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TECHNICAL
R E P O R T

Examining Child Care Need Among Military Families

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with

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Prepared for the Office of the Secretary of Defense

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Summary

The military child-care system has received nationwide recognition for providing high-quality child care to a large number of military families (Campbell et al., 2000). The military provides care for as long as 12 hours per day in child development centers (CDCs), and even longer if necessary in family child care (FCC) homes.¹ However, in spite of the vast size of the system, access to child care is far from universal within the Department of Defense (DoD). Many families remain on waiting lists for military child care or seek out alternatives off base.

DoD is committed to meeting the child care need among military families. To monitor progress toward that goal, DoD requires a meaningful measure of that need. The purpose of this report is to improve understanding of the child care choices that military families make and the factors that might influence those choices, and to assess the extent to which DoD is meeting the child care needs of military families. This report will assist DoD in assessing the effectiveness of the current DoD child-care-demand formula, which translates the basic demographic characteristics of the military population into child care need as a tool to get information on the magnitude of the potential need.

This Report Estimates the Factors Influencing the Use of and the Unmet Need for Child Care Among Military Families

This report documents the results of a survey of 1,137 active-duty military families, including activated Reservists, regarding child care use. We analyze these survey data to estimate the relationship between individual family characteristics and installation characteristics and the probability that the family uses any nonparental child care, uses DoD-sponsored child care, has unmet need for child care, and has undermet need for child care. Through this analysis, we develop a richer understanding of the extent to which DoD is meeting the need for child care among military families. This empirically based understanding provides the basis for an assessment of the DoD child-care-demand formula provided in a related RAND report (Moini, Zellman, and Gates, 2006).

As an employer of many individuals with dependent children, DoD is concerned that parents who need some form of child care in order to work receive that care. It is also concerned that the quality of the care received is high enough that parents do not worry about their children and can focus their attention on their work. The basic questions are whether

¹ The services use different terms to describe FCC, including child development homes.

military parents are able to access some type of formal child care when they want it and to what extent they are satisfied with the care they are using.

There are a number of ways to think about and measure the concepts that lead to preference for and use of care. In this report, we avoid use of the term “child care demand.” *Demand* is a technical economic term that relates the price charged by suppliers for a specific good or service to the amount of a product or service desired by consumers. In this report, then, we avoid focusing on demand, because the word *demand* can be interpreted in a manner that is inconsistent with its technical meaning. Instead, we consider both the use of formal child care and the extent to which parental needs are being met. We relate these “outcomes” to observable information about military families and the communities in which they live.

In approaching the issue of *need*, we articulate definitions for four key outcomes of potential interest to DoD. First, we consider parents who report that they would like to use a formal child-care arrangement but are not currently doing so. We define such parents as expressing *unmet need*. This group may include parents who care for their children themselves, as well as parents who rely on friends, older siblings, or other relatives. We also consider an alternative issue that is related to unmet need: Parents who report that they are likely or very likely to leave the military because of child care issues. Some of these families may be “served” by the system in the sense that they have an arrangement (even a DoD-sponsored arrangement) that they use. However, these parents expressed in the survey that some aspects of their child care arrangements are inadequate to the point that they may leave the military. We also consider *unmet preference*, which describes families who report using some form of care that is not their first choice. An understanding of unmet preference may help DoD consider the range of policy tools that could be used to better meet the needs of military families. Finally, we conduct an empirical analysis of the child care choices that families make.

Findings

Our findings are based on information gathered through a survey of military families with dependent children between the ages of 0 and 12 years. The survey, which covers a wide range of child care issues, was fielded between February and August 2004. The survey response rate was low (34 percent) but typical of recent surveys of military personnel. In interpreting the findings, readers should keep in mind the low response rate and the fact that response rates differed by the service, rank, race, and gender of the military member selected. In reporting the findings, we weight survey responses to correct for such observable non-response bias.

Unmet Need

Nearly 9 percent of parents responding to the survey reported having unmet need, defined by indicating that they would like to use a formal child-care arrangement but are not currently doing so. Parents of pre-school-aged children are neither more nor less likely than parents of school-aged children to express unmet need.

Among parents of children aged 0 to 5 years, dual-military families are the least likely to report unmet need, whereas families with civilian nonworking spouses are most likely to report unmet need (about 19 percent). The analysis also suggests that the income level of the

military family affects the likelihood of unmet need. Compared with families that had earnings greater than \$75,000 in 2003, those earning less than \$50,000 per year were more likely to report unmet need. Families on the low end of the income distribution that express unmet need may be in a situation in which a lack of child care availability is preventing a civilian spouse from working outside the home.

Among families of children between the ages of 6 and 12 years, we found no relationship between family or installation characteristics and reports of unmet need.

Unmet Preference

While relatively few families reported unmet child-care need, many more reported unmet preference. Of survey respondents, 22 percent reported that their current child-care arrangement is not their first choice. Parents of pre-school-aged children are more likely to report unmet preference (30 percent) than are parents of school-aged children (19 percent).

Among parents of pre-school-aged children, those families with military members whose work hours vary are more likely to report unmet preference, which suggests that existing child-care arrangements may not match well with irregular military schedules. Relative to Air Force families, Army and Marine Corps families are less likely to report unmet child-care preference.

Among parents of school-aged children, we found that those using civilian-run formal child-care arrangements were more likely than those using DoD-sponsored arrangements or parental care to report unmet preference. Dual-military families with school-aged children were also more likely to report unmet preference than were single parents of school-aged children. Finally, families who have variable work hours were more likely to report unmet preference.

Approximately one-third of families that expressed unmet preference stated that their preferred option is DoD-sponsored care. This response is particularly true for parents of pre-school-aged children. Fifty-one percent of parents of pre-school-aged children who expressed unmet preference state a preference for DoD CDC care. However, preference for DoD-sponsored care is not universal. Many families who currently use DoD-sponsored care state a preference for some other form of care. Among parents of pre-school-aged children, we found no statistically significant relationship between the type of care currently used and the likelihood of expressing unmet preference, suggesting that families using DoD-sponsored care are no more (or less) likely to be dissatisfied with their current arrangements than are other families. Among parents of school-aged children, we found that parents using civilian-run formal child-care arrangements are twice as likely to express unmet preference, compared with parents using any other option.

Likelihood of Leaving the Military

Given that few families reported unmet child-care need, it is somewhat surprising that 21 percent of families responding to our survey reported that it was likely or very likely that they would leave the military because of child care issues. Families with pre-school-aged children were much more likely to report a propensity to leave the military (36 percent) than were parents of school-aged children (15 percent). Since our analysis does not control for military rank or years of service, this difference is most likely due to the fact that families with older children have more years of military service and a greater commitment to the military career.

Family status and service-related issues appear to have a strong relationship with plans to leave the service. Among families, with a pre-school-aged child, we found that dual-military families report a higher propensity to leave the military due to child care issues than single parents. Among families with school-aged children, families with a working civilian spouse are less likely than single parents to report such a propensity.

The type of child care arrangement currently used also relates to reports of the likelihood of leaving the service. Compared with families using the DoD CDC, families using all other care arrangements, including DoD FCC, are *less* likely to report that they are considering leaving the military due to child care issues (although the difference between DoD CDC and formal civilian care is significant only at the 10-percent level.) Families of military officers are less likely to report that they have considered leaving the military due to child care issues than are families of enlisted personnel.

Among families with school-aged children, those with an employed civilian spouse are less likely to be considering leaving the military due to child care issues compared with single parents. Families living more than 20 miles from the installation are substantially more likely than families living on base to be considering leaving the military. Reservists are more likely to report having considered leaving the service.

We also found that families who express unmet preference are much more likely to say that they are likely to leave the military due to child care issues, illustrating an important link between these two outcomes.

Child Care Choice

Military families use a wide variety of child care arrangements, with parental care being the most prevalent. In modeling child care choice, we first considered the question of whether a family uses parental care or not; then, for those families who do not use parental care, we explored the question of which child care option they would choose. Not surprisingly, the factors that influence the decision to use parental care differ from the factors influencing the type of care used, and the factors differ by child age.

Decision to Use Parental Care. Compared with single military parents,² dual-military families are less likely to use parental care, and civilian families with nonworking spouses are more likely to use parental care. Families who live off base, but within 10 miles of the installation, are more likely than those on base to use parental care.

Among families with pre-school-aged children, we also found that families with a civilian working spouse are more likely to use parental care. Families who live in a community with a greater supply of child care workers are less likely to use parental care for their pre-school-aged children. This finding is consistent with our hypothesis that, in areas in which the supply of non-DoD child-care options is greater, civilian spouses are more likely to work outside the home and to use that care.

Among families of school-aged children, we found that families with incomes less than \$50,000 per year are more likely than families with incomes of more than \$75,000 per year to use parental care. Families whose highest-ranking military member is an officer are more likely than families of enlisted personnel to use parental care for their school-aged chil-

² Although it appears counterintuitive that single parents would use parental care, one should keep in mind that a child of a single military parent often has another parent who may be available to provide care. Our survey data reveal that all of the single parents who report using parental care are male military members who use care by the mother.

dren. Compared with Air Force families, Army and Marine Corps families are more likely to use parental care for their school-aged children. Finally, families living in areas with higher median incomes are more likely to use parental care for their school-aged children.

Choice Among Nonparental Care Options. Among families with pre-school-aged children, we considered the choice among four options: DoD CDC care, DoD FCC, formal civilian child care, and other care. The “other” category includes nanny care, relative care, or informal child-care options. The first thing we noted is that family income plays a significant role in child care choice.³ Families earning less than \$75,000 per year are less likely to use FCC than are families earning more than \$75,000 per year. We also found that families whose work hours vary are less likely to use FCC.

Proximity to the installation is also an important factor in child care choice. Families living between 11 and 20 miles from the installation are less likely to use FCC than are families that live on base. Across the board, families living off base are more likely to use formal civilian child-care options, and the propensity to use civilian child care increases as the distance from the installation increases. Families who live off base but near the installation are more likely to use other care options. Relative to the Air Force, survey respondents in the Marine Corps were less likely to choose FCC or formal civilian-care options. Reservists were more likely to use FCC and other care options over the CDC. Families living in areas with higher median incomes are less likely to use formal civilian-care options, whereas families living in areas with a high supply of child care workers are more likely to use civilian, formal care options and other, informal care options as opposed to the CDC.

When we examined child care choice for families with school-aged children, we considered three options: DoD-sponsored care (including DoD-operated youth centers, school-aged care (SAC) facilities, FCC, and CDC care),⁴ formal civilian child care, and other, informal care options. Again, we found a relationship between various family and installation characteristics and child care choice.

Families who have another child between the ages of 13 and 18 years are much more likely to use other informal care options relative to those who do not. Families with a civilian spouse who does not work outside the home but who use some form of nonparental care are much less likely to use DoD-sponsored forms of care for their school-aged children than are single military parents. Across the board, families living off base are more likely to use formal civilian child-care options and other informal options over the DoD-sponsored child-care options. Families who live in areas in which the female unemployment rate is high are more likely to use other, informal types of child care. Families of officers are more likely to use formal civilian-care options and informal care options, relative to families of enlisted members.

Child Care and Military Readiness

Child care issues do appear to influence the readiness of military members, and the effect appears to be greater for female military members than for males. Among families with a military father, 22 percent of survey respondents reported that the military father was late to work due to child care issues in the past month. For families with a military mother, 51 per-

³ Comparisons discussed in this paragraph are relative to the probability of using DoD CDC care.

⁴ Although some CDCs provide care for school-aged children, most CDCs focus on providing care for pre-school-aged children.

cent reported that the military mother was late to work due to child care issues in the past month. Forty-seven percent of families with a civilian spouse reported that the spouse was late to work due to child care issues during the past month.

Parents also miss work due to child care issues (i.e., when the child care provider is unavailable or the child is sick and cannot attend). Among families with a military father, 7 percent of survey respondents reported that the military father missed work due to child care issues in the past month. For military mothers, the figure was 37 percent. For families with a civilian spouse, the figure was 21 percent for the civilian spouse. Clearly, female military members and civilian spouses are carrying a bigger load in terms of child care, covering for child care inadequacies more than do male military members.

Conclusions

Unmet Child Care Need Is Not Prevalent Among Military Families

Just under 10 percent of military families reported unmet child-care need. While this percentage is low, DoD may be concerned that it is not zero. We found that unmet need is much more prevalent among families with pre-school-aged rather than school-aged children. Families with a civilian working spouse are more likely to express unmet need, as are families earning less than \$50,000 per year. These findings suggest that policies that give dual-military and single parents a preference for DoD-sponsored care may be effective in reducing unmet need among these populations.

Unmet Preference Is More Common Than Unmet Need

A larger proportion of military families—22 percent—reported unmet preference for child care. Again, we found a greater prevalence of unmet preference among families with pre-school-aged children. Families had unmet preference for different types of care. Overall, 49 percent of the families who reported unmet preference stated that their preferred form of care is one that is provided by DoD. This finding suggests that DoD may need to use a wide variety of policy tools if it is to better meet the child care “demands” of military families.

Child Care Concerns May Influence Retention Decisions

Nearly one-third of survey respondents report that it is likely or very likely that child care issues would lead them to leave the military. This response would seem to support the notion that child care is a retention issue. However, it is important to emphasize that the fact that individuals report that they are likely to leave the service does not mean that they actually act on that sentiment. Further information would be needed to determine whether individuals who express a propensity to leave the service due to child care issues actually do so.

Nevertheless, families with pre-school-aged children were much more likely to report a propensity to leave the military. This difference may be partially due to the fact that the parents of older children tend to be older themselves and to have a longer tenure in and stronger commitment to the military career.

Dual-Military and Single-Parent Families Experience Challenges

Despite the fact that DoD policy gives special priority to dual-military and single-parent families in terms of accessing DoD-sponsored child-care options, these families are much more likely to report that they plan to leave the military due to child care issues—even though these families are less likely to report unmet need.

Housing Patterns Influence Use of DoD-Sponsored Care

The distance between a family's home and the installation is strongly related to the type of child care it uses. Families that live off base are less likely to use DoD-sponsored child-care options, and the propensity to use DoD-sponsored care is lower for families that live farther from base. It appears that many families that live off base do not find DoD-sponsored care, which is typically located on the installation, to be a convenient option. These families do seem to find other options that meet their needs.

It may be that while DoD-sponsored care is able to meet the needs of many, if not most, families who live on base, those families have few other options if they cannot be accommodated by DoD-sponsored care. This fact suggests that the housing patterns of military families stationed on a particular installation are an important characteristic for DoD to consider in deciding how to allocate its child care resources.

DoD CDC Users Appear to Have a Weaker Attachment to the Military

The conventional wisdom is that DoD CDC care is the most sought-after and convenient type of child care among military families. Certainly, waiting lists are long, and the subsidy provided to families who use this type of care is larger than the subsidy available for any other type of care. It is therefore surprising that our analysis reveals that families who use the DoD CDCs are more likely than families who use other care options to report that they are likely to leave the military due to child care issues. Given that the DoD heavily subsidizes care provided in the CDCs, and provides little or no subsidy for other options, DoD may be interested in more fully understanding the attitudes of CDC families.

Local Market Conditions Are Related to the Child Care Choices That DoD Families Make

Although DoD-sponsored care is an important option for military families, it is not the only option. Our analysis reveals that families with pre-school-aged children who live in areas with lower median incomes are more likely to use civilian sponsored care, and families who live in areas with a greater supply of child care workers are more likely to use other child care.

The relationship between median income and use of civilian-sponsored child care may reflect the implications of differences in cost of living. Since the income of military families does not vary much by locale, military families who live in affluent communities may be less willing to pay the market price for civilian child care than military families who live in poorer communities. Therefore, characteristics of the local community may be important determinants of the relative need for DoD-sponsored care. Attention to these conditions may help DoD to more effectively allocate its child care resources.

Results from This Study May Help Inform DoD Policy Decisions Related to Child Care

In a companion report (Moini, Zellman and Gates, 2006), we apply the results of this study to the question of how DoD characterizes and responds to child care need. That report recommends that DoD consider a broader range of child care outcomes and clearly articulate

those that are most important in developing child care policies. We recommend that DoD consider the factors that influence child care outcomes in designing policy responses, and we suggest that DoD consider additional options to address child care need. Such options might include child care vouchers, subsidized spaces in civilian centers, subsidized wraparound care,⁵ or support for after-school programs in the community.

DoD recently introduced a new program called “Operation: Military Child Care” that can serve as an example of a type of policy option DoD might want to pursue further. The program helps active-duty, Reserve, and National Guard families who do not have access to DoD-sponsored care on base to find child care, and will defray the cost of that care while military members of these families are mobilized or deployed. Clear DoD guidance, combined with a package of options that extend beyond creating spaces in DoD-sponsored care, holds promise of better utilizing child care resources to promote DoD goals and promote family choice and child well-being.

⁵ *Wraparound care* is child care that is provided before a CDC or FCC opens and after it closes. CDCs and FCCs typically have standard hours of operation, but military families often have workdays (or have to pull 24-hour shifts) that extend beyond the hours of operation.