



NATIONAL  
MILITARY FAMILY  
ASSOCIATION

# Military Teen Food Insecurity



While fielding our 2022 Military Teen Experience Survey, the National Military Family Association (NMFA) asked respondents about their experiences of food insecurity. Of the 2,254 respondents, almost half (46%) reported experiencing some level of food insecurity within the past 30 days. Here, we take a closer look at how food insecurity may affect military teens' mental well-being and daily life.

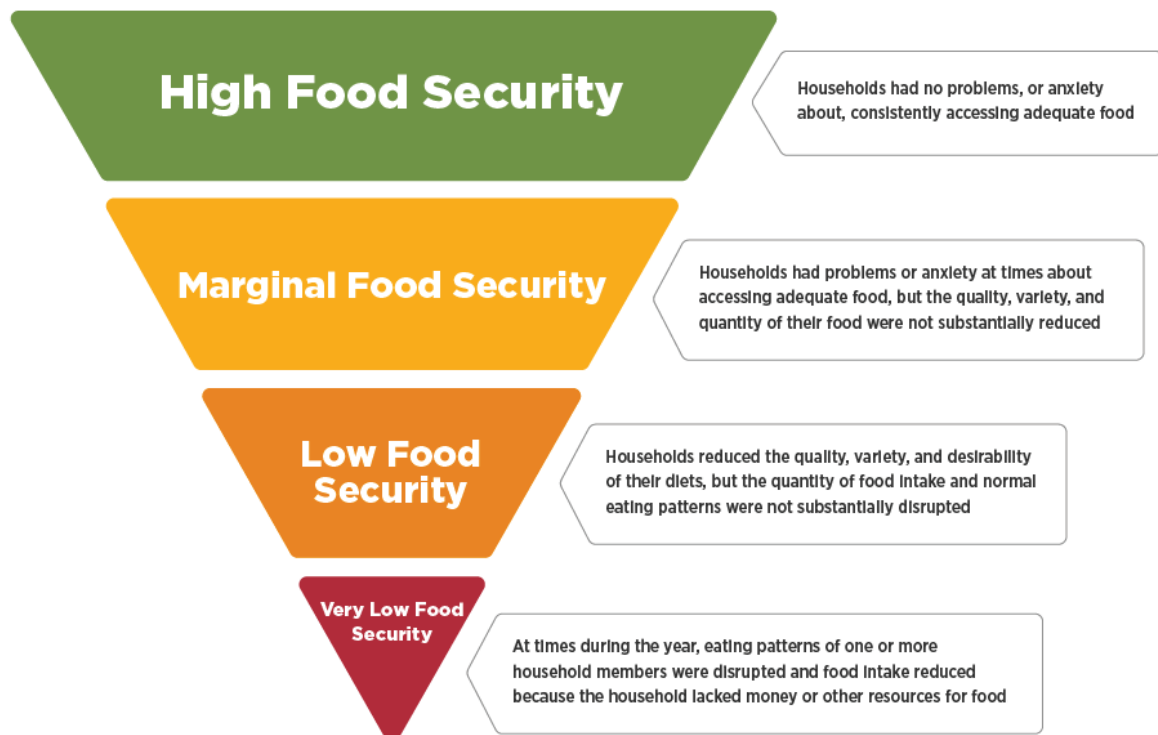
## INTRODUCTION

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. It is associated with lasting negative physical effects, such as poorer general health and greater risk of hospitalization and mental effects, such as cognitive problems, depression, and suicidal ideation (Gundersen & Ziliak, 2015; United States Department of Agriculture [USDA], 2022). In its annual data collection from December 2020, the USDA showed that 14.8% of households with children reported experiencing food insecurity (USDA, 2022). 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.

Military teens shared their experiences regarding food insecurity in NMFA's 2022 Military Teen Experience Survey. Analyzing their responses allowed us to identify how food insecurity may affect their mental well-being and daily life and how local communities, states, and the federal government can respond.

We relied on the USDA Food Security Survey Module for Children Ages 12 Years and Older to measure the food insecurity levels of our military teens. Teens were asked to answer questions about food insecurity experiences over the past month.

Some questions in this measure include “Did you worry that food at home would run out before your family got money to buy more?” and “Did you have to skip a meal because your family didn’t have enough money for food?” The USDA has identified categories for food security in accordance with the current measure. Categories include experiencing food security (scores of 0 or 1), low food security (scores between 2 - 5), and very low food security (scores between 6 - 9).



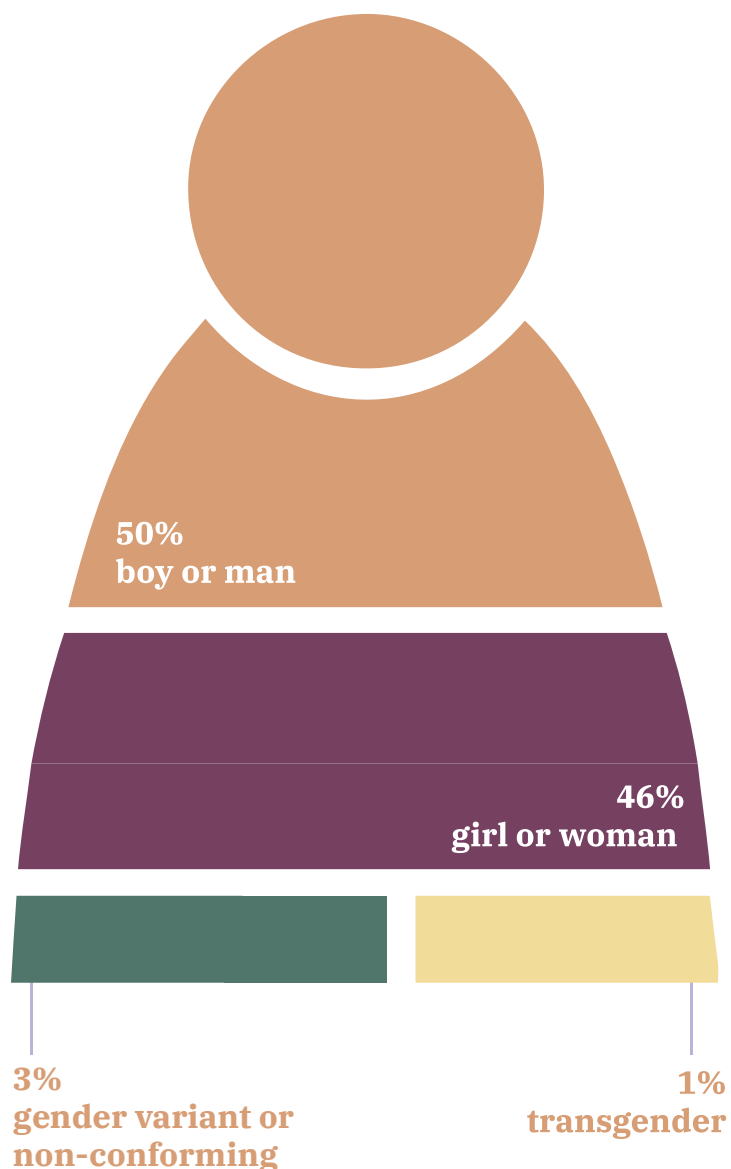
Source: Adapted from the USDA Economic Research Service.



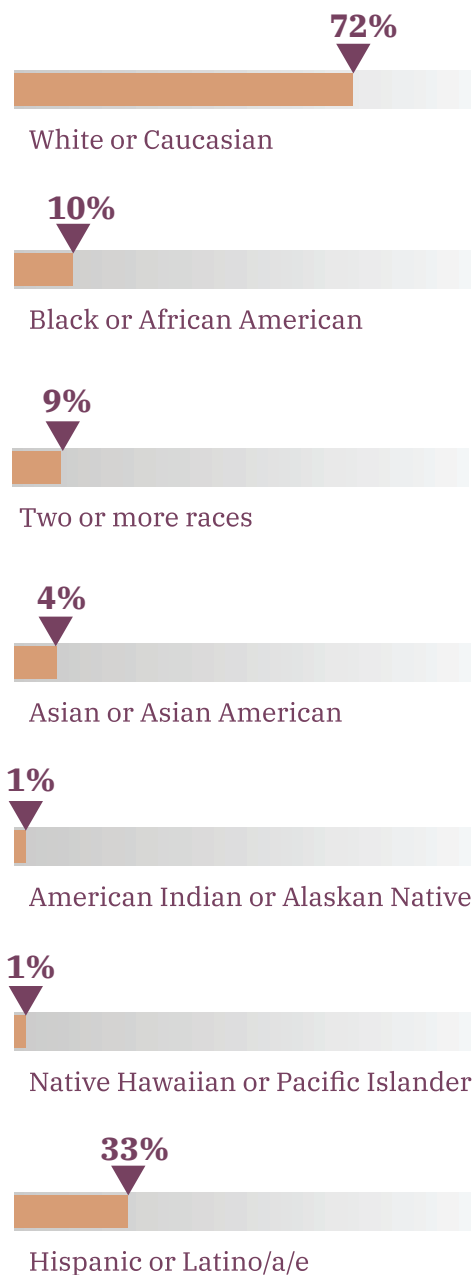
# DEMOGRAPHICS

NMFA heard from 2,254 respondents between the ages of 13 – 19 in the 2022 Military Teen Experience Survey.

**Teens were, on average, about 16 years old and identified as:**

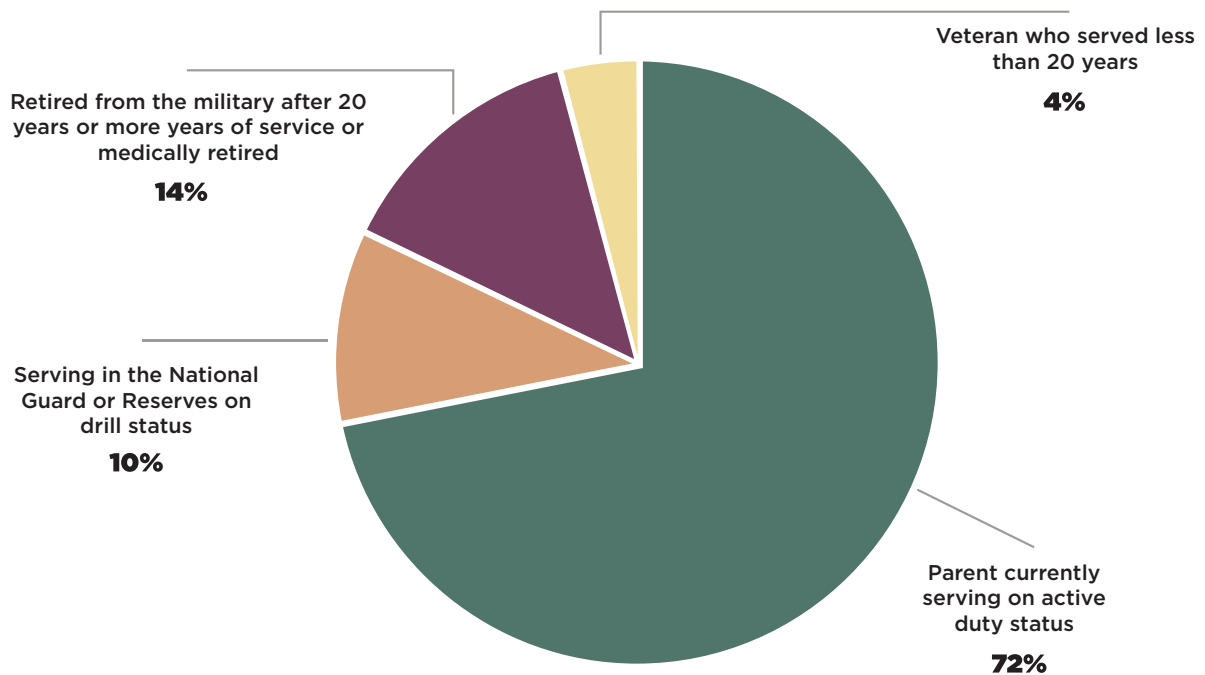


**Teens primarily reported their race as:**



Because respondents were not required to respond to demographic questions by selecting 'Prefer Not to Answer,' a small percentage did not report their gender identity, race, or ethnicity.

## Military Status of Hidden Helpers' Parent



Some teens (18%;  $n = 393$ ) reported that two or more of their parents or guardians had served in the military, and in 39% ( $n = 119$ ) of those families, both parents were currently serving on active duty status (i.e., serving on active duty or serving in the National Guard or Reserves on active status).

About half of respondents indicated that their military parent was of an enlisted rank (52%) and about one-third (34%) were of an officer rank. This is not necessarily an accurate representation as 82% of the U.S. military are enlisted personnel (Department of Defense, 2020).

Military teens were enrolled in schools around the world, with most students attending public schools including charter schools (61%). Teens also were enrolled in private schools (22%), Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA) schools (9%), home schools (4%), virtual schools (unrelated to the pandemic, 2%), and types of schools not listed as an option (2%).

# FINDINGS

## Military Teens Are Experiencing Food Insecurity

Out of 2,254 respondents, 54% of teens reported being food secure over the past month. Teens were considered food secure if they reported no indicators or one indicator of food insecurity. According to the USDA, food security often indicates no concerns regarding access to food or limitations in the variety of food.



**Almost half of military teens reported experiencing some level of food insecurity over the past month.**



**Reported experiencing low food security. Low food security generally suggests having reduced quality, variety, or desirability of diet, although there is little or no indication of reduced food intake.**



**Over a quarter of teens reported experiencing very low food security. Very low food security means there are multiple indications of disrupted eating patterns and reduced food intake.**

The fact that military families are experiencing food insecurity is not in itself surprising. Previous studies have demonstrated concerns regarding food insecurity among military families. For example, one study found that, among 248 military families with active-duty service members and young children, about one in seven families reported food insecurity (Wax & Stankorb, 2016).

The COVID-19 pandemic has also had an effect on military families' food insecurity. One study found that among a sample of Army families, one in seven (15.6%) transitioned from being food secure before the pandemic to being marginally food insecure after the onset of the pandemic and an additional 16.3% were consistently marginally food insecure from before the pandemic to during the pandemic (Rabbitt et al., 2022). Out of their total sample, 32% of Army families were marginally food insecure during the pandemic (Rabbitt et al., 2022). However, our teen respondents reported significantly higher levels of food insecurity than these earlier studies showed.

## **Aspects of Military Life Are Related to Experiences of Food Insecurity**

Some aspects of military life were (statistically) related to teens' reports of food insecurity. Military teens who reported their parents' pay grade as lower (e.g., enlisted rank) generally reported experiencing greater food insecurity. This finding may reflect access to money and resources that are needed to feed one's family, as pay grade can be an indicator of socioeconomic status for military families (Blaisure et al., 2012).



## Food Insecurity, Pay, and PCS Moves

Food Insecurity	Serving parent's highest pay grade	
	Pearson Correlation	-.165*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001
	N	1992

\*\*. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Additionally, teens who reported experiencing more military moves in their life generally reported experiencing greater food insecurity. Frequent geographical relocations can negatively impact military families' finances. Due to moving often, military spouses may struggle to find steady employment, reducing the overall household income (Burke & Miller, 2017). Moreover, geographic relocations can be costly and, although the Department of Defense provides financial compensation for such moves, compensation does not always cover the cost of a move, leaving less money available for necessities, such as food (Booth et al., 2007).



# Military Teens With Wounded, Ill, or Injured Parents Experience More Food Insecurity

Some teens reported having a parent who had sustained a service-connected wound, illness, or injury. Teens whose primary service member had sustained a wound, illness, or injury generally reported more food insecurity compared to teens who did not report their primary serving parent as wounded, ill, or injured. 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.

## Parental Service-Connected Wound, Illness, or Injury and Food Insecurity

		Food Insecurity
Has this parent or guardian experienced a military service-connected wound, illness, or injury?	Pearson Correlation	-.095**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001
	N	2004

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

## Food Insecurity Takes a Mental Toll on Military Teens

Food insecurity impacts a teen's mental health. Military teens who reported greater food insecurity were generally more likely to also report thoughts of harming themselves or others. Multiple studies have linked food insecurity to negative outcomes for adolescents, including depression and suicidal ideation (Ke & Ford-Jones, 2015; McIntyre et al., 2013). Moreover, a recent study showed that as youth experienced increasingly more severe food insecurity, they also were at increasing risk of experiencing suicidal thoughts (Men et al., 2021). Ensuring that military teens have the food they need may be a tangible way of supporting teens to face the unique challenges of military life.

### Food Insecurity and Thoughts of Harming Self or Others

		Have you ever had thoughts of harming yourself or others?
Food Insecurity	Pearson Correlation	.451*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001
	N	1916

\*\*. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

# POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Military families need reliable access to appropriate resources to mitigate experiences of food insecurity.

Low-income civilian families dealing with food insecurity can turn to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) for assistance. However, those benefits are not available to most military families because their Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH) is counted when determining eligibility. Housing costs continue to outpace BAH, putting families under increasing strain.

While most military families are not eligible for SNAP, many may be able to benefit from WIC, the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children. In most states, BAH is not included in determining WIC eligibility. While this program will not support most families of teens, it can benefit junior families with young children, who also struggle with food insecurity. We urge entities that interact with young families, such as Child Development Centers and Military Treatment Facility pediatric clinics, to ensure that they are sharing information about WIC.

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 will provide a temporary pay boost to families whose incomes and household sizes place them below 130 percent of federal poverty guidelines. Like SNAP, the BNA will include BAH when determining eligibility.

However, the legislation did provide DoD latitude to exclude some or all BAH in “high cost” areas. We’re hopeful this new benefit will help some struggling families when it is implemented in January 2023.

The longer-term solution is to revise the rules around SNAP so that BAH is excluded from eligibility calculations. We continue to urge Congress to make this much-needed change when it reauthorizes the Farm Bill in 2023.



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