

AIR COMMAND AND STAFF COLLEGE
AIR UNIVERSITY

Dual-Military Couples, Child Care & Retention

by

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A Research Report Submitted to the Faculty

In Partial Fulfillment of the Graduation Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF OPERATIONAL ARTS AND SCIENCES

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Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama

April 2016

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Abstract

The demographic of the Air Force is one of high interest in light of higher headquarters' focus on diversity and inclusion. A number of Airmen are married to other military members—a phenomenon coined as “dual-military” marriages. Specifically, 11.3% (35,239) of active-duty Airmen are in dual-military marriages—more than double the percentage of each of the other services. Unlike non-dual-military marriages, retention of one or both members of dual-military marriages significantly decreases after ten years of service. Among the military community, child care issues most negatively affected the retention decisions of members of dual-military marriages. The Air Force should place an emphasis on members in dual-military marriages now to sustain a relevant, diverse Air Force twenty years from now.

The DoD has a military child care system that seeks to provide child care for eligible families, e.g. single parents and parents with a spouse employed outside of the home. Costs associated with military child care provided in child development centers (CDCs) are subsidized by the government. In national surveys of state oversight and program standards for child care, the DoD repeatedly comes out on top. Military child care has long been praised by many parents, but there is also the continuous complaint that it is difficult to get care at CDCs.

On 28 January 2016, the Honorable Ash Carter, Secretary of Defense, recently announced new DoD initiatives to ease military family life as a part of the Force of the Future reforms. One suggestion for consideration is to offer off-base child care providers with incentives in the form of tax credits to match the costs of child care provided at CDCs.

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Introduction

The integration of the military has produced a group of service members in dual-military marriages that often does not receive as much attention as other traditional military families. Defying the statistics of other service members, those dual-military couples with children tend to separate from the Air Force during the latter part of their careers. As the DoD enacts changes in policy to accommodate the unique challenges of these marriages, the Air Force must do its part to assist the DoD and place more of a focus on the retention of these couples as it seeks to further diversify its force for the future. One way to do this is to address the need for more child care options. Tax credits to businesses that are willing to match the costs of military child care is how to do so without incurring additional budgetary expenses.

Background: Dual-Military Marriages

The demographic of the Air Force is one of high interest in light of higher headquarters' focus on diversity and inclusion. Sixty-eight years ago, President Harry Truman signed the Women's Armed Services Integration Act. But as early as the Revolutionary War, women followed their husbands to war and served as nurses, cooks and laundresses. In addition, women served in World Wars I and II most notably as nurses and cooks. Today's Air Force is still overwhelmingly male-dominated; however, women are making an impression in visible positions of leadership. Many of these women are serving our nation while balancing additional duties associated with being wives and mothers. Of these women, an even smaller number are married to other military members—a phenomenon coined as “dual-military” marriages.

Out of the total active-duty Air Force population of 312,453, 18.7% (59,100) of Airmen¹ are women.² Moreover, 11.3% (35,239) of active-duty Airmen are in dual-military marriages—more than double the percentage of each of the other services.³ More specifically, 27.9%

(16,488) of women serving on active-duty in the Air Force are in dual military marriages compared to 7.4% (18,748) of men on active-duty.⁴ In addition, 5% (15,620) of active-duty Airmen are in dual-military marriages with children—the highest percentage of the other services.⁵ Of the 264,630 dependent children in the Air Force, 113,096 are between the ages of zero and five.⁶ Specifically, for DoD dual-military members in the E-5 – E-6 and O-4 – O-5 pay grades, 256,706 of their dependents are under the age of five (the cited report did not provide a breakdown by individual services).⁷

A 2010 study by V.A. Long researched over 28,000 active-duty Airmen, comparing the retention rates among dual-military and non-dual-military Air Force couples.⁸ This study found that unlike non-dual-military marriages, retention of one or both members of dual-military marriages significantly decreases after ten years of service.⁹ Long offered that one reason why members of dual-military marriages are separating in the latter part of their careers is because of parenting issues.¹⁰ Long concluded in the study that while the presence of children in the household is a motivating factor for members to remain in the Air Force for at least 20 years, this was less of a motivating factor for members in dual-military marriages.¹¹ Long's study cited to a RAND survey that revealed among the military community, child care issues most negatively affected the retention decisions of members of dual-military marriages.¹²

Background: Military Child Care

The DoD has a military child care system that seeks to provide child care for eligible families, e.g. single parents and parents with a spouse employed outside of the home. The first type of military child care is provided at CDCs that are located on military installations. The second type is provided by Family Child Care (FCC) providers, where individuals (usually military spouses) care for a certain number of children in their homes. This system began in the

mid-1970s due to a growth in the number of women in the military—and to a certain extent civilian wives entering the workforce—as well as an increase in the number of dual-military marriages.¹³

The U.S. military child care system is the largest employer-sponsored child care system in the nation, and it is widely recognized for providing high-quality care.¹⁴ In national surveys of state oversight and program standards for child care, the DoD repeatedly comes out on top.¹⁵ In a 2013 report from the nonprofit organization Child Care Aware, the DoD's child care system was the only one to earn a B, the highest grade rewarded as no system received an A.¹⁶ In Washington, D.C., Maryland, and Virginia—states with high military populations—Child Care Aware gave them a D.¹⁷

Costs associated with military child care provided in CDCs and some FCCs are subsidized by the government. Under this structure, families are grouped into fee categories based on total family income.¹⁸ For example, an eligible family whose total income is between \$0 and \$30,771 would pay \$58 per week (\$2,784 per year) while an eligible family whose income is over \$130,869 would pay \$145 per week (\$6,960 per year).¹⁹ These fees have optional low and high market adjustment fees that decrease or increase by less than \$10.²⁰

Child Care Aware works with the DoD to help military families find and afford care when they are not on a military base.²¹ This includes assisting families who are on waiting lists for CDCs. The costs of child care provided in these off-base facilities are often significantly higher than what military families would pay a CDC or FCC provider who receives subsidies. In Washington, D.C., Maryland, and Virginia, the annual cost of infant care is \$22,631, \$13,932, and \$10,458, respectively.²² Public college tuition in Washington, D.C. and Maryland is cheaper

and the cost is comparable in Virginia.²³ By way of example, public college tuition in Washington, D.C. is \$7,422.²⁴

Child Care Aware operates a fee assistance program that serves Navy, Air Force and Marine Corps families.²⁵ The Army has a similar fee assistance program. The Military Child Care in Your Neighborhood program provides fee assistance for families of active-duty service members who are unable to access on-base child care.²⁶ Families living within 15 miles or 20 minutes of on-installation child care must be on the waitlist before applying for fee assistance.²⁷ Providers may be eligible for the Military Child Care In Your Neighborhood program if they have a valid state license, annual licensing inspection reports and are nationally accredited.²⁸ In addition, they must meet additional DoD qualifications.²⁹ Subsidies to eligible providers shall be calculated by computing the difference between the Air Force monthly fee based on one's fee category and the provider's rate, which shall not exceed the maximum fair market rate of \$900.00 per month for all localities.³⁰ Thus, if a provider charges \$300 per week, the Military Child Care in Your Neighborhood program calculates its fee assistance based on \$225 per week and the family is responsible for paying the additional \$75 per week.

Military child care has long been praised by many parents, but there is also the continuous complaint that it is difficult to get care at CDCs.³¹ In addition, many service members have to utilize outside providers because their work schedules do not align with military child care hours. On 28 January 2016, the Honorable Ash Carter, Secretary of Defense, recently announced new DoD initiatives to ease military family life as a part of the Force of the Future reforms.³² These initiatives include increasing military child care hours to 14 hours instead of 12 hours per day and long-term plans to expand child care capacity in areas where wait times exceed 90 days.³³

Why Air Force Should Focus on Retention of Dual-Military Members

The Air Force should place an emphasis on members in dual-military marriages now to sustain a relevant Air Force twenty years from now. As the service with the highest number of dual-military members, the Air Force has a large stake in this matter. According to the 2013 United States Air Force Diversity Strategic Roadmap, Air Force decision-making and operational capabilities are enhanced by diversity among its Airmen, uniformed and civilian, helping to make the Air Force more agile, innovative and effective.³⁴ The Honorable Michael B. Donley, former Secretary of the Air Force, stated: “Across the service, we represent a broad range of diverse missions, family situations, ethnicities, faiths, races and educational backgrounds. Yet, together, this rich tapestry forms the world’s finest Air Force, drawn from the best talent that America has to offer.”³⁵ Thus, the Air Force Global Diversity Division listed as a priority the retention of a high quality, talented and diverse workforce.³⁶ Therefore, one of the goals listed in the roadmap to facilitate this priority is to “develop and promote quality of life approaches/practices that influence the retention of top talent across the total force capable of meeting the Air Force mission requirements.”³⁷

The Honorable Donley highlighted the importance of including one’s “family situation” in his definition of diversity. Indeed, dual-military couples provide a dynamic perspective that differs from their counterparts due to the unique challenges they face as members married to other members. While there are many civilian families where both parents are employed outside of the home, dual-military couples face unique challenges due to military demands such as frequent moves and deployments. Though dual-military couples are required to have family care plans that detail who cares for their dependents while they are on temporary duty, these plans are

of little assistance when child care, in general, is a challenge due to the availability of services in an area where a military branch assigns the members.

Moreover, in those situations where dual-military couples are separated due to different military assignments, these couples must make the difficult decision of how to split up their family, e.g. with which member the child(ren) will reside. In this regard, these couples operate as pseudo-single-parent households. While many may liken this situation to one where a military member married to a civilian deploys for an extensive period of time, it differs for many reasons. First, the period of separation usually lasts longer than that of a typical deployment. Second, there is added financial stress when a dual-military couple is stationed apart since there are additional costs associated with managing two households. In addition, although there are many civilian spouses who are employed outside of the home, they have more flexibility in deciding whether not to work in order to spend more time tending to the needs of their children and assuming the responsibilities of their spouse while he or she is deployed. The dual-military members with children do not have this flexibility as they usually have a term of service or other similar obligation to fulfill. Thus, the dual-military member must master a balancing act of sorts that is different than most of their counterparts and that many—both inside and outside of their community—are simply unable to appreciate. For those who do master this challenge, this adds a depth of character that lends perfectly to a typical fast-paced, ever-changing military environment. Essentially, these members become experts in how to operate in a world of chaos.

Of course, diversity also includes gender. However, while a second-order effect of focusing efforts to increase the retention of those in military marriages will be to retain women, this matter is not one that is a woman's issue only. Historically, the Air Force—and the DoD in general—has focused on the quality of life for women service members in an effort to retain such

members. While these efforts are warranted, so are efforts to focus on a couple who both have sworn to defend this country's constitution, creating a double sacrifice and commitment of their family. This is not to say that such couples deserve anything more than other service members but they do deserve treatment that would place them on equal footing with their counterparts who are not in dual-military marriages. Undoubtedly, family plays an important part in any service member's decision to separate from the military. But the amount of time and money invested in these dual-military members who separate in the latter part of their career is immeasurable. In this environment of fiscal constraint, the Air Force cannot afford to ignore the reason why these members are leaving.

There are many reasons the Air Force's focus on this type of family will enrich the service, in general, years from now. First, the children of these dual-military couples are a great pool for potential candidates for Airmen so amenities afforded to these families easily assists with recruitment efforts. As the civil-military divide continues to increase, it is important that the Air Force focuses on a segment of its "family"—military dependents—that is more likely to serve and be committed to the mission.

In regards to commitment, a second reason why the Air Force should focus on dual-military families is because these service members are particularly dedicated to the mission and actually have more of an incentive to remain in the Air Force. Remaining in the Air Force, with the right amount of support, would be much easier than separating. These families rely on the dual-income to sustain their way of living and almost have more to lose than a typical Air Force family by virtue of both members relying on the Air Force to provide for their families. Indeed, just because these members are separating does not mean that they are not seeking employment

opportunities outside of the Air Force and many are in the Air Force in the first place for more than a paycheck, but to do their part towards serving their country.

This dedication to serving their country contributes to a third reason why the Air Force should focus on dual-military families. The steadfastness these members possess more likely than not will translate to them excelling at work and motivating their subordinates, which will enable them to move into key leadership positions. An important part of diversity and inclusion is permitting a range of people the opportunity to visibly lead. Thus, it is important to continue to cultivate the careers of those such as these dual-military members in order to continue to groom them for leadership positions. Women are obviously a part of this group but so are the men who have diverse perspectives of leadership and mentorship due to their experiences in a dual-military marriage.

What the Air Force Can Do to Retain Dual-Military Members

The Honorable Carter is already on a promising path with his assurance that the DoD would develop a plan to expand child care capacity in areas where wait times exceed 90 days. The DoD's initiatives are also the Air Force's initiatives and the Air Force is likely already assisting with suggestions to contribute to this plan. One suggestion for consideration is to offer off-base child care providers with incentives to match the costs of child care provided at CDCs. In this regard, eligible families would pay the same costs to the off-base child care providers. The CDCs can assist by certifying these families for such assistance and including a priority determination in the certification to accommodate dual-military couples and single parents (much like the current system they have in place at the CDCs). These providers would be incentivized to match the costs offered by the CDC at the local installation through tax credits enacted by Congress, saving families hundreds of dollars each month.

As referenced above, retention of one or both members of dual-military marriages significantly decreases after ten years of service and child care issues most negatively affected the retention decisions of members of dual-military marriages. Based on the statistics previously provided, over half dependents under the age of five in the DoD were children of members in the pay grades correlated to 10 years of service or more (E-5 – E-6 and O-4 – O-5). One important way the Air Force can prioritize dual-military members is to address the lack of availability of military child care services, especially in localities where there is a large number of active duty service members. In doing so, the Air Force would also provide relief to other groups such as single parents serving on active duty.

Despite the efforts of the DoD and the Air Force, military child care issues are still prevalent. CDCs in high demand areas such as Washington, D.C., Maryland and Virginia have long waiting lists—many times as long as one year. Given these circumstances, dual-military families have no choice but to resort to child care off-base, in areas such as Washington, D.C., Maryland and Virginia that have lower quality yet more expensive child care than that provided by the DoD services. The DoD at large has attempted to address these issues as evidenced in the FCC program and the military fee assistance program. However, for many families, the FCC program is not as viable of an option due to the perceived lack of oversight. These providers are located in their homes with no way of monitoring their actions real-time. In the CDCs, there is video-monitoring of the rooms where the children are located, which helps keep providers accountable. In addition, much like the CDCs, the availability of FCCs likely does not address the issue that occurs when members' work hours are outside of the hours prescribed for services.

In regards to the fee assistance program, although it reduces the costs of off-base child care, these adjusted costs are still significantly higher than CDCs, especially in areas such as the

Washington, D.C., Maryland and Virginia area where child care costs are more than two times the amount that the CDCs charge. Moreover, eligible DoD families must still compete—with more than just other eligible DoD families—for available slots at off-base child care facilities that participate in the fee assistance program. Thus families such as dual-military couples in dire need of child care are forced to make concessions to settle for child care in order to keep their jobs. As such, these parents are placed in the position of compromising what they desire for their children in order to prevent a child care issue from arising that could interfere with their ability to stay employed with the Air Force. Many times, one or both members of these dual-military couples choose to separate and obtain the stability and support system that best meets the needs of their child care issues.

During these fiscally constraining times, it would be impossible for the DoD and its services to absorb the costs to build new CDCs or expand existing facilities. Similarly, it would also be too costly to provide additional funding through the fee assistance program. Businesses are eager to find ways to minimize the taxes that they pay and a tax credit that permits them to write off their loss—up to a specified percentage or amount of loss—would certainly provide them with the motivation to match the rates offered by the CDC. Congressional sanction of tax credits to assist military members is not something new—the VOW to Hire Heroes Act of 2011 is a tax credit offered to businesses who hire eligible unemployed veterans.³⁸

Indeed, Congress can include in such a law the requirement that providers meet the same standards currently required for those who are a part of the military fee assistance program. In addition, Child Care Aware can continue to implement the program as well as the military fee assistance program. Both programs are important to keep in order to provide military members

with options. However, the incentive to receive the tax credit should be so meaningful as to avoid a situation where providers sign up for the fee assistance program only.

Although addressing this deficiency in the availability of quality, affordable child care for eligible Air Force families will not result in the retention of all dual-military members, it will alleviate a prominent issue these families encounter. In addition, the Air Force will be enriched due to such efforts because both members in a dual-military marriage diversify the Air Force. The future of the Air Force depends on preparing Airmen today to assume key leadership roles in the future. Diversity in thinking, as opposed to group think, assures independent and bold initiatives. Catering to a group of people with the same experiences, beliefs and culture will prevent the Air Force from progressing and remaining a powerful future force.



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- ²⁴ *Ibid.*
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³¹ Karen Jowers, “Military Leaders Promise to Extend Child Care Hours, Shorten Wait Lists at Child Development Centers,” *Military Times*, <http://www.militarytimes.com/story/military/family/2016/02/01/military-leaders-promise-extended-child-care-hours-shorter-wait-lists-child-development-centers/79654946/>, (3 February 2016).

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Department of the Air Force, *United States Air Force Diversity Strategic Roadmap* (Washington, D.C.: Air Force Global Diversity Division, 12 March 2013): 4.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 15.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

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