Children's Hospital of Philadelphia
PolicyLab

Children of Female Soldiers at Greatest Risk for Abuse Prior to Parent's Deployment

New Study Details Family Characteristics Associated with Child Maltreatment in U.S. Army Families

Philadelphia, Pa. – October 4, 2017 – With growing evidence around the increased risk of child abuse and neglect surrounding a U.S. Army soldier's deployment, new research from PolicyLab at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia (CHOP) reveals that the risk may not be the same for children of male and female soldiers. In a study published in *Military Medicine*, PolicyLab researchers report that children of male U.S. Army soldiers are at greatest risk for abuse and neglect following deployment, while children of female soldiers are at greatest risk prior to deployment. These findings are part of the largest-ever study of child abuse and neglect in the military.

The study also found that whether the soldier in the family is mom or dad doesn't change the overall likelihood of abuse and neglect, and children in U.S. Army families whose parent is diagnosed with a mental health condition prior to the child's birth are at increased risk for abuse or neglect. While the findings do not identify the perpetrator of abuse, they provide new details about particular characteristics of U.S. Army families that contribute to risk for child abuse and neglect around periods of deployment.

"This is the first study to look closely at how U.S. Army families may respond differently to deployment-related stress, and how that could affect the likelihood of abuse or neglect for their children," said Doug Strane, MPH, research associate at PolicyLab and lead author on the study. "With these findings, we can see how providing targeted services to mothers prior to deployment, for example, could go a long way to preventing abuse or neglect of their children."

This study builds upon prior PolicyLab research which found that children in U.S. Army families overall are at highest risk for abuse and neglect during the six months following their parent's deployment, and at an even greater risk if their parent is deployed a second time.

"For the more than 50 percent of Armed Forces members who are parents, deployment can introduce serious stress within their families and create a unique environment that is associated with child abuse and neglect," said David Rubin, MD, MSCE, director of PolicyLab and senior author on the study. "The knowledge that time of greatest risk for child abuse and neglect in a U.S. Army family differs whether the soldier parent is male or female can better inform screening and positioning of Family Advocacy Program resources to help support families when they need it most."

Both studies pull from a data set of all U.S. Army soldiers and their families who were deployed one or two times between 2001 and 2007, including insurance claims and reports to the U.S. Army Family Advocacy Program. The Department of Defense created the Family Advocacy Program (FAP) in 1981 to investigate child abuse and neglect cases and provide treatment and supportive services for affected military families. There is a FAP office in each branch of the military.

Limitations: Identifying cases of child maltreatment is fraught with challenges, given the many different sources from which reports of maltreatment can originate. For this reason, we used two different sources (substantiated FAP maltreatment reports and medical maltreatment diagnosis) to identify our outcome of

interest. Additionally, our study examined soldier mental illness only when identified prior to a child's birth. This likely miscategorized some soldiers' mental illness status if their mental illness was identified following the child's birth. By under-detecting mental illness, we are likely underestimating the true magnitude of its relationship with maltreatment. Finally, we were unable to examine the relationship to maltreatment with other important characteristics such as a soldier's direct combat exposure and a family's socioeconomic status.

Citation: Strane D, Lynch KG, Griffis HM, et al. Family characteristics associated with child maltreatment across the deployment cycle of U.S. Army soldiers. Military Medicine. 2017.

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About PolicyLab at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia: PolicyLab at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia (CHOP) is dedicated to achieving optimal child health and well-being by informing program and policy changes through interdisciplinary research. Founded in 2008, PolicyLab is a Center of Emphasis within the CHOP Research Institute, one of the largest pediatric research institutes in the country. With more than 25 highly-regarded faculty and 35 passionate staff who bring expertise from myriad of fields covering health, research and health policy, our work focuses on improving public systems, improving health care delivery and improving child health outcomes. For more information, visit http://www.policylab.chop.edu.

About Children's Hospital of Philadelphia: Children's Hospital of Philadelphia was founded in 1855 as the nation's first pediatric hospital. Through its long-standing commitment to providing exceptional patient care, training new generations of pediatric healthcare professionals and pioneering major research initiatives, Children's Hospital has fostered many discoveries that have benefited children worldwide. Its pediatric research program is among the largest in the country. In addition, its unique family-centered care and public service programs have brought the 546-bed hospital recognition as a leading advocate for children and adolescents. For more information, visit http://www.chop.edu.