

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Air Force

Spouses' Ability to Cope With Deployment and Adjust to Air Force Family Demands

Spera, C. (2009). Spouses' ability to cope with deployment and adjust to Air Force family demands. *Armed Forces & Society*, 35(2), 286-306. doi:10.1177/0095327x08316150

SUMMARY: Using data from a large-scale Community Assessment survey of Air Force members, the author examined Active Duty members' perceptions of their spouse's or significant other's ability to cope with deployment of unknown length and adjust to demands of being an Air Force family. Rank, length of years married, and Service members evaluation of protective factors (e.g., level of social support) influence their perceptions.

KEY FINDINGS:

- The percentage of Active Duty Service members who reported their spouse would have a problem coping with deployment varied by rank and years married. One third of junior enlisted and members married less than three years believed their spouse would have a serious or very serious problem coping with deployment.
- The proportion of Service members indicating that their spouse would have a problem coping with deployment was lower whereas levels of support from leadership, base agencies, and community social support were higher.
- Support factors had a greater impact for families under greater levels of deployment stress, such as members who have been away from home for more time in the last 12 months.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Provide support groups for junior enlisted members and spouses who have been married to Active Duty members for a short duration
- Continue to implement community-building events to build formal and informal networks, and as much as possible, integrate leadership into these events
- Offer workshops to military spouses who are perceived by their significant others as having a particularly difficult time coping with deployment

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Recommend collaboration between service providers and community based organizations both on and off installations to help Active Duty members and their families develop leadership and strong relationships with other spouses and fellow community members.
- Continue to support programs that offer services to military spouses throughout the deployment cycle
- Recommend health evaluations for military spouses during pre- and post-deployment events to better assess spouse needs

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METHODS

- Data were collected as part of the Air Force Community Assessment (CA) survey of active-duty personnel, civilian spouses and reservists conducted in the spring and summer of 2003.
- The sample was stratified by two primary strata, rank group and gender, within each of 85 Air Force bases. Further, junior enlisted members were over sampled to account for a traditionally lower rate of return from individuals within this rank group.
- Participants were recruited via email to complete the web-based survey.

PARTICIPANTS

- Thirty-four thousand three hundred eighty-one Active Duty Air Force members participated.
- Data were not reported based on age or ethnicity.
- The majority of respondents were male (75%) and ranked E1-E6 (67%).

LIMITATIONS

- Data about spouses' or significant others' ability to cope was gathered indirectly only from Active Duty members, their opinions may not accurately reflect the experiences of their spouses or significant others.
- The sample was primarily male and other demographic information was not reported (e.g., age, ethnicity, socioeconomic status), which limits the generalizability of results.
- Data were not collected on other factors that might influence the results including personality or psychological traits, or family functioning prior to enlistment/deployment.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Obtain data about family functioning and coping directly from spouses or significant others rather than relying solely on Service members' reports
- Follow families longitudinally to determine more precisely how the number and length of deployments affects families
- Explore the accuracy of spouse's assessment of stress

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