

**Defense Advisory Committee on Women in the Services
December 2024 Request for Information**

**Military Personnel Policy/Military Community and Family Policy Response
November 2024**

BACKGROUND

The Defense Advisory Committee on Women in the Services (DACOWITS) is seeking information on the impact on military mothers who are reintegrating into family/home life after deployment. The office of Military Personnel Policy (MPP) and Military Community and Family Policy (MC&FP) within the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Manpower and Reserve Affairs will provide a response to applicable sub-questions.

In accordance with DACOWITS' Terms of Reference, the Well-Being and Treatment (WB&T) Subcommittee will renew the 2019 DACOWITS' study which examined the impact of deployments on military mothers who reintegrate into family/home life after deployment. Determine whether additional policy development is required, or if the Department and Military Services have sufficiently addressed concerns.

REQUEST FOR INFORMATION No. 7

In 2019, the Committee identified challenges, impacts, and issues military mothers experience returning from deployment as they reintegrate to family and work life, and subsequently recommended that the Secretary of Defense commission a foundational research study to identify and assess these potentially unique impacts on military mothers and identify measures to help ease their transition back to "normal" family and home life. The Committee seeks information on the progress of research and initiatives to address these reintegration concerns.

The Committee requests a **written response** from the **USD(P&R) via Military Personnel Policy (MPP) and Military Community and Family Policy (MC&FP) and both the Active and Reserve Components of the Military Services (Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Department of the Air Force (Air & Space)), Coast Guard, and the National Guard Bureau** on the following:

- a. What research or studies have been undertaken or is ongoing to identify the issues unique to returning mothers and reintegration? Provide links to or copies to findings and reports. What actions have been taken to address issues identified by the research or studies, if applicable?
- b. Section 555 of the FY21 NDAA directed the Secretary of Defense to develop policy that, among other issues, outlined "[r]esponses to the effects specific to covered members who

reintegrate into home life after deployment.” What policy, initiatives, or resources have been developed to assist returning military mothers with the challenges they face on return from deployment. Provide copies of relevant policies, training, and other documents,

- c. What are the issues and challenges that have been identified, including the restoration of the parent-child bond, and resumption of prior family roles and responsibilities?
- d. What policies and procedures does each Service have to support reintegration. Are there any programs specific to mothers and being a woman?
- e. Are there any resources or programs geared to military mothers prior to deployment to help them plan for and more successfully reintegrate post-deployment? If so, describe these efforts and provide links to policies, programs, etc.
- f. DACOWITS’ 2019 focus group participants expressed that post-deployment reintegration/assistance efforts were male-centric and lacked resources to assist the unique challenges returning military mothers faced. What efforts have been made to address this important subset of re-integration assistance?
- g. What kind of mentorship and support are specifically provided to deploying mothers?
- h. What efforts have the Women’s Initiatives Teams (WITs) initiated, if any, and how are the Services supporting those recommendations?
- i. What type of mental health screening/care is provided?
- j. What kind of follow up is provided and at what intervals?
- k. Is leadership training provided to military leaders about the challenges and difficulties of reintegration that military mothers may encounter, the range of impacts of those challenges, in order to increase knowledge and understanding? Provide links to or copies of such training.
- l. What second and third order effects of reintegration difficulties have been identified (e.g., on military readiness, work productivity, psychological and physical health, attrition rates)?
- m. Do exit surveys have questions related to whether reintegration/post-deployment challenges are a reason for separation?

MPP/MC&FP RESPONSE

MPP and MC&FP can provide a response to the following requests for information:

- a. What research or studies have been undertaken or is ongoing to identify the issues unique to returning mothers and reintegration? Provide links to or copies to findings and reports. What actions have been taken to address issues identified by the research or studies, if applicable?**

Research has been ongoing to identify the unique issues faced by returning mothers and their reintegration into family and military life. The Military REACH team from Auburn University conducted a literature review, which shed light on the deployment and reintegration experiences of service member mothers,

highly significant challenges such as post-deployment stress, marital strain and difficulties in reconstituting the household. The Defense Advisory Committee on Women's Services (DACOWITS) also has published the Request for Information (RFI) 7, which aimed to understand the challenges surrounding the reintegration of deployed military mothers. Furthermore, the Millennium Challenge Program (MCP), a global research effort supported by the Department of Defense and other agencies, has published reports that address the reintegration challenges faced by military mothers. The MCP's studies, including the Millennium Challenge Program (MCS), Millennium Challenge Program Family Support (MCFS), a Millennium Challenge Program Study of Adolescent Resilience (SOAR), provide valuable insights into the experiences of military mothers and their reintegration. Findings from these studies support their successful transition back to family and military life. A brief summary is provided for each publication listed below.



Insight RFI 7.pdf



Deployment and Reintegration Exper



Reintegration for Military Mothers - re

- b. Section 555 of the FY21 NDAA directed the Secretary of Defense to develop policy that, among other issues, outlined [r]esponses to the effects specific to covered members who reintegrate into home life after deployment. What policy, initiatives, or resources have been developed to assist returning military mothers with the challenges they face on return from deployment. Provide copies of relevant policies, training, and other documents.**

Department of Defense Instruction 2, "Military Family Readiness" aims to assist returning service members, including mothers, in overcoming the challenges they face upon return from deployment.

The DOD signed its policy on deployment readiness services to ensure Service members, including mothers, and their family members have access to necessary tools and programs before, during and after deployment, promoting a positive adjustment to deployment, family separation and reintegration.

In addition, the PP is the process of drafting a new Department of Defense Instruction on membership services that incorporates the elements of Section 5 of Public Law 116-281.

- c. **What are the issues and challenges that have been identified, including the restoration of the parent-child bond, and resumption of prior family roles and responsibilities?**

MPP and MC&FP defer to the military Services.

- d. **What policies and procedures does each Service have to support reintegration. Are there any programs specific to mothers and being a woman?**

In accordance with Department of Defense Instruction 1342.22 “*Military Family Readiness*” the Military Departments educate Service members and families about potential deployment-related challenges and the available support programs and services.

- e. **Are there any resources or programs geared to military mothers prior to deployment to help them plan for and more successfully reintegrate post-deployment? If so, describe these efforts and provide links to policies, programs, etc.**

Yes. The following programs are geared to help military parents with reintegrating post-deployment:

Military OneSource: Military OneSource is a Department of Defense program that provides a range of resources and support services to military members and their families, including pre-deployment planning and post-deployment reintegration support. They offer counseling, financial planning, and legal assistance.

Yellow Ribbon Reintegration Program: The Yellow Ribbon Reintegration Program is a DoD-sponsored program that provides resources and support to National Guard and Reserve members and their families throughout the deployment cycle. The program includes pre-deployment planning and post-deployment reintegration support, including workshops, counseling, and access to resources and services.

Military Family Life Counselors (MFLCs): MFLCs are licensed counselors who provide short-term, non-medical counseling services to military members and their families, including military mothers, both before and after deployment. They provide support for a range of issues, including stress management, communication, and relationship issues.

- f. **DACOWITS’ 2019 focus group participants expressed that post-deployment reintegration/assistance efforts were male-centric and lacked resources to assist the unique challenges returning military mothers faced. What efforts have been made to address this important subset of re-integration assistance?**

MPP and MC&FP defer to the military Services.

- g. **What kind of mentorship and support are specifically provided to deploying mothers?**

Family Readiness Programs: Family readiness programs are designed to provide support and resources to military families throughout the deployment cycle. These programs often

include resources specifically designed for deploying mothers, such as workshops, support groups, and counseling services.

i. What type of mental health screening/care is provided?

MPP and MC&FP defer to the military Services.

j. What kind of follow up is provided and at what intervals?

MPP and MC&FP defer to the military Services.

k. Is leadership training provided to military leaders about the challenges and difficulties of reintegration that military mothers may encounter, the range of impacts of those challenges, in order to increase knowledge and understanding? Provide links to or copies of such training.

Leadership training is provided to military leaders about the challenges and difficulties that military mothers may encounter during reintegration, and the range of impacts of those challenges. The training is designed to increase knowledge and understanding and help military leaders better support military mothers and their families.

It is recommended to check with the specific military service for the most current and relevant training programs.

l. What second and third order effects of reintegration difficulties have been identified (e.g., on military readiness, work productivity, psychological and physical health, attrition rates)?

MPP and MC&FP defer to the military Services.

m. Do exit surveys have questions related to whether reintegration/post-deployment challenges are a reason for separation?

Questions regarding reintegration and post deployment challenges have appeared on the Status of Forces Survey-Reserve survey and on Spouse Surveys. The following is a sampling of the questions asked and response choices.

Status of Forces-Reserve:

After returning home from your most recent deployment to what extent have you seemed to...*Mark one answer for each item (Not at all / Small extent / Moderate extent / Large extent / Very large extent):*

- a. Be more emotionally distant (e.g. less talkative, less affectionate, less interested in social life)?
- b. Appreciate life more?
- c. Get angry faster?
- d. Appreciate family and friends more?

- e. Drink more alcohol?
- f. Have more confidence in yourself?
- g. Take more risks with your safety?
- h. Be different in another way?

Which of the following was your biggest concern about returning from your most recent activation/deployment? Select one item from the list below.

Reemployment

Readjusting to work life

Financial stability

Readjusting to family life

Reestablishing a good relationship with your spouse

Reestablishing a good relationship with your children

Recovering from a physical injury/limitation

Recovering from the emotional impact and stress of activation/deployment

Health care coverage for yourself

Health care coverage for your family

Possibility of being activated/deployed again

Other

From the Active Duty Spouse Survey:

After your spouse most recently returned home from a deployment to what extent did your spouse seem to... *Mark one answer for each item (Very large extent / Large extent / Moderate extent / Small extent / Not at all):*

- a. Be more emotionally distant (e.g., less talkative, less affectionate, less interested in social life)?
- b. Show negative personality changes (e.g. more critical, indifferent to family/life)
- c. Show positive personality changed (e.g. more attentive, more agreeable)?
- d. Appreciate life more?
- e. Get angry faster?
- f. Appreciate family and friends more?
- g. Have mental health concerns (e.g., anxiety, being “on guard”)?
- h. Drink more alcohol?
- i. Have more confidence?
- j. Take more risks with his/her safety?
- k. Have difficulty adjusting (e.g., to family responsibilities, to civilian life)?
- l. Have trouble sleeping?
- m. Have difficulty with day-to-day activities (e.g., driving, eating, hygiene)?
- n. Be different in another way?

Which of these would you consider to be the main issue you discussed with your counselor?

Mark the one answer you feel is the MAIN issue.

Coping with stress

Financial issues

Family issues

Marital issues
Couple's communication issues
Parent/child issues
Deployment and reunion
Crisis situations
Grief and loss
Mental health concerns for self/family member (e.g., PTSD, depression, anxiety)
Medical issues for self/family member
Jealousy/concerns around infidelity
Dealing with the military way of life (e.g., managing separations, demands of the military)
Other concerns

From our Reserve Spouse survey:

Overall, how well do you think your most recent readjustment is going for...*Mark one answer for each item:*

- a. You?
- b. Your spouse?

Deployment and Reintegration Experiences among Service Member Mothers

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Military REACH

Mission: To support military families by mobilizing research into practical applications across the spectrum of family support, resilience, and readiness.

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Request: The Military REACH team was asked to identify recent academic research or empirical studies related to the challenges, impacts, and issues Service member mothers experience after returning from deployment, as they reintegrate to family and work life.

Research Summary

Since 2019, few studies have investigated the experiences of deployment and reintegration with a primary focus on the experiences of Service members who are mothers. This annotated bibliography presents key findings from 3 studies published since 2019, and 1 particularly relevant study published in 2017.

Long separations can disrupt family bonds, and Service member mothers may grieve the time spent away from their children. Upon return from deployment, mothers must readjust to advances in their child's development and changes in their behavior, which can be particularly challenging without adequate support. Factors that contribute to positive post-deployment parenting experiences include healthy behaviors (e.g., exercise), social support, perceived resilience, and good mental health. Role strain is another challenge faced by Service member mothers. As the primary caregiver, mothers may overprepare for their absence prior to deployment and then manage caregiving responsibilities alongside work duties immediately upon return. This dual responsibility can lead to stress and exhaustion (e.g., short temper, low energy). In their efforts to shield their children from their own distress, mothers may inadvertently cause additional difficulties for themselves, such as disrupted sleep. Emotional and instrumental support from the community, friends, and family can ease reintegration experiences, particularly in the absence of formal support and resources. However, barriers such as long wait times for mental health services, concerns about career repercussions, and providers unfamiliar with military culture hinder Servicewomen from seeking the help they need.

Annotated Bibliography

Morgan, N. R., Karre, J. K., Aronson, K. R., McCarthy, K. J., Bleser, J. A., & Perkins, D. F. (2022). Factors influencing parental functioning and satisfaction for veteran mothers during civilian transition. *Family Relations, 71*(4), 1554-1574. <https://doi.org/10.1111/fare.12669>

Abstract

Objective: Risk and protective factors associated with parental functioning (i.e., meeting child's emotional needs) and satisfaction (i.e., closeness) were examined among post-9/11 veteran mothers during their civilian transition. Background: Post–military-separation stressors (e.g., relocation, benefit changes) can strain well-being and familial relationships. Stress, particularly in the presence of unresolved trauma from military-specific risks, can impinge upon parental functioning and satisfaction, negatively influencing child outcomes (e.g., social–emotional, academic, behavioral). Method: A prospective cohort was identified from all active-duty service members who separated in May–September 2016. Logistic regression analyses of surveys completed by post-9/11 veteran mothers ($n = 711$) assessed effects of protective (i.e., resilience) and military-specific risk factors (i.e., deployments) on parental functioning and satisfaction. Interactions between protective factors and deployments and combat (patrols and corollaries) were explored. Results: Coping characteristics (e.g., healthy behaviors), absence of mental health conditions, and social supports were positively associated with parental functioning and satisfaction. Household financial security was not. Mothers who had deployed reported higher parental functioning and satisfaction. Mothers experiencing combat patrols were less likely to report high parental functioning. Conclusion: Malleable protective factors positively influence parenting but do not buffer against combat exposure. Implications: Interventions bolstering protective factors for veteran mothers can foster coping, reintegration, and positive child outcomes.

Key Findings

- Participants were women Veterans who had separated from active duty in the past 90 days and had at least 1 child under 18. Data were collected in 2016.
- 32% were married to a Veteran, 27% were married to an active-duty Service member.
- Engagement in healthy behaviors (i.e., exercise, sleep, diet), consistent social support from the community, friends, and family, and being deployed at least once were associated with high parental functioning (e.g., providing a healthy environment; meeting a child's emotional needs).
- The absence of mental health symptoms (i.e., PTSD, depression, anxiety, alcohol problems), high resilience, consistent support from the community, friends, and family and deploying 1 or 2 times were associated with high parental satisfaction (e.g., closeness with children; parenting enjoyment).

Nicholson, J. H., & DeVoe, E. R. (2020). Thrown back: Reintegration experiences of National Guard/Reserve mothers of young children. *Child & Family Social Work, 25*, 188-197. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12758>

Abstract

Few studies have examined the experiences and perceptions of servicewoman mothers and their children, even as an increasing number of them have experienced deployment and combat exposure. The present paper describes a qualitative study that explored National Guard/Reserve (NG/R) mothers' experiences with mothering and co-parenting during reintegration and their perceived priorities, supports, challenges and needs. Interpretive phenomenological analysis of seven in-depth qualitative interviews produced themes including reunion and loneliness, the importance of time, help seeking and gendered experiences. Notably, all participants transitioned immediately back into primary caregiver roles upon homecoming, and several described how difficult it was to readjust while privately dealing with unmet mental health needs. Findings underscore the importance of a flexible suite of service options that meet key needs, most importantly, childcare, social-emotional support for children and peer-based parenting support specific to servicewoman mothers. For NG/R mothers, who may live far from base, community-based services are essential, but as participants described, civilian social workers and other professionals must develop specialized knowledge, skills and experience to provide appropriate support.

Key Findings

- All participants ($N = 7$) were returning from a deployment of 1+ years and spoke to a feeling of disrupted bonds with children and partners upon return.
- All participants were the primary caregivers of their children prior to deployment and assumed this role immediately upon return. Most participants ($n = 6$) felt rushed to reconnect after returning home, and most ($n = 6$) began full-time work right away.
 - One participant who was able to delay her return to work noted the positive impact on their child.
- In general, all participants noted the impact of mental health and readjustment stress on their parenting.
 - 4 participants reported unmet mental health needs (i.e., significant PTSD symptoms) during reintegration and attempted to protect their children from these symptoms, which instead resulted in longer term consequences (e.g., interrupted sleep).
- Emotional (e.g., shared understanding of deployment) and instrumental support (e.g., childcare) from a variety of sources (e.g., friends, co-parents, partners) aided participants' positive reintegration experiences.
- Women benefited when barriers to accessing formal support (e.g., therapy) were limited. Conversely, factors such as long wait times or working with providers who did not understand military culture, were barriers to utilizing care.
- Participants noted that connecting with military-specific parenting supports and other servicewoman mothers was particularly beneficial.

Roche, R., Manzi, J., & Bard, K. (2020). A double bind for the ties that bind: A pilot study of mental health challenges among female US Army officers and impact on family life. *Journal of Veterans Studies*, 6(1), 200-210.

<https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/be2b/f754d9ec3c6980f749bc58a74ac73c5f68b1.pdf>

Abstract

Female military personnel, rising in both number and in rank, are key to the success of the US military. Currently 16% of active-duty enlisted personnel and 18% of all officers in the US military are women (Department of Defense 2018). Unique stressors for women in the military now include combat stress, the stress of a minority status, military sexual violence, divorce and parenting. Our aim was to investigate these issues related to professionalism, personal health and support networks among female military officers while they also develop and maintain a command presence. The results of our pilot with 73 female US Army Officers support generalized research with female military personnel which illustrate high self-reporting and diagnoses of stress, anxiety and depression (Haskell et al. 2010; Bean-Mayberry et al. 2011; Shekelle et al. 2011). Importantly, 65.7% of servicewomen in our sample self-reported feelings of stress, anxiety, and depression as a direct result of their leadership role in the military. When women were asked how their psychological condition impacts their family as a wife and/or mother (caregiver), they responded with comments such as low energy, less patience and family discord because of distinct roles in and out of the military. As a result of these dichotomous roles, some reported that they hid their distress from their families. These findings offer important insight for US veteran support services and highlight an under-researched set of health challenges experienced by US female military officers facing mental fatigue who simultaneously serve as a caregiver.

Key Findings

- Data were collected in 2019 from women officers in the Army, including active-duty and National Guard/Reserve.
- Caregivers tended to avoid seeking mental/behavioral health services due to their position in the military (68.9%) more so than their non-caregiver counterparts (59.1%). Caregivers also reported trying to hide their distress and mental health symptoms from their family members.
- Caregivers reported low energy, low patience, and family conflict due to their dual role as Service member and caregiver.

Walsh, T. B. (2017). **Mothers and deployment: Understanding the experiences and support needs of deploying mothers of children birth to five.** *Journal of Family Social Work, 20*(2), 84-105. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10522158.2017.1279576>

Abstract

Military deployments can demand long separations of service members and their families. The strain of separation is particularly acute for mothers of very young children. This study aimed to better understand the deployment and reintegration experiences of service members who are mothers of young children. Focus groups and interviews were conducted with 12 service member mothers who deployed to Iraq and/or Afghanistan when one or more of their children was younger than age 6. Discussions explored experiences before, during, and after deployment; needs and challenges at each stage; available support resources and gaps in support. Thematic data analysis was conducted, drawing on principles of grounded theory. Disruption and continuity were central themes as participants illuminated the challenges they faced and their profound dedication to sustaining strong family relationships across the deployment cycle. Relinquishing, reassuming, and balancing multiple roles and responsibilities are additional themes that were frequently evoked. Participants noted a lack of formal resources responsive to their needs and circumstances and highlighted a need for services tailored to mothers who are deploying. Military mothers, particularly mothers of young children, face distinct challenges surrounding deployment. Better understanding their experiences and support needs can inform tailored services to meet their needs.

Key Findings

- The lack of tailored resources for mothers during the deployment cycle was a prominent theme among participants. Due to an absence of formal, tailored support, most mothers turned instead to family and friends.
- In general, mothers grieved the time lost with their children and had difficulty adjusting to the “new” child they came home to. Mothers of children from age 0-5 found it particularly difficult adjusting to changes in expectations for their child’s behavior and development.
- Some mothers noted the benefit of family support during deployment, but it did not seem to persist upon return.
 - Mothers who experienced less or no transitional support had more difficulty adjusting to children’s needs.
- Having access to technology for communication during deployment was noted as a facilitator of a more positive reintegration experience, especially for mothers of older children who could more easily use the technology.
- Mothers felt particularly burdened in the pre-deployment phase, due to their perceived need to overprepare for their separation (e.g., make childcare arrangements) due to their role as the primary caregiver.
- Mothers’ experiences of role strain were exacerbated by reintegration. That is, they felt a strain between their role as a parent and as a Service member prior to deployment, and this was heightened following a deployment.

Other Selected References

Acker, M. L., Nicholson, J., & DeVoe, E. R. (2020). Mothering very young children after wartime deployment: A case report. *Infant Mental Health Journal*, 41(3), 313-326. <https://doi.org/10.1002/imhj.21837>

- This is a case report of 1 African American mother who served in the Reserves and experienced significant deployment-related mental distress. Although these results cannot be generalized or transferred, they did align with key findings listed above.

Bernat, L.J. (2023). The lived experience of American mothers in the military. In: B.A. Anderson & L. R. Roberts (Eds.), *Maternal health and American cultural values. Global maternal and child health*. Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-23969-4_6

- Book chapter that reviews a broader literature of mothers in the military (i.e., Service members and civilian spouses) more generally.

Walsh, T. B., & Nieves, B. (2018). Military moms: Deployment and reintegration challenges to motherhood. In: M. Muzik & K. L. Rosenblum (Eds.), *Motherhood in the face of trauma: Pathways towards healing and growth*. Springer. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-65724-0>

- Book chapter that reviews the literature on Service member mothers' experiences parenting across the deployment cycle.



Military Mothers: Reintegration After Deployment

Request:

In 2019, the Committee (DACOWITS) identified challenges, impacts, and issues military mothers experience returning from deployment as they reintegrate to family and work life, and subsequently recommended that the Secretary of Defense commission a foundational research study to identify and assess these potentially unique impacts on military mothers and identify measures to help ease their transition back to “normal” family and home life. The Committee seeks information on the progress of research and initiatives to address these reintegration concerns.

Millennium Cohort Program

The Millennium Cohort Program (MCP) is a DoD program of research supported by the Defense Health Agency, Department of Veterans Affairs, and Military Community and Family Policy (MC&FP), including three major longitudinal research efforts: The **Millennium Cohort Study (MCS)**, **Millennium Cohort Family Study (MCFS)**; and Millennium Cohort **Study of Adolescent Resilience (SOAR)**. MCP has published four papers that generally address the questions of the Committee. A brief synopsis of findings for each publication is included below:

Seelig, A. D., Jacobson, I. G., Smith, B., Hooper, T. I., Gackstetter, G. D., Ryan, M. A., Wells, T. S., MacDermid Wadsworth, S., Smith, T. C., & Millennium Cohort Study Team (2012). Prospective evaluation of mental health and deployment experience among women in the US military. *American journal of epidemiology*, 176(2), 135–145. <https://doi.org/10.1093/aje/kwr496>.

Women with reported combat exposures were more likely to have mental health symptoms than women who deployed without combat associated exposures and women who never deployed.

Nguyen, S., LeardMann, C. A., Smith, B., Conlin, A. M. S., Slymen, D. J., Hooper, T. I., ... & Smith, for the Millennium Cohort Study Team, T. C. (2013). **Is military deployment a risk factor for maternal depression?** *Journal of Women's Health*, 22(1), 9-18. <https://doi.org/10.1089/jwh.2012.36>

Military women who deployed with combatlike experiences after childbirth were at increased risk for postdeployment maternal depression. The risk, however, appeared primarily related to combat rather than childbirth-related experiences.

Ippolito, A. C., Seelig, A. D., Powell, T. M., Conlin, A. M. S., Crum-Cianflone, N. F., Lemus, H., Sevick, C. J., & LeardMann, C. A. (2017). **Risk Factors Associated with Miscarriage and Impaired Fecundity among United States Servicewomen during the Recent Conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan.** *Women's health issues: official publication of the Jacobs Institute of Women's Health*, 27(3), 356–365. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.whi.2016.12.012>.

Among Servicewomen aged 18-45 years, 31% reported a miscarriage and 11% reported impaired fecundity (infertility) during a 3-year study period. Findings suggest that deployments in support of the operations in Iraq and Afghanistan do not increase the risk for miscarriage and infertility among U.S. Servicewomen. More research is needed to better understand whether specific combat experiences or environmental exposures encountered during deployments increase the risk for adverse reproductive health outcomes.

Hare, A., Boyer, N., Wakar, B., Scanlon, J., Montgomery, S., Sparks, A. C., ... Stander, V. (2024). **Factors influencing postdeployment reintegration adjustment for U.S. service members and their spouses by spouse gender.** *Military Psychology*, 1–14.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/08995605.2024.2394725>

Cross-sectional analyses of heterosexual couples revealed two factors associated with postdeployment reintegration adjustment that differed by the gender of the spouse. Specifically, female spouses married to male service members, who had lower perceptions of their mental health, or lower ratings of readiness for their husband to deploy again, were more likely to report that their husbands took longer than 1 month to adjust to being home. Gender of the spouse was not directly associated with time to adjust after deployment (service member or spouse).

As an ongoing longitudinal research program, MCP can address the Committee's questions more directly by conducting additional analyses, if requested:

1. MCFS can limit their sample to couples with children and examine service member reintegration outcomes from the spouse's perspective.
2. SOAR can examine the impact of maternal deployment on child outcomes.
3. MCS can:
 - a. Examine the mental and physical health of military service women pre- and post-pregnancy and identify whether deployment and/or combat experiences during deployment are associated with changes in health status among mothers after return from deployment.
 - b. Examine whether mothers who deploy are more likely to experience adverse occupational outcomes (e.g. separation from service) after return from deployment compared with mothers who do not deploy.
 - c. Examine whether mothers who deploy are more likely to experience marital dissolution (e.g. divorce or separation) after deployment compared with mothers who do not deploy.

Challenges Surrounding the Reintegration of Deployed Military Mothers

Response to DACOWITS RFI 7



Prepared for June 2019 DACOWITS Quarterly Business Meeting

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Bottom Line Up Front

The research addressing the impact of deployments on military mothers is limited, and no research has evaluated or studied the effects of programs intended specifically to address the reintegration needs of this population.

This review identifies the areas of consensus in the available literature as well as the areas for which there are no established studies addressing these research topics. Some of the findings follow:

Relevant Demographic Information on Women in the Military

- A. A greater proportion of women than men are in dual-military marriages within both the Active and Reserve Components
- B. Women comprise 30 percent of single parents in the military within both the Active and Reserve Components

Key Challenges Faced by Military Mothers Within the Deployment Cycle

- C. Difficulty maintaining communication with their children while deployed and reconnecting with them upon returning home
- D. Relinquishing parental control and household responsibilities during deployment
- E. Expectation they will seamlessly resume their roles as mother and wife upon returning home
- F. Determining where they fit in the family dynamic formed during their absence

Single Military Mothers

- G. Military women who are single mothers may face different challenges within the deployment cycle (e.g., determining their children's primary caregiver arrangements) and higher levels of anxiety and depression

National Guard and Reserve Military Mothers

- H. Current research did not produce any findings that were unique to Guard and Reserve mothers when compared with Guard and Reserve parents in general

A. Introduction

The Defense Advisory Committee on Women in the Services (DACOWITS) requested a literature review on reintegration programs for military mothers. The Committee was interested in (1) studies assessing the impact of deployments on military mothers; (2) existing programs to address military mothers' needs to mitigate or prevent negative outcomes and the effectiveness of such programs; and (3) literature addressing the challenges unique to deployed and returning servicewomen in the following categories: (a) mothers with a nondeployed spouse, (b) mothers with a deployed spouse, (c) single mothers, and (d) mothers who are part of the Guard or Reserve.

The information presented here begins with an overview of the prevalence of military mothers overall and within the categories of interest to the Committee. The response next examines the overall dearth of research addressing the deployment and reintegration experiences of military women. The response concludes with an overview of the limited number of programs for military parents overall as a result of the lack of programs to address military mothers specifically.

1. Limitations

The lack of research on how deployment affects military mothers and their families was noted by the Women in Combat Symposium as a research gap in 2014, and little has been published since that time to address the gap.¹ Research conducted with military mothers has been qualitative in nature and has used a small sample size, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Much of this research has focused specifically on women in the Reserve Components. Although some research has examined the postdeployment and reintegration experiences of military parents in general, most of these studies were conducted during the height of the recent conflicts in the Middle East, when 12-, 15-, and 18-month deployments were more commonplace. Nearly all of this research focused solely on military fathers or included a small number of military mothers with no specific findings drawn for that group. Readers should keep these limitations in mind when reviewing and applying the literature summarized here.

B. Relevant Demographic Characteristics of Military Mothers

1. Women in the U.S. Military

Women have been an important part of the Military Services, representing 16.5 percent of active duty and 22.2 percent of reserve duty Service members.² Many servicewomen have deployed to combat locations in recent years, which was not the case for prior conflicts. From September 2001 to February 2013, 299,548 female Service members deployed in support of operations in Iraq and Afghanistan.³ Similarly, between 2009 and 2012, 28 percent of living female veterans who had served since 2001 indicated they had served in a combat zone.⁴ During DACOWITS' 2014 focus groups, 62 percent of female participants said they had deployed at least once, with 68 percent of those having deployed more than one time.⁵

2. Percentage Married in the U.S. Military

In 2017, approximately half of all Service members were married (53 percent of those on active duty and 44 percent of those on reserve duty). Service members in dual-military marriages made up 7 percent of those in the Active Component and 3 percent of those in the Guard and Reserve.⁶

- ▶ A greater percentage of active duty women (20 percent) were in dual-military marriages compared with active duty men (4 percent). Among the Reserve Components, 8 percent of women versus 1 percent of men were in dual-military marriages.⁷
- ▶ Viewed another way, nearly half of married active duty women (44 percent) were in dual-military marriages compared with only 7 percent of active duty men.⁸

3. Percentage With Children in the U.S. Military

Overall, 38 percent of active duty Service members had children, and 42 percent of Guard and Reserve members had children.⁹

- ▶ Broken out by marital status, 32 percent of active duty parents were married to a civilian spouse, 3 percent of active duty parents were in a dual-military marriage, and 4 percent of active duty parents were single parents. In the Reserve Components, 31 percent of parents were

married to a civilian spouse, 2 percent were in a dual-military marriage, and 9 percent were single parents.¹⁰

- ▶ Of active duty single parents, 35 percent were women. Of Reserve Component single parents, 32 percent were women.¹¹

C. Summary of Research on Deployments and Military Mothers

Although limited in number, research studies on deployments and military mothers identified several common challenges faced by military mothers during the deployment cycle, which are described in this section.

1. Connection With Children

One challenge for military mothers is maintaining the continuity of the “sacred bond” relationships with their children while deployed.^{12,13} Similarly, mothers face difficulty reconnecting with their children upon their return, particularly mothers who are adjusting and adapting to the new needs of their young children, who developed rapidly during their absence.¹⁴ Efforts by servicewomen to maintain bonds with their children and reconnect with them upon their return were heavily reliant on communication as well as assistance and support from their social networks.¹⁵

2. Parental Control and Household Responsibilities

Another challenge is in relinquishing parental and household responsibilities during deployments.^{16,17} Surrendering control over family routines and caregiving throughout the process was particularly difficult because these mothers had typically played the role of primary caregiver prior to their deployment.^{18,19} Similar to this was the difficult process of selecting the primary caregiver for their children during the deployment. Although in many cases the caregiver was to be the woman’s spouse, women often arranged backup or additional childcare, or enlisted the support of friends in the local community, to support the spouse in caring for the children.²⁰

3. Reassuming Former Roles Within the Family

Similarly, military mothers can face difficulty stepping back into their roles of mother and wife upon returning home.^{21,22} Military mothers are often expected to immediately resume their former roles upon their return from deployment rather than being allowed the time to readjust to civilian life typically granted to returning military fathers.²³ Making this adjustment can be particularly difficult for mothers returning from deployment, who experienced significantly more difficulty regulating their emotions when compared with civilian spouses of returning Service members with children.²⁴ However, military mothers returning from deployment did not differ significantly from civilian spouses of returning Service members with respect to relationship adjustment (among married or cohabitating couples), parenting practices, feelings of parental self-efficacy, or ratings of their child’s psychosocial functioning.²⁵

4. Adjustments to New Family Dynamic

In addition to the lack of time to readjust, military mothers often face difficulty finding their way back into the family and addressing shifts in family relationships.^{26,27} When the father becomes the primary caregiver during the mother’s deployment, it can be difficult for the mother to identify where she fits into the family dynamic that has developed during her absence.

5. Unique Challenges for Single Mothers

Determining a primary caregiver to care for children during deployment is a particular challenge for single mothers. Unlike a married woman, whose spouse typically assumes the role, a single mother often relies on relatives that reside far from where she is based. This can create challenges for her children related to relocating them to the new caregiver's location, removing them from the military supports they are used to, and integrating them into new school systems or daycare facilities.^{28,29} Another challenge mothers without a partner at home face is chain of command denials of requests to return home temporarily to resolve urgent caretaker issues, which can cause significant stress.³⁰

When examining the effects of deployment on military mothers' psychological well-being, single mothers who deployed showed significantly higher levels of anxiety and more symptoms of depression than single mothers who did not deploy and married mothers who deployed.³¹ However, single mothers who deployed did not experience higher levels of stress than the other mothers in the study; this suggests factors other than being in a deployed environment, away from family, may contribute to their anxiety and depression.³² In examining possible causes for the increased levels of anxiety and depression in single mothers, the research showed deployed military mothers with social support from a spouse and/or friends experienced less psychological distress;³³ simply being a deployed mother did not significantly increase such distress.³⁴

6. Unique Challenges for Mothers in National Guard or Reserve Components

Although much of the research on military mothers focused either solely or mostly on women in the Reserve Components, none of this research revealed challenges that were unique to this group.

D. Research on Programs and Support for Deploying and Reintegrating Military Mothers

This review did not identify any programs intended solely to support deploying and reintegrating military mothers. In fact, one study of military mothers regarding their deployment and reintegration experiences noted a lack of resources to address their unique circumstances and needs.³⁵ All studies that discussed support programs focused on the resources available to all Service members and military families during times of deployment and reintegration (e.g., behavioral health services, avenues for communicating with family while deployed, parenting classes). In a 2017 study, military mothers described feeling alienated by many of the military resources because they were designed for male Service members with stay-at-home wives, which was frustrating both for servicewomen with civilian husbands who were not included in support groups and for dual-military wives who felt the resources were only for civilian spouses.³⁶

A 2013 study of the impact of military programs, processes, and policies on the deployment and reintegration experiences of military mothers outlined several positive aspects of existing support programs. For example, participants emphasized the benefits and importance of receiving support from their units, family readiness groups, and behavioral health resources.³⁷ Family readiness groups were seen as a positive source of support by many of the participants, both for the military mothers as well as

¹ It is important to note that the data collection for this study, published in 2002, occurred prior to the 9/11 terrorist attacks, so the definition of deployment used in this study of Navy women was any sea duty assignment.

for their children and caregivers.³⁸ With respect to beneficial support from their units, these women highlighted briefings for themselves and their families on what to expect during the deployment and the reintegration period as well as communication from their units to their children and caregivers throughout the deployment period.³⁹ Another positive feature participants mentioned was the benefit of frequent communication, and accessible channels to do so, during deployment to maintain communication and a feeling of connection with their children.⁴⁰

With respect to the negative aspects of existing military programs and policies, the literature revealed the following gaps and limitations:

- ▶ Lack of services and family readiness group support for nontraditional caregivers such as husbands^{41,42}
- ▶ Lack of unit support for members attached to a unit, particularly Reserve Component members⁴³
- ▶ Issues surrounding family care plans and the challenges Service members can face in creating and implementing them, particularly when leadership is not supportive⁴⁴
- ▶ Insufficient reintegration time to reconnect with their children, readjust to being a mother and/or wife, and relearn (or learn newly established) family routines⁴⁵

E. Conclusion

This literature review has highlighted a gap in what is known about how military mothers experience the deployment cycle. Although only a few studies have examined the impact of deployments on military mothers, no research has conducted a rigorous evaluation of existing programs or supports for military mothers and their reintegration needs.

Women comprise a greater proportion of the Services and continue to deploy to support the dynamic mission set of the U.S. military; the literature reviewed in this summary demonstrates common challenges they may face as they reintegrate with their children and families after deployment. A few studies identified several positive and negative aspects of current reintegration programs from the perspective of military mothers.

The dearth of research presented here highlights a need for additional and continued research to identify what challenges may be unique to military mothers, including special populations of military mothers such as those who are dual-military, single, or members of the Guard or Reserve. The lack of research in this area also indicates a need to determine which programs and services will best support the needs of this population.

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