

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Multiple
Branches

Combat Exposure, Mental Health, and Relationship Functioning Among Women Veterans of the Afghanistan and Iraq Wars

Creech, S. K., Swift, R., Zlotnick, C., Taft, C., & Street, A. E. (2016). Combat exposure, mental health, and relationship functioning among women veterans of the Afghanistan and Iraq wars. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 30 (1), 43-51. doi:10.1037/fam0000145

SUMMARY: As women continue to represent a fast-growing segment of the present military and Veteran population, more research regarding their combat exposure is needed. This study examined the impacts of combat exposure, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms, and alcohol misuse on family, intimate relationship, and parenting functioning of female OEF/OIF/OND Veterans.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Combat exposure had a direct, positive relationship with both PTSD symptoms and alcohol misuse.
- Combat exposure did not have a direct relationship with family functioning; however PTSD symptoms did have a direct, negative relationship with family functioning and intimate relationship satisfaction.
- Parenting confidence and satisfaction did not have a relationship with combat exposure, PTSD, or alcohol misuse, although the authors note to interpret this finding with caution due to the small subsample of respondents who were parents.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Increase the level of relationship- or family-focused programming for Service members and families
- Provide a parenting toolkit or resources for female Service members who return from deployment
- Host mother-child social gatherings for Service members and families to nurture parental and social bonds

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Continue to support the professional development of professionals working with female Service members or Service members exhibiting symptoms of PTSD or alcohol misuse
- Recommend regular family participation in community programs for Service members
- Support programs that focus on deployed mothers and ease their transition into reintegration

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METHODS

- A random selection of 600 female Veterans of OEF/OIF/OND were sent study information with 134 women returning at least a partial survey for a response rate of 27%.
- The survey included questions for measures such as: combat exposure, PTSD symptoms, alcohol misuse, post-deployment stress exposure, family functioning and, for applicable participants, intimate relationship satisfaction and parenting confidence and satisfaction.
- Analysis was conducted to explore any relationships between PTSD symptoms and alcohol misuse along with combat exposure and the family, intimate relationship, and parenting variables.

PARTICIPANTS

- Participants' average age was 37.11 (SD = 8.74), years of education was 16.10 (SD = 2.87), years of Active Duty service was 5.69 (SD = 5.31), and years of Guard or Reserve service was 7.33 (SD = 7.61).
- The vast majority of participants (81%) were White, while 9% were Black, 4% Other, 2% Native American, 2% Asian-American and 2% Multiracial.
- Most (78%) were currently in a romantic relationship, 40% had children living with them, and 28% had a child under 18 years old during last deployment.
- Nearly half (49%) were Army Veterans, 31% Air Force, 19% Navy, and less than 1% Coast Guard; over half (52%) had one deployment; and the median number of years since returning from deployment was 7 years.

LIMITATIONS

- The sample was fairly small, racially and geographically homogeneous, and represented a low response rate, making the findings hard to generalize, especially as the subsample of female Veterans who were parents was quite small.
- There were some measures that were analyzed separately—family and relationship functioning—but could be linked in the minds of respondents, which could lead to unclear findings.
- The study analyzed data from one time point, which does not allow for any clear insight into causality.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Expand the study to reach more participants in order to increase racial and geographic diversity
- Use a longitudinal approach to see how these associations change over time
- Incorporate family surveys to gain an understanding of how the family unit perceives functioning in the Service member post-deployment

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