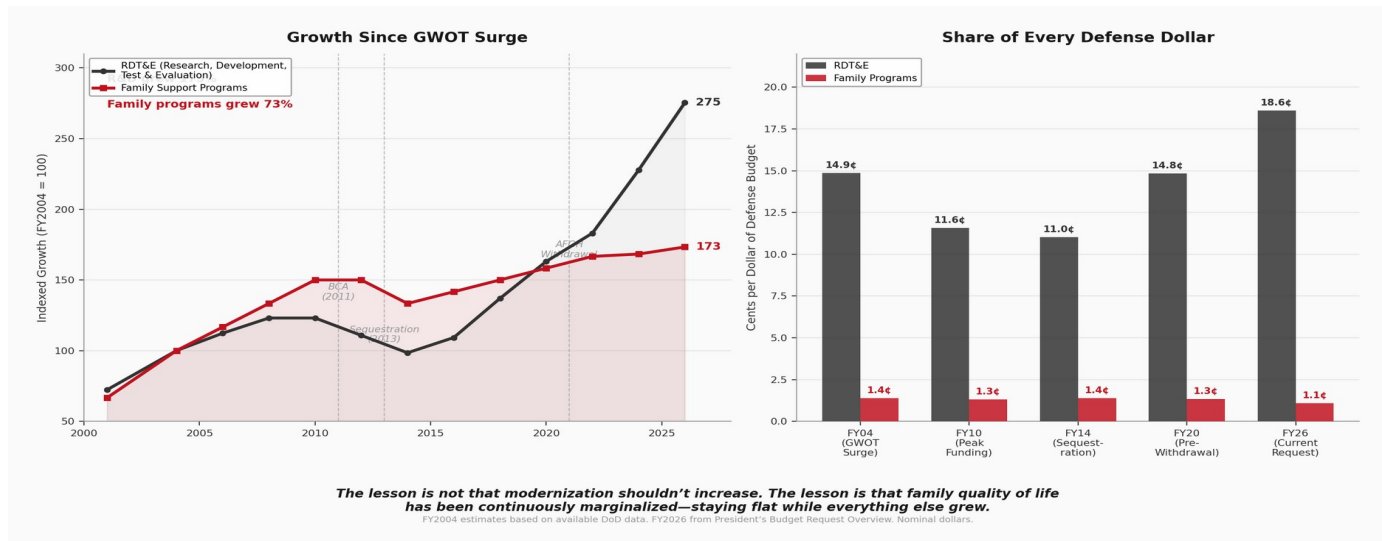


# FOLLOW THE MONEY

## 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
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$10.4B</b>

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 broken promises.

### 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?*