

STATEMENT BY

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THE EFFECTS OF MULTIPLE DEPLOYMENTS ON ARMY ADOLESCENTS

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Despite the increased attention on the impact of repetitive deployments on soldiers, there has been very little research examining the effects of multiple deployments on Army children. And of the research conducted, much energy continues to be spent determining whether Army children are indeed stressed by deployments. Previous studies and thousands of Army households can confirm that deployments do cause stress in children. It may now be appropriate for research to shift to determining what factors influence the magnitude of that stress.

With those intentions, in March of 2009, Stephen Gerras and I received survey responses from a random sample of over 2,000 soldiers within U.S. Army Forces Command (the largest command in the Army and over 80% of the deployable force) who responded to an invitation to complete an anonymous, web-based survey. The soldiers—36% of whom were deployed—were also given a link and password to forward to their spouses, so over 700 spouses completed an identical survey. But we also gave the soldiers four links to send to up to four of their children between the ages of 11 and 17 which resulted in over 550 completed surveys from Army adolescents.¹

In addition to collecting demographic data such as age, soldier's rank, and the number of deployments experienced since 9/11, the surveys gathered the perspectives of soldiers, spouses, and adolescents measuring the perceived stress of adolescents along with variables concerning their beliefs about the war and the Army, the strength of their family, the child's participation in activities such as sports and clubs, the frequency and depth of communication between the parent and child during deployment, and the availability of supportive mentors such as coaches, teachers, and friends to discuss problems.

We also conducted a second phase of the study consisting of over 100 individual interviews with Army adolescents at eight Army installations throughout the country. These interviews allowed us to flesh out trends that emerged in the quantitative surveys. One of the first questions in the interviews with the children was, "How many times has your parent been deployed since 9/11?" Surprisingly, the most common answer was, "I don't know."

This response highlights a challenge confronting studies analyzing deployments and children – obtaining critical information from the most relevant source. If we want to know how many times a soldier has been deployed, the best source of that information is the soldier, not the child. If we want to know how well a non-deployed spouse handles things when their soldier is deployed, we should ask the spouse, not the soldier. And if we want to know how adolescents feel—if they are nervous, if they have disturbing thoughts, if they worry about what will happen in the future—we should ask the children, not their parents. The interaction of the three subgroups in our survey—soldiers, spouses, and children—allow such an analysis.

¹ For a complete description of this study, see Leonard Wong and Stephen Gerras (2010) *The Effects of Multiple Deployments on Army Adolescents*, Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pubs/display.cfm?pubID=962>

We were expecting a cumulative effect of deployments – that each subsequent deployment would result in higher stress in children. Analysis using only the survey responses of soldiers confirmed this hypothesis. Figure 1 shows that based on the perspective of soldiers, the greater the number of deployments of the parent, the more the soldier perceived their child as being stressed.

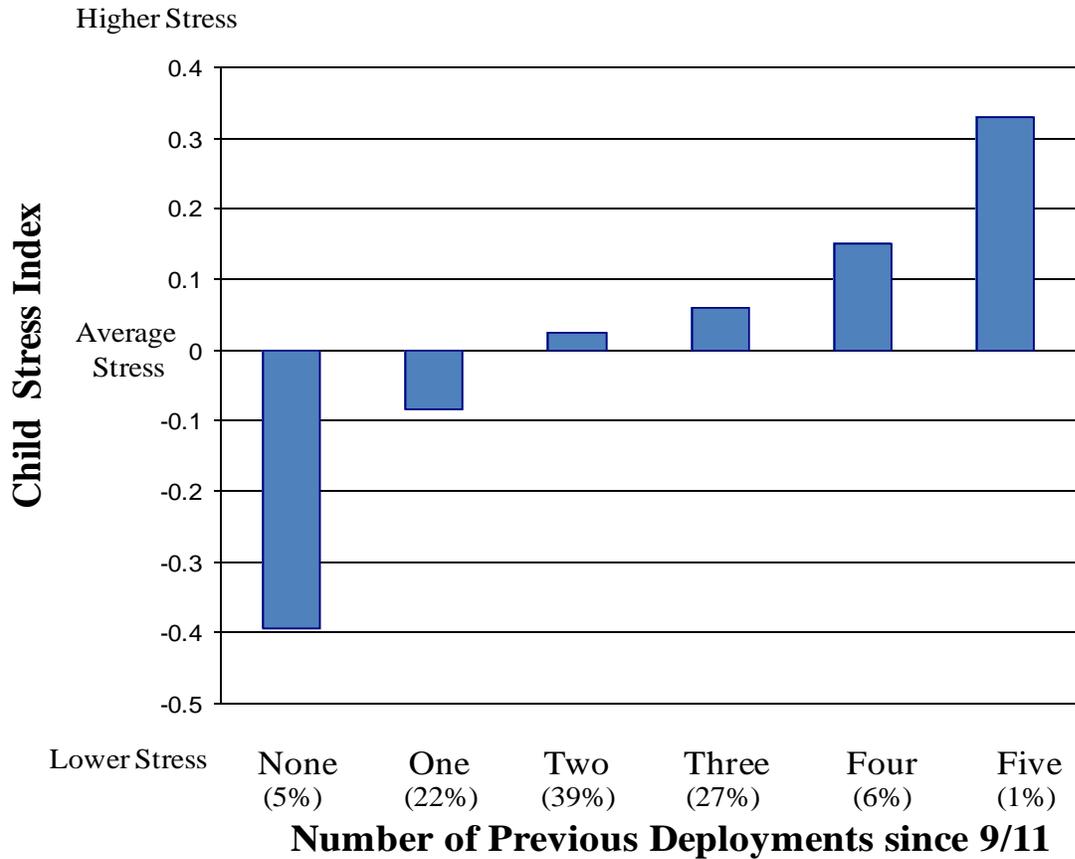


Figure 1. Cumulative Stress from the Soldier Perspective

But when measuring deployment stress using the children’s perspective (and number of previous deployments using the soldiers’ perspective), there was no cumulative effect. Figure 2 shows that adolescents who had experienced two previous deployments actually reported lower average stress than those with only one deployment in their past. The mean deployment stress of adolescents who had experienced three deployments was even lower.² With each deployment, it appears children learn coping strategies and mature.

² The size of the circle is proportional to the number of respondents and the center of the circle is the average stress index score in that category. The number of children experiencing four or five deployments was too small to derive any generalizations.

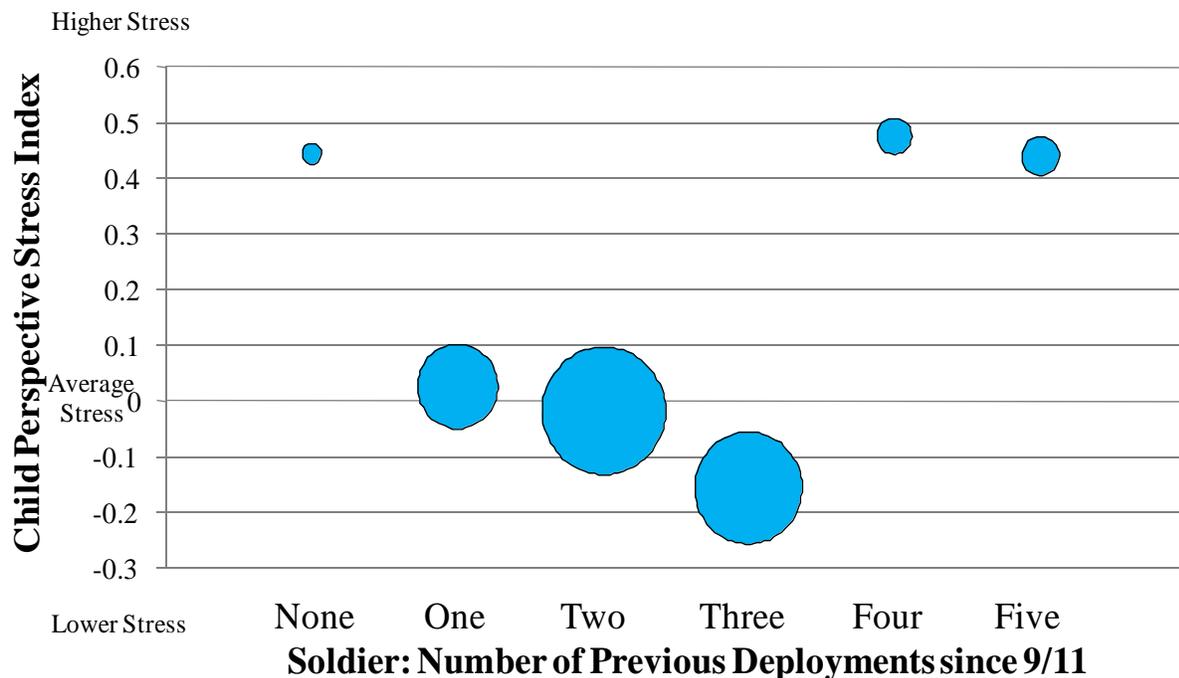


Figure 2. Cumulative Stress from the Child and Soldier Perspective

Because adolescent deployment stress was not directly related to the number of previous deployments, a child’s age was thought to be acting as a possible moderating variable. Prior research on deployment and adolescents had shown that their understanding of the deployment was often a function of their age. As children mature, they become more aware of a parent’s absence, the reasons for the deployment, and also the possible consequences of the deployment. As a result, age may moderate the stress experienced by adolescents during deployments.

Figure 3 shows stress levels for adolescents who were currently experiencing a deployment and those who were not. For those children who did not have a parent deployed, stress levels were significantly higher in older children. The upward trend in Figure 3 may reflect the relatively uncomplicated existence of pre-teens compared to the complex lives of teenagers.

For adolescents who did have a parent deployed, stress levels were expected to be parallel but higher to those adolescents who did not have a parent deployed. As expected, children from ages 11 to 13 with a parent deployed did report higher stress levels. But for ages 14 to 16, the children reported lower stress than those children who did not have a parent deployed. In other words, for mid-teen adolescents, stress levels are lower when their parents deploy. While the survey data could not provide an

explanation for this curious finding, subsequent interviews suggested that children between ages 14 and 16 often enjoy their new-found independence and experience less stress when their soldier parent is absent. For many teenagers in this age range, the decrease in supervision and relaxation of restrictions during deployment may lower the parental conflict common during this stage of adolescence. As one 15-year-old pointed out:

My dad—he’s the one who enforces the discipline and my mom’s kind of lenient. When he left, I went through a phase where I got into trouble—talking back to my mom, and going out when I wanted . . . But now that he’s back—not anymore!

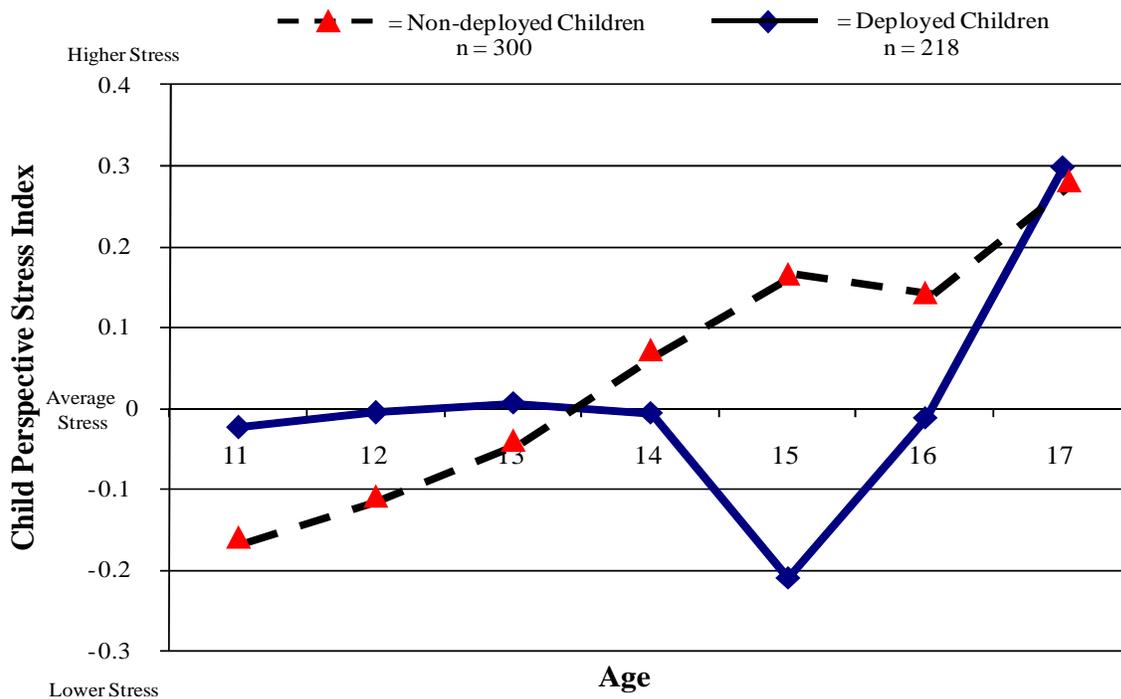


Figure 3. Stress and Age

While 14- to 16-year-olds reported lower stress when their parents deployed, 17-year-old adolescents with a parent deployed had the same mean stress levels as those with their soldier at home. The stress for 17-year-olds with a parent deployed may be explained by interview comments expressing special disappointment that their deployed parent would miss key occasions such as their high school graduation, college application process, senior year sporting events, or the job search after high school.

Returning to the study purpose of determining the key predictors of the stress levels experienced by adolescents during a deployment, we found that the best predictor of stress is a child’s involvement in activities – specifically sports. Additional significant predictors are the strength of the child’s family and the child’s belief that the American public supports the war, in that order.

Participation in sports as a predictor of deployment stress was unremarkable and youth sports programs are relatively easy to create. The strength of the family as a mitigator of deployment stress was also expected, but building strong families is definitely a much longer term concern. But that the strength of a child's perception of public support for the war would be associated with their deployment stress was unexpected and is a much more complex issue.

In addition to analyzing factors to influence the magnitude of stress during an individual deployment, we examined how well Army adolescents coped with deployments overall – how they dealt with life as an Army brat in a deployed Army. This inquiry moved away from a focus on day-to-day stresses and instead examined strategies for dealing with the difficult role of as son or daughter of a soldier during a long war.

How adolescents cope with a life of deployments has been asked in previous research. Figure 4 shows assessments from various studies and various perspectives of how Army adolescents are faring with lives involving multiple deployments. The first bar in Figure 4 shows that according to spouse responses in the 2005 Survey of Army Families, 49% of the adolescents were coping well or very well with deployments. The 2008 Department of Defense Spouse survey showed nearly identical results. The spouse perspective in the 2009 present study also shows almost identical results—which reinforce the representativeness of the sample in the current study.

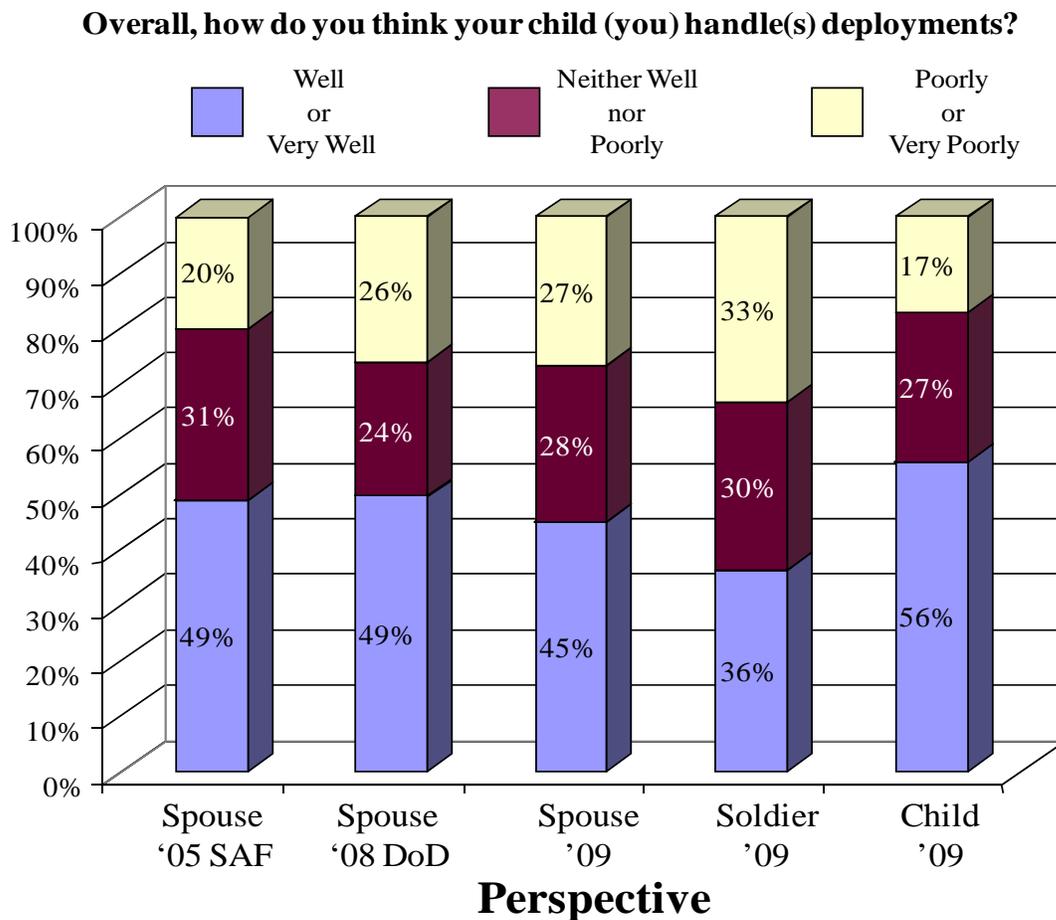


Figure 4. Coping with Deployments

Shifting to the soldier perspective, however, introduces an interesting finding. Soldiers appear to be more pessimistic with estimates that a third of their children are coping poorly or very poorly with deployments. A possible explanation for the pessimism of soldiers could be that soldiers feel responsible for subjecting their families to deployment separations in the first place and therefore tend to heighten negative perceptions because of guilt. Soldiers may also be less apt to believe that, despite their repeated absences, their children can fare well without them.

From the adolescent perspective, the contrast is even greater, yet in the opposite direction. When asked how they handled deployments overall, a surprising 56% of Army adolescents responded that they coped well or very well while a much lower 17% said they coped poorly or very poorly. In other words, adolescents are significantly more optimistic about their overall ability to handle deployments than either spouses or soldiers.

Before celebrating the unexpectedly high percentage of adolescents who claimed they handled deployments well, we must remember that the results can be extrapolated to imply that over 20,000 adolescent children in active duty Army families are not coping well with deployments. Today's Army adolescents realize that they too are inextricably linked to the war fight. If one out of every six Army adolescents reports doing poorly with repeated deployments, the situation can hardly be considered satisfactory. Yet, the findings illustrate an unanticipated and remarkable resiliency in most Army adolescents in dealing with lives marked by multiple deployments.

The intent of this study, however, was not to determine how many Army adolescents were faring well or poorly with deployments. Instead, the goal was to identify factors that predicted, in the case of an individual deployment, lower levels of deployment stress. Or in this stage of the study, to identify those predictors of an adolescent's ability to cope overall with a life of deployments.

Multivariate analysis using the perspectives of children, spouses, and soldiers showed that strong families, a strong non-deployed spouse, and the strength of an adolescent's belief that America supports the war were significant predictors of adolescent ability to cope with deployments. But the largest predictor of an Army adolescent's ability to cope with a life of deployments was their belief that soldiers are making a difference in the world.

This finding is surprising and yet intuitive. Army adolescents grow up in an environment laden with lofty notions such as sacrifice, duty, and selfless service. They are accustomed to hearing common Army aphorisms such as, "I know my soldiers and I will always place their needs above my own," and "I will always place the mission first."³ They understand that the Army is a "greedy" institution that demands all of their parent's time, energy, and focus. They also understand from firsthand experience that the family is another greedy institution requiring constant attention and care. They see deployed

³ From the Non-commissioned Officer's Creed and Soldier's Creed respectively.

soldiers caught in the middle—struggling to maintain balance in the pull of both noble institutions.

Some Army adolescents contend poorly in this dilemma; others—many more than soldiers or Army spouses would indicate—say they are doing amazingly well in these trying times. They still suffer from stress and anxiety during each deployment, but they can handle the life of an Army adolescent if they remain confident that the repeated absences of their parent are not in vain. The maturity of today's Army adolescents is exemplified by the comments of the very discerning 16-year-old daughter of a Sergeant Major who stated:

My daddy always being gone makes me stress out the most. He is in charge of a lot of soldiers and he always has to do what they do. "Set the example," he says, "Don't ask a soldier to do something you can't or won't do." I get scared that sometimes he will forget to be careful and he will get hurt. He has deployed so many times already, but he tells me to not worry. "Somebody has to do the job and take care of the younger soldiers."

I just wish that sometimes he would forget about soldiers and remember me and my sisters. We need him too. I just wish the fighting would stop, then he would be able to stay home with us. I love my daddy to death, but he will never give up on taking care of his soldiers.

Overall, our study reinforces the necessity of having a strong family and the value of keeping kids busy to mitigate the negative outcomes of an individual deployment. The study also highlights, however, the impact of attitudinal factors such as the influence of public opinion concerning the war and the importance—in a life marked by multiple deployments—of a child's confidence that their parent's call to duty is worth the sacrifice.