



U.S. Department of Health
and Human Services
Administration for Children
and Families
Office of Family Assistance

www.fatherhood.gov

Responsible Fatherhood Spotlight



Fathers in the Military

Military fathers and their families face extraordinary stress before, during, and after deployment. Although the physical and psychological risks of active combat for soldiers are well known, the implications of deployment for soldiers' partners and their children have not been documented widely.

Definitions

Military personnel include members on active duty, in the Coast Guard, and in the Reserves, as well as civilian personnel employed by the Department of Defense. For the purposes of this brief, the term *military fathers* is used to refer to men in the military with children under the age of 23 who are or who have previously been deployed to active duty.

Importance and Implications of Military Fatherhood

The United States converted its military to an all-volunteer force in 1972. Since then, the armed services has transitioned from a body largely comprised of unattached men without family obligations to a force that is now the province of both men and women, more than half of whom have family commitments. This change has broad implications for military parents, their children, and their partners.

Implications for Fathers

All military personnel who are deployed to combat regions are at risk for several negative outcomes, but military personnel who are parents constitute an especially vulnerable group, due to their complex commitments to the families that they leave behind.

- For example, approximately 16 percent of military personnel who faced combat in Iraq demonstrated symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder,ⁱ compared with 9 percent experiencing this disorder before deployment.

- Military veterans are also at increased risk of depression, anxiety, and continuing high stress levels before, during, and after deployment than are civilians.ⁱⁱ
- Although marriage rates are higher among military populations than among civilians in the United States, so too are divorce rates. Higher divorce rates can be attributed to a variety of factors, including the younger age of first marriage among military personnel, elevated stress levels, and conflict surrounding issues of deployment and separation.ⁱⁱⁱ

Implications for Fathers' Involvement With Children

The Department of Defense estimates that 592,646 of its active duty service members have children under the age of 23, and the majority of these military parents are fathers.^{iv} The growing number of parents in the military since the 1970s has contributed to the rise in the number of children who experience separations from their military parents on a regular basis.

- Separation due to deployment has been found to increase children's behavior problems both during and after fathers' service. In cases in which mothers report high levels of disruption and distress as a result of deployment, children's behavior problems are heightened.^v
- Teachers report that children whose fathers are away because of military service experience academic and adjustment problems.^{vi}

- Behavior and developmental problems associated with fathers' deployment are particularly salient for boys. Studies have found that young boys of military fathers regularly demonstrate poorer peer relations, elevated unhappiness, and increased conduct problems.^{vii}
- In the long term, researchers have found that adolescent children of combat veterans are at risk for poorer attitudes towards school and parents, as well as increased depressive symptoms and anxiety.^{viii, ix}

Implications for Fathers' Spouses/Partners

Fathers' deployment for active duty in the military has implications for partners, especially during the periods just before and just after deployment.

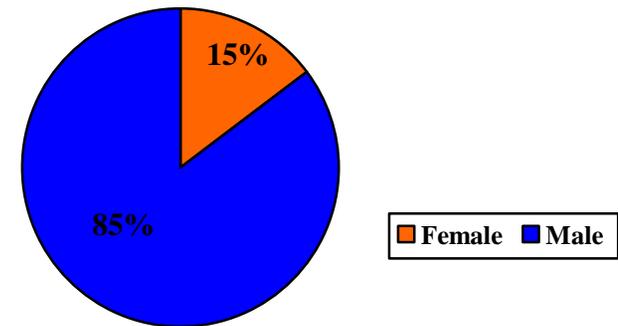
- Findings are mixed about the influence of deployment on relationships and marital satisfaction for the partners of military fathers. Whereas some studies have found that separation has no significant effect on marital satisfaction for either partner, other studies have shown that some negative changes do occur.^{x, xi}
- Declines in marital satisfaction generally occur immediately before and during deployment but tend to stabilize after soldiers return to civilian life.^{xii}
- Markers of stress shown by the partners of military fathers due to the men's deployment include increased depressive symptoms, sexual frustration, and mood disorders.^{xiii}
- Rates of severe spousal aggression have been found to be significantly higher for military husbands than for civilian husbands, and the probability of spousal violence tends to increase with the length of men's deployment.^{xiv}
- Cohesion among military spouses through support groups and interactions can be important for women whose husbands are deployed. Such vehicles can reinforce partners' positive outlook on the military lifestyle and help with coping and adjustment during deployment.^{xv}

Trends in Military Fatherhood Over Time

Total Military Population

Figure 1 shows that the vast majority of active duty military personnel are male. Although the percentage of women in the active duty population increased from 11.5 percent in 1990 to approximately 15 percent in 2005, men continue to comprise the largest portion of active duty members.

Figure 1. Percentage of Male and Female Active Duty Personnel (2005)



Total Number of Active Duty Members (N = 1,373,534)

Source: Department of Defense 2006 Demographics Report

Total Military Population by Gender and Race

Table 1 shows the proportion of active duty military personnel with dependent children as of 2002 by gender and race. Across all racial groups, a higher percentage of men in the military have children than do their female counterparts. Enlisted black males are the most likely group to have dependent children, followed by white and Asian/Pacific Islanders, Hispanics, and finally, American Indians. Of men in the other or mixed race category, 50 percent have dependent children.^{xvi}

Table 1. Percentage of Military Personnel with Dependent Children by Gender and Race/Ethnicity (2002)

	Percentage with Dependent Children	
	Male	Female
White	44	33
Black	53	52
Hispanic	42	34
American Indian	34	33
Asian/Pac. Islander	43	34
Multiracial/Other	50	40

Source: Defense Manpower Data Center, 2002

Differences by Subgroup

Differences by Marital Status

Table 2 shows the percentage of active military personnel who are married by gender. Across service type, men in the military are more likely to be married than are women.

Table 2. Marital Status of Military Personnel by Gender and Service (2002)

	Percentage Married	
	Enlisted	Officer
Male	50	71
Female	42	51

Source: Defense Manpower Data Center, 2002

Differences by Race/Ethnicity

Table 3 shows that the majority of active duty male military members identify themselves as white (64 percent), followed by African American (20 percent), and Hispanic (10 percent). Individuals who identify themselves as of other or mixed race make up the final 6 percent.

Table 3. Race/Ethnicity of Active Duty Men in the Military (2005)

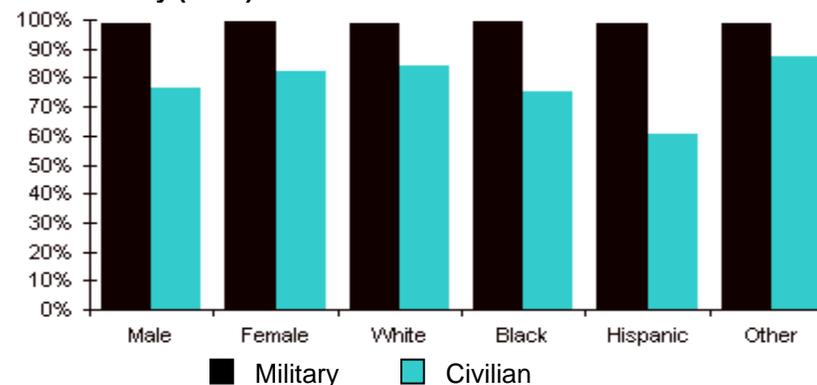
	Percentage	Total Number
White	64%	880,799
Black	20%	243,998
Hispanic	10%	123,429
Multiracial/Other	6%	39,013

Source: Department of Defense 2006 Demographics Report; Defense Manpower Data Center, 2002

Differences by Education Level

Figure 2 shows that the educational levels of male and female military personnel are, overall, higher than the educational level of the general population in the United States. Specifically, whereas 99.2 percent of enlisted male military personnel (aged 18 to 24) had at least high school diploma or GED, less than 80 percent of males in the general population had achieved that same level of education.

Figure 2. Percentage of Military Personnel and Civilians Aged 18-24 With High School Diplomas or GEDs by Gender and Race/Ethnicity (2002)



Source: Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness, Population Representation in the Military Services Report 2002, Ch. 2.

Differences by Age

Table 4 shows that the average age of military fathers when their first child is born is about the same as that of men in the total U.S. population who have ever fathered a child. Across both genders, the average age of having a first child is slightly younger in the military than it is in the total population.

Table 4. Average Age at First Birth for United States Military and Total Populations of Individuals who Have Ever Had a Child (2000-2006)

	Average Age at Birth of First Child	
	Active Duty Military (2005)	Total United States (2002)
Male	25.0	25.1
Female	23.6	25.1
Total	24.8	25.1

Source: National Survey of Family Growth, 2002; Department of Defense 2006 Demographics Report; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. National Center for Health Statistics. VitalStats, 2000.

Definitions and Measurement

Unless otherwise indicated, statistics about military personnel in this brief reflect data gathered in 2005 and are representative of the full population of active duty members serving in the military in the United States. These data do not include members serving in reserve or civilian forces. Interpretation of statistics comparing military members to the United States population as a whole should be undertaken with caution, because the age, gender, and socioeconomic background of military personnel are not representative of the entire U.S. population.

Data Limitations

Information about the parental status of men serving in the military is not collected regularly in studies on the military, and this information, when it exists, often is incomplete and lacking in detail.^{xvii} Available data on military fathers is also sketchy. Thus, most of the statistical information presented in this brief is reflective of military members and military parents as whole, rather than primarily of fathers.

Data Sources

Data documenting trends and demographic characteristics of military members were summarized from the 2005 Demographics Report, published by Office of the Deputy Under Secretary of Defense (Military Community and Family Policy), under contract with Caliber, an ICF Consulting Company. Additional data regarding U. S. demographics as a whole were analyzed from the 2000 U.S. Census, through the National Center for Health Statistics, Vital Statistics Cooperative Program; reports from Cycle 6 of the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG, 2002); and summaries from the Social Explorer online data bank (www.socialexplorer.com).

Resources

- The **Military Family Research Institute** at Purdue University both conducts and acts as a clearinghouse for research on issues concerning military members, their partners, and their children: <http://www.cfs.purdue.edu/mfri/pages/military/index.html>.
- **Military OneSource** offers a Web site and free hotline to help military members and their families with a variety of issues, including child care, personal finances, relocation, and emotional support during deployments, among many other topics: www.militaryonesource.com.
- **Military Home Front** is the official Department of Defense Web site designed to help troops and their families, leaders, and service providers improve the quality of life of military members and their families: <http://www.militaryhomefront.dod.mil/>.

References:

- ⁱ Hoge, C. W., Castro, C. A., Messer, S. C., McGurk, D., Cotting, D. I., & Koffman, R. L. (2004). Combat duty in Iraq and Afghanistan, mental health problems, and barriers to care. *New England Journal of Medicine*, 351(1), 13-22.
- ⁱⁱ Stretch, R. H., Bliese, P. D., Marlowe, D., & Wright, K. M. (1996). Psychological health of Gulf War-era military personnel. *Military Medicine*, 161(5), 257-261.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Adler-Baeder, F., Pittman, J. F., Taylor, L., & Pasley, K. (2005). *Marital transitions in military families: Their prevalence and their relevance for adaptation to the military*. Auburn, AL: Auburn University Department of Human Development and Family Studies.
- ^{iv} *Department of Defense 2006 Demographics Report*. (2006). Washington, DC: Office of the Deputy Under Secretary of Defense.
- ^v Medway, F. J., Davis, K. E., Cafferty, T. P., Chappell, K. D., & O'Hearn, R. E. (1995). Family disruption and adult attachment correlates of spouse and child reactions to separation and reunion due to Operation Desert Storm. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, 14(2), 97-118.
- ^{vi} Chok, C. H. (1992). Separated by their work: Families with fathers living apart. *Environment and Behavior*, 24(2), 206-225.
- ^{vii} Applewhite, L. W., & Mays, R. A. (1996). Parent-child separation: A comparison of maternally and paternally separated children in military families. *Child & Adolescent Social Work Journal*, 13(1), 23-39.
- ^{viii} Dansby, V. S., & Marinelli, R. P. Adolescent children of Vietnam combat veteran fathers: A population at risk. *Journal of Adolescence*, 22(3), 329.
- ^{ix} Applewhite, L. W., & Mays, R. A. (1996). Parent-child separation: A comparison of maternally and paternally separated children in military families. *Child & Adolescent Social Work Journal*, 13(1), 23-39.
- ^x Nice, D. S. (1981). *A longitudinal analysis of Navy family separation*. San Diego, CA: Navy Personnel Research and Development Center.
- ^{xi} Shumm, W. R., Hemesath, K., Bell, D. B., Palmer-Johnson, C. E., & Elig, T. (1996). Did Desert Storm reduce marital satisfaction among Army enlisted personnel? *Psychological Reports*, 78, 1241-1242.
- ^{xii} Shumm, W. R., Bell, D. B., & Gade, P. A. (2000). Effects of a military overseas peacekeeping deployment on marital quality, satisfaction, and stability. *Psychological Reports*, 87, 815-821.
- ^{xiii} Frankel, H., Snowden, L. R., & Nelson, L. S. (1993). Wives' adjustment to military deployment: An empirical evaluation of a family stress model. *International Journal of Sociology of the Family*, 23(1), 89-115.
- ^{xiv} McCarroll, J. E., Ursano, R. J., Liu, X., Thayer, L. E., Newby, J. H., Norwood, A. E., et al. (2000). Deployment and the probability of spousal aggression by U.S. Army soldiers. *Military Medicine*, 165(1), 41-44.
- ^{xv} Pittman, J. F., Kerpelman, J. L., & McFadyen, J. M. (2004). Internal and external adaptation in Army families: Lessons from operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm. *Family Relations*, 53(3), 249-260.
- ^{xvi} Segal, D. R., & Segal, M. W. (2004). *America's military population*. Washington, DC: Population Reference Bureau.
- ^{xvii} Bachrach, C. A., & Sonenstein, F. (1998). Report of the Working Group on Male Fertility and Family Formation. In *Nurturing fatherhood: Improving data and research on male fertility, family formation, and fatherhood*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.