailed developing parallel versions of documents that described the survey and sampling approach as it pertained to DoD. DoD-sponsored surveys that are not intended to survey DoD agency employees would not need to take this step.

These regulatory hurdles to fielding surveys are layered on top of additional requirements in place for all DoD-conducted and DoD-supported research, outlined in DoD Instruction 3216.02 (DoD, 2022b). This guidance is designed to protect human subjects and requires review of research plans by an institutional review board (IRB) (in the case of our research, this review was performed by RAND’s Human Subjects Protection Committee), as well as a second-level review from DoD officials. The former is not unique to DoD or the federal government—academic researchers also must have plans approved by an

IRB—but, for DoD-sponsored research, second-level review by DoD is layered on top of this requirement.

## Recommendations

DoD-sponsored employer surveys face challenges that are common to surveys fielded by other federal agencies but that are distinct from surveys unconnected to the federal government. Although IRB processes might shape or delay surveys for both federal and nonfederal researchers, the typically six- to nine-month process to receive approval to field a federally sponsored survey introduces the possibility of substantial delays (Digital.gov, undated).

Our recommendations related to approval procedures for future employer surveys are as follows:

- **Plan and budget appropriately for the time it will take the survey to get in the field.** The process of applying for and receiving approval to field a survey under the Paperwork Reduction Act takes, on average, six to nine months (Digital.gov, undated). Extensive documentation of survey methods, the survey instrument, and all materials intended to go to potential respondents is required to be submitted up front.
- **Be mindful of the limitations that the timeline might pose for surveying on timely topics.** Researchers should develop their research plans and survey instrument with an understanding that it will be difficult to pivot approaches or revise materials on the fly.

## Encouraging Survey Response

We confronted several challenges to obtaining responses to our survey, some flowing from the lack of a clear sampling frame with good data on potential survey respondents, and others stemming from the long-term trend of declining response rates for all manner of surveys. We took steps to encourage survey response by developing materials intended to assuage concerns about the survey's legitimacy and to incentivize participation by leveraging the DoD name, but we do not know whether these efforts were effective. We discuss these topics in this section.

## Identifying Points of Contact Is Challenging

We encountered challenges identifying individual points of contact to whom to send the survey. As described earlier, our preferred point of contact was an HR executive, when information was available, followed by a senior leader in the organization (who could then delegate survey response to another individual as appropriate). With respect to the D&B database, although the database often includes an array of information on individuals who work at the organizations, we found some titles, telephone numbers, and email addresses that were incorrect or outdated. In some cases, worker turnover means that points of contact might have left the organizations entirely. In addition, the subscription option we selected did not allow users to apply detailed filtering and prioritization of types of contacts to

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download along with company information in bulk. Although we could manually review contacts available at each organization to select for outreach, this too was not feasible for us given our project scope and budget.

Ultimately, of the more than 26,000 organizations to which NORC mailed invitation letters and follow-up postcards on our behalf, about 3.5 percent were undeliverable. Of about 15,500 emails sent to those for whom we collected what we believed to be valid email addresses, 8.4 percent were rejected or otherwise did not reach the intended respondent. Prefielding outreach via phone calls could identify valid points of contact and contact information for organizations included in the survey, yielding higher response rates (Snijkers and Jones, 2013; Wu, Zhao, and Fils-Aime, 2022). However, this would come at a substantial upfront cost.

## Survey Response Rates Have Been Falling for Decades

Our survey was subject to a common pressure in the modern world of survey research: People are overwhelmed by requests to participate in surveys and are increasingly suspicious of attempts to get them to give up data or personal information. Response rates to other employer surveys have declined precipitously over the years. In 2011, the Kaiser Family Foundation's health benefits survey overall response rate was 47 percent; one decade later in 2021, it was just 15 percent (and 8 percent among nonpanel firms) (Claxton et al., 2011; Claxton et al., 2021). This trend is not limited to employer surveys. BLS data show that the response rate to both its establishment-level employer surveys and its household surveys have been trending downward for at least a decade (BLS, 2023b). A report by the National Research Council's Committee on National Statistics from 2013 documents a trend of declining response rates—and corresponding increases in survey costs—going back to the mid-1980s (National Research Council, 2013).

In our case, we expect that fielding the 2022 employer survey on the heels of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, when office

workers were more likely to be working remotely, meant that our mailed invitations (our only form of contact when we did not have an email address) were less likely to reach their intended recipients than they otherwise would have been (even if the mailing address remained valid). This might have undercut the effectiveness of our mixed-modes approach to survey recruitment, which we chose based on prior research showing that combining mail and email approaches resulted in higher response rates for surveys of employers than did either method alone (Funkhouser, 2017; Sakshaug, Vicari, and Couper, 2019).

## Steps Can Be Taken to Establish Survey Credibility and Encourage Participation

Despite some erosion in public trust in the military as an institution in recent years, relative to other institutions in American life, the military remains more likely to be viewed in a positive light (Kennedy, Tyson, and Funk, 2022; Beacon Research and Shaw & Company Research, 2022). This might make DoD uniquely able to leverage its reputation to lend credibility to surveys and encourage survey response even when monetary incentives are out of project scope (because of costs and the time to obtain approvals to use monetary incentives) or, in the case of employer surveys, when monetary incentives might not be cost-effective (Baruch and Holtom, 2008; Cosgrove, 2018; Holtom et al., 2022). We took several steps to leverage DoD's reputation, although we caution that we do not know whether these efforts were effective in encouraging participation.

Steps we took to establish the survey's credibility with potential respondents included mailing hard copies of the survey invitation package with letters on DoD stationery from the then-Acting Assistant Secretary of Defense for Manpower and Reserve Affairs and on RAND stationery from the project's principal investigators, using the official DoD color seal on the envelopes mailed to potential respondents, and developing cross-linked webpages on both RAND's and NORC's official websites with information about the survey (although, notably, there was

no DoD-hosted website). NORC staffed a help desk during business hours for the duration of the fielding period that respondents could call with questions or concerns. Additionally, to encourage responses within DoD, we worked with the project sponsor to identify points of contact at Level 1 DoD agencies, and we sent invitation email messages and reminders directly from a RAND email account rather than intermediated by NORC.

To encourage participation, we designed a certificate of appreciation using the ESGR seven seals logo (representing the seven RCs), and we flagged in the invitation letter that survey respondents would be able to print this certificate on completion of the survey. This idea was inspired by ESGR's Statement of Support Program, which asks employers to pledge their support for RC member employees, receiving a certificate to display at their place of business in return for the commitment. More than 30,000 business establishments nationally have signed the Statement of Support (ESGR, undated), and we anticipated that offering another opportunity to print a certificate for display for "demonstrating commitment to improving policies to support Guard and Reserve personnel in the workforce" might encourage some employers to respond.<sup>10</sup> We also offered survey respondents the ability to receive a copy of the final report by sending an email to RAND. More than 75 individuals from private businesses, nonprofit organizations, and government offices requested the report.

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We took several steps to highlight the DoD brand and encourage response by drawing on patriotic sentiments.

## Recommendations

Our recommendations related to encouraging response for future employer surveys are as follows:

- **Conduct prescreening of potential respondents when feasible.** Because data sources with information on employers and individuals who work at those employers often are incomplete or out of date, future surveys might consider taking additional steps to verify and validate employer and individual information prior to fielding the survey. However, a common approach—phone calls to verify information—comes at a substantial upfront cost, and it is difficult to predict their payoff given falling response rates to surveying by phone even prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic (Kennedy and Hartig, 2019) and the possibility that phone numbers contained in available databases might also be outdated or an unreliable means to reach employers because more people are working from home.
- **Experiment with additional approaches to providing nonmonetary incentives and establishing survey legitimacy.** We took several steps to highlight the DoD brand and encourage response by drawing on patriotic sentiments; however, we did not collect systematic information on whether these approaches were effective. To enable identification of promising practices, future efforts should build in mechanisms to track uptake of incentives (e.g., how often certificates were viewed) and possibly conduct follow-up interviews with a subset of respondents to gather views both on substantive topics and on experiences with the survey itself. To the extent feasible, future projects should consider testing multiple approaches in a *soft launch* of a survey (i.e., invites sent initially to a small portion of the sample)—such as sending hard-copy invitations on official stationery to a portion of the sample—and assessing whether these approaches were effective prior to deciding whether to implement them at scale when launching to the full sample.

## Concluding Thoughts

The 2022 employer survey that we designed, administered, and analyzed for our study yielded substantive findings that are similar to the findings from the survey fielded by DMDC a decade prior, despite significant changes to the sampling and analysis approach. Some changes were driven by data limitations, and others were motivated by lessons learned from analyzing the 2011 employer survey results.

Our experience with the 2022 employer survey resulted in lessons of its own. Foremost among these is that DoD data on where RC members are employed have deteriorated in quality such that they are not usable as a sampling frame from which to select a

probabilistic random sample and that alternative sampling approaches have significant limitations. Our primary recommendation is that DoD improve data quality through enhanced RC compliance with CEI data reporting requirements or by developing an alternative approach to collecting and maintaining civilian employer information. We have identified additional challenges and trade-offs related to sampling, targeting the survey, approval procedures, and response rates, and we make recommendations related to each. We hope that future efforts to survey employers of RC members will benefit from the lessons cataloged in this report.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Appendix A in Werber et al. (2024) provides details on the analysis approach.

<sup>2</sup> Werber et al. (2024) provides additional details on our sampling approach, data sources, and methods for selecting the sample; our process for fielding the survey in collaboration with NORC; and our analysis approach.

<sup>3</sup> Werber et al. (2024) describes the nature of these reporting requirements related to CEI and the decline in compliance across the RCs over time. Specifically, according to DMDC data provided by ESGR, the CEI database had data for just 2.5 percent of RC members as of 2022.

<sup>4</sup> These data included Patriot Award-winning employers, Freedom Award nominees, employers registering for ESGR events, employers signing the ESGR Statement of Support, and employers involved with mediation cases.

<sup>5</sup> For example, search results based on specified criteria returned a maximum of 400 pages with 25 results each, which impeded our ability to select from a population larger than 10,000 firms using probabilistic methods. We worked around this limitation by stratifying selection by industry within each employer size group—specifically, by two-digit North American Industry Classification System code—such that each group returned fewer than 10,000 results. However, it would have been preferable not to have a cap on the number of results returned.

<sup>6</sup> We included both parent and subsidiary locations within the set of organizations eligible to be surveyed—aiming, for example, to survey the equivalent of a Whole Foods (corporate) despite being owned by Amazon—while excluding branch locations of organizations (e.g., we did not want to survey individual Whole

Foods locations). However, many parent-subsidiary relationships are principally for legal purposes. Neither limiting the scope to parent companies nor limiting to subsidiaries seemed adequate, but the result is that we ended up with obvious duplicates with the same address that we needed to replace prior to fielding the survey.

<sup>7</sup> Werber et al. (2024) contains a related recommendation to improve data and data systems by having the RCs better position themselves to comply with the requirements outlined in DoDM 7730.54, thereby reinvigorating the CEI database. Werber et al. (2024) also calls for complementing large-scale national employer surveys with pulse surveys, which we reiterate in the recommendations in this report.

<sup>8</sup> The 2022 survey asked employers of RC members that had experienced a duty-related absence whether any of those employees returned from the military duty with positive or negative characteristics. The prevalence of “don’t know” responses varied by individual question and across employer types. Between 10 and 27 percent of small businesses answered “don’t know” for these questions, whereas “don’t know” rates exceeded one-third for nearly all questions for other employer types (Werber et al., 2024, Appendix B).

<sup>9</sup> The requirement to both obtain a Report Control Symbol and gain approval from OMB when an information collection is both a public and a DoD internal collection was changed in the December 5, 2022, revision to DoD Manual 8910.01, Volume 1.

<sup>10</sup> Although respondents were able to complete and print a certificate of completion, programming limitations prevented us from knowing how many did. We requested this information from the survey vendor at the conclusion of the fielding period. Future surveys could build this capability in from the outset.



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## About This Report

Motivated by persistent concerns that using the reserve component (RC) as both an operational and a strategic reserve force might pose challenges for civilian employers of RC members, in 2019, the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Manpower and Reserve Affairs asked the RAND Corporation to update its 2013 study on employer experiences employing RC members (Gates et al., 2013a). A central part of this effort was developing, fielding, and analyzing data from the 2022 Department of Defense (DoD) National Survey of Employers. Findings and recommendations for the overall project are presented in our main research report, *Understanding and Improving Civilian Employer Experiences with Guard and Reserve Duty* (Werber et al., 2024). In this companion report, we describe lessons learned for survey development and administration beyond the substantive findings presented in the main report. We expect these lessons will be of primary interest to DoD or other federal agencies that have an interest in or responsibility for civilian employment of RC members, although portions of this report might be of interest to researchers or research sponsors more broadly.

The research reported here was completed in July 2023 and underwent security review with the sponsor and the Defense Office of Prepublication and Security Review before public release.

### RAND National Security Research Division

This research was conducted within the Personnel, Readiness, and Health Program of the RAND National Security Research Division (NSRD), which operates the RAND National Defense Research Institute (NDRI), a federally funded research and development center (FFRDC) sponsored by the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the Joint Staff, the Unified Combatant Commands, the Navy, the Marine Corps, the defense agencies, and the defense intelligence enterprise. This research was made possible by NDRI exploratory research funding that was provided through the FFRDC contract and approved by NDRI's primary sponsor.

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