

# Putting Research to Work for Military Families



**Focus:**  
National  
Guard

## Finding Their Way Back In: Family Reintegration Following Guard Deployment

Messecar, D. C. (2017). Finding their way back in: Family reintegration following guard deployment. *Military Medicine*, 182(3/4), 266-273. doi:10.7205/MILMED-D-16-00109

**SUMMARY:** Few studies examine family reintegration among National Guard families. Interview data were used to examine National Guard members' and families' experiences of family reintegration following deployment. Family reintegration required Guard members to renegotiate their roles in the family and a variety of factors influenced this process.

### KEY FINDINGS:

- Guard members discussed how family reintegration was a difficult process that required them to find a way back into their families by renegotiating roles and expectations.
- Deployment length and type (i.e., combat), as well as the experience of multiple deployments, influenced family reintegration.
- Communication during deployment helped Guard members feel connected to their families but was also a source of strain when Guard members were unable to help their families cope with a difficult situation.
- Many of the coping mechanisms adaptive to deployment situations (e.g., withdrawing, making quick decisions, avoiding problematic emotions) negatively impacted Guard members' ability to reintegrate back into their families.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Offer workshops during reintegration to help Service members and their families adaptively cope following deployment
- Provide education to military couples to enhance communication skills and address how communication during deployment can have positive and negative effects on family reintegration following deployment
- Disseminate information regarding potential problems families may face during reintegration and offer tips on how to best cope with these stressors

### IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Continue to support programs that provide resources to Service members and their families throughout the deployment cycle
- Recommend education for service providers regarding the possible effects of deployment on Service members and their families
- Continue to encourage collaboration among DoD programs and community-based organizations to support a smooth transition for deploying Service members and their families

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

- Participants were recruited via a study website, presentations to families during family support gatherings, newspaper ads, and flyers.
- Participants completed either individual, couple, or focus group interviews and were asked to describe and reflect on their experiences related to deployment and reintegration.
- Participants were Guard members or family members of a Guard member who had deployed and returned home within the last three months to five years.

## PARTICIPANTS

- A total of 26 Guard members and 19 family members completed interviews.
- The majority of Guard members and family members were between 40 and 49 years old; most Guard members were male (n = 23), while the majority of family members were female (n= 14).
- Guard members were from either the Air Guard (n = 21) or the Army Guard (5); family members were associated with an Air Guard member (n = 12) or an Army Guard (n= 7) member.
- The study did not specify who the family members were (e.g., spouse, parent, child).

## LIMITATIONS

- The study did not specify family members relationship to the Service member; therefore, important differences between different family members (e.g., spouse versus child) may not have been fully captured.
- Only retrospective interview data was utilized for this study and may not accurately capture Guard members' and families' experiences during reintegration, particularly for families who had a Guard member deploy and return as long ago as five years prior to the interview.
- Due to the small sample size, reintegration experiences may not be generalizable to all National Guard families.

## AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Continue to examine the family reintegration experiences of National Guard and Reserve families to explore how they are similar to or different from the reintegration experiences of returning Active Duty members.
- Examine how support from civilian communities influences Guard families' ability to adaptively reintegrate following deployment.
- Continue to explore effective ways to reduce stigma related to mental health help seeking for Service members and their families coping with reintegration difficulties.

## ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



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