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TECHNICAL REPORT

Year of the Air Force Family

2009 Survey of Active-Duty Spouses

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Summary

Air Force leaders are concerned about the well-being of Air Force families, the types and causes of problems they face, and whether Air Force support programs successfully assist families with these problems. Leaders are also interested in families' perceptions of Air Force leadership and satisfaction with Air Force life. To provide the Air Force with insights on a subset of problems our sponsor identified as their highest priority, we conducted a telephone survey of a representative sample of 802 military and civilian spouses of active-duty officers and enlisted airmen in July and August 2009.

The survey focused primarily on child-related, financial, and employment problems that families had experienced in the past year. We analyzed the data to produce overall Air Force spouse results and to identify any significant differences between the particular subgroups of greatest interest to our research sponsor, comparing spouses of officers with spouses of enlisted airmen, dual-military couples with civilian spouses, families residing on and off base, and families having minor children at home with those that did not. The following are our overall results:

- Thirty-seven percent of all respondents reported at least one child-related problem. Difficulties finding child care and child emotional and behavioral problems were most common examples.
- Among families with children and at least one parent deployed recently, 52 percent reported that the deployment worsened their child-related problems, and few reported that the problems improved.
- Of the 26 percent of spouses reporting at least one financial problem, an inability to save money was the most common, cited by 24 percent of respondents.
- Among respondents who indicated at least one financial problem and a recent deployment, 35 percent reported that financial problems improved, 36 percent reported that they did not change, and the remaining 29 percent that they worsened during deployments.
- Thirty-seven percent of all respondents reported spousal employment problems, which most frequently involved difficulty being able to work a preferred schedule or number of hours and difficulty finding a job, especially one appropriate to the respondent's education, abilities, and interests.
- For spouses who had had at least one employment problem and a recent deployment, 44 percent reported that employment problems worsened during deployment, while 9 percent said their situation had improved. Forty-eight percent reported that deployment had no effect on their employment issues.

The survey also asked spouses who reported problems whether they associated particular factors with the problems. Spouses commonly associated child-related problems with a recent move or permanent change of station (PCS), their work schedule, and/or the hours Air Force child care is available. Ten percent or more of spouses associated the problems relating to their children with the distance from Air Force activities for children, distance from Air Force day care, and/or the limitations of Air Force programs. The factors most commonly associated with financial problems were costs of raising children, the spouse's employment status, and a recent move or PCS. Notably, 30 percent of those with financial problems reported associated them with a lack of information about Air Force financial education programs, while 34 percent said that lack of information about spousal employment assistance programs was related to their employment problems. The factors most commonly associated with spousal employment problems were difficulties finding a job that paid enough to cover the costs of child care, a recent PCS, and finding child care that matched the parent's working hours. Around 30 percent of respondents with employment problems also linked their employment problems to a lack of information about Air Force employment assistance programs, inconvenient access to the programs, and/or inability of the programs to address the specific problems.

Our subgroup analyses showed that the differences between dual-military and civilian spouses were more prevalent across the survey items than were the differences between the other subgroups (officer and enlisted; residence on or off base; and between parents and non-parents for issues not related to children). Compared to civilian spouses, dual-military parents were more likely to report problems finding child care while they worked or attended school and were more likely to associate their child-related problems with their work schedule and the hours Air Force child care is available. Dual-military spouses who had experienced a recent deployment were much more likely than their civilian peers to report that deployments did not affect their employment-related problems and were more likely to have attended deployment briefings.

Civilian spouses were more likely than dual-military spouses to report financial problems and were more likely to associate their employment status with them. Civilian spouses were also more likely to experience each of the employment-related problems on our survey or to have any employment problems at all. Deployments were more likely to negatively affect the employment status of civilian spouses than of dual-military spouses. Civilians were significantly more likely than their dual-military counterparts to associate five of six possible factors with employment problems.

These subgroups also differed in their preferred means of communication about Air Force programs and services: Dual-military spouses were more likely to prefer emails and posters or flyers on base, while civilians were more likely to prefer direct mailings and Air Force newspapers and newsletters.

Family participation in leisure activities can help relieve stress and anxiety, build skills and confidence, strengthen family bonds, and facilitate friendships with other families. Nearly every respondent participated in at least one of the ten leisure activities listed in our survey. Use of the local gym or fitness center was the most common activity (about 85 percent), followed by bowling (about 70 percent) and outdoor recreational activities (about 65 percent). Many families rely on Air Force programs and facilities to meet their leisure needs either wholly or partially. Of the roughly one-third of families who participate in arts and crafts with other people, however, more than half engage in these activities entirely off base.

In spite of noted child, financial, employment problems and the effects of deployments and PCSing, over 90 percent of all spouses were satisfied with their lives and their family's well-being, and 84 percent were satisfied with Air Force family life. The majority of spouses (at least 60 percent) agreed that their spouse's supervisor, unit leader, and senior Air Force leadership cared about Air Force family well-being. Eighty-three percent indicated that their families were likely to remain in the Air Force for another tour of duty. Despite the significantly different experiences that civilian and dual-military spouses reported in terms of problems and associated factors, both groups evaluated their life satisfaction, opinion of Air Force leadership, and organizational commitment the same way.

The Air Force has a number of options to improve support for Air Force families:

- Expand assistance with the PCS transition to minimize disruptions to spousal employment, family finances, and child well-being.
- Increase the availability, both in terms of time and slots, of child care.
- Expand and better publicize youth activities available after school or on weekends.
- Support greater on-base recreational programming for arts, crafts, and hobbies popular with spouses and their families.
- Deepen support to families throughout the deployment cycle, particularly with regard to the needs of children and the employment of spouses remaining at home.
- Better promote financial and employment assistance programs.
- Improve employment opportunities for military spouses through partnerships with national companies and Air Force contractors.
- Use spouses' preferred means of communication, including emails, websites, and newsletters and newspapers, to convey information about outreach efforts and publicize new or modified programs and policies.
- Finally, the Air Force's ability to support families would be enhanced if it centrally collected direct contact information for spouses.