

The Military's Impact on San Diego

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Still a Military Town

San Diego's economy has expanded since the turbulent early 90's when decreased defense spending contributed to a regional recession. Throughout much of its history, a reliance on defense contracting and military bases led San Diego to define itself as a military town. While the economy has diversified over the last decade, the latest installment of the KPBS/Competitive Edge Research Poll shows that San Diego County residents still feel the military's impact. Almost 85% think that the military has an impact on our local economy. The large number of military families also shapes our perspective. Two-thirds of San Diego County residents have at least indirect ties to the military. As Washington considers a new round of base closures, over 70% of residents think the closing of another local base would be a serious problem. Further, there is no consensus as to which base should be closed. On the other hand, San Diegans display a fondness for retaining Camp Pendleton.

Military Ties: Binding the County to the Armed Forces

The proportion of households containing an active member of the military remains small (9.6%), but that equates to roughly 95,000 in raw numbers. Another 30% qualify as households containing veterans, the bulk of these folks being over the age of 55 and male. All told, about two-thirds of San Diegans have at least some tie to the military.

Due to the number of military spouses residing in town and the predominantly male demographic of the armed forces, women far outnumber men among those with a household member currently serving. Residents with other indirect ties to the military represent almost a quarter of the county's population. These may

include those with family members outside their household in the military and civilians who work at military installations. These residents tend to be under the age of 55.

A little over a third of county residents have no ties to the military. This group tends to be younger – two-thirds less than 45 years old -- and less affluent.

The survey did not reveal a strong relationship between military service and ideology nor is there a significant geographic component. That is, active military, veterans and those without ties are all scattered throughout the County.

Economic Impact: Military is Perceived as an Important Driver

Sixty-one percent of San Diegans believe the military has a very big economic impact on the County's economy and another 24% rate the impact as moderate. It is clear that residents are well aware that the region's economic well-being is closely intertwined with military installations and personnel.

Not surprisingly, the amount of perceived economic impact is closely related to how tied a resident is to the armed forces. Those with no military ties are least likely to perceive an economic impact as just 44% of them feel that the military has a very big impact on the local economy. In stark contrast, 70% of those who have at least some tie to the armed forces say the military is a very big economic force. This discrepancy is explained as a simple case of "out of sight, out of mind." Average citizens are more likely to rely on personal anecdotal evidence than quantitative data when assessing economic matters. The lack of firsthand family military experience among those with no ties means they feel the military's impact less strongly. So while they may believe the military is a major player in the local economy, they are less likely to be intense in their response due to a lack of personal familiarity.

A similar principle applies to East County residents. Less than half of East County residents feel that the military represents a very big impact on the local economy, as compared to the over 60% of residents in the rest of the county. The lack of military installations in the County's eastern areas decreases the opportunity for residents to come in contact with the armed forces in their places of business. Personal experience or lack thereof, drives the strength of feelings concerning economic matters.

It is interesting to note that ideology, income, and age do not seem to significantly change residents' feelings about the economic impact of the military in San Diego. Many liberal residents may be opposed to specific military action, but they still overwhelmingly recognize the military's local financial benefits.

Base Closure: Would Create Serious Headaches

San Diego has endured base closures in the past (the Naval Training Center being the most recent). The KPBS/Competitive Edge Research Poll shows that residents would prefer not to relive that experience: over 70% would view a base closure as a serious problem and 36% say it would be very serious.

Unlike the economic impact question, ideology does play a significant role here. Among very liberal residents, just 53% regard the closing of a base as a serious problem (30% very serious) as compared to 81% of very conservative residents (50% very serious.) While recognizing the substantial economic value of having a military presence in the county, those on the far left are much less concerned about letting an individual base close. This is not a surprise considering the long-standing alignment of the political right with the military.

What may be surprising, however, is the finding that female residents display significantly more concern about base closures than do men. Seventy-seven percent of women regard the closing of a military installation as serious (40%

very serious) as compared to 64% of men (31% very serious.) One possible explanation for the gap is that while men may judge base closures on solely economic grounds, women may view them from both an economic and a security perspective. During the Presidential campaign, pollsters and pundits tabbed “security moms” as a newly important segment of the electorate. Women, it was surmised, were voting on national security and terrorism issues much more so than in previous election cycles. This same phenomenon may be influencing women’s responses to the question of base closures.

Geography also plays a role. North coastal residents are much more likely to view the closure of a base as a serious problem. A miniscule 8% of residents from Del Mar to Oceanside feel that closing a base would not be a serious problem while 82% in that area regard a possible closure as serious—the largest proportion of any geographical area in the county. Home to Camp Pendleton, the county’s largest base, the North coastal areas are more dependent than most on military spending for their economic survival. It is not hard to imagine the severe impact on the city of Oceanside -- in particular -- should Camp Pendleton close.

As with the more general economic impact question, residents with no military ties are also less likely to feel the closing of a base is a serious problem.

Which Base to Save?

With potential closures on the horizon, the poll queried residents about their preferences. Respondents were asked if one base were to shut down, which one they would prefer to see close as well as which base they would least like to see close.

Overall, the clear favorite to be saved was Camp Pendleton, with 36% saying that is the installation they would least like to see closed and only 4% stating it

was their preferred closure target. Leading the charge for Camp Pendleton are the north county areas – over half in the north coastal and north suburban regions oppose closing the base -- but all areas of the county show substantial opposition to closing Pendleton.

The data also shows that upper income residents are also bigger fans of Pendleton which is probably an indication of the role the base plays as a buffer between San Diego and Orange counties. Affluent residents likely believe that closing the massive base may spur an explosion of housing development, which, in turn, would lower property values while bringing more folks to the County.

Geography is also crucial for some other installations. Residents in the County's southern areas throw a substantial amount of support behind the 32nd Street Naval Station and those in the southern half of the City are also supportive of the SPAWAR facility. As well as being home to many of the folks employed or serving at those facilities, these areas would experience the most economic pain should the nearby installations be closed.

The Marine Corps Air Station at Miramar and the Naval Air Station at North Island do not generate the same levels of geographic support, which might be explained by their central locations in the county.

Which Base to Close?

The Marine Corps Recruit Depot (MCRD) receives the least support. The survey found that desire for closing MCRD is strongest among middle-aged residents, especially those in the 45 to 54 year-old group. Since 45 to 54 year-olds tend to be parents of older children, it is quite possible that the recruiting mission of the installation tends to scare them. Also, because of the transitory nature of recruits, the MCRD may generate the least sustained economic benefit and local community involvement. Further, the young age of those associated with this

installation may be perceived as a factor in various social ills, so it is not surprising that this base topped the list.

If you ask military households which base to close the answer heard most often is SPAWAR, the Navy's research and development installation on Point Loma. It is unclear why those in the military prefer this facility for closure.

Conclusion

While the nature of San Diego's economy may have changed over the last decade, its ties to the military are as strong as ever. As the home of Fleet Week, the county seems to embrace its military installations and appreciate the economic benefits of having service men and women in town. The county is wary of losing any of its military facilities with Camp Pendleton at the top of the "keeper list." Between the strong military ties and the economic benefits reaped by having the military in town, the KPBS/Competitive Edge Research Poll indicates that residents will support elected officials who work hard to keep their bases off of the closure list.