

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Multiple
Branches

Prospective Evaluation of Mental Health and Deployment Experience Among Women in the U.S. Military

Seelig, A. D., Jacobson, I. G., Smith, B., Hooper, T. I., Gackstetter, G. D., Ryan, M. A., ... Millennium Cohort Study Team (2012). Prospective evaluation of mental health and deployment experience among women in the U.S. Military. *American Journal of Epidemiology*, 176(2), 135-145. doi:10.1093/aje/kwr496

SUMMARY: Data from the Millennium Cohort Study were used to examine military women's mental health outcomes (depression, anxiety, and posttraumatic stress disorder [PTSD]) following deployment. Women with combat exposure, Active Duty women, and mothers with young children had greater odds of reporting mental health symptoms.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Service women who reported prior combat exposure had 1.83-2.74 times greater odds of reporting symptoms of mental health disorders than women who did not report prior combat exposure.
- Deployment was significantly associated with PTSD and anxiety disorders, but not depression.
- Active Duty women and mothers of young children had increased odds of mental health disorders. Higher stress levels, problem drinking, and a history of mental illness were also significantly associated with an increased risk of later mental health conditions.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Develop curricula specific to female Service members about mental health conditions, with particular attention paid to the impact of multiple deployments and prior combat exposure on mental health
- Offer courses for military families whose Service members has been diagnosed with a mental health condition, including information about how to best support the Service member
- Disseminate information regarding possible mental health issues related to deployment for female Service members

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Recommend professional development for program staff regarding gender differences in mental health conditions
- Continue to support programs that offer services to Service members with mental health concerns and their families
- Continue to support pre- and post-deployment workshops that help Service members prepare for deployment and re-adjust following deployment

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METHODS

- Data for this study included self-report data collected from the Millennium Cohort questionnaire (2001-2008) and electronic military records provided by the Defense Manpower Data Center.
- All participants had completed a baseline survey and one (n = 8,551) or two (n = 8,930) follow-up surveys.
- Analyses were conducted on the deployed subgroup (n = 4,906) to determine which specific mental health outcomes (PTSD, depression, or anxiety disorders) were most influential.

PARTICIPANTS

- Seventeen thousand four hundred eighty-one military women participated, including 48% Army, 31% Air Force, 18% Navy, 3% Marine Corps; 51% Active Duty, 49% Reserve/National Guard; 76% enlisted, 24% officers.
- Sixteen percent were 34 years or younger, 29% were 35-44 years, 36% were 45-54 years, 19% were 54 years or older.
- Sixty-six percent of participants were White.

LIMITATIONS

- Female Service members included in the Millennium Cohort data may not be representative of all female Service members, limiting generalizability of results.
- Self-report survey data can under- or over-represent the true prevalence of an exposure or outcome, biasing the results.
- The use of standardized instruments for screening for mental health issues may have resulted in some misclassifications, thereby biasing results.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Examine the effects of military-induced separation from children on military mothers
- Explore the protective factors that positively impact military Service women against negative mental or behavioral outcomes
- Explore how deployment (number and length) of military mothers influences a child's emotional, social, and physical development

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