

ABSTRACT

Background: In recent decades, mental health and related outcomes for US military service members following war zone deployment have been documented empirically for multiple conflicts, beginning with Vietnam and continuing through the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. Much less attention has been paid, however, to deployment-related outcomes for spouses and other family members (e.g., children, parents) of those deployed. The DoD Plan to Achieve the Vision of its Task Force on Mental Health (September, 2007) addressed these concerns directly by recommending the following actions to better understand the role that deployment stress and war-related PTSD has on military families: (1) DoD should conduct research on the processes of post-deployment adjustment for family members, and (2) DoD should conduct research on children who have been separated from their parents by deployment, including their access to support for psychological health issues.

Objective/Hypothesis: The primary objective is to examine empirically the hypothesis that stressors associated with deployment (e.g., geographical separation, increased risk of being wounded or killed) are associated with adverse mental health and related outcomes for spouses and children of deployed service members.

Study Design: We will add a family impact component to Millennium Cohort Study cohort that will be recruited in 2010. Sampled service members who report having a spouse will be asked to permit the research team to contact and interview their spouse. We estimate that approximately 10,000 spouses will enroll in the study, and we will assess their perception of deployment stressors, their current mental health status, their perception of their spouse's mental health status, their report of mental health and related symptoms of their children, and their perception of the quality of family relationships.

Relevance: Anecdotal evidence from military commanders and other sources suggests that family problems are an important and significant source of stress for at least a subset of deployed service members during OIF/OEF deployment. Additionally, particularly for the 20-30% of deployed service members who return from deployment with significant mental health and related adjustment problems, the adjustment problems of the service member can add to family member stress. Importantly, however, support from family members can play a critical role in the recovery of the service member.

Taken together, these factors suggest that family member relationships can range from being an important source of support for service members and their families to being an important additional stressor for all. Therefore, understanding the impact of deployment on family members and family relationships is a critical step in developing interventions that can build resilience and reduce stress in service members and their family members. Information on family risk and resiliency factors examined in this study are likely to inform the development of efficacious interventions that have the potential to contribute to force readiness, to retention of service members, and to the well-being of service members and their families.