

Teens from military families suffer from deployments

November 20 2013, by Katherine Kahn



It is widely known that deployment is stressful for military families, including their children. A new study in the *Journal of Adolescent Health* finds that teens from military families are more likely to feel sad or hopeless, have thoughts about suicide and symptoms of depression than teens of civilian families.

"We've been in the longest war in recent history with increased numbers of individuals experiencing combat and being deployed for longer periods of time—and multiple times," says study co-author Julie Cederbaum, Ph.D., a researcher at the University of Southern California. "We are logically thinking about the adult that is being deployed, but we're not talking enough about the kids left behind and how they might

manage the military experience of their parent."

To study the relationship between military connections and adolescent mental health, Cederbaum and colleagues reviewed the mental health data of over 14,000 California [teens](#) in the 7th, 9th and 11th grades from the 2011 California Healthy Kids Survey.

More than 13 percent of the teens surveyed had a parent or sibling in the military. Teens who had experienced just one deployment of a parent or sibling were 40 percent more likely to feel sad or hopeless, 24 percent more likely to have suicidal thoughts and 15 percent more likely to be depressed than teens that did not have military connections.

"You see an even bigger shift with two or more deployments," Cederbaum says. "These kids were 56 percent more likely to experience feelings of sadness or hopelessness, 34 percent to have thought about suicide and 41 percent more likely to experience depressive symptoms."

Anita Chandra, Ph.D., a researcher at the RAND Corporation who has extensively studied military families says that there are many important factors that influence the mental health of teens with military connections, including the teens' age, the total number of months a parent is deployed and whether the parent was deployed into combat. Reintegration—when a parent returns home—can be an emotionally difficult time for military families, as well.

Additionally, Chandra notes, not all mental health findings of teens with military connections are negative. "We also know that kids in these families have exhibited a lot of rebound and recovery from deployment stress and a lot of resilience."

Even though the Iraq war ended in 2011 and American troops are withdrawing from Afghanistan, the mental health of children in military

families is likely to remain an important issue.

"While many deployed service members return home with minimal reintegration issues, we know that a fair number of folks coming back from deployment aren't doing particularly well," says Cederbaum. "Their children may now be in a home where there's potential traumatic brain injury, mental distress, or substance misuse. That service member or veteran is going through an adjustment and the family has to readjust as well."

Increasing [mental health](#) screenings in pediatric and school settings and creating a safe environment for teens of [military families](#) to talk about their experiences and feel supported are ways to help identify and reach at-risk youth, Cederbaum says.

More information: Cederbaum JA, Gilreath TD, Benbenishty R, et al. Well-being and suicidal ideation of secondary school students from military families. *J Adol Health*, 2013.

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