
Defense Report

AUSA



Military Commissaries—Their Loss Would Be a Severe Blow to Military Pocketbooks

Historically, the military commissary system grew out of the need to provide service families stationed at remote outposts with places to buy the necessities of life. For most service families stationed in the continental United States the original need for the commissaries was overtaken by the growth of civilian facilities. But, while the stores might no longer be the sole source of necessities, they have become the places at which military families can best afford to shop.

For longer than anyone in uniform can remember, recruiters have used the availability of commissary shopping as an arrow in their quiver of selling points for a military career. For just as long, Congress and the Department of Defense (and its various predecessors) have considered the savings derived from commissary shopping when attempting to judge the effectiveness of the military compensation system. It is now generally agreed that the service family shopping in the commissary can save 20 to 25 percent from the prices in civilian supermarkets.

From time to time there have been a number of proposals to close all or some of the commissaries. None of these proposals has succeeded because Congress knows the value of the stores to military families and realizes that, if the stores were closed, there would have to be a substantial pay increase to offset the military families' loss of buying power.

Now another potential threat to the commissaries has surfaced in the form of a staff recommendation prepared for the Private Sector Survey appointed by President Reagan and charged with finding ways for the government to save money—a very worthwhile mission. The recommendation has a long way to go—approval by the appointed members of the survey, by the President and the concurrence of Congress—and may never see the light of day. But the very existence of the recommendation is unsettling at a time when military pay may be frozen, and service members *are uneasy about the future*. The responsible parties should act immediately to lay this issue to rest, one hopes for the last time.