

# Challenges Surrounding the Reintegration of Deployed Military Mothers

Response to DACOWITS RFI 7



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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.<sup>1</sup> 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

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### 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.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, between 2009 and 2012, 28 percent of living female veterans who had served since 2001 indicated they had served in a combat zone.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup>

### 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.<sup>6</sup>

- ▶ 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.<sup>7</sup>
- ▶ 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.<sup>8</sup>

### 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.<sup>9</sup>

- ▶ 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.<sup>10</sup>

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

## C. Summary of Research on Deployments and Military Mothers

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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.<sup>12,13</sup> 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.<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup>

### 2. Parental Control and Household Responsibilities

Another challenge is in relinquishing parental and household responsibilities during deployments.<sup>16,17</sup> 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.<sup>18,19</sup> 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.<sup>20</sup>

### 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.<sup>21,22</sup> 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.<sup>23</sup> 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.<sup>24</sup> 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.<sup>25</sup>

### 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.<sup>26,27</sup> 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.<sup>28,29</sup> 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.<sup>30</sup>

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.<sup>31</sup> 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.<sup>32</sup> 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;<sup>33</sup> simply being a deployed mother did not significantly increase such distress.<sup>34</sup>

## 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

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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.<sup>35</sup> 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.<sup>36</sup>

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.<sup>37</sup> Family readiness groups were seen as a positive source of support by many of the participants, both for the military mothers as well as

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<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>38</sup> 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.<sup>39</sup> 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.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>41,42</sup>
- ▶ Lack of unit support for members attached to a unit, particularly Reserve Component members<sup>43</sup>
- ▶ Issues surrounding family care plans and the challenges Service members can face in creating and implementing them, particularly when leadership is not supportive<sup>44</sup>
- ▶ Insufficient reintegration time to reconnect with their children, readjust to being a mother and/or wife, and relearn (or learn newly established) family routines<sup>45</sup>

## E. Conclusion

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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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