

# Putting Research to Work for Military Families



**Focus:**  
Multiple  
Branches

## Bereaved Military Dependent Spouses and Children: Those Left Behind in a Decade of War (2001–2011)

Cozza, S. J., Fisher, J. E., Zhou, J., Harrington-LaMorie, J., La Flair, L., Fullerton, C. S., & Ursano, R. J. (2017). Bereaved military dependent spouses and children: Those left behind in a decade of war (2001-2011). *Military Medicine*, 182(3), e1684-e1690. doi:10.7205/MILMED-D-16-00109

**SUMMARY:** Family members of U.S. Service members who have died on duty are at risk for debilitating grief; however, little is known about the demographics and composition of these families. This study examined characteristics of surviving military dependents of Service members who died in the first decade following September 11, 2001. Results suggest that certain demographic characteristics of many bereaved spouses and children may put these families at greater risk for debilitating grief.

### KEY FINDINGS:

- Of the approximately 16,000 Service member deaths during this period, 55% had spouses and 56% had children.
- About one third of the Service members included in the sample died in combat during this period.
- The mean age of spouses in this sample at the time of their Service member's death was 32.8 years, while for children it was 10.3 years.
- Many of the spouses and families with children lived further than 60 miles from an installation (58-60%), and families with children were more likely to live farther from installations than spouse-only families.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Offer classes addressing the grieving process for bereaved spouses and children that can be accessed remotely in order to reach families who live further away from installations
- Disseminate information to providers regarding possible characteristics of bereaved families in order to effectively offer assistance following the death of a Service member
- Provide concrete information on normative versus problematic children's responses to the death of a parent and strategies to address children's distress

### IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Continue to support programs that address grief in military families who have lost a Service member
- Recommend training for community and military providers to recognize grief-associated risk in bereaved families
- Encourage collaboration among DoD programs, the Veterans Affairs system, and community-based organizations to continue to support families who have lost a Service member

This product is the result of a partnership funded by the Department of Defense between the Office of Military Community and Family Policy and the USDA's National Institute of Food and Agriculture through a grant/cooperative agreement with The University of Minnesota.



# Putting Research to Work for Military Families



## METHODS

- Data on Service members who died between September 11, 2001 and September 11, 2011 and their families were obtained from a series of DoD databases.
- Demographic data were assessed to gain a better idea of the characteristics of all deceased Service members and their families.
- Families with spouses only were compared to families with spouses and children to assess for any differences by family composition.

## PARTICIPANTS

- A total of 15,938 deceased Service members were included in analyses. The mean age at time of death was 28.5 years, and the majority were men (94.6%) and either White (77%) or Black (15%).
- There were 10,304 spouses included in the sample, and 12,641 children.
- When the Service member died, 30% of the children were under 5 years, 25% were between 6 and 10 years, 20% were between 11 and 15 years, 9% were between 16 and 18 years, and 16% were 18 years or older.

## LIMITATIONS

- Limited information about family members (beyond gender and approximate location) restricted the conclusions that could be drawn about this population.
- Significant others who were not married to their Service member as well as children who lived at other locations than with the Service member were not included in the sample, so findings may not generalize to all families who have lost a Service member.
- This sample didn't include other family members affected by the loss of a Service member, including parents, siblings, and other relatives.

## AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Collect more diversified information about the functioning of families who have experienced the death of a Service member
- Ensure that nontraditional families are included in samples of grieving military families
- Make an effort to include other family members (parents, siblings, etc.) in order to obtain a more complete picture of how the death of a Service member affects all members of the Service member's family

## ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



For more information about the Assessing Research that Works rating scale visit:  
<https://reachmilitaryfamilies.umn.edu/content/assessing-research-that-works>