

Study finds more child abuse in homes of returning vets

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(Photo: AFP/Getty Images)

WASHINGTON — The babies and toddlers of soldiers returning from deployment face the heightened risk of abuse in the six months after the parent's return home, a risk that increases among soldiers who deploy more frequently, according to a study scheduled for release Friday.

The study will be published in the *American Journal of Public Health*. The abuse of soldiers' children exposes another, hidden cost from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan that killed than 5,300 U.S. troops and wounded more than 50,000.

Research by the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia looked at families of more than 112,000 soldiers whose children were 2 years old or younger for the period of 2001 to 2007, the peak of the Iraq War. Researchers examined Pentagon-substantiated instances of abuse by a soldier or another caregiver and from the diagnoses of medical personnel within the military's health care system.

"This study is the first to reveal an increased risk when soldiers with young children return home from deployment," David Rubin, co-director of the hospital's PolicyLab and the report's senior author, said in a statement. "This really demonstrates that elevated stress when a soldier returns home can have real and potentially devastating consequences for some military families."

Rubin said the study will help the Army and other services learn "when the signal [of stress] is the highest and the timing for intervention to help the returning soldiers."

The Army said it will use the information to help serve soldiers and their families better.

"While incidents of child abuse and neglect among military families are well below that of the general population, this study is another indicator of the stress deployments place on soldiers, family members and caregivers," said Karl Schneider, principal deputy assistant secretary of the

Army for manpower and reserve affairs. "Since the end of the data collection period in 2007, the Army has enacted myriad programs to meet these kinds of challenges head on, and we will continue working to ensure services and support are available to soldiers, families and their children."

The study focused on the first two years of a child's life because of the elevated risk for life-threatening child abuse among infants exceeds risk in all other age groups. In all, there were 4,367 victims from the families of 3,635 soldiers.

The rate of substantiated abuse and neglect doubled during the second deployment compared with the first, the study found. For soldiers deployed twice, the highest rate of abuse and neglect occurred during the second deployment and was usually a caregiver other than the soldier.

"The finding that in most cases, the perpetrators were not the soldiers themselves reveals to us that the stress that plays out in military families during or after deployment impacts the entire family and is not simply a consequence of the soldier's experience and stress following deployment," said Christine Taylor, the study's lead author, a project manager the PolicyLab.

Researchers had an ongoing interest in the topic, Rubin said, which coincided with the Army's interest in determining how to better serve its returning soldiers and families.

A key finding was that mandatory reporting of child abuse by the Army to the Pentagon's Family Advocacy Program appears to have been largely ignored; 80% of the instances were not reported to the program. The program offers parenting instruction, child care and classes to ease a soldier's transition home. Those services may not be offered widely enough to meet the need, the study found.