



Child Abuse and Neglect in Military Families

Civilian versus Military Rates

Examining child abuse and neglect in military families is a complex task. Careful evaluation of the data offers some insights regarding differences between rates in military and civilian populations.

The standardization of definitions and protocols regarding child abuse and neglect in military families compared to the wide variations in definitions and protocol for civilian families is a significant factor that **must always be considered** when examining and comparing trends of child abuse and neglect.

- Military rates of child abuse and neglect are much lower than civilian rates across time.
- Rates of reports of suspected child abuse and neglect have been increasing over time for both military and civilian families.
- Rates of substantiated cases of child abuse and neglect are increasing for military families at a slightly faster pace than they are for civilian families.
- Military standardized processes and procedures for assessing incidents of suspected child abuse and neglect likely influence a rate of substantiation in military families that is higher than in civilian families.
- Collection of data regarding cases of child abuse and neglect is much more rigorous for military families than it is for civilian families.
- Standard definitions and protocols regarding child abuse and neglect in the military creates data fundamentally different than those in the civilian sector.

Child Abuse and Neglect during Deployment

Parental deployment is an experience unique to military families. Deployment has been suggested as a time when children in military families may have a higher risk of experiencing abuse or neglect.

Through an extensive literature search and review of over 300 documents, only six empirical studies of the direct association between deployment and child abuse and neglect in U.S. Military families were found.

Analysis of these studies revealed:



An increase in overall rates of child abuse and neglect during deployment, driven by an increase in neglect.



All other forms of child abuse decreased or remained unchanged during deployment.



Findings regarding changes in rates of child abuse and neglect during the post-deployment period are mixed and at times contradict each other.



No existing research to conclude that deployment causes increases or decreases in child abuse and neglect.

Implications

Critical analyses of data and existing research demonstrate that overall rates of child abuse and neglect are much lower among military families than civilian families and that there are some associations between deployment and child abuse and neglect. More research is needed in this area, however, current findings have actionable implications for policies, programs, and future research.

Policies could:

- Continue to support the Family Advocacy Program and its work in prevention, identification, intervention, and treatment for all military families
- Promote further research and investigation of risk and protective factors surrounding child abuse and neglect in military families, generally and during the deployment cycle
- Endorse the development of programs for military families who are in crisis or caregivers who feel they are at imminent risk for perpetrating child abuse or neglect

Programs could:

- Focus on families who are most at risk for child abuse and neglect, including single-parent households, families with younger caregivers and/or younger children, junior enlisted Service members, and families with other stressors (such as financial difficulties, recent moves, and caring for family members with illnesses or special needs)
- Investigate possible barriers to resources faced by caregivers during parental deployment to make sure resources are as readily available and accessible as possible

Future research could:

- Utilize a prospective design, following families from multiple branches across deployment cycles to gain a better understanding of the relationship between deployment and changes in risk of child abuse or neglect
- Investigate factors that increase the risk of child abuse and neglect in military families, both during the deployment cycle and during other times

To read the full Research Report on this subject visit: <https://reachmilitaryfamilies.umn.edu/research/document/10363>

With continued research deepening the understanding of child abuse and neglect in military families, programs and policies will be able to be continually evaluated and modified to meet the needs of families and protect children.

Caveats: The restriction of the sample used for an empirical study limits the extent to which the results of the study can be generalized. Conclusions are limited to the samples studied and cannot be extended to other military branches or other types of families.

Given that there have only been six studies directly evaluating the relationship between deployment and child abuse and neglect and that these studies have varying definitions of deployment phases and methods of analysis, more research is needed to understand the association between deployment and child abuse and neglect.

