

Military Families During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Lack of Child Care, Military Spouse Unemployment, and Income Loss

Thesis/Aims/Goals:

The stress of COVID-19 has raised concerns regarding family wellness and functioning among vulnerable populations, including the military community. Military families face additional challenges than civilian families including but not limited to frequent geographical relocations, deployment cycles, reintegration, and the emotional and physical toll of war (Burke & Miller, 2018; Maury & Stone, 2014; Whitby & Compton, 2016). The COVID-19 pandemic has compounded these issues and created additional struggles for military families including access to childcare, financial hurdles, and food insecurity (Department of Defense, 2020; MAZON, 2020; National Military Family Association, 2020). Additionally, military spouses are an understudied population that has poor mental and physical health compared to the general populous (Mailey et al, 2018), which can negatively impact the overall wellness and functioning of military families.

The recruitment and retention of the 100% voluntary U.S. armed forces are based on job satisfaction and the satisfaction levels of the servicemember's family members (Castaneda & Harrell, 2008). When military spouses are unable to complete higher education programs and secure gainful employment, their entire family suffers (Castaneda & Harrell, 2008). When military families struggle due to only having a single income, they may consider leaving the military or actually leave the service (Castaneda & Harrell, 2008). This may also have lasting impacts on military family wellness and functioning.

For 51 years, The National Military Family Association (NMFA) has supported military families. The association has long recognized the barriers military spouses face due to the mobile military lifestyle; NMFA works to alleviate these barriers and support military families through advocacy on Capitol Hill, programming that supports military children and wounded warriors through camps, scholarships, and child care fee relief. A military spouse may need re-licensure in a new state, supervised clinical hours, or just one more class before they PCS. [NMFA's scholarship program](#) bridges that gap and make the difference between unemployment and meaningful employment for military spouses (NMFA, 2020).

Our primary objectives of this study were to 1) determine the incidence of reduced income and child care access among military families, particularly those with diverse racial and socioeconomic backgrounds during the COVID-19 pandemic and 2) identify demographic, rank, and military status differences between military families struggling during the pandemic and those not struggling.

Methods:

A descriptive, cross-sectional study design was used to quantitatively depict how the COVID-19 pandemic is impacting the military community. The benefit of using a cross-sectional study design was that it allowed NMFA to compare many different variables at the same time. We did not try to measure the effects of variables, but sought instead to describe them statistically. Variables included military status, rank, race, personal income, family income,

access to childcare, and employment. The drawback of using this methodology is that it did not allow for conclusions about causation.

NMFA collected data from military families using our organization's internal scholarship data collection and management tool. We surveyed 4,112 military families applying for NMFA's scholarship program (n= 4,112). This cross-sectional sample provides us with a snapshot of that population, at that one point in time, during the COVID-19 outbreak and aftermath. This research is timely and relevant as we are still living in the midst of this global pandemic and U.S. military families continue to move or PCS (permanent change of station) and deploy despite the health risks posed by COVID-19. We asked our military family respondents:

- What impact has the COVID-19 pandemic had on your access to childcare?
- What impact has the COVID-19 pandemic had on your employment?
- What impact has the COVID-19 pandemic had on your personal income?
- What impact has the COVID-19 pandemic had on your family income?

Analysis and Preliminary Results/Contributions:

The National Military Family Association collected data from 4,112 military families over the course of nine months (April 2020-December 2020). Of the respondents, 80% were from enlisted military families, and 42% were military families of color. Additionally, 49% of our military family respondents reported lost or reduced access to childcare. Survey participants also reported loss of income - 53% reported decreased personal income, and 49% had decreased family income due to COVID-19. Finally, regarding employment, 59% of military spouses reported job loss or reduced hours.

Implications for Research/Practice/Policy:

This research can inform the Department of Defense in their efforts to support military families. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the U.S. Department of Defense created and implemented programs to support military spouses' education and employment including the Military Spouse Professional Network (MSPN), Military Spouse Economic Empowerment Zones (MSEEZ), My Career Advancement Account scholarship program (MyCAA), and My Spouse Education and Career Opportunities program (MySECO). (Military OneSource, 2019; U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation [USCCF], 2019; U.S. Department of Defense, 2018). This research may help expand or shift the focus of these existing programs and inform the creation of new, necessary COVID-19 related programs for military families.

Additionally, the impacts of COVID-19 on military families can inform policy. COVID-19 has already impacted the military's health care benefits (to include telehealth appointments), the Military Readiness Policy, the Servicemembers Civil Relief Act, and many more. This research could contribute to lawmakers' understanding of the military community's needs during the pandemic and beyond.

Finally, this research can inform higher education institutions with military-affiliated learners and other organizations that support the military community. Despite similarities in lifestyle to active duty service members, military spouses who enroll in higher education programs are not categorized as an at-risk population (Ott, Kelley, & Akroyd, 2018). The psychological stress and anxiety that are associated with spouse deployments, and frequent geographical moves that

accompany the military lifestyle also leave military spouses disproportionately accountable for all family obligations, especially during deployment cycles of their spouses (Redmond, Wilcox, Campbell, Kim, Finney, Barr, & Hassan, 2015; Ott et al., 2018). COVID-19 has compounded the issues that military-affiliated students face and this research can contribute to directions necessary to support the overall wellness and functioning of this population.



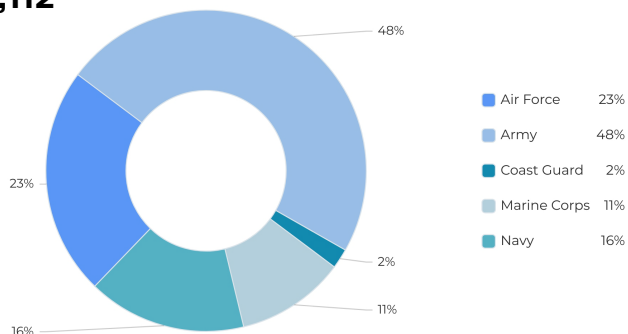
NATIONAL MILITARY FAMILY ASSOCIATION

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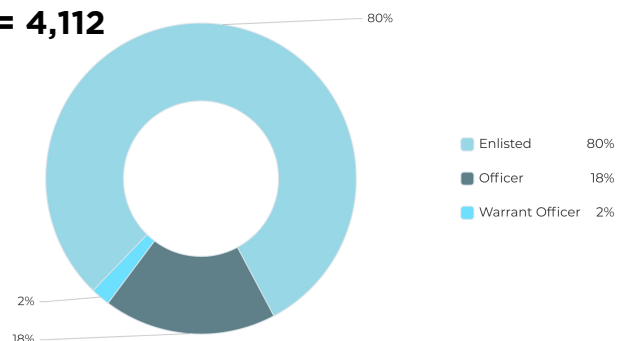
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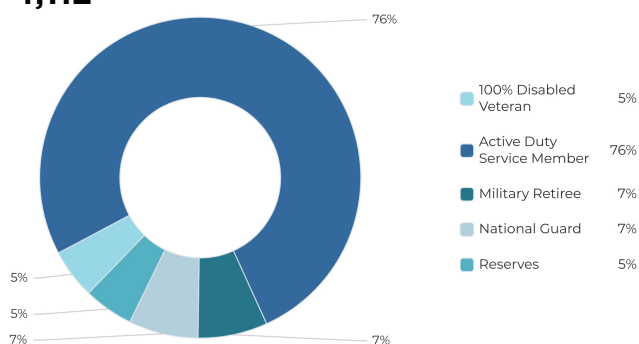
RANK

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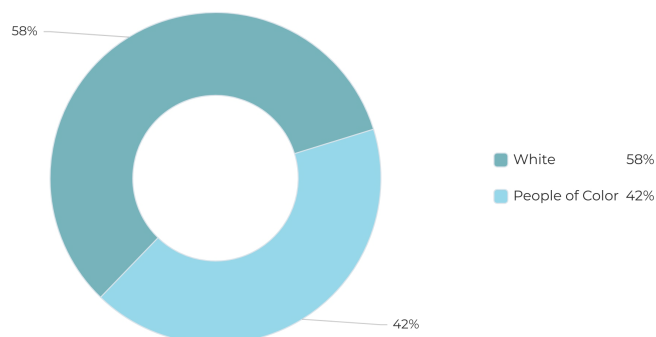
STATUS

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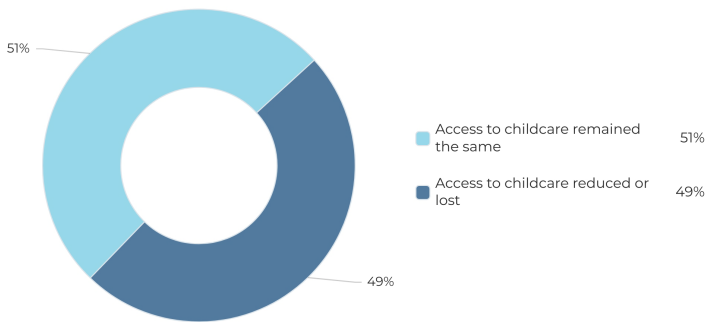
RACE

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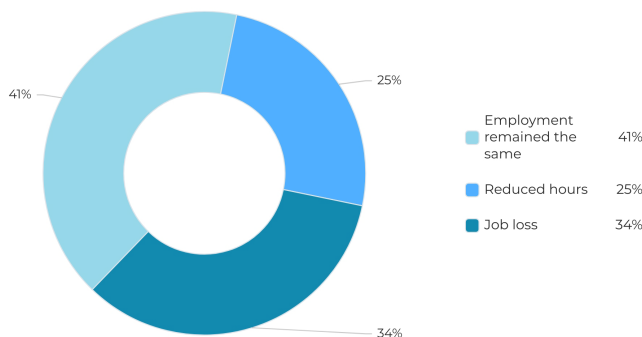


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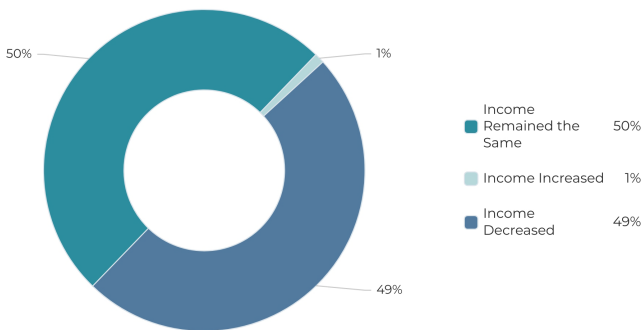
Incidence of Childcare Loss During Covid-19 Pandemic



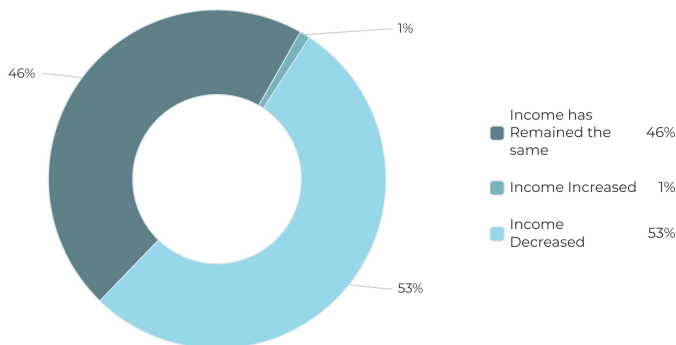
Incidence of Employment Loss During Covid-19 Pandemic



Incidence of Personal Income Loss During Covid-19 Pandemic



Incidence of Family Income Loss During Covid-19 Pandemic



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