

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Multiple
Branches

School Climate, Deployment, and Mental Health Among Students in Military-Connected Schools

De Pedro, K. T., Astor, R. A., Gilreath, T. D., Benbenishty, R., & Berkowitz, R. (2018). School climate, deployment, and mental health among students in military-connected schools. *Youth & Society, 50*(1), 93-115.
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SUMMARY: Deployment of a family member can be a significant event in the life of an adolescent. This study examined the relationship between deployment and mental health in adolescents, and considered the protective factors that school climate might have with this population. Results indicated a need for considering not only adolescents with a Service member parent, but also those whose sibling was a Service member as impacted by deployment.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Adolescents who experienced a parent or sibling being deployed were more likely to experience depressive symptoms and suicidal thoughts compared to adolescents with no parent or sibling in the military; one deployment increased this risk by 27% and two or more deployments increased the risk by 38%.
- Meaningful participation in school, feeling safe at school, and having caring relationships at school increased adolescents' sense of well-being.
- Adolescents experienced reduced depressive symptoms and suicidal thoughts when they reported increased school connectedness and sense of safety at school.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Provide education to military families regarding the relationship between adolescent well-being, family member deployment, and school climate
- Engage Service members and their families in school programs that increase caring relationships at school, school connectedness, and safety in school
- Provide information to Service members regarding the relationship between deployment and depressive symptoms and suicidal ideation in adolescent family members, either siblings or children

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Recommend the inclusion of adolescent siblings of Service members in programs for families of Service members that aim to improve mental health and family readiness
- Promote collaboration between military-based programs and schools that serve military bases to smooth the transition to a new school for military adolescents
- Recommend professional development for staff at schools near military bases to promote awareness of the protective factors that caring relationships, connectedness, meaningful participation, and safety can have in adolescents

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METHODS

- Data were gathered by the California Department of Education via a statewide, required survey. The schools chosen for this study administered an additional optional module specifically designed for military-connected schools.
- The researchers compared students who reported having a military parent or sibling to students who reported no military parent or sibling.
- All data were gathered by self-report from the students at school. The survey questions were tested with a pilot study prior to the full study and reported good reliability.

PARTICIPANTS

- Participants included 14,493 students in the seventh, ninth, and eleventh grades in six military-connected school districts in Southern California. Four of the districts were suburban, one was urban, and one was rural.
- There were 52% females and 48% male participants, with 33% 7th graders, 35% 9th graders, and 32% 11th graders. Races/ethnicities reported include Latino (50%), White (27%), multiracial (11%), Asian (8%), and Black (3%).
- Nine percent of the participants reported having a parent in the military and 4% reported having a sibling in the military. Nine percent experienced one deployment, while 4% experienced two or more deployments.
- No military rank or branch information was provided.

LIMITATIONS

- Limited demographic information were gathered (i.e., socioeconomic status), which limits generalizability.
- The study was a cross-sectional design, so causality cannot be determined between the well-being measures of the students and their military connections and school climates.
- The study assessed school climate as global and static, while students' experiences of school climate may fluctuate, limiting its application to all parts of the school experience.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Study socioeconomic status and other demographic variables to provide additional information about which aspects of students' well-being are most affected by their military connections and experiences of school climate
- Conduct longitudinal studies in order to establish an understanding of causality and how the variables of student well-being, military connections, and school climate interact over time
- Gather data about critical moments in student life, such as various aspects of transition to a new school and experience of the deployment cycle

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