

# Study examines mental health toll exacted on civilians working with military in war zones

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The punishing psychological toll endured by military personnel in war zones has been extensively documented for years by researchers, perhaps more than ever in the wake of recent military engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan.

But there has been a troubling dearth of research examining the [mental health](#) toll exacted on the large numbers of [civilians](#) who work with the military in [war zones](#).

Sociologists Alex Bierman, an assistant professor at the University of Calgary, and Ryan Keltz, an associate professor at Washington College in Maryland, point this out in a new study, published in the most recent issue of *Social Psychology Quarterly*.

The study examines the experiences of United States Department of Army civilians working in Iraq and Afghanistan. The workforce of civilians employed by the military—including technicians and others working to support the military's infrastructure and capabilities—is significant. In 2009, for example, the U.S. Army employed nearly a quarter of a million civilians, with over 6,000 deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan.

Even though these civilians are not on the frontlines fighting, they are still exposed to "life threatening hazards," says Bierman. The researchers found that exposure to these hazards was relatively frequent for many of the civilians they studied—over a third of their sample reported feeling

that their lives were threatened a few times a month or more.

According to Bierman, there are a number of ways these threats manifest themselves. "For example, civilians may be exposed to IEDs (improvised explosive devices)," Bierman says. "And rocket or mortar attacks on the bases are not uncommon. The protocol for civilians in these instances is to grab their gear—their Kevlar vests and gasmasks—and head to the designated shelter until they receive further notice. Civilians frequently face this sort of overwhelming threat in their environment."

Bierman and Kelty found that civilians who reported greater exposure to life-threatening experiences exhibited more frequent symptoms of psychological distress, such as depression, anxiety, and anger. The researchers also found that mental health became progressively worse as exposure to threats increased.

"It's important to understand that civilian exposure to life threatening hazards may have long-term mental health effects, and we should be offering support to these people," Bierman says.

Bierman and Kelty's future research in this area will focus on ways in which an improved workplace environment might be created for civilian workers in war zones. Even though the threats in war zones are ever present, Bierman believes that opportunities can be created within the workplace for a more supportive environment that can help reduce tension and stress in war.

Provided by American Sociological Association

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