

# Need for High-Quality Child Care Affects Military Readiness and Retention

The Department of Defense (DoD) supports the largest employer-sponsored system of high-quality child care in the United States. Through accredited child development centers (CDCs), family child-care homes, youth centers, and other after-school programs, the DoD provided approximately 176,000 spaces for military children ages 0–12 in fiscal year 2006. The DoD recognizes that high-quality child care is both a readiness and a retention issue. If parents are forced to make do with inadequate child-care arrangements or cannot find child care, they may be distracted from duty or in some instances may even fail to report for duty in order to care for their children. Inadequate child care may also affect a family's decision to remain in the military.

The Office of the Secretary of Defense recently asked the RAND Corporation to assess its formula for estimating child-care need among military families and to improve understanding of the factors that influence key child-care outcomes of interest. To perform the assessment, researchers conducted focus groups on eight installations and fielded a mail survey to assess parental preferences and other factors that might affect child-care need.

## Some Data Elements Used in the DoD's Child-Care Demand Formula Need Attention

The DoD currently uses a "child-care demand formula" to estimate *potential need* for child care among military families and to determine how many child-care spaces or "slots" the system should provide. However, the DoD does not oversee the needs-based allocation of spaces across installations. The child-care demand formula incorporates data from the Defense Manpower Data Center, Defense Enrollment Eligibility Reporting System (DEERS), and the services, and also makes assumptions about the fraction of

### Key findings

Focus groups and survey results pointed to several options for improving the DoD's approach to addressing the child-care needs of military families:

- Identify a broader range of goals for the military child-care system, such as reducing the level of unmet need and unmet preference in child-care arrangements, or reducing the number of workdays lost because of child-care problems.
- Create policy alternatives to DoD-sponsored child-care centers (e.g., vouchers for child care at non-DoD providers, subsidized slots in civilian centers, subsidized wraparound care) and provide flexibility in applying options according to local need.
- Improve the quality of data used to estimate child-care need.
- Consider establishing a mechanism to provide centralized assessment of child-care needs across installations.

dependent children living with their parents in different family types (single parent, dual military, military married to civilian).

Survey results suggest that there may be problems with the accuracy of some inputs to the formula. For example, of those families identified by DEERS as "single parent," only 43 percent reported this same status on the survey. Similarly, only 83 percent of those identified by DEERS as "military married to civilian" and 90 percent of those identified as "dual military" reported the same status, respectively, on the survey. In addition, because DEERS no longer includes a flag denoting dual-military families, identifying this family type proved quite challenging. Assumptions made by the formula about the fraction of children living with a military parent or parents and about spousal employment rates also differed substantially from what was found in the survey.

## Multiple Child-Care Indicators Provide Important Insights into How Well the System Is Working

The survey and focus group results also pointed to other important indicators of system functioning besides potential child-care need that the DoD should consider monitoring. These include use of multiple child-care arrangements, unmet need for care, unmet preference for care (i.e.,

whether families are using their preferred type of care), and the effect of child-care problems on military readiness and retention. Among the study's key findings:

**Families living off base are less likely to use DoD-sponsored care.** The distance between a family's home and the installation is strongly related to the type of child care used. Also, families with preschool-aged children who live in lower-income areas are more likely to use less-expensive civilian child-care options than DoD-sponsored care.

**Unmet child-care need is not prevalent among military families, affecting fewer than 10 percent of families surveyed.** However, unmet need is more prevalent among families with preschool-aged children compared with those with older children (4 percentage points) and those earning less than \$50,000 per year (18 percentage points). Military members with a civilian spouse are also more likely than single parents to report unmet need.

**Unmet preference is more common than unmet need, affecting 22 percent of those surveyed, especially families with preschool-aged children.** Fifty-four percent of these families stated that they would prefer some form of DoD-provided care.

**Child-care issues impact the readiness of military members.** Challenges in finding child care after the birth of a child or when moving to an installation sometimes prevent military families from reporting for duty. Problems finding child care were particularly common among single-parent and dual-military families with preschool-aged children. Single parents, and especially female military members, often reported challenges of this nature.

**Child-care concerns may influence retention decisions.** More than one-fifth of survey respondents—and especially families with preschool-aged children, and dual-military and single-parent families—reported that it is likely or very likely that child-care issues would compel them to leave the military. Surprisingly, users of DoD CDC child care—the

most sought after and most heavily subsidized type of non-parental care—were more likely to report a high probability of leaving the military because of child-care issues.

## Policy Options

The study findings point to several policy options for the DoD to consider.

**The DoD should identify a clear set of goals for the military child-care system and establish the key outcomes of interest.** Goals might include reducing the level of unmet preference, the level of unmet need, or the number of workdays lost by military personnel because of child-care problems.

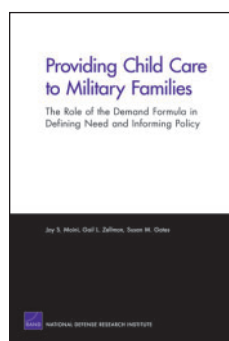
**The DoD should consider creating additional policy levers, and encourage their flexible application at the installation level.** For example, in areas with limited on-base or near-base housing, the DoD might provide vouchers or subsidize care in civilian-operated centers in the communities where military families live. In communities with a low cost of living, families tend to prefer less-expensive civilian care, so the DoD may want to reduce the number of DoD-sponsored slots and instead subsidize wraparound civilian care.

**The DoD should collect additional data that will help improve the formula's predictions and better target child-care resources.** Validation studies are needed to ensure that the data used to assess potential child-care need are producing the most accurate indicators possible.

**A DoD-wide role may be needed to help allocate child-care resources across installations.** Currently, there is no mechanism for the centralized consideration of child-care need across installations. Such a systemwide perspective, provided by the DoD, combined with the use of a broader set of policy tools, could lead to more effective use of resources and better options for families and enhance the military's ultimate goals: readiness and retention. ■

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