

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Multiple
Branches

The Impact of Multiple Deployments and Social Support on Stress Levels of Women Married to Active Duty Servicemen

Van Winkle, E. P., & Lipari, R. N. (2015). The impact of multiple deployments and social support on stress levels of women married to active duty servicemen. *Armed Forces & Society*, 41(3), 395-412. doi:10.1177/0095327X13500651

SUMMARY: Survey data were utilized to examine the relationship between the number of times a Service members was deployed and their wives' self-reported stress levels. Stress levels were highest for women whose husbands had been deployed twice and for those whose husbands had been deployed eight or more times. Spouses with children reported lower levels of stress than those without children.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Female spouses of Service members who had not been deployed reported lower stress levels than those of partners who have been deployed.
- For spouses, stress levels increased through the first two deployments, decreased through the fifth deployment, and then increased again.
- Military spouses with children reported higher levels of social support and lower levels of stress than those without children.
- The difference between the most stressed and least stressed spouses was small.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Provide activities for military spouses without children in order to develop and strengthen social support networks
- Develop education curricula about the effects of chronic stress on family functioning and relationships
- Offer pre-deployment trainings on stress management techniques related to continuous deployment cycles

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Encourage awareness campaigns on installations about the role of social support for women during a husband's deployment
- Recommend routine screening of stress levels in those families who are new to deployment and those who have experienced a high number of deployments
- Support the training of professionals who work with military families to better recognize high levels of stress among military spouses and children

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METHODS

- Web-based and paper surveys were sent to a random sample of spouses of Active Duty Service members.
- Service members had served at least six months and were below flag rank at the time the study began.
- Surveys were conducted between March 14 and August 4, 2008.

PARTICIPANTS

- Participants were 6,470 female spouses of Active Duty military members.
- On average, wives were 33 years old, 76% were non-Latino/Latina White, and 73% had at least one child under the age of 18 years.
- Women were married to Service members from the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, and Air Force (percentages were not provided).

LIMITATIONS

- Differences in levels of stress reported by spouses of Service members were small, regardless of number of deployments, making it unclear whether these values represent a meaningful difference in stress levels.
- The study measured only absolute number of deployments, not length of deployments or time between deployments, which could influence the results.
- The study measured perceptions of current stress, not perceived stress at the time of deployment.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Use a more robust measurement of stress and assess spouses' stress levels during deployment
- Examine how stress is related to personal factors that influence which service branch a Service member pursues
- Qualitatively explore the types of social support that military spouses who do not have children find valuable

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