
Defense Report

AUSA



Military Pay and Eligibility for Food Stamps – The Relationship Is Obvious

The General Accounting Office, which Congress has charged to keep a watchful eye on the executive departments, has recently released a study requested by Sen. Sam Nunn (D-Ga.), who wanted to know more precisely how many military families were eligible to participate in the federally-sponsored food stamp program. The GAO concluded that estimates in a widely circulated report by a private research group, which claimed about 100,000 eligible families, were exaggerated by the report's failure to include allowances for food and housing in the families' income. A more accurate figure, the GAO said, would be between 19,700 and 25,500.

In its report the GAO provided a table that showed their estimates of the number of food stamp-eligible military families beginning in 1964 (the number then was 197,767) when military pay had lain dormant for several years. The number of eligibles began to slip downward as some modest pay raises came about during the late '60s and made a very long drop (to 18,299) in 1972 when military pay momentarily achieved comparability with civilian compensation. According to the GAO estimate, the number of food-stamp-eligible families bottomed out at 3,933 in 1975 and then began to follow a generally upward path as military spending power once again began to lose out to inflation.

It is interesting to note, also, that the GAO report very accurately traces the impact of the shift to an all-volunteer force which has brought a dramatic increase in the number of married personnel in the junior ranks. The percentage of the force eligible for food stamps rose dramatically as draftees left the ranks and volunteer career people took their place. In 1975, when the number of eligible families reached its lowest level of 3,933, that number reflected less than one-fourth of one percent of the total enlisted force. By 1979, with the full impact of the volunteer concept in effect for five years, the percentage of the total enlisted force eligible for the food-stamp program had gone up almost eightfold, to 1.9 percent.

Food stamps are a means of assuring a healthy diet for those whose income is too low to buy the right kind of food. We generally think of them as being available to the unemployed or to families on welfare for any of a variety of reasons. Few people think of food stamps as a form of welfare available to the families of *employed* people, particularly the families of people productively employed by the federal government. And yet that is exactly the situation in which 25,500 military families found themselves during 1980.

We have lured hundreds of thousands of young people into the military ranks with promises of a fruitful career of service to the nation. Many of them, in almost every rank, have found they cannot support a family on military pay alone. Soldiers have taken "moonlighting" jobs and their wives, when possible, have left their children and found jobs. But for a family with very small children this is often impossible. They swallow their pride and turn to food stamps as a form of last resort.

This cannot be the kind of life the people of the United States expect their young service members to endure.