

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Multiple
Branches

Do Child Abuse and Maternal Care Interact to Predict Military Sexual Trauma?

Wilson, L. C., Kimbrel, N. A., Meyer, E. C., Young, K. A., & Morissette, S. B. (2014). Do child abuse and maternal care interact to predict military sexual trauma? *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 71(4), 1-9. doi:10.1002/jclp.22143

SUMMARY: Based upon research indicating that Veterans who had experienced child sexual abuse were at higher risk for military sexual trauma (MST), this study seeks to discover whether maternal care serves as a protective factor in that association. It was discovered that of individuals who had experienced childhood sexual abuse, those who had low levels of perceived maternal care were more likely to have experienced MST.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Low maternal care was a risk factor in the relationship between child sexual abuse and MST.
- Child sexual abuse was related to MST but only within the context of low maternal care.
- Age was another significant predictor of MST, but gender was not.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Provide educational content in parenting classes to help mothers understand how their support, affection, and nurturing impacts child outcomes
- Develop workshops to assist parents of children who have been abused understand how to best help their children
- Provide peer support groups for mothers to share strategies for strengthening parent-child attachment in order to increase the protection created by high levels of maternal care

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Encourage Service members and their partners to participate in parental education focused on enhancing the quality their relationships with their children
- Continue to support programs that provide services for parents of children who have experienced sexual abuse
- Recommend training for practitioners about the experience of Service members who may have experienced child sexual abuse

This product is the result of a partnership funded by the Department of Defense between the Office of Military Community and Family Policy and the USDA's National Institute of Food and Agriculture through a grant/cooperative agreement with The University of Minnesota.



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METHODS

- Participants were gathered from advertisements at Veteran service organizations, presentations to Veteran's Affairs (VA) hospital staff, and via mail to those enrolled in the Central Texas Veterans' Health Care System.
- Data were gathered through four different self-reporting questionnaires about demographics, risk and resilience of relationships within the military unit, childhood trauma, and parental bonding.
- The presence or absence of child sexual abuse and military sexual trauma were statistically analyzed in relationship to measures of perceived parental care. The relationship between childhood sexual abuse and MST was analyzed to determine if it differed between those with high and low maternal care.

PARTICIPANTS

- Participants were 197 Veterans who had been previously deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan.
- The majority were male (92%) and Caucasian (66%), numbers that are consistent with the demographics found in the U.S. Military.
- The sample was 39.9 years of age on average (SD = 10.4) and had an average of 15.7 years of military service (SD = 9.4).
- Most of the participants served in the Army (86%). Information about other branches was not provided.

LIMITATIONS

- The Veterans' responses may be skewed based on recall bias or on the willingness of the participant to report sexual abuse.
- This sample is pulled from Veterans enrolled at the VA, so results may not be able to be extended to individuals who are not enrolled in VA.
- Low maternal care and child sexual abuse may indicate other environmental risk factors, and therefore there may be other untested variables that may be influencing the results.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Include more diverse samples in the research, such as including participants from different branches of the military
- Explore other constructs that may be risk factors for low maternal care and MST
- Conduct research including Active Duty Service members in samples

ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



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