

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Air Force

Coming Home: A Prospective Study of Family Reintegration Following Deployment to a War Zone

Balderrama-Durbin, C., Cigrang, J. A., Osborne, L. J., Snyder, D. K., Talcott, G. W., Slep, A. M. S., ... Sonnek, S. (2015). Coming home: A prospective study of family reintegration following deployment to a war zone. *Psychological Services, 12*

SUMMARY: Seventy-six partnered Air Force Service members were evaluated to determine correlates of family reintegration challenges. Service members reported on relationship functioning, communication, mental health, and reintegration challenges. Results indicated that pre-deployment drinking and relationship difficulties predicted post-deployment reintegration challenges.

KEY FINDINGS:

- About half (56%) of Airmen reported moderate to severe difficulties in one aspect of post-deployment family reintegration, with 19% reporting difficulties in multiple aspects.
- Pre- relationship distress, and pre-deployment alcohol use were positively associated with post-deployment family-reintegration difficulties.
- Post-deployment relationship distress, alcohol use, depressive symptoms, and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) were also associated with post-deployment reintegration difficulties.
- Protective factors included partner support, and willingness to disclose deployment and combat experiences.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Provide peer support groups to Service members and their partners prior to deployment
- Make educational materials available on the dangers of alcohol abuse both pre- and post-deployment
- Offer supportive services to help children cope with the challenges of Service member reintegration

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Recommend pre-deployment screening for alcohol and other substance abuse
- Encourage routine screening for PTSD and depressive symptoms that may hinder reintegration
- Urge the development of activities that promote bonding and reconnection between Service members and their children following deployment

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METHODS

- Data from Service members were collected pre-, during, and post-deployment.
- Service members reported family reintegration difficulties, relationship distress, partner support, PTSD symptomology, depression, alcohol use, and combat exposure using validated survey instruments.
- Using original survey instruments, Airmen also reported deployment preparation challenges, shared commitment to a military lifestyle, frequency of family communication while deployed, and willingness to disclose combat experiences.
- Researchers used single and multiple regression to assess post-deployment integration and functioning.

PARTICIPANTS

- The sample consisted of 76 USAF Service members deployed to Iraq for one year.
- Service members who remained in the same relationship for the entire deployment cycle were retained for analysis.
- The sample was largely White (60%) and male (92%), with some college education and a mean age of 28 years.
- Most of the partners were married (76%), and the majority of couples had one or more children (63%).

LIMITATIONS

- The data were limited to information provided by Service members, and was not validated by spouses.
- The sample was comprised predominantly of White and male. Results may differ for women, or people of color.
- The study analyzes reintegration experiences of Airmen with and without children, together. However, demands and roles are likely to be different based on parent status.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Examine how posttraumatic growth impacts reintegration experiences over a longer term
- Evaluate the impact of physical injury (including Traumatic Brain Injury) in family reintegration
- Explore the impact of family members' mental health of Service members' reintegration experiences

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