

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Multiple
Branches

Adolescent Well-Being in Washington State Military Families

Reed, S. C., Bell, J. F., & Edwards, T. C. (2011). Adolescent well-being in Washington State military families. *American Journal of Public Health: Research and Practice*, 101(9), 1676–1682. doi:10.2105/ajph.2011.300165

SUMMARY: In this cross-sectional, cohort study, researchers examined associations between parental military service and adolescent well-being (as measured by quality of life, depressed mood, and thoughts of suicide) using data from the 2008 Washington State Healthy Youth Survey. Military service, particularly deployment, negatively influenced adolescent well-being.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Adolescents with military parents, regardless of deployment status, had slightly elevated risks of lower well-being across measures.
- Thoughts of suicide were 1.66 times more likely among 8th grade girls if their parent was deployed when compared to girls in civilian families. There were no differences found for 10th or 12th grade girls.
- Thoughts of suicide were higher among all boys if their parent was deployed; risks were 1.75 times greater at 8th grade and 1.50 times higher at 10th and 12th grade compared to civilian boys.
- Increased risk for lower quality of life was observed for boys in military families (regardless of deployment status), compared to boys from civilian families; girls did not differ in quality of life based on their parents' military or deployment status.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Offer programming directed toward adolescent boys with a deployed parent as these adolescents may be at increased risk for decreased well-being, including thoughts of suicide
- Provide classes that aim to enhance the coping skills of military youth
- Partner with community programs for youth in order to offer a full range of programming to military-affiliated youth

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Recommend training for professionals who work with military-affiliated youth on risk factors of suicide among adolescents
- Recommend collaboration between military-sponsored programs and community programs to increase the network of available resources for military-affiliated youth and their families
- Encourage the development and continuation of programs that assist military-affiliated youth experiencing mental health issues and their families in identifying beneficial resources

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METHODS

- Surveys were administered in schools to youth in 8th, 10th, and 12th grade in Washington State.
- The survey included questions regarding the military status of the youths' parents, quality of life, and behavioral and mental health measures.
- Data were analyzed to determine whether the youth from military-affiliated families differed from youth in civilian families with regard to well-being.

PARTICIPANTS

- Participants (N = 10,606) were 8th, 10th, and 12th graders in Washington State. Just over half were girls (52%).
- Over half (~55%) of participants were White.
- Authors did not provide information regarding what portion of the sample were military-affiliated youth or the branches with which they were affiliated.

LIMITATIONS

- Participation was optional; youth who participated may differ from non-participants in a way that may influence results.
- It is unclear how many youth with civilian parents (versus military parents) participated in the study, which impacts the ability to make conclusions regarding the strength of findings.
- The survey was based on self-report. Youth may have answered questions in ways they felt were more socially acceptable, which may have influenced results.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Include a more nuanced approach by collecting information such as the timing, duration, or frequency of deployment; gender of the military parent; and family structure during deployment
- Utilize a longitudinal design to determine the trajectory of stress responses in children and adolescents connected to the military
- Examine potential factors that may help explain gender-based differences in adolescent well-being in military families

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