

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Multiple
Branches

The Effect of Geographic Moves on Mental Health Care Utilization in Children

Millegan, J., McLay, R., & Engel, C. (2014). The effect of geographic moves on mental health care utilization in children. *Journal of Adolescent Health, 55*(2), 276-280. doi:10.1016/j.jadohealth.2014.01.009

SUMMARY: Numerous geographical moves may have a negative impact on children's mental health. This study examined the relationship between the experience of geographical moves in 2008 and military children and adolescents' mental health care visits in 2009. Results revealed a positive association between geographical moves and military children and adolescents' mental health.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Military children and adolescents who experienced a geographical move in 2008 were more likely to have mental health care visits in 2009.
- The associations between geographical moves and mental health problems were more prominent in adolescents than in children.
- The mental health issues experienced by military children and adolescents after moves were more likely to be externalizing than internalizing problems.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Develop workshops that focus on adjustment issues targeted specifically toward military families that just experienced a geographical move
- Offer support groups for military adolescents who just had a geographical move so that they can find support from peers with similar experiences
- Disseminate information regarding possible negative effects of geographical moves on military children and adolescents' mental health and the potential benefits of parent education programs

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Continue to support programs that aim to assist military families before, during, and after Permanent Change of Station
- Raise awareness of the potential difficulties that military children and adolescents may experience after geographical moves
- Recommend training for professionals who work with military families on how to better support military children and adolescents after geographical moves

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METHODS

- Data were obtained from the Military Health System Medical Data Repository.
- Experience of geographical moves was defined as at least one move between cities or towns during 2008, and mental health care utilization meant having at least one mental healthcare visit during 2009.
- Data were analyzed to examine the associations between geographical moves and children's mental health.

PARTICIPANTS

- Participants were 548,336 children and adolescents of military parents; 25% of them moved in 2008.
- Participants were divided into two age groups: 6-11 years (mean age = 8.4 years, SD = 1.7, 50% male) and 12-17 years (mean age = 14.2 years, SD = 1.7, 51% male); Race/ethnicity of the participants was not reported.
- The military branches that the military parents served in were: Army (41%), Air Force (24%), Navy (23%), Marine (8%), and Coast Guard (4%).

LIMITATIONS

- The study only examined children and adolescents who moved during 2008; it is possible that participants who moved before 2008 were also more likely to experience mental health problems in 2009 than participants who did not move, therefore the results may underestimate the association between geographical moves and mental health care visits.
- The study only examined mental health care visits in 2009; it is possible that children who moved in 2008 did not show any mental health symptoms until 2010 or later, therefore the results may underestimate the association between geographical moves and mental health care visits.
- Only big geographical moves between cities or towns were included in the study; without also accounting for smaller moves that happen within a city or town, the study may not accurately capture the associations of interest.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Study the long-term effect of geographical moves on military children and adolescents' mental health
- Investigate the characteristics of military children and adolescents who adjust poorly after moves
- Compare the differences between military and civilian children and adolescents regarding the associations between geographical moves and mental health

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