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In 2017, Military Family Advisory Network (MFAN) began learning about food insecurity among military-connected families in the Tidewater region from an advisory board member who worked at a local foodbank. As a result of that conversation, MFAN wanted to understand the face of food insecurity among military families. In 2019, MFAN added the USDA’s Six-Item Short Form Food Security Scale, a validated scale that assesses food insecurity and hunger, to the biennial Military Family Support Programming Survey. The findings were shocking—one in eight military family respondent was experiencing food insecurity or hunger. As an organization committed to fully understanding the experiences of those we serve, we knew we needed to take a closer look. We needed to understand the personas of those in our community who are experiencing food insecurity, we needed to understand their journeys, we needed to understand the causal factors so that we address the issue upstream before families have to choose who eats dinner, whether they should pay rent, or buy groceries.

Today, we are releasing the findings from 312 interviews with food insecure military families, including 97 in the Tidewater region. On the subsequent pages, you will understand how MFAN conducted the research, hear their stories, and identify ways you and your organization can be part of the solution.

To the hundreds of 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. Additionally, this work would not be possible without the generous support of our partners at Wounded Warrior Project (WWP). Thank you for your continued investment in this most-deserving community.

I would also like to thank our research team. You gave families something invaluable—a safe, empathic ear, and an opportunity to be heard. You provided a safe place for them to be vulnerable. Now, we are all armed with this information that will allow us to move the needle in meaningful ways. Alongside our partners, we can drive real change and continue to spotlight this issue and develop lasting solutions. Because, no military family should worry about where their next meal is coming from and we will continue this fight to support our families who serve.

Warmly,

Shannon Razsadin
President & Executive Director
Military Family Advisory Network
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 WOUNDED WARRIOR PROJECT

Wounded Warrior Project® (WWP) is committed to serving the post-9/11 generation and all future generations of injured service members, ensuring they get the care, attention, and support they deserve. WWP also serves the family members and caregivers who are an integral part of the warrior’s recovery and transition back into civilian life. Learn more at woundedwarriorproject.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.

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 Wounded Warrior Project (WWP). 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. 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. Ninety-seven (97) interviews were conducted throughout Tidewater, Va. and the remaining 215 interviews were conducted in Texas.

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 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 VIRGINIA POPULATION

The Virginia population demographics follow many of the same demographic trends established by the study population at large. Most respondents were female, between 25 and 40 years of age, and Caucasian. In addition, participants tended to be married, have kids under 18 years of age in their homes, and have a household size between three and five. The most notable difference between the Virginia population and the whole is that respondents tended towards being a higher rank, had the highest rates of service in the Navy, and fewer respondents indicated that they or their service member had a service-connected wound, illness, or injury.

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 Virginia. Eighty-one percent of Virginians reported being hungry or food insecure.

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<td>Food Insecurity</td>
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<td>Total</td>
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Throughout data analysis, four core personas came to the surface, and one persona unique to the experience of military and veteran families in Tidewater, Va. 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 Virginia who had recently experienced rising cost of living.

**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
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 factors of 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
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, “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’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
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.”

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 pocket 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.”
VIRGINIA SPECIFIC PERSONA: FAMILIES THAT EXPERIENCED A RISING COST OF LIVING

The findings indicate that families living in Tidewater, Va. are experiencing a rise in the cost of living that they are not associating with COVID-19 which acts as a causal factor on their journey through food insecurity. The families in this persona are struggling to afford the things they used to afford because their pay has not risen to meet growing inflation. One-hundred percent of respondents stated that they were female, and the majority were married, had kids in their home, and are the spouses of active duty members. Half of the participants stated that they were Caucasian, followed by Asian (25%) and Black/African American (19%). Active Duty service members were more likely to have a rank between E5 and E7. The most notable demographic finding was regarding the military branch; 82% of active duty service members were in the Navy, which is far higher than the general sample (28%). Eighty-three percent of respondents in this persona rated highly on the USDA Food Security Scale, with 53% rated as food insecure.

These families reported specific challenges associated with a gradual rise in the cost of living over the last few years. Many families reported an inability to keep up with the rising costs of food, rent, and taxes as they simultaneously contended with stagnant or insufficient military pay, longer-than-normal pay periods, and in many cases, families being forced to rely on a single income.

Families voiced their struggle to find healthy, balanced food options for their families, as these were often the costliest. More specifically, many families shared a concern that they were not able to provide their kids with nutritious meals.
“The prices of food - It’s just gone up. It’s ridiculous. And of course, the military pay, I mean, it kind of stays the same. It’s real stagnant, and really, it’s not like my husband can work overtime and get more money. It doesn’t matter, you know, the hours. We’re on a fixed income. So, like I said, the food prices have just gone up. Now, we’re seeing it with gas too, and it’s scary. And now, we’re like looking at the gas, we’re like, “Oh my goodness.” It’s going to cost us more at the pump, which is going to take away from trying to buy the kids the healthier options.”

–Spouse/partner of active duty service member in Tidewater, Va.

When faced with these challenges, families in this persona were less likely to rely on food banks and food drives. Instead, they noted internal reserves, relying on resourceful methods to make ends meet, such as shifting to less expensive food options, taking advantage of free school meals for their kids, meal planning, shopping sales, couponing, and stretching the food they do have to last multiple meals. In many cases, families reported that having a spouse on deployment helped lessen the family burden of having another mouth to feed. While some individuals qualified for programs like WIC, many were not eligible for government benefits. Many did not pursue government support, stating feelings of shame, embarrassment, or stigma associated with the reality of their family’s food insecurity. One active duty spouse explained their hardships saying,

“My husband was deployed for a good portion of the last like the last 12 months. He’s only been home for about four months. So that, as bad as it sounds, is actually very, you know kind of helpful. Because then we’re only feeding 3. It’s pretty much impossible to make sure that we’re eating balanced - like, especially with just the rising cost of everything. Like fresh fruit, vegetables things like that I guess. That’s why we ended up going back on WIC. Thankfully, we qualify for that. But like without that, we, we would not be able to have like fruits and veggies in our diet and have the funds to buy much meat at all to have that kind of protein.”

–Spouse/partner of active duty service member in Tidewater, Va.
The Causal Factors of Food Insecurity

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

- Military Spouse Unemployment
  - Military spouses faced unemployment due to PCS, COVID-19, and childcare responsibilities

- Growing Families
  - Families' expenses grew exponentially after having kids

- Unexpected Expenses
  - Families incurred unexpected expenses they could not be prepared for

- Rising Cost of Living
  - Military pay did not keep up with the rising cost of living

Recent PCS
- Families experienced a recent Permanent Change of Station (PCS)

Military Families Experienced a Common Journey Through Food Insecurity

Military and veteran families experienced a causal factor of food insecurity

Due to their experience with a causal factor, they found it difficult to provide balanced meals

Families felt a stigma around being food insecure

Families relied on various support mechanisms to survive

Families utilized many resources to make ends meet

Families encountered barriers to exiting food insecurity

One universal experience is that military families experienced food insecurity when a number of compounding factors impacted their finances

Most families felt a stigma around being food insecure which led them to feel shame and embarrassment

The greatest support cited by most families that experienced food insecurity is family, followed by community and friends

Families That Experienced Food Insecurity Asked For The Following Supports

- Information on support systems and resources
- Affordable childcare
- Eligibility for benefits like SNAP
- Reduced PCS costs
- Higher pay

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.
- Rising Cost of Living: Military pay did not keep up with the rising cost of living.

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.
- No food in stores; food in stores becoming more expensive.

Families Felt a Stigma Around Being Food Insecure

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

Families Relied on Various Support Systems to Survive

- Families received support primarily from their family members.
- 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.
- Families relied on friends and looked for tips on social media.

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.
- Families were less likely to rely on food banks/drives; they stretched the budget and meal planned.

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, and affordable housing.
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. **Virginia: Right-size BAH and ensure adequate housing inventory**
   
   Support pay and allowance increases for military personnel that commensurate with the rising cost of living. Also, ensure that there is enough rental inventory (privatized housing or otherwise) to accommodate demand.

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