

IMPROVING CHILD ABUSE REPORTING AND TREATMENT FOR MILITARY FAMILIES

THE U.S. ARMY MAY NOT KNOW THE TRUE RATE OF CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT IN ITS MILITARY FAMILIES.

As recently as 2014, the U.S. military reported rates of child abuse and neglect that were 45 percent lower than those of the general civilian population.^{1,2} **However, recent PolicyLab research suggests that the U.S. Army may be unaware of a large proportion of child maltreatment cases among its families** because of a breakdown in communication between health care providers, state-based civilian Child Protective Services (CPS), and the military's welfare agency, the Family Advocacy Program (FAP).

BREAKDOWN IN COMMUNICATION BETWEEN PROVIDERS AND AGENCIES MAY LEAVE THE MILITARY UNAWARE OF SOME CHILD MALTREATMENT.



Although military families have stable employment and access to family support programs, they also face unique challenges and stressors related to deployment and frequent relocations that may increase the risk of child abuse and neglect. Recognizing these unique needs, the U.S. Department of Defense created FAP as a separate military welfare agency dedicated to preventing, investigating and treating child maltreatment among military families. FAP not only provides tailored treatment and prevention services, but can also overcome the logistical hurdles that a state CPS agency could face in working with military families who frequently move across state lines or even internationally.

Reports that never reach FAP could leave vulnerable children and families without the help they need to remain safe and healthy. Unfortunately, PolicyLab research reveals that's what may be happening. In this brief, we explain the potential reasons for incomplete reporting to FAP, as well as provide recommendations to improve reporting practices.

POLICYLAB RESEARCH SHOWS GAPS IN REPORTING OF SUSPECTED CHILD ABUSE OR NEGLECT

When doctors suspect child abuse or neglect in a patient, they are legally obligated to report it to an appropriate child welfare agency, which then initiates an investigation into the child's well-being. For U.S. military families, FAP may be the agency best situated to help them. Civilian medical providers, however, are legally only required to report suspected child maltreatment to CPS; in fact, many civilian medical providers are likely unaware of FAP's existence. Though not all reports for suspected abuse or neglect will be substantiated upon investigation—that is, confirmed that the child is actually being harmed—it is nevertheless vital that FAP be notified, either through the mandated reporter, or from the civilian child welfare agency, so that they can respond to suspected cases.

As part of the largest-ever study of child abuse and neglect in the military, PolicyLab researchers used medical records to identify all child dependents of U.S. Army soldiers who received a diagnosis of maltreatment from 2004–2007.

Of the nearly 6,000 child abuse or neglect diagnoses we identified, only one in five were linked to a substantiated FAP report. This is much lower than the civilian population, where more than two in five cases of medically diagnosed child abuse or neglect are linked to a substantiated CPS report.

This is concerning because it tells us that a large proportion of diagnosed child abuse or neglect cases are likely never made known to FAP. Our greatest fear is that diagnoses aren't being reported at all by some health care professionals, meaning at-risk children in U.S. Army families could be left vulnerable to future harm.

LACK OF COMMUNICATION MAY LEAD TO UNDER-REPORTING OF ABUSE AND NEGLECT

Several barriers can prevent medical providers' diagnoses of suspected child abuse and neglect in military families from reaching FAP, even when providers make reports according to existing hospital protocol and state laws. For instance, civilian providers may report such cases only to CPS either because they don't know the child is part of a military family, or they don't know about FAP's existence. The breakdown in the reporting process then occurs when CPS does not have a clear and consistent communication channel to alert FAP of this possible abuse.



IMPROVING REPORTING PRACTICES TO MEET THE NEEDS OF MILITARY FAMILIES

Stakeholders at the state and federal level, including the U.S. Department of Defense, already recognize the challenge of streamlining communication between military and civilian providers and child welfare agencies, and are working to improve protections for at-risk children. For instance, federal legislation from 2016, known as “Talia’s Law,” requires all mandatory reporters within the Armed Forces to report suspected child maltreatment to the state’s child welfare services agency, in addition to reporting to FAP.³ Additionally, some states have laws requiring the state child welfare agency report to FAP when the victim is a member of a military family.⁴ These and other efforts can be built upon to maximize the impact of protective services in place for military children and families so that the level of care and protection children receive does not depend on the state in which their families live.

✓ RECOMMENDATIONS

While more research is needed to understand how the gaps in reporting occur, there are several actions we can take now to improve reporting practices and protect vulnerable children from additional, preventable harm.

- **States and counties should** require CPS to establish an agreement with FAP to identify CPS-reported cases of abuse that involve military families and pass the report on to FAP.
- **States and counties that have an agreement with FAP in place should** enhance training and enforcement mechanisms to ensure that cases of abuse involving military families are being reported to FAP.
- **Congress should** pass legislation that requires every state and local CPS agency to report victims in military families to FAP so all protective services are coordinated and no child slips through the cracks of a fragmented system.

These measures can help to resolve the reporting gaps between civilian and military agencies, and ensure that all reported cases of child maltreatment are properly investigated. With a clearer understanding through improved data of what happens with child maltreatment cases after they are reported:

- **The Department of Defense should** establish more systematic surveillance to determine if and where lapses in provider reporting are occurring across military installations so that FAP can implement initiatives to improve reporting practices.

REFERENCES

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The mission of PolicyLab at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia (CHOP) is to achieve optimal child health and well-being by informing program and policy changes through interdisciplinary research. PolicyLab is a Center of Emphasis within the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia Research Institute, one of the largest pediatric research institutes in the country.

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