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**RAND**

*Financial Management  
Problems Among  
Enlisted Personnel*

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Richard Buddin*

*National Defense Research Institute*

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## PREFACE

This documented briefing describes the financial well-being of enlisted military personnel and is based on a presentation given to the Military Summit on Personal Financial Management Conference on December 16, 1997. The study provides evidence of the extent of personal financial problems in the military. The analysis describes how financial problems vary with the demographics of the military and with particular aspects of the military work environment (e.g., deployments, frequent relocations). Finally, we examine which types of members are receiving financial assistance and what types of programs they are utilizing.

The briefing is part of a broader study of the personal financial well-being of military personnel and of military readiness. Further analysis is planned to identify which types of members are having financial problems and whether these problems are amenable to greater financial management training.

This study was sponsored by the Office of Family Policy, Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Personnel Support, Families, and Education. It was carried out in the Forces and Resources Policy Center of RAND's National Defense Research Institute, a federally funded research and development center sponsored by the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the Joint Staff, the unified commands, and the defense agencies.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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We also appreciate the assistance and information provided to us by the Defense Manpower Data Center. In particular, we wish to thank Dr. Rich Riemer and Dr. Tim Elig for their assistance with RAND's 1997 Enlisted Career Intentions (ECI) Survey. The ECI Survey was sponsored primarily by the Directorate for Officer and Enlisted Personnel Management (OEPM), Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Force Management Policy. We appreciate the support of Debra McCorkle from OEPM.

We are also grateful for the helpful comments and assistance of our RAND colleagues Beth Asch, Susan Hosek, Rebecca Kilburn, Al Robbert, and Sandra Wade-Grusky.

***Financial Management Problems  
Among Enlisted Personnel***

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LTC Casey Wardynski, USA  
Richard Buddin, RAND**

**December 1997**

## ***Issues***

- **Are financial management problems common?**
- **What causes financial management problems?**
- **What type of help do service members with problems get?**

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In this briefing, we address three issues. First, we quantify the relative frequency with which young service members are experiencing financial management problems. Second, we examine various factors that are believed to increase or decrease the risk of experiencing financial management problems. Finally, we look at who is getting help and the type of help they appear to receive.

## **Preliminary Research Draws from Two Information Sources**

- **RAND Quality of Life Study Site Visits**
  - **Seven Site Visits**
    - Fort Lewis, San Diego, Camp Lejeune, Offutt AFB, Fort Drum, Camp Pendleton, Edwards AFB
  - **Focus Groups and Discussions with 300 people**
    - Enlisted Personnel
    - Platoon and Company Sergeants/Commanders
    - Community Support and MWR Program Directors
    - Base and Operations Commanders
- **RAND 1997 Enlisted Career Intentions Survey**
  - Enlisted personnel with 10 or less years of service
  - 6,200 respondents worldwide
  - Designed to be comparable with existing civilian data

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The information in this briefing derives from two sources.

The perceptual information presented here is drawn from an extensive set of qualitative interviews that were conducted for a broader RAND study examining issues related to quality of life in the military. During three informal site visits in early 1997 at Fort Drum, Camp Pendleton, and Edwards Air Force Base, we interviewed MWR and community support program directors to learn about the types of programs and facilities available to service members.

Four intensive three-day site visits between June and November of 1997 followed. We conducted interviews and focus groups with senior base and operations commanders, MWR and community support program directors, chaplains and counselors, supervisors (platoon and company sergeants and commanders, or the relevant comparable groups for the given service), and junior enlisted personnel -- approximately 300 individuals in total.

The quantified results in this briefing are drawn from the 1997 RAND Enlisted Career Intentions (ECI) Survey, which was administered between April and October of 1997 to a worldwide sample of enlisted personnel in their first 10 years of service. The data contain more than 6,200 responses.

The ECI Survey elicited information from service members regarding their financial well-being through questions about their perceptions of their financial situation, about steps they might have taken in response to financial problems in the past year, and about specific actions that might have been taken against them by creditors in the past year. A number of these items were specifically designed to be comparable to existing civilian data.

### **All Levels of Leadership Concerned About Financial Problems**

- **Financial management was the most commonly cited personnel problem**
- **Senior enlisted and officers were more concerned about the standard of living for young enlisted than for themselves**
- **Young enlisted were less concerned with their standard of living than with**
  - **Current work environment**
  - **Opportunities to advance themselves**
  - **Erosion of long term returns to military service**

**(Source: Rand Quality of Life Site Visits.)**

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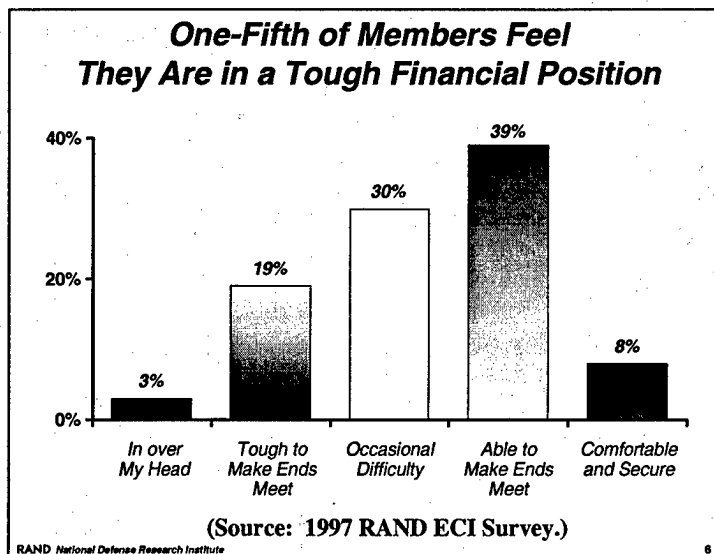
Throughout our inquiries, it became clear that all levels of command are concerned about financial management problems among enlisted personnel. In our interviews, we asked troop leaders<sup>1</sup> what kind of personnel problems they confronted most in their positions. In nearly all discussions, financial management problems were the first concerns mentioned.

Officers, NCOs and Petty Officers expressed particular concern over the standard of living that the services provide for their young enlisted personnel. In fact, they seemed considerably more concerned about the young enlisteds' standard of living than their own. Most of the officers and senior enlisted members that we interviewed felt that their own quality of life was quite good.

It should be noted, however, that young enlisted personnel did not list standard of living as their most significant concern. Young service members were generally more worried about the pace and character of their work or with barriers they face to enrolling in and completing college classes. In evaluating their condition relative to peers who did not enter the military, most young service members perceived that their standard of living and opportunities were meaningfully better. This is consistent with careful evaluations of military relative to civilian pay for junior enlisted personnel (Hosek et al., 1994).

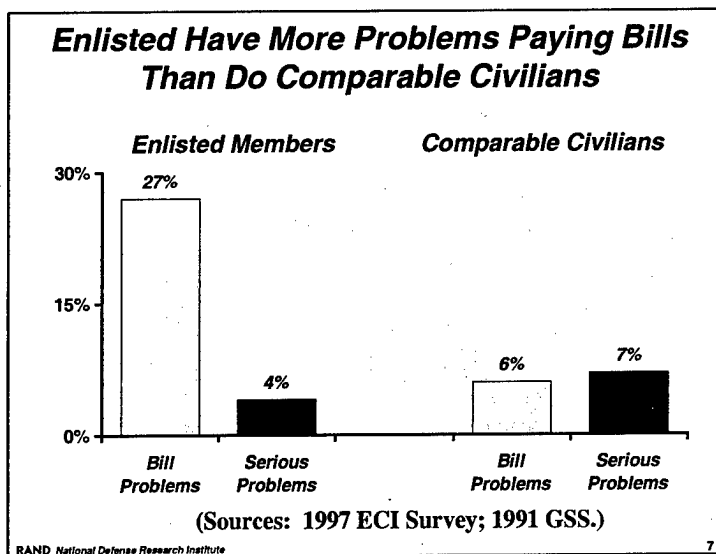
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<sup>1</sup>Here we refer to our interviews with platoon and company commanders and sergeants, or those with similar levels of responsibilities.



Consistent with the tone of our interviews, the ECI Survey found that most enlisted personnel<sup>2</sup> feel that they are generally able to make ends meet. The ECI Survey asked respondents to rate their financial condition on a five-point scale: 1, "in over my head"; 2, "tough to make ends meet, but keeping my head above water"; 3, "occasionally have some difficulty making ends meet"; 4, "able to make ends meet without much difficulty"; or 5, "very comfortable and secure." Only about one-fifth of respondents rated their financial condition as being "in over my head" or "tough to make ends meet." Nearly half expressed only occasional or little concern over their financial conditions.

<sup>2</sup>Assertions regarding enlisted personnel throughout this document refer only to those enlisted personnel in their first 10 years of service.



The survey also asked respondents about a number of specific financial problems they might have encountered over the past year, ranging from being pressured by a bill collector to filing for personal bankruptcy. We divided the problems into two groups: less significant problems with paying bills and more serious problems. The next couple of slides detail which items fit into each of these groups. Yet at this summary level, we see a rough correspondence between the number who perceived their financial condition to be difficult and the number who are having specific problems paying bills. In fact, having problems paying bills appears to be a rather common experience among enlisted personnel. On the other hand, only a small number of enlisted personnel experienced serious financial problem in the past year.

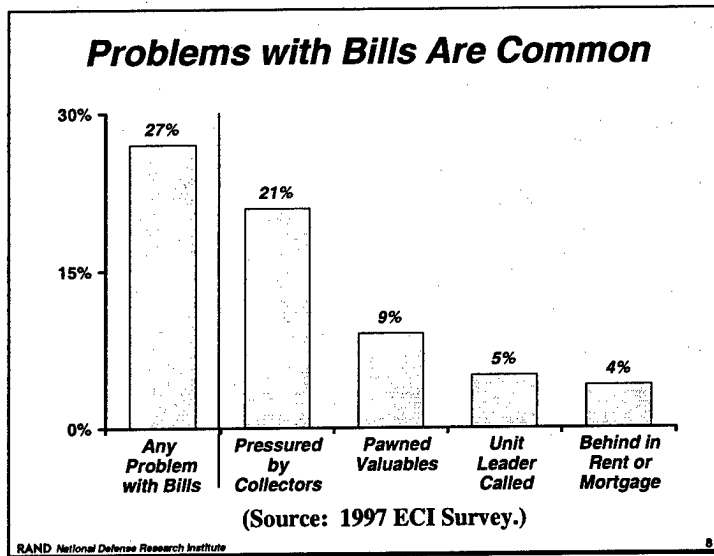
One approach to evaluating the significance of this frequency of financial problems is to consider whether we would expect the same relative frequency among a comparable group of civilians. The General Social Survey (GSS), conducted by the National Opinion Research Center, asked a nationally representative sample of civilians about a comparable list of financial problems. The military sample was more than four times more likely to have experienced problems paying bills than was a comparable civilian sample.<sup>3</sup> The military and civilian samples were equally likely to have more serious financial problems.<sup>4</sup>

A couple of cautions should be offered for this comparison. The GSS was administered in 1991, six years before the ECI Survey was conducted. Some of the difference between the civilian and military numbers may merely represent a change in financial problems for all individuals over time. The number of young adults with credit cards increased substantially over the past decade (Crispell, 1993).

<sup>3</sup>Our estimates of civilian financial problems have been adjusted for military/civilian differences in age, race, gender, educational attainment, employment status, marital status, spouse's employment status, and spouse's educational attainment.

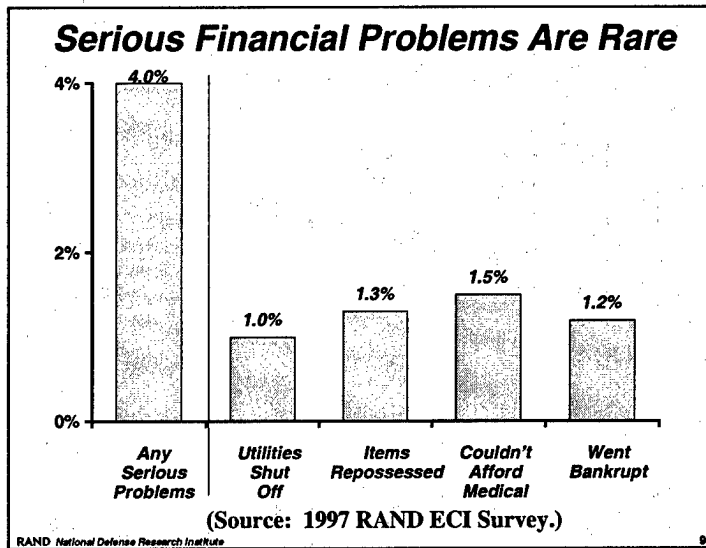
<sup>4</sup>The military/civilian difference in the probability of having a serious financial problem is not statistically significant.

However, the total debt burden in relation to household income and the proportion of households with delinquent payments increased only slightly between 1992 and 1995 for households headed by an adult under 35 years of age (Kennickell et al., 1997).



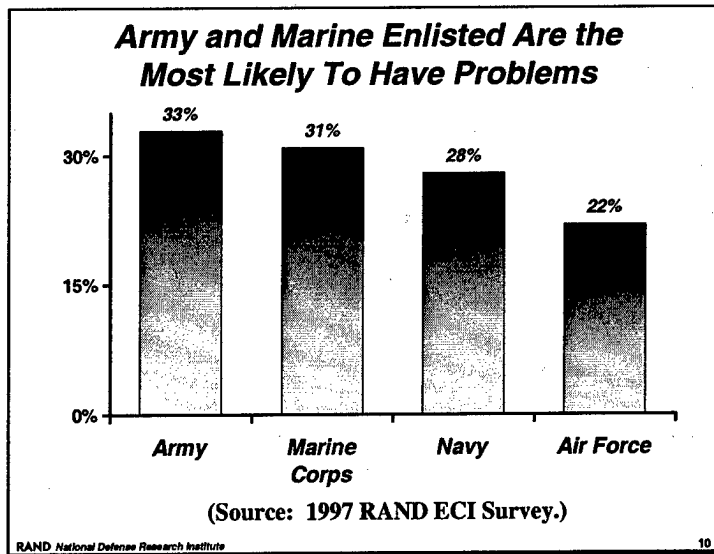
The ECI Survey asked respondents if over the past year they had been pressured by bill collectors, had pawned or sold valuables to make ends meet, had their unit leader called, or fell behind in rent or mortgage payments. More than one-quarter of respondents had one or more of these problems in the past year. Such problems do not necessarily indicate a financial crisis, but all go beyond simple difficulties making ends meet.

Note that because individuals could indicate that more than one of these problems occurred to them, the number who experienced any of these problems is less than the sum of those who experienced each problem.



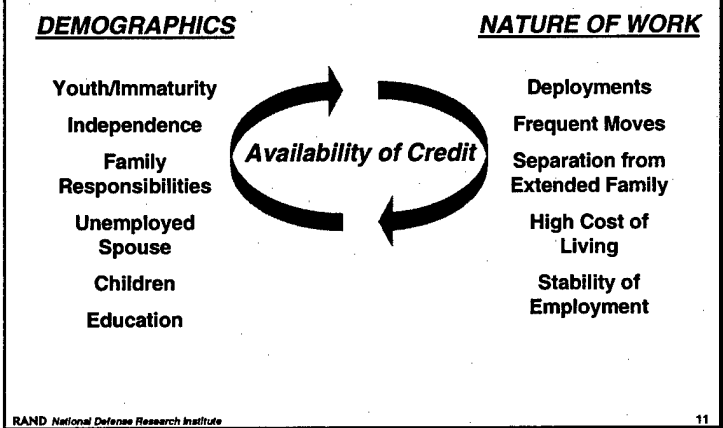
The ECI Survey also asked about four specific serious financial problems: (1) having had one's utilities shut off; (2) having had a car, household appliance, or furniture repossessed; (3) having been unable to afford needed medical care; or (4) having declared personal bankruptcy. Again, individuals could indicate that more than one of these problems occurred to them in the past year, so the number who had a serious financial problem is not the same as the sum of those who had each of the separate problems.

We would expect the military population to be much less likely to experience two of these problems: having utilities shut off and being unable to afford needed medical care. Since more than half of enlisted members with 10 or fewer years of service still live on base, we would expect substantially fewer of them to be in a position to have their utilities shut off. Further, the military provides medical care for service members and their families at no or low cost. Thus, it is somewhat surprising that any members found it impossible to afford needed medical care over the past year. Unfortunately, the low frequency of any of these events makes it difficult to distinguish significant military/civilian differences on individual items.



Some distinct service patterns are evident in the chances of having financial problems. The Army and Marines have the highest rate of any financial problems, while the Air Force has the fewest. These differences hold even when we control for differences in the age and education level of the enlisted members of each service.

**Numerous Factors May Place Enlisted at Risk for Financial Problems**



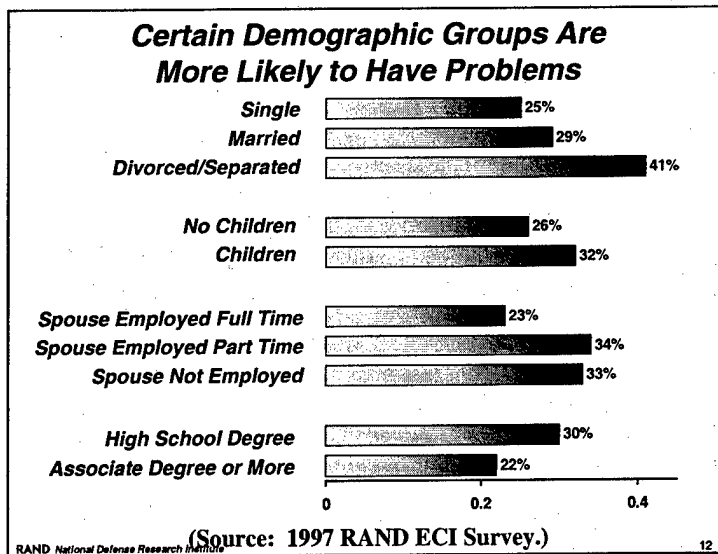
A number of characteristics of the enlisted force are unrepresentative of the civilian population. The enlisted force is quite young relative to the civilian population. Service members are probably more financially independent from their parents than is a comparably aged civilian population. Service members tend to marry and have children at younger ages than does the civilian population. They also tend to have a more traditional household structure, with the spouse working only part time or not at all. It is possible that the greater financial and family responsibilities military members have for their age puts them at increased risk for financial problems.

The nature of military work and life is also unique and brings with it a number of possible financial stressors that fewer civilians face. Deployments and moves can necessitate expenses for storage costs or household start-up expenses (for example, utility hook-up charges). Further, individuals have more limited means for choosing where they must live and may be stationed in relatively high-cost living areas.<sup>5</sup>

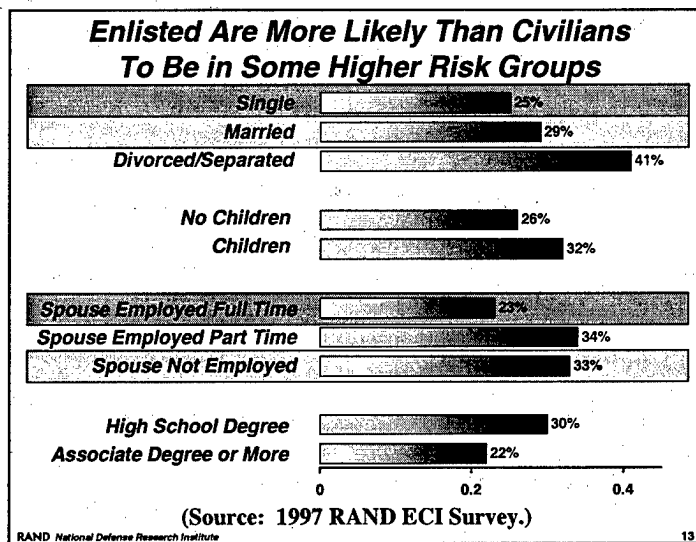
While these factors may increase the risk that service members face financial problems, two important factors that potentially reduce the risk of problems should be noted. For its age, the enlisted force is a relatively well-educated group. Few members have less than a high school diploma, and many have associate degrees. Further, service members have a relative certainty of their continued employment through their enlistment contract.

This all takes place within an environment that makes credit relatively easily available to service members. Like most Americans, members report being inundated with offers for bank cards. In fact, the service's exchange system now extends credit itself through a deferred payment plan.

<sup>5</sup>Although individuals are supposed to be compensated for variation in housing costs through adjustments to the Variable Housing Allowance and for local cost of living differences through the Continental United States (CONUS) Cost of Living Allowance (COLA).



There are significant differences in the risk of financial problems for certain demographic groups in the military. Single enlisted personnel have fewer problems than do married personnel. Divorced or separated service members have a particularly high rate of financial problems. Those with children have more problems than those without, regardless of whether the children are young or older. Those whose spouses are employed full time have fewer problems than other married personnel. Finally, those with associate degrees or more have fewer problems than do those with only high school diplomas.



The dark gray bars on this chart highlight the demographic groups that are underrepresented in the enlisted population, relative to a civilian population with similar age, race, and gender characteristics. The lighter gray bars indicate the groups that are overrepresented in the enlisted population.

The enlisted population is about 65 percent more likely than the civilian population to be married. Among those who are married, military spouses are about 50 percent more likely to not be employed. Enlisted personnel are less likely than civilians to have college degrees, but they are more likely to have a high school diploma or associate degree.

The greater proportion of the enlisted force in demographic groups with higher risk for financial problems explains only a very small proportion of the military/civilian difference in financial problems. In fact, the numbers presented above had already controlled for such differences. Rather, in each of these groups, the military population demonstrated a greater propensity to experience financial problems.

### **First Term Members with Children Appear at Particular Risk**

- One-fifth of first term members have children
- Compared to peers with no children, first term members with children are
  - 35% more likely to describe their financial condition as "Tough to make ends meet" or "In over my head"
  - 2½ times as likely to have received an Emergency Assistance Program/Relief Society loan in the last year
- One-quarter report having received food stamps, welfare, or other public assistance in the past year

(Source: 1997 RAND ECI Survey.)

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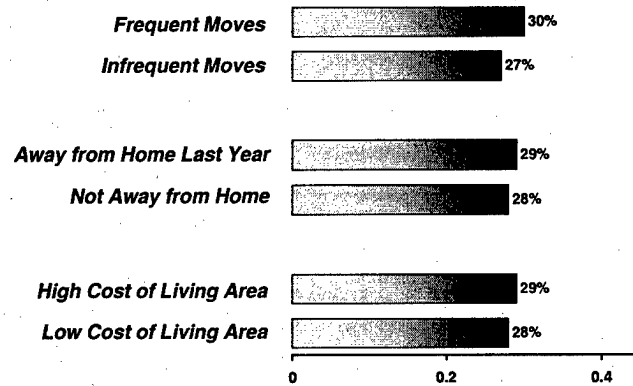
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One group that appears to be at particular risk for financial problems are first termers with children. This is not an especially large group, representing about 20 percent of first termers and about 7 percent of all enlisted with less than 10 years of service; yet, it is not a trivially small group, either.

More than one-third (36 percent) of first termers with children had a financial problem in the past year, as opposed to about one-quarter (27 percent) of first termers with no children. Correspondingly, first termers with children are 35 percent more likely than their childless peers to describe their financial condition as "tough to make ends meet" or worse. They are also two and one-half times more likely to have received an emergency assistance loan or a loan from a service relief society.

One-quarter of first termers with children reported that they had received food stamps, welfare, or other public assistance in the past year. Among all enlisted personnel with less than 10 years of service, only 6 percent report receiving such assistance. This number must be viewed with some caution. A recent careful study of food stamp reciprocity by the Directorate of Compensation, Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Force Management Policy, found that only about 1.4 percent of the enlisted force in the E-1 through E-4 grades had received food stamps in 1995 (Directorate of Compensation, 1996).

### **Deployments, Moves, and Cost of Living Do Not Explain Who Has Financial Problems**



(Source: 1997 RAND ECI Survey.)

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We speculated above that some of the higher risk for financial problems might be attributed to characteristics of military work and life, such as the frequent moves and deployments. The ECI Survey collected a limited amount of information on moves and deployments. Neither those who had a high number of Permanent Changes Station (PCS) moves for their time in service nor those who had recently been deployed experienced a significantly greater chance of financial difficulties.

We were also able to identify individuals who were in a high cost of living versus low cost of living area. The cost of living for the respondent's area was determined by matching the unit locator for an individual to the Variable Housing Allowance for the area in which he or she was assigned. High cost areas were those areas where the allowance was higher than the overall average. Granting that this is an imprecise measure of an area's cost of living, we see no greater chance of financial difficulty for those in high versus low cost areas.

We plan further investigation of whether particular groups of service members do have financial problems that are precipitated by PCS moves, deployments, or assignment to a high cost area. The insignificance of these factors in the overall pattern of financial problems might mask particular problems for important subsets of the enlisted population.

Our survey questions do not detail whether military members suffer financial hardships because of PCS moves, deployments, or assignments in high cost areas. We find that financial problems do not vary across these aspects of military life, but this may reflect the fact that members adjust to these hardships by curtailing expenditures or reducing their quality of life. If such hardships exit, they might bode problems for member morale and retention that should be addressed by DoD policies. Nevertheless, we find no evidence that the financial problems of members are related to these characteristics of the military work environment.

<b>Immaturity and Self-Control Are Seen As Key Drivers of Problems</b>	
<b>Individual</b>	Naivete regarding financial matters
	Living beyond one's means
<b>Family</b>	Marriage and parenting at a young age
	Poor communication with spouse
	Lack of trust of spouse on financial matters
<b>Market</b>	Local businesses financial advantage of young service members
	Easy access to credit
<b>(Source: 1997 RAND QOL Site Visits.)</b>	
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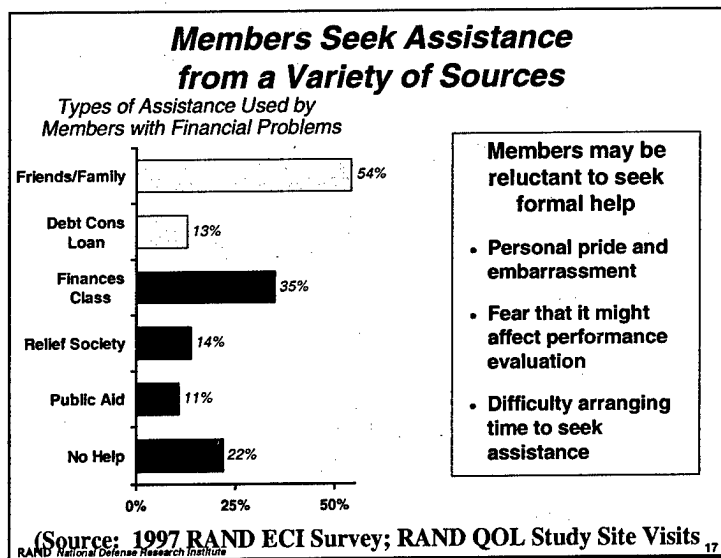
Given that we are unable explain the significantly greater chance of financial difficulties for enlisted personnel using the ECI Survey data, we must turn to the discussions from our site visits for additional clues to the causes of financial problems among young enlisted.

Young enlisted, their supervisors, community support service directors, chaplains, and counselors all identified immaturity, a lack of spending restraint, and naivete regarding financial matters as the most significant drivers of financial problems. A typical story related to us in our discussions described a young service member who buys an expensive sports car at an exceptionally high interest rate. The car and insurance payments consume half or more of his income. The service member ultimately becomes financially overextended and falls behind on his payments. This example illustrates both the lack of restraint in spending habits among some service members as well as a naivete regarding the cost of high interest.

In our discussions, early marriage and parenting was often cast in the same boat as living beyond one's means. Service members told us of individuals who married their girlfriend/boyfriend shortly after reaching their first assignment. Given that these new couples receive low priority for on-base housing assignments, they must set up households off-base. Military compensation for junior enlisted grades may be sufficient to provide a single person living on-base, or off-base sharing housing with several friends, with an acceptable standard of living; yet, it is unlikely to stretch far enough to support a non-working spouse with several children in off-base housing.

Marital relations may also lead to financial problems when partners have poor communication skills regarding financial matters, or when a lack of trust exists between partners. Some supervisors related stories such as the service member who takes the family checkbook on a deployment because he or she does not trust the spouse.

Another issue that arose in our discussions was the manner in which local businesses sometimes take advantage of the naivete of young service members. One base that we visited publishes a list of notoriously bad local businesses that service members are advised to avoid. Supervisors also raised concern over the ease with which young service members appear able to get credit cards. Supervisors believe that this makes it possible for some service members to rapidly slide into deep financial debt.



Enlisted personnel with financial problems get help from a variety of sources. The most common source is borrowing money from friends and family. Fewer service members seek help through the more formal means of financial management classes, relief society loans, or other public assistance. One-fifth of those with a financial problem received no help.

We heard a number of reasons why service members were reluctant to seek formal help. First, service members might wish to avoid the embarrassment that would come from publicly acknowledging their financial problems. Second, some service members fear that if their supervisor knew about their problem, it might get reported in their subsequent performance evaluation. Third, some members found the hours of operation for support services to be limited.

**First Line of Defense Is the  
NCOs, POs, and Officers**

- **Closest to the situation**
  - May catch problems early
  - Need to be supportive of members who seek assistance
- **Creditors sometimes call supervisors**
  - Tension between legal and leadership responsibilities
  - Supervisors resent being called, but want to help member
- **Yet, NCOs and officers rarely receive training on financial counseling**
  - Most programs aimed solely at service member
  - Few sites had programs that utilized supervisors

(Source: RAND QOL Study Site Visits.)

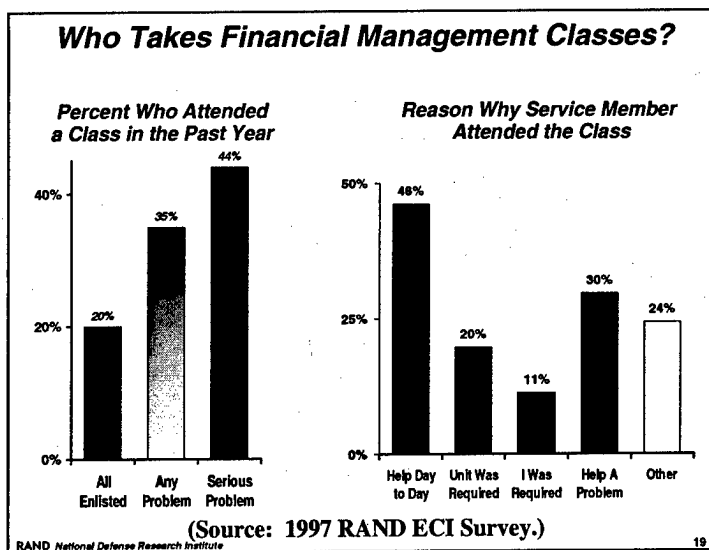
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The first line of defense for limiting and addressing member problems is the NCOs, Petty Officers, and officers who supervise young enlisted personnel. These individuals are closest to the situation and can often recognize a problem before it spirals out of control. Because of the reluctance of some members to seek formal help, it is important that leaders create an environment that is supportive of members who seek help.

Some creditors call supervisors when service members fall behind in payments. Most supervisors resented receiving such calls. Some tell creditors that the initial contract, and therefore the problem, is between the service member and the creditor. Yet most supervisors strongly felt that their role as a leader required them to intervene and ensure that their service member received the help to work out financial problems. By helping service members work through financial problems, supervisors ultimately reinforce the behavior of creditors.

Even though NCOs, POs, and officers deal with the financial problems of service members every day and view it as their role to help service members negotiate these problems, few support services were targeted at helping them fulfill this role. Most financial management programs view the troubled service member as their sole client. Few sites had programs that actively involved and directly supported NCOs, POs, and officers in their efforts to help service members work through financial problems.



A primary source of assistance given to service members with financial problems is financial counseling or financial management classes. Of those who have had a financial problem in the past year, about one-third saw a financial counselor or attended a financial management class. Among those with serious financial problems, less than half received counseling or attended a class.

Classes are open to all service members. Many attend either because they want help organizing their day-to-day finances or because everyone in their unit was required to attend. A smaller number attend because they have a specific problem for which they require help.

### **Programs Caught in a Tension Between Acting Preventively or Reactively**

#### **• PREVENTIVE**

- Some bases require attendance for new enlisted members
- There could be a high cost to instructing those who do not need the class
- Participant may see material as relevant only if having difficulties

#### **• REACTIVE**

- Targets resources to those most in need
- Close one-on-one interaction seen as most valuable
- Problem may become unresolvable by time member gets assistance

(Source: RAND QOL Study Site Visits.)

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Financial management programs appear to be caught in a tension between acting preventively and acting reactively. One site we visited has begun sending all new enlisted personnel through a mandatory financial management class. The base hopes that the savings that derive from a reduction in members' financial problems will ultimately offset the additional costs that result from instructing all new enlisted personnel, including those who otherwise would not need such instruction. The program has not been in existence long enough to evaluate its success.

The alternative approach has been to target program resources primarily on those who have financial problems. This allows for a more focused and personal interaction with service members. Unfortunately, members may not receive assistance until the problem has progressed to an unresolvable point.

The relative success of one approach over the other will depend critically on the reason for problems. Mandatory classes that utilize creative learning approaches may be successful in preventing financial problems due to financial naivete. Yet, individuals who develop financial problems due to immaturity or lack of self-control may not be responsive to such mandatory classes.

## **Preliminary Summary**

- **A significant financial management problem exists for young enlisted personnel**
  - Substantially higher rate of financial problems than among comparable civilians
  - Problems probably derive from naivete and a lack of self-control
  - Services should ensure that they do not contribute to the problem
- **The success of programs needs to be carefully evaluated**
  - Creative experimentation is under way
  - Benchmarking program outcomes will help identify most successful approaches

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We reach a couple of conclusions from our preliminary research.

First, there is a relatively significant financial management problem among young enlisted personnel. The problem is considerably larger than among comparable civilians. The cause of the problem may derive primarily from the irresponsibility and financial naivete of some young enlisted personnel. This is not to suggest that service members are more or less irresponsible or naive than are civilians. Given the stability of their employment, young enlisted personnel may have greater resources than do civilians of the same age. As a result, civilian young adults may have less opportunity to put themselves into the type of financial problems that we have measured.

That said, the services need to ensure that they are not contributing to members' financial problems in any way. Where the nature of military work or living puts service members at greater risk for financial problems, the services should consider solutions to alleviate this condition. Our preliminary analysis did not substantiate any such conditions, but a more thorough analysis of the ECI data may identify some such conditions.

Second, bases are already implementing a wide range of creative approaches to help service members with financial management classes. Unfortunately, systematic evaluations of the effectiveness of such classes are not occurring. A careful benchmarking of the effectiveness of different programs might help the services and OSD to identify particularly effective approaches to preventing and managing financial problems.

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