

# Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:  
Army

## Child Maltreatment in Enlisted Soldiers' Families During Combat-Related Deployments

Gibbs, D. A., Martin, S. L., Kupper, L. L., & Johnson, R. E. (2007). Child maltreatment in enlisted soldiers' families during combat-related deployments. *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 298(5), 528-535. doi:10.1001/jama.298.5.528

**SUMMARY:** It is important to understand the relationship between deployment and child maltreatment in order to provide the best programs for prevention and intervention. Rates of child maltreatment incidents perpetrated by Active Duty Soldiers or their spouses were compared during deployment and when Soldiers were not deployed. Rates of maltreatment were significantly higher among these families during deployment, particularly neglect and more severe maltreatment incidents.

### KEY FINDINGS:

- Of families with substantiated maltreatment cases, rates of child maltreatment were 42% higher during deployment than non-deployment; moderate and severe maltreatment was higher during deployment, and rates of neglect were almost twice as great during deployment, while physical and emotional abuse rates were lower.
- Among civilian mothers, the rate of maltreatment during deployment was three times greater overall, the rate of child neglect was almost four times greater, and the rate of physical abuse was nearly twice as great than during non-deployment.
- Among those parents who committed maltreatment, rates during deployment were higher among White than Black or Latino parents.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Offer support groups for civilian wives of deployed Soldiers given they may have increased vulnerability of engaging in child maltreatment during deployment
- Educate spouses of deployed Soldiers about effective parenting (e.g., age-appropriate expectations, effective discipline) and child maltreatment risks
- Provide drop-in childcare during deployment for families with children at the highest risk for child maltreatment (i.e., ages 2-12 years) and for overwhelmed parents

### IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Continue to provide support for military parents through programs and education to prevent child maltreatment
- Encourage education for providers working with military families regarding child maltreatment and its risk and resilience factors
- Recommend collaboration between the Department of Defense and community mental health services to help parents who have perpetrated family violence receive treatment

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## METHODS

- Data from the Army Central Registry for Army personnel information and substantiated child maltreatment incidents between 2001-2004 were utilized.
- Databases included information regarding maltreatment incident type and severity, offender and child characteristics, and military family demographic data.
- Ratios of maltreatment incidents to days at risk were used to compare rates of substantiated child maltreatment incidents during deployment and non-deployment, as well as to compare offender and victim characteristics and incident characteristics.

## PARTICIPANTS

- Data was included for parents (n = 1858) who had perpetrated child maltreatment in families (n = 1771) of Active Duty enlisted Soldiers who had at least one combat-related deployment; these incidents affected 2968 children across 3334 incidents.
- Children were ages 0-18 years old (m=6 years), and were 50% female; parents were enlisted Soldiers or their spouses, had a mean age of 29 years, and were primarily White (54%).
- Most offenders committed child maltreatment on one day during the study (90%).

## LIMITATIONS

- Parent stress was not assessed, so conclusions about whether deployment-related stress is associated with increased child maltreatment cannot be drawn.
- Findings may not be generalizable to officers or to other branches of the military since only enlisted Army soldiers were included.
- Not all maltreatment incidents are likely to be reported or substantiated, and many cases of child maltreatment may be missing from these analyses.

## AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Examine the effects of military parents' substance use on rates of child maltreatment
- Explore military family characteristics that may be resilience factors (e.g., social support, available resources, parental education or employment) for child maltreatment
- Conduct studies that compare different levels and combinations of parenting support (e.g., education, childcare, stress management) to understand how programs can best prevent parent perpetration of child maltreatment

## ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



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