

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Air Force

The Risk for Marital Infidelity Across a Year-Long Deployment

Balderrama-Durbin, C., Stanton, K., Snyder, D. K., Cigrang, J. A., Talcott, G. W., Smith Slep, A. M., ... Cassidy, D. G. (2017). The risk for marital infidelity across a year-long deployment. *Journal of Family Psychology*, Jan(2017), doi:10.1037/fam0000281

SUMMARY: Pre- and post-deployment data from 63 married male Airmen was used to explore the prevalence and risk factors associated with marital infidelity (either emotional or physical), committed by the Service member, their spouse, or both partners, following a year-long deployment to Iraq. Results indicate that sexual infidelity during a deployment cycle were higher than civilian estimates. A variety of relationship factors were associated with an increased risk of infidelity during or immediately (6-9 months) following a deployment.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Nearly 30% (n = 18) of Airmen experienced infidelity (either emotional or physical) committed by the Service member, their spouse, or both partners prior to being deployed. Additionally, 30% (n = 18) of Airmen experienced either emotional or physical infidelity during or since their deployment.
- Physical sexual infidelity rates prior to deployment were similar to rates of sexual infidelity among civilians but rates during deployment were substantially higher for military members compared to non-military civilians.
- Relationship distress, previous separation, and greater steps towards divorce were associated with an increased risk of infidelity by either partner during or immediately following a deployment.
- Marital dissolution was more likely among Airmen who had experienced infidelity committed by either the Service member, their spouse, or both partners during or immediately following their deployment (75%).

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Offer workshops aimed at increasing communication and enhancing couple intimacy prior to and during deployment
- Disseminate information regarding the unique challenges military couples and families experience and tips on how to strengthen couple and family relationships
- Offer pre- and post-deployment support groups for couple who are experiencing relationship distress or infidelity concerns

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Continue to support programs that aim to increase resilience among military couples and build strong relationships that can effectively cope with a deployment
- Continue to support research efforts aimed at understanding the risk factors associated with infidelity to develop cohesive interventions and prevention efforts that build stronger military families
- Facilitate collaboration between military-related and community-based services that support military couples strengthen their relationships

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METHODS

- The participants were a sub-set of a larger study examining risk and protective factors across a year-long deployment during 2009-2010.
- Only those who were married, male, and completed the pre- and post-deployment assessments were included.
- Participants answered a variety of questions regarding infidelity, relationship distress, steps taken towards relationship dissolution, and the status of their relationship.

PARTICIPANTS

- The sample consisted of 63 married male Airmen who had, on average, been married for 6.40 years (SD = 5.58).
- Mean age was approximately 29 years (SD = 6.50), with the majority of participants identifying as White (71%).
- Forty-five percent of participants had deployed twice previously, and the average duration of all deployments in an OEF/OIF mission was close to 15 months (SD = 10.76).

LIMITATIONS

- The sample was only comprised of active-duty Airmen, limiting the applicability to other branches of the military.
- Female Service members were not included in the study; therefore, conclusions based on this sample do not represent their experiences of infidelity.
- Only the perspective of the Service member is included in the study and spouses' experience of infidelity may differ, limiting the generalizability of the results.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Include Service members from different branches of the military to get a more comprehensive understanding regarding how infidelity is experienced across all branches of the military
- Explore how the experiences of infidelity are similar or different between Service members and their partners to better understand the effect of deployment on infidelity
- Continue exploring risk factors associated with infidelity among military couples to develop effective prevention and intervention strategies

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