

Policy Brief: Food Insecurity Among Veterans & Military Families

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Goal statement

The following policy brief will advocate for and propose a long-term resolution to the crisis of food insecurity among U.S. veterans and military families due to challenges they face while serving in the military. The issues can stem from economic instability, spousal unemployment, lack of access to childcare, long-standing and frequent station changes and lack of information to address the stigmas around food insecurity. It is important to close these gaps and to address the issue of food insecurity holistically and to respond to and improve the short-term needs of veterans and military families so that they remain food secure.

Scope of the Problem

Food insecurity among service members and their families is a long-standing concern in the armed forces, in Congress, and among advocacy groups. It is widely debated that the extent of the problem and whether any level of food insecurity is acceptable at all in the U.S. military, and it is not. Food insecurity among U.S. veterans and military families is a national security concern: it multiplies stress on active-duty personnel, diminishes well-being among service members and their children who are more likely to serve in the military as adults and it can even hinder recruitment for the armed services. U.S. veterans also face challenges with mental and physical health and finding and maintaining employment after completing their military service.

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs has reported that 1.5 million veterans live in poverty, and their poverty rates are rising. Increasing poverty among veterans has a profound effect on whether they can remain food secure, and this can affect their health outcomes because

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not having access to enough food for an active, healthy lifestyle can have a negative outcome on their well-being.

Food insecurity can cause serious health issues when people have to choose between spending money on food and medicine or healthcare, Food insecurity can make it more difficult for a child to learn and grow, Food insecurity can lead to difficult decisions like choosing between food and rent, bills, and transportation Part of what makes food insecurity so difficult to solve is that the underlying causes poverty, unemployment/under-employment, and inconsistent access to enough healthy food are often deeply interconnected. Moving in and out of food insecurity adds more stress to a household that may already be wrestling with instability and unpredictability. It is essential for the veterans and their families to maintain their well-being (Cohen, 2022).

In 2019, it was reported that 17.4 million veterans lived in the United States, of whom three-fourths were of working age (i.e., between the ages of 18 and 64). These veterans faced many challenges to maintaining their health and well-being due to circumstances related to their military service and to their unique demographic composition (Rabbit et al, May 2021).

It was noted that one of the fastest growing and youngest groups of veterans those who served after September 11, 2001, is more likely to have a service-connected disability than veterans from other service periods. ***“Instead of having three meals a day, we ate two. Sometimes, we slept until late so we could beat the hunger and ate once a day.”*** (Spouse of a post-9/11 Army Veteran).

These factors suggest working-age veterans are vulnerable to issues with food insecurity. Understanding food insecurity among working-age veterans compared with working-age

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nonveterans can provide useful information for maintaining a healthy veteran population well into the future (Lutz, 2022).

These factors alone suggested that the working-age veterans were more vulnerable to having issues of food insecurity. Having an understanding of food insecurity among working-age veterans compared with working-age non-veterans could provide practical data for maintaining a healthy veteran population well into the future. In a national survey conducted in 2019, 1 in 8 survey respondents was experiencing food insecurity. The COVID-19 pandemic compounded the issue which caused that number to rise to 1 in 5 which were shown by results that were released in 2021. Research released in 2022 showed that 1 in 6 military families are presently food insecure (Military Family Advisory Network, *Food Insecurity*. 2023).

Past Policy

The research discussed in this brief focuses on information related to the root causes of food insecurity and how it developed. It is important to understand the root causes and the underpinnings in order of food insecurity in the military to determine the best policies, programs, and activities to address the issues found among military families.

Stakeholders suggest that the root causes of food insecurity among service members are both acute and chronic; on the one hand, changes in household income play a role. Factors like a spouse of a veteran may lose a job as a result of relocating so there will be loss of income and sometimes unreimbursed expenses when families move to new assignments which can affect the household.

There can be delays in a family receiving their basic allowance for housing (BAH) the may delay a family receiving income on time. There may be certain cost-of-living expenses that

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are not covered by geographic differences in military compensation, and changes in special and incentive pays which all present issues to the family. And on the other hand, chronic issues like financial mismanagement, lack of financial literacy by service members, chronic spouse unemployment, and support of extended family are indicators that food insecurity can be connected with a variety of other factors that can affect a service members house finances (Lutz, 2022).

According to the U.S. Department of Defense, in 2020, nearly a quarter (24%) of active duty service members were food insecure and junior enlisted service members were at the highest risk of experiencing food insecurity and solutions that target food insecurity alone may not be as effective as approaches that recognize the array of financial and other factors related to food insecurity (Feeding America Hunger & Food Insecurity, 2023).

The National Defense Authorization Act for fiscal year 2020 directed the Secretary of Defense to report on food insecurity among members of the armed forces and their dependents. The report included an assessment of the current extent of food insecurity among not only service members and their dependents but also those living on post and who may not have been receiving the basic allowance for housing (BAH).

It also included service members who had active participation in food assistance programs; barriers to accessing this assistance; a description of other sources of income to meet basic needs; an assessment of the feasibility and advisability of a basic needs allowance (BNA) for low-income members; and three sets of recommendations (for policies, programs, and activities) to address food insecurity among military families (Lutz, 2022).

In December of 2020, the Thirteenth Quadrennial Review of Military Compensation, published that they found that between 0.08 percent and 0.42 percent of service members

stationed in the United States were enrolled in the SNAP Program at some point in 2019. The enrollment in the general U.S. population was significantly lower, which was 9.6 percent the same year. The low numbers of enrollment in SNAP did not indicate that there were low levels of need by service members but that there were barriers such as stigma, administrative inconsistencies, and lack of information and awareness that prevented families from accessing the necessary resources they needed (Lutz, 2022).

As data is researched and made available the public, what is uncovered are the real challenges that military families face globally and as a result, this has led to which has led to policy changes, program development, and national collaboratives to solve food insecurity on a national level. But we know that not all military family struggles can be solved on a national level because many of these problems have to be solved on local levels so they will require local solutions. As light is shone on the 'national stage', the real needs of military families will be met (Military Family Advisory Network, 2023).

Current Policy

Utilizing food assistance including federal nutrition assistance programs and charitable food aid can carry significant stigma and negative perceptions in the military and in veteran communities. Military families experience the feelings of Some military families experience the feelings of embarrassment because they have to apply for assistance like SNAP or because they have to visit food pantries to make ends meet.

There is a feeling of shame and military families feel a loss of dignity because the they experience professional repercussions when they have to report to their leaders that they are in need of food assistance or because they may not be able to manage their money and situations

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like this can affect their security clearances, their performance reviews, and their career prospects and this should not be the case (Military Family Advisory Network, 2023).

It is clear that when the USDA calculates the household incomes for SNAP eligibility for military veterans and their families they may be disqualified from accessing federal nutrition benefits. This is due to how the Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH) gets counted and calculated as income for the purposes of SNAP eligibility. This means that a military family who resides off base or even a military family who lives in a private military home on base may be considered by the USDA to have a higher income and they become less likely to qualify for SNAP benefits. Such regulations are unfavorable for those military families (Basic Needs Allowance, 2023).

A recent working paper simulating changes in SNAP eligibility under different BAH exemption levels found that exempting a service member's BAH from income would increase SNAP eligibility among active-duty households by as much as 70 percent. However, the USDA Food and Nutrition Service (USDA-FNS), which administers SNAP, says that the BAH does not currently meet any of the income exclusions outlined in SNAP regulations, meaning the BAH cannot be exempted from income calculations for SNAP (Military Family Advisory Network, 2023).

Currently, the federal government does not count the BAH as income for the purposes of taxes and most other federal benefits. The value of federal housing vouchers for low-income civilians is also not counted as income for SNAP eligibility, creating a disparity in SNAP eligibility between service members receiving the BAH and civilians receiving federal housing benefits (Military Family Advisory Network, 2023).

Proposed Solutions

There are a myriad of questions that must be asked to fully understand the needs and the root causes of military families and to fully understand why food insecurities even exists in the U.S. military today. Thus, the information provided in this policy brief is just a beginning, as it provides some insights and raises important questions centered around topics that need to be addressed in order to meet that needs and to better serve our service members and their families.

The impact of risk factors which includes the behaviors and eating habits of service members returning from combat, the role of financial literacy plays in their lives and how it affects their financial outcomes, the potential impacts of societal changes, and how military households earnings change should be analyzed more readily to avoid financial insecurity.

Efforts are currently underway that may improve food security within the military. The Department of Defense (DOD) released the new Military Leaders Economic Security Toolkit, a resource to help military leaders identify and assist troops who are struggling with food security. In November 2021, Secretary Austin announced that the DOD would temporarily raise the BAH in some high-cost areas to create a 90-day roadmap to address food insecurity in the armed forces (Food Security in the U.S., 2022).

In 2021, the House of Representatives introduced a new Military Hunger Prevention Act, which became law in December 2021. The Act requires the DOD to institute a BNA for service members whose household income falls at or below 130 percent of the federal poverty guidelines (FPG), in the amount of 130 percent of the FPG minus their gross household income.

Act such as the Military Hunger Prevention Act will help to provide more support for low-income military families to be able to afford basic living costs and to help them maintain their household needs. The DOD should also consider additional and more informative ways for

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reviewing service members about food insecurity and how service member can earn more income so they can help their families remain food secure (Food Security in the U.S., 2022).

The NDAA grants the secretary of defense discretion regarding assessment of the BAH in income calculations for the purposes of the BNA. Discussions are ongoing within the DOD on whether and how much of the BAH to exclude, and for which geographic areas. The House of Representatives' version of the NDAA had proposed entirely excluding the BAH from income calculations, and the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) estimated that 3,000 service members would qualify, with an average benefit of \$400 per month and a total cost of \$15 million per year (Food Security in the U.S., 2022).

The final version of the FY 2022 NDAA allows the secretary of defense to exclude “any portion of the basic allowance for housing” from income calculations for the new BNA but only if a service member lives in an area with high cost of living. The DOD might determine which areas are “high cost of living” in a manner similar to how they decide who receives the Cost of Living Allowance (COLA) within the continental United States (CONUS), an additional allowance provided to service members living in select high-cost areas (Food Security in the U.S., 2022).

3-6 Key Organizations/Individuals

The Military Family Basic Needs Allowance has met some resistance and it also has gained support from military families, military service organizational partners, anti-hunger advocates, and from elected officials. Ending food insecurity is a new path forward and this policy brief proposes an exploration in the direction of new efforts to meet the goals to end it.

A need to make the effort to ensure that policy makers address military hunger where no ‘family is left behind’ is essential and necessary. Several key organizations have to be sought in order to help with the expedition.

The ***Military Family Advisory Network (MFAN)*** continues to lead the way in both understanding and responding to food insecurity among military and veteran families. In 2021, MFAN and their partners distributed over 1 million meals nationwide to military and veteran families in need. The ***Combat Military Hunger Task Force***, which consists of a group of the world’s leading food industry companies helps the cause by identifying the most efficient, scalable, and sustainable methods of delivering food directly into the hands of military families who need it most (Leibman et al, April 2021).

Other groups who are founding participants that assist military veterans with maintaining food security include ***American Logistics Association, Coastal Pacific Food Distributors, Coast Produce Company, Defense Commissary Agency (DeCA), Del Monte Foods, EURPAC, Kellogg’s, Military Resale Small Business Coalition (MRSBC), Nestlé USA, Robert Irvine Foods, SpartanNash, and Tyson Foods.***

When considering other key organizations/individuals to help affect change they it is required that they are able to include today’s diverse veteran population. Support for military families also includes assistance from personnel like ***Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense*** Patricia Barron who said that “The department (DOD) is all in to make sure that no military family goes hungry or no military family does not have the proper nutrition that they need at the table to do their very best.”

Military Leaders Economic Security Toolkit released in November 2021 provides useful information for those who need it, even the information may not be used by all service members (Leibman et al, April 2021).

The **USDA** began the SNAP Online Purchasing Pilot in April 2019, and it quickly gained popularity throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, expanding to all states except Alaska by early 2022 in order to assist service members and their families in obtaining financial assistance.

It is unethical that the salaries that are earned by military veterans in the United States are not enough to meet the basic needs for their families. These are service men and women who have made noteworthy sacrifices for our country. ***They should never go hungry.*** We have a duty to fulfill our collective responsibility to care for the most vulnerable, to support them in times of need, and to expand opportunities so that they as well all citizen in the United States can reach their full potential.

This can only happen by implementing the suggestions in the policy brief because they can make a difference in the lives of our service men and women and their families. Systemic change is necessary in order to address the structural problems that allow hunger to continue, especially among our military veterans and their families (Leibman et al, April 2021).

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