



## Research article

# Victimization and adversity among children experiencing war-related parental absence or deployment in a nationally representative US sample



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## ABSTRACT

This study compares children and youth who have experienced lifetime war-related parental absence or deployment with those having no such history on a variety of victimization types, non-victimization adversity, trauma symptoms, and delinquency; and assesses whether cumulative adversity and victimization help to explain elevated emotional and behavioral problems among children of parents who have experienced war-related absence or deployment. The National Surveys of Children's Exposure to Violence (NatSCEV) are comprised of three cross-sectional telephone surveys conducted in 2008, 2011, and 2014. Data were collected on the experiences of children aged one month to seventeen years. In each survey, interviews were conducted with youth 10–17 years old and with caregivers of children 0–9 years old. The analyses use pooled data from all three U.S. nationally-representative samples (total sample size of 13,052). Lifetime parental war-related absence or deployment was a marker for elevated childhood exposure to a wide array of victimization and adversity types. Cumulative past year exposure to multiple forms of victimization and adversity fully explained elevated trauma symptoms and delinquency in this population of children. Given the breadth of victimization and adversity risk, children with histories of parental war-related absence or deployment, as well as their families, represent important target groups for broad-based prevention and interventions to reduce exposure and ameliorate consequences when it does occur.

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The number of US military personnel that were deployed in Afghanistan and Iraq between 2001 and 2011 exceeded 2.3 million (Martinez & Bingham, 2016). This cohort of military have also experienced the longest, most frequent, and most cumulative number of deployments in U.S. history (Tanielian & Jaycox, 2008). Because almost one half the nation's military also have children under 18, this trend inevitably impacts them. In fact, nearly 1 million U.S. children had at least one parent deployed to either Afghanistan or Iraq (Card et al., 2011; U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2016). Moreover, given the substantial number of civilians employed in war-zone contractor roles during this time periods (Isenberg, 2012), the potential for war-related parental absence is even greater.

Concern over the consequences of parental deployment for children can be seen in several kinds of studies. Some document increased internalizing and externalizing symptoms in children during deployment periods (Kelley et al., 2001; Rabenhorst et al., 2015); some show more symptoms in children of deployed parents relative to children in non-deployed

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military families (Cederbaum et al., 2013; Chandra et al., 2010; Chartrand, Frank, White, & Shope, 2008). Others show elevated symptoms in children of deployed parents compared to population norms of the same measures (Lester et al., 2010; Mustillo, Wadsworth, & Lester, 2015) and still others show greater problems among military-connected youth during war time (without specifically assessing deployment) relative to youth in non-military families within the same communities (Sullivan et al., 2015). At the same time, several studies also highlight the resilience and adaptability of children and youth from military families (Easterbrooks, Ginsburg, Lerner, 2013; Lucier-Greer et al., 2016). Although, taken as a whole, research suggests only moderately elevated emotional and behavioral problems among children of deployed parents (Card et al., 2011), there is less research addressing factors that explain their greater risk.

Adjustment problems among children of deployed parents likely stem from both the emotional difficulties and the practical challenges associated with an absent parent, both for the child and for the remaining parent (Card et al., 2011). Research finds, for example, that high levels of residential and school changes, as well as some aspects of school climate in military-connected schools, are important correlates of adjustment problems (De Pedro, Astor, Gilreath, Benbenishty, & Berkowitz, 2015; Esqueda, Astor, & De Pedro, 2012).

However, the literature also suggests a broader risk of adversity within families who have experienced deployment. Such risk is consistent with the concept of “stress proliferation” whereby exposure to one stressor, whether it is a stressful event or ongoing hardship, may lead to exposure to other “secondary stressors” over time (Pearlin, 1989). These secondary stressors in turn can exert additional independent effects on emotional and behavioral health. As Pearlin writes: “People’s lives can be caught up in a temporal proliferation of stressors, where repeatedly one or more stressors follow others through time (Pearlin, 2010; p. 213). In this way, children can experience strings and clusters of stressors, which can persist and contribute to cumulative adversity (Turner & Butler, 2003; Turner, Finkelhor, & Ormrod, 2006). Thus, emotional and behavior difficulties experienced by children who have experienced parental deployment likely arise from by a series of interrelated hardships and problematic experiences.

Deployment, traumatic combat experiences, social network disruptions, and difficulty reintegrating back into civilian society, all have the potential to create additional stressors that extend far beyond the deployment experience itself. For example, past studies suggest that veterans are more likely to be unemployed (Loughran, 2014), have elevated risk of physical illness, such as respiratory disease (Miller, 2013), have greater problems with drug and alcohol abuse (Fear et al., 2007; Jacobson et al., 2008), are more likely to experience homelessness (Fargo et al., 2011), and are at greater risk of suicide (Kaplan, McFarland, Huguette, & Newsom, 2012). Although each one of these events or conditions can negatively impact the well-being of children, the accumulation of such adversities can be especially damaging (Turner et al., 2006).

Past research also suggests that children with histories of parental deployment are at elevated risk for maltreatment. Several studies found that rates of child abuse and neglect increased substantially during the periods of deployment (Finkelhor, Ormrod, & Turner, 2007; McCarroll et al., 2010; Monson, Taft, & Fredman, 2009; Turner et al., 2006), pointing to maltreatment as another potential, and especially impactful, source of stress for children of deployed parents. Other forms of victimization could also be higher in this population. Intimate partner violence (IPV), for example, has been found to be elevated among soldiers who have been in combat, likely due to linkages between post-traumatic stress symptoms and IPV (McCarroll et al., 2010; Monson et al., 2009). Thus, children of deployed parents may be at increased risk for witnessing intimate partner violence. Heightened victimization risk could also extend beyond the family context. Several studies have documented substantial co-occurrence of victimization across different types and contexts (for example, maltreatment at home and bullying at school), and demonstrate that experiencing multiple forms of victimization is especially traumatic for children and youth (Finkelhor et al., 2007; Turner, Finkelhor, & Ormrod, 2010).

Most studies addressing risk among children with deployed parents have used samples drawn from US military bases or through lists of active duty personnel, often relying on small and/or convenience samples (Card et al., 2011). Although some studies have utilized population-based samples (e.g. Cederbaum et al., 2013; Sullivan et al., 2015), they are limited to a single geographic area. Such studies do not allow direct comparisons of children who have experienced war-related parental absence or deployment with those who have not, within the US population as a whole. In addition, most studies have focused on the effects of current deployment and/or short-term re-integration post-deployment. However, as discussed above, there is reason to believe that parental deployment may often result in a proliferation of family stressors that can have long-term effects beyond the reintegration period.

The current study uses a large nationally representative sample to: 1) compare children and youth who have experienced war-related parental absence or deployment with those having no such history on a variety of victimization types and non-victimization adversity, and 2) determine the extent to which cumulative past year adversity and multiple victimization might explain elevated trauma symptoms and delinquency among children with lifetime histories of war-related parental absence or deployment.

## 1. Methods

### 1.1. Participants

The National Surveys of Children’s Exposure to Violence (NatSCEV) are comprised of three cross-sectional studies conducted in 2008, 2011, and 2014 assessing the experiences of children aged one month to seventeen years. A short interview was conducted with an adult caregiver (usually a parent) in each household to obtain family demographic information. One

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