



U.S. House Committee on Armed Services  
Subcommittee on Military Personnel

“Intimate Partner Violence in the Military”

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Chairwoman Speier, Ranking Member Gallagher, and distinguished members of the U.S. House Committee on Armed Services Subcommittee on Military Personnel, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today.

My name is Jessica Strong, and I am the Co-Director of Applied Research for Blue Star Families—a national nonprofit organization dedicated to supporting military and veteran families from all ranks and services. With over 150,000 members, Blue Star Families is the nation’s largest grass-roots military family support organization, and touches more than 1.5 million military family members every year. By cultivating innovative programs and partnerships, Blue Star Families seeks to ensure that our military and veteran families always feel connected, supported, and empowered to thrive.

Blue Star Families’ groundbreaking research calls attention to the unique experiences and challenges faced by military and veteran families. Our annual Military Family Lifestyle Survey (aMFLS)—developed in partnership with the Institute for Veterans and Military Families (IVMF)—is the largest annual comprehensive survey of military and veteran families, and it is widely regarded as the gold standard among military family surveys. Data from the aMFLS has been used at every level of government to help inform those tasked with making policy decisions that impact our military-connected communities.

### **Intimate Partner Violence / Domestic Abuse**

Intimate partner violence (IPV), also known as “domestic abuse” or “domestic violence,” is often defined as “a pattern of controlling behavior used to maintain power in a relationship by one partner over the other.”<sup>1</sup> According to the 2015 National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey, 5.5% of U.S. women and 5.2% of U.S. men had experienced sexual violence, physical violence, or stalking by an intimate partner within the 12 months preceding the survey.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, the Department of

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<sup>1</sup> “What is Domestic Violence?” National Domestic Abuse Hotline, Accessed March 4, 2020, <https://www.thehotline.org/is-this-abuse/abuse-defined/>.

<sup>2</sup> Smith, S.G., Zhang, X., Basile, K.C., Merrick, M.T., Wang, J., Kresnow, M., Chen, J. (2018). The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS): 2015 Data Brief – Updated Release. Atlanta, GA: National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Justice reports that intimate partner violence accounts for 15% of all violent crime.<sup>3</sup> Younger women (ages 18-24) are the most common victims of IPV.<sup>4</sup> It is no surprise then that the Center for Disease Control (CDC) and U.S. Preventive Services Task Force (USPSTF) have identified IPV as a major public health issue in the United States—one that disproportionately affects women.<sup>5,6</sup>

## Prevalence of Intimate Partner Violence in the Military

### *Department of Defense Findings*

The Department of Defense defines IPV/domestic abuse as “domestic violence, or a pattern of behavior resulting in emotional/psychological abuse, economic control, and/or interference with personal liberty.”<sup>7</sup> DOD’s Family Advocacy Program (FAP) tracks reports of domestic abuse between spouses and unmarried intimate partners within the military. In FY2019, FAP collected 13,571 reports of spouse abuse. Of those, roughly half (6,800) met the criteria for abuse under DOD definitions. In other words, the rate of met criteria spouse abuse incidents in FY2019 was 10.9 per 1,000 military couples, or about 1.1%. Of the 6,800 met criteria reports of spouse abuse, there were 5,505 unique victims (i.e., 8.8 unique victims per 1,000 military spouses, or approximately 0.9%). Sixty-six percent of those victims were female and 34% were male; 54% of the victims were service members, and 46% were civilian spouses. Fifty-nine percent of all abusers were service members. Pay grades E4-E6 had the highest percent of active-duty abusers in met criteria incidents (59%); pay grades E1-E3 had the highest rate of spouse abuse (16.9 per 1,000 married couples, or about 1.7%). Nine spouse abuse fatalities were presented to DOD’s Incident Determination Committee and entered into the FAP Central Registry in FY2019.<sup>8</sup>

FAP also tracks reports of *unmarried* intimate partner abuse involving: 1) a former spouse; 2) a person with whom the victim shares a child in common; or 3) a current or former intimate partner with whom the victim shares or has shared a common domicile. In FY2019, there were 1,902 reports of intimate partner abuse—1,121 of which met FAP’s criteria for abuse under DOD definitions. Among the 1,121 met criteria reports, there were 886 unique victims.<sup>9</sup> Three intimate partner abuse fatalities were presented to the IDC and entered into the FAP Central Registry in FY2019.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Jennifer L. Truman, Ph.D., and Rachel E. Morgan, Ph.D., “Nonfatal Domestic Violence, 2003–2012,” U.S. Department of Justice Office of Justice Programs Bureau of Justice Statistics, April 2014, <https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/ndv0312.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> “Intimate Partner Violence,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Accessed on March 9, 2020, <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/intimatepartnerviolence/index.html#:~:text=>.

<sup>6</sup> “Final Recommendation Statement: Intimate Partner Violence, Elder Abuse, and Abuse of Vulnerable Adults: Screening,” U.S. Preventive Services Task Force, October 2018, Accessed on March 8, 2020, <https://www.uspreventiveservicestaskforce.org/Page/Document/RecommendationStatementFinal/intimate-partner-violence-and-abuse-of-elderly-and-vulnerable-adults-screening1>.

<sup>7</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, “Report on Child Abuse and Neglect and Domestic Abuse in the Military for Fiscal Year 2019,” April 2020, <https://download.militaryonesource.mil/12038/MOS/Reports/FINAL-DoD-FAP-Report-FY2019.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> A rate per 1,000 of intimate partner abuse incidents and/or victims cannot be established, as data on unmarried individuals involved in intimate partner relationships as defined by DoD are not available. [U.S. Department of Defense, “Report on Child Abuse and Neglect and Domestic Abuse in the Military for Fiscal Year 2019,” April 2020, <https://download.militaryonesource.mil/12038/MOS/Reports/FINAL-DoD-FAP-Report-FY2019.pdf>.]

<sup>10</sup> Ibid; For additional data, see: Gierisch JM, Shapiro A, Grant NN, King HA, McDuffie JR, Williams JW. Intimate Partner Violence: Prevalence Among U.S. Military Veterans and Active Duty Servicemembers and a Review of Intervention Approaches. VA-ESP Project #09-010; 2013. [https://www.hsrd.research.va.gov/publications/esp/partner\\_violence.pdf](https://www.hsrd.research.va.gov/publications/esp/partner_violence.pdf).

## *Blue Star Families' Findings*

Data from Blue Star Families' aMFLS corroborates DOD's findings regarding the prevalence of IPV in the military. In our 2015, 2016, and 2017 surveys, approximately 1% of active-duty spouse and service member respondents reported being hit, kicked, punched, or otherwise hurt by their significant other. A greater proportion (9%-15%) reported they did not feel safe in their relationship.<sup>11</sup> In the 2019 Military Family Lifestyle Survey, 1.65% of active-duty family respondents (both spouses and service members) reported they had experienced intimate partner violence within the past year.<sup>12</sup> Blue Star Families' 2021 Military Family Lifestyle Survey is currently fielding and aims to explore IPV in the military, including physical, verbal, and emotional abuse, as well as financial abuse.

The relative stability of respondents reporting instances of IPV from 2015 to 2017, despite DOD's efforts to reduce it, is concerning. Moreover, the fact that incidents of IPV seem to have increased for civilians during the COVID-19 pandemic<sup>13</sup>—a trend that might very well be mirrored in military households—provides further cause for alarm.

## *Comparison to Civilian Spouse Abuse*

Unfortunately, there is currently no federal mechanism to track rates of civilian spouse abuse for comparison to the military population. In part, this is due to the fact that each state has different laws and definitions of domestic abuse, making any aggregation of these incidents very difficult. Research comparing the prevalence of IPV in military and civilian couples is mixed, with some indicating the incidence of IPV is higher in military populations<sup>14,15</sup>, and others indicating a similar rate among civilian women, active-duty women, and wives of active-duty men.<sup>16</sup> More recently, according to the Department of Justice's Bureau of Justice Statistics, the incidence of domestic violence in the U.S. was approximately 4.2 victimizations per 1,000 persons age 12 or older in 2019 (or 0.42%).<sup>17</sup> When we compare this figure to the rate of spouse abuse reports that met DOD criteria in FY2019 (10.9 per 1,000 military service members, or approximately 1.1%), we see the frequency of domestic

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<sup>11</sup> Unpublished data. Please contact [survey@bluestarfam.org](mailto:survey@bluestarfam.org) for more information. Data from 2015 MFLS includes active-duty spouse, active-duty service member, veteran spouse and veteran service member respondents, while data from 2016 and 2017 MFLS includes only active-duty spouse and active-duty service member respondents.

<sup>12</sup> Blue Star Families, "2019 Military Family Lifestyle Survey," <https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/BSF-2019-Survey-Comprehensive-Report-Digital-rev200305.pdf> Intimate partner violence was defined in the 2019 MFLS with the following statement: "Intimate partner violence is described as physical violence, sexual violence, stalking, and psychological aggression (including coercive acts) by a current or former intimate partner."

<sup>13</sup> Brad Boserup, Mark McKenney, Adel Elkbuli, "Alarming trends in US domestic violence during the COVID-19 pandemic," *The American Journal of Emergency Medicine*, Vol. 38, Issue 12, April 28, 2020, [https://www.ajemjournal.com/article/S0735-6757\(20\)30307-7/fulltext#articleInformation](https://www.ajemjournal.com/article/S0735-6757(20)30307-7/fulltext#articleInformation).

<sup>14</sup> Jones, A. (2012). Intimate partner violence in military couples: A review of the literature. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*.17(2). 147-157. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2011.12.002>

<sup>15</sup> Stamm, S. (2009). Intimate partner violence in the military: Securing our country, starting within the home. *Family Court Review*. 47 (2). 321-339.

<sup>16</sup> M. C. Black, & M. T. Merrick (2013). Prevalence of intimate partner violence, sexual violence, and stalking among active duty women and wives of active duty men—comparisons with women in the U.S. general population, 2010: Technical report. Atlanta, GA: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control.

<sup>17</sup> Rachel E. Morgan, Ph.D., and Jennifer L. Truman, Ph.D., "Criminal Victimization, 2019," U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, September 2020, <https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/cv19.pdf>.

violence/abuse in the military was potentially greater than two times that of the national population pre-pandemic.

## **Reluctance to Report**

Military spouses who are victims of domestic violence might be reluctant to report said violence if they believe that doing so would negatively impact their service member's career. In the 2017 Military Family Lifestyle Survey, 87% of active-duty spouse respondents who indicated they had experienced physical violence in the past year did not report the most recent incident; their top two reasons for not reporting the abuse was because they felt "it was not a big deal" and they "did not want to hurt their spouse or partner's career."<sup>18</sup> The military culture may also prevent military-affiliated victims from reporting intimate partner violence to law enforcement.<sup>19</sup>

## **What Factors Influence Intimate Partner Violence in the Military?**

The prevalence of IPV in the military is partially a factor of demographics. IPV tends to disproportionately affect younger women. Of the 605,716 active-duty spouses in our military communities today, approximately 91% are female, and almost half (49%) are 30 years old or younger.<sup>20</sup>

Still, demographics alone are insufficient to explain the disproportionate incidence of IPV in military families. Many factors endemic to the military lifestyle place military spouses at greater risk of experiencing intimate partner violence, including: economic vulnerability, social isolation, and mental health/behavioral challenges. Indeed, the Department of Veterans Affairs attributes the prevalence of military IPV to the unique factors indelibly associated with military service:

Military service has unique psychological, social, and environmental factors that may contribute to elevated risk of IPV among active-duty service members and veterans. Multiple deployments, family separation and reintegration, demanding workloads at home and while on duty, histories of trauma, mental illness, and substance abuse can contribute to partner conflict and elevated risk of IPV among active-duty service members, veterans, and their intimate partners.<sup>21</sup>

Finally, military culture itself may contribute to the incidence of IPV, due to its normalization of violence and hypermasculine culture, which has previously been associated with an increased risk of IPV.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Unpublished data. Please contact [survey@bluestarfam.org](mailto:survey@bluestarfam.org) for more information.

<sup>19</sup> Becker, P., and d'Almeida, R. (2020). Intimate Partner Violence in the Military: an Investigation of Reporting Crimes to Law Enforcement Officials. *Journal of Family Violence*. 35(4) <http://dx.doi.org.liblink.uncw.edu/10.1007/s10896-019-00091-x>

<sup>20</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, "2019 Demographics: Profile of the Military Community," <https://download.militaryonesource.mil/12038/MOS/Reports/2019-demographics-report.pdf>.

<sup>21</sup> Gierisch JM, Shapiro A, Grant NN, King HA, McDuffie JR, Williams JW. Intimate Partner Violence: Prevalence Among U.S. Military Veterans and Active Duty Servicemembers and a Review of Intervention Approaches. VA-ESP Project #09-010; 2013. [https://www.hsrd.research.va.gov/publications/esp/partner\\_violence.pdf](https://www.hsrd.research.va.gov/publications/esp/partner_violence.pdf).

<sup>22</sup> Rosen, L.N., Kaminski, R.J., Parmley, A.M., Knudson, K.H., and Fancher, P. (2003). The effects of peer group climate on intimate partner violence among married U.S. Army soldiers. *Violence Against Women*. 9. 1045-1071.

## (1) Economic Vulnerability

Military spouses are uniquely vulnerable to economic abuse, wherein abusive partners use their financial power to control their spouse's behavior. Higher unemployment and lower labor force participation among military spouses, when compared to their civilian peers, mean military spouses frequently do not have an income of their own on which to support themselves and their children. Pre-pandemic, the military spouse unemployment rate was 22%—nearly seven times that of the national population.<sup>23</sup> Meanwhile, among active-duty military spouse respondents to the 2020 Military Family Lifestyle Survey who were employed, either full time (30%) or part time (17%), two-thirds (67%) report they were underemployed in some way (indicating their current employment did not match their desires, education, or experience).<sup>24</sup>

In the 2017 Military Family Lifestyle Survey, of those working military spouses who reported they were underemployed, 59% reported they were currently earning less than half of their previous highest salary.<sup>25</sup> Fifty-one percent of military spouse respondents who were employed earned less than \$20,000 that year—well below the median income of civilian women in the U.S. (\$30,246 in 2016).<sup>26</sup> Meanwhile, the average pay for a mid-grade NCO (E-5) was \$31,745 in 2016.<sup>27</sup> Thus, even when military spouses are employed, they typically earn far less than their service member partner. By leveraging their financial power, an abusive partner can therefore exploit their spouse's financial dependency to control their behavior.

The COVID-19 pandemic may have exacerbated military spouses' economic vulnerability, as many stepped out of the workforce to supervise their children's education<sup>28</sup>—thereby relinquishing some measure of their financial autonomy. Civilian research has indicated that individuals who rented housing, lost income due to the pandemic, and/or experienced increased nutritional stress—all factors that are present in military families (and particularly enlisted families)—were more likely to report IPV.<sup>29</sup>

## (2) Social Isolation

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<sup>23</sup> Office of People Analytics, "2019 Survey of Active Duty Spouses," December 2, 2020, [https://download.militaryonesource.mil/12038/MOS/Surveys/ADSS1901\\_MOS-Briefing-508-Revised.pdf](https://download.militaryonesource.mil/12038/MOS/Surveys/ADSS1901_MOS-Briefing-508-Revised.pdf).

<sup>24</sup> The causes of military spouse un/underemployment are myriad and complex; however, military spouse respondents report a lack of affordable child care, the unpredictability of service member day-to-day job demands, hiring/promotion discrimination, and frequent permanent change of station (PCS) moves as key barriers to employment. Other important, but less common factors include: state licensure barriers and gaps in resumes due to frequent PCS moves.

<sup>25</sup> Blue Star Families, "2017 Military Family Lifestyle Survey," <https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/MFLS-ComprehensiveReport17-FINAL.pdf>.

<sup>26</sup> Proctor, B. D., Semega, J. L., & Kollar, M. A. (2016). Income and Poverty in the United States: 2015. (No. P60-256). <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/2016/demo/income-poverty/p60-256.html>.

<sup>27</sup> Brendan Stickle, "How the U.S. Military Became the Exception to America's Wage Stagnation Problem," Business Insider, November 29, 2018, Accessed on March 8, 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/11/29/how-the-u-s-military-became-the-exception-to-americas-wage-stagnation-problem/>.

<sup>28</sup> Blue Star Families, "2020 Military Family Lifestyle Survey: Finding 13," [https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/BSF\\_MFLS\\_CompReport\\_FINDING\\_13.pdf](https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/BSF_MFLS_CompReport_FINDING_13.pdf).

<sup>29</sup> Cannon, C., Ferreira, R., Buttell, F., and First, J. (2021). COVID-19, Intimate Partner Violence, and Communication Ecologies. *American Behavioral Scientist*. <https://doi-org.liblink.uncw.edu/10.1177/0002764221992826>

The COVID-19 pandemic might have also increased a second risk factor for IPV: social isolation. Active-duty families relocate, on average, once every two to three years. This requires many families to separate from established social support systems that may protect against IPV. In fact, almost half of active-duty spouse respondents to the 2020 Military Family Lifestyle Survey (45%) report that “isolation from family/friends” was a top stressor during their time associated with the military, and more than one-third have no friends in the local civilian community (34%), and no one they know well enough to ask for a favor (34%).<sup>30</sup> Note that isolation from family and friends has been a consistent top-five stressor for military spouses since 2014. This means that military spouses often do not have people to turn to in times of need (e.g., when facing IPV). This isolation, inherent in the military lifestyle, puts families at greater risk of IPV.<sup>31</sup>

### (3) Mental Health/Behavioral Challenges

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and substance abuse (particularly alcohol abuse) have been repeatedly linked to increased risk of IPV.<sup>32</sup> Unfortunately, these illnesses are all too common among active-duty families. In the 2020 Military Family Lifestyle Survey, 11% of active-duty service members and 7% of active-duty spouse respondents report they had a current diagnosis of PTSD. Furthermore, in 2015, more than one in three service members met criteria for hazardous drinking or possible alcohol use disorder.<sup>33</sup> The high incidence of these adverse mental health/behavioral challenges among active-duty families might therefore contribute to the prevalence of IPV.

### (4) Military Culture

#### *Normalization of Violence*

It is probable that the prevalence of IPV among active-duty families is also due, in part, to the normalization of violence in military culture, a functional necessity.<sup>34</sup> The United States military is first and foremost a war-fighting machine. Service members are therefore trained to use lethal means in defense of U.S. interests. However, for some individuals, exposure to violence (in combat and in training) might have an adverse psychological effect. As Professors Resul Cesur and Joseph J. Sabia explain in their study, “When War Comes Home: The Effect of Combat Service on Domestic Violence”:

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<sup>30</sup> Blue Star Families, “2020 Military Family Lifestyle Survey,” [https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/BSF\\_MFLS\\_CompReport\\_FULL.pdf](https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/BSF_MFLS_CompReport_FULL.pdf).

<sup>31</sup> Mojahed, A., Brym, S., Hense, H., Grafe, B., Helfferich, C., & Lindert, J. (2021). Rapid Review on the Associations of Social and Geographical Isolation and Intimate Partner Violence: Implications for the Ongoing COVID-19 Pandemic. *Frontiers in Psychiatry*. <http://dx.doi.org.liblink.uncw.edu/10.3389/fpsy.2021.578150>

<sup>32</sup> M. M. Rabenhorst, R. J. McCarthy, C. J. Thomsen, J. S. Milner, W. J. Travis, R. E. Foster, & C. W. Copeland (2013). Spouse abuse among United States Air Force personnel who deployed in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom/Operation Enduring Freedom. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 27(5), 754–761; B. M. Quigley, & K. E. Leonard (2000). Alcohol and the continuation of early marital aggression. *Alcoholism: Clinical and Experimental Research*, 24(7), 1003–1010. [10.1111/j.1530-0277.2000.tb04643.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1530-0277.2000.tb04643.x).

<sup>33</sup> Meadows, S. et al. (2018). 2015 Health Related Behaviors Survey: Substance Use Among U.S. Active-Duty Service Members. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation. [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_briefs/RB9955z7.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RB9955z7.html).

<sup>34</sup> Taft, C. T., Walling, S. M., Howard, J. M., & Monson, C. (2011). Trauma, PTSD, and partner violence in military families. In S. M. Wadsworth & D. Riggs (Eds.), *Risk and resilience in U.S. military families* (pp. 195-212). New York, NY: Springer Science & Business Media. doi:10.1007/978-1-4419-7064-0\_10.

Normalization to violence may be yet another pathway through which combat service could affect domestic violence.<sup>35</sup> There is some evidence that combat exposure, as well as combat training itself, may permanently break down the mind's natural barriers to committing violent acts.<sup>36</sup>

As part of their study, Cesur and Sabia ran a natural experiment among active-duty military personnel deployed overseas in prosecution of the war on terror to identify the effect of combat service on intimate partner violence. They found that assignment to combat zones is positively correlated with a higher incidence of IPV.<sup>37</sup> Their results corroborate multiple other studies, which suggest that combat exposure and deployment are positively associated with an increased risk of IPV.<sup>38</sup>

### *Hypermasculinity*

Men make up 49.2% of the U.S. population,<sup>39</sup> but they comprise 83% of those serving on active duty. Women have a slight majority in the U.S. population (50.8%), but they make up only 17% of active-duty personnel. Meanwhile, of the 233,189 active-duty officers in the military, less than one-fifth (18.4%) are female, and 81.6% are male.<sup>40</sup> The military's demographics therefore contribute to a predominantly masculine culture. As Professors Karly Richard and Sonia Molloy explain in "An Examination of Emerging Adult Military Men: Masculinity and U.S. Military Climate":

The military has been previously noted for its adherence to and celebration of traditionally masculine values, sometimes referred to as hypermasculinity.<sup>41</sup> The military attracts traditionally masculine/hypermasculine men and promotes in-group favoritism to those who adhere to this ideal.<sup>42</sup>

The military's masculine/hypermasculine culture might therefore contribute to gender discrimination against female service members. In the 2020 Military Family Lifestyle Survey, 48% of female active-duty service member respondents report experiencing gender-based discrimination in their

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<sup>35</sup> Schwab-Stone, Mary E., Tim S. Ayers, Wesley Kasrow, Charlene Voyce, Charles Barone, Timothy Shriver, and Roger P. Weissberg, "No Safe Haven: A Study of Violence Exposure in an Urban Community," *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* 34 (1995), 1343–1352.

<sup>36</sup> Grossman, Dave, *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society*, rev. ed. (New York: Back Bay Books, 2009); Grossman, Dave, and Bruce Siddle, "Psychological Effects of Combat" (pp. 139–149), in Lester Kurtz and Jennifer Turpin, eds. *Encyclopedia of Violence, Peace, and Conflict*, vol. 3 (San Diego, CA: Academic Press, 1999).

<sup>37</sup> Resul Cesur and Joseph J. Sabia, "When War Comes Home: The Effect Of Combat Service on Domestic Violence," *The Review of Economics and Statistics*, Vol. 48, Number 2, May 2016, <https://bit.ly/3fEObfk>; Elbogen, E.B., Fuller, S., Johnson, S.C., Brooks, S., Kinneer, P., Calhoun, P.S., Beckham, J.C. (2010). Improving risk assessment of violence among military veterans: An evidence-based approach for clinical decision-making. *Clinical Psychology Review*. 30. 595–607.

<sup>38</sup> Elbogen, E.B., Fuller, S., Johnson, S.C., Brooks, S., Kinneer, P., Calhoun, P.S., Beckham, J.C. (2010). Improving risk assessment of violence among military veterans: An evidence-based approach for clinical decision-making. *Clinical Psychology Review*. 30. 595–607.

<sup>39</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, "Quick Facts: United States," Accessed on May 21, 2021, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/SEX255219>.

<sup>40</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, "2019 Demographics: Profile of the Military Community," <https://download.militaryonesource.mil/12038/MOS/Reports/2019-demographics-report.pdf>.

<sup>41</sup> Dimitrovsky, L., Singer, J., & Yinon, Y. (1989). Masculine and feminine traits: Their relation to suitedness for and success in training for traditionally masculine and feminine army functions. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 57, 839 – 847. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.57.5.839>.

<sup>42</sup> Arbeit, M. R. (2017). "Make sure you're not getting yourself in trouble": Building sexual relationships and preventing sexual violence at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. *Journal of Sex Research*, 54, 949 –961. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00224499.2016.1207055>; Correll, S. J. (2001). Gender and the career choice process: The role of biased self-assessments. *American Journal of Sociology*, 106, 1691– 1730. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1086/321299>.

unit or command, compared to only 4% of their male counterparts. Meanwhile, 55% of active-duty service member respondents (68% female and 34% male) agree there is gender-based discrimination in the military. Only 37% of active-duty respondents (14% female and 46% male) think there is less gender discrimination in the military than civilian society. These findings were mirrored by an online poll of 1,708 *Stars & Stripes* digital subscribers in 2019, wherein approximately 68% of female active-duty and Veteran respondents reported they had experienced discrimination based on gender while serving in the military, compared to only 6% of male respondents.<sup>43</sup> Such gender discrimination might itself be indicative of hostile sexist attitudes towards women in the military.

Civilian literature indicates a potential correlation between hostile sexist attitudes and IPV. In 2019, a team of researchers studied a population of 196 incarcerated males in Asturias, Spain, and they found that hostile sexism (i.e., derogatory attitudes that include the belief that women are inferior to men) was shown to be associated with more positive attitudes toward IPV.<sup>44</sup> According to the authors of that study:

Hostile sexist attitudes were associated with higher IPV via its effect on positive attitudes towards intimate partners abuse. In addition, the links between hostile sexism, more positive attitudes of abuse of intimate partners, and the perpetration of IPV continued after controlling for broader variables such as family of origin and community social disorder. This suggests [that]... derogatory attitudes towards women (hostile sexism) relate to psychological IPV.<sup>45</sup>

Similarly, the preponderance of IPV in the U.S. military might be, in part, due to the existence of hostile sexist attitudes among male service members. As evidence for this hypothesis, one only needs to point to the high incidence of sexual assault against female service members in the military. According to the Department of Veterans Affairs, one in four veteran women report having experienced military sexual assault or harassment while serving in the military.<sup>46</sup> However, even this alarming figure might be under-representative. In a 2019 *Stars & Stripes* poll, approximately 66% of female respondents reported they had experienced sexual assault or harassment while serving in the Armed Forces.<sup>47</sup> It therefore seems reasonable to conclude that a military culture capable of breeding such high rates of sexual violence towards female service members might also give rise to high rates of IPV.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Diana Chan, "Poll Asks Troops, Veterans Thoughts on Women in Combat, Mixed-Gender Training and More," *Stars and Stripes*, January 2, 2019, Accessed on March 4, 2020,

<https://www.stripes.com/news/poll-asks-troops-veterans-thoughts-on-women-in-combat-mixed-gender-training-and-more-1.56289>.

<sup>44</sup> Juarros-Basterretxea, J., Overall, N., Herrero, J., and Rodríguez-Díaz, F. J. (2019). El efecto del sexismo en la violencia psicológica de pareja: un estudio con reclusos. *The European Journal of Psychology Applied to Legal Context*, 11, 61-69. <https://doi.org/10.5093/ejpalc2019a1>.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. (2017). Military Sexual Trauma. Retrieved from <https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/mentalhealth/msthome/index.asp>.

<sup>47</sup> Diana Chan, "Poll Asks Troops, Veterans Thoughts on Women in Combat, Mixed-Gender Training and More," *Stars and Stripes*, January 2, 2019, Accessed on March 4, 2020,

<https://www.stripes.com/news/poll-asks-troops-veterans-thoughts-on-women-in-combat-mixed-gender-training-and-more-1.56289>.

<sup>48</sup> N.B. The prevalence of sexism and sexual assault in the U.S. military has implications for retention and recruitment. In our 2018 Military Family Lifestyle Survey, military and veteran family respondents were significantly less likely to recommend service to their daughters (39%) than they were to their sons (51%). Qualitative responses indicated that those respondents who were not likely to recommend service to their daughters were primarily concerned about sexual assault, harassment, and sexism in military culture. It is probable that a spouse's experience of IPV would likewise affect his/her willingness to recommend service to a son or daughter.



## The Effects of Military IPV

A wide range of adverse mental health outcomes have been associated with IPV, including anxiety and depression.<sup>49</sup> IPV has also been associated with poor outcomes for children who witness domestic violence, even if they are not themselves abused. These negative outcomes can include increased risks of behavioral, mental, and physical health problems in adolescence and adulthood.<sup>50</sup> Considering the fact that many military recruits come from military families, addressing IPV in current military families may support a stronger future force.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Gierisch JM, Shapiro A, Grant NN, King HA, McDuffie JR, Williams JW. Intimate Partner Violence: Prevalence Among U.S. Military Veterans and Active Duty Servicemembers and a Review of Intervention Approaches. VA-ESP Project #09-010; 2013.

<sup>50</sup> Anderson, Kimberley, and Elisa Van Ee. "Mothers and Children Exposed to Intimate Partner Violence: A Review of Treatment Interventions." *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* vol. 15,9 1955. 7 Sep. 2018, doi:10.3390/ijerph15091955.

<sup>51</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, "New Recruit Survey: Wave 1," 2016, Accessed on May 24, 2021, <https://time.com/4254696/military-family-business/>.

## Recommendations

Any plan to reduce the high incidence of military IPV must address the underlying factors that contribute to such violence. A successful IPV prevention strategy must therefore seek to:

- (a) empower military spouses financially;
- (b) combat social isolation; and
- (c) eliminate hostile sexist attitudes within military culture.

To accomplish the first of these objectives, we must collectively work to reduce the military spouse unemployment rate, which has not decreased significantly since 2012.<sup>52</sup> While the causes of military spouse un/underemployment are myriad and complex, military spouse respondents in the 2020 Military Family Lifestyle Survey report a lack of affordable child care, the unpredictability of service member day-to-day job demands, hiring/promotion discrimination, and frequent Permanent Change of Station (PCS) moves as key barriers to employment. In order to empower military spouses financially, we therefore recommend Congress:

- Support a fixed period of federal student loan deferment for military spouses who leave a job in order to relocate due to military orders.<sup>53</sup>
- Support incentives for employers to make retirement savings plans more accessible and portable for military spouses.<sup>54</sup>
- Commission a report on discrimination against military spouses in employment, housing, and public accommodations due to their military affiliation. The report should include an assessment of the viability of policy solutions to prevent such discrimination (e.g., expanding USERRA to cover military spouses, making military spouses a protected class, etc.)<sup>55</sup>
- Enhance and expand access to child care fee assistance programs. For example, direct the services to expand fee assistance eligibility under the Military Child Care in Your Neighborhood (MCCYN) program to military families who wish to enroll their child in a child care facility that is state licensed, even if it is not accredited.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Office of People Analytics, "2012 Survey of Active Duty Spouses," <https://download.militaryonesource.mil/12038/MOS/Surveys/ADSS1201-Briefing-Support-Deployment-Reintegration-PCS-WellBeing-Education-Employment.pdf>.

<sup>53</sup> In the 116th Congress, Rep. Elise Stefanik (R-NY) introduced the Military Spouse Student Loan Deferment Act of 2020 (H.R.7433). This bill would have allowed certain military spouses to defer payment on their federal student loans for 90 days. Specifically, borrowers would be eligible to receive this deferment if (1) their spouse is an active-duty service member of the Armed Forces, (2) they lost their employment due to a permanent change of station move, and (3) they could provide certain documentation to the Department of Education. Loan interest would not accrue during the deferment period. Blue Star Families supported this proposal. [Blue Star Families, "2020 Military Family Lifestyle Survey: Finding 13," [https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/BSF\\_MFLS\\_CompReport\\_FINDING\\_13.pdf](https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/BSF_MFLS_CompReport_FINDING_13.pdf).]

<sup>54</sup> In the 116th Congress, Rep. Jason Crowe (D-CO) introduced the Military Spouse Retirement Security Act of 2020 (H.R.7927). This bill would have allowed a small business employer to take a tax credit for each of their employees who is a military spouse and is eligible to participate in the employer's defined contribution retirement plan. Blue Star Families supported this proposal. [Ibid.]

<sup>55</sup> Blue Star Families included a deep dive on this recommendation in our 2020 Military Family Lifestyle Survey Comprehensive Report. [Blue Star Families, "2020 Military Family Lifestyle Survey: Recommendations," [https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/BSF\\_MFLS\\_CompReport\\_RECOMMENDATIONS.pdf](https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/BSF_MFLS_CompReport_RECOMMENDATIONS.pdf).]

<sup>56</sup> Blue Star Families, "2020 Military Family Lifestyle Survey: Finding 11," [https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/BSF\\_MFLS\\_CompReport\\_FINDING\\_11.pdf](https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/BSF_MFLS_CompReport_FINDING_11.pdf).

- Commission a report on the demand for various child care options among military families, and assess the pros and cons of requiring families to first seek care at their local CDC before being authorized to use MCCYN fee assistance.<sup>57</sup>

Eliminating sexism from the military will require systemic cultural reform. We therefore recommend Congress:

- Implement Fort Hood Independent Review Committee recommendations across the services to alleviate instances of sexual harassment, assault, and gender discrimination.<sup>58</sup>
- Work with the DOD to continue to recruit women into senior leadership positions.

Finally, to combat social isolation, Congress ought to work with community-based Military Support Organizations to bolster active-duty family members' sense of belonging to their local civilian communities. With 11 funded Chapters and 200+ neighborhoods nationwide, Blue Star Families is well-positioned to aid the federal government in that effort.

I would again like to thank the distinguished members of the Subcommittee for their efforts to address this deeply troubling issue. IPV is a crime, and it is neither a normal nor acceptable byproduct of the military lifestyle. Blue Star Families applauds this Subcommittee's work to protect military family members from these unconscionable acts of violence.

Sincerely,

Jessica Strong, PhD, LMSW  
Co-Director of Applied Research  
Blue Star Families

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<sup>57</sup> Blue Star Families included a deep dive on this recommendation in our 2020 Military Family Lifestyle Survey Comprehensive Report. [Blue Star Families, "2020 Military Family Lifestyle Survey: Recommendations," [https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/BSF\\_MFLS\\_CompReport\\_RECOMMENDATIONS.pdf](https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/BSF_MFLS_CompReport_RECOMMENDATIONS.pdf).]

<sup>58</sup> Blue Star Families, "2020 Military Family Lifestyle Survey: Finding 6," [https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/BSF\\_MFLS\\_CompReport\\_FINDING\\_6.pdf](https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/BSF_MFLS_CompReport_FINDING_6.pdf).