

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Air Force

Child Maltreatment Among Civilian Parents Before, During, and After Deployment in United States Air Force Families

McCarthy, R. J., Rabenhorst, M. M., Thomsen, C. J., Milner, J. S., Travis, W. J., Copeland, C. W., & Foster, R. E. (2015). Child maltreatment among civilian parents before, during, and after deployment in United States Air Force families. *Psychology of Violence, 5*(1), 26-34. doi:10.1037/a0035433

SUMMARY: Child maltreatment is a serious concern for families, and it is important to understand factors that may influence maltreatment rates. Rates of child maltreatment by a civilian parent in a military family were compared before, during, and after deployment. Rates of child maltreatment perpetrated by the civilian parent increased substantially during deployment, but decreased after deployment to levels that were lower than pre-deployment rates.

KEY FINDINGS:

- During deployment, overall rates of child maltreatment by a civilian parent increased by 52%, with physical and sexual abuse rates remaining approximately the same, emotional abuse rates decreasing by 64%, and rates of neglect increasing by 124% relative to pre-deployment rates.
- The rate of child maltreatment by a civilian parent decreased during post-deployment, dropping to 85% of the pre-deployment rates and 56% of deployment rates; however emotional abuse increased 89% from deployment to post-deployment.
- Of children abused by their civilian parent, 43% were also abused by their Active Duty parent.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Provide childcare and additional support to civilian spouses during deployment
- Offer after-school activities and supervision for military children that are free or low-cost
- Educate military spouses about the risks for child maltreatment and what they can do or where they can find resources if they are concerned about parenting stress

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Continue to support family advocacy programs for families in which child maltreatment is occurring
- Encourage the development of support groups for civilian parents married to Service members, especially during deployment
- Recommend professional development for those who participate in child abuse awareness programs, highlighting deployment as a time when children may be at increased risk

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METHODS

- Child maltreatment data were collected from the Air Force Family Advocacy System of Records; deployment data was collected from the Clinical Informatics Branch.
- The Family Advocacy System classified maltreatment by type and severity, and tracked if substance use was involved in the incident.
- Incidents of maltreatment were categorized and frequencies were calculated for variables of timing (i.e., pre-deployment, deployment, post-deployment), nature (i.e., physical, emotional, neglect, sexual), and severity of abuse.

PARTICIPANTS

- The dataset included maltreatment data from 400,725 combat-related deployments completed by 240,354 U.S. Airmen between October 2001 and October 2008.
- The data included 2,442 maltreated children, and 2,879 verified incidents of child maltreatment by a civilian parent.
- Mean age of child victims was 5.4 years (SD=4.4), and 64% were White.
- Mean age of parent offenders was 29.1 years (SD=6.2), and they were 68% White and 89% female.

LIMITATIONS

- As child maltreatment often goes unreported, these figures may underestimate the true extent of the problem.
- Without a comparison group, no causal inferences can be drawn; for instance, it cannot be concluded that deployment causes higher rates of abuse.
- All maltreatment incidents were with families of deployed Service members and had been substantiated, so results may not generalize to military families with other circumstances.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Evaluate the relationship between the rates of child maltreatment in military families by civilian parents and by Service member parents
- Examine rates for a longer post-deployment period to determine whether rates of maltreatment return to pre-deployment levels over time
- Investigate child maltreatment patterns in couples in other branches of the military

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