

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Air Force

Impact of Combat Deployment on Psychological and Relationship Health: A Longitudinal Study

Cigrang, J. A., Talcot, G. W., Tatum, J., Baker, M., Cassidy, D., Sonnek, S., & Slep, A. M. S. (2014). Impact of combat deployment on psychological and relationship health: A longitudinal study. *Journal of Traumatic Stress, 27*(1), 58-65. doi:10.1002/jts.21890

SUMMARY: Survey data of members of the U.S. Air Force security forces assigned to a year-long high-threat ground mission in Iraq were used to determine the degree to which Airmen's emotional and behavioral health and committed relationships were adversely impacted by an extended deployment to a warzone. Participants completed mental health and relationship measures just prior to and 6-9 months after deployment. Deployment to a warzone negatively impacted Airman's emotional and behavioral health, as well as their relationship functioning.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Higher levels of relationship distress pre-deployment and increases in relationship distress during deployment predicted lower frequency of communication during deployment.
- More relationship distress and higher levels of depression predicted lower self-rated duty performance among the deployed Airmen.
- Relationship distress increased significantly during deployment for many Service members (34%), but decreased for others (14%).

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Offer workshops that help military couples in the pre-deployment phase create a reasonable plan for communication during deployment
- Provide education to military couples to enhance relationship quality and communication to help couples effectively cope with deployment-related stressors
- Provide support groups for spouses of Service members who are currently deployed

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Continue to support the development of programs that aim to increase Service members' relationship quality
- Encourage training for community providers about stressors that may come with different phases of the deployment cycle so that they can best support families during those times
- Recommend Service members have as much access as possible to various methods of communication with their families during deployment

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METHODS

- Participants were part of two detachments of Airmen who were deployed to Iraq.
- Airmen were surveyed at three time points in the deployment cycle: pre-deployment, in-theater, and post-deployment. These surveys included questions about relationship functioning, depression, communication with romantic partners, and the impact of relationship concerns on duty performance.
- Participants were recruited during their pre-deployment training, which occurred 30 prior to deploying to Iraq.

PARTICIPANTS

- Participants were 144 Airmen in significant romantic relationships.
- Of the Airmen, the majority (89%) were male with an average age of 26.8 years (SD = 6.3).
- In the sample, 63% were White, 18% were Black, 8% were Latino/Latina, 6% were Asian-American, 1% was Native American, and 4% were other races.

LIMITATIONS

- All participants were part of two very similar deployments, therefore these results may not be generalizable to Service members experiencing different types of deployments.
- This study relied upon self-reports of duty performance, which may not be an accurate measurement as problems in this area may have been under-reported.
- The sample was limited to Airmen, so it is unknown whether similar associations exist for members of other military branches.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Explore factors that distinguish couples who experience an increase in relationship distress during deployment from those who experience decreased distress
- Gather information from partners as well as Service members during the deployment cycle
- Incorporate objective measures of duty performance

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