

Pulse Check

**Afghanistan to Ukraine —
How are our Military Families
Doing?**

February 2022

As part of our ongoing commitment to provide timely, relevant support for military families, Blue Star Families conducted a follow-up to our original Supporting Afghanistan Allies Pulse Check (September 3rd - 7th, 2021). With this follow-up Pulse Check, we want to understand the feelings surrounding last year's withdrawal of all remaining troops from Afghanistan and actions taken to support our Afghan allies, as well as how the current ongoing crisis in Ukraine is impacting our military and Veteran families.

Fielded from February 23rd - March 12th, 2022, this poll captured the responses of 2,250 respondents who identified as an active-duty spouse (26%), a Veteran/retired service member (47%), a spouse of a Veteran (15%), a military parent (11%), and an active-duty service member (4%). Respondents included 235 service members or Veterans/retired service members who had served in Afghanistan, 460 family members of a current service member or Veteran/retired service member who served in Afghanistan, 106 service members or family members who are deployed or have received orders to deploy in response to the crisis in Ukraine, and 170 family members or service members who are on standby to deploy in response to the crisis in Ukraine.

The majority of findings in the February 2022 Pulse Check remain consistent with the September 2021 Pulse Check findings, indicating that perspectives and emotions may not have changed substantially in the six months since the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan. However, the emergence of conflict in Ukraine and the potential for U.S. military involvement may have reignited emotions about the deployment of American troops in response to foreign conflicts.

Key Findings

The most common response to an open-ended question about the deployment of troops to Eastern Europe to respond to conflict in Ukraine indicates support for the deployment, but responses are mixed.

In an open-ended question about the deployment of troops to Eastern Europe to respond to the conflict in Ukraine, support for troop deployments to Europe was the most commonly-coded response



In your own words, how do you feel about the end of the war in Afghanistan?

“Glad it is over after all of these years, but I am sad that Afghanistan people have died, Afghanistan women have to go back to the way things were when they had no freedoms, and we had American service people die over there. Seems like it is old news now since we have a new war brewing in Ukraine. Is it really over?” – Veteran/retired service member who did not serve in Afghanistan

across all respondents (38%, n=1,406). Support was slightly greater among service members or Veterans who had served in Afghanistan (42%, n=177), and slightly lower among service members and spouses of service members who are currently deployed or have orders to deploy to Europe in response to the conflict in Ukraine (33%, n=217). Other common themes that emerged were feeling the deployments are necessary or needed (27%), opposition to U.S. involvement (20%), anxious or worried (9%), and the U.S. should support NATO (7%).

A majority of all respondents continue to agree that the U.S. has an obligation to help Afghan allies.



70% of all respondents agree that the U.S. has an obligation to help Afghan allies.

Currently-serving service member and Veteran service member respondents who served in Afghanistan continue to report that it is very important that America helps Afghan allies.



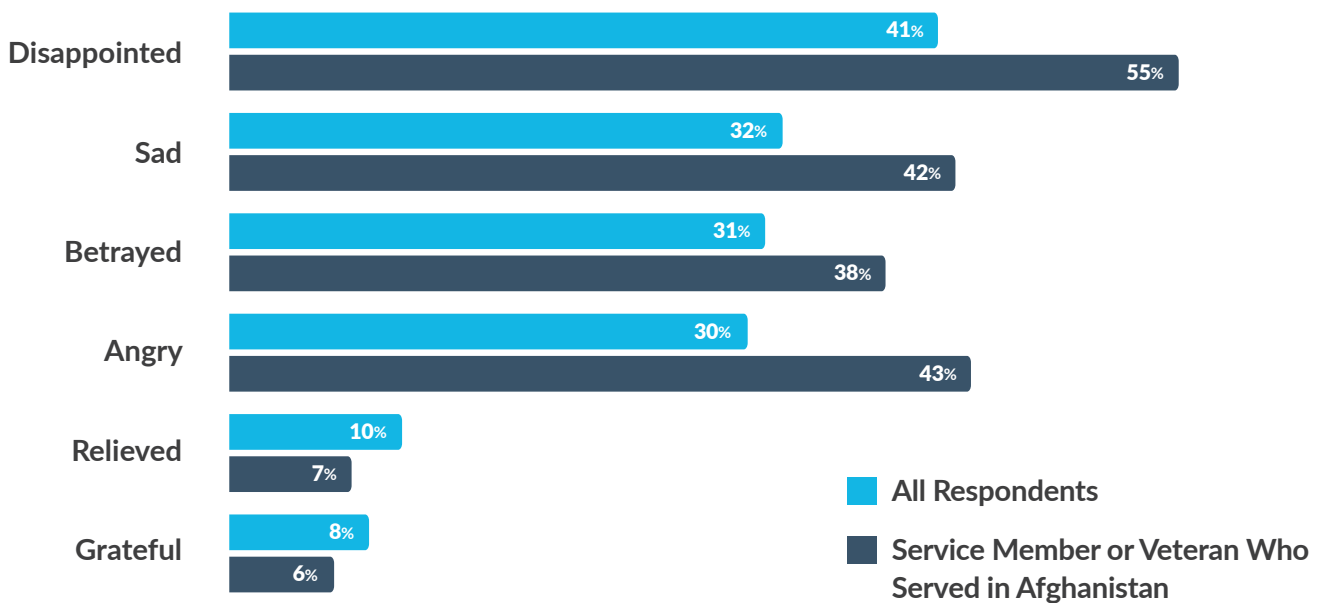
All respondents, including military and Veteran respondents who served in Afghanistan, indicate they believe the war in Afghanistan has not been important to the average American who has not served in the military.



Respondents continue to report disappointment, anger, sadness, and betrayal as the most prevalent emotional responses to the Afghanistan withdrawal.

The most commonly-reported emotions from all respondents, including those who served in Afghanistan, remain disappointment, anger, sadness, and betrayal. However, feelings of relief and gratitude also emerge in open-ended responses.

% of Respondents Who Report Feeling Selected Emotions “Very Much”



Which of the following emotions are you currently feeling with respect to the withdrawal of the American military? (1 = not at all and 5 = very much)

In your own words, how do you feel about the end of the war in Afghanistan?

“Relieved to finally be done but disappointed at how quickly all the gains we made are being erased for the society.” — Veteran/retired service member who served in Afghanistan

“Just a true sense of utter sadness. I worked with some Afghan nationals as well as Iraqi civilians in Iraq. We formed mutual bonds and respect for one another while working together towards a better future for Afghanistan and America. [...] I am afraid that the images of our abrupt pull-out that I saw on the nightly news will stay with me forever.” — Veteran/retired service member who served in Afghanistan

“I am depressed after serving, being bombed by the enemy, and trying to create a safe space for Afghans. I am numb. I’m dumbfounded and disheartened. I’m angry. I’m retiring from the military because of it.” – Active-duty service member who served in Afghanistan

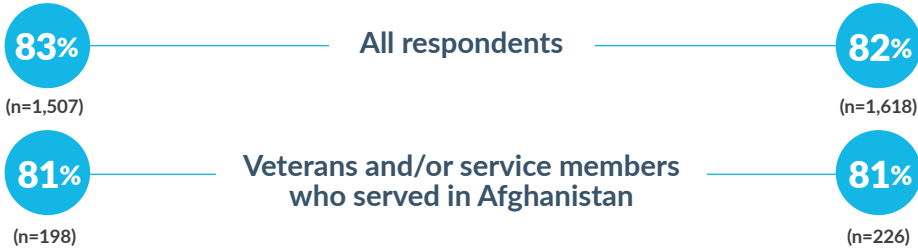
“As a Veteran, the spouse of a retiree who served in Afghanistan, and mother of 2 active military (1 of whom was involved in the evacuation) I have been deeply affected by the war in Afghanistan. My overwhelming feeling today is that I am grateful the war is over and our loved ones are no longer dying for a country that will never be stable on its own, regardless of the aid, weapons, training we provide.” – Spouse of a Veteran/retired service member who served in Afghanistan, military parent

Respondents continue to express concern about the impact of the Afghanistan withdrawal on Afghanistan Veterans’ well-being.

September 2021

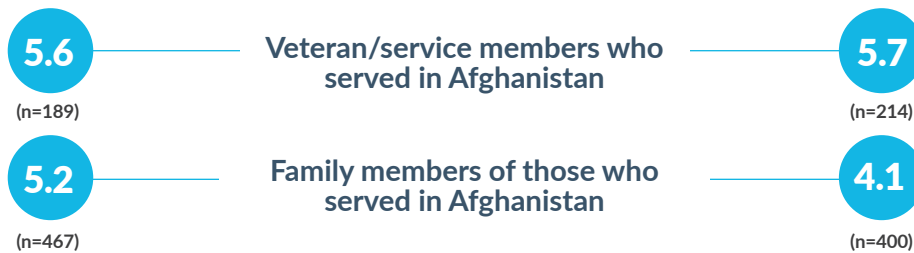
February 2022

Veterans of the war in Afghanistan are going to have a hard time processing the end of the war.



On a scale of 1 to 10, to what degree has the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan negatively impacted your well-being or mental health?

1 = Not at all to 10=Extremely



Some currently-serving military and Veteran family respondents look for opportunities to help resettle Afghan allies to improve their well-being or mental health; those who served in Afghanistan show slightly more interest.



While more than half of respondents (56%) have already taken action to support Afghan allies or are considering taking action, most are unaware of current efforts to support Afghan allies in their local communities.

Most respondents (68%, n=1557) indicated they were not aware of any efforts to support Afghan allies in their local communities, even among respondents who had already taken action or were considering taking action (55%). Open-ended responses confirmed this lack of awareness; when asked where respondents would turn for information on relief efforts, “unsure/I do not know” was the most common response (30%), followed by “national, international, or both” faith-based organizations (11% of responses), and “local church or religious institutions” (8% of responses).



16% of all respondents who have taken action to support Afghan allies have worked directly with Afghan allies who are resettling in the United States.

Opportunities for Action

Continue to provide resources for mental health, particularly for Veterans.

Veteran respondents' need for mental health care has not diminished and continues to be an important concern in light of the conflict in Ukraine.

“Ensure that families have mental health resources available at all times. As a Veteran and spouse of an Active Duty member, this conflict hits very close to home, and sometimes we just need someone to talk to.” — Veteran/retired service member who served in Afghanistan and active-duty spouse

Provide both emotional and tangible support, especially for deploying units and families.

“I’m most concerned about deploying units. Support for their families is critical. Hourly care availability increases. Letters to spouse employers asking for compassion for their employees affected by such deployments. Support group meetings via zoom etc. for spouses. And lots of prayer.”

— Spouse of an active-duty service member who served in Afghanistan

Provide clear and accurate information about the unfolding situation in Ukraine and about opportunities to have shared conversations about the situation or opportunities to help.

Limitations

The September 2021 and February 2022 samples differ in important ways that may influence interpretations of survey results. The February 2022 survey sample included a considerably greater proportion of Veteran/retired service member respondents, but a smaller proportion of active-duty spouse respondents. These two samples should be considered independent, cross-sectional impressions of the perspectives of military- and Veteran-affiliated respondents at their respective time periods. These surveys are not weighted to be representative and, therefore, cannot be generalized to the larger military- and Veteran-connected populations.

Primary Identity	September 2021	February 2022
Active-Duty Service Member	6%	4%
Active-Duty Spouse	38%	26%
Veteran/Retired Service Member	23%	47%
Spouse of Veteran/Retired Service Member	18%	15%
Military Parent	13%	11%

	September 2021	February 2022
Service Members or Veterans/Retired Service Members Who Had Served in Afghanistan	200	235
Family Members of a Current Service Member or Veteran/Retired Service Member Who Served in Afghanistan	494	460
Service Members or Family Members Who Are Deployed or Have Received Orders to Deploy to Response to the Crisis in Ukraine	--	106
Family Members or Service Members Who Are on Standby to Deploy in Response to the Crisis in Ukraine	--	170