

# Military Spouses: Lessons (Un)learned from 31 Years of Research

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One of the first and most comprehensive studies of issues facing military spouses since the inception of the all-volunteer force is the 1992 Defense Manpower and Reserve Personnel Survey (Resnick et al., 1997). As summarized in Figure 1, many of the issues identified in this report have shaped research and interventions with military spouses over the past several decades. The most notable aspect of this report is how dissimilar the results are to more current research on military spouses. Indeed, a brief glimpse of the last 31 years of military spouse research suggests the narrative of the military spouse experience has remained unchanged since the Gulf War's conclusion.

Numerous studies since the 1992 survey have reported on the adverse effects and increased stress associated with separations and PCS moves on military spouse well-being (Allen et al., 2010; Friedman et al., 2015; Jennings-Kelsall et al., 2012; Norris et al., 2018). Studies have also consistently reported that military spouses frequently report higher levels of stress, depression, anxiety, and trauma disorders than their civilian counterparts (Erbes et al., 2017; Mailey et al., 2018; Manguno-Mire et al., 2007;

Mansfield et al., 2010; Yambo & Johnson, 2014). Last year, results from the Military Family Advisory Network survey of military spouse experience echoed the 1992 Manpower and Reserve findings by exhibiting the importance of military spouse lifestyle satisfaction on military retention (L'Esperance et al., 2022). Another consistent finding is that military spouses are more likely than service members to use behavioral health services; this finding lays the groundwork for current research suggesting that service members are more likely to seek behavioral health treatment—and have better treatment outcomes—when they are joined in treatment by their spouses or encouraged by their spouse to seek treatment (Goodman et al., 2020; Greenman & Johnson, 2013; Guay et al., 2011; Jennings et al., 2014; Khalifian et al., 2020; May, 2022). Since 1992, spouses have consistently reported their distress, resilience, and importance to researchers; however, there does not appear to be much evidence that three decades of research has helped mitigated military spouses' challenges or distress.

Despite politicians and military interest groups rallying around military spouse employment, military spouse unemployment rates have remained unchanged since 2015 (Office of People Analytics, 2023). While this trend is related to a host of systemic issues such as the unreliable funding and bureaucratic restrictions around the My Career Advancement Account Scholarship (MyCAA) Program (Bushatz, 2023; Kness, 2023), new licensing laws that will continue to rely on state boards to make decisions on transferability (Veterans Auto and Education Improvements Act, 2023), and promises of homesteading without feasible plans to deliver – the fact remains that military spouse unemployment has been a topic of research since the 1970s (Hayghe, 1974) and no study since then seems to have supported serious change.

In addition to issues of unemployment, the behavioral health treatment options for military spouses continue to dwindle despite research that has found military spouses report more psychological distress than their civilian counterparts (Allen et al., 2010; de Burgh et al., 2011; Norris et al., 2018) and that spouse mental health is strongly associated with Service member mental health (Dekel et al., 2010; Guay et al., 2011; Khalifian et al., 2022; Manguano-Mire et al., 2007). In 2018, changes in TRICARE led to increased copays and reduced reimbursement for civilian behavioral health providers (National Defense Authorization Act, 2016). As service members have priority at behavioral health clinics in military treatment facilities (MTFs) and Morale, Welfare, and Recreation (MWR) sponsored programs like the Community Counseling Program (CCP) and the Military

**Figure 1.** Selected Results from the 1992 DoD Surveys of Officer and Enlisted Personnel and Military Spouses.

- Spouses reported more stress related to military life than the member especially in relation to moves, separations, and related to communities surrounding military bases.
- Spouse satisfaction with military life increases the likelihood of retention and there is some evidence that spouse satisfaction with military life predicts retention even if the service member reports dissatisfaction with military life.
- Spouses more likely to use “supportive” Morale Welfare and Recreation (MWR) resources like behavioral health counseling for individuals and couples.
- The perceived stress of deployments is related to the joint perception of service members and their spouse which suggests it is the couple's combined experience, not the service member or spouse's alone, that determines the impact of deployments on the marriage, family, and military career projections.
- There are discrepancies in both factual and attitudinal differences between members and spouses which indicate that spouses and members have fundamentally different perceptions of military life. Because of this, spouses and members should not be used as proxy samples for one another and that both partners should be included in studies which impact the family unit.

Family Life Counseling program, the changes in TRI-CARE further restricted spouses' access to already limited sources of care. Additionally, spouses' access to behavioral health care stands to be further restricted by the congressionally mandated drawdown of MTFs in which spouses will be reassigned to civilian care providers (National Defense Authorization Act, 2016). As the civilian healthcare system continues to be strained by the effects of COVID-19, this shift from MTF to civilian care stands to increase the prevalence of previously documented barriers to spouse mental health care, such as long wait times for behavioral health treatment, financial barriers to accessing treatment, and a lack of consistent care between duty stations (Cole et al., 2021).

Considering the research and policy trends presented, one cannot help but wonder why we continue to study military spouses. If the field of military psychology was merely interested in understanding how the military lifestyle impacts spouses, we have 31 years of research that suggests it impacts them negatively. If the field had hoped to use research on military spouses to encourage policy changes or to improve their experience, it seems we have failed that mission. Therefore, as we come to the conclusion of military spouse appreciation month, we must ask ourselves what one more survey on military spouses' attitudes, perceptions, or symptoms could tell us that we do not already know. Or, perhaps more importantly, how many more years of research do we need until we are fully convinced of military spouses' worth and sacrifice?

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