

# Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:  
Army

## Child Maltreatment and Substance Abuse Among U.S. Army Soldiers

Gibbs, D. A., Martin, S. L., Johnson, R. E., Rentz, E. D., Clinton-Sherrod, M., & Hardison, J. (2008). Child maltreatment and substance abuse among U.S. Army soldiers. *Child Maltreatment*, 13(3), 259-268. doi:10.1177/1077559507313462

**SUMMARY:** Substance abuse has been cited as a potential risk factor for child maltreatment. This study assessed the odds of certain characteristics being possessed by Service members (e.g., marital status, gender, age) or maltreatment incidents (e.g., severity, recurrence) among Army child maltreatment incidents involving substance abuse during 2000-2004. Of the offenders, 13% were abusing substances during the incident, and several factors (e.g., spousal abuse, male gender, White race) were associated with substance use during offense.

### KEY FINDINGS:

- Of the child maltreatment incidents from 2000-2004, 13% of offenders were abusing drugs (6%), alcohol (89%), or both (5%) during their first child maltreatment incident.
- Child maltreatment offenders whose first incident involved substance abuse were much more likely to have been referred to substance abuse services prior to the incident compared to those who did not abuse substances.
- The odds of child maltreatment offenders' substance abuse during the incident was higher for males than females, married parents than single parents, and White parents than Black or Latino parents, but did not differ by pay grade or Soldier age.
- Odds of substance abuse nearly tripled in child maltreatment incidents that also involved co-occurring spousal abuse.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Educate Service members and their families about the negative consequences of substance abuse on parent and family relationships
- Offer workshops for offenders of child maltreatment that teach ways to manage stress and anger
- Disseminate information to military parents regarding support programs and intervention programs for parents with a history of substance abuse or child maltreatment

### IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Continue to support programs that integrate and coordinate the services provided for individuals with a history of both family violence and substance abuse
- Recommend collaboration between military and community programs for violence and substance abuse to ensure that Service members and families have appropriate program referrals and early intervention
- Encourage all providers working with military families to obtain education about the co-occurrence of child maltreatment and substance abuse

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## METHODS

- Data for the study were provided by the Army's Family Advocacy Program database and other Army Central Registry databases.
- Data were used for child maltreatment incidents that occurred during 2000-2004, had information regarding whether substance abuse was involved, and were perpetrated by a parent who was an Active Duty Soldier and first-time offender.
- The odds of certain characteristics being possessed by the Service member (e.g., substance use, gender, marital status, pay grade) or the maltreatment incident (e.g., severity, type of abuse, recurrence) out of all offenders and child maltreatment incidents were assessed.

## PARTICIPANTS

- Service member offenders included 3,959 Active Duty Soldiers, who were 81% male and 66% over the age of 25 years old.
- Service members were 53% Black or Latino and 47% White.
- The majority of Service members were married (89%).

## LIMITATIONS

- Due to the cross-sectional nature of the study and lack of comparison group, the direction of the relationship between substance abuse and child maltreatment cannot be inferred.
- Other unmeasured factors (e.g., Service members' co-occurring mental health disorders, deployment history, combat exposure) were not measured and could have impacted results.
- Data from unreported cases, as well as excluded cases that were missing substance use information (7%), may have differed from incidents that were reported, possibly affecting results.

## AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Investigate the nature of the relationship between substance abuse and recurrent child maltreatment following the first-time offense
- Examine the effects of mental health disorders and other co-occurring problems on the odds of child maltreatment perpetration to better understand risk factors for maltreatment
- Explore the relationships between deployment, substance abuse, co-occurring mental disorders, and child maltreatment together to understand how these relationships are intertwined within military child maltreatment

## ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



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