



Solving Food Insecurity among U.S. Veterans and Military Families

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JUNE 2022

THE ISSUE

Food insecurity among U.S. veterans and military families is a national security concern: it multiplies stress on active-duty personnel, diminishes well-being among service members and their children—who are more likely to serve in the military as adults—and may hinder recruitment for the armed services. As direct service providers and the U.S. government respond to the short-term needs of veterans and military families, this brief puts forward long-term solutions to food insecurity in the U.S. military and veteran communities.

INTRODUCTION

The CSIS Global Food Security Program publishes this policy brief at a time of notable movement on these issues. Food insecurity has existed in the U.S. military community for decades, but when Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin discussed food insecurity in military families in November 2021, he was the first secretary of defense to express concern over this problem and instruct the Department of Defense (DOD) to take action. He reiterated this support on May 3, 2022, when he stated before the Senate Defense Appropriations Subcommittee that the DOD wants “to make sure that people can put food—good food, healthy food—on the table,” emphasizing that “all of our services are focused on it as well; again, it’s very, very important to us.”¹ The FY 2022 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) tasked the secretary to conduct a study of food insecurity in the armed forces and present results to Congress by October 1, 2022. As policymakers and the public await results of this study, they also anticipate the release of a roadmap to strengthen food security across the armed forces, which Secretary Austin instructed the undersecretary of defense for personnel and readiness to develop in early 2022. The FY 2022 NDAA also

mandated a Basic Needs Allowance (BNA), and the DOD is deliberating qualifications for and benefits due to service members under the BNA. The Veterans Health Administration (VHA) began to ask veterans about their experiences with food insecurity only five years ago, updated its survey in 2021, and is seeking further ways to address food insecurity among U.S. veterans in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Indeed, the Covid-19 pandemic attracted significant media attention to food insecurity in the military and among veterans, often focusing on the role of charitable organizations such as food banks and food pantries. While these organizations provide important services in times of great need—in the military and the general population—they are not designed or resourced to provide lasting solutions. Long-term solutions are the purview of the U.S. government. As new data emerge and legislation and policies take shape, the CSIS Global Food Security Program intends for this brief to guide legislators, policymakers, and policy and program implementers in their efforts to address food insecurity in the military community.

The content and recommendations herein are the culmination of intensive research and outreach to and

interviews with U.S. government officials, active-duty service members, researchers, advocacy organizations, and others. This brief focuses specifically on active-duty families and veterans living in the continental United States, though members of the National Guard, Reserves, and those serving outside the continental United States may face different challenges and require different solutions.

As is true in the general population, food insecurity in the military community does not exist in a vacuum—it exists alongside, and is exacerbated by, other challenges. The policy recommendations at the conclusion of this brief reflect the integrated nature of these challenges and their solutions.

THE EXTENT OF FOOD INSECURITY AMONG U.S. VETERANS AND MILITARY FAMILIES

New data have shed light on the extent and nature of food insecurity among U.S. military families and veterans. Research shows that U.S. military families and veterans experience food insecurity at higher rates than the general population, and Covid-19 has only amplified the problem. The reasons for and manifestations of food insecurity differ between these two populations, as described below.

FOOD INSECURITY AMONG ACTIVE-DUTY FAMILIES

The DOD has yet to release comprehensive, nationally representative data on food insecurity among active-duty service members. In the meantime, researchers have used many different national data sets, organizational member surveys, and other sources to begin filling this knowledge gap. For example, in 2021, the U.S. Army Public Health Center and U.S. Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service (USDA-ERS) released the results of a 2019 survey at a major U.S. Army installation. The study found that nearly 33 percent of over 5,600 respondents were marginally food insecure, using a two-item food insecurity screener derived from the USDA's 18-item Household Food Security Survey Module (HFSSM).² In comparison, the USDA found that 17.9 percent of all U.S. households were marginally food insecure in 2019. At a national level, Blue Star Families' annual member survey found that 14 percent of almost 4,500 enlisted active-duty family respondents reported low or very low food security in 2020 using questions from HFSSM, compared to 10.5 percent of all U.S. households in 2020.³

Risk factors for food insecurity among active-duty families include lower rank and age, race and ethnicity, having children, and location. Several surveys have found that food insecurity is most prevalent among junior enlisted families, although some families of high-ranking enlisted service

DEFINING FOOD INSECURITY

According to the USDA, food insecurity is “a household-level economic and social condition of limited or uncertain access to adequate food.”⁴ The USDA measures this through an 18-item measure, the HFSSM. **Marginal food insecurity** refers to those who report one or two indicators of food insecurity on the HFSSM, typically anxiety over food sufficiency but no reduced food intake. **Food insecurity** indicates reduced quality or quantity of food intake, while very low food security (similar to **food insufficiency**) means reports of disrupted eating patterns or reduced food intake. **Hunger**, according to the USDA, is an individual-level physiological condition that may result from food insecurity.

DEFINING FOOD SECURITY

According to the USDA, “Food security means access by all people at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life.”⁵ To be food secure means to have access to not only a sufficient *quantity* of food but also the right *quality* of food—that is, food that meets the nutritional needs of all members of a household.

members also experience it.⁶ Additionally, in their annual member survey, Blue Star Families found that active-duty families of color were twice as likely to report food insecurity as their white, non-Hispanic counterparts.⁷ Military families with children are at higher risk, and a recent study at one Army base found that families with children were more likely to have become food insecure during the pandemic.⁸ Some evidence suggests that certain locations have higher rates of military food insecurity, such as Texas and Virginia, but more evidence is needed to determine the extent of regional differences in military hunger.⁹

Active-duty families of color were twice as likely to report food insecurity as their white, non-Hispanic counterparts.

FOOD INSECURITY AMONG VETERANS

In the veteran population, data show a higher prevalence of food insecurity than among the general U.S. population. In one of the first nationally

representative studies of food insecurity among veterans, which surveyed over 13,800 working-age veterans, the USDA-ERS found that veterans have a 7.4 percent greater risk for food insecurity than non-veterans, after adjusting for observable differences between veterans and non-veterans.¹⁰

Working-age veterans . . . have a 7.4 percent greater risk for food insecurity than non-veterans.

Just as in the active-duty population, some veterans are more likely to be food insecure than others. A recent study from the VHA found that Black and Hispanic veterans are more likely to screen positive for food insecurity, as are women, those who are non-married/partnered, low-income veterans, and those with housing instability.¹¹ The USDA-ERS also reported that food insecurity was higher among disabled and unemployed working-age veterans.¹²

Some research shows that veterans' age and era of service play a role in food security. Younger and middle-aged veterans are somewhat more likely to be food insecure, according to research from the USDA-ERS and IMPAQ International.¹³ Similarly, some studies show higher food insecurity among veterans of the U.S. wars in Iraq and Afghanistan than among all veterans.¹⁴ Participation in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is also three times higher among those who left military service during the prior year than among active-duty personnel, suggesting that the transition out of military service is a particularly high-risk time for new veterans.¹⁵ Another study found that, since 2009, new veterans who attend college are much less likely to be enrolled in SNAP than long-term veterans, indicating a possible knowledge gap or other barriers that new veterans face as they transition to civilian life.¹⁶

IMPACTS OF COVID-19

Covid-19 amplified hunger in the military and veteran community, as it did across the United States and around the world. A number of advocacy groups surveyed active-duty and veteran families early in the pandemic, and all found increases in food insecurity during the pandemic compared to the pre-pandemic period. For example, in its 2019 annual survey, the Military Family Advisory Network (MFAN) found that one in eight respondents were food insecure, but by

SNAP USE AMONG U.S. MILITARY PERSONNEL

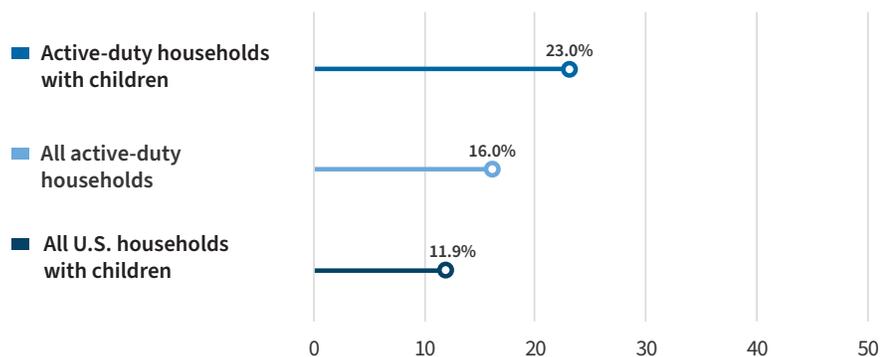
The concept of U.S. military personnel—who make extraordinary sacrifices for their country—relying on “food stamps,” or SNAP benefits, is anathema to many. In 2000, Senator John McCain decried “soldiers on food stamps”; one member of the military interviewed by CSIS commented, “Join the Army and you’ll need food stamps’—that’s a hell of a recruitment tool.”¹⁷ Ideally, for the reasons explained here, no member of the military would face food insecurity, yet for some, it is a reality of life during and after service. The solutions proffered here could obviate the need for SNAP benefits but would take time to implement, and even if implemented fully, some families would still face unexpected circumstances that necessitate food-security assistance. For this reason, the authors do not recommend *reducing* enrollment in federal nutrition programs—such as SNAP and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC)—which could increase stigma around these programs and deter otherwise eligible families from accessing services that could improve their well-being. Federal nutrition programs are important sources of food and nutrition for millions, and some of the recommendations in this brief concern these programs.

2020, MFAN found that number had jumped to one in five.¹⁸ In a spring 2020 survey by Syracuse University, 30 percent of veterans and 39 percent of active-duty respondents said they needed more food and nutrition resources, with respondents of color reporting even higher levels of need.¹⁹

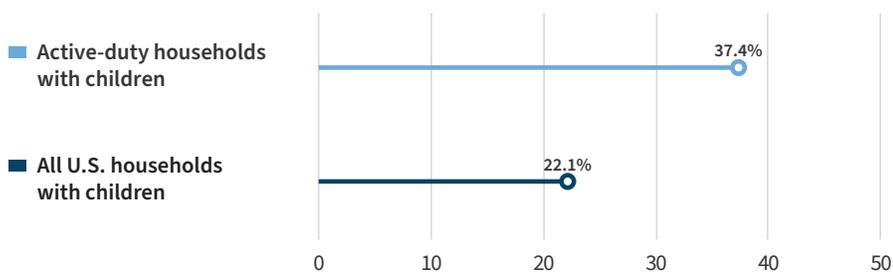
The impacts of Covid-19 are even greater for families with children. In fact, a recent study by the USDA-ERS and U.S. Army Public Health Center found that being a single soldier was the only protective factor against becoming food insecure during the pandemic.²⁰ Between April 2020 and February 2022, the Census Bureau’s Household Pulse Survey showed an average of 23 percent of active-duty respondents with children reported not having enough to eat sometimes or often, compared to 16 percent of all active-duty respondents and 11.9 percent of all U.S. households with children.²¹ Additionally, from July 21, 2021, through January 10, 2022, 37.4 percent of active-duty family respondents to the Pulse Survey reported receiving the expanded Child Tax Credit.²² The Child

Household Pulse Survey: Food Insecurity and the Child Tax Credit

Percentage of Household Pulse Survey respondents who reported sometimes or often not having enough to eat, Apr 14, 2021 – Feb 7, 2022.



Percentage of Household Pulse Survey respondents who reported receiving the Child Tax Credit, Jul 21, 2021 – Jan 10, 2022.



Source: CSIS Global Food Security Program analysis of the Census Bureau's Household Pulse Survey data. "Household Pulse Survey Data Tables," U.S. Census Bureau, <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/household-pulse-survey/data.html>.

Tax Credit payments that families received from July to December 2021 were shown to decrease child poverty across the United States, so it is likely that military families receiving these payments faced hardships after the expanded payments expired in December.²³

WHY FOOD INSECURITY IS HAPPENING: CHALLENGES UNIQUE TO MILITARY LIFE

Many of the drivers of food insecurity are shared among military and civilian populations, but some characteristics of military life present additional challenges for families. These include barriers to accessing food assistance, challenges to household financial stability, and amplified physical and mental health concerns. Each of these increases the likelihood that service members and their families will experience food insecurity during and after their military careers.

FOOD ASSISTANCE

The Thirteenth Quadrennial Review of Military Compensation, published in December 2020, found that between 0.08 percent and 0.42 percent of service members stationed in the United States were enrolled in SNAP at any point in 2019.²⁴ This is significantly lower than SNAP enrollment in the general U.S. population, which was 9.6 percent the same year. However, low enrollment in SNAP does not necessarily indicate low levels of need among service members. Barriers such as stigma, administrative inconsistencies, and lack of information and awareness can prevent families from accessing resources they need.

Utilizing food assistance—including federal nutrition assistance programs and charitable food aid—can carry significant stigma and negative perceptions in the military and veteran communities. Some military families report feeling embarrassed that they need to apply for SNAP or visit food pantries to make ends meet.²⁵ In addition to feelings

of personal shame and lost dignity, there can also be professional repercussions if a service member tells their base chain of command that they are in need of food assistance—a military leader's perception that their service member cannot properly manage their money could negatively impact the service member's security clearance, performance reviews, and career prospects.²⁶

The way the USDA calculates household incomes for SNAP eligibility disqualifies many otherwise eligible military families from accessing federal nutrition benefits. The Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH) is counted as income for the purposes of SNAP eligibility while the monetary value of in-kind housing is not. This means that a military family living off base—or even a military family living in privatized military housing on base—is considered by the USDA to have a higher income and is less likely to qualify for SNAP

benefits than a military family living in military housing on base, even if the on- and off-base service members earn the same base pay. A recent working paper simulating changes in SNAP eligibility under different BAH exemption levels found that exempting a service member's BAH from income would increase SNAP eligibility among active-duty households by as much as 70 percent.²⁷ However, the USDA Food and Nutrition Service (USDA-FNS), which administers SNAP, says that the BAH does not currently meet any of the income exclusions outlined in SNAP regulations, meaning the BAH cannot be exempted from income calculations for SNAP.²⁸ Currently, the federal government does not count the BAH as income for the purposes of taxes and most other federal benefits. The value of federal housing vouchers for low-income civilians is also not counted as income for SNAP eligibility, creating a disparity in SNAP eligibility between service members receiving the BAH and civilians receiving federal housing benefits.

Finally, a lack of awareness about food insecurity and food assistance programs can be a barrier for some. In MFAN's spring 2020 survey of military families, nearly 30 percent of those who did not have enough food said they did not seek assistance;²⁹ however, Blue Star Families found in 2021 that the most common reason food-insecure families did not access food and nutrition programs was that they did not think they were eligible.³⁰ Further education about eligibility for and availability of resources may be helpful for those who are able to overcome the personal, professional, and administrative barriers to accessing assistance.

FAMILY ECONOMIC SECURITY

Some realities of military life make economic stability difficult to achieve, which can compromise families' food security and nutrition.

First and foremost, service members are often required to move every one to three years, which has ripple effects for household finances, spousal employment, and childcare. There are both direct and indirect costs of these frequent moves. A Blue Star Families survey released in March 2022 found that two-thirds of active-duty family respondents reported unreimbursed out-of-pocket expenses related to their last Permanent Change of Station (PCS) move, and over half of these reported over \$1,000 in unreimbursed expenses.³¹

There are also indirect costs of frequent moves, such as military spouses struggling to find and maintain career paths. The DOD's 2019 Survey of Active Duty Spouses found that a PCS move within the last year more than doubles the odds that a civilian active-duty spouse was

unemployed, and 35 percent of active-duty spouses who experienced a PCS move indicated that it took seven months or more to find employment after the move.³² When changing locations frequently, many spouses also found it difficult to maintain jobs that allow them to advance professionally throughout their career in the same way as their civilian counterparts. Remote work has presented new, flexible opportunities for some, but a majority of military spouses work in positions that cannot be done remotely, such as in healthcare and education.³³ In the same DOD survey, 35 percent of active-duty spouses said they required a state-issued license for their career field or occupation, which can prolong periods of temporary unemployment after a move and may force spouses to start over in a new role or field entirely.³⁴

DOD representatives and others have previously pointed to the competitive base pay that young service members receive relative to civilians of a comparable age and educational background as evidence that food insecurity should not exist among military families.³⁵ Military pay was initially designed on an assumption that the service member would be a young, single man, but this is no longer the reality. Today's service members are much more likely to be older and have families than in the past, and as living costs have risen, two incomes have become necessary to meet household needs for many families in both the military and civilian populations.³⁶ Comparing only an individual service member's salary to a similar civilian's salary ignores the fact that military spouses are more likely to be unemployed or underemployed than their civilian counterparts. According to Blue Star Families' 2020 member survey, the unemployment rate of military spouse respondents was nearly seven times the rate of similar civilian peers (20 percent, compared to 3 percent).³⁷ Research shows that military families with unemployed or underemployed spouses are more likely to be food insecure, and Blue Star Families reported that 41 percent of active-duty families who report financial stress cite spouse unemployment or underemployment as a top contributor to their stress.³⁸

A lack of access to childcare is negatively associated with household economic and food security. The DOD provides subsidized on-base childcare and off-base childcare fee assistance, but these resources are not available to all families who need them. A 2020 review of military childcare by the Government Accountability Office (GAO) found that there are significant waitlists for on-base childcare at many bases, which DOD officials report they are working to address on a location-specific basis.³⁹ Many advocates and military families

report that off base fee assistance is not sufficient and has strict eligibility requirements that make it difficult to qualify. Spouses who are unemployed are not eligible, and without childcare, many spouses find it difficult to seek work. In each branch of service, families can apply for a one-time 90-day waiver to receive childcare fee assistance while a spouse is seeking work, though it takes an average of seven months for spouses to find employment after a PCS move.⁴⁰ According to Blue Star Families, childcare expenses are one of the top reasons that some active-duty spouses are not working.⁴¹

In addition to the challenges noted above, 70 percent of service members live off post and may not have easy access to lower-cost food from commissaries. They are also required to get permission from their commander before taking a second job, something civilians may be able to do if they desire.⁴²

LONG-TERM CHALLENGES

The cumulative effects of these challenges throughout a service member's military career can have lifelong effects. They can decrease a household's lifetime earning potential and economic stability, leading some higher-ranking service members and veterans to experience food insecurity later in life. In addition to active-duty military spouses, veteran spouses also reported higher unemployment in Blue Star Families' latest survey, indicating long-term impacts of military service on spouse employment.⁴³ These compounding challenges are even more acute for active-duty and veteran families of color, who report a greater need for two household incomes and a harder time finding employment than their white peers.⁴⁴

Additionally, evidence shows that military service increases the likelihood of poor health and disability. This is particularly prevalent among certain groups and has increased in recent years. Recent medical and equipment advances have improved combat survival rates, which means that post-9/11 veterans and those who experienced combat are more likely to have a service-related disability than other veterans.⁴⁵ Female veterans are even more likely to be disabled than men, which may at least partially explain why female veterans have a higher prevalence of food insecurity than men or the general population.⁴⁶ Strong evidence associates veteran hunger with a multitude of other health concerns as well, including higher odds of diabetes, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, suicidal thoughts, and HIV, among other physical and mental illnesses.⁴⁷ Increased medical expenses, financial hardship, and employment limitations resulting from disabilities can all contribute to and exacerbate food insecurity for veterans.

NATIONAL SECURITY IMPLICATIONS OF FOOD INSECURITY AMONG VETERANS AND MILITARY FAMILIES

Improving the food security of service members, veterans, and their families can positively impact the long-term health and well-being of military families, improving force readiness, retention, and future recruitment.⁴⁸ Though food security is an individual experience, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Military Community and Family Policy Patricia Barron says, "it is also a family, community, and national experience."⁴⁹ The costs of inaction are high, since persistent food insecurity among the military and veteran communities threatens U.S. national security. General Mark Milley told the Senate Defense Appropriations Subcommittee on May 3, 2022, that "taking care of our people is critically important for our entire chain of command. . . . No soldier, sailor, airman, marine, should struggle to feed their family. . . . If they're going to put their life on the line for this country, we owe it to them to make sure they're being taken care of."⁵⁰

READINESS

Hunger can negatively affect service members' mission readiness by taking a toll on their physical and mental health. Service members require adequate quantity and quality of food in order to be physically fit and perform their duties. When they or their families go hungry, mission readiness may be at stake.

Worrying about where their next meal will come from can also cause stress and anxiety, distracting from immediate tasks and training. As Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin said in 2021, "Our men and women in uniform and their families have enough to worry about. Basic necessities, like food and housing, shouldn't be among them."⁵¹

"Our men and women in uniform and their families have enough to worry about. Basic necessities, like food and housing, shouldn't be among them."

— Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin

RETENTION

Improving food security can also improve retention rates, which can decrease personnel costs and contribute to the long-term well-being of military families. Struggles with food security can cause service members to leave the military—a recent study of one Army base found that

food insecurity was associated with anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation, which were in turn associated with intentions to leave the Army.⁵²

Today's military population has changed substantially from previous generations. More people of color, women, and those with families are enlisting, and as the force continues to diversify, it will become increasingly important to address these members' concerns in order to retain talent. Data from the Army's 2021 exit surveys show that the effects of military service and deployment on families were the top reasons troops cited for leaving.⁵³ In a 2019 RAND study, women in the Coast Guard were more likely than men to say that family considerations could drive them to leave the military.⁵⁴ Food security is one mechanism by which to improve families' experiences and quality of life, thereby reducing the number of families who choose to leave the armed forces. Given the high representation of people of color and the concentration of food insecurity among junior enlisted ranks, addressing food insecurity in this segment of the military could also help retain service members of color and increase diversity in military leadership.⁵⁵ The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) estimates that the veteran population will continue to become more diverse over the next few decades, meaning that today's disparities among veterans could only continue to grow under current policies.⁵⁶

RECRUITMENT

Reducing food insecurity among service members and their families may also have long-term benefits for military recruiting efforts. As is true for many U.S. citizens, research shows that potential recruits and veterans could benefit from improvements to their diet quality in addition to quantity of food. According to a 2020 Congressional Research Service report, 21 percent of U.S. adolescents aged 12 to 19 and 19 percent of adults aged 18 to 24 do not meet standards for accession to the U.S. military because of obesity.⁵⁷ Perhaps counterintuitively, food insecurity greatly increases the risk of obesity. Furthermore, over half of DOD Education Activity students in military families were eligible for free or reduced-price meals in 2016, providing an indication of how many military children may be at elevated risk for malnutrition.⁵⁸

This has direct implications for future military recruiting: the children of current service members are more likely to enlist in the military as adults, so reducing food insecurity among military families can improve physical and cognitive health among future recruits.⁵⁹ In fact, in the National Military Family Association's 2021 survey of

military teens, 65 percent of teen respondents said they plan to serve in the military in the future—compared to only 13 percent of U.S. citizens aged 16 to 24 in the DOD's 2019 poll.⁶⁰

EFFORTS TO ADDRESS MILITARY FOOD SECURITY

There is a patchy record of attempts to address this issue through policy and legislation. The Basic Allowance for Subsistence (BAS) is meant to offset costs for a service member's meals but is not intended to be used for family members.⁶¹ As the number of service members with families increased, Congress recognized that the BAS was not sufficient to cover a household's food costs, so the Family Supplemental Subsistence Allowance (FSSA) was instituted in 2002 to eliminate service members' need to rely on SNAP benefits for their food security. It was originally open to all service members but was underutilized for two main reasons: it counted the BAH as income for eligibility calculations, which resulted in ineligibility for many otherwise-eligible service members, and it required application through a service member's base chain of command, which led service members to fear being perceived negatively by military leaders.⁶² Many potentially eligible families decided not to apply, and in 2016, the FSSA was terminated for service members living in the United States and U.S. territories.⁶³

The organization MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger and other organizations have advocated for years to exclude the BAH from income calculations for SNAP eligibility and other federal benefits.⁶⁴ Multiple legislative efforts to exclude the BAH have previously faltered; a bill introduced by Senators Tammy Duckworth and Lisa Murkowski on March 8, 2022, has increased attention to the issue.⁶⁵ Various other legislation has been proposed in the past several years, often focusing on access to federal nutrition assistance benefits such as SNAP and the National School Lunch Program as well as on other aspects of military life that impact food security, such as military families' employment and childcare. Efforts to address other aspects of military life that impact food security have come through both legislation and policy changes, such as the Military Spouse Employment Act of 2018 and the Jobs and Childcare for Military Families Act of 2018, portions of which were included in the FY 2018 NDAA.⁶⁶ The Military Spouse Residency Relief Act of 2009 also allows military spouses to retain legal residency in the state where they lived before a PCS move, and the FY 2020 NDAA allows

military spouses who are nurses, psychologists, and physicians to choose a “home state” but have their license valid in other locations through interstate compacts, among other expanded support for military spouses.⁶⁷

Some branches of service have begun to reduce the frequency of PCS moves on a voluntary basis. In FY 2014, the DOD spent \$4.3 billion for approximately 650,000 PCS moves, and other reports show that longer time between moves not only reduces these costs but can also lead to higher satisfaction and retention.⁶⁸ The Army was the first to change its policy on this, when it recommended in 2018 to allow soldiers to voluntarily remain in one location for longer than two to three years.⁶⁹ Other branches have since followed suit, with the Marine Corps most recently updating its PCS policy to “seek to keep Marines and their families in the same geographic duty station as long as opportunities for career growth exist.”⁷⁰ Though the same document says that “the institution will no longer view ‘homesteading’ [service members remaining in one location for an extended period of time] as a negative practice,” there is still significant stigma within the military community around service members who elect not to PCS frequently, which can deter some families from selecting this option. The Navy has not tried to reduce the frequency of moves, but it has made efforts to improve moving support, including resources such as MyPCS Mobile, the Entitlements Calculator, and Electronic Travel Vouchers.⁷¹

ONGOING EFFORTS

Multiple efforts are currently underway that may improve food security within the military. The DOD released the new Military Leaders Economic Security Toolkit, a resource to help military leaders identify and assist troops who are struggling with food security.⁷² In November 2021, Secretary Austin announced that the DOD would temporarily raise the BAH in some high-cost areas and create a 90-day roadmap to address food insecurity in the armed forces.⁷³

In 2021, a new Military Hunger Prevention Act was introduced in the House of Representatives by Representative Jimmy Panetta and in the Senate by Senator Tammy Duckworth. An amended version of the bills was included in the FY 2022 NDAA, which became law in December 2021.⁷⁴ The NDAA requires the DOD to institute a BNA for service members whose household income falls at or below 130 percent of the federal poverty guidelines (FPG), in the amount of 130 percent of the FPG minus their gross household income. While this will provide much-needed support for some low-income military families,

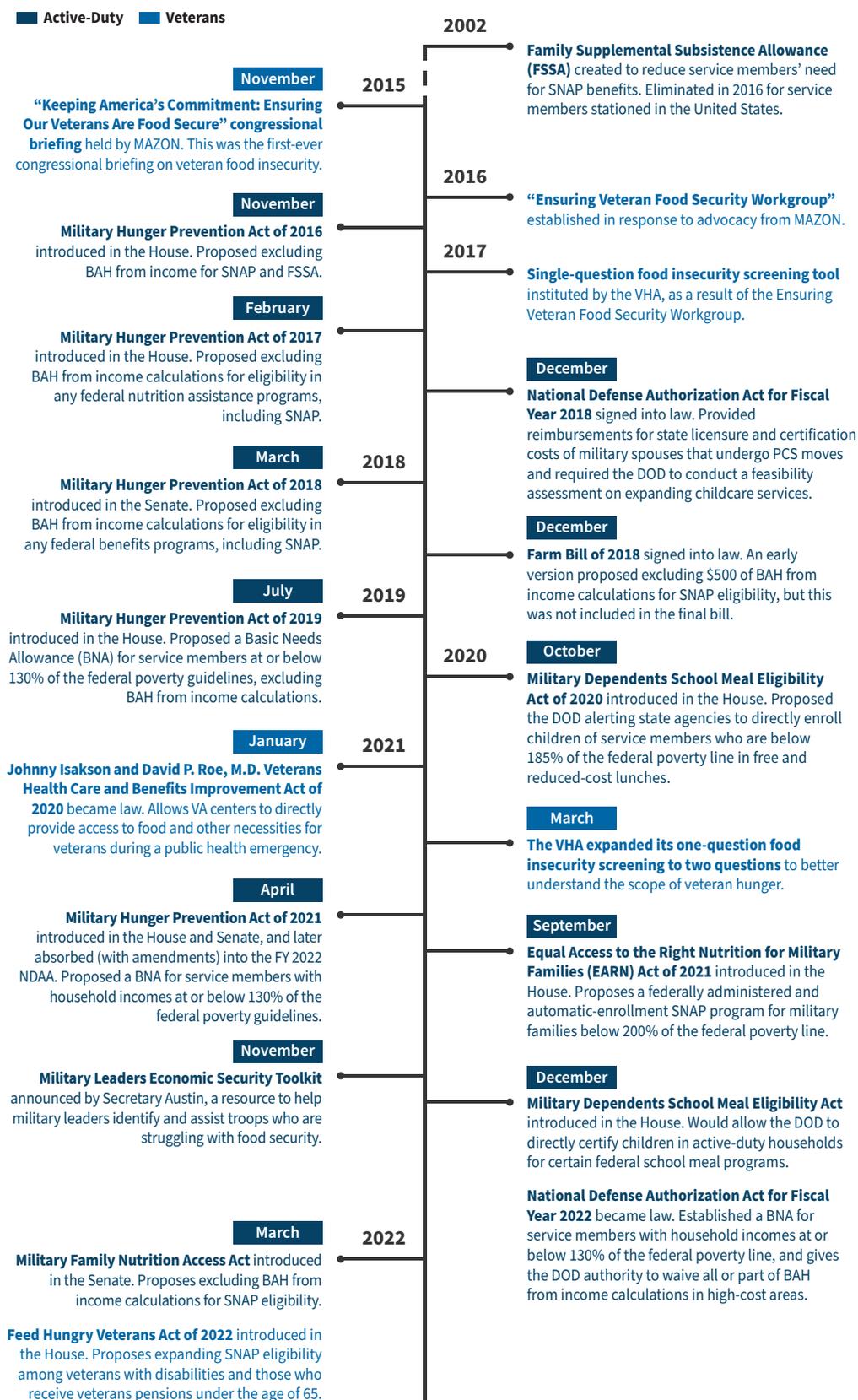
previous analyses have shown that 130 percent of the FPG is still inadequate for many families to afford basic living costs. The FPG was designed in the 1950s on now-outdated assumptions about household needs and merits revision.

The NDAA grants the secretary of defense discretion regarding assessment of the BAH in income calculations for the purposes of the BNA.⁷⁵ Discussions are ongoing within the DOD on whether and how much of the BAH to exclude, and for which geographic areas. The House of Representatives’ version of the NDAA had proposed entirely excluding the BAH from income calculations, and the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) estimated that 3,000 service members would qualify, with an average benefit of \$400 per month and a total cost of \$15 million per year.⁷⁶ The Senate version of the bill included the BAH as income for all service members, and while the CBO did not detail how many service members may be eligible under this version or average benefits per household, they estimated a total cost of \$1 million per year. Similar to SNAP eligibility, it can be inferred that far fewer families would be eligible to receive the BNA if the BAH is included as income.

The final version of the FY 2022 NDAA allows the secretary of defense to exclude “any portion of the basic allowance for housing” from income calculations for the new BNA—but only if a service member lives in an area with high cost of living.⁷⁷ The DOD might determine which areas are “high cost of living” in a manner similar to how they decide who receives the Cost of Living Allowance (COLA) within the continental United States (CONUS), an additional allowance provided to service members living in select high-cost areas.⁷⁸ Out of 1.3 million active-duty troops, only 6,000 members qualified for CONUS COLA in 2022.⁷⁹ If a similar method is used to determine which service members will have the BAH excluded from income for BNA eligibility, far fewer service members will be eligible for the new allowance than if all service members had the BAH excluded, regardless of location.

The FY 2022 NDAA also requires the DOD to conduct a study on food insecurity in the armed forces and to present findings to Congress by October 2022. This study will include an analysis of food deserts that affect members of the armed forces, an analysis of methods used by the secretary of defense to determine areas with high costs of living and food costs, and the effects of food insecurity on members and their dependents, among other elements.⁸⁰ Initial findings were due to Congress no later than March 31, 2022, though the study is still underway as of the time of writing. This follows a similar study that was mandated in the FY 2020 NDAA, the

Efforts to Address Military Food Insecurity: 2002–2022



Source: Authors' compilation based on multiple sources. See endnotes for complete references.

results of which have also not been released.

RECOMMENDATIONS

ACTIVE-DUTY FAMILIES

Support for military families begins during service. At CSIS in July 2021, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Patricia Barron said, “The department [DOD] is all in to make sure that no military family goes hungry or no military family doesn’t have the proper nutrition that they need at the table to do their very best.”⁸¹ Below are steps that the DOD, USDA, and Congress should consider to improve food security for active-duty military families.

Reform the new BNA. The BNA is a major step forward, but more work can still be done to ensure that no military families fall through the cracks. The BNA eligibility cutoff should be increased from 130 percent to 200 percent of the federal poverty guidelines, a level that better reflects today’s basic costs of living.⁸² The BAH should also be fully excluded from income calculations for BNA eligibility so that all service members receive equal treatment regardless of location.

Increase PCS support and flexibility. All branches of the armed forces should consider reducing the frequency of PCS moves to decrease personnel costs as well as unnecessary financial strain on military families—when such moves are not essential to a service member’s mission readiness and training. Branches that have already moved in this direction should focus on reducing the stigma of “homesteading” among military leadership so that service members who voluntarily remain in one location for longer are not treated differently with regard to pay and promotion. When families do move, the DOD could provide more support during the settling-in period, including increased reimbursements for moving expenses.

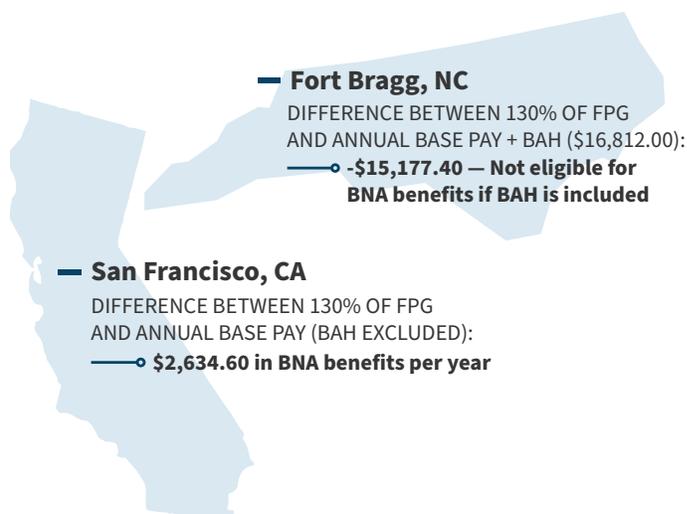
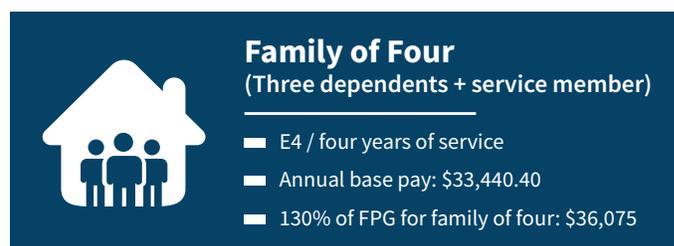
Increase support for military spouses to find and maintain professional careers. For military spouses who want or need to work, it is important to have opportunities to advance throughout their careers in similar ways to their civilian peers. The DOD can support this goal by working with state-based professional boards to expand professional licensing reciprocity when a military family moves to a new state and by providing additional support and incentives for private sector companies who wish to retain their military spouse employees after a PCS move.

Make childcare more affordable and accessible for spouses seeking employment. Childcare costs are one of the primary reasons military spouses are unable to

Basic Needs Allowance (BNA) Eligibility If BAH Is Included/Excluded Based on Duty Station

Excluding BAH from BNA income calculations for only some service members (those in high-cost areas) would create disparities between service members in different locations. Many low-income service members would be ineligible for the BNA solely based on where they are stationed, even if their families have just as much need for the new allowance.

For example, an E4 with three dependents would receive BNA benefits if they are stationed in San Francisco (a high cost of living area, according to the DOD’s COLA list), but would not receive BNA if stationed at Fort Bragg.



Source: “Regular Military Compensation (RMC) Calculator,” Department of Defense, <https://militarypay.defense.gov/calculators/rmc-calculator/>; “CONUS COLA Locations for 2022,” Department of Defense, <https://www.defensetravel.dod.mil/Docs/perdiem/browse/Allowances/COLA/CONUS/Locations/cclocs22.pdf>; “2022 Federal Poverty Guideline Chart,” Lawrence County Early Childhood Academy, revised January 25, 2022, http://www.headstartworks.org/sitebuildercontent/sitebuilderfiles/2022_federal_poverty_guideline_chart.pdf.

seek work. The DOD should expand on-base care so that more spouses seeking employment can access this service, and each branch of service should extend reimbursement waivers for spouses seeking employment from 90 days to up to seven months, the average length of time spouses reported needing to find a new job after

a PCS move.

Offer regular economic security trainings throughout service. Service members currently participate in financial literacy trainings connected with the Blended Retirement System at key career and life stages, and they receive information, resources, and tools through the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) as they prepare to transition to civilian life.⁸³ In addition to these, the services should offer information on economic security sooner and on a regular basis so that each military family is equipped with the knowledge and resources they need to be successful, such as information on household financial management, post-service employment options, and the DOD Credentialing Opportunities On-Line program.

Exclude the BAH from income calculations for SNAP eligibility and all other federal nutrition assistance programs. This would result in similar assessment of applications for SNAP and other federal programs between military families who live on base and military families who live off base or in on-base privatized housing, increasing military families' access to these important food security benefits.

TRANSITIONING OUT OF SERVICE

The transition out of military service is a particularly high-risk time for new veterans to experience food insecurity. Investing in preventative outreach and education can reduce future costs to individual veterans and to the VA. Collaboratory efforts by the DOD, VA, and USDA, authorized by Congress, could help ease the transition to civilian life and set all new veterans up for success.

Continue BNA payments for six months after leaving service. Lower-income families who were receiving the BNA during service may be at particularly high risk of becoming food insecure soon after leaving service. Extending BNA payments, or a payment modeled on the BNA, for six months would help ensure food security for veterans and their families while they settle into civilian life and find new employment. As the DOD will fund the BNA, the cost of an extended BNA-type payment would likely need to be borne by the VA, and administration of the extended payment would require demographic data sharing between the DOD and VA.

Improve transitional education and outreach. The VA conducts follow-up calls with new veterans around 90, 180, and 365 days post-separation through the Solid Start program. They should incorporate standardized food security screening questions into these calls with new

veterans and provide necessary resources and referrals, including information on SNAP eligibility and enrollment (including eligibility for student veterans), to prevent veterans from falling through the cracks.⁸⁴

Improve data sharing between the DOD, VA, and USDA. The DOD collects data on its service members throughout their time in the military; the VA collects data on veterans who visit its locations and seek services; and the USDA collects data on families that access federal nutrition assistance. These three agencies should collaborate to better share their data sets (maintaining all appropriate data privacy measures) to ease the transition from military to civilian life and ensure that new veterans are informed of all benefits to which they are entitled.

VETERANS

The veteran population is not a monolith; it has expanded and changed significantly over time, requiring solutions that reflect today's diverse veteran population. The following recommendations focus on targeting groups who are at a higher risk of food insecurity but have not been the focus of traditional VA outreach and services, including rural veterans, veterans of color, and female veterans.

Increase VA partnerships and collaboration with non-VA organizations. Many veterans, particularly those living in rural areas, do not have easy access to VA centers but may visit other service providers, such as veteran service organizations, community centers, homeless shelters, and food pantries. The VA already partners with many community organizations and should continue to expand these partnerships to reach all veterans. Food security screenings during intake at non-VA organizations should be included in these partnerships to complement the VHA's screening program and expand its reach beyond veterans who visit VA centers. Veterans who screen positively for food insecurity should be referred to application assistance for SNAP or other resources for which they may qualify.

Increase peer-to-peer outreach among veterans. Many veterans report not utilizing food and nutrition benefits that are available to them due to stigma, lack of information, or other factors. Increasing peer-to-peer outreach between veterans can encourage more veterans to access available federal, state, and local resources by counteracting some of the negative perceptions and incorrect or insufficient information that exists around food security.

GENERAL

Collect and release nationally representative data on

the extent of food insecurity among active-duty service members and their families. The DOD should collect and disseminate nationally representative data on food insecurity in all branches of the military and among veterans and should continue regular assessments to track food insecurity in the military and veteran communities across time. Additionally, the Pentagon should release the results of studies on food insecurity in the armed forces tasked to them in the FY 2020 and FY 2022 NDAs.

Reduce stigma around food insecurity in the military. The Military Leaders Economic Security Toolkit released in November 2021 was a step in the right direction and provides useful information for those who need it, but the information may not be utilized by all officers. To ensure uptake and awareness, the DOD should train officers on the tool kit and the importance of discussing these issues with their direct reports. More discussions during service can also have the added benefit of destigmatizing food insecurity among veterans, which may prompt more food-insecure veterans to seek help.

Expand online SNAP redemption options. The USDA began the SNAP Online Purchasing Pilot in April 2019, and it quickly gained popularity throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, expanding to all states except Alaska by early 2022.⁸⁵ Further expanding the program at commissaries and small retailers would increase SNAP redemption options for active-duty service members living farther from commissaries and for veterans in rural areas, respectively.

LOOKING AHEAD

As noted above, this brief is published at a time when great changes are underway on this issue. Moving forward, it will be important to assess the efficacy of these changes—such as the Military Leaders Economic Security Toolkit, the new BNA, and reducing the frequency of PCS moves—and of changes yet to be authorized, such as changes to SNAP eligibility. Likewise, data on food insecurity specifically among children of active-duty service members are limited and merit further attention.

This brief has focused on active-duty families and veterans

within the United States, but other military populations merit further research and consideration. Members of the National Guard, Reserves, and those living outside the continental United States experience unique challenges that may differ from those presented in this analysis. It is also important to note that while many studies have looked at the effects of military life on active-duty spouses and children, there is extremely limited evidence considering veterans' families. Individual food security is strongly connected with household food security, so this is an area that merits funding and attention in future research. ■

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This brief is made possible by the generous support of the Bob Woodruff Foundation.

The authors would like to thank the researchers, practitioners, and policymakers who participated in extensive stakeholder meetings in 2021 and 2022, which helped lay the foundation for this brief. Special thanks to those who reviewed and provided extensive feedback on this brief: Seamus Daniels, CSIS Defense Budget Analysis; Nipa Kamdar, Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center; Shelley MacDermid Wadsworth, Military Family Research Institute at Purdue University; Josh Protas, Mazon: A Jewish Response to Hunger; Matthew Rabbitt, USDA-ERS; and Christopher Reid, CSIS International Security Program and U.S. Air Force. The authors would like to thank the 2021–2022 CSIS military fellows (Commander Christopher Bernotavicius, Lieutenant Colonel Michelle Macander, Captain Brian McSorley, Colonel Danielle Ngo, Colonel Christopher Reid, and Colonel Matthew Strohmeyer), whose insights were invaluable. Finally, the authors would like to thank Tia Carr, CSIS GFSP event coordination and research intern, for her significant research contributions to this publication.

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