

# Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:  
Air Force

## Spouse Abuse and Combat-Related Deployments in Active Duty Air Force Couples

Rabenhorst, M. M., Thomsen, C. J., Milner, J. S., Foster, R. E., Linkh, D. J., & Copeland, C. W. (2012). Spouse abuse and combat-related deployments in active duty Air Force couples. *Psychology of Violence*, 2(3), 273-284. doi:10.1037/a0027094

**SUMMARY:** The records of married U.S. Air Force personnel were reviewed to compare rates of spouse abuse before and after combat deployments to Operation Iraqi Freedom/Operation Enduring Freedom (OIF/OEF). Overall rates of spousal abuse were lower after deployment than before, and some couples engaged in bidirectional violence.

### KEY FINDINGS:

- Twenty-five percent of the couples engaged in bi-directional abuse; in bi-directionally abusive relationship, abuse rates increased after deployment only for moderate to severe abusive incidents that involved alcohol.
- Overall rates of spouse abuse were lower after deployment than they were before deployment.
- In unidirectional abuse, 75% of offenders were male, 60% of offenders were the deploying partner, and abuse rates increased after deployment only for moderate to severe abusive incidents that involved alcohol.
- Spouse abuse rates were significantly higher post-deployment compared with predeployment for more severe abuse and/or when the offender used alcohol.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Provide community outreach to at-risk families (e.g., community forums, free classes) regarding healthy means of managing conflicts
- Partner with domestic violence prevention experts to provide professional development
- Include information in family programs' educational curricula about bi-directional violence

### IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Recommend continued tracking of domestic violence rates for Air Force members
- Continue to support interventions for Service members and families coping in domestic violence
- Recommend installation-wide awareness events about family violence and available resources

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## METHODS

- Family Advocacy records of married Air Force members with at least one incident of spouse abuse and one combat deployment between October 2001 and 2008 were used.
- Abuse incidents were coded as mild, moderate, or severe.
- Incident of maltreatment could be substantiated as physical abuse, emotional abuse, or both physical and emotional abuse.

## PARTICIPANTS

- Participants included 4,874 married Active Duty Air Force couples.
- Forty-seven percent of couples were White, and offenders' average age was 26.6 years (SD = 6.1 years), while victims average age was 26.2 (SD = 6.1 years).
- Average number of substantiated claims per couple = 1.44 (SD = 0.78).
- Sixty-nine percent of couples were an Active Duty husband and civilian wife, 11% were Active Duty wives and civilian husbands and 20% were dual military.

## LIMITATIONS

- Use of administrative databases may introduce some measurement errors.
- The sample was only Air Force Active Duty, and results may not generalize to other Service members.
- The use of only substantiated claims may underestimate the incidents due to under-reporting biases.

## AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Follow couples engaging in domestic violence longitudinally
- Assess how many couples participated in recommended interventions and the impact of such interventions
- Explore how combat severity is linked to reports of domestic violence

## ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



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