



Executive Summary: Indicative Research Findings on Military Quality-of-Life



BACKGROUND

In 2024, the **Association of Defense Communities (ADC)** commissioned **Feedback to conduct a Digital Ethnography Study to illuminate military family quality-of-life (QoL) issues**. Addressing the vital topics of housing, healthcare, education, childcare and spouse employment from the **Five & Thrive** framework, the research team analyzed tens of thousands of discussions to distill behavioral insights. This summary outlines key challenges and opportunities revealed.

Top Takeaways from the Study

- Stigma and bureaucratic barriers conceal issues and people.
- Exceptional Family Member Program (EFMP) sentiment is the leading indicator of broader military quality-of-life (QoL) issues.
- Individual base and community programs yield more immediate and impactful results compared to large-scale initiatives.

Facts About the Research Data

- 50,000+ Behavioral Data Points have been analyzed in this study, providing deep insights into the quality of life for military families.
- 75,000,000+ Additional Data Points are from other studies conducted by the team of researchers and subject matter experts considered, enriching understanding and findings.

Conclusion

The set of challenges facing military families are broad and structural, but in many cases are heavily influenced by location-specific factors. Because of this local installations and community programs tend to yield more immediate and impactful results compared to large-scale, national initiatives.



Five & Thrive is a strategic framework aimed at improving the quality of life (QoL) for military families, underscored by the implications for our military and national security as QoL directly impacts the recruitment, readiness, resilience, and retention of the armed forces.

KEY INSIGHTS

Overall, Military Families are:

- **STRUGGLING**– with finances, mental health, and basic needs such as food, housing, childcare, education, and respite
- **FEARFUL**– of career or mission repercussions for seeking help, or making struggles visible
- **DISORIENTED**– by chronic instability from PCS, where last minute changes/denials create logistical/cost nightmares

In carrying out the mission, they feel:

- **UNSUPPORTED**– by centralized programs that fail to see and help individual needs
- **AT ODDS**– with leadership and stigmas when asking for QoL improvements
- **MISSION-DRIVEN**– they are proud to serve, but asked to sacrifice too much family livelihood

Topic 1: Housing

“So with the economy and inflation how it is, how are you holding up? ... it just seems like money is evaporating faster than expected.”

“I have enough money to live comfortably for the rest of my life... as long as I die by next Wednesday.”

“E-4 all my bills are paid but I got \$40 to my name rn.”

*“Stationed in Hawaii and the first thing I got told was our COLA is going down. Normally I wouldn't care except Hawaii is expensive as sh*t to live in.”*

Cost of living is frequently cited as a primary concern. The preference for off-base housing is increasing, with open discussion around better utility support, streamlined processes, and a balance of military and civilian life. Additionally, the cost-effectiveness of taking the housing stipend off-base, where families can keep any unspent money, further incentivizes off-base living in some cases. Geographically, we see these voices get stronger in regard to remote or rural bases.

Topic 2: Healthcare

“We have sh*t we deal with and if we don't start having different conversations... we all know where that usually ends up...Live die repeat.”

Healthcare covers a lot of ground, but the data highlights a critical need to prioritize mental health within the broader scope of healthcare. Military personnel often discuss the unique stressors and challenges that can impact their mental health, including frequent relocations, separation from family, hostile environments from leadership, and trauma directly related to their service experiences. In our research we've seen how stigma, lack of understanding, and logistical barriers can often prevent individuals from seeking the help they need and creates additional pressure for their families to keep their struggles bureaucratically invisible as well.

KEY INSIGHTS continued

Topic 3: Education

“DoD schools are stable and meet IEP needs well but there’s a sheer drop-off for any special needs beyond.”

The engagement and public discussion related to education— both real-time and those reflecting retroactively as adults— share their schooling experiences with each other, discuss the challenges of transitioning between military base schools and off-base schools with mostly civilian children— not to mention the frequency of those transitions. A key theme is how children even talk about how leadership affects the family.

Topic 4: Childcare

“This is probably for me at least the most stressful thing about PCSing.”
—Referring to the struggle of finding quality childcare with each relocation.

Military families discuss the significant challenges they face in accessing quality childcare. Support programs are often inaccessible to working parents, and the rising costs of childcare can negate the benefits of a second income. Even affordable care options can be of poor quality and/or requiring long commutes. These issues are exacerbated by the transient nature of military life due to frequent relocations (PCSing), leading some families to consider leaving the military. Families discuss that waitlists for daycare can be a year-long or more, adding to the stress. This highlights the need for more accessible and affordable high-quality childcare and respite options for military family caregivers.

Topic 5: Spouse Employment

“Moving is not only going to tank any prospects I had of making my dream promotion but I am also likely going to have to change fields and make significantly less money (like 1/3rd of my current salary based on the job postings I’m seeing).”

Frequent relocations exacerbate career instability for military spouses, even forcing them to conceal their status during job searches. Systemic issues, including pay disparities and inadequate employment programs, are frequently discussed, highlighting the necessity for more supportive employment pathways.



SIGN UP

Want to learn more about the Digital Ethnography Study?

Sign up for alerts and register to join a special webinar to review the findings later this month.