

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Multiple
Branches

Family Stressors and Postdeployment Mental Health in Single Versus Partnered Parents Deployed in Support of the Wars in Afghanistan and Iraq

Vaughn-Coaxum, R., Smith, B. N., Iverson, K. M., & Vogt, D. (2015). Family stressors and postdeployment mental health in single versus partnered parents deployed in support of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq *Psychological Services, 12*(3), 241-249. doi:10.1037/ser0000026

SUMMARY: An examination of 318 single (n = 74) and partnered (n = 244) parents exposure to family-related stressors during and after deployment and post-deployment psychological symptoms was conducted. The sample included Veterans of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF). Findings suggest that the deployment and post-deployment experiences of parents differ based on their partnered status.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Single parents experienced higher levels of concern about life and family disruptions during deployment, lower levels of social support during and after deployment, and poorer post-deployment family functioning than partnered parents.
- Single parents reported higher posttraumatic stress symptom severity, but not depression or anxiety symptom severity, compared with partnered parents.
- Family-related stressors demonstrated different associations with mental health for single and partnered parents.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Develop an online network for all Service member parents and spouses that can offer social support during major life transitions
- Educate Service members and families who are more at risk for family-related stressors on positive coping skills
- Develop workshops for different kinds of military families around topics related to preparing for major life transitions

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Continue support for the unique challenges (e.g. childcare, relationship tension) faced by deployed Service members, spouses and their children
- Recommend professional development for professionals who work with military families around family-related stressors during the deployment cycle
- Continue efforts with each military branch to foster partnerships with community organizations in supporting Service members and their families

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METHODS

- Potential participants were identified from a Defense Manpower Data Center roster of OEF/OIF Veterans.
- Nine different assessment tools were used in the study. These included tools such as the deployment risk and resilience inventory-2, post-deployment family functioning, and anxiety symptom severity measures.
- Data analysis was conducted to determine whether or not single and partnered parents differed on demographic and military characteristics and experienced different levels of family-related stress during and post-deployment.

PARTICIPANTS

- Out of 2,662 Veterans, 1,046 completed and returned surveys yielding a response rate of 39.2%.
- In the sample, 318 self-identified as parents (44% female) with at least one dependent child.
- The majority of parents (77%) were partnered; whereas, 23% were single at the time of deployment.
- Nearly two thirds (63%) were in Active Duty and 37% were in the National Guard or Reserves. Parents had an average of two deployments in support of OEF/OIF and represented all branches of service.

LIMITATIONS

- Participants reported on their deployment and post-deployment family stressors and support within two years of having returned from deployment, which could have retrospective recall bias.
- In this study prior diagnoses of mental disorders, current psychological distress, and treatment may have influenced individuals' reports of their deployment and post-deployment family stressors and support.
- The smaller number of single parents ($n = 74$) in this study may have reduced the strength of the effects in some analyses.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Include of pre and post-deployment measures of parental stress, parenting behaviors, and additional stressors, to better understand how family-related stressors affect family functioning after deployment
- Incorporate comprehensive family demographic information (e.g., custodial arrangements, relationships with children) to learn whether there are other variables that should be considered when evaluating associations between family structure, and psychological distress
- Explore other family structures such as extended family involvement in parenting, step families, children who are not legal dependents, and same-sex parent families in future studies

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