

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Air Force

Child Maltreatment Among U.S. Air Force Parents Deployed in Support of Operation Iraqi Freedom/Operation Enduring Freedom

Rabenhorst, M. M., McCarthy, R. J., Thomsen, C. J., Milner, J. S., Travis, W. J., & Colasanti, M. P. (2015). Child maltreatment among U.S. Air Force parents deployed in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom/Operation Enduring Freedom. *Child Maltreatment*, 20(1), 61-71. doi:10.1177/1077559514560625

SUMMARY: Increased stress, including during deployment, may put parents at greater risk for perpetrating child maltreatment. Rates of child maltreatment, as well as type and severity of maltreatment, were compared pre- and post-deployment among Active Duty U.S. Air Force parents. No significant differences were found between overall rates of child maltreatment pre- and post-deployment; however, rates of moderate and severe maltreatment and incidents involving alcohol and child injury were greater post-deployment.

KEY FINDINGS:

- There was no significant difference between overall rates of child maltreatment pre- and post-deployment; however, rates of mild maltreatment decreased post-deployment while rates of moderate or severe maltreatment increased.
- Rates of maltreatment incidents that included offender alcohol use or child injury, particularly moderate or severe injury, were significantly higher post-deployment than pre-deployment.
- Regardless of deployment stage, maltreatment rates were higher among fathers than mothers, never married or divorced parents than married parents, and enlisted parents than parents who were officers.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Educate returning Service members and their families about child maltreatment risk factors
- Provide education to military families with a history of regarding healthy parenting, alternative discipline strategies, and stress-management techniques
- Offer post-deployment support groups for Service members and their families to assist them with the potentially stressful transitions

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Continue to support programs that assist Service members with coping with parenting stress
- Encourage the incorporation of education about the potentially negative impacts of unsafe alcohol use on parenting in existing military parenting programs
- Recommend partnerships among military-based and community-based programs to coordinate family violence awareness campaigns

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

- Deployment and personnel data were provided by the Clinical Informatics Branch from the Air Force database; child maltreatment rates were obtained from Family Advocacy Program databases.
- Data were included for only Active Duty Air Force personnel who had deployed for at least 31 days during OIF/OEF and who had at least one child under the age of 18 years; maltreatment incidents included only substantiated incidents of child maltreatment (e.g., neglect, physical abuse, sexual abuse).
- Child maltreatment rates were calculated as the ratio of maltreatment incidents to the number of days maltreatment could have occurred, and rates were compared between deployment stages, demographic characteristics, and deployment characteristics.

PARTICIPANTS

- Participants included 99,697 Active Duty Air Force members who had deployed in OIF/OEF; they were 89% male and had an average age of 31.21 years (SD = 7.22).
- Participants were 62% White, 12% Black, 8% Latino, 2% Asian American, 2% Multiracial, and less than 1% Native American; 14% had missing race data.
- Air Force members had completed an average of 1.80 deployments between 2001-2008

LIMITATIONS

- Some important variables (e.g., combat exposure, Service member's mental health status) were not included in the database, and therefore, could not be analyzed.
- Participants were predominately male and all Air Force members, limiting generalizability to a broader population of military families.
- Given that child maltreatment is often under-reported and only substantiated cases were included, many incidents of child maltreatment were likely not included in the study.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Explore whether parent attitudes and beliefs impact rates of child maltreatment
- Conduct qualitative research on military parents' perspectives of child maltreatment
- Examine protective factors that may increase resilience of military families at risk for child maltreatment

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