

Who gets left behind: Adolescent well-being in Washington State military families

Sarah C. Reed

Background: In 2007, 1.88 million United States children had at least one parent serving in the military. Adolescents are vulnerable to adverse health effects from parental deployment. Normal development may be interrupted and many experience worry, anxiety, and behavior problems at school. Qualitative studies underscore the difficulties associated with parental deployment; however, little quantitative research has addressed these issues.

Methods: We used cross-sectional data from the 2008 Washington State Healthy Youth Survey collected for adolescents in 8th, 10th, and 12th grades of public schools (n=10,606). Multivariable logistic regression was used to examine associations between parental military service (categorized as none, service without combat zone deployment, or service deployed to a combat zone in the past six years) and adolescent well-being (quality of life and depressed mood, including thoughts of suicide). Standard errors were adjusted for the complex survey design.

Results: In the 8th grade, girls with a deployed parent had higher odds of reporting thoughts of suicide (odds ratio (OR)=1.66; 95% confidence interval (CI), 1.19-2.32), and boys with a deployed parent had higher odds of low quality of life (OR=2.10; 95% CI, 1.43-3.10) and thoughts of suicide (OR=1.75; 95% CI, 1.15-2.67) compared to those with civilian parents. Boys in 10th and 12th grades with a deployed parent had significantly higher odds than their counterparts with civilian parents of reporting low quality of life (OR=2.74; 95% CI, 1.79-4.20), depressed mood (OR=1.50; 95% CI, 1.02-2.20) and thoughts of suicide (OR=1.64; 95% CI, 1.13-2.38).

Conclusion: Parental military status is a significant predictor of adolescent well-being, especially among boys. Military, school-based, and public health professionals have a unique opportunity to develop interventions and enhance school- and community-based resources to improve well-being of youth in military families.

Thesis committee:

Janice F. Bell, MN, MPH, PhD, Assistant Professor (chair)

Todd C. Edwards, PhD, Research Assistant Professor



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