



**Military Family
Advisory Network**

CAUSAL FACTORS OF MILITARY AND VETERAN FAMILY FOOD INSECURITY

JUNE 2022

TEXAS RESEARCH REPORT



*MFAN's Food Distribution Event in
Fort Hood, Texas - March 19, 2022*

Made possible by



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Letter from the President	01
Contributing Organizations	02
Introduction	03
Methods	04
Military and Veteran Family Food Insecurity Journeys	06
Conclusion	15

A LETTER FROM MFAN'S PRESIDENT AND EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

In 2017, Military Family Advisory Network (MFAN) began learning of food insecure military families through our advisory board – a group of military-connected leaders who provide MFAN with a constant ear to the ground and mechanism of trusted peer-to-peer communication. As with all efforts that MFAN pursues, we tested what we were hearing through scientific research. The lived experiences shared by our network paired with our research illustrated just how prevalent the issue was within our community.

In the 2019 Military Family Support Programming Survey, we found that one in eight military family respondents was experiencing food insecurity. As we cross-tabulated our findings specifically in Texas, we found that, pre-pandemic, one in six respondents residing in Texas was experiencing food insecurity or hunger. With those data in-hand, we elevated the stories of food insecure military families. We used this data to inform government leaders, but knew we needed to arm ourselves even further to move the needle. We provided immediate assistance by hosting food distribution events, ultimately providing over 1 million meals to military families in 2021. Now, as we work toward lasting solutions, we recognize the need to understand the causal factors. We needed to understand the personas and journeys of those who are experiencing food insecurity. With that question in mind, thanks to the generous support of the Bob Woodruff Foundation (BWF), MFAN interviewed 312 food insecure military families, 215 of whom were in Texas. The following pages outline how we approached this critical work and what we learned.

To those families who participated, thank you. Thank you for entrusting us and thank you for joining us as we embark on this goal of preventing food insecurity. As we continue to host food distribution events and work toward lasting solutions, we are better positioned to solve this issue upstream so that families don't have to choose who eats and who doesn't. I would also be remiss if I didn't express my admiration and gratitude toward the MFAN research team. These families were truly heard. You provided a safe place for them to be vulnerable. Now, we are all armed with this information that will allow us to make a meaningful impact. It is time for a culture shift, one that celebrates help-seeking behavior around these basic needs, one that breaks down any stigma, and one that recognizes the inherent strength of these families. This issue is complex, and this report will shed light for all those who serve our military-connected community so that we can work together to combat hunger for families who serve today, and those who will follow tomorrow.

Warmly,



Shannon Razsadin
President & Executive Director
Military Family Advisory Network



CONTRIBUTING ORGANIZATIONS



ABOUT MFAN

The Military Family Advisory Network (MFAN), founded in 2013, serves as the authentic voice of the modern military family and the bridge that connects military families to the resources, people, and information they depend on to successfully navigate all phases of military life. This survey is a comprehensive review of military families' experiences and well-being, covering questions that will help us to better understand and ultimately address issues. The findings from this research allow MFAN to bring together and inform nonprofit organizations, policymakers, armed forces leadership, and other stakeholders around key interests.



ABOUT THE BOB WOODRUFF FOUNDATION

The Bob Woodruff Foundation (BWF) was founded in 2006 after reporter Bob Woodruff was wounded by a roadside bomb while covering the war in Iraq. Since then, BWF has led an enduring call to action for people to stand up for heroes and meet the emerging and long-term needs of today's veterans, including mental health, caregiver support, food insecurity, and service-connected fertility issues. To date, BWF has invested over \$85 million to Find, Fund and Shape™ programs that have empowered impacted veterans, service members, and their family members, across the nation, reinforcing the message that BWF has 'Got Your Six'. For more information, as well as stories of success and innovation from BWF's network of partners, please visit bobwoodrufffoundation.org.



ABOUT THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

The Institute for Military & Veteran Family Wellness conducts research, evaluation and program development to improve the lives of service members, veterans and their family members. In order to impact families now and in the future, the program focuses on research on practices and programs that support service members, veterans and their families; and training and education that prepares professionals and peers to deliver evidence-informed and culturally relevant programs and practices. The institute also engages in community collaboration to ensure that new programming that is designed with the needs and voices of potential recipients in mind.

INTRODUCTION

MILITARY AND VETERAN FAMILY FOOD INSECURITY

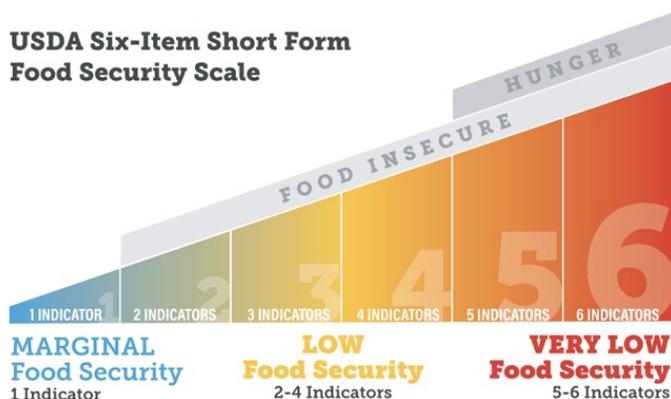
In 2017, the Military Family Advisory Network (MFAN) began collecting data about the incidence of military and veteran family food insecurity. The findings from the 2017 Military Family Support Programming Survey showed us that 15% of military and veteran family respondents were experiencing food insecurity. Needing to learn more, MFAN adopted a new instrument, the USDA Six-Item Short Form Food Security Scale, which has been shown to reliably identify food insecure households. Respondents are asked six statements about their food situation. An affirmative answer to at least one of the six statements in the scale indicates that respondents are experiencing some level of difficulty accessing or affording food.ⁱ

In 2019, MFAN incorporated the USDA Food Security Scale in the Military Family Support Programming Survey, which indicated that 1 in 8 respondents was experiencing food insecurity. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, MFAN launched an off-cycle survey containing the USDA Food Security Scale. Again, the results were alarming; at the height of COVID-19, military and veteran family respondents were experiencing food insecurity at an increased rate of 1 in 5. The findings underscore the need for information relating to the causal factors of food insecurity. Without which, meaningful solutions remain out of reach.

In 2021, MFAN initiated this causal factor study, made possible in part by a partnership with the Bob Woodruff Foundation (BWF). Utilizing the USDA Food Security Scale and rigorous qualitative methodology, MFAN and research partners at the University of Texas at Austin's Institute, investigated the causal factors of food insecurity for military and veteran families in Texas and Tidewater, Va., which were previously identified locations with high frequency of food insecurity, through the 2019 Military Family Support Programming Survey.

The goal of this research was twofold. First, this research sheds light on the causal factors of food insecurity in military and veteran families in the two target locations.

USDA Six-Item Short Form Food Security Scale



Food insecurity is indicated when respondents answer affirmatively to two or more items. Hunger is indicated when respondents answer affirmatively to five or more items.

Second, this research sits as a foundation from which to build robust models that can be used to target other locations experiencing food insecurity, deepen our understanding of causal factors at large, and make way for data-led interventions to reduce for insecurity for military and veteran populations. Undertaking research in two locations, Texas and Tidewater, Va., and conducting data analysis simultaneously strengthened this foundation.

Therefore, this report dives into the findings of the 2021 study on the causal factors of food insecurity by reviewing the common causal factors of food insecurity throughout Texas and Tidewater, Va., before exploring a final causal factor unique to the research participants in Texas. To do so, quotes from participants in both Texas and Tidewater, Va. will be referenced throughout the four core personas that were identified in the data at both locations. But first, an overview of the methodology is provided, including recruitment mechanisms and analytical approach. Following a presentation of demographic information, readers are taken on a collection of journeys through food insecurity made possible by identifying generalized personas that emerged from the data. Rich descriptions of upstream effects, causal factors, and pit stops along the way document military and veteran families' pathways towards and through food insecurity. Finally, key recommendations for support improvement are presented.

METHODS

MFAN conducted qualitative interviews with military and veteran family members who had recently experienced food insecurity to understand the causal factors of food insecurity for military and veteran families.

Three mechanisms were used for recruitment.

- Email interview invitations were sent to all MFAN food distribution event participants in Texas and the Tidewater region. Through the 1 Million Meals Challenge, MFAN hosted multiple food distribution events in each location, providing food for nearly 6,700 military and veteran families.
- MFAN leveraged organic social media outreach by posting to official MFAN social media pages, sharing widely in military-connected Facebook groups to expand recruitment, and engaging with posts online.
- Partner organizations shared the study information with clients and stakeholders.

These outreach efforts resulted in a total of 312 semi-structured, qualitative phone interviews throughout Texas and Tidewater, Va. Two-hundred and fifteen interviews (215) were conducted throughout Texas, and the remaining 97 interviews were conducted in Tidewater, Va.

Interviews were conducted by researchers at MFAN and UTA from April 2021 to March 2022. The interviews specific to the Texas region were conducted from April 2021 to February 2022. In both locations, thirty-minute phone interviews were conducted with military-connected individuals over the age of 18 who had experienced some level of food insecurity within the previous 12 months. Interviewers introduced the purpose and parameters of the study, the ability of the participant to withdraw at any time, and asked permission to record the phone conversations.

The interviews began by asking participants to share demographic information, summarized below. Interviewers then walked respondents through the USDA Food Security Scale. For the interview to continue, respondents had to answer affirmatively to at least one of

the items in the six-item scale indicating at least marginal food security. After confirming an occurrence of food insecurity, interviewers asked participants to describe their experiences with food insecurity in the last 12 months, and over the previous five years.

Completed interviews were transcribed and uploaded into Qualtrics, a state-of-the-art analysis system. Data analysis was conducted in two phases. First, the entire data sample (including data from Texas and Tidewater, Va.,) was analyzed for common themes and sub-themes. From this first phase analysis, four core personas were identified. Each persona is shaped by a single causal factor which catalyzed a resultant journey through food insecurity for military and veteran families. After four core causal factors and personas were identified, the second phase of analysis took a closer look at the data collected from interview participants in Texas. This analysis resulted in a fifth causal factor, persona, and journey unique to the lived experiences of military and veteran families living in Texas. This report will explore each of these personas in turn. The four core personas, which came out of the analysis of both Texas and Tidewater, Va. data will be explained using quotes and examples from both geographic locations. The fifth, Texas-specific persona, is explained using quotes and examples only from participants in Texas.

PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS (TEXAS AND VIRGINIA)

Taking into account the data collected in Texas and Tidewater, Va., the majority of respondents identified as female, Caucasian, and between the ages of 25 and 40. The next most common racial and ethnic groups were Hispanic (32%) and Black or African American (29%).

An overwhelming number of participants were married (90%) and had kids under the age of 18 in their homes (85%). Most families had either three (20%), four (26%), or five (24%) people living in the home.

More than half of the participants stated that they were spouses to active duty members of the military; of the

METHODS

remaining percentage, the majority either identified as active duty (15%), veterans (10%), or military retirees (5%). Service members were most likely to be in the Army (64%) or Navy (28%), and either an E4 (25%), E5 (24%), or E6 (25%) in rank. Of those that had left service, the majority did so within the last ten years, and nearly all had served after 9/11. Further, 36% of participants claimed that they or their service member had a military-connected wound, illness, or injury, and 15% identified themselves as caregivers for an individual with said injuries.

DEMOGRAPHIC BREAKDOWN FOR THE TEXAS POPULATION

The Texas population demographics largely kept with the trends established by the sample as a whole. For individual statistics, the majority of participants were once again female, Caucasian, and between 25 and 40 years of age. They were more likely to be married and have kids under 18 years old in their home. Most

respondents identified as spouses to active duty service members. Service members were most likely to be in the Army. However, there were some notable differences between the Texas sample and the overall population. Texas participants were more likely to state that their service member had a military-connected wound, illness or injury, were more likely to be E4 in rank, and had a more even spread in average household size.

USDA SIX-ITEM SHORT FORM FOOD SECURITY SCALE

The majority of individuals in this study reported significant struggles with food security. On the USDA Food Security Scale, those rated highest on food insecurity are labeled “hungry,” with the second-highest rating being “food insecure.” Nearly 75% of respondents surveyed fell within those two categories. Only 25.7% of respondents had marginal food security, respectively. These statistics stayed consistent in Texas. Seventy percent of Texan subjects reported being hungry or food insecure.

FULL POPULATION	Food Security Rating	Number	Percentage
	Marginal Food Security	80	25.7%
	Food Insecurity	138	44.2%
	Hunger	94	30.1%
	Total	312	100%

TEXAS POPULATION	Food Security Rating	Number	Percentage
	Marginal Food Security	62	28.8%
	Food Insecurity	90	41.9%
	Hunger	63	29.3%
	Total	215	100%

MILITARY AND VETERAN FAMILY FOOD INSECURITY JOURNEYS

Throughout data analysis, four core personas applicable in Texas and Virginia came to the surface, and one persona unique to the experience of military and veteran families facing food insecurity in Texas. Each persona experienced a different journey through food insecurity. This section explains each persona in detail and provides an overview of their journey, including causal factors, hurdles, and support mechanisms. The military and veteran family personas include families experiencing spousal unemployment, growing families, families who recently had a permanent change of station (PCS), families incurring unexpected expenses, and families in Texas who experienced an external systems shock.

PERSONA #1: FAMILIES EXPERIENCING SPOUSAL UNEMPLOYMENT:

When discussing their experiences with food insecurity in the last 12 months, the families in our first persona were characterized by the military spouse being unemployed or underemployed. Of the family members the research team spoke to, most were female, from 25 – 40 years old, and were white and non-Hispanic. They represented families with married adults, with three, four, or five people in the home, and most had kids in the home. Most often, they represented active duty Army families in the enlisted ranks. Individuals within the Spousal Unemployment persona were the most likely to be rated as hungry. Forty-three percent scored at the top of the USDA Food Security Scale, as opposed to 30% in the general study sample.

Across all research participants, when asked about factors contributing to their family's food insecurity in the last 12 months, stories relating to military spouse lack of employment, unemployment, and/or the ability to maintain consistent employment were, by far, the most frequently described struggle. Reasons include but are not limited to job losses due to permanent

change of station (PCS) and COVID-19 and the high price of childcare. For many spouses, childcare hurdles render their employment, in their words, 'pointless' as any income earned would only be spent on childcare and, in some instances, still not cover the full costs. The families that mentioned spousal unemployment or underemployment as a significant challenge experienced unemployment as a causal factor in their food insecurity in the past five years. Interestingly, for some families, preexisting spousal unemployment did not cause food insecurity until compounded by other factors which occurred in the last year. Regardless, the limitations of living on a single income made providing food for their families more difficult. One active duty spouse in Tidewater, Va., discussed their unemployment and a recent PCS saying,

"We had a PCS that was quite impromptu. We learned that we were moving like two months before we moved. So, the pick-up and go was quite quick, and you know, there wasn't much time to save like we would like to save...So with that, moving here and taking care of getting here, the Navy was not quick with paying back things that they were supposed to pay back, and because of that, there wasn't much money to go towards food. We had to be very careful with how we spend because with housing, you know, just because you're not receiving your housing allowance doesn't mean they're not gonna take the pay from your check. They're gonna take their portion from your check so, there were times for a few months that things were quite short, and we really had to cut corners."

They continued to say,

"It took me about six months to actually find a job... So, me trying to get back into [my] sector; I have over 60 applications on there. And after I got hired through a private company, I'm just now receiving notices for interviews; this is six months later."

–Spouse/partner of active duty service member

MILITARY AND VETERAN FAMILY FOOD INSECURITY JOURNEYS

Many in this persona noted just how difficult it is to live on a single income; a Texas veteran said, *“Um, my wife lost her job. So, we, and the family, both depend on both my salary and my wife’s salary. So once my wife lost her job, we depend solely on my salary, which is not enough.”* Others explained how the single income makes it difficult to afford common food items, much less the balanced food they would otherwise hope to provide their family. For example, a Tidewater active duty spouse shared, *“And then I told my husband, ‘March 1st, I am going to work, even if it’s at McDonald’s. I was a teacher for years, and I stopped teaching, to stay at home with the boys... You know, I hate, I absolutely hate saying, you know, ‘Oh, I’m sorry. You know, I don’t have chips,’ or ‘We can’t buy popsicles.’ Like, that kills me.”*

COVID-19 also contributed to these families’ spouses’ employment or underemployment. As one spouse described, *“Like I said, I lost my job, so during COVID, everyone was totally staying indoors. I couldn’t go to my shop and like transact the business ... sell things to my customers...so throughout the COVID time, we were just living based on what we had left in the accounts and also in the home already.”* These families’ struggles to afford childcare, coupled with the need to keep kids home due to COVID-19, compounded preexisting difficulties. One Texas active duty spouse explained, *“I used to work, but then with all the COVID and laying off people from jobs and everything. Even before COVID they would cut my hours down and having three kids it’s like someone always needs you. So, either I don’t show up for work because one of my kids is sick or because I have an appointment. I was under hours, and we were relying on my husband’s income.”* The aforementioned high costs of childcare create a barrier to employment; as one Texas spouse of an active duty service member explains, *“childcare is crazy expensive, so I would be working just to pay childcare. So, we wouldn’t be having any extra money anyway because it would go straight to childcare. So, I guess in a way, it’s by choice because I’d rather stay home*

with the kids than just drop them off at daycare and not make any extra money anyway.”

Another active duty spouse from Tidewater explained how she often feels like, and is perceived as, a single parent.

“It’s been very difficult. I’m in health care. I have 12 years health care experience. I’m a certified phlebotomist. I’m a certified MA. Certified PPT. I have my associates degree. Um, I’ve never not had a job and I’ve never had such difficulty finding a job until I moved here, you know, even before the pandemic happened, it was difficult...I am very transparent with employers [that] my husband’s military. You know if my kids get sick, he’s not always around. I can’t rely on him, it’s all me. I don’t like to say single parent because I’m not ...And I get it from their point of view. They need someone who can come in when they need them.”

–Spouse of an active duty service member

Families facing food insecurity due to spousal unemployment admit that their situation hurt their pride. Overall, they face aspects of stigma that cause feelings of shame and embarrassment when seeking out additional resources for their families. Nevertheless, they do adopt strict budgets, rely on food banks and food drives, and simply let the kids eat first. One active duty spouse in Tidewater, Va., said, *“So, we just deal with it the best way we know how. Make sure the kids eat and go on.”* These families indicate that their family helps most often in their times of need. One active duty service member in Tidewater, Va., summarizes, *“My parents and my husband’s parents are always willing to help us but sometimes we don’t like asking for that help.”*

PERSONA #2: GROWING FAMILIES

The second military and veteran family food insecure persona is that of a growing family. As a requirement for inclusion in this group, interviewees identified the causal

MILITARY AND VETERAN FAMILY FOOD INSECURITY JOURNEYS

factor of their food insecurity as their growing family in the 12 months prior to their interview. On average, these families are comprised of married parents with one to three kids. The family members we spoke to were mostly female, between 22 and 30 years of age, and were most often white and non-Hispanic. The next most common racial identity was Black or African American. They are from active duty families and were equally likely to serve in the Army or Navy, all were in enlisted ranks, and did not include wounded warriors or caregivers. Over three-fourths (77%) of families within the Growing Families persona were rated as hungry or food insecure on the USDA Food Security Scale. This is consistent with the findings for the general population.

Families in this persona realize that their costs began to grow exponentially once they brought kids into the home. One active duty spouse in Tidewater, Va. stated, *“Once you become a family unit, and you add kids to the mix, I think that’s when, you know, expenses and stuff really spiral.”* One early hurdle in these families’ journeys through food insecurity was the overwhelming cost of childcare. Another military spouse from Texas discussed the realities families face regarding childcare expenses, *“so, having a childcare plan is expensive. Like basically getting a job would be pointless because my job would only go to childcare. So, it’s easier if I just stay at home.”*

The costs of childcare caused military spouses who were growing their families to forego working outside of the home to provide consistent care to their young kids while limited them to a single income, provided by the military member. Budget constraints limited by one income highlight the realities of expensive bills, unexpected expenses, and the rising costs of housing and daily living. Participants were asked about providing balanced meals for their families, and those with young kids expressed concern for their kids’ overall health and growth. They confronted the realities of high-cost healthy foods and lower-cost unhealthy options.

“You know ideally, we have to spend on food, but you know, buying all the healthy stuff is getting it up

before the next pay period. Right like that’s hard. It’s hard to make that money. Stretch it out. And it’s like I mean, a bag of ramen, you know, it’s way cheaper than, you know, a bag of apples.”

–Spouse/partner of active duty service member in Texas

These families did not experience long-term food insecurity but began to incur additional expenses that made it difficult to afford food when they began growing their families. Constraints pushed these families to shuffle the budget or stretch food in the pantry, and regularly rely on food drives and banks. One spouse/partner of an active duty service member in Texas described their experience stretching what they had,

“So, it’s just me and the two girls, and my oldest was six and the baby was four months so, I couldn’t breastfeed anymore. So, I had to move to formula. Even with WIC, it wasn’t enough. So, I think I’m having to buy at least two big containers at the end of the month and they’re about \$45 apiece. And, of course, she’s picky and everything like that. So, you know, most nights I made something, and I would let her eat first.”

–Spouse of an active duty service member

Some participants had learned that they were ineligible for assistance benefits, while others were able to fill income gaps with WIC assistance. Those who were ineligible for SNAP or other benefits had given up on searching for additional support. One Texas respondent shares their struggle with applying for assistance,

“And with the military, when you apply for food stamps, they count your BAH, they count everything on the LES, even though we don’t see a lot of it. You know? ‘Cause obviously the rent goes to the housing and stuff like that, but they still factor that out as an amount that your household is getting. So, to them, we’re getting too much money, whether we’re starving or not.”

–Spouse/partner of active duty service member

MILITARY AND VETERAN FAMILY FOOD INSECURITY JOURNEYS

In times of uncertainty, the Growing Families persona identifies their extended family as the best support system they have found. A Texas veteran respondent says *“I would say I usually just call my parents. Like my stepmom and my mom are like the go to people.”*

PERSONA #3: FAMILIES WHO RECENTLY HAD A PERMANENT CHANGE OF STATION

When describing their experiences with food insecurity over the last 12 months, the families in the third persona, mentioned that the source, or causal factor, of their problems with food security was a recent PCS (military move). These participants were most often Caucasian, non-Hispanic, married females between 25 – 40 years of age. The remaining interviewees who fit this persona were Black or Asian and nearly 40% were Hispanic. Service members within this persona were more likely to state that they were in the Army (70%) or Navy (23%), and 100% of personnel that had left the service had done so within the last two years. Compared to the average, individuals in this persona tended to be younger, with 35% stating they were between 25-29 years of age (compared to 18% in the general sample). Service members also tended towards having a higher rank (31% rated E6, versus 25% in the general sample). Exactly one-half of participants within this persona rated as food insecure on the USDA Food Security Scale. Two percent indicated marginal food security, which is the lowest percentage out of every population studied.

The families that fit this persona experienced a PCS in the last 12 months in the midst of the COVID pandemic while their kids were home from school. This persona identified as not having previous long-term struggles with food insecurity prior to their PCS. An active duty spouse/partner in Texas says that, *“this is the first time in life where I ever experienced this, you know. I’ll tell you- my husband told me about the food [drive]. I’ve never*

like had problems with food prior to this year span. This prior year, you know. We moved, you know, came to a new place.” When discussing their experiences over the past five years, these families recall that making ends meet was more difficult while serving at lower ranks, receiving only one income, or an inconsistent second income. The struggles were more pronounced while they were growing their families, but their struggles did not impede their ability to buy food until their recent PCS.

The burdens of PCS expenses were mostly centered around slow, or incomplete reimbursement, housing uncertainty because of the limitations in the housing market, insufficient BAH, finding available childcare at the new duty station, and unemployment of the spouses because of change of location. These families may have also had to stay in hotels until housing became available. While reflecting on their recent PCS experience, a Texan spouse of an active duty service member states *“We still haven’t gotten the money to like we haven’t gotten the allowance for that and we’ve been here since August. I mean that that’s all on our credit card. Like we don’t have. so that’s a huge thing.”*

In the face of these housing and financing struggles, providing balanced meals for their families was a challenge. PCSing made it harder to afford and find healthy food options. In order to feed their families, they were relying on unhealthy food. These families also adopted internal strategies in response to these struggles. They extensively budget, coupon, use credit cards, and look for items that are on sale. A spouse/partner of an active duty service member from Virginia shared *“I do a lot of couponing for like essential stuff around the house, so it’s that saves us a buck or two.”*

Families of this persona are hesitant to seek outside support, and they struggle with overcoming the stigma associated with asking for help. When they do it is mostly in the form of WIC, food banks, and food drives. They report that their chain of command is resistant or

MILITARY AND VETERAN FAMILY FOOD INSECURITY JOURNEYS

unhelpful when seeking assistance. A divorced spouse, previously married to an active duty service member, living in Texas states, *“sometimes it is my pride and other times it’s just the judgment. I’ve already been judged, in that they think my income should be able to do more than it does, and then unfortunately it doesn’t.”*

When reflecting on the most effective forms of support during transitions, these families were likely to mention community, family, and friends. Respondents suggested changes to improve support for PCSing families including recalculating eligibility for benefits such as SNAP, improving access to information about resources available to them, increasing available childcare, and higher pay and lower PCS costs. An active duty spouse from Virginia shared, *“better wages. I mean for the military; I mean that answer comes without saying. I mean, that’s been a long-standing issue, so. And I know a lot of military families feel the same way, that we just don’t make enough money to support our needs nowadays. And the increased cost of living in general, and the military’s pay is not rising fast enough to meet that.”*

PERSONA #4: FAMILIES INCURRING UNEXPECTED EXPENSES

The families in this persona incurred unexpected expenses, often associated with their vehicles, that set them back financially and deepened their food insecurity. While this persona was female-dominated, it had the highest percentage of male respondents (16%). There was close to an even distribution of Hispanic and non-Hispanic individuals as well. Another notable difference was in connection to the military – this persona had the largest number of participants state that they were active duty, a military retiree, or a veteran (as opposed to a spouse of a service member). Of those that had left the military, 38% had done so 6 – 10 years ago. The

distribution of USDA Food Security Scale scores of individuals in this persona largely followed the same trends as the general population sample. Eighty-six percent indicated that they were either hungry or food insecure, which is only slightly above the average.

These families did not experience long-term food insecurity, but they did have pre-existing burdens on their finances that make affording all unexpected expenses very difficult. When discussing their experiences over the last five years and the past 12 months, these families spoke about unemployment for the spouse and the service member. Whatever the pre-existing conditions, over the last year, these families have experienced unexpected expenses that put undue strain on their budget and finances. A Texas veteran reflected,

“My daughter, she also had her appendix removed, so that was another big surprise. You know, that kind of happened unexpectedly and we were kind of set back with the medical bills and stuff. So, that did take a toll on us. So, it kind of set us back a little bit.”

–Veteran

A Texas spouse of an active duty service member explained how a variety of unexpected expenses all at the same time could lead to food insecurity. Like many others on this journey, they unexpectedly had to spend a portion of their income on healthcare for their pets and additional unexpected expenses. *“Then we had a cat that came down with feline leukemia that turned into lymphoma. And then we had dentist bills and then our car broke all while my husband is deployed.”* Another Texas veteran described a similar situation in more detail, *“some of it was just due to normal life situations - like my dog got sick twice. We had to take him to the vet. So that’s money out of my pocket. My vehicle wound up getting hit so I had to pay money out of my pocket for that. Right now, it’s just normal life stuff that just keeps [...] happening all at once and it makes everything go around in a circle.”*

MILITARY AND VETERAN FAMILY FOOD INSECURITY JOURNEYS

These families explained how they would turn to community supports and food banks around the holidays when they needed to use their food budget on holiday gifts. A Texas active duty service member explained, *“sometimes... they go to the church and then maybe save some money, you know, for like, for Christmas, we can have like money enough to buy gifts for the kids.”*

When these families were forced to incur additional unexpected expenses, they were pushed deeper into food insecurity. A Tidewater spouse of an active duty service member feels that higher income is a clear way to help them, *“I mean, just hope that the military actually get paid more for us to be able not to struggle. Um, because I think we’re, they’re, I think they’re underpaid for all the things they do- ... not the sacrifice they do, but that’s basically it. I’m hoping and wishing that they get paid more so we could not struggle like this.”* These families also identified potential support improvements in increased eligibility for benefits such as SNAP and overall increased overall access to more resources. Ultimately, higher pay is their main solution. A Tidewater spouse of an active duty service member shared a common sentiment:

“And I know a lot of military families feel the same way, that we just don’t make enough money to support our needs nowadays. And the increased cost of living in general, and the military’s pay is not rising fast enough to meet that.... I think that, and like I said, we have three children, and they all consume a lot of resources so, I think just that would help us tremendously if the pay were increased or even the subsidy when you talk about BAS, even if that was increased or instead of it being standard by rank, it should be standard by family size or something.”

–Spouse/partner of active duty service member

TEXAS SPECIFIC PERSONA: FAMILIES WHO EXPERIENCED AN UNEXPECTED EXTERNAL SYSTEMS SHOCK

The families that fit this persona were on the edge between food security and food insecurity when they experienced an external systems shock, an uncharacteristic ice storm, that disrupted their balance and shifted them into food insecurity. These families’ stories clearly show that they were struggling to escape the episode of food insecurity that followed the ice storm in 2021. The individuals we interviewed who fit this persona were largely married females with kids in their home. Their identities were more evenly split between Hispanic (42%) and non-Hispanic (58%). These families had service members that served in the Army (92%), had a service-connected wound, illness, or injury (69%), or were therefore, caregiver families (45%). Individuals in this persona had a rate of food insecurity that was far higher than any other persona or the broader Texas participant population, with 91% of families who had experienced an external systems shock experiencing hunger. All individuals in this persona were experiencing food insecurity or hunger.

When discussing their experiences with food insecurity, Texas families reported a few specific struggles that were compounded by their challenges finding food after the ice storm. The first pre-existing challenge was the impact of COVID-19 which created a strain on the family’s ability to work. This additionally strained the family’s budget and was further impacted by unforeseen childcare needs resulting from schools shutting down, family members contracting COVID-19, and their need for care during recovery.

MILITARY AND VETERAN FAMILY FOOD INSECURITY JOURNEYS

At large, the influence of these complicating factors resulted in prolonged unemployment or underemployment, with many households who normally relied on two incomes, now being restricted to one. One active duty service member spoke to the complications caused by the confluence of pre-existing challenges and the aftermath of the uncharacteristic ice storm, saying,

"The stores around here were pretty much empty. And then we did have food here, but the prices were really jacked. Like all the way up. And then we lost our jobs due to COVID. And then there was a time where neither of us could go to work because we had COVID. There were a lot of things."

–Active duty service member

The Texas ice storm in February 2021 sent shockwaves through families' local and state systems. Neither they, nor their communities, were prepared for the storm, and it set them on a path towards food insecurity. In the time following the ice storm, there was no food in stores, much less balanced food for their families. The storm, which resulted in state-wide power and plumbing outages, caused severe strains on family budgets, impacted families' ability to work and pay for the unforeseen damages to their homes and property, all while navigating the pre-existing challenges mentioned above.

"Well earlier this year so we had the ice storm. Nobody anticipated that and so most of our food went bad because there was no power where we live so I know it's just too little. I have two toddlers and so we kind of

struggled to have these balanced meals after that so we had to use emergency food, like cans and stuff that we bought. We did have a little food, but there was a food shortage after the storm, so we had to cut back and ration... After the snowstorm we kind of had pick ourselves back up and spend a lot of money on other things for emergencies. You know equipment and other payments that we have, like bills, and all the food and so I just had to start over again. So yeah. I guess you could say that was the significant event that kind of started the food insecurities."

–Active duty service member

In the face of these challenges, many families sought community support from food pantries, food drives, and places of worship to access food.

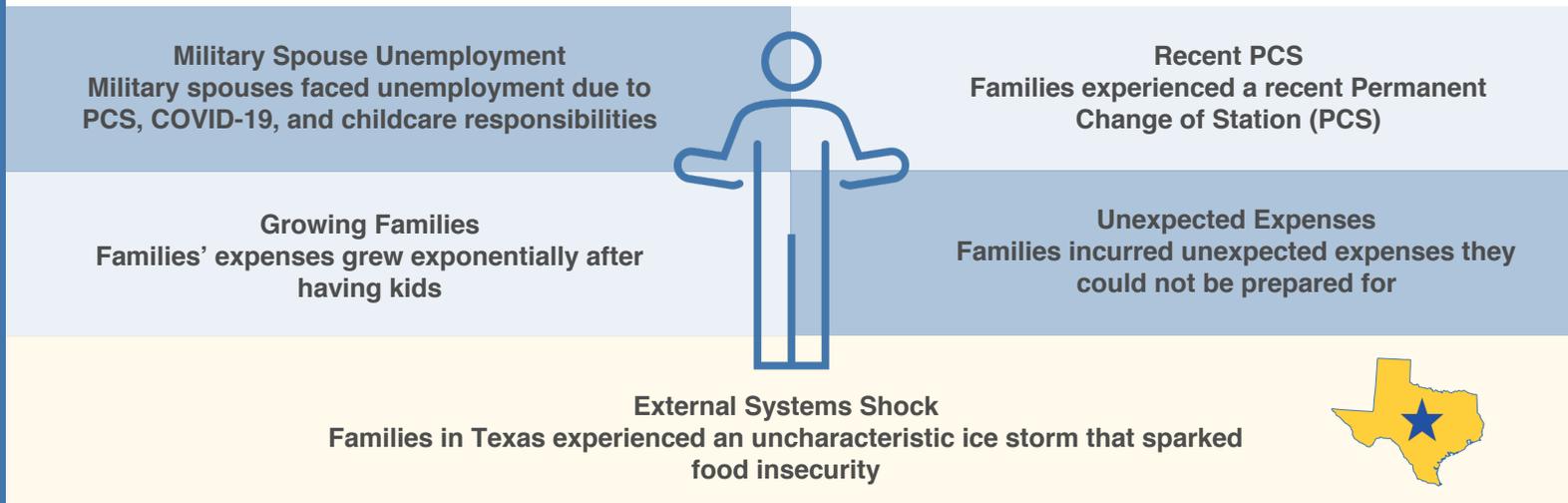
"I hate asking for help, but I had to ask like- I had to go to food pantries. They were absolutely amazing 'cause I was in tears and they told me not to worry about it. They gave me a phone number and they said anytime we ever had any hardship to call this guy, this guy loves supporting military and all that and they said that I should have never had to be in this situation and like they were super nice."

–Spouse/partner of active duty service member

When reflecting on this time in their lives, the families who experienced the ice storm in early 2021 cited logistic hurdles to finding adequate support, but generally strived to be resilient to struggles they faced.

The Causal Factors of Food Insecurity

Military and veteran families experienced several causal factors of food insecurity.



Military Families Experienced a Common Journey Through Food Insecurity



Families That Experienced Food Insecurity Asked For The Following Supports



Footnote: personas are based on families discussing their experiences with food insecurity in the last 12 months

Military Families Experienced Different Journeys Through Food Insecurity

The Causal Factors of Food Insecurity for Military and Veteran Families



Spousal Unemployment

A recent PCS, COVID-19, and childcare expenses forced spouses to stay home



Growing Families

Growing costs coupled with expensive and unavailable childcare caused spousal unemployment



Recent PCS

A recent PCS brought slow/incomplete reimbursement, housing struggles, and unemployment



Unexpected Expenses

Pre-existing financial burdens and unemployment made unforeseen expenses hard to handle



External Systems Shock

Pre-existing COVID-19 struggles were compounded by an uncharacteristic ice storm

Families Found It Difficult To Provide Balanced Meals



All families struggled to provide balanced meals - they realized that meat and produce are expensive and unhealthy food is more affordable



After the ice storm in there was no food in stores, balanced or otherwise

Families Felt a Stigma Around Being Food Insecure



Families experiencing food insecurity felt their pride was hurt; they were embarrassed and ashamed



Growing families did not report feeling stigma



Families experiencing food insecurity felt their pride was hurt; they were embarrassed and ashamed
Families felt the pressure of a resistant command structure



Families received support primarily from their family members



Families experiencing the ice storm did not report feeling stigma

Families Relied on Various Support Systems to Survive



Families received support primarily from their family members



Growing families stretched the budget and used WIC



Families that had recently had a PCS also relied on community and friends in addition to family



Families received support primarily from their family members



Texas families sought support from their communities and friends

Families Utilized Many Resources to Make Ends Meet



In the face of food insecurity families let the kids eat first, budgeted and couponed, used credit cards, and went to food banks and drives



Growing families stretched the budget and used WIC



Texas families also relied on community assistance and churches

Families Encountered Barriers to Exiting Food Insecurity



Barriers to relief from food insecurity included ineligibility for SNAP, difficulty accessing resources, limited information on resources, affordable childcare



Affordable housing



Logistic and bureaucratic hurdles to finding support

CONCLUSION

Military and veteran families are experiencing food insecurity at an alarming rate and this research finally explores the causal factors of their food insecurity. Armed with this knowledge, military and veteran family stakeholders can take actionable steps towards long-term solutions. Given the findings presented above, MFAN suggests the following recommendations:

1. Enhance military and veteran family eligibility for Federal benefits

Revise Federal benefit calculations for military and veteran families to exclude the Basic Allowance for Housing. As an immediate stopgap, count as little BAH as possible toward the Basic Needs Allowance.

2. Lessen the financial burden military families experience due to Permanent Changes of Station

Support expedited and complete reimbursement processes and protocols during PCS moves. Consider and support educational programs for the whole family that strengthen military families' ability to anticipate, budget for, and prevent unexpected expenditures ahead of a PCS move. Additionally, consider pre-paid cards so that families do not incur as much debt during military moves.

3. Mitigate barriers to dual income earnings

Leverage the learnings during COVID-19 to provide alternative, flexible employment opportunities for military spouses. Increase the availability and capacity of and access to affordable childcare and daycare services. Consider and support alternative military and governmental stipends to offset the rising cost of childcare.

4. Reduce stigma and promote help-seeking behaviors

Equipped with this information, service providers and military leaders are better positioned to reduce stigma and promote help-seeking behavior. Based on these personas, readers can decipher those who may struggle in silence and those who are more inclined to seek support.

5. Texas: Promote the importance of emergency savings and awareness of disaster-related resources, enhance infrastructure for immediate emergency support.

When families are struggling to make ends meet, emergency savings and planning can seem impossible. Lower barriers to emergency support during natural disasters and other unpreventable emergencies.

¹Coleman-Jensen, A., Rabbitt, M. P., Gregory, C. A., & Singh, A. (2021). Household Food Security in the United States in 2020. [www.ers.usda.gov](https://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/public-details/?pubid=102075); Economic Research Center, US Department of Agriculture. <https://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/public-details/?pubid=102075>



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