

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Multiple
Branches

A National Assessment of Children With Special Health Care Needs: Prevalence of Special Needs and Use of Health Care Services Among Children in the Military Health System

Williams, T. V., Schone, E. M., Archibald, N. D., & Thompson, J. W. (2004). A national assessment of children with special health care needs: Prevalence of special needs and use of health care services among children in the military health system. *Pediatrics*, 114(2), 384-393. doi:NULL

SUMMARY: Children in military families experience health challenges just like children in other families. Using data from administrative databases and surveys from parents, researchers investigated the prevalence of special health care needs among children who receive care through the Military Health System (MHS). Across a range of indices, children with special health care needs had higher rates of service utilization than children without special needs.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Children with special health care needs comprised 23% of the TRICARE Prime enrollees who were younger than 18 and whose parents responded to the survey.
- Children with special health care needs experienced five times as many admissions and ten times as many days in hospitals compared with children without special needs.
- Of the outpatient visits of enrolled children, nearly half were from children with special health care needs and nearly 75% of inpatient days were also from those children.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Offer peer support groups for parents of children with special needs so that they can form a social support network that includes others who have had similar experiences
- Provide workshops for families with children with special needs to help them develop strategies in managing the demands associated with the special need, including how to manage the stress of many health care appointments
- Develop classes for parents of children with special needs to increase skills around advocating for their child and organizing health care information

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Continue to support programs that aim to assist families with children with special health care needs
- Recommend professional development for professionals who work with military families about the experience of families with a child with special needs
- Encourage collaboration among providers who care for children with special needs to ensure continuity of care

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METHODS

- Surveys were sent to 35,000 individuals who were eligible to receive benefits through the MHS.
- Children with special health care needs were identified by a five question screener that identified children who needed prescription drugs, medical services, were limited in their activities, and/or received special therapies or counseling.
- Data were analyzed to examine the relationship between the use of medical services and demographic characteristics.

PARTICIPANTS

- Data were collected regarding 6,180 children who were eligible for MHS coverage who used TRICARE Prime.
- Participants had a mean age of 9.52 years old.
- Of the participants, 52% were male, 75% were White, and 23% had a special health care need.

LIMITATIONS

- The classification of a child having a special health care need was determined in part through questions regarding utilization of health care services more often than the typical child, so findings regarding increased health care usage were implied in the definition of a child having a special health care need.
- The researchers restricted their study sample to enrolled users of care, but it is possible that some services were obtained outside the MHS and were unrecorded in the databases used.
- This study did not evaluate involvement in services not covered by insurance such as alternative therapies.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Include parents' reports of their experiences in seeking care to investigate the extent to which care provided through the health care system meets the special needs of their children
- Investigate the additional time (e.g., referral reports, treatment plans, and family education) and tasks required in the treatment of children with special health care needs
- Examine the ways in which stressors around accessing health care interact with everyday stressors and the stressors inherent in being affiliated with the military

ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



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