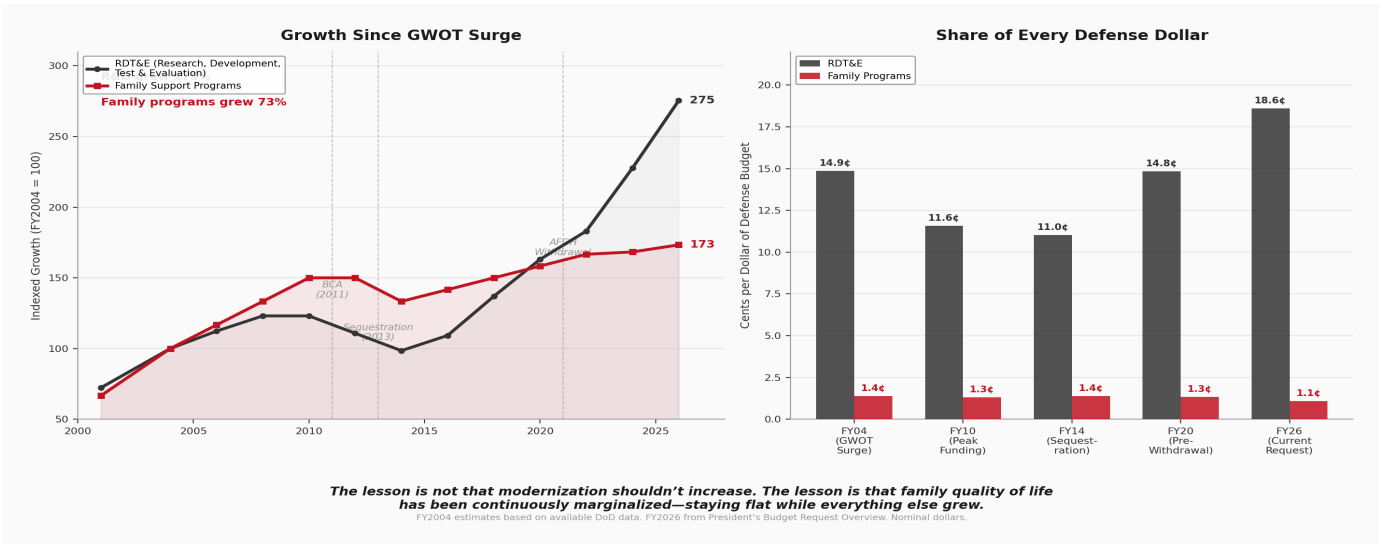


FOLLOW THE MONEY

How Defense Budget Growth Outpaced Investment in Military Families

The defense budget has more than doubled since 9/11. But budget growth alone does not determine quality of life for military families. **How the money is allocated matters more than how much there is.**



A note on inflation: These figures are in nominal dollars. Adjusted for inflation, FY2004's ~\$6B in family programs equals roughly \$10B today—meaning **family investment is essentially flat in real terms** while R&D and modernization captured the real growth.

By the numbers: FY2026 RDT&E: \$179.1B (18.6¢ per defense dollar) | FY2026 Family Programs: \$10.4B (1.1¢ per defense dollar) | FY2026 Family Housing: \$1.9B (down 52% from GWOT era)

The Hinge Point (2011–2021): The Budget Control Act capped defense spending after the GWOT build-up. Sequestration forced across-the-board cuts that hit family programs hard: FRsAs eliminated, childcare reduced, resilience programs defunded, maintenance backlogs left to grow. R&D recovered and accelerated. Family programs never did.

The lesson is not that modernization shouldn't increase. The lesson is that family quality of life has been continuously marginalized since sequestration—staying flat while everything else grew.

Where the 1.1¢ Goes: FY2026 Family Programs

FY2026 Family Support Programs	Amount
Child Development & Youth Programs	\$2.2B
Morale, Welfare & Recreation (MWR)	\$1.8B
Warfighter & Family Services	\$2.2B
Commissary	\$1.5B
DoDEA Schools	\$2.5B
TOTAL	\$10.4B

Source: FY2026 Defense Budget Overview, Chapter 4. For comparison: Science & Technology alone is \$20.3B—nearly double all family programs combined.

FOLLOW THE EXPERIENCE

What Military Families Actually Lived Through

Numbers tell one story. Lived experience tells another. The generation you are leading was **imprinted** during the periods below. Their trust and willingness to participate were shaped by what they experienced—not what the budget said.

2001–2010: The Surge of Support

The post-9/11 era created new programs at a pace families had rarely seen:

- **FRSAs** — Paid civilian family liaisons, Army-wide by 2007. Casey called them a “long-term investment.”
- **Strong Bonds, Military OneSource, MFLCs** — Chaplain-led retreats, 24/7 counseling, and non-medical support launched as deployments surged.
- **Housing Privatization** — 112,000+ units privatized by 2005. Arriving families experienced new or remodeled homes.
- **TRICARE for Life & Childcare Expansion** — Full retiree medical coverage and childcare investment reaching \$1B annually by 2020.

“GWOT dollars were pouring into the installation, FRGs were thriving, and on-post housing had just been updated. We were babies, learning how to exist in the world, and the structure from that unit helped us.”

— Military spouse, *Military Culture Shift* (2025)

2011–2021: The Decade of Compounding Loss

Sequestration did not just reduce budgets—it fractured the relationship between families and the institution:

- **FRSAs eliminated.** The “long-term investment” was among the first civilian positions cut. Families lost their connection to command.
- **Childcare cut, resilience programs defunded.** No childcare vouchers, no printed materials. Staff were dual and triple-hatting roles.
- **Pink slips—some reportedly while deployed.** As one spouse wrote: “If the Army is our family, then this is divorce.”
- **Housing deteriorated.** Privatized housing oversight lapsed. By 2019: mold, sewage, vermin. The Afghanistan withdrawal capped the decade.

The Bottom Line for Leaders: The generation you are leading was imprinted during the loss, not the surge. Their skepticism is not entitlement—it is a rational response to a decade of challenges.

What We Say vs. What Families Hear

Official language signals commitment. Families measure it by what changes in their daily lives.

What We Say	What Families Hear
<i>“Investing in Quality of Life for Warriors and families is essential.”</i>	Family programs get 1.1¢ of every defense dollar. R&D gets 18.6¢. The “investment” is a rounding error.
<i>“Modernization of barracks and family housing.”</i>	Housing funding is down 52% from the GWOT era. GAO found a \$20B maintenance backlog. Families lived with mold, sewage, and vermin.
<i>“No one serves alone—it’s you, your kids, your spouses, your communities.”</i>	FRSAs—the paid family liaisons—were cut and never replaced. The people who connected families to command are gone.
<i>“Economic security of Service members and military families is critical to mission readiness.”</i>	DoD created a Basic Needs Allowance because junior enlisted families qualified for food stamps. The fix for poverty-level pay was an additional benefit—not addressing the pay.

Left column quotes: FY2026 President’s Budget Request and SecDef statements.

Discussion Prompt

Where is the gap between what we say and what families experience at your installation? Who owns it?