One-Size-Fits-All Approach Isn't Enough to Prevent Child Abuse in U.S. Army Families

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Every child deserves systems that keep them safe from abuse and neglect. For civilians that system is Child Protective Services (CPS), but for families in the military it's the Family Advocacy Program (FAP). FAP personnel know the challenges that service members and their families can face and provide support and interventions tailored to their specific needs. In order to prevent and address child maltreatment in military families, however, FAP needs to know when its resources are most necessary.

New research from PolicyLab gives us a better understanding of which U.S. Army families with a deployed soldier will need FAP's services and when they will need those services most. What we found suggests that a one-size-fits-all approach isn't enough to prevent child abuse and neglect in Army families.

How can deployment cycles impact U.S. Army Families?

Deployments can be incredibly stressful periods for Army families, especially those with young children. A soldier's departure for deployment leaves one fewer parent at home or could mean that a soldier's children stay with another caregiver, such as a grandparent. Returning from deployment doesn't always alleviate problems, either. Fathers, for example, may return home from deployment to a child that wasn't born when they left. Upon returning home, soldiers are tasked with reintegrating into their family roles as a parent and partner, all while processing their experiences from deployment. The combination of these stressors can create a unique environment that affects the risk of child maltreatment.

In order to provide guidance to FAP on when their resources can be most impactful, we needed to look at children's risk of maltreatment at specific points in the time surrounding soldier deployment. As part of the largest-ever longitudinal study of child maltreatment in the military, prior research from PolicyLab illustrated that young children in Army families are at the greatest risk of abuse or neglect in the six months immediately following a parent's return from deployment.

This answered a critical question about *when* abuse or neglect occurs during the deployment cycle, but it left open questions of *who* is most likely to be maltreated and whether all Army children were likely to be maltreated *at the same point* in the deployment cycle. We also wanted to know whether the soldier's gender and mental health status affected when children were abused or neglected.

When are FAP's resources needed the most?

To dig deeper into this, our recent study in *Military Medicine* takes a close look at the family characteristics that may affect the relationship between deployment and child maltreatment. Our study of more than 73,000 young

children looked at Army families in which a parent was deployed a single time between 2001 and 2007. We were able to study these childrens' medical records from the first 24 months of their lives and observe whether they experienced abuse.

First, when comparing children of male and female soldiers, we detected no difference in risk for maltreatment. Looking at *when* they were abused or neglected, however, we found some surprising results. Among children of male soldiers, the risk of maltreatment was highest following deployment. Among children of female soldiers, this risk was highest before deployment. The number of female service members in the Army increased by nearly 50 percent over the last decade, so keeping kids safe will mean better understanding female soldiers' unique needs surrounding deployment.

Next, we examined children of soldiers with mental illness and found that they were overall at greater risk for experiencing maltreatment than children in families with no mental illness. Looking at this risk across the deployment cycle, however, showed a sharp increase in risk in the months immediately before deployment among children in families with mental illness.

We also learned that children born prematurely or with early special needs, as well as children with more siblings at birth, were at increased risk of maltreatment throughout their parent's deployment cycle.

This study echoes our previous finding that, when looking at all children in our study, the six months following a soldier's return home from deployment are when young children are at greatest risk of abuse and neglect. But by looking at different types of families across the deployment cycle, we found other points in time when FAP interventions could make all the difference for children of female soldiers or those with a mental illness.

It's important to highlight that our study didn't identify who perpetrated maltreatment – regardless of who it was, the stress that can lead to maltreatment affects the entire family unit. Soldier deployment can be stressful for all Army families, but by carefully positioning resources so that families receive extra support they need, we can ensure that all children in Army families have a safe and healthy home during a stressful period.

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