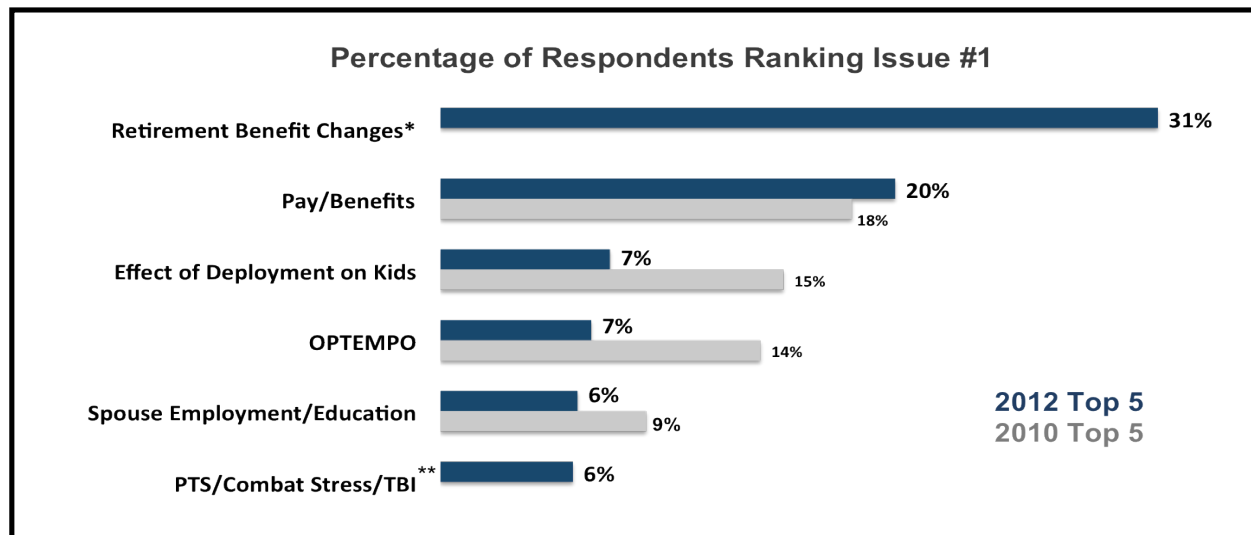




# 2012 Military Family Lifestyle Survey

The comprehensive report is available on Blue Star Families' website:  
[www.bluestarfam.org](http://www.bluestarfam.org)

In November 2011, Blue Star Families fielded an online survey of military family members to determine the major issues facing today's military families. The key concerns identified by the responding military family members are: **pay/benefits**, with specific emphasis on **changes to retirement benefits**, the **effects of deployment on children**, **general operational tempo (OPTEMPO)**, **military spouse employment**, and issues surrounding **Post Traumatic Stress (PTS)**, **combat stress**, and **Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI)**. Additionally, this year's survey also added sections on the topical areas of suicide prevention, financial literacy, exceptional family member programming (EFMP), care-giving, and public policy. This year's survey also continued to track how military families support each other, seek out resources, and stay connected to their communities and to their service members.



\* Option not included in 2010 survey. \*\*Option not ranked as top issue in 2010. Slight percentage differences occur among the bottom four issues when percentages are shown to the tenths: Effect of Deployment on Kids= 7.4% OPTEMPO= 6.5%; Spouse Employment/Education= 6.0%; PTSD/Combat Stress/TBI= 5.8%.

## Top Issues

**Changes to Retirement Benefits and Pay/Benefits:** Thirty-one percent of respondents listed changes to retirement benefits as their top military family life issue while twenty percent of respondents cited pay/benefits as their top concern. When veterans were asked about concerns related to separating from the military, twenty-five percent cited employment opportunities as their top concern, nineteen percent cited changes to health care access, and six percent cited issues with civilian licensing or certification.

**Effects of Deployments on Children:** Seven percent of respondents listed effects of deployment on their children as their top concern. When asked a separate question about overall concerns for their military children, twenty-three percent of parents mentioned “deployment” in their responses. Fifty-two percent said there were some negative effects to deployment, but some positive effects too. Forty-one percent felt like their community did not embrace opportunities to help their military children.

**OPTEMPO:** Seven percent of respondents listed the operational tempo of the military as their top concern. Deployments account for half the total time service members have spent away from their families since September 11, 2001 while trainings and TDY's are also significant contributors to family separations. And, the length of time spent apart was found to impact a respondent's support of continued military service for their service member. Fifty-two percent of respondents who had experienced thirteen to twenty-four months of deployment separation supported continued military service whereas support dropped to fifteen percent for those who had experienced thirty-seven months or more of separation.

**Military Spouse Employment:** Fifty-seven percent of spouses felt that being a military spouse had a negative impact on their ability to pursue a career. Of the sixty percent who were not currently employed, fifty-three percent wanted to be. When asked their reasons for not working, ninety-two percent mentioned job market alignment and sixty-seven percent cited childcare issues. Twenty-seven percent of spouses had faced challenges with their state licenses, certifications or other professional qualifications due to military-oriented moves across state lines, and twenty-six percent currently are or have operated their own business as a military spouse.

**PTS/TBI/Combat Stress:** Six percent of respondents listed PTS/TBI/Combat Stress as their top military family life issue. Three percent of respondents reported that their service member had been diagnosed with TBI while eleven percent reported that their service member was diagnosed with PTS. However, twenty-six percent reported that, *regardless of diagnosis*, their service member had exhibited symptoms of PTS. Of those who reported that their service member had exhibited symptoms of PTS, sixty-two percent had not sought treatment.

#### **Additional Findings Of Note:**

**Children's Education:** Ninety-two percent of respondents were confident they could help their children make positive in-school decisions regarding their child's future during a spouse's deployment. However, sixty-four percent said their child's participation in extracurricular activities was negatively impacted by deployment. Sixty-three percent of respondents reported that their children's school did not utilize a Military School Liaison, forty-seven percent of respondents reported that their children's school do not find opportunities to celebrate and include the service member in the classroom, and forty-one percent said their child's school was not responsive to unique military situations, all indicators that more needs to be done in the area of military child education.

**EFMP:** Seventeen percent of respondents said their family was currently enrolled in the EFMP, while thirteen percent said they were not currently enrolled but thought their family would qualify. Twenty percent of EFMP family respondents reported that EFMP enrollment has had a negative impact on their service member's career. The top three challenges associated with moving for families with exceptional family members were finding new doctors and therapists (forty-three percent), TRICARE (referrals and prescriptions) (thirty-seven percent), and educational accommodations (thirty-four percent).

**Suicide Prevention:** The percentage of family members who have considered suicide (ten percent) is almost equal to the percentage of service members who have considered suicide (nine percent). Forty-two percent of respondents felt that the Department of Defense was handling the issue of suicide poorly. Fifty-seven percent thought the top priority in prevention efforts should be aimed at preventative training for frontline supervisors and commanders.

**Financial Literacy:** When asked about financial education within the military community, fifty-three percent of respondents said their unit provided financial education information and they knew where to go with questions. Sixty-two percent said they wanted greater emphasis on preventative financial education and sixty-eight percent felt stress about debt, savings or their overall financial condition. Sixty-four percent owed less than \$5,000 on their credit cards.

**Volunteerism and Civic Engagement:** Eighty-one percent of respondents had volunteered in the last year, with the largest percentage of outlets being informal in nature. Impressively, ten percent of respondents volunteered over thirty hours a month. Eighty-nine percent of respondents are currently registered to vote, and eighty-two percent had voted in the last presidential election. Other exciting findings were that eighty-two percent of respondents believe that the all-volunteer force has worked well and seventy-three percent support their service member's continued military service. Sixty percent would advise a young person to join the military and seventy percent expressed satisfaction with the military lifestyle.

**Public Policy – Don't Ask Don't Tell:** When asked about the effects, if any, of the reversal of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" (DADT), a majority of respondents felt the repeal had no impact. In fact, seventy-two percent of respondents said it had no impact on their service member's ability to do his/her job, sixty-five percent said it had no impact on their service member's desire to re-enlist or stay in the military, and sixty percent said it had no impact on their service member's morale. Fifty-six percent said the repeal had no impact on mission readiness or national security, and fifty-five percent of spouses said it had no impact on their military support group's morale.

**Social Media:** Seventy-seven percent of respondents indicated that social media is important or very important for communicating with their service member during deployment, while seventy-one percent reported using social media to connect with other military families. Additionally, while forty-five percent of overall respondents said their service members' unit uses Facebook to disseminate information, only sixteen percent said they use social media to stay connected with the unit. The top three resources for online information-gathering were split between official and non-official sources - Facebook, Military OneSource, and Military.com.

#### **Conclusion**

After a decade of war, military families are generally coping well with the unique stressors of military family life. However, as indicated by the results detailed here, community and government leaders can do more to help make military life more sustainable. While military families have the same life experiences common to many families, including balancing work and family, parenting issues such as caregiving and education concerns, and maintaining healthy relationships, they also have unique stressors relating to the requirements of the military lifestyle. Many factors of military family life, from frequent separation and the subsequent pre-deployment and reintegration processes to the issues surrounding frequent relocation and injuries sustained in the line of service produce added pressures that need to be examined and addressed in order to maintain health and wellness within both the military and family contexts.