Women in the National Guard: Experiences With Children During Deployment


SUMMARY: Female National Guard members who had children and had been deployed overseas completed interviews about their experience during reintegration. Mothers reported concerns for their children’s well-being prior to deployment. Some mothers reported strong, negative reactions from their children during reintegration.

KEY FINDINGS:
- Participants worried about their children before and during their deployment.
- Prior to deployment, deciding who would care for children was especially stressful.
- The majority of women felt a sense of loss due to not being able to participate in important family events during deployment, such as birthdays and holidays.
- Children’s responses to deployment and reintegration varied, including some strong negative reactions to their mothers' return.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:
Programs could:
- Develop curricula focused on helping parents prepare children for deployment (e.g., how to ask family and friends for help, talking with children about what to expect)
- Implement support groups specifically for mothers preparing for or returning from deployment
- Provide courses for family members and friends caring for children during deployment focusing on recognizing problem behaviors in children and identifying community resources

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:
Policies could:
- Recommend collaboration between the Department of Defense and community-based organizations to provide support to deploying mothers
- Suggest professional development for community providers about how to support mothers post-deployment and their children
- Continue to provide infrastructure and support for Family Readiness Groups and other supports for Service members with children

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METHODS

- Participants were recruited via word of mouth, flyers posted at National Guard units, and announcements on units’ Facebook pages.
- Participants completed semi-structured interviews about post-deployment family reintegration experiences.
- Interview questions focused on women’s experiences of reintegration, children’s reactions to deployment, and stressors experienced across the deployment cycle.

PARTICIPANTS

- Female National Guard members (N = 30) who had deployed outside the U.S. and had children participated.
- Participants had an average age of 39 years (SD = 10.5); 37% married, 43% divorced, 10% engaged or partnered.
- Over two-thirds (77%) had deployed once, 20% deployed twice, and 3% deployed three times.
- Over one-third (37%) had one child, 30% had two children, 33% had three or more children.

LIMITATIONS

- Recruitment primarily occurred through National Guard websites and Facebook; findings may be biased towards women who frequently use the Internet.
- Women were recruited from Midwestern states; results may not generalize to all female National Guard members living outside the Midwest.
- All data were retrospective and collected via self-report, both of which may introduce biases.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:
- Employ longitudinal designs to examine mothers’ experiences across the deployment cycle
- Include data from both female National Guard members and their children
- Compare mothers’ and fathers’ parenting experiences during the deployment cycle

ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS

Design

Appropriate Research Plan and Sample

Methods

Excellent Measurement and Analysis

Limitations

Few

For more information about the Assessing Research that Works rating scale visit:
https://reachmilitaryfamilies.umn.edu/content/assessing-research-that-works