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Food Insecurity among Military and Veteran Families

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Food insecurity, which is defined by the United States Department of Agriculture as a “lack of access to enough food for an active, healthy life for all household members”¹ was present in 10.5% of American households in 2019, before the COVID-19 pandemic.¹ By late March and early April 2020, food insecurity rose to 21.9%, an 11.4 percentage point increase and the highest level ever recorded in the 25-year history of the measure.² In the general population, food insecurity tends to be higher among non-white households, those with lower levels of income and education, households with children, people living alone, and single-headed households with children. The risk of food insecurity also varies by geography: Rates of food insecurity are higher in urban cities and in rural areas, and food insecurity varies significantly across states from a low in New Hampshire (6.6%) to a high in Mississippi (15.7%).¹ Although our country spends billions of dollars annually to create the best military force in the world, food insecurity is prevalent among our active-duty military personnel and families and persists among our veterans, especially our disabled veterans.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- By early April 2020, food insecurity rose to 21.9% among U.S. households - the highest rate ever recorded.
- Before COVID-19, about 1 in 7 military families experienced food insecurity.
- Data collected since COVID-19 hit the U.S. in early-2020 suggest that between 1 in 5 and 1 in 3 military families have experienced food insecurity in the last year.
- Food insecurity risk is also high among veterans, particularly disabled veterans.
- Food insecurity among soldiers is associated with lower likelihood of re-enlisting.
- Eligibility standards prevent many military families from accessing SNAP benefits.
- Several policy revisions are needed, including a change to SNAP eligibility guidelines for veterans and provision of transitional SNAP benefits to those leaving the military.

Food Insecurity is Prevalent Among Military Families

While the Department of Defense does not collect systematic data on the level of food insecurity among military families, several different estimates suggest that around 1 in 7 military families experienced food insecurity before COVID-19.^{3,4,5} Estimates collected during the COVID-19 era from one Army installation indicated that 1 in 3 military families experienced marginal food insecurity in Summer 2020⁶ and estimates collected in Winter 2021 by the Military Family Advisory Network indicated that 1 in 5 military families were food insecure.⁵ In addition, Feeding America estimates that 20% of all families served by their national network of food banks contained a household

member currently or formerly connected to the military.⁷ Currently, food pantries operate in or near every military installation in the country.

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), which is the cornerstone of federal food and nutrition assistance programs, has eligibility standards that specifically prevent military families from accessing benefits. Military families that live off base receive a Basic Housing Allowance (BAH) which is based on the geographic duty station, pay grade, and dependency status and is designed to cover the cost of housing and utilities.⁸ However, this benefit, which resembles housing assistance for civilian households, is treated as income during the SNAP determination process and many military families stationed in high-cost housing areas are rendered ineligible for SNAP benefits. **SNAP eligibility guidelines should be revised to treat the BAH as it does other forms of federal housing assistance.**

The Transition from Military to Civilian Life is Often Accompanied by Hardship

Food insecurity likely causes retention problems for the military. Among soldiers who indicated in 2019 that they were likely to leave the military after their current service period, 46% were marginally food insecure (compared to 36% for those who were neutral or unlikely to leave the military). Additionally, food insecurity among active-duty members is associated with poor mental health outcomes (depression, anxiety and suicidal ideation) and poor mental health is associated with an intention to leave military service.⁹ Unfortunately, the transition from military to civilian life is often a point of increased hardship, especially for those separating at younger ages with fewer job skills that easily transition to the civilian economy.¹⁰ Unemployment is a significant problem among what are known as Gulf War-era II (post 9/11 wars) veterans, particularly those aged 25 to 34 (IVMF 2021).¹¹ Military service members who transition to civilian life face multiple new challenges with regards to their nutrition. Individuals who transition no longer have access to free or subsidized meals in military mess halls and cafeterias or lower-cost and tax-free groceries at military commissaries. To the extent that these benefits are not replaced immediately with civilian labor market earnings or family and network support, military members may experience food insecurity during the transition period. In my own research with Andrew London (Syracuse University), I have documented that SNAP participation is about 10% higher during the first year after leaving military service than it is for all veterans (7.1% versus 6.5%).¹² However, given the social stigma associated with SNAP participation as well as fears about ineligibility, this level of participation likely underestimates the share of recently transitioned veterans who are eligible for SNAP benefits but do not apply.

The U.S. government could demonstrate the value of our service members **by providing an automatic transitional SNAP benefit to all families leaving military service at the E4 level and below.** If half of the separating service members qualify for the benefit (or about 100,000 per year) and received the FY2019 average household benefit level of \$258 per month, this would cost the federal government approximately \$154 million annually (a very low percentage of the total federal SNAP benefits of \$55.6 billion in FY2019).¹³

Disabled Veterans Are at a High Risk of Food Insecurity

While military service members are selected for their good health, veterans are more likely to be disabled than civilians due to the unique risks of injury and exposure to circumstances such as combat, interpersonal violence, substance use and stress-related mental health issues that are associated with disability.^{14,15} Having a disability is a significant risk factor for being food insecure or having other forms of material hardship.^{16,17,18,19,20} According to a 2020 analysis by Alisha Coleman-Jensen at the US Department of Agriculture, U.S. households with an adult who is unable to work because of a disability face levels of food insecurity that are 3 times that of the general population (31.6 versus 10.5% in 2019).^{21,22,23} According to analysis by She and Livermore (2007), individuals with a disability make-up over half of the population identified with food insecurity.²⁴

In research with Andrew London and Janet Wilmoth (Syracuse University), I have found that among adults aged 25-65, being a veteran is associated with a reduction in the probability that a household experiences poverty, food

insecurity or other forms of material hardship. However, being a disabled veteran removes this protective effect of veteran status.²⁵ While veterans tend to be in better health around retirement age, they tend to experience steeper age-related declines in health.²⁶ When examining older adults (those aged 65 and above), we found that, while food insufficiency (a measure that is similar to the most severe form of food insecurity, very low food security) was lower generally among older adults than younger adults, disabled veterans had a higher risk of food insufficiency than disabled non-veterans.²⁷

Veterans with a disability should have a substantial economic advantage relative to their civilian counterparts. They should have the ability to receive disability compensation through the Veterans Affairs in addition to the civilian Social Security Disability Program. However, in previous work using the Survey of Income and Program Participation, (with Wilmoth and London), I found that joint participation in both programs is quite rare. In 2008, about 13% of veterans received support from the VA's Disability Compensation Program, 7% received support from Social Security's Disability Insurance Program, but only 4% receipt support from both programs.²⁸ While eligibility for the two disability programs does differ significantly, the low levels of joint participation likely reflects some level of stigma and lack of information that disabled veterans face when considering civilian disability benefits. Perhaps because of these barriers, previous research has shown that disabled veterans have lower incomes than non-veterans who report the same number of disabilities.²⁹

Improved coordination of services between the Veterans Affairs Disability Compensation Program and the Social Security Administration's Disability Insurance Program is needed to improve access to these programs, such as creating categorical eligibility under certain circumstances, raise household income for disabled veterans and reduce food insecurity. More generally, the concentration of food insecurity within households dealing with disabilities is an area that deserves further policy attention.

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