

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Army

Gender Differences in Traumatic Experiences and Mental Health in Active Duty Soldiers Redeployed From Iraq and Afghanistan

Maguen, S., Luxton, D. D., Skopp, N. A., & Madden, E. (2012). Gender differences in traumatic experiences and mental health in active duty soldiers redeployed from Iraq and Afghanistan. *Journal of Psychiatric Research*, 46(3), 311-316. doi:10.1016/j.jpsychires.2011.11.007

SUMMARY: Pre- and post-deployment data of Soldiers were utilized to examine possible gender differences in combat exposure, military sexual trauma (MST), and their associations with mental health outcomes (i.e., problem drinking, depression, posttraumatic stress disorder [PTSD]) of military personnel recently returned from deployment to Afghanistan or Iraq. Results indicate that gender influenced the relationship between combat exposure, MST, and mental health outcomes.

KEY FINDINGS:

- On average, men and women reported similar rates of PTSD symptoms; however, a stronger association existed between injury and PTSD symptoms for women than for men.
- Women were more likely to report depressive symptoms than men. For both genders, injury, combat exposure and MST were significant predictors of depressive symptoms.
- Women were significantly more likely to report MST; MST was a significant predictor of both PTSD and depression symptoms.
- Men were more likely to report problem drinking and combat exposure was significantly associated with hazardous alcohol use for both genders.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Offer support groups for male and female Service members returning from combat
- Provide education to Service members regarding the occurrence of MST and its influence on depression and PTSD
- Publicize information regarding common mental health issues associated with deployment and resource available to military families who are coping with these issues

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Promote the development of services specifically aimed at helping Service members cope with MST
- Recommend professional development and continuing education opportunities for service providers about how combat injury may impact mental health, specifically in women
- Encourage collaboration between the DoD and community organizations and programs to meet the needs of Service members returning from deployment

This product is the result of a partnership funded by the Department of Defense between the Office of Military Community and Family Policy and the USDA's National Institute of Food and Agriculture through a grant/cooperative agreement with The University of Minnesota.



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METHODS

- This study used data collected from mandatory pre- and post-deployment screenings conducted from 2006-2009.
- Data for the current study were from a single Army medical treatment facility.
- Active duty Service members who were deployed in support of OEF and OIF were compared on PTSD and depression symptoms, hazardous alcohol consumption, and MST.

PARTICIPANTS

- Seven thousand two hundred fifty-one participants were included in this study and all were Active Duty Service members.
- The participants included 554 women and 6,697 men, ranging from 17-53 years of age (mean = 25.7 years, SD = 6.1 years).
- In terms of race/ethnicity, 64% of participants were White, 12% Black, 12% Latino/Latina, 5% Asian-American, and 7% were other.
- Sixty-two percent of participants had a rank of E1-E4; 30% were E5-E9, and 9% were W1-W5/O1-O10.

LIMITATIONS

- All participants were Soldiers from one treatment facility; therefore, results may not generalize to other locations or military branches.
- Without a follow-up assessment, no evidence exists of long-term gender differences in mental health outcomes.
- Age and length of time in the military were not considered in the analyses, both of which could affect responses to combat experiences.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Supplement self-report data with information gathered from other sources, such as clinician reports
- Develop a more comprehensive measure to assess the occurrence of MST and further investigate its impact on mental health symptoms
- Explore whether male and female Service members cope differently with combat experiences over time

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