

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Army

Childhood Adversity and Combat as Predictors of Depression and Post-Traumatic Stress in Deployed Troops

Cabrera, O. A., Hoge, C. W., Bliese, P. D., Castro, C. A., & Messer, S. C (2007). Childhood adversity and combat as predictors of depression and post-traumatic stress in deployed troops. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 33(2), 77-82.
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SUMMARY: Soldiers prior to an OIF deployment and Soldiers after an OIF deployment completed a survey to assess the mental health impact of childhood adverse events (e.g., psychological abuse, mental illness in the home) on combat troops. Adverse childhood events significantly predicted mental health symptoms beyond combat exposure after deployment.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Soldiers who reported two or more traumatic childhood experiences were at increased risk of meeting criteria for depression and PTSD (in both the pre- and post-Iraq deployment samples).
- In the post-deployment sample, adverse childhood experiences were a significant predictor of depression and PTSD symptoms (above and beyond combat exposure in Iraq).
- When examining all Soldiers who had combat exposure, those with a history of adverse childhood experiences displayed lower levels of PTSD and depression compared to those without adverse childhood experiences. Researchers speculate that these Soldiers may be displaying lower reactivity to combat or their previous trauma may have created a ceiling effect for mental health functioning.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Offer supportive classes that address the impact of childhood adverse events on Service members, and teach strategies for managing the aftermath of such experiences
- Offer courses for family members, such as training on understanding and supporting the Service member who is facing mental health concerns after deployment
- Disseminate information regarding possible symptoms of mental health problems Service members may face after deployment and where individuals and families can find help for those problems

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Recommend that Service members be assessed for childhood adverse events and any associated mental health difficulties prior to deployment
- Continue to support programs dedicated to the provision of mental health interventions that address the impact of childhood adverse events on Service member functioning
- Recommend integrating education on trauma and coping into existing service delivery systems for military families

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METHODS

- Soldiers were surveyed prior to deployment to Iraq and approximately three months after returning from deployment.
- Participants completed scales of childhood adverse events, depression, PTSD symptoms, combat exposure, demographic, and military questions.
- Statistical analyses were used to predict depression and PTSD symptoms based on childhood adverse experiences.

PARTICIPANTS

- Four thousand five hundred twenty nine Soldiers participated prior to deployment to Iraq and 2,392 Soldiers participated after deployment to Iraq; both samples were 100% male.
- Participants' pre-Iraq deployment sample characteristics: 65% were 18-24 years old, 70% were White, 13% were Latino, 9% were African American, and 40% were married.
- Participants' post-Iraq deployment sample characteristics: 57% were 18-24 years old, 69% were White, 11% were Latino, 13% were African American, and 48% were married.
- All participants were Active Duty Soldiers serving in infantry and support units; no other military or demographic variables were presented.

LIMITATIONS

- All data were retrospective and self-report which may introduce biases (particularly in the recall for childhood events).
- Only male Active Duty Soldiers were used; it is unknown how these results might generalize to female, Reserve, or Guard Service members and those in other branches of the military.
- The data were cross-sectional which means no conclusions based on causation can be determined.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Utilize a longitudinal design to measure and control for pre-deployment mental health
- Investigate women exposed to combat to see if these patterns are similar for both genders
- Gather data about current traumatic or adverse experiences to explore the extent to which past and current experiences are related among Service members

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