

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Multiple
Branches

Comparing Marital Status and Divorce Status in Civilian and Military Populations

Karney, B. R., Loughran, D. S., & Pollard, M. S. (2012). Comparing marital status and divorce status in civilian and military populations. *Journal of Family Issues*, 33(12), 1572-1594. doi:10.1177/0192513x12439690

SUMMARY: Military couples may experience significant marital stressors that civilian couples do not face (e.g., deployment, mental health concerns). Rates of marriage and divorce among Active Duty, male U.S. Service members and a matched civilian sample were compared from 1998-2005. Across ranks, age ranges, and racial/ethnic groups, Active Duty male Service members are generally more likely to be married and no more likely, or often even less likely, to be divorced compared to matched civilians.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Overall, male, Active Duty Service members were more likely to be married than their civilian counterparts both before and after OEF/OIF.
- Across almost all groups (e.g., age, race/ethnicity, officer or enlisted), Service members were equally likely or less likely to be divorced than their civilian counterparts before and after OEF/OIF, with a small number of exceptions.
- The difference between the numbers of military and civilian divorces was largest among older men; older Service members were much less likely to be divorced than their civilian counterparts.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Offer classes to Service members and spouses on ways to improve and strengthen the marital relationship
- Provide pre-marital workshops to teach skills for effective communication and conflict management to Service members and their significant others who are considering getting married
- Disseminate information regarding risk and protective factors of divorce, particularly malleable factors, to military couples

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Promote collaboration between military family programs and community marital therapy programs to offer affordable, accessible counseling to military couples
- Encourage further research on marriage and divorce among military couples, including surveys with military couples about perceptions of which military policies help or hinder their marriage
- Recommend education for military professionals about risk and protective factors of divorce specific to military couples

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METHODS

- Defense Enrollment Eligibility Reporting System (DEERS) records of 18-41 year old male, Active Duty Service members were used to calculate annual proportions of married and divorced individuals from 1998-2005.
- The March Current Population Surveys were used to calculate annual proportions of married and divorced civilians, who were matched with Service members on age, gender, race/ethnicity, employment status, and educational attainment, from 1998-2005.
- The number of individuals who were married and divorced were compared between the military and civilian samples each year.

PARTICIPANTS

- No precise participant characteristics were reported.
- The military sample included roughly 1.3 million observations per year.
- The civilian sample included about 12,000 observations per year.

LIMITATIONS

- Results were restricted by the databases used, and some important variables were not measured (e.g., marital attitudes and preferences, religiosity, traditional values).
- No information regarding marriage quality was available, and it is possible that military and civilian couples have differences in marriage quality not related to marriage or divorce rates.
- Only Active Duty male Service members were included, and findings may not generalize to female, National Guard, or Reserve Service members.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Examine whether the extended OEF/OIF conflicts have resulted in changes in marriage and divorce rates among military couples since 2005
- Conduct a similar study that includes measures of marriage satisfaction and marital quality to also compare military and civilian samples on these variables
- Assess the effectiveness of current marital and family-based military programs on decreasing the rates of divorce among military couples

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