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Food Insecurity is a Common Problem for Military Service Members and their Families

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Nearly 1 in 4 U.S. active-duty service members experienced food insecurity in 2020.
- Low participation in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) among active-duty service members is related to unintended barriers created by program eligibility rules.
- Barriers to SNAP among active-duty members, such as the inclusion of the Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH) during the SNAP income eligibility determination process, should be removed.

Food insecurity – when a person or a household does not have enough nutritious food to live an active, healthy life – impacts the performance, professional success, and health and wellness of military-service members and their families. Children from food insecure households are more likely to experience negative cognitive, behavioral, physical, and psychological outcomes than children who are not food insecure. Food insecurity is related to economic insecurity, as service members who experience financial difficulty also report higher rates of food insecurity.

This brief summarizes the key findings of a recent memorandum released by the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness entitled, *Strengthening Food Security in the Force: Strategy and Roadmap*.¹ The memorandum was based on data taken from the Status of Forces Survey of Active-Duty Members (SOFS-A). The survey captured responses from over 1.3 million active-duty Service members across all services, in the United States and overseas. It was administered from October 26, 2020, to January 25, 2021, and collected self-reported information on food hardships over the preceding 12 months.

Food Insecurity is High among Service Members

In 2020, nearly 1 in 4 active-duty service members experienced food insecurity at some point – a rate two times higher than the general population.² The high levels of food insecurity among active-duty military households is related to instability in household income and barriers to accessing food assistance programs that are specific to the military experience. For example, active-duty military household income is often lower than civilian households with comparable education partly due to more stable employment histories among civilian workers.³ Military spouses are specifically disadvantaged in the civilian labour market - working fewer hours and earning less than non-military spouses – because of service members’ unpredictable deployment schedules, long work hours, and frequent relocations.³

Additionally, active-duty military households use U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) food and nutrition assistance programs, like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), at lower rates compared to civilian households. The relatively low SNAP participation rates may be related to the unintended barriers created by the program eligibility rules.³ For example, service members who receive the basic allowance for housing (BAH) may be deemed ineligible for SNAP because the BAH is treated as household income (unlike other federal housing subsidies), resulting in many households having income above the allowable threshold to qualify for the program.³

Food Insecurity and Spousal Unemployment

The relationship between food insecurity and spousal unemployment is notable. Those with an unemployed spouse had significantly higher rates of food insecurity than married members. Specifically, among enlisted military households with an unemployed spouse, 43% reported experiencing food insecurity during 2019. COVID-19 impacts may also have contributed to reduced labor force participation among spouses.⁴

What Can be Done to Improve Food Security among Active-Duty Military Members?

The U.S. government is currently developing programs to strengthen food and economic security of service members and families. Some of these efforts include “Meals in Minutes” classes, which provide tools and strategies to prepare quick, nutritious meals to Army service members. The Navy analyzes economic security screening questions to capture food insecurity data among its members, and the Air Force tracks service members who request food security assistance and provides counselling on SNAP through the Military Leaders Economic Security Toolkit.⁵ In January 2023, military members stationed in the U.S. who have dependents and a gross household income below 130% of the federal poverty guidelines will be eligible for the Basic Needs Allowance (BNA) benefit - a new initiative aimed at improving economic security among active-duty military households.⁶

Additionally, the Department of Defense’s (DoD) food security strategy and roadmap continues to address spousal unemployment. This strategy includes the ability for military spouses employed as federal civilians to work remotely overseas, resources that connect spouses to federal government employment opportunities, and access to affordable childcare services through the expanded Military Child Care in Your Neighborhood PLUS (MCCYN-PLUS) assistance program to other states.

Efforts to increase participation in existing USDA nutrition assistance programs such as SNAP should be examined to further support active-duty members and their families. For example, the BAH is currently counted as income in the SNAP eligibility determination process, making many military families ineligible for benefits. USDA should consider treating the BAH in a similar manner to Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) sponsored housing assistance programs and the Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program.

A Note on Measuring Food Insecurity

To measure food insecurity, the DoD included a validated USDA instrument and adopted its definitions for levels of food security. This survey formed part of the Status of Forces Survey of Active-Duty Members (SOFS-A) and the Active-Duty Spouse Survey (ADSS) to allow for food security reporting by service members and their spouses, respectively. This measure of food insecurity has some limitations worth noting. The shortened version does not capture child food insecurity and may understate the severity of the problem. Additionally, reported levels of food insecurity are likely under-reported given the stigma associated with acknowledging weakness among active-duty service members. This concern, however, might have been mitigated by administering surveys online.

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