

Thematic Analysis of Comments: 2001 Survey of Army Families IV

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ABSTRACT

This report contains a thematic analysis of comments made by non-military spouses on the Survey of Army Families IV, administered in 2001. Of the 6,812 usable surveys received, 42% contained comments. The comments were classified into 25 major categories, most of which had sub-categories, with each comment also evaluated in terms of its “valence” (positive, negative, neutral). Only one major category (Patriotism; Pride/Shame in the Military) elicited a majority (80%) of positive comments, although Military Way of Life and the Survey itself were viewed favorably by sizable groups of respondents (43% and 31%, respectively). Although most comments were negative (87%), not all of them expressed objections to Army programs and policies. Instead, many of the negative comments involved constructive suggestions for improvements or proposed greater development and extension of existing programs. Areas with particularly high levels of dissatisfaction (90% negative statements) were: Medical Program, Housing on Post, Deployment, Soldier’s Work Conditions, Finances, and Spouse Issues. Sub-categories that were viewed as particularly problematic included medical cost-coverage, quality of on-post housing, volunteer work, and the perceived role of the Army spouse. Comparisons of the comments on this survey with those on previous surveys revealed a number of persisting trends and some differences.

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SURVEY OF ARMY FAMILIES IV - SPRING 2001

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INTRODUCTION

This report presents a thematic analysis of comments volunteered by respondents in the Survey of Army Families (SAF) IV, conducted in the spring and summer of 2001. This is the fourth in a series of world-wide surveys (1987, 1991, 1995) sent to the non-military spouses of active duty soldiers. The survey includes questions relating to: housing, relocation, separation, Army resources and facilities, medical and dental care, satisfaction/problems with the Army way of life, and background data on both soldier and spouse. The last page of the survey asks the following:

If you would like to make any comments on the topics in this survey or any other Army topics of interest to you and/or your family, please write them in the space below.

If applicable, please indicate the question number to which your comment is related.

The comments were separated from the survey and included only an ID number so that certain demographic data could be recorded: rank of soldier, location (continental United States or other), gender and race of spouse. A copy of the comment sheet is found in Appendix A.

The survey was administered starting April 3 through July 19, 2001 to a probability sample of 26,392 spouses of active duty soldiers: 11,592 officers and 14,800 enlisted (23% and 7% of the active duty officers and enlisted soldiers, respectively). In terms of location, surveys were sent to 23,625 CONUS (continental U.S.) residents and 2,767 OCONUS (outside U.S.)

A total of 6,812 (33%) of the surveys have been returned; the response rate for officers' spouses is 44% compared with 24% for spouses of enlisted soldiers.* After correction for missing data, ineligible respondents, etc., the final sample consists of 6,759 usable surveys--4,097 officers' and 2,662 enlisted soldiers' spouses.

About 3,600 comment sheets were completed and returned but, of these, approximately 750 were merely informative and thus not included in the thematic analysis. The final total of comment sheets is 2,850, indicating that 42% of the survey respondents volunteered comments.

The final sample includes 1,502 respondents (over half of the usable comment sheets) generating a total of 4,507 comments which were coded according to the procedure described below.

* The rate of return is computed on the basis of *delivered* surveys; although over 26,000 surveys were sent, over 5,000 were returned as undeliverable.

METHODOLOGY

We should note that although we have referred to “comment sheets,” this indicates the number of respondents. The number of comments ranges from one brief statement to lengthy discussions covering more than one page. The average comment sheet includes three or four comments covering less than a page.

Code Construction

We used the code developed for the 1991 survey as the basis for the current study. Each of the two investigators selected 30 comment sheets at random and coded them using the 1991 code categories but noting instances where changes were indicated. A review of the results showed that the code was generally applicable, although some categories had few or no comments.

As an initial check on reliability and validity, each investigator then coded the same set of ten comment sheets chosen at random and compared results. Most of the coding was consistent; in some cases, clarifications were necessary and some sub-categories were added. Furthermore, the investigators agreed on specific coding of certain types of comments, i.e., how to code comments on lack of information about family services, differentiating these comments from attitudes toward family services.

The following changes applied to general coding categories:

1. ODS (Operation Desert Storm) was eliminated as no longer relevant.
2. Family Separation was changed to Deployment/Separation issues.
3. Downsizing was changed to Future Plans including desire to leave the Army, retirement, and effects of downsizing.

The code sheets used in the previous surveys were used once more. These sheets had proven highly efficient in facilitating data entry on the computer. Each sheet provides space for an I.D. number, rank of soldier, current location, gender, and race of respondents, and a total of ten comments, using a four-digit code for each comment. (In the few cases where there were more than ten comments, two sheets were used.) A copy of the code sheet is presented in Appendix B.

Major Code Categories.

The following is a list of the major code categories developed for SAF- 2001.*

- 01 Medical
- 02 Dental
- 03 Housing on Post
- 04 Housing off Post
- 05 Moving (Permanent Change of Station - PCS)
- 06 Finances
- 07 Post Facilities
- 08 Soldier's Work Conditions
- 09 Unit Climate
- 10 Army Attitude toward Family/Spouses
- 11 Family/Spouse Support Programs
- 12 Deployment/Separation Issues
- 13 Spouse Issues
- 14 Children
- 15 Schools
- 16 Social and Post Problems
- 17 Military Way of Life
- 18 Social/Psychological Issues Affecting Spouse
- 19 Communication and Information Dissemination
- 20 Civilian Attitudes toward Military
- 21 Patriotism; Pride/Shame in Military
- 22 Military as an Organization
- 23 Overseas Experience
- 24 The Survey
- 25 Plans for Future

Most of these categories include sub-categories that will be described later.

Coding Procedure

Each comment receives a four digit code. The first two digits indicate the major category as listed above. The third digit refers to the sub-category, and ranges from 0 through 9. In all cases, 0 indicates that the comments refer to the major category in general while 9, NEC (Not Elsewhere Classified), refers to "other" (a residual category not fitting into any of the sub-categories).

* A complete description of the code, including major and sub-categories, is presented in Appendix C.

The final digit on the four-digit code represents the valence of the comment, i.e., whether it is negative, positive, or neutral/not discernible. The following code indicates valence:

- 0 = Negative
- 1 = Positive
- 9 = Neutral

To sum up, each comment is assigned a four-digit code to indicate general substantive area, sub-category, and positive/negative valence. An example would be a comment about medical care, stating that the waiting time for appointments is too long. The code is 0140, 01 = medical, 4 = waiting time, and 0 = negative comment.

At this point, it is useful to explain the coding procedure applied to valence. Positive valence is relatively simple to assess. This includes favorable remarks about any aspect of Army life, including specific programs and policies, either in general or with reference to a particular location. Generally positive statement about the Army community, the Army as an organization, and pride in the Army are also included here. However, negative valence is more complex as it comprises two distinct types of comments. The first includes criticism or unfavorable comments about any program, policy, or general aspect of military life. The second group of comments refers to the absence or lack of certain desirable/desired programs, policies, etc., as well as suggestions for change. The respondent in these cases is favorable toward the program but feels it is absent, undeveloped, or could be improved in the Army as a whole or at a particular installation. A neutral comment either has no valence or it cannot be discerned. These were extremely rare as purely informative comments were omitted from the analysis. Examples of each type of comment and the code assigned to it are presented below.

Positive: "This is a great service, particularly for new and young spouses"
[referring to the Army Family Team Building Program - positive comment
about spouse support group - Code 1121]

Positive: "Thank you for caring enough to do this survey"
[appreciation of survey - Code 2421]

Negative: "This survey is totally too long and a waste of my time"
[criticism of survey - Code 2430]

Negative: "The installation we are currently stationed at doesn't have a lot of the
service/recreation opportunities mentioned. We wish they did."
[absence of certain desired facilities - Code 0750]

Neutral: "I have no complaints but I could take it or leave it"
[referring to military way of life - Code 1709]

RESULTS

Demographics

The table below presents the distribution of the sample with respect to several demographic variables: rank, location, gender and race.:

	Frequency	Percent
Rank		
E1-E3 (PV1, PV2, PFC)	290	6%
E4 (CPL/SPC)	262	6
E5-6 (SGT, SSG)	523	12
E7-9 (SFC, MSG/1SG, SGM/CSM)	579	13
W1-W5 (WO1-CW5)	430	10
O1-O3 (2LT, 1LT, CPT)	1158	26
O4-O6 (MAJ, LTC, COL)	1265	28
Location of Spouse		
CONUS (U.S., including Alaska, Hawaii)	3912	87%
OCONUS (overseas)	555	12
Other	33	1
Gender		
Female	4387	98%
Male	103	2
Race		
White	3829	89%
African-American	263	6
Asian	85	2
American Indian	101	2
Native Hawaiian	4	1

It is apparent that the respondents are overwhelmingly female and mostly white. The great majority are living in the United States and, finally, the lower ranks of enlisted soldiers' spouses are underrepresented. These results reflect several factors: the survey was restricted to civilian spouses, who are largely female; the small number of overseas respondents is due to the fact that fewer soldiers are now stationed overseas, particularly in Europe. Finally, the disproportionately low enlisted percentage can be explained as follows:

1. The rate of return is considerably higher for officers' spouses than for enlisted (44% compared to 24%).

2. Although 42% of the survey respondents volunteered comments, officers' spouses are considerably more likely to do so than their enlisted counterparts. (See section on Demographics above.)

Major Categories

The table below presents the results for each major category: rank in terms of total number of comments; percentage of total; number of comments (figure in parentheses); and percentage of comments in each category in the 1991 survey.

Rank	Major Category	Percent of total comments - 2001		Percent of total comments -1991
1	Medical	10%	(462)	13%
2	Support Programs	9	(388)	5
3	Housing on Post	8	(360)	4
4	Moving	7	(302)	4
5	Deployment/Separation.	6	(282)	2 *
6	Soldier's Work Conditions	6	(276)	5
7	Finances	6	(258)	4
8	Spouse Issues	5	(249)	4
9	Communication/Information	5	(222)	2
10	Survey	5	(212)	6
11	Military Organization.	5	(211)	5
12	Military Way of Life	4	(183)	5
13	Army Attitudes to Family	4	(178)	4
14	Unit Climate	4	(165)	6
15	Post Facilities	3	(150)	4
16	Social/Psychological Issues	3	(140)	3
17	Dental	2	(80)	3
18	Housing off Post	2	(76)	1
19	Schools	1	(64)	1
20	Plans for Future	1	(64)	4**
21	Social/Post Problems	1	(50)	<1
22	Children	1	(52)	<1
23	Overseas Experience	<1	(33)	3
24	Civilian Attitudes to Military	<1	(26)	1
25	Patriotism	<1	(25)	<1
26	Operation Desert Storm			8***

* In 1991, this category was titled "Family Separation."

** In 1991, the category was titled "Downsizing" and included some of the same sub-categories as Plans for the Future.

***Operation Desert Storm which was an important category in 1991 (ranking second) did not appear in the 2001 survey.

A comparison of the two sets of data shows both similar patterns and some changes. Medical issues still elicit the highest percentage of comments although this has decreased slightly since 1991. Support Programs, Housing on Post, Deployment/Separation and Moving all show increases in 2001. Most of the other issues show little or no change in percentage of comments with one exception. Plans for the Future elicit only 1% of the comments compared to downsizing in 1991 (4%). This category, which deals with retention, retirement, etc., was more salient in 1991 when the Army was undergoing considerable downsizing. Overseas Experience is similarly somewhat less important now, reflecting the decrease in the number of soldiers serving overseas. Schools, Social/Post Problems, Children, Civilian Attitudes to Military, and Patriotism all continue to rank low in the percentage of comments volunteered by respondents.

Valence

As might be expected, the great majority of comments are negative, offering criticism of general and specific policies and programs, perceived attitudes toward spouses and families, and describing problems that Army families and spouses often encounter. This is a general pattern as respondents are much more likely to cite problems and dissatisfactions than positive factors. Overall, valence in 2001, compared to 1991 and 1987, is presented in the following table.

Valence	2001	1991	1987
Negative	87% (3934)	85%	81%
Positive	11 (478)	14	18%
Neutral	2 (96)	1	1

We can see that there has been a steady increase in the percentage of negative comments since 1987, although the differences are moderate. We will examine the major and sub-categories presenting changes, i.e., whether the increase in negative comments is reflected throughout or particularly in certain substantive areas.

Analysis of Major and Sub-categories

As indicated above, a total of 1502 comment sheets containing 4507 comments were analyzed. Comments are categorized under twenty-five major substantive areas and, in most cases, under several sub-categories as well. In the analysis which follows, we have listed the major areas in terms of rank (how frequently cited), the total number of comments, and the percentages that are negative, positive or neutral in terms of valence. Wherever possible, examples are quoted to illustrate both the substance and valence of the comments in that category.

The sub-categories are also presented in rank order within each major category and the percentages that are negative, positive, or neutral are indicated in that order (e.g., negative/positive/neutral). The figure in parenthesis is the total number of comments for that sub-category. It should be noted that in most cases, there are few neutral comments and, in many cases, none at all. Several major substantive areas do not include any sub-categories. Either they relate to

general topics which are not sub-divided or the responses to each sub-category are so few that they are grouped under the major heading.

The category “General Comments” refers to statements about the substantive area as a whole, such as general dissatisfaction with the medical system. On the other hand, the category NEC (not elsewhere classified) includes individual comments, often idiosyncratic, that do not fit under any category and are too few to warrant a separate code.

It is important to note that the percentages cannot be compared across major categories as they represent different numbers of comments. Thus, while the 8% positive medical comments reflect 38 comments, the 19% positive comments under children represent only ten cases.

Finally, percentages are rounded so that the totals range from 99%-101%.

1. Medical

462 total comments: 92% (424) negative, 8% (38) positive

1. Tricare; cost; coverage	(114)	96 / 4%
2. Adequacy/competence of care	(88)	92 / 8%
3. General comments	(61)	69 / 31%
4. Attitudes of personnel	(53)	92 / 8%
5. Avail. of appts. /waiting time	(53)	98 / 2%
6. Administration	(34)	100%
7. NEC	(25)	92 / 8%
8. Accessibility (hours, location)	(16)	100%
9. Staffing shortage	(14)	100%
10. Rank issues	(4)	100%

The area of medical care emerges once again as the topic of greatest concern to respondents, with 462 comments, representing 10% of the total number of comments. The great majority of the comments are negative; only in the General sub-category is there a substantial group of positive comments. Major sources of dissatisfaction include coverage (Tricare), competence of care and, particularly, availability of appointments and waiting time. The miscellaneous (NEC) comments include specific individual experiences with medical care. It is noteworthy that a substantial group mentions attitudes of personnel as an issue; respondents feel that they are not treated with respect and consideration by medical and other personnel. With regard to competence, respondents cite lack of training, absence of specialties, and language difficulties with foreign doctors. It should be noted that some respondents indicate that the quality of medical care has varied among different locations.

It is apparent that the Army’s medical program is both highly important to spouses and families and widely used. It is also clear that there is room for improvement, particularly in areas where many respondents express dissatisfaction. The following quotes indicate the range of responses on the subject of medical care.

“I am extremely concerned about the quality, honesty, and professionalism of the Army Medical Corps. In four unrelated instances, all within six months, different doctors at ___ failed to correctly diagnose and properly institute a corrective treatment. [Respondents proceeds to describe each incident in detail.] We are scared to seek medical attention from the Army Medical Corps.”

“I am extremely unsatisfied with our health care. It is like a nightmare HMO!”

“Your health benefits are great and your health care providers are dangerous.”

“Most of our providers are foreign which makes communication extremely difficult. I have to translate the questions for my children and they are uncomfortable.”

“The worst part is, we are met with bad attitudes and we are made to feel like cattle being herded through the system and not like important individuals.”

“It is very difficult to obtain a routine medical appointment at ___. My clinic is always booked up 2-3 weeks out. Tricare then gives me the clinic phone number to see if I can get a walk-in appointment. This is nearly impossible. Appointments I have made have been summarily canceled. The result is that my children have gone untreated for such things as soccer injury....., acne,....flu symptoms.”

2. Support Programs

388 total comments: 81% (313) negative, 17% (65) positive, 3% (10) neutral

1. Spouses’ support groups and programs	(254)	84 / 13 / 4%
2. General comments	(53)	64 / 36%
3. Child care (pre-school or after school)	(45)	91 / 9%
4. Chaplain; counseling	(12)	58 / 42%
5. Army Community Service (ACS)	(8)	50 / 38 / 12%
6. NEC	(7)	100%
7. Spouse centers and activities	(5)	80 / 20%
8. Umbrella services	(2)	50 / 50%
9. Support programs for male spouses	(1)	100%
10.Red Cross; Army Emergency Relief	(1)	100%

Support programs represent an area that has grown in importance since the earlier surveys. Much of this is due two programs: FRG (Family Readiness Group) and AFTB (Army Family Team Building). A total of 254 comments refer to these programs, the majority of them citing the FRG, a unit-based support group. Child care is also an important issue, spouses citing the unavailability and cost of child care on post, which prevents spouses from attending meetings or seeking employment. General comments refer to the entire range of support programs without specification. Unlike other areas, support programs elicit sizable percentages of positive responses. Respondents are more positive about AFTB than they are about the FRG. Some indicate that while they do not participate in AFTB, it is very useful for new and young Army spouses. The quotes below illustrate this.

“Every time I’ve been called by them, all they talk about is gossip.” [referring to FRG]

“Lack of FRG participation was poor due to personal conflicts between several of the wives in the company....this caused a majority of the group to refuse to come to the meetings or want anything to do with the Army as a whole.”

“This is a great service for new and young spouses. I personally already know most of the information provided by AFTB.”

”Also there is no child care for young children available. The wait can be up to one year.”

Among the comments, there is considerable discussion of the failure to learn about these support activities. These comments will be discussed in a later section, Communication and Information.

3. Housing, On-Post

360 total comments: 95% (347) negative, 4% (13) positive

1. Quality/maintenance	(155)	98 / 2%
2. Availability/waiting period	(85)	99 / 1%
3. Inequities/unfairness in assignments	(40)	100%
4. General comments	(21)	76 / 24%
5. NEC	(20)	95 / 5%
6. Post community (quality; maintenance)	(17)	82 / 18%
7. Attitudes of personnel	(16)	100%
8. Cost of leased housing	(6)	100%

The major source of criticism in this area relates to quality and availability of post housing (two-thirds of the comments fall under these two sub-categories). Comments regarding quality focus on size of units (too small), maintenance of services such as heat and air conditioning, rundown nature of units (e.g., need for repairs and painting). Under availability, respondents complain of lack of on-post housing, producing long waiting periods during which families may have to rent expensive off-post housing. A sizable group criticizes methods of assigning housing, citing unfairness in favoring certain ranks and/or other groups. Interestingly, a number of officers’ wives do not complain about their own housing but are concerned with enlisted families. The unclassified comments include behavior of neighbors, too many rules, or failure to observe rules. The quotes below illustrate the comments.

“At our new post we were offered everything in a house we asked not to have. We asked to live near the airfield - denied, in a townhouse - denied, a three-bedroom - denied...”

“They need a decent place for their families to live (and not just high ranking ones).”

“Housing is deplorable with deficiencies in heating and air conditioning...It is sad to see units that should be condemned because of leaking roofs and worse.”

“When you make an improvement or self-fix something in military housing to better your home, it has to be removed/returned to the original...Why? If I chose to improve my quarters and have to get ‘clearance’ from the housing office for the change, why take it down?”

4. Moving

302 total comments: 81% negative (246), 16% (49) positive, 2% (7) neutral

1. Sponsorship; support	(78)	35 / 60 / 5%
2. Timing/disruption (schools, stress)	(70)	96 / 1 / 3%
3. Cost (damage, housing loss)	(45)	100%
4. Frequency	(38)	100%
5. Information; preparation	(27)	100%
6. Household goods problem (non-financial)	(15)	100%
7. NEC	(13)	100%
8. General comments	(9)	78 / 11 / 11%

Moving or PCS (permanent change of station) is a part of military life. An Army family usually is assigned a sponsor at the new station to help them find their way, adjust, settle in their new surroundings. This aspect of moving, unlike the others, elicits positive comments from three-fifths of the respondents. Many of the comments cite a single activity of the sponsor (e.g., driving the family around the post, helping them locate a specific facility, etc.) Others report general help and friendliness extending over a period of time. Negative comments in this category generally focus on the lack of sponsorship and support. Moving in the middle of a school year is the major complaint regarding timing, and the frequency of moves is generally criticized. Comments that are unclassified include several involving care of pets during the move, before settling in the new housing. Some of the negative comments are actually constructive suggestions for change as the quotes below will show.

“Our sponsor took us everywhere and let us stay in their home for a month. They were wonderful. We love them and are still friends.”

“[sponsor]....helped us evaluate off-post housing.”

“We PCSd 4 times in 4 years. Three of these moves were in Germany. This caused much stress on my family.”

“An idea for ‘welcome’ packets. Usually there is a reliable map. It would be very helpful if there was a ‘list’ of place close to the post such asnearest playground/park area for small children, nearest fast food place, restaurants...Kmart, drugstore...”

“During a PCS move, there are many things (cleaning supplies, spray cans...etc.) That you either give to neighbors/friends or you throw it out. At your new post you then turn around and purchase them all over again. Some ‘self-help’ housing fix-it shops have a ‘swap-closet...anyone can access and borrow or drop off. If there was a similar thing--probably through ACS lending closet--for initial house set-up items/cleaning supplies that would help defray initial costs some.”

5. Deployment/Separation

282 total comments: 99% (278) negative, 1% (2) positive, 1% (2) neutral

1. Effect on children/family	(62)	100%
2. Frequency	(61)	100%
3. Duration	(43)	96 / 2 / 2%
4. Effect on marriage	(34)	100%
5. Need for counseling; preparation	(18)	100%
6. Unaccompanied tours; lack of sponsorship for family	(17)	100%
7. NEC	(15)	94 / 6%
8. Financial problems	(13)	100%
9. Effect on soldier	(9)	100%
10. General comments	(7)	86 / 0 / 14%

Currently, Army policy includes relatively short deployments (six months) in which soldiers are sent overseas to trouble spots or on peace-keeping missions. The families do not accompany them. This is now a major issue among Army spouses, ranking sixth, as compared to twelfth in 1991 (when it was titled “Family Separation”). The comments are overwhelmingly negative with 100% of the respondents citing negative effects on family, children, and marriage. Similarly, frequency and duration of deployments are also criticized by all or nearly all of the spouses. Some suggest specific remedies, such as sending only single soldiers overseas or limiting the number of deployments within a certain period. The statements which follow illustrate some of these attitudes.

“My husband went on a 6 month deployment to Bosnia. A month after his return he went to PLDC to become a Sergeant. Two months after that he goes away for training exercises for a month also. His company now is preparing to leave for NYC training for a month. Since my husband has come back from Bosnia he’s been home for a total of three months. Although my husband and I have a great understanding that this is his job other families don’t. The strain on their relationships is a great deal.”

“As an FRG leader, I see the breaking point for most spouses as being a deployment over months. This is when most people start to lose it, marriages suffer and the units suffer. Soldiers deployed must worry about whether or not their families are able to cope back home.”

6. Soldier's Work Conditions

276 total comments: 91% negative, 4% (12) positive, 4% (12) neutral

1. Hours	(104)	97 / 1 / 2%
2. Stress (family problems)	(40)	100%
3. Work satisfaction	(32)	75 / 25%
4. Off-post duty stations (ROTC, other services, remote sites)	(30)	67 / 3 / 30%
5. TDY (effect on soldier; communication)	(25)	96 / 0 / 4%
6. Promotions	(20)	100%
7. Access to education, training	(15)	87 / 13%
8. NEC	(9)	100%
9. General comments	(1)	100%

This category includes issues directly related to the soldier's work in the Army, many of which have an impact on the family and spouse. The major concern is hours of work, cited negatively by nearly all of the respondents. They complain about long hours, unpredictability of hours, work on weekends. Family stress elicits the next most frequent responses and much of it is related to hours. Work satisfaction frequently involves assignments unrelated to the soldier's training or expertise. A sizable group explain that they are assigned to remote or off-duty locations where they lack access to Army facilities. The relatively large percentage of neutral comments indicate that, because of their location, many of the survey questions are inapplicable. The unclassified category (NEC) includes comments on the Army as a career, and all are negative. The following quote describes the major problem of hours and its effect on the family.

“My husband works extremely long hours often leaving the house at 0500 and not returning until 2000. 15 hour days is excessive. Additionally frequent field problems and staff duty make it almost impossible to have a quality family that includes my spouse. I don't wonder when he is going to be home anymore. We just go about our business and when he is around it is almost like an intrusion.”

7. Finances

258 total comments: 93% (240) negative, 7% (17) positive

1. Pay	(155)	95 / 5%
2. Benefits (current)	(59)	86 / 12 / 2%
3. Benefits upon retirement (pensions)	(20)	95 / 5%
4. Administration (delays, mistakes)	(12)	100%
5. NEC	(6)	100%
6. Security; stability	(5)	60 / 40%
7. General comments	(1)	100%

As might be expected, pay is the most salient issue among Army spouses and most are dissatisfied, citing unfavorable comparisons with the civilian community as well as inequities among ranks. With regard to current benefits, respondents describe erosion of benefits (e.g., medical) while others advocate extension of benefits such as educational funds for spouses and children; however, a minority expresses a favorable view of current benefits. Respondents also criticize pensions as too small and unfair, while a few suggest extension of pensions to spouses. The most favorable attitudes are with regard to security as two-fifths are satisfied with this aspect of military life. The following quotes show some of the feelings about pay, benefits, and work conditions.

“...financially we will be beyond broke by the time his 4 years of service is over. We--both employed--make just enough money to not qualify for programs that help the poor (excluding WIC). All our emotion/marital or other problems stem from the lack of finances.”

“The benefits are wonderful but not enough to make us forget that he works 13 hour days, gets yelled at, belittled and treated badly.”

8. Spouse Issues

249 total comments: 94% (234) negative, 4% (10) positive, 2% (5) neutral

1. Employment; job availability	(66)	97 / 3%
2. Establishing a career	(59)	95 / 5%
3. Volunteer work	(45)	80 / 9 / 11%
4. CPO policies; information	(38)	100%
5. Education opportunities	(16)	100%
6. Pressures to participate	(16)	100%
7. NEC	(4)	100%
8. DODD employment policies	(1)	100%

In fact, the entire survey relates to spouse and family issues. However, this category focuses specifically on the soldier’s spouse as an individual, distinct from Army and family concerns. It is clear that employment is the major concern of spouses and they feel overwhelmingly negative about their opportunities. They complain about the lack of job opportunities, both on post and in the surrounding communities. Many spouses who are professionally trained describe the difficulties of establishing a career due to frequent moves and the necessity to start at the bottom with each move. Related to this is the employer’s unwillingness to hire someone who is likely to move in the near future. The policies of the Civilian Personnel Office are criticized as non-informative, unfair, and unhelpful. With regard to perceived Army demands, spouses (particularly on the officer level) say they often feel pressure to participate in volunteer and other activities although they have jobs and lack the time. A small group enjoys volunteer work but the percentage is considerably lower than in 1987 (9% compared to 40%). In general, many respondents feel that the Army does not recognize that society, especially with regard to women, has changed.

“I was a career woman before I married my spouse but have found that in my field of expertise I cannot have a real career because of the constant moves.”

“The opportunity for me to have a career is almost non-existent. Good professional jobs are lacking in the bases we have been to thus far. Employers are reluctant to hire a mil. spouse for a professional position because they know we’ll be moving soon. Trying to get a govt. job is almost impossible even though I am eligible for VRA & spouse preference.”

“The Army seems to expect me to attend balls, family groups, meetings, etc., even though I work full time and attend classes at night.”

“They make it mandatory to go to the meetings. I don’t need another meeting to go it if I don’t want to just because my husband’s job is in the army.”

“My spouse has been in the military 24 years. I have done all that before. Now it’s someone else’s turn.”

“While this does not apply to all working spouses, I’ve heard many say they choose to work so that they aren’t expected to give all their time to volunteer activities.”

“Did much volunteer work in past and enjoyed it.”

9. Communication/Information

222 total comments: 86% (190) negative, 1% (2) positive, 14% (30) neutral

- | | | |
|--|-------|--------------|
| 1. Comments on information (or lack of it) for specific services | (104) | 98 / 1 / 1% |
| 2. General comments | (62) | 95 / 2 / 3% |
| 3. Reliance on soldier spouse for information | (44) | 48 / 0 / 52% |
| 4. Learning about service and facilities from survey itself | (9) | 67 / 33% |

This category refers to two types of comments: those relating to general communication and dissemination of information and comments on information about specific programs and facilities. The latter is a residual category as information issues are found in other categories (see Moving and Spouse Issues). Most of the specific criticisms refer to the FRG program; respondents indicate that they have never heard of the program, are not notified of meetings, or are notified too late to make arrangements to attend. Other respondents state that they rely on their soldier spouses for information, and a few indicate that they first learned about a program from the survey itself. Whatever, it is clear that this area could be improved, possibly with some kind of systematic communication, rather than relying on individuals, word-of-mouth, or posted notices. The quotes which follow illustrate these points.

“It is difficult to find out information on TDY duties, moves and reimbursement. Web sites give conflicting information and it seems like we never know what is going on.”

“Army services are not well advertised. I am not aware of many programs, much less where they are located or what they do. Maybe a directory of the programs stating what they are, what is offered and a POC would be nice.”

“I have never heard of any of your organizations or programs. Who does the informing?”

“Poor communication, i.e., notification of events usually after the event is over or too short notice.”

10. Survey

212 total comments: 59% (126) negative, 31% (66) positive, 9% (20) neutral

1. Criticisms (omissions, suggestions, etc.)	(114)	86 / 1 / 13%
2. Appreciation; “waste of time	(59)	17 / 83%
3. Will results be used, make a difference	(16)	37 / 63%
4. NEC	(10)	30 / 20 / 50%
5. Feeling that somebody cares	(6)	33 / 67%
6. Lack of other surveys	(6)	100%

As we discovered in the earlier survey of 1987, a substantial number of respondents comment on the survey itself, its content, format, and purpose. A considerable minority makes positive comments of appreciation for the survey, the feeling that someone cares and that the survey may have some effect. Negative comments mostly concern the length of the survey, omission of certain topics, and constructive criticism as to what should be included in future surveys. The quotations below are examples of the comments.

“Thank you for caring enough to do this survey. I hope you receive a lot of good feedback, not just negative criticism.”

“This survey is totally too long and a waste of my time.”

“I would love to hear from someone on what I have written so I know it was good.”

“Honestly...I’m not expecting anything from this survey because I know the survey is just a show-off and nothing we can change as family members.”

11. Military as an Organization

211 total comments: 98% (207) negative; 2% (4) positive

1. Unfairness; rank inequities; racism	(39)	100%
2. Concern for soldiers	(38)	97 / 3%
3. Policies re: assignment, deployment	(37)	97 / 3%
4. Army leadership	(31)	97 / 3%
5. NEC	(23)	100%
6. Effectiveness/efficiency (e.g., waste)	(18)	100%
7. Trust/distrust	(10)	100%
8. Bureaucracy	(8)	100%
9. General comments	(7)	86 / 14%

This category focuses on the Army as a whole, rather than on the unit, which is coded in a separate category. Most of the comments are negative, no matter what the sub-category. Respondents cite unfairness in policies, such as treatment of different ranks and racism. Interestingly, the latter topic tends to mention instances of reverse racism, *i.e.*, favoritism toward minority groups. Many feel that there is no real concern for the individual soldier and that assignment policies do not take into account needs of certain groups. Some spouses question the current policy regarding peacekeeping, stating that this is not the Army's mission unless the United States is in jeopardy. The unclassified comments include a number relating to the recent changes regarding Black Berets--respondents feel that these should be reserved for special units only. The following comments illustrate some of these findings.

"We are a broken Army. We still have to do more with a great deal less."

"The Army has screwed us over numerous times."

"Great strides are being made by the Army to improve enlisted soldiers' lives. But officers' lives, especially O-4s and above are terrible."

"I feel the government discriminates against white soldiers and their families. There are hiring preferences for minorities within the federal agencies. Minority soldiers report to the EEO office for every offense. They use EEO to get out of punishment they would have to serve. The Army should quit the quota promotions."

"The Army s...s at the way they treat soldiers."

"In my previous job as a DA civilian I saw repeated examples of the Army just not treating its soldiers very well..."

"I am politically against peace-keeping missions."

"I am concerned about the strain the peace-keeping rotations put on families and on training."

"The black beret is an absurd fiasco. How long before common sense dictates a 180 degree reversal?"

12. Military Way of Life

183 total comments: 55% (101) negative, 43% (78) positive, 2% (4) neutral

- | | | |
|-------------------------------|-------|--------------|
| 1. General comments | (159) | 50 / 48 / 2% |
| 2. Changes in quality of life | (24) | 92 / 8% |

General comments on this subject tend to take either of two forms: an overall opinion, attitude, or perception of military life as a whole or comments focusing on a particular aspect of military life. A few respondents compare the Army quality of life to that of other services. Enjoying military life is an example of the former; citing opportunity to travel and distance from one's family are positive and negative examples of the latter. This category is noteworthy in that the majority of respondents are favorable toward military life. The second sub-category refers to perception of change in military life, as viewed by the spouse. A number of quotations illustrate these attitudes.

"We would choose the Air Force quality of life, programs over the Army."

"I live on an Air Force base and I have discovered that quality of life is so much better for Air Force families." [Then lists advantages of the Air Force]

"I HATE THE ARMY! It has been the worst experience of my life. The Army is full of a bunch of liars. [This also reflects distrust of the Army as an organization]

"...all the B.S. we have to endure - time away from loved ones, deployments, raising kids alone while he is gone, field time, schooling, not receiving money he is owed from enlisting - I could go on and on."

"As we end our 20 years in the Army, I can say we enjoyed the people we have met but would not do it again or advise anyone to do it."

"I have enjoyed our Army experience very much. You might say I love the Army. The travel and lifestyle really agreed with me."

"It's a real joy to be able to travel and go where you want."

"When we entered the military 18 years ago, we had a better life. The Army was adequately staffed and equipped - we were better trained. Over the past 8 years our quality of life has diminished." [followed by a description of changes]

"I have no complaints but I could take it or leave it."

13. Army Attitudes Towards Family/Spouses

178 total comments: 94% (168) negative, 6% (10) positive

Although the Army has explicitly stated a policy of concern for families, this has clearly not convinced the respondents who volunteered comments. They are overwhelmingly negative, stating that this concern is mainly verbal and has not been translated into real policies and programs. A number of spouses include specific examples of the Army's lack of concern such as failure to consider unique needs of the family at certain stages of life, failure to allow for emergencies such as death in the family, etc. A small minority indicates that, although not ideal, the Army has made strides in its attitude toward family and spouses. Quotes follow:

"I am sorry to say that I feel the Army does not really care about the family at all."

"I feel that more consideration should be given by Branch to the welfare of families, especially when you have high school students."

"...family time needs to be given more consideration. The Army in general needs to remember that a happy family means a happy soldier which means a retainable soldier. PLEASE look at us as an asset not a problem to be dealt with."

14. Unit Climate

165 total comments: 91% (150) negative, 7% (12) positive, 2% (3) neutral

1. Unit family support	(49)	86 / 14%
2. Leadership	(48)	94 / 6%
3. Unit attitudes toward families/spouses	(42)	90 / 5 / 5%
4. Unit morale	(9)	100%
5. Rank differences/favoritism within unit	(6)	100%
6. NEC	(5)	100%
7. Intrusion by unit; lack of privacy	(4)	100%
8. General comments	(2)	50 / 50%

This section refers to the soldier's unit as distinct from the larger Army as an organization. It is the part of the Army that the spouse is most likely to know and to experience in daily life. The interaction between unit and family is the major issue under this category. The sub-categories of unit family support, attitudes toward family and leadership all relate to this interaction and the majority of the comments are negative. Family support refers to activities (other than the FRG) such as parties for families and organized functions for spouses when the soldier is in the field or deployed. Attitudes are closely related to this; they refer to the respondent's perception of how the unit views and treats families, i.e., providing for time off for the soldier for family functions. Often these perceptions are based on the leadership, either officers or NCOs. Comments about the unit tend to be internally consistent, i.e., respondents will either criticize or praise unit support, attitudes and leadership. In some cases, leaders are simply described as incompetent or inefficient. Illustrations are presented below.

“Our unit commander has no regard for family members.”

“My husband is leaving the Army. The reasons are: poor treatment by his chain of command, stress, disregard for his parental responsibilities by his chain of command.”

“I can handle it but I know there are some who really need the unit support.”

“During the past 12 months my spouse was away on extended TDY. Although he was still attached to the unit, we were dropped from the FRG roster and therefore not included in meetings, etc.”

“I feel that at the unit level, there is usually not a lot of support for families because the focus is on getting the job done at all costs.”

“Based on conversations with my husband, morale in the military is very low on his post and mainly in his company.”

15. Post Facilities

150 total comments: 77% (115) negative, 23% (35) positive

1. Recreational	(45)	64 / 36%
2. Post Exchange; AAFES	(34)	91 / 9%
3. Commissary	(29)	76 / 24%
4. NEC	(22)	77 / 23%
5. General comments	(12)	83 / 17%
6. Religious facilities	(6)	83 / 17%
7. Transportation on post	(1)	0 / 100%
8. MP's	(1)	100%

Among post facilities, recreation emerges as the most salient topic. Respondents cite the need for playgrounds for young children as well as facilities for family activities. Over one-third of the comments indicate satisfaction with existing facilities on the post. The PX is viewed unfavorably by most respondents who cite high prices and inadequate products. The commissary is somewhat more favorably viewed but many again mention high prices. The unclassified comments include once again provision for pets--this subject comes up under several topics and is obviously a matter of concern to a number of respondents. A quote is given below.

“The installation we are currently stationed at doesn't have a lot of the service/recreation opportunities mentioned. We wish they did. Where housing is located, we have only two small playgrounds.”

16. Social/Psychological Issues

140 total comments: 94% (132) negative, 6% (8) positive

1. Role behavior expected of spouse	(31)	100%
2. Morale; general stress; welcome	(28)	82 / 18%
3. Overdependence on military	(18)	100%
4. Psychological effects on self-concept, identity; independence; personal fulfillment	(17)	88 / 12%
5. Loneliness; isolation	(16)	100%
6. Rank relations among spouses	(15)	100%
7. Expressing complaints	(8)	100%
8. NEC	(6)	83 / 17%

This category was added to the 1991 survey in response to a large number of comments relating to the spouse as an individual--her well-being, inner feelings, and perception of Army expectations. It refers to the effects of both the Army and the military community on the soldier's spouse. Although it may relate to Spouse Issues, this category deals with psychological states and emotions, rather than with objective factors such as employment. The social changes in the perception of the female role are reflected in many of the comments. The quotes which follow will provide a clearer picture of these issues.

“Family Readiness Group (FRG) does not invite others to attend. It is a senior officer coffee group for the most part. I was not contacted by my spouse's FRG while he was deployed.” [While this is a criticism of the FRG, it reflects feelings about relations among soldiers' spouses]

“If I have to live my life over, I seriously doubt I'd marry a man in the military. I've been depressed (how can you have a marriage if one partner is never around?) I think military spouses are stuck in the 1950s. I think it's degrading to be asked to bring cookies for single soldiers. Many of them have more time on their hands than I do. When has my husband been asked to bring cookies for my job? We are dumbed down. I am not a shadow of my husband like so many military spouses. We each have only one life. I intend to shine on my own. Where are my military spouse models? Few and far between.”

“It's almost like the Army expects and rewards the spouse to do nothing more than be a homemaker, mother, and, of course, a volunteer.”

17. Dental

80 total comments: 97% (78) negative, 3% (2) positive

1. Cost/coverage	(50)	98 / 2%
2. General comments	(12)	100%
3. Adequacy/competence of care	(7)	86 / 14%
4. Availability of appointments	(3)	100%
5. Administration	(3)	100%
6. Accessibility	(2)	100%
7. NEC	(2)	100%
8. Attitudes of personnel		

Compared to the medical program, the Army dental program is both less developed and less used and, thus, elicits far fewer comments. The great majority of these comments are critical. The most frequent negative opinions involve cost and coverage. A common complaint is the lack of coverage for orthodontia, a very common and costly procedure for many children and teenagers. There are few comments in the additional sub-categories; only adequacy/competence of care is viewed favorably by a noticeable minority of respondents (14%). The following quote sums up respondents' attitudes.

“I just think it’s a shame that military benefits in the area of medical and dental care have been allowed to erode. Care is substandard and patients are treated without the respect they deserve.”

18. Housing, Off-Post

76 total comments: 95% (72) negative , 5% (4) positive

1. Cost	(44)	100%
2. Distance from post; transportation	(12)	100%
3. Quality; maintenance	(9)	78 / 22%
4. NEC	(6)	83 / 17%
5. General comments	(3)	100%
6. Community	(2)	50 / 50%

Comments about off-post housing differ from those about on-post housing in two respects: first, this is a far less salient topic and draws considerably fewer comments than does on-post housing; second, the comments differ in terms of substance. However, in both cases comments are overwhelmingly negative. With regard to housing off-post, the major complaint centers on the cost which may not be fully covered by the housing allowance. Second, is the distance from the post which produces problems in transportation as well as accessibility of post facilities and programs. However, a sizable minority expresses favorable views as to the quality of off-post housing, a distinct difference from on-post housing (22% compared to 2%). A few unclassified comments relate to housing assignments which force people to rent off post, as the following illustrates.

“We didn’t qualify for on-post housing (no children) so we ended up paying a lot in rent... extra for laundry and extra driving time in the early morning for him to get to work.”

19. Schools

64 total comments: 89% (57) negative, 11% (7) positive

The comments in this category tend to take one of two forms: a general criticism of the schools their children attend, although it is not clear if these are on-post or local schools. Factors such as failure to offer certain programs is a common complaint. Second, respondents in some cases indicate that changing schools due to PCS has produced problems--inability to pursue certain subjects, or problems adjusting to the academic standards of the new school. The following quote expresses this.

“Both my children were performing above grade level as we PCSd overseas. When we returned 3 years later, they were performing below grade level and had to be caught up.”

20. Plans for Future

64 total comments: 89% (57) negative, 8% (5) positive, 3% (2) neutral

1. Desire to leave Army	(48)	88 / 8 / 4%
2. Unfairness/inequities	(4)	100%
3. NEC	(4)	100%
4. General comments	(3)	67 / 33%
5. Downsizing problems	(2)	100%
6. Transition problems	(2)	100%

This subject has been dealt with under various category headings in previous surveys. In 1987, the title was “Retention” and in 1991 “Downsizing,” reflecting the salient issues of each period. The current study uses a general term, “Plans for the Future,” which includes some aspects of the earlier categories. Most of the comments here involve plans to leave or stay in the Army and most of these are unfavorable, indicating a desire to leave or to retire. Downsizing appears to be much less important now than in 1991. The following reflect both positive and negative attitudes toward the soldier remaining in the Army. The second quote is typical for respondents who are impatient to leave military life.

“It makes you want to stay in the Army longer.”

“29 1/2 years as a military spouse, 19 different homes, only 100 more days...”

21. Social/Post Problems

50 total comments: 94% (47) negative, 6% (3) positive

1. Crime/safety	(11)	91 / 9%
2. NEC	(11)	100%
3. General comments	(10)	80 / 20%
4. Spouse abuse	(6)	100%
5. Racial issues	(5)	100%
6. Alcohol abuse	(4)	100%
7. Drugs	(3)	100%

This topic refers to general and specific problems in the post community as perceived by respondents (excluding housing which is covered elsewhere). Since the category is defined in terms of “problems,” it is not surprising that most comments are negative. The unclassified sub-category includes a miscellany, i.e., divorce, profanity, suicide, pet abuse, and poor supervision of children. These issues and crime/safety elicit the most comments. The general comments include a considerable percentage (20%) of favorable comments, dealing mostly with improvements in certain areas. Quotes are presented below.

“In my husband’s company they are busy with reports of domestic violence, drinking and driving and soldiers going AWOL and a lot of this is due to separation from their families.”

“The post has numerous problems that really should be investigated.”

“The Army states that it has a zero tolerance for domestic violence but I’m not sure if that is just talk. I had a neighbor move in next door to me and she was getting abused everyday. It took her husband’s company over two months to get her out and here and over 4 months to discharge him.”

22. Children

52 total comments: 81% (42) negative, 19% (10) positive

1. Facilities/opportunities for youth/ teenagers	(26)	73 / 27%
2. Facilities for young children (other than day care)	(12)	83 / 17%
3. Exceptional/handicapped children	(10)	100%
4. NEC	(3)	100%
5. General comments	(1)	100%

This area deals largely with recreational, athletic, and other programs for children and teenagers (excluding day care which is covered elsewhere). Substantial minorities approve of these facilities, especially those available for teenagers. The program for Exceptional Family Members is viewed negatively, the comments centering on unavailability of services.

“Youth programs need lots of improvement here.”

“I have been disappointed with the services offered for parents of infants/toddlers at Fort _____. There was a lot more to do at Fort _____. I would use programs here often if more was offered.”

23. Overseas Experience

33 total comments: 91% (30) negative, 9% (3) positive

Compared to earlier years, there are now fewer families living overseas (only 12% of the respondents reside OCONUS) and, consequently, there are relatively few comments on the overseas experience. Most of them refer to the experience as a whole and are negative, as the following quotes illustrate.

“I used to live in Europe but returned to the U.S. because I could not cope with being there. Now I’m back home and my husband still overseas for 2 and ½ more years.”

“Being stationed in _____ Germany has been an experience that I hope my family and I never have to experience again.”

24. Civilian Attitudes to Military

26 total comments: 88% (23) negative; 12% (3) positive

Attitudes of civilian personnel have been covered in other sections referring to medical and dental care, housing, and employment. This is a residual category and, although it is stated in terms of civilian attitudes in general, comments tend to refer to civilian employees (unspecified) with whom the respondent has contact. The perceptions of civilian employees is mostly unfavorable--they are viewed as rude, uncaring, and inefficient. The following quote sums up respondents’ feelings rather colorfully.

“Civilians are out of control. They are fat, lazy and cocky...they are worthless.”

25. Patriotism/Pride/Shame

25 total comments: 20% (5) negative, 80% (20) positive

This category produces the highest proportion of positive comments, although the total number is small. Respondents indicate that they are proud of their spouses’ service and that they feel they are also serving as Army spouses. A few feel that pride in the Army is being eroded, that military service is viewed as a job, rather than as a patriotic calling. Quotes are presented below.

“We are very happy and feel secure knowing we are raising our children in an Army environment.” [this relates to military way of life as well]

“It is an honor to have my husband serve our country...”

“I have always believed that the Army is a way of life--not just a job. Too many officers today look at their career as a job and the spouses follow suit. There is not a feeling that it's important to give back to the community by being involved in it.”

Summary

1. As indicated earlier, most of the comments reflect a negative valence. Respondents use this opportunity to express dissatisfaction, describe specific problems, and, in some cases, vent their feelings in a way that the survey itself does not provide. However, it should be noted that 11% of the overall comments are positive and an additional 2% are neutral. Moreover, not all negative comments express objections to Army programs and policies. Rather, many comments indicate a desire for greater development and extension of existing programs or offer constructive suggestions for their improvement.

2. Among the major categories, Patriotism; Pride/Shame in the Military stands out as the only topic eliciting a majority of favorable comments (80%). However, it should be noted that this category ranks last in terms of volume of comments. The Military Way of Life and the Survey itself are viewed favorably by sizable groups of spouses (43% and 31%, respectively). Furthermore, a range of 17-23% of the respondents volunteer positive comments regarding Support Programs, Moving, Post Facilities, and Children.

3. Conversely, certain areas reflect particularly high levels of dissatisfaction, both in terms of high volume and the percentage of negative statements (90% and over). These include the Medical Program, Housing on Post, Deployment, Soldier's Work Conditions, Finances and Spouse Issues. Unit Climate, the Military Organization, and the Army Attitude toward Families elicit fewer but, again, largely negative feelings.

4. Certain sub-categories are viewed as particularly problematic by many respondents, e.g., medical cost/coverage, quality of on-post housing, volunteer work, and the perceived role of the Army spouse.

5. While about one-third of the spouses approve of the survey itself, a higher percentage express appreciation for the opportunity to express their views and hope that it will make a difference. The criticisms mostly relate to the length of the survey as well as suggestions for improvement. It is apparent that the effort to study the views and attitudes of Army spouses is a worthwhile enterprise.

Comparison with Previous Surveys

Since the Survey of Army Families has been undertaken several times in the past with similar content and format, we can compare some of the major results. The following table presents the percentage of negative responses in each major category for 2001 and for two previous iterations. There are some minor differences in the category titles: Deployment was called Family Separation both in 1991 and 1987. Plans for the Future covers material similar to Downsizing in 1991 and Retention in 1987, reflecting the crucial concerns in each period. The category, Social and Psychological Issues was added in 1991 as many comments fit into this area. Finally, ODS (Operation Desert Storm) appeared only in 1991 and is not listed here.

Percent Negative Responses in Major Categories

Category	2001	1991	1987
Medical	92%	89%	86%
Support Programs	81	77	69
Housing on post	95	93	93
Moving	81	98	90
Deployment/Separation	99	98	96
Work Conditions	91	92	86
Finances	95	93	87
Spouse Issues	94	95	89
Communication/Inform.	86	91	95
Survey	59	53	32
Military Organization	98	98	96
Military Way of Life	55	35	42
Army Attitudes to Family	94	89	81
Unit Climate	91	91	88
Post Facilities	77	90	87
Social/Psychological	94	79	--
Dental	97	96	84
Housing off Post	95	93	94
Schools	89	76	82
Future plans	89	94	81
Social/Post Problems	94	100	94
Children	81	88	84
Overseas	91	89	86
Civilian Attitudes	88	100	97
Patriotism	20	5	25
N =	4,507	2,756	10,578

In an earlier section, we observed an overall increase in negative comments from 1987 to 1991 to the present survey in 2001. If we analyze the specific categories, we can distinguish several trends in these data over this period.

1. A number of areas show little or no change over the years. Housing (on and off Post), Deployment/Family Separation, the Military Organization, Work Conditions, Unit Climate, and Spouse Issues are viewed negatively by over 90% of the respondents on all three surveys.

2. Three areas, Social/Post Problems, Overseas Experience, and Civilian Attitudes exhibit an uneven pattern, i.e., an increase between 1987 and 1991, followed by a decrease in negative comments in 2001. It should be noted that these categories elicit a relatively small number of comments.

3. For a significant number of categories, the trend has been an increase in the percentage of negative comments, either in a linear fashion or with some movement up and down. However, in all these areas, negative views have shown an increase between 1987 and 2001. These categories are: Medical, Dental, Support Programs, Finances, Army Attitudes toward Family, the Survey, Military Way of Life, Social/Psychological Issues (since 1991), Schools, and Plans for the Future. The increase in criticism of the Survey in 2001 focuses on its length (although in reality it is shorter than the previous surveys).

4. Respondents apparently perceive improvement in some areas as negative comments have decreased: Moving, Communication/Information, Post Facilities, and Children fall into this group. The more favorable (or less negative) views on Moving mainly relate to the Sponsorship program which seems to be better developed and utilized than in the past.

5. In 1991, the survey was conducted during the Gulf War which may account for some of the deviation from general trends observed in that year. For example, Patriotism presents a distinctive pattern: a sharp drop in negative comments between 1987 and 1991 followed by a sizeable increase in 2001. This suggests that ODS in 1991 produced stronger feelings of both patriotism and pride in the Army. Again, it should be noted that this category ranks last or nearly last in the volume of comments on all three surveys. ODS may similarly explain changes relating to the Military Way of Life which also shows a decrease in negative views in 1991, followed by a sharp increase in 2001. Similarly, the recent terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 would have an effect on certain types of responses; very likely both the volume and positive valence would show an increase for Patriotism and for the Military Organization and Way of Life.

The Effect of Rank

Overall differences among enlisted, NCO, and officer spouses. The data for spouses volunteering comments includes the rank of the soldier spouse. The following table presents, for each rank, the percentage of negative, positive, and neutral comments, as well as the frequency (indicated in parentheses). This table refers to the valence of *all* comments, irrespective of category. The column totals show the percentage and frequency of responses for each rank. The row totals indicate the percentage of comments that are negative, positive, or neutral.

Valence	E1-E3	E4	E5-E6	E7-E9	W1-W5	O1-O3	O4-O6	Total
Negative	94% (274)	95% (249)	89% (464)	85% (493)	84% (361)	88% (1023)	85% 1069)	87% (3933)
Positive	5% (14)	4% (10)	10% (75)	13% (75)	15% (63)	9% (109)	12% (157)	11% (478)
Neutral	<1% (2)	1% (3)	2% (9)	2% (11)	1% (6)	2% (26)	3% (39)	2% (96)
Total	6% (290)	6% (262)	12% (523)	13% (579)	10% (430)	26% (1158)	28% (1265)	100% (4507)

1. Irrespective of rank, most comments are negative, ranging from 85% to 95% of the total number of comments for each rank. However, among the enlisted ranks, the proportion of negative comments decreases (with the one exception of E1 to E4), as rank rises; this is followed by a modest increase in negative valence among junior officers and a subsequent decrease among senior officers.

2. Since there are very few neutral comments, positive valence shows the opposite trend, generally growing stronger among higher ranks, both within the enlisted and officer corps. From these data, we can conclude that satisfaction with life as a military spouse improves with rank. It should be noted that the relationship between rank and positive feelings may take either of two directions. Higher rank is accompanied by higher pay and greater privileges which probably produce more positive feelings toward the Army. However, these data may also reflect a selective factor, i.e., soldiers whose spouses/families are very dissatisfied may leave the Army earlier than others; the more satisfied are retained and, thus, tend to achieve higher rank.

3. Finally, not only are higher ranks less negative but they are also much more likely to volunteer comments, as the column totals indicate. While only 6% of E1 spouses offer comments, 13% of the E7-9 do so, and this rises to 28% among senior officers' spouses.

Differences among ranks by category. The table which follows presents percentage of negative comments for each rank of soldier spouse in each of the twenty-five major categories. The figures in the last column represent the total frequency of negative comments for each category, including all ranks.

Percent Negative Comments by Rank for each Major Category

Category	E1-E3	E4	E5-E6	E7-E9	W1-W5	O1-O3	O4-O6	Freq.
Medical	88%	95%	88%	92%	92%	92%	93%	423
Support Programs	83	93	91	69	72	86	74	313*
Housing on Post	100	100	100	96	94	96	95	347
Moving/PCS	100	100	65	79	79	81	82	246*
Deployment/Separation	100	100	100	98	98	99	98	278
Work Conditions	100	89	96	93	77	94	84	252*
Finances	89	94	90	90	96	95	95	240
Spouse Issues	100	100	93	94	90	97	91	234
Communication.	94	95	82	75	94	84	78	190
Survey	63	43	39	57	71	55	65	126*
Military Organization	100	100	95	100	96	97	100	207
Military Life	88	100	57	48	38	51	48	101*
Army Attitude toward Family	100	100	85	87	95	98	95	168
Unit Climate	95	90	95	100	88	97	72	150*
Post Facilities	100	100	89	76	62	77	72	115*
Social/Psychological Issues	100	100	100	94	94	90	93	132
Dental	100	100	100	91	100	100	100	78
Housing off Post	100	100	100	100	75	95	92	72
Schools	--	--	100	75	83	86	94	57
Future Plans	100	100	100	93	83	84	86	57*
Social/Post Problems	100	100	100	100	100	89	75	47*
Children	100	100	63	91	67	100	67	42*
Overseas	--	100	86	100	0	100	100	30
Civilian Attitudes	100	--	100	100	100	91	78	23*
Patriotism.	--	--	--	20	0	25	25	5*

To summarize this information, we see that there are very small differences among the ranks for most of the substantive categories of comments. The categories marked with an asterisk show substantial rank differences, with fewer negative comments among the higher ranks, especially senior officers. However, the trend is not uniformly linear, as there is some upward and downward movement between adjacent ranks. It should be noted that the lower ranks, particularly E1-3 and E4s, tend to offer fewer comments in general so that in some cases there were no responses at all, e.g., Patriotism and Schools.

It is difficult to find a single explanation of the rank differences. In some cases, higher rank spouses may simply be better informed and better able to utilize Army services and programs: Support Programs, Moving, Communication, and Post Facilities fall into this group. Work Conditions and Unit Climate reflect the soldier spouse’s environment, which may be more favorable for soldiers of higher rank. Finally, a number of categories showing rank differences (e.g., Future Plans, Social/Post Problems, Children, Civilian Attitudes, and Patriotism) elicit relatively few responses in general, particularly among the lower rank spouses, so that comparisons are based on a very small number of respondents.

The Effect of Location

In the survey, location is defined as either CONUS (within the U.S., including Alaska and Hawaii) or OCONUS (overseas). Location refers to the residence of the spouse, even if the soldier is stationed or deployed elsewhere. The table below shows the distribution of comments by location for each of the three surveys--1987, 1991, 2001. The figures in parentheses indicate the frequency of the comments in each category for each year.

Location of Respondents

Location	2001	1991	1987
CONUS	87% (3912)	55% (473)	62% (6302)
OCONUS	12 (555)	45 (329)	38 (4207)

There are sharp differences both in the total number of comments and the percentage for each location. In 1987, a much larger volume of comments were analyzed than in either of the other two surveys; 1991 generated the smallest sample of comments. However, the significant comparison is among percentages: the proportion of OCONUS responses has dropped precipitously since 1991--from 45% to 12%. This is not due to a lower rate of response among overseas residents. Rather, the proportion of families living overseas has decreased sharply as fewer soldiers are stationed overseas and, consequently, 90% of the surveys were sent to Army spouses residing in the United States.

The table below shows the overall valence (negative, positive, neutral) for comments volunteered by CONUS and OCONUS residents in the 2001 survey.

Valence of Comments by Location

Location	Valence		
	Negative	Positive	Neutral
CONUS	92% (390)	8% (32)	--
OCONUS	84 (31)	16 (6)	--

Overall, CONUS residents are more negative than those residing overseas (92% compared to 84%). In the next section, we examine for 1991 the differences between CONUS and OCONUS comments for each of the major categories. The following table presents these data, citing negative responses only (as indicated earlier, there are few neutral comments so that we can easily infer the proportion of positive responses).

Percent of Negative Comments by Location

Categories	CONUS	OCONUS
Medical	92%	84%
Support Programs	81	78
Housing on Post	97	94
Moving	90	41
Deployment/Separation	99	96
Work Conditions	93	83
Finances	94	86
Spouse Issues	93	97
Communication/Information	85	96
Survey	60	53
Military Organization	98	100
Military Way of Life	54	65
Army Attitude to Families	94	93
Unit Climate	91	100
Post Facilities	75	83
Social/Psychological Issues	95	89
Dental	97	100
Housing off Post	96	80
Schools	88	100
Future Plans	87	100
Social/Post Problems	93	100
Children	80	82
Overseas Experience	100	88
Civilian Attitudes	92	--
Patriotism	22	--
	3912	555

The trends in this table can be summarized briefly as follows:

1. Several important major categories (those generating a large volume of comments) show a higher percentage of negative comments among U.S. residents. These include the Medical Program, Moving, Work Conditions, Finances, Off-post Housing, and Overseas Experience..

2. Conversely, Communication, Military Way of Life, Schools, and Future Plans reveal more negative attitudes among overseas residents. However, it should be noted that the number of comments in the latter two categories is very small. Similarly, Civilian Attitudes and Patriotism elicit no negative comments overseas but, again, these are the lowest ranked categories in terms of volume.

3. It is difficult to explain all of these differences. The generally negative view of living overseas is reflected in the figures on the Military Way of Life and Future Plans. Moving while overseas is not an issue as it is in the U.S. Other categories may simply reflect post differences among programs and facilities with certain aspects more or less favorably viewed by OCONUS residents.

GENERAL SUMMARY

1. The Thematic Analysis deals with qualitative material, volunteered by a self-selected sample of survey respondents. Consequently, we cannot generalize from the comments to either the total sample of survey respondents or to the population of Army spouses.

2. In addition, the sample offering comments is skewed toward the higher ranks due to their higher rate of return on the survey as well as their greater propensity to elaborate on their survey responses. The result is that in many categories of comments, lower rank spouses are represented in very small numbers.

3. Despite these qualifications, analysis of the comments is useful in specifying the substance of particular problem areas, thus filling in the brief pre-categorized responses of the survey. The comments are valuable in elaborating, illustrating, and, in some cases, explaining the quantitative findings. They may also identify areas which were not adequately covered in the survey. In the next section, we will examine preliminary survey data to see how it relates to the comments.

4. The heavily negative valence of the comments is to be expected and was marked in the previous surveys as well. Given the opportunity to volunteer remarks, individuals tend to focus on criticism--what is wrong, what should be changed or improved. They are less likely to point out things that work well. As noted earlier, some comments are simply informative, elaborating or clarifying certain survey responses. We have also noted that a considerable number of comments, while classified as negative (because they point to shortcomings in various areas), actually represent constructive suggestions for change and improvement in Army policies and programs. Finally, some comments by higher-rank spouses indicate that while personally satisfied, they are concerned about their lower-rank counterparts. This is especially noticeable in categories such as finances and housing.

5. It should be pointed out that events can influence both the survey and, particularly, the volunteered comments. The Gulf War in 1991 affected attitudes regarding Army life and patriotism while downsizing influenced feeling about Army policies on retention. The current terrorist events would probably change the substance of comments in certain areas, such as deployment, military organization, and patriotism.

PRELIMINARY SURVEY RESULTS AND COMMENTS

The thematic categories and code for the comment sheets were developed during the earlier surveys, independently of both the survey instrument and the quantitative results. For the current analysis, we used the earlier code with several modifications appropriate to the 2001 Survey of Army Families.

At this point, only preliminary results of the survey have been quantified; i.e., frequency distribution for each item and a comparison of enlisted and officer ranks. These quantitative data cannot be directly related to the thematic analysis for several reasons. The comments are volunteered by a self-selected group of respondents who want to add something to their survey responses. Although a sizable group volunteered comments (42%), we cannot claim that these individuals are representative of the entire survey sample or of the population of Army spouses. Furthermore, there is a tendency for the more articulate individuals to express their attitudes and thoughts in written form (this is probably reflected in the higher rate of comments among officers' spouses). In the survey, respondents have to choose from a group of pre-categorized answers, usually stated in terms of a range of satisfaction-dissatisfaction. The comments, on the other hand, are completely open-ended so that the respondent can express any opinion, in terms of substance and intensity. Finally, as indicated earlier, the tendency is to volunteer mostly negative comments (87% of the comments are coded as negative in valence). Respondents use the comment sheet in several ways: to offer information that is not covered in the survey (these comments are not coded); to explain other survey responses, i.e., by describing specific examples relating to their survey answers; and, finally, to convey their feelings of dissatisfaction with certain aspects of Army life. In a sense, they are venting their feelings in a manner that the survey cannot convey. Although the survey responses show considerable satisfaction in some areas, individuals are less likely to explain why some things work than why they are unsatisfactory.

At this point, we will not try to cover the entire survey but will describe some of the areas in which there are a high volume of comments and/or a great majority of negative comments. Medical care has emerged as a major area of concern on every survey. In 2001, 63% express overall satisfaction yet the comments are overwhelmingly negative. This is not necessarily inconsistent as a sizable group (over 40% of the survey respondents) are dissatisfied with particular aspects of medical care, viz., waiting time, attitudes of personnel, access and payment of claims. Many of the comments relate to these specific categories.

With regard to support programs, comments reveal a lack of information. Respondents frequently state that they either are unaware of the two major programs (Family Readiness Groups and Army Family Team Building) or that they fail to hear about meetings. The survey indicates that 36% do not know if their unit has an FRG and 61% have not heard of the AFTB program, results consistent with complaints about lack of information.

Moving elicits a large volume of comments with the focus on sponsorship and support. The majority of spouses have favorable opinions on this topic (60%) and the survey supports this. The percentage having sponsors has increased, and 83% indicate that the sponsor was at least of some help. Nearly two-thirds state that their moving costs were not completely covered,

consistent with the comments which are all negative. Disruption of the school year is cited in many comments, while 44% of survey respondents indicate that children have trouble adjusting to a new school after a move.

The comments referring to deployment/separation emphasize negative effects on family and marriage and complain about frequency and duration. These comments amplify the survey results which indicate increasing problems as the length of deployment grows longer. Some comments refer to the Army's peacekeeping mission as certain respondents object to deployment for this purpose. However, recent events (war against terrorism) probably would change some negative attitudes toward deployment.

With regard to Army benefits and facilities, the survey reveals considerable dissatisfaction with pay, child care, and deployment, and the voluntary comments certainly support these findings. The commissary is viewed more favorably than the Post Exchange both on the survey and in the comments. The survey reveals that about three-quarters of the families use Army recreational facilities and that most of them (65%) rate the facilities as good or very good. A similar proportion of the comments are also positive with regard to these facilities and programs.

Almost half of the survey respondents are employed, and most of these cite money as the major reason for working. A significant group focus on their careers (43%), and the comments reveal concern with both career and employment opportunities for spouses. Work and family needs are cited as the main reason for not participating in volunteer work (only 18% do participate in military-affiliated organizations), and the comments indicate that spouses resist pressure to volunteer, claiming it is not part of their role. Related to this are comments on the role of the Army spouse; many respondents feel that the Army does not recognize them as individuals but expects them to enact the "Army spouse role."

The unit is the part of the Army with which the spouse and family are probably most familiar. In this case, negative comments focus on three interrelated topics: leadership, family support, and attitude toward family and spouses. The survey indicates that about one-third of the spouses are dissatisfied with the NCOs and officers in the unit, with the unit concern for families, and with the respect shown spouses by the unit. Similarly, 33% are dissatisfied with Army concern for families; this figure is exemplified in the comments on Army Attitude to Families where respondents say that the Army does not really care.

Overall, the survey indicates that 57% and 53% are satisfied with the Army as a career and with the military way of life, respectively. These results are very similar to the comments in which 55% volunteer positive feelings about military life (one of the few categories in which the majority of comments are positive). We should point out, however, that overall satisfaction has shown a decrease since earlier surveys (in 1991, 71% were satisfied if the soldier would make the Army a career). Most of the comments regarding future career plans reflect either a desire to leave the Army or eager anticipation of retirement.

In an earlier section, we examined rank differences in the nature of the comments. Aside from the disproportionate number of comments from higher ranks, the major difference is the

association between rank and positive valence. Overall, senior rank spouses are somewhat less likely to make negative comments, although the differences are not great. This association is strongest in the following categories: Work Conditions, Communication, Military Way of Life, Unit Climate, Housing off Post, and Post Facilities. The survey results comparing enlisted soldiers' and officers' spouses, while not directly comparable, is generally consistent with the comments. Officers' spouses are more likely to be satisfied with respect shown soldiers and spouses, unit's concern for families, making the Army a career, the kind of life you can have in the Army, and the opportunity to serve one's country. They are also more satisfied with pay, benefits, and the soldier's Army job. Senior spouses have a more favorable view of leaders in the unit, feeling they are concerned about families, and of leaders in high positions. With regard to other programs and policies, such as the Medical and Dental programs, there is little or no difference among ranks.

As noted above, this is a very preliminary comparison between survey and thematic results. A more complete quantitative analysis of the survey measuring interrelationships among variables is indicated at this point.