

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Multiple
Branches

A Comparison of Civilian and Enlisted Divorce Rates During the Early All Volunteer Force

Lundquist, J. H. (2007). A comparison of civilian and enlisted divorce rates during the early all volunteer force. *Journal of Political and Military Sociology*, 35(2), 199.

SUMMARY: An assessment of the divorce rates of military personnel was conducted. This study used the military data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY) and conducted a multivariate analysis of divorce rates among young military couples. This dataset comprised both civilians and enlisted personnel, thus providing an accurate comparison. Overall, the findings suggest that enlisted divorce rates in the Armed Forces are higher than for comparable civilians within a specific age range.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Controlling for basic demographic factors (e.g., race, gender, the presence of children, age at marriage, residence at age 14 years) married enlisted individuals were 62% more likely to divorce during the study time period than married civilians.
- Among military and civilian families, having children was negatively correlated with divorce.
- When controlling for socioeconomic factors, it was found that these indicators (e.g., attended private high school, number of siblings, single parent, attended college) did little to explain higher divorce rates in the military.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Develop online modules that focus on relationship building and communication for Service members and their partners
- Focus relationship support on younger, lower ranked Soldiers in newer marriages and relationships
- Offer groups that support a broad range of Service members and their partners during times of stress (e.g. deployment, relocation, grief)

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Promote the development of structured workshops for Service members and their partners to provide support during times of stress (e.g. relocation, deployment)
- Encourage awareness among professionals working with Service members families and communities about the effects of stressful experiences on the well-being of Service members and their relationships
- Recommend collaboration between DoD programs and local community organizations to support programs for Service members and their families that address positive relationships

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METHODS

- Data was sampled from the NLSY, which is a longitudinal survey that provides information on family formation patterns at multiple points in time for civilians and military enlistees.
- Data for the NLSY was collected beginning in 1979, and included a subsample of military Active Duty personnel, ages 17-21 years as of September 30, 1978 (N = 1,280).
- Analysis for each individual began upon marriage, and looked at various factors (e.g., demographic, religiosity, socioeconomic, race) and which of these, if any, were associated with divorce among young military couples.

PARTICIPANTS

- This study included 650 enlisted military members as well as 2,294 civilians who were married.
- Eighty-eight percent of the enlisted participants were male; whereas only 41% of the civilian participants were male. The average age at which participants married was almost the same, 20.2 years old for enlisted and 20.3 years old for civilians.
- Enlisted participants identified as White (80%) or Black (20%); whereas, civilians identified as White (91%) and Black (9%).

LIMITATIONS

- The data in the study only represent a specific age group of married couples; which constrains findings to only be representative of this age group.
- Data analyzed were collected over a five year time period time starting in 1978, which may be less applicable to today's Armed Forces.
- While censorship of the data of those who exited or entered the military occurred in the analysis of the data; this population may have been different than those who remained in the military or civilian population and as such affected the outcomes of the study.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Explore the association between military families stress (e.g., financial, relocation, deployment) and divorce rate
- Engage in process-oriented and longitudinal studies that help determine the factors that contribute to marital quality and stability over time in military marriages
- Investigate the degree to which dual-military couples are at increased risk for lower marital quality and divorce

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