

What It Means for Hunger to Burn Through the Pentagon's Ranks

Military Food Insecurity and Our Obsession with Defense Spending

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By any standard, the money the United States government pours into its military is simply overwhelming. Take the \$858-billion defense spending authorization that President Biden [signed](#) into law last month. Not only did that bill pass in an otherwise riven Senate by a bipartisan majority of [83-11](#), but this year's budget increase of 4.3% is the second highest in inflation-adjusted terms since World War II. Indeed, the Pentagon has been granted [more](#) money than the next 10 largest cabinet agencies combined. And that doesn't even take into account funding for [homeland security](#) or the growing costs of caring for [the veterans](#) of this country's post-9/11 wars. That legislation also includes the [largest pay raise](#) in 20 years for active-duty and reserve forces and an expansion of a supplemental "[basic needs allowance](#)" to support military families with incomes near the poverty line.

And yet, despite those changes and a Pentagon budget that's gone through the roof, many U.S. troops and military families will continue to struggle to make ends meet. Take one basic indicator of welfare: whether or not you have enough to eat. [Tens of thousands](#) of service members [remain](#) "food insecure" or hungry. Put another way, during the past year, members of those families either worried that their food would run out or actually did run out of food.

As a military spouse myself and co-founder of the [Costs of War Project](#), I recently interviewed Tech Sergeant Daniel Faust, a full-time Air Force reserve member responsible for training other airmen. He's a married father of four who has found himself on the brink of homelessness four times between 2012 and 2019 because he had to choose between necessities like groceries and paying the rent. He managed to make ends meet by seeking assistance from local charities. And sadly enough, that airman has been in all-too-good company for a while now. In 2019, an estimated [one in eight](#) military families were considered food insecure. In 2020, at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, that figure rose to [nearly a quarter](#) of them. More recently, [one in six](#) military families experienced food

insecurity, according to the advocacy group Military Family Advisory Network.

The [majority](#) of members of the military largely come from [middle-class](#) neighborhoods and, not surprisingly perhaps, their struggles mirror those faced by so many other Americans. Spurred by a multitude of factors, including pandemic-related supply-chain problems and — you guessed it — war, inflation in the U.S. rose by [more than 9%](#) in 2022. On average, American wages grew by about [4.5%](#) last year and so failed to keep up with the cost of living. This was no less true in the military.

An Indifferent Public

An abiding [support](#) for arming Ukraine suggests that many Americans are at least paying attention to that aspect of U.S. military policy. Yet here's the strange thing (to me, at least): so many of us in this century seemed to care all too little about the deleterious domestic impacts of our prolonged, disastrous Global War on Terror. The U.S. military's growing budget and a reach that, in terms of [military bases](#) and deployed troops abroad, encompasses [dozens](#) of countries, was at least partly responsible for an increasingly [divided](#), ever more [radicalized](#) populace here at home, degraded protections for [civil liberties and human rights](#), and ever less access to decent [healthcare](#) and [food](#) for so many Americans.

That hunger is an issue at all in a military so wildly well-funded by Congress should be a grim reminder of how little attention we pay to so many crucial issues, including how our troops are treated. Americans simply take too much [for granted](#). This is especially sad, since government red tape is significantly responsible for creating the barriers to food security for military families.

When it comes to needless red tape, just consider how the government determines the eligibility of such families for food assistance. Advocacy groups like the National Military Family Association and MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger have [highlighted](#) the way in which the [Basic Allowance for Housing](#) (BAH), a non-taxable stipend given to military families to help cover housing, is counted as part of military pay in determining the eligibility of families for food assistance. Because of that, all too many families who need such assistance are disqualified.

Debt-Funded Living, Debt-Funded Wars

The BAH issue is but one part of a larger picture of twenty-first-century military life with its torrent of expenses, many of which (like local housing markets) you can't predict. I know because I've been a military spouse for 12 years. As an officer's wife and a white, cisgender woman from an upper-middle-class background, I'm one of the most privileged military spouses out there. I have two graduate degrees, a job I can do from home, and children without major health issues. Our family has loved ones who, when our finances get tight, support us logistically and financially with everything from childcare to housing expenses to Christmas gifts for our children.

And yet even for us, affording the basics has sometimes proved challenging. During the first few months after any move to a new duty station, a typical uprooting experience for military families, we've had to wield our credit cards to get food and other necessities like gas. Add to that take-out and restaurant meals, hotel rooms, and Ubers as we wait weeks for private contractors to arrive with our kitchen supplies, furniture, and the like.

Tag on the cost of hiring babysitters while we wait for affordable childcare centers in the new area to accept our two young children, and then the high cost of childcare when we finally get spots. In 2018, during one of those moves, I discovered that the military had even begun putting relocated families like ours at the back of wait lists for childcare fee assistance — “to give others a chance,” one Pentagon representative told me when I called to complain. In each of the five years before both of our children entered public school, we spent nearly twice as much on childcare as the average junior enlisted military service member [gets](#) in total income for his or her family.

Our finances are still struggling to catch up with demands like these, which are the essence of military life.

But don't worry, even if your spouse isn't nearby, there are still plenty of social opportunities (often mandated by commanders) for family members to get together with one another, including annual balls for which you're expected to purchase pricey tickets. In the post-9/11 era, such events have become more common and are frequently seen as [obligatory](#). In this age of the gig economy and the [rolling back](#) of workplace benefits and protections, the military is, in its own fashion, leading the way when it comes to “[bringing your whole self \(money included\) to work](#).”

Now, add the Covid-19 pandemic into this fun mix. The schedules of many military personnel only grew more complicated given pre- and post-deployment quarantine [requirements](#) and labor and supply-chain issues that made [moving](#) ever less efficient. Military spouse [unemployment](#) rates, which had hovered around 24% in the pre-pandemic years, shot up to more than 30% by early 2021. Spouses already used to single parenting during deployments could no longer rely on public schools and daycare centers to free them to go to work. Infection rates in military communities [soared](#) because of travel, as well as weak (or even nonexistent) Covid policies. All of this, of course, ensured that absenteeism from work and school would only grow among family members. And to make things worse, as the last Congress ended, the Republicans insisted that an authorization [rescinding](#) the requirement for military personnel to get Covid vaccines become part of the Pentagon budget bill. All I can say is that's a bit more individual freedom than this military spouse can wrap her brain around right now.

Worse yet, this country's seemingly eternal and disastrous twenty-first-century war on terror, financed almost entirely by [national debt](#), also ensured that members of the military, shuttled all over the planet, would incur ever more of it themselves. It should be no surprise then that many more military families than civilian ones struggle with [credit-card debt](#).

And now, as our country seems to be gearing up for possible [confrontations](#) not just with terror groups or local rebel outfits in places like Afghanistan or Iraq, but with other great powers, the problems of living in the U.S. military are hardly likely to get easier.

The Fire of War Is Spreading

Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin has at least publicly [acknowledged](#) hunger as a problem in the military and taken [modest steps](#) to alleviate the financial stresses on military families. Still, that problem is far larger than the Pentagon is willing to face. According to Abby Leibman, MAZON's chief executive officer, Pentagon officials and military base commanders commonly deny that hunger exists among their subordinates. Sometimes they even discourage families in need of food assistance from seeking help. Daniel Faust, the sergeant

I mentioned earlier, told me that his colleagues and trainees, concerned about seeming needy or not convinced that military services offering help will actually be useful, often won't ask for assistance — even if their incomes barely support their families. Indeed, a recently released RAND Corporation [investigation](#) into military hunger found that some troops worried that seeking food assistance would jeopardize their careers.

I'm lucky that I haven't had to seek food assistance from the government. However, I've heard dozens of officers, enlisted personnel, and family members shrug off such problems by attributing debt among the troops to lack of education, immaturity, or an inability to cope with stress in healthy ways. What you rarely hear is someone in this community complaining that military pay just doesn't support the basic needs of families.

Ignoring food needs in the military is, in the end, about more than just food. Individual cooking and communal meals can help individuals and families cope in the absence of adequate mental healthcare or... well, so much else. The combat veteran who takes up baking as a tactile way of reminding himself that he's here in the present and not back in Afghanistan or Iraq or Somalia or Syria is learning to conquer mental illness. The family that gathers for meals between deployments is seizing an opportunity to connect. In an age when military kids are suffering from [widespread](#) mental-health problems, eating together is one way parents can sometimes [combat](#) anxiety and depression.

Whatever is life-enhancing and doesn't require a professional degree is vital in today's stressed-out military. Heaven only knows, we've had enough excitement in the years of the war on terror. Perhaps in its wake you won't be surprised to learn that [military suicide rates](#) have reached an all-time high, while [mental healthcare](#) is remarkably inaccessible ([especially](#) to families whose kids have disabilities or mental illnesses). And don't let me get started on [sexual assault](#) or [child abuse](#), or the [poor school performance](#) of so many military kids, or even the growth of divorce, not to speak of [violent crime](#), in the services in these years.

Yes, problems like these certainly existed in the military before the post-9/11 war on terror began, but they grew as both the scale and scope of our disastrous military engagements and the Pentagon budget exploded. Now, with the war in Ukraine and growing tensions with China over Taiwan, we live in what could prove to be the aftermath from hell. In other words, to quote 1980s star Billy Joel's famous record title, we *did* [start this fire](#).

Believe me, what's truly striking about this year's Pentagon funding isn't that modest military pay raise. It's the way Congress is allowing the Department of Defense to make ever more stunning [multi-year spending commitments](#) to corporate arms contractors. For example, the Army has awarded Raytheon Technologies [\\$2 billion](#) in contracts to replace (or even expand) supplies of missile systems that have been sent to aid Ukraine in its war against Russia. So count on one thing: the [CEOs](#) of Raytheon and other similar companies will not go hungry (though some of their own [workers](#) just might).

Nor are those fat cats even consistently made to account for how they use our taxpayer dollars. To take but one example, between 2013 and 2017, the Pentagon entered into [staggering numbers](#) of contracts with corporations that had been indicted, fined, and/or convicted of fraud. The total value of those questionable contracts surpassed [\\$334 billion](#). Think of how many [military childcare centers](#) could have been built with such sums.

Human Welfare, Not Corporate Welfare

Policymakers have grown accustomed to evaluating measures meant to benefit military families in terms of how “[mission ready](#)” such families will become. You would think that access to food was such a fundamental need that anyone would simply view it as a human right. The Pentagon, however, continues to frame food security as an instrument of [national security](#), as if it were another weapon with which to arm expendable service members.

To my mind, here’s the bottom line when it comes to that staggering Pentagon budget: For the military and the rest of us, how could it be that corporate weapons makers are in funding heaven and all too many members of our military in a homegrown version of funding hell? Shouldn’t we be fighting, first and foremost, for a decent life for all of us here at home? Veteran unemployment, the pandemic, the Capitol insurrection — these crises have undermined the very reasons many joined the military in the first place.

If we can’t even feed the fighters (and their families) decently, then who or what exactly are we defending? And if we don’t change course now by investing in [alternatives](#) to what we so inaccurately call national defense, I’m afraid that there will indeed be a reckoning.

Those worried about looking soft on national defense by even considering curbing military spending ought to consider at least the security implications of military hunger. We all have daily [needs](#) which, if unmet, can lead to desperation. Hunger can and [does](#) fuel [armed violence](#), and has [helped lead the way](#) to some of the [most brutal](#) regimes in history. In an era when uniformed personnel were distinctly [overrepresented](#) among the domestic extremists who attacked our Capitol on January 6, 2021, one of the fastest ways to undermine our quality of life may just be to let our troops and their families, hungry and in anguish, turn against their own people.

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