Child Maltreatment in Enlisted Soldiers’ Families During Combat-Related Deployments


In 2003, the United States military began its longest-ever period of protracted combat. Because service members today are more likely than ever before to have families, the impact of deployments on family members’ well-being is of concern. Numerous studies have demonstrated that combat deployments are associated with increased stress and mental health difficulties among nondeployed spouses and increased rates of depression, anxiety, and behavior problems among children. These findings suggest the possibility that rates of child abuse and neglect may increase within some of these families.

This study used Army data to examine all incidents of child abuse and neglect among families in which soldiers experienced at least one deployment during a 3-year period. Analyses showed that the rate of substantiated child neglect by civilian female parents during times that soldier parents were deployed was nearly four times as high as at other times. The rate of child physical abuse was more than twice as high during times that soldier parents were deployed. These increases occurred regardless of parent characteristics, child age, or soldiers’ rank.

These findings underscore the need for supportive and preventive services for military families during soldier deployments. Although such services exist, participation is voluntary and parents experiencing stress may not take advantage of them. As a result of this study and related research, Army medical providers were instructed to inquire about soldier deployments during encounters with civilian spouses, to assess parental well-being, and to make referrals to services when needed. In recognition of its impact on Army policy, this study was recognized as one of RTI’s *Outstanding Papers* for 2007.