

# How Do Soldiers' Deployments Affect Children's Academic Performance and Behavioral Health?

Ongoing deployments have placed stresses on Army children and families already challenged by frequent moves and parental absences. These stresses include social or behavioral problems among children at home and at school. With a better understanding of the issues that children face when a parent or guardian deploys, the Army can more effectively target services for military families and their children to address those needs.

The Army asked RAND Arroyo Center to assess the effects of soldiers' deployments on their children's academic performance and emotional and behavioral outcomes in the school setting, and to make recommendations to support programs to ensure that children's academic and emotional needs are met. Efforts are already underway in some areas.

## What Academic Challenges Do Children Face When Parents Deploy?

To understand the relationship between deployment and academic achievement, researchers conducted statistical analyses of the correlation between parental deployment and student achievement test scores for public school students in North Carolina and Washington between 2002 and 2008. The analysis included school-age children of soldiers in the active force, Army Reserve, and Army National Guard. Researchers also conducted interviews with school staff concerning the challenges students face and options for support.

The study found the following:

**Children whose parents have deployed for a total of 19 months or more since 2001 have modestly lower (and statistically different) achievement scores compared with those who have experienced less or no parental deployment.** This finding holds across states and academic subjects; is consistent across the rank or

### Key Points

- Children whose parents have deployed 19 months or more since 2001 have modestly lower (and statistically different) achievement scores compared with those who have experienced less or no parental deployment.
- Teachers and counselors identified a range of deployment-related issues that may affect children's academic success, including problems with homework completion, school attendance, and parental engagement.
- Options for improving support to children include providing additional resources to assist students with schoolwork, improving information flow to schools, and increasing the number of providers trained in child and adolescent behavioral health issues.

component of the soldier, seniority of the soldier, gender of the deploying parent, and gender of the child; and it is stable over time. The relationship is stronger for elementary and middle school students, but not significant for high school students. These differences in academic performance suggest that, rather than developing resiliency, children appear to struggle more with more cumulative months of deployment.

**The study found no other consistent, statistically significant differences in academic performance among children in the sample.**

In both states, the *number* of deployments is not associated with children's academic performance once the researchers accounted for cumulative months of deployment.

**Teachers and counselors identified a range of deployment-related issues that may affect children's academic success.** These include

problems with homework completion, school attendance, and parental engagement, as well as stress related to household responsibilities or resident parents' mental or emotional problems concerning their partner's deployment.

**School staff had little consistent information to let them know which students are military and when students may be experiencing deployment.** These difficulties were sometimes more pronounced for educators serving Reserve and National Guard families because these students tend to be a small minority in their schools.

### **What Psychological and Behavioral Health Challenges Do Families Face During Deployment?**

Interviewees also identified barriers to behavioral health services for children of deployed soldiers.

**School staff identified parental struggles as a challenge for youth.** Staff believed that some parents appear to be struggling with deployments more than their children are. Staff also reported that for many children, resiliency appears to be decreasing. Some staff felt they did not often have adequate assistance in helping students and parents access psychological and behavioral health services. Military Family Life Consultants (MFLCs) may provide necessary student, family, and staff support in schools, but those interviewed felt that the monitoring and evaluation of this program could be improved.

**Stakeholders felt that the number of available providers with training in child and adolescent services is low.** Further, the availability and coverage of certain behavioral health services, as well as prevention, screening, and early intervention, are not adequate and vary geographically. Stakeholders also noted that some providers do not have good grounding in military culture.

### **Recommendations**

Improving support is an ongoing process. Arroyo researchers identified several options the Army might consider to address

the challenges faced by military children regarding parental deployment. Because most of these recommendations come with a financial cost, the Army should carefully analyze these costs before pursuing any changes.

### **Academic and School-Based Needs**

- Provide additional resources to assist students with schoolwork and transportation to school activities, and develop procedures to help schools obtain Army Community Services support to engage unresponsive parents.
- Address challenges related to high mobility, e.g., by continuing to advocate for full implementation of the Interstate Compact on Educational Opportunity for Military Children, which addresses state variation in the transfer of records, course sequencing, and graduation requirements.
- Develop methods to inform schools about which children are military, when children's parents are deploying, and what support and services are available for military families.

### **Behavioral Health Needs**

- Support efforts to increase the number of providers trained in child and adolescent behavioral health issues, and develop provider training on military culture and deployment impacts.
- Expand models to improve access for hard-to-reach populations, including telepsychiatry programs and social networks to support Reserve Component families.
- Consider strategies for improving prevention, screening, and early identification of behavioral health issues, particularly in schools and other community settings, and for improving family engagement in behavioral health services.
- Provide information to help school staff assist students and parents in accessing services.
- Improve evaluation of the MFLC program by integrating outcomes-based measurement. ■

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This research brief describes work done by the RAND Arroyo Center and documented in *Effects of Soldiers' Deployment on Children's Academic Performance and Behavioral Health*, by Amy Richardson, Anita Chandra, Laurie T. Martin, Claude Messan Setodji, Bryan W. Hallmark, Nancy F. Campbell, Stacy Hawkins, and Patrick Grady, MG-1095-A, 2011 (available at <http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG1095.html>). This research brief was written by Kristin J. Leuschner. The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit institution that helps improve policy and decisionmaking through research and analysis. RAND's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. RAND® is a registered trademark.

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