



# The Deployment Life Study

## Longitudinal Analysis of Military Families Across the Deployment Cycle

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In 2009, the RAND Corporation launched the Deployment Life Study, a longitudinal study of military families across a deployment cycle. This culminating report reviews the study design and data collection procedures, then presents results from analyses of the data collected from some 2,700 military families, focusing on marital relationships, family environment, psychological and behavioral health, child well-being, and military integration.



### RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- How do military families fare on a set of outcomes over the course of a deployment cycle?
- How do families who experienced deployment compare with similar families that did not deploy?
- Which characteristics of deployment are associated with better or worse postdeployment outcomes?
- Which characteristics of families are associated with better or worse postdeployment outcomes?



### KEY FINDINGS

#### Marital Relationships

- Across the entire deployment cycle, couples, on average, became significantly less satisfied with their marriages and engaged in less psychological and physical aggression than they reported prior to the deployment. These changes across the deployment cycle do not differ significantly from the changes experienced during the same period by similar couples that did not deploy.

#### Family Relationships

- Service members reported better family environments during deployments than before or after deployments, possibly because they are removed from the daily challenges associated with family life. Spouses, in contrast, reported no significant changes in family environment across the deployment cycle.

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- Service members who reported engaging in more predeployment preparation activities reported higher satisfaction with parenting postdeployment. Similarly, spouses who reported more preparation activities and greater satisfaction with the frequency of communication with the service member during deployment reported higher parenting satisfaction postdeployment.

#### Psychological and Behavioral Health

- We found no overall significant effect of deployment on persistent psychological or behavioral health outcomes for service members or spouses. This is consistent with the fact that we studied a relatively experienced population, serving during a period of the conflict with comparatively low levels of reported deployment trauma.
- However, deployed service members who experienced deployment trauma did show a persistent increase in their depression, posttraumatic stress disorder, and anxiety symptoms relative to their pre-deployment levels. When the service member experienced physical trauma (i.e., injury) during the study deployment, their spouses also showed persistent increases in those symptoms.

#### Child and Teen Well-Being

- In our analyses, most outcomes did not change over the course of a deployment cycle. Those that did change might reflect maturational changes among children and teens rather than changes related to deployment.
- Three child outcomes (reported by spouses) showed significant changes over the deployment cycle: Total difficulties (and more specifically, emotional problems), as well as depression screener scores. Spouses reported elevated symptoms in their children during deployment.

#### Military Integration

- Communication with other military families during deployment was associated with higher service member retention intentions and greater spouse and teen military commitment postdeployment.
- Experiences of nondeployed families may also be stressful, which may minimize the gap between deployed and nondeployed families. For example, among nondeployed families, relocation was related to decreased military satisfaction, commitment, and retention intentions among service members.



### RECOMMENDATIONS

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- Efforts should target families that experience deployment trauma, especially during postdeployment.
- Addressing psychological problems around the time of separation may be important for avoiding the longer-term impairments caused by these problems.
- Attention to the challenges associated with deployment should not detract from supporting services that address other challenges of military life.
- Programs that facilitate communication during a deployment may promote not only greater military integration, but also better outcomes across the domains highlighted in this report.
- Support to improve relationships during the postdeployment, reintegration period may improve family functioning.

