



National
Military Family
Association

BLOOM
EMPOWERING THE MILITARY TEEN

2023

Military Teen Experience Survey: Food Security

While fielding our 2023 Military Teen Experience Survey, the National Military Family Association (NMFA) asked respondents about their experiences with food insecurity. Food insecurity, or the lack of adequate resources to access an appropriate variety, quality, and/or amount of food to maintain a healthy lifestyle, takes both a physical and mental toll on children and teens.

Consistent access to nutritious food is [foundational](#) for both physical and mental health and is a vital component of both military family well-being and force readiness. Food insecurity [negatively](#) impacts quality of life, increasing the risk of physical and mental health conditions.

The USDA population [estimate](#) of food insecurity was 10% in 2021, reflecting a nationwide problem to which military families are not immune.

Military families may be particularly vulnerable to experiencing food insecurity due to the unique factors of military life and broader policies that may impact their access to resources.

NMFA looks at food security across all of its survey respondents. For more information on food insecurity in the military community and our longstanding advocacy to eliminate it, visit our website (militaryfamily.org).

Military Life and Food Security

Some factors of military life may contribute to greater financial constraints compared to civilian families (e.g., relocating frequently, needing childcare during parental deployment or forgoing additional income to stay home with children). These financial constraints can impact food security. Literature on food security among military personnel is still emerging, however in 2012 Feeding America [estimated](#) that one quarter of military personnel used food banks to help feed themselves and their families. In 2021, NMFA found that 15% of actively serving military personnel polled had visited a food bank in the previous 12 months. Additionally, the Department of Defense (DoD) does not currently [track](#) military personnel use of food assistance programs.



The distress and anxiety caused by food insecurity is especially salient for military families. Service members who are worried about putting food on the table for their families will struggle with readiness and retention. Poor mental health is [associated](#) with intentions to leave the military and addressing food insecurity may help mitigate mental health concerns, reducing intentions to leave. [Stigma](#) also appears to be a major barrier in seeking support for food security. This stigma is especially relevant for junior service members, who may be particularly concerned about career advancement.

Previous Findings

In 2022 we found almost half of our 2,254 respondents (46%) reported experiencing some level of food insecurity within the past 30 days. About 18% of military teens reported experiencing low food security and over a quarter (28%) experienced very low food security.

What We Asked

The Six-Item Short Form Food Security Survey Module (USDA ERS, also known as the USDA Short Form) was used to measure the food security of our military-connected youth. This validated measure assesses household access to food and eating patterns. [Research](#) has rigorously tested this measure with a youth population and found responses to be reliable.

Respondents were asked to report on the food situation in their home in the past month, with questions assessing access to food, worry about not having enough food, and changes in eating behavior. For example: “Did you worry that food at home would run out before your family got money to buy more?” Responses included “Never,” “Sometimes,” and “A lot”. Scores across the six items are summed, with a range of 0 to 9.

Food secure or high food security

(sum score of 0 to 1) means that there were no or minimal reported indications of food-access problems or limitations.

Low food security

(sum score of 2 to 5) means there were reports of reduced quality, variety, or desirability of diet with little or no indication of reduced food intake.

Very low food security

(sum score of 6 to 9) means there were reports of multiple indications of disrupted eating patterns and reduced food intake.



What We Learned

51%

Just over half of our participants **(51%)** reported food insecurity.

30%

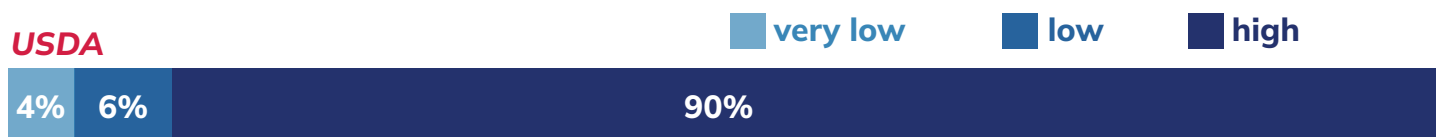
30% reporting low food security.

21%

21% reporting very low food security.

These rates of food insecurity surpass those reported in civilian populations and a 2020 [estimate](#) of 22% in U.S. soldiers. Compared to our 2022 numbers, rates of low food security increased by 12 percentage points, while rates of very low food security decreased by approximately 7 percentage points. It's important to note that our data is cross-sectional, meaning the same respondents are not completing the survey both years.

USDA



2022



2023



Please note - the respondents in the 2023 sample are different from those in the 2022 sample. This is not longitudinal data.

Demographic Factors

Age

Young adults reported greater levels of food insecurity compared to teens. A majority of our young adult respondents (73%) are currently enrolled in college, which may impact their access to food and eating behaviors, especially if they are paying for their food themselves. Recent [research](#) has found approximately 41% of college students report low food security. Many college students struggle with access to and affordability of nutritious foods.

Race

Food security was highest among bi- or multiracial respondents, and lowest among Native American respondents (although sample sizes for these groups were low; n = 89 and n = 22, respectively). Asian respondents were the only group that reported being majority food secure; all other groups were majority food insecure. An abundance of [research](#) has found food insecurity rates are higher among Black and Latino households.

Service Member Factors

Rank

Respondents who reported their service member was a lower rank (E1-E4) reported experiencing significantly greater food insecurity. This is consistent with [existing](#) literature, which finds significant associations between lower rank and greater food insecurity. Pay grade is a proxy measure for socioeconomic status in military families, therefore this finding may reflect difficulties with food access due to financial resources.

Service Member Injury

Respondents with a wounded, ill, or injured service member were significantly more likely to report food insecurity.

Respondents with a service member sharing both a visible and invisible injury reported the greatest levels of food insecurity. The additional costs associated with caring for an injured service member, including healthcare, may contribute to lower food security. Other reasons include reduced income as service members may experience employment limitations due to health issues and spouses may be unable to work due to caregiving responsibilities. To date, there has been minimal research examining the link between service-connected wounds, illnesses, or injuries and military teen food insecurity. More research is needed to better understand this connection.

Dual Military

Respondents from active duty dual military families were significantly more likely to report food insecurity. Dual-military families are a severely [understudied](#) population. As such, it's difficult to speculate why food insecurity was greater among these families. This finding reiterates the need for further study with this population.

Deployments and PCS

A greater number of deployments and PCS moves were related to greater reported food insecurity. Changes in family functioning during deployments, such as needing childcare or choosing not to work to avoid high costs of childcare, affect family finances and may contribute to lower food security. Frequent moves have long [hindered](#) military spouses' ability to find and retain steady work, which can impact a family's finances. Further, geographic relocations can be costly and, although the DoD provides financial compensation for such moves, this compensation does not always cover the entire cost of a move, leaving less money available for necessities, such as food.



Mental Wellbeing

When examining the link between mental well-being and food security, we discovered greater food insecurity was related to worse well-being.

This finding is unsurprising considering the negative [impact](#) food insecurity has on quality of life and the stress and worry it causes. You can read more about the mental health of our military-connected youth here.

www.militaryfamily.org/wp-content/uploads/2023-MTES-Mental-Health.pdf

Recommendations

Low-income civilian families dealing with food insecurity can turn to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). However, SNAP benefits are not available to most military families because their Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH) is counted when determining eligibility. As housing costs continue to outpace BAH, this has put families under increasing strain. After years of advocating for military families facing food insecurity, NMFA is pleased that Congress and DoD have finally started to recognize that food insecurity affects military families.

In November 2021, Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin directed DoD to create a toolkit to help military commanders recognize signs of financial stress among families and point them to resources. Even more significantly, the FY22 National Defense Authorization Act included a Basic Needs Allowance (BNA) for low-income military families. This allowance provides a temporary pay boost to families whose incomes and household sizes place them below 130 percent of federal poverty guidelines. The following year, Congress increased the income threshold to 150 percent of poverty guidelines. However, because BAH is included in determining eligibility for BNA, few families are able to qualify. We support legislation that removes BAH in determining BNA eligibility, so more families can access this vital benefit. The longer-term solution, which NMFA supports, is to revise the rules around SNAP so that BAH is excluded from eligibility calculations. We are urging Congress to make this much-needed change when it reauthorizes the Farm Bill in 2023.





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