

# Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:  
Air Force

## Child Maltreatment Before and After Combat-Related Deployment Among Active-Duty United States Air Force Maltreating Parents

Thomsen, C. J., Rabenhorst, M. M., McCarthy, R. J., Milner, J. S., Travis, W. J., Foster, R. E., & Copeland, C. W. (2014). Child maltreatment before and after combat-related deployment among Active-Duty United States Air Force maltreating parents. *Psychology of Violence, 4*(2), 143-155. doi:10.1037/a0031766

**SUMMARY:** Understanding rates and risk factors for child maltreatment among military populations is vital for creating effective prevention and intervention programs. The frequency of child maltreatment perpetrated by Active Duty Air Force members deployed during OEF/OIF was compared pre- and post-deployment. Unexpectedly, the overall frequency of child maltreatment was almost 13% lower post-deployment compared to pre-deployment, however more severe forms of child maltreatment increased following deployment.

### KEY FINDINGS:

- Contrary to expectations, the frequency of child maltreatment was 12.8% lower post-deployment compared to pre-deployment.
- More mild forms of child maltreatment (i.e., emotional abuse, mild neglect) decreased from pre-deployment to post-deployment; however, more severe forms of maltreatment either remained stable over time (i.e., physical abuse) or increased following deployment (i.e., severe neglect, sexual abuse).
- Child victims were most likely to experience neglect (44%), followed by emotional abuse (39%), physical abuse (30%), and sexual abuse (2%).
- The majority of victimized children experienced mild maltreatment (69%), while 31% experienced at least one moderate to severe incident and 13% experienced maltreatment with parent alcohol use involved.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Disseminate information to military families about signs and symptoms of child maltreatment and how to report suspected cases of child maltreatment in the military
- Integrate child maltreatment education and prevention into existing groups for military parents with drug and alcohol abuse
- Educate military parents about effective, positive parenting, alternative discipline strategies, and stress management techniques

### IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Recommend routine screenings of military children for child maltreatment to allow for identification of families at risk
- Encourage professionals working with military families to receive training regarding risk factors for child maltreatment in military families
- Recommend integrating child maltreatment education into military parenting programs to improve prevention efforts

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## METHODS

- Data included in the study were gathered from several U.S. Air Force databases used to track Service member deployment information and military child maltreatment information.
- Data for child maltreatment incidents were included if they were substantiated cases of child maltreatment by a parent who was an Active Duty Air Force member and was deployed at least once during OEF/OIF.
- The frequency of child maltreatment rates, including overall rates, rates of specific types of child maltreatment, and rates categorized by other characteristics of the offender or incident, were described and compared pre- and post-deployment.

## PARTICIPANTS

- The data included 2,287 children, who were 54% male, had an average age of 5.89 years (SD = 4.61), and experienced a total of 2,563 substantiated maltreatment incidents.
- At the time of the first maltreatment incident, offenders had an average age of 29.90 years (SD = 6.25); they were primarily male (89%) and enlisted (96%).
- Children were 63% White, 16% Black, 7% Latino, 2% Asian American, 1% Native American, and 11% Multiracial.

## LIMITATIONS

- Only child maltreatment events perpetrated by Air Force members were included, so findings may not generalize to members of other military branches.
- The incidence of child maltreatment is likely under-reported, and findings may be affected by differences between incidents that are reported and substantiated versus those that are not.
- Other variables (e.g., offenders' mental health status or combat exposure) may have influenced results.

## AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Compare rates of child maltreatment between different branches of the military, as well as with civilian rates
- Explore factors that may help explain the decrease in mild and increase in severe maltreatment post-deployment, such as mental health functioning, supportive resources available, or combat exposure
- Investigate whether number of children and feelings of being overwhelmed with parenting contribute to child maltreatment offender risk

## ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



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