

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Army

Do Secondary Trauma Symptoms in Spouses of Combat-Exposed National Guard Soldiers Mediate Impacts of Soldiers' Trauma Exposure on Their Children?

Herzog, J. R., Everson, R. B., & Whitworth, J. D. (2011). Do secondary trauma symptoms in spouses of combat-exposed national guard soldiers mediate impacts of soldiers' trauma exposure on their children? *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, 28(6), 459-473. doi:10.1007/s10560-011-0243-z

SUMMARY: An exploratory investigation of the associated effects of combat exposure on Soldiers assigned to a Midwestern Army National Guard unit was conducted. In addition, this study tested a hypothetical model which asserted that there are secondary and contributing factors of combat exposure on Soldiers' spouses and children. Overall there is initial evidence to suggest that immediate family members of combat-exposed Soldiers with high levels of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) are at risk for developing secondary traumatic stress.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Secondary trauma symptoms in spouses were found to be significantly correlated with posttraumatic stress in Soldiers.
- Internalizing problems were found to be symptomatic of secondary trauma stress in children; whereas, externalizing symptoms were not found to be symptomatic of secondary trauma.
- Secondary trauma symptoms in spouses are a risk-increasing link between trauma symptoms in combat-exposed Soldiers and secondary trauma symptoms in their children.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Provide safe spaces for Soldiers and their families to interact with others who have had similar combat experiences
- Develop workshops for professionals who work with Soldiers who have experienced combat related trauma to be able to identify potential PTSD and secondary traumatic stress symptoms and connect the Soldiers and their families to needed resources
- Provide screening and support for Soldiers' children that might be troubled by the negative impact of their parent's combat trauma

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Support professional development for professionals who work with military families (e.g., teachers, counselors, social workers) around issues associated with families and secondary trauma symptoms
- Continue support for preventive efforts targeted toward all military family members and their relationships in order to lessen the effects of direct and secondary trauma
- Develop an awareness campaign around the importance of supporting Soldiers' families' well-being

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METHODS

- Participants were recruited through introductory letters from the Army National Guard Brigade Combat Team family program.
- A survey was sent out to the 1,011 households, asking Army National Guard Soldiers and their spouses' questions about deployment(s), PTSD and secondary trauma symptoms, as well as their child's behavior.
- Analysis examined whether or not there were any secondary and contributing factors of combat exposure on Soldier's spouses and children.

PARTICIPANTS

- The sample included 54 couples, all of whom had an Army National Guard Soldier living in their household, a partner residing with them, and at least one child in the home between 2 and 18 years old.
- Soldiers identified as White (n = 51), Latino (n = 2), or other (n = 1) and were all male; whereas, all the spouses were female and identified as White (n = 52), Latino (n = 1), and one did not disclose.
- Most Soldiers and their spouses had at least some college education, with 16 holding an officer position and 38 with an enlisted role.

LIMITATIONS

- The National Guard did not have a list of all eligible households; therefore, it was impossible to determine the survey response rate which limits generalizability.
- The sample for this study had a high percentage of highly-educated, high ranking Soldiers and their spouses, which is not representative of the enlisted Active Duty Soldier population.
- The National Guard unit from which participants were recruited had family programming with a special focus on reunion integration. These protective factors may have made for a healthier sample than other National Guard units and biased the results.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Replicate this study with the goal of increasing the sample size in order to increase generalizability to other military branches
- Examine the long-term factors influencing and related to secondary trauma in Soldiers' spouses and children
- Evaluate what types of programs provide effective prevention of secondary trauma for Soldiers' spouses and children

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