

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Multiple
Branches

Associations Between School Violence, Military Connection, and Gang Membership in California Secondary Schools

Estrada, J. N., Gilreath, T. D., Sanchez, C. Y., & Astor, R. A. (2016). Associations between school violence, military connection, and gang membership in California secondary schools. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, doi:10.1037/ort0000181

SUMMARY: Military youth attending public schools often possess many risk factors also associated with gang membership, including home and school upheaval and alienation from peers. Associations between military family characteristics (e.g., deployments, relocations), youth health behaviors, and gang membership were examined. While military connection alone did not predict youth gang membership, frequent moves and family deployments put youth at increased risk for being in a gang.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Having a parent or sibling currently serving in the military did not by itself predict students' gang membership.
- Students who changed schools four or more times in the past five years were 53% more likely to be in a gang than students who had moved three or fewer times.
- Students who had experienced a family member being deployed were 44% more likely to be in a gang than students without a family deployment history.
- Students who had engaged in a fight or carried a weapon to school in the past year were two times more likely to be in a gang than students who had not.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Provide education to military parents on child adjustment, particularly after moving schools
- Offer after-school programs for military youth that promote positive school and community involvement and prevent gang membership
- Disseminate information regarding youth risk factors (e.g., carrying weapons, frequently changing schools) for violence and gang membership to military families

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Encourage collaboration between public schools and the Department of Defense (DoD) to identify military youth at increased risk for gang membership
- Recommend professional education for public school personnel regarding stressors and risk factors, including family deployment and frequent moves, for military youth
- Promote the development of programs to support military youth attending public schools

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METHODS

- Students in southern California public schools who completed the military module of the ongoing statewide California Healthy Kids Survey during 7th, 9th, or 11th grade were recruited.
- There was a 97% consent rate, and an 87% survey completion rate among recruited students.
- Associations between self-reported demographic variables, military-related characteristics, youth health behaviors, and gang membership were examined.

PARTICIPANTS

- The sample included 13,484 students (52% female) from 23 southern California public schools near Navy and Marine bases with high rates (i.e., 10% or more) of military-connected students.
- Youth identified as Latino (50%), White (28%), Multiracial (12%), Asian-American (7%), and Black (3%).
- Students' military connections included having a family member who was currently an Active Duty or Reserve Service member (14%) or who had been deployed in the past ten years (27%).

LIMITATIONS

- Due to the cross-sectional study design, the direction of the effects of military connection, family deployments, frequent moves, and gang membership cannot be determined.
- Other variables (e.g., poverty, race, family functioning) may have impacted the results of the associations and were not taken into account in the analyses.
- Results from youth in southern California public schools with high rates of military-connected students may not generalize to youth in other schools or geographic locations.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Examine other variables (e.g., length of family deployment, family functioning, demographics) that may impact youth, especially military youth, and their likelihood of gang membership
- Investigate differences in risk and resilience factors and gang membership rates between military youth attending public schools and DoD schools
- Explore military youths' motives for gang membership, such as need for belonging or safety

ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



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