



U.S. House Committee on Oversight and Accountability
Subcommittee on National Security, the Border, and Foreign Affairs

Hearing on

“The Risks of Progressive Ideologies in the U.S. Military”

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Chairman Grothman, Ranking Member Garcia, and distinguished Members of the House Oversight Subcommittee on National Security, the Border, and Foreign Affairs, thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony for this hearing.

I am Founder and CEO of Blue Star Families — the nation’s largest grass-roots military family support organization, which 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, wherever their service takes them, in order to ensure military readiness, retention and recruiting.

Blue Star Families’ research calls attention to the unique experiences and challenges faced by military and Veteran families. Our annual Military Family Lifestyle Survey (MFLS) — developed in partnership with Syracuse University’s D’Aniello Institute for Veterans and Military Families (IVMF) and fielded since 2009 — is the largest annual comprehensive survey of military and Veteran families, and is widely regarded as the gold standard among military family surveys. Data from the MFLS and other research by Blue Star Families has been used at every level of government to help inform those tasked with making policy decisions that impact our military-connected communities. At Blue Star Families, we know that behind every statistic is a story, and it is my honor to share data and stories with you.

This data will demonstrate five points: 1) challenges to families are the primary threat to the All-Volunteer Force, impacting both retention and future recruitment, 2) the issues that are top-of-mind for military families are focused on the impacts of military service on family financial and emotional well-being, 3) the military is becoming increasingly diverse, and issues surrounding race and gender impact current service members’ retention in the military and likelihood to recommend military service to their young family members, 4) Senate holds on nominations have been a significant concern for military families, and 5) military families have continued and repeated concerns of a government shutdown with the potential for loss and delay of pay.

Our data will shed light on the challenges and solutions that military families share with us through our research.

Challenges to Families are the Primary Threat to the All-Volunteer Force

The Department of Defense (DoD) has long understood the responsibility to support military families, and is engaged in developing and administering programs to that effect. It is an adage that “you recruit the warfighter but retain the family.” Indeed, one of Secretary of Defense Austin’s three priorities is “taking care of our people,”¹ including their families, and he has issued several memoranda²³ directing the services to address military family challenges such as spouse employment, child care, and food insecurity. In general, therefore, service members’ and military families’ quality of life and their ability to thrive is a central concern to the DoD. In addition, we are thankful to the House Armed Services Committee’s bipartisan Quality of Life Panel for their commitment on the life issues that our military families are facing today.

Blue Star Families has also seen that the issues driving current families out of military service and limiting the recommendation of military service to the next generation of the All-Volunteer Force are centered on the impacts of military service on the family. A 2021 Army exit survey reaffirmed this – “Family” was one of the biggest reasons soldiers had left or would leave the Army.⁴ Additionally, while military spouse support is a key predictor of the service member’s likelihood to remain on active-duty service, that spouse support has steadily declined over the last decade, primarily because of dissatisfaction with the military way of life, which increased odds of favoring leaving military service by over seven times⁵. By many indicators, the greatest threat to the All-Volunteer Force are the impacts of military life on the family.

Military Families’ Top Issues

Blue Star Families’ research has allowed us to understand what military family experiences are most stressful, of greatest concern, and best addressed by the DoD and the Quality of Life Panel.

¹ Secretary of Defense. (2021, Mar 4). *Message to the force*. <https://media.defense.gov/2021/Mar/04/2002593656/-1/-1/0/SECRETARY-LLOYD-J-AUSTIN-III-MESSAGE-TO-THE-FORCE.PDF>

² Secretary of Defense. (2022, Sep. 22). *Taking care of our service members and families*. <https://media.defense.gov/2022/Sep/22/2003083398/-1/-1/0/TAKING-CARE-OF-OUR-SERVICE-MEMBERS-AND-FAMILIES.PDF>

³ Secretary of Defense. (2023, Mar. 22). *Strengthening our support to service members and their families*. <https://media.defense.gov/2023/Mar/22/2003184739/-1/-1/1/STRENGTHENING-OUR-SUPPORT-TO-SERVICE-MEMBERS-AND-THEIR-FAMILIES.PDF>

⁴ Vie, L.L., Trivette, E.V., & Lathrop, A. D. (2021, June). *Department of the Army career engagement survey: First annual report*. Department of the Army. https://talent.army.mil/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/DACES-Annual-Report_JUNE2021.pdf

⁵ Military One Source. (2023, Feb. 9). *2021 Active duty spouse survey (ADSS)*. Defense Personnel Analytics Center, Office of People Analytics, Center for Retention and Readiness Research. <https://download.militaryonesource.mil/12038/MOS/Presentations/2021-active-duty-spouse-overview-briefing.pptx>

In our MFLS, year after year, the top issues for active-duty families reflect other research on the key issues for military families.⁶ Spouse employment, time away from family as a result of military service, children’s education, military pay, and the out-of-pocket costs of military service such as relocation and housing costs have been within the top five concerns in the past three years of the MFLS. Spouse employment has been a top concern for military families since the inception of the MFLS in 2009.

Overall spouse well-being and family experiences also impact the decision to remain in or leave the military. In our 2022 MFLS, more than 4 in 10 (42%) active-duty family respondents said their family expected to exit military service within five years. Among those planning to exit service, the most commonly cited reason for leaving besides military retirement is “the military lifestyle did not allow me sufficient time with my family”(36%).⁷ Given the potential impact on service branch end strength, if and when families choose to exit military service, it is imperative that military families’ overall well-being factor into personnel policy priorities.

For example, the DOD recognizes that child care is a “workforce issue that directly impacts the efficiency, readiness, retention, and lethality of the Total Force,” which is one of the reasons it is the largest employer-sponsored child care provider in the United States.⁸ Despite this recognition, however, thousands of military families still struggle to find quality affordable child care. In the 2022 MFLS report, only 50% of employed active-duty spouse respondents who needed daily child care were able to find child care that works for their current situation. In addition to directly affecting a service member’s ability to effectively execute their job requirements, child care also affects a military spouse’s ability to retain employment.⁹ In the 2022 MFLS, 1 in 4 (25%) active-duty family member respondents reported that civilian spouse employment concerns were one of the primary reasons for potentially choosing to leave military service.¹⁰ While many Americans are dealing with financial stress, the challenges associated with the military lifestyle — including child care, spouse unemployment, and housing and relocation costs — may be contributing factors in choosing to leave military service.

The Increasing Diversity of the Current and Future All-Volunteer Force

Last year, the U.S. Armed Forces faced the most significant recruiting challenge since the inception of the All-Volunteer Force 50 years ago. In fiscal year 2022, every branch struggled to fulfill its recruitment goals and the Army fell short by nearly 25 percent.¹¹

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Blue Star Families. (2023). *2022 Military Family Lifestyle Survey Comprehensive Report*. https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/BSF_MFLS_Spring23_Full_Report_Digital.pdf

⁸ Congressional Research Service. (2020, Mar. 19). *Military child development program: Background and issues*. <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/R45288.pdf>

⁹ Blue Star Families. (2023). *2022 MFLS Comprehensive Report*.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Baldor, L. (2022, Oct. 2). *Army misses recruiting goal by 15,000 soldiers*. Army Times. <https://www.armytimes.com/news/your-army/2022/10/02/army-misses-recruiting-goal-by-15000-soldiers/>

In addition to traditional challenges to recruiting,^{12,13,14} generational and demographic changes are also impacting how the armed services recruit. The oldest members of Generation Z are turning 26 this year, meaning that nearly all recruitable youth are part of this generation.¹⁵ Moreover, nearly 90% of the Army active-duty junior enlisted service members and 35% of junior officers are part of Gen Z.¹⁶ A recent analysis of the factors driving youth to a career in the military suggests that social-emotional well-being — including strong community bonds, emotional resilience, and the ability to positively contribute to society¹⁷ — is a key factor youth consider when considering military service.¹⁸ Given this, there is reason to believe that incidents of sexual harassment, assault, suicide, racism, and other types of discrimination in the military may be harming the services' ability to recruit.¹⁹

Moreover, research shows that “the best predictor [of military service] is a person’s familiarity with the military.”²⁰ Most youth in this country are not exposed to military service: less than 1%²¹ of the U.S. population serves on active-duty and Veterans made up only 6.9% of the total adult population in 2021.²² Understanding that exposure to service is a key indicator of likelihood to serve, Blue Star Families has explored the reasons why active-duty and Veteran families would or would not recommend service to a young family member. In the 2022 MFLS, about one-quarter of active-duty family respondents (28%) were unlikely to recommend military service, with “poor military leadership,” “challenges for families,” and “financial sacrifice” as top reasons.²³

¹² Warner, J.T. (2012). The effects of the civilian economy on recruiting and retention. *The Eleventh quadrennial review of military compensation* (pp.71-91).

https://militarypay.defense.gov/Portals/3/Documents/Reports/SR05_Chapter_2.pdf

¹³ Baldor, L. (2022). *Army misses recruiting goal*

¹⁴ Mongilio, H. (2022, Dec. 1). *Tough military recruiting environment is about more than low unemployment, experts say*. USNI News. <https://news.usni.org/2022/12/01/tough-military-recruiting-environment-is-about-much-more-than-low-unemployment-experts-say>

¹⁵ Dimock, M. (2019, Jan. 17). *Defining generations: where millennials end and generation Z begins*. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/01/17/where-millennials-end-and-generation-z-begins/>

¹⁶ Hanks, R. (2022, Feb. 28). *What soldiers want: the gen Z perspective*. Army University Press. <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/NCO-Journal/Archives/2022/February/What-Soldiers-Want/>

¹⁷ Center for Disease Control and Prevention. (n.d.) *Emotional well-being, population health*. <https://www.cdc.gov/populationhealth/well-being/index.htm>

¹⁸ Gehlhaus, D. (2021). *Youth information networks and propensity to serve in the military*. Rand Corporation. <https://doi.org/10.7249/RGSDA1662-1>

¹⁹ Beynon, S. (2022, Sept. 14). *Army secretary blames bad press for making recruiting woes worse*. Military.com <https://www.military.com/daily-news/2022/09/14/army-secretary-blames-bad-press-making-recruiting-woes-worse.html>

²⁰ Phillipps, D. & Arango, T. (2020). *Who signs up to fight? Makeup of U.S. recruits shows glaring disparity*. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/10/us/military-enlistment.html>

²¹ Department of Defense. (2022). *DoD personnel, workforce reports & publications*. DMDC. <https://dwp.dmdc.osd.mil/dwp/app/dod-data-reports/workforce-reports>

²² United States Census Bureau. (2021). *American community survey data*. <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/data.html>

²³ Blue Star Families. (2023). *2022 MFLS Comprehensive Report*.

Racial- and Gender-Based Discrimination Impacts Retention and Recruitment

Experiencing racial- and gender-based discrimination may also make current service members more likely to leave military service and less likely to recommend military service to the next generation of the All-Volunteer Force. In our 2020 MFLS report,²⁴ only 43% of those who have experienced military-connected racial discrimination would recommend military service to a young person, compared to 63% of those who have not experienced discrimination. Similarly, only 47% of those who have experienced gender-based discrimination would recommend military service, compared to 64% of those respondents who have not.

This pattern persists when service members determine whether to stay in military service. One-third (33%) of active-duty family respondents of color and 34% of Veteran respondents of color reported that they considered racial/ethnic discrimination in family conversations regarding whether to remain in service.²⁵ Excluding “retirement” or “medical/administrative discharge,” 12% of female active-duty service member respondents indicated “gender discrimination” was one of the primary reasons why they would leave the military, and 8% indicated “sexual harassment/assault” was a reason. This trend persists among Veteran respondents. Excluding those who left due to retirement, 20% of female Veteran respondents from communities of color and 15% of white, non-Hispanic female Veteran respondents reported sexual harassment or assault as one of the reasons they left the service. Additionally, 1 in 10 (10%) female Veteran respondents reported gender-based discrimination as one of the reasons they left military service. Similarly, 8% of Veteran respondents from communities of color cited racial discrimination as one of the reasons they left service. Although Black Veterans are just one racial group among the larger communities of color, nearly 1 in 5 (18%) Black Veteran respondents reported racial discrimination as one of the reasons they left military service. Furthermore, in Blue Star Families’ 2022 Campaign for Inclusion research, we found that those who experienced instances of discrimination – whether in their military or civilian communities – were significantly less likely to recommend military service to a young family member.²⁶

In less than five years, the majority of recruitable youth will be people of color. Most of the current All-Volunteer Force (70-80%) are members of families with a tradition of military service,²⁷ but this tradition may be jeopardized when service members experience racial- or gender-based discrimination and leave military service or deter young family members from considering military service in their future. Policies that address discrimination based on race, ethnicity, or gender and

²⁴ Blue Star Families. (2022). *2021 Military Family Lifestyle Survey Comprehensive Report*. https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/BSF_MFLS_Results2021_ComprehensiveReport_3_22.pdf

²⁵ Blue Star Families. (2022). *Blue Star Families’ social impact research 2021: The diverse experiences of military & veteran families of color*. Blue Star Families’ Department of Applied Research. https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/BSF_MFC_REI_FullReport2021-final.pdf

²⁶ Blue Star Families. (2022). *Campaign for Inclusion research 2022: Building bridges to belonging for Military Families of Color comprehensive report*. https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/BSF_CFI23_Comp_Report_FULL-5.pdf

²⁷ Defense Human Resource Activity. (n.d.). *New recruit survey, wave 1 findings (October 2012-March 2013)*. JAMRS. https://time.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/new_recruit_wave1_briefing_final_7-23-2013.pptx

improve the experiences of female service members, service members of color, and LGBTQIA+ service members, are essential to retaining and recruiting a highly trained and imminently ready All-Volunteer Force.

Senate Hold on Military Promotions

While the recent military promotion holds by Sen. Tuberville have ended, the months-long and ill-advised episode resulted in cascading impacts to thousands of military families and created unreliability in their military careers and the relocation orders affecting where their families would live, work, and go to school. The long delay in promotions has adversely and permanently impacted those officers and their families, setting them back from their peers.

The majority of respondents to a Blue Star Families' poll²⁸ reported that the promotion block decreased their satisfaction with military life (63%), their likelihood to recommend military service (57%), and nearly half said it decreased their likelihood to remain in military service (48%).²⁹ In an open-ended question, nearly half (47%) also expressed concerns about the politicalization of the military, and the military being used as a pawn in political games. More than one-quarter expressed sentiments about how the promotion block would impact retention (27%, n=49), and 17% (n=30) expressed that the promotion block indicated that the government doesn't support the military.³⁰

"I didn't join the Army to become a political tool. It goes against our oath and creates unnecessary drama that makes serving unappealing." -Active-Duty Field Grade Officer

The military is an apolitical institution, and military families should not be caught in the crossfire of politics.

Impact of the Government Shutdown

According to a recent Pulse Check, the vast majority of currently-serving respondents (84%) reported that they would be somewhat or greatly impacted by a government shutdown.³¹ When 1 in 3 military families have less than \$3,000 in their savings – not enough for rent, utilities, and food should a potential government shutdown take place, the loss and delay of military pay threatens the financial stability of military families.³² With many families living paycheck to

²⁸ https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/BSF_GovtShutdown_PulseCheck_Report_Sep23.pdf

²⁹ Blue Star Families. (2023). Pulse Check: Compounding threats to the common defense. https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/BSF_GovtShutdown_PulseCheck_Report_Sep23.pdf

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

paycheck, our military families should not be humiliated to rely on community charities for assistance in this time of need.

One spouse of a Field Grade Officer stated the following: “We will not get paid. We will not be able to pay our mortgage. Why would we want to continue to serve in a military that is run by people that don’t understand the basic needs of its soldiers and their families?”

Military families have seen the uncertainty that comes with threatened government shutdowns multiple times over the past few years, and grow weary of repeated threats to their financial stability.

Closing

Our research shows that military readiness, recruitment, and retention are all deeply affected by policies and programs that support cohesive communities and ensure the health and well-being of our service members and their families. Congress and the DoD have recognized these nonpartisan necessities for decades and we’ve seen major improvements in the experiences of military families since the birth of the All-Volunteer Force 50 years ago.

We appreciate that most members of Congress have a sincere interest in creating the best conditions possible to support the best military possible. Evidence from our research supports the wisdom of efforts to make it easier for military families to continue their service and for the services to be attractive for young Americans to enter the military. Important strides to improve public and institutional respect for women and service members and families of color are helpful for recruiting and retention according to our research and therefore should not be feared or politicized. Further, damaging military careers and introducing chaos into the lives of military families by holding up promotions for political ends (however strongly held), and withholding military pay and interfering with mission execution through government shutdowns are an enormously inappropriate means to score political points. Respectfully, please work to refrain from using the livelihoods and service of military families to exact political victories.

While challenges still need to be addressed, we are grateful for the efforts of Congress, as well as the armed services that support the quality of life of our service members and their families.

I would again like to thank the Committee for inviting Blue Star Families to submit testimony on this matter, and for their continued attention to military family issues. I am happy to respond to written questions.