

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Army

2003-2009 Marital Functioning Trends Among U.S. Enlisted Soldiers Following Combat Deployments

Riviere, L. A., Merrill, J. C., Thomas, J. L., Wilk, J. E., & Bliese, P. D. (2012). 2003-2009 marital functioning trends among U.S. enlisted soldiers following combat deployments. *Military Medicine*, 177(10), 1169-1177. doi:10.7205/MILMED-D-12-00164

SUMMARY: Researchers examined the relationships between indicators of marriage functioning and rates of divorce upon returning from deployments. In this sample, rates of infidelity and intent to separate or divorce increased, while the rate of overall marriage quality decreased. A combination of depression, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), alcohol misuse, and somatic symptoms were factors related to the measures of marriage functioning.

KEY FINDINGS:

- From 2003 to 2009, the proportion of Soldiers reporting high marital quality declined by 14%, problems of infidelity increased by 8%, and intent to separate or divorce increased by 4%.
- When compared to noncommissioned officers, junior enlisted soldiers had lower marriage quality and higher rates of infidelity and intent to separate or divorce.
- Somatic symptoms, alcohol misuse, depression, and PTSD increased the likelihood of low marital quality.
- Rates of infidelity rose with increased somatic symptoms, alcohol misuse, depression, as well as younger age, longer marriage, and junior rank.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Consider providing marriage enrichment programs to married and soon-to-be married Service members to improve marriage quality
- Provide education for Service members and their partners to increase their knowledge about factors that impact marriage quality
- Offer peer support programs for Service members and their spouses where they can address issues related to marriage quality

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Recommend programming that teaches healthy communication in marriages during post-deployment
- Encourage the enrollment of Service members who have evidence of somatic symptoms, alcohol misuse, depression, or PTSD in military-specific marriage programs
- Support mental health programs that target military couples with poor marriage quality

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METHODS

- Service members were recruited for this study during a briefing by their unit commander.
- Data were collected from Service members three to six months after their return from deployment.
- Surveys were given to assess marriage quality, combat exposure, depression, somatic symptoms, PTSD, and alcohol misuse.
- Data were analyzed to determine trends regarding marital quality, infidelity, and intent to separate or divorce. These trends were then compared between different groups of Service members.

PARTICIPANTS

- Participants consisted of 5,928 married male Service members from OEF/OIF combat teams between 2003 and 2009.
- In the sample, 39% of participants were 18-24 years old; 30% were 25-29 years old; 28% were 30-39 years old; and 3% were 40 years old or older.
- No information on race or ethnicity was provided.

LIMITATIONS

- Only certain data were available from the given database, which does not allow for an understanding of other constructs that may influence these associations.
- There was no inclusion of data about female Service members' experiences, which limits the generalizability of the study.
- Data were collected through self-report; therefore, some problems may have been under-reported.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Compare marriage quality trends in military and civilian populations to assess similarities and differences between the two
- Replicate this study with female and same-sex participants to improve the generalizability of the results
- Include a longitudinal assessment of marriage quality and examine the effects of multiple combat deployments on marriage functioning

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