

Food Insecurity in the Military Community

Best practices to support professional response



Read more from our MFed Inform blog.
Scan this QR Code!



The Problem

Food security is a need that some families are fortunate to never have to think about, yet others struggle with every day. Food security is consistent access by all family members to enough food for an active, healthy life. Access includes nutritionally adequate and safe food along with the ability to acquire food in socially acceptable ways. It is important to know that though hunger and food insecurity are closely related, they are distinct concepts.

While food insecurity is a national problem, it significantly impacts military service members and their families. The 2020 Blue Star Families Military Family Lifestyle Survey Comprehensive Report indicated that 14% of enlisted active-duty family respondents reported low or very low food security in the past 12 months, compared to 10% of the general population.

USDA SPECTRUM OF FOOD INSECURITY

In USDA uses the following language to describe ranges of severity of food insecurity.

- **Low Food Security:** Reduced quality, variety, or desirability of diet. Little or no indication of reduced food intake.
- **Very Low Food Security:** Multiple indications of disrupted eating patterns and reduced food intake.

CONTRIBUTING FACTORS TO FOOD INSECURITY IN THE MILITARY COMMUNITY

Food insecurity among military families may be attributed to multiple factors, including but not limited to:

Financial Issues

- Low salaries of enlisted members
- High rates of unemployment among military spouses due to multiple relocations
- High cost of living near military bases
- High cost of childcare

Societal and Logistical Issues

- Stigma associated with requesting support to provide for one's family
- Ineligibility for federal programs
- Lack of awareness of supportive services
- Lack of access to supportive services

IMPACT OF FOOD INSECURITY ON FAMILY SYSTEM

- **Physical Health**—Service members and their family members should maintain a high level of nutrition to reduce risk of developing health problems.
- **Mental Health**—Increase in potential for negative mental health outcomes when food insecurity is present.
- **Family Stress**—Food insecurity increases family stress, which in turn may place strain on relationships.
- **Mission Readiness (Military Families)**—Providing food insecurity support allows the service member to remain focused on the mission.

It is important that teachers, counselors, and others who work with children and youth create opportunities to inquire about, identify, and respond to food insecurity issues.

The Magellan Federal Solution

Magellan Federal provides individual, and family counseling services through 1,400 counselors at more than 160 military installations around the world. Each month we provide over 70,000 counseling sessions and 14,000 consultations to service members and military connected families.

In 2021, Magellan Federal counselors provided intentional support to address food insecurity. We studied the frequencies that our non-medical counseling services focused on food insecurity and related problems and developed a best practices list of associated interventions.

Here are some recommended best practices to support all professionals as they assist patient and clients that face food insecurity.

UNDERSTAND THE PREVALENCE IN THE MILITARY

As mentioned previously, the 2020 Blue Star Families Military Family Lifestyle Survey Comprehensive Report indicated that 14% of enlisted active-duty family respondents reported food insecurity (low or very low food security). Almost 30% of junior enlisted (E1-E4) families have reported food insecurity. Lower education level, varying cost of living, lack of homeownership, lack of savings/emergency funds, income changes, poor health status, and social isolation are all factors that can influence food security. While military spouses are generally more highly educated than their civilian counterparts, high unemployment rates among military spouses, childcare costs, student loans, and high out-of-pocket housing

and relocation costs can contribute to military families' financial instability.

This issue is particularly apparent among active-duty enlisted spouse respondents who are unemployed but need or want to work; 20% reported low or very low food security, compared to the 10% among active-duty enlisted spouses who are working (both full time and part time). Military spouses have reported that they will/would go without eating a meal or not eating at all so that their military spouse and children will have enough food.



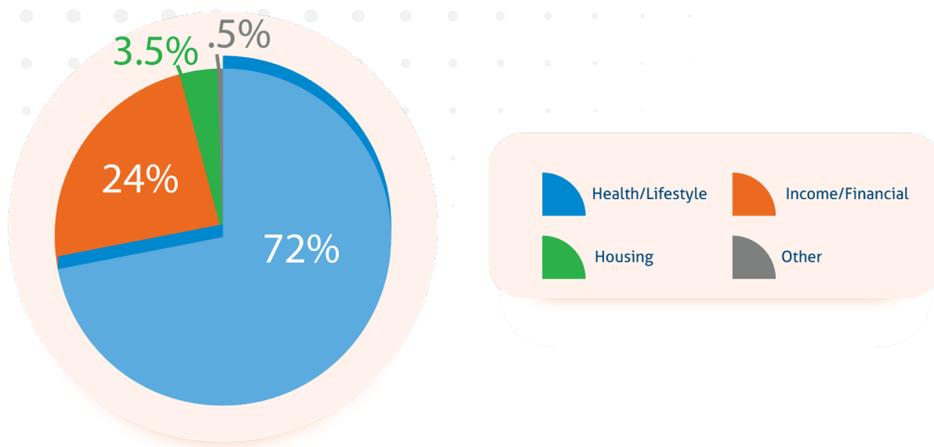
According to the Department of Defense schools, 24% of military children qualified for free meals and 21% of military children qualified for reduced-price meals. According to a 2013 U.S. Census Bureau survey, 23,000 active-duty service members used Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits.

Other barriers military families face such as not being aware of what military resources or community resources there are to access or concerns of how it would be perceived by chain of command. Many families are unaware that some community resources assess income eligibility and count a military family's Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH) as addition income added to their yearly gross income. Often, the BAH will put them over or reduce the amount of support they are eligible for.

Our research shows...

Magellan Federal conducted our own review of the frequencies of non-medical counseling services focused on food insecurity and related problems. Over a 2.5-year period (2018–2021), we conducted 283 non-medical counseling sessions focused primarily on food insecurity.

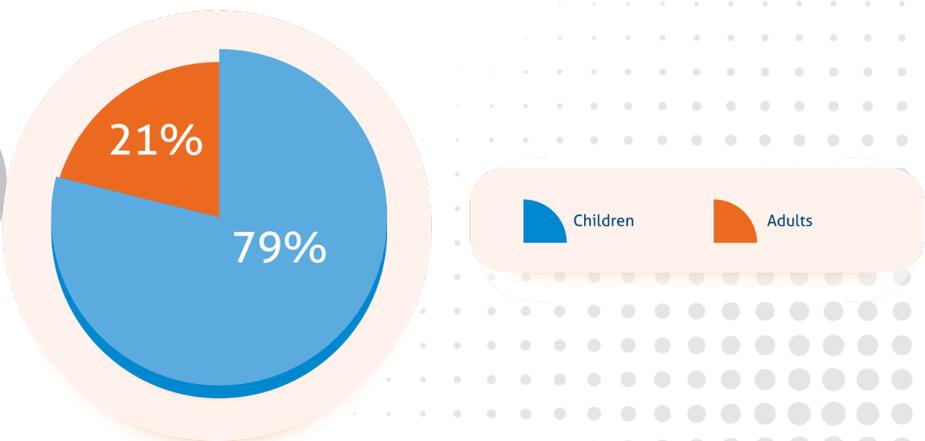
Through this study, we found that the common factors leading to food insecurity fell into the following categories:



Additionally, we found that participants who engaged in non-medical counseling sessions about food insecurity most often:

- Served in the Army (66%) or Air Force (18%)
- Were children counseled in individual or group sessions (74%)
- Were sponsors (or dependents of sponsors) in grade levels E1–E9

Of the food insecurity cases studied, 79% were children while adults made up 21%.





Understand the signs of food insecurity in children

It is critical to identify children who may be suffering from food insecurity.

Social Signs

- Hoarding snacks and food
- Rushing food lines
- Eating all the food served, clean their plate, does not throw food away
- Lingers or asks for second helpings

Physical Signs

- Undernourished weight, skin, or eyes
- Obesity caused by poor nutrition

- Extreme hunger at the beginning of the school week

School Performance

- Social insecurities
- Poor attention span, memory, trouble concentrating
- Repeating grades
- Excessive absences

Home Environment

- Lack of resources
- Single parenting with multiple children is high risk
- Parent unable to prepare meals for children



Understand the signs of food insecurity in adults

Assessing and detecting food insecurity in adults is critical. Food insecurity can lead to increased complications during pregnancy, poorer birth outcomes, and an increased likelihood of postpartum mental disorders.

Here are some signs and symptoms of food insecurity in adults:

Physical Appearance

- Underweight or Overweight
- Diabetes
- Nutrient deficiencies
- Pale skin
- Fatigue
- Weakness
- Trouble breathing
- Sleeping disruptions
- Frequent headaches

Mental health issues

- Anxiety
- Depression/low mood
- Poor concentration

Financial strains

- Expressing concerns about housing, utilities, childcare, or other financial issues
- Relational strains
- Interpersonal issues
- Domestic violence

Opportunities to identify food insecurity

- Schools
- Clinics
- Childcare centers
- Hospitals
- Mental health centers
- Private practice
- Public health clinics
- Substance abuse treatment centers
- Social service programs
- Counseling programs

Use the “CORE” approach

Professionals who support patient and clients that face food insecurity can utilize several techniques to bring awareness to the situation. The following **CORE** method is a proactive way to address food insecurity signs that are discovered and provide support.

Magellan Federal military and family life counselors use the following approach to identify food insecurity during sessions:

CONSIDER THE COMPLETE FAMILY

- ▶ Food insecurity is experienced differently in children and adults
- ▶ Disclosure will vary based on who is sharing the information
- ▶ Identify food resources and other supports for the entire family

OWN YOUR “ONE SHOT”

- ▶ There may be only one opportunity to provide care!
- ▶ Be ready: both rapport and resources

REMOVE THE STIGMA

- ▶ Implement activities that remove stigma and ease angst
- ▶ Casual Inquiry vs. Formal Screening
- ▶ Discreet and/or limited tracking and reporting
- ▶ Normalizing the experience through education and communication

EXPLORE AND EXECUTE THE OPTIONS

- ▶ Be prepared! Know what is available for your clients—resources for nutritious foods, assistance programs for the entire family
- ▶ Know eligibility requirements before referring to resources
- ▶ Identify potential partnerships with support resources
- ▶ Remember government programs like WIC or SNAP, when applicable

CONNECT FAMILIES WITH FOOD AND ASSISTANCE RESOURCES

- ▶ Become knowledgeable of what’s out there
- ▶ Understand which programs your clients are eligible for
- ▶ Implement discreet referral practices
- ▶ Identify partnerships that reinforce continued support for clients

Recommended Resources



RESOURCE NAME

KNOWLEDGE RESOURCES

- USDA Definitions of Food Insecurity: <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-u-s/definitions-of-food-security/>
- Trends in Food Insecurity: <https://hungerandhealth.feedingamerica.org/2021/10/trends-in-food-insecurity-detailed-in-americas-health-rankings-health-disparities-report/>
- Food Insecurity and the Military:
 - ▶ <https://bluestarfam.org/food-insecurity-resources/>
 - ▶ https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/BSF_MFLS_CompReport_FINDING_12.pdf

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE (USDA) FOOD ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS

- USDA National Hunger Hotline: Referrals for food banks and other social services. 1-866-348-6479 (TTY: 711)
- Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP): Assistance for low-income persons at least 60 years of age. Provides a monthly food package. <https://www.fns.usda.gov/csfp/commodity-supplemental-food-program>
- School Breakfast and Lunch Programs for Children: Free or reduced cost for school breakfast and lunch. Income-based eligibility. www.fns.usda.gov/sbp/school-breakfast-program





Recommended Resources Con't

- **Seniors Farmers' Market Nutrition Program:** Assistance for low-income seniors. Provides vouchers for seniors to access locally grown nutritious foods. <https://www.fns.usda.gov/sfmnp/senior-farmers-market-nutrition-program>
- **Summer Food Service Program (SFSP):** Free healthy meals and snacks for children 18 and under. State-administered. www.fns.usda.gov/sfsp/summer-food-service-program Call 1-866-348-6479 (TTY: 711) to find a local meal service site.
- **Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP):** Provides supplemental assistance for food. Commonly known as food stamps. www.fns.usda.gov/snap
- **Women, Infants, and Children Program (WIC):** Provides supplemental assistance for nutritious foods for pregnant women, infants and children. Also provides referrals for healthcare. www.fns.usda.gov/wic

NONPROFIT ORGANIZATIONS

- **Feeding America Network of Food Banks:** Resources for local food banks and food programs. Resources and eligibility requirements vary by location. www.feedingamerica.org/find-your-local-foodbank
- **Meals on Wheels:** Community-based nutrition program for seniors. Offers free or lost-cost meals delivered to the home. www.mealsonwheelsamerica.org
- **The Helpline Center:** Online database and support network that lists a broad range of services, including food and other basic supports. www.helplinecenter.org. Dial 211 from any phone.



Conclusion

- There is no one correct standard approach, but no matter what approach you take, it is best to always deliver guidance in an empathic, compassionate, and authentic manner. When building relationships and understanding children and youth strengths and needs, it is especially important to use open ended questions to support confidence, validate, and provide positive affirmations.
- If you remain knowledgeable about Food Insecurity issues and trends and are able to spot the signs, you will be equipped to help someone in need.



References

1. Food & Environment Reporting Network. (2020, October). Why food insecurity is a huge problem among active-duty military and veterans. https://thefern.org/ag_insider/why-food-insecurity-is-a-huge-problem-among-active-duty-military-and-veterans/
2. Food Research & Action Center. (2021). Federal Nutrition Programs. <https://frac.org/programs>
3. Governing: The Future of States and Localities. (2016, May). Where Housing Is Least and Most Affordable for Military Families. <https://www.governing.com/archive/gov-housing-leastaffordablemilitary-families.html>
4. Military Family Advisory Network. (2017). Combat Military Hunger. <https://militaryfamilyadvisorynetwork.org/our-programs/military-family-food-insecurity/>
5. US Department of Agriculture. (2019). Definitions of Food Security. <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-us/definitions>
6. Maryah Stella Fram, Edward A. Frongillo, Sonya J. Jones, Roger C. Williams, Michael P. Burke, Kendra P. DeLoach, and Christine E. Blake (2011). Children Are Aware of Food Insecurity and Take Responsibility for Managing Food Resources. *The Journal of Nutrition* 141: pp 1113-1119. doi:10.3945/jn.110.135988
7. Tamika Rey, Angel De Jesus, Hannah Lanier, and Blake Evans (2019). Shame, stigma, misinformation compound food insecurity problems. *The Rampage*. <https://www.therampageonline.com/news/2019/05/01/shame-stigma-misinformation-compound-food-insecurity-problems/>. May 1, 2019.
8. Chloe Pineau, Patricia L. Williams, Jennifer Brady, Madeleine Waddington, and Lesley Frank (2021). Exploring experiences of food insecurity, shame, stigma, and social exclusion among women in high-income countries: A narrative review. *Canadian Food Studies*. Vol. 8No. 3, pp. 107-124. DOI: 10.15353/cfs-rcea.v8i3.473



THOUGHT LEADERSHIP WHITE PAPER

