

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Marines

Emotional Distress and Health Risk Behaviors of Mothers of United States Marines

Slaven-Lee, P. W., Andrews, C. M., & Fitzpatrick, J. J. (2011). Emotional distress and health risk behaviors of mothers of United States Marines. *International Nursing Review*, 58(2), 164-170. doi:10.1111/j.1466-7657.2010.00860.x

SUMMARY: While ample research has examined the effects of deployment on Service members and their spouses and children, few studies have examined the experiences of Service members' parents. The health behaviors and psychological distress of mothers of deployed male Marines were compared to mothers of non-deployed Marines. Mothers of deployed Marines had higher psychological distress, but not more negative health behaviors, than mothers of non-deployed Marines.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Mothers of deployed Marines reported significantly higher levels of psychological distress compared to those whose sons were not deployed.
- The average level of psychological distress among mothers of both deployed and non-deployed Marines was high, indicative of difficulties with anxiety and depression.
- Mothers of deployed and non-deployed Marines did not significantly differ in their health risk behaviors; however, rates of obesity were slightly higher among Marine mothers than the general female population.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Offer support groups for deployed Service members' parents
- Educate parents of Service members about the risk for psychological distress when their children serve in the military or are deployed and effective strategies to manage that distress
- Offer exercise-based activities for family members of deployed Service members to support healthy body weight and overall well-being

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Recommend that deployment readiness and reintegration programs include specific information for parents of Service members
- Encourage the development of programs to support the mental and physical health of Service members' parents
- Promote education of professionals (e.g., mental health providers, medical providers, social services staff) regarding the possible emotional, psychological, and physical effects of deployment on parents of Service members

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METHODS

- Mothers of male Marines were recruited from the MarinesParents.com website and newsletter to participate in a web-based survey between July and September 2007.
- Participants completed questionnaires about demographic information, psychological distress, and health behaviors (e.g., height, weight, smoking, drinking, exercise).
- Psychological distress and health behaviors were compared between mothers of deployed and non-deployed sons in the Marines.

PARTICIPANTS

- The sample included 1,370 mothers (M = 49 years of age) of male Marines (55% deployed).
- Mothers were primarily White (93%), followed by Latino (4%), Native American (1%), Black (1%), Asian American (1%), and a different race/ethnicity (1%).
- Most mothers had completed either high school (26%), 1-3 years of college (42%), or 4 or more years of college (30%).

LIMITATIONS

- Mothers experiencing higher levels of distress may have been more inclined to use the website or to agree to participate in the study.
- The sample was primarily White and composed only of mothers of male Marines, so results may not generalize to other military branches or more diverse samples.
- Unmeasured variables regarding previous deployments and mothers' baseline mental and physical health concerns may have impacted results.
- Mothers of deployed and non-deployed Marines were compared to national statistics rather than a matched civilian sample.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Examine the experience of fathers of deployed Service members and how it may be similar or different from mothers' experience
- Include measures of Service members' perceptions of their parents' distress and well-being and compare parent and Service member report
- Explore the experience of parents of female Service members, both deployed and non-deployed

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