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Troops' kids feel war toll

By Gregg Zoroya, USA TODAY

WASHINGTON — After seven years of war, most children of combat troops are showing more fear, anxiety and behavioral problems, according to the Pentagon's most sweeping survey of the effects of war on military children.

Six out of 10 U.S. military parents told researchers their children have increased levels of fear and anxiety when a parent is sent to war, according to a survey of more than 13,000 military spouses of active-duty servicemembers. The results, tabulated early this year, were released to USA TODAY.

More than half of those surveyed say generally their children have coped well or very well with a parent who has gone to war. But one in four say the child has coped poorly or very poorly, and a third say the child's grades and behavior in school have suffered.

Nearly 900,000 troops with children have deployed to war since 2001, and the Pentagon estimates that currently 234,000 children have a mother or father at war. The survey last year had a margin of error of +/-4 percentage points says Barbara Thompson, head of the Pentagon office of Family Policy/Children and Youth.

The Pentagon is "very concerned" about the effects of multiple deployments, she says. Children have classmates who have lost a parent, she says, "it's in their face that it could happen to me."

Army documents show that nearly 600,000 active-duty soldiers have deployed once since 2001, 110,000 have gone twice, 38,000 have gone three times and 8,000 have done four tours. Deployments last from a year to 15 months in most cases. Despite plans to draw down forces in Iraq, Army leaders say lengthy deployments followed by short periods at home may continue for at least the next year or more.

The Pentagon declined to break out its child survey results by branch of service.

Troubled children add to a growing list of war strain issues that the military, and particularly the Army, struggle with, including increases in suicide, mental health problems, alcohol abuse and divorce.

A more recent study this year by the University of California-Los Angeles of nearly 200 families of active duty Army and Marine Corps personnel shows problems for children may not go away. A year after parents returned from combat, 30% of the children exhibited clinical levels of anxiety — levels requiring possible treatment. The children's average age was 8.

Children kept worrying that their parents might return to war, says the study's author, Patricia Lester, a UCLA psychiatry professor who released the results to USA TODAY. "When the parent puts on the uniform," she says, "The child becomes distressed that they're not going to be coming back."

The Pentagon survey of 13,000 shows that the children most affected by deployments were between 6 and 13, followed by those ages 2-5.

Both studies show that "we're seeing children and families under stress as a result of military parent deployment," says Stephen Cozza, an associate director for the Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress at the Uniformed Services University School of Medicine, who specializes in the study of military children.

"I think people are really paying attention to get ahead of it (the effects on children)," Thompson says.

Congress is spending more than \$700 million on programs for military families in the current supplemental bill to pay for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, 15% more than the Pentagon requested. Programs targeting the problem include:

- Offering \$6,000 to military spouses to pay for education, training and licensing or credentialing for careers that can be easily re-established should the family move to a different military post.
- Dissemination of more than 1 million bilingual Sesame Street kits that include Elmo videos designed to help children ages 3-5 cope with deployment and family changes. Also a video will be released later this year addressing the emotional trauma of losing a parent, Thompson says.
- Distribution of more than 200,000 copies of a graphic novel aimed at military families titled *Coming Home*, which looks at problems family face when the servicemembers come home.
- The Pentagon's creation of child and youth behavioral health specialists who work with families and educators to identify and help struggling children and families. The program has more than 300 full-time and temporary positions and is expanding.
- Offering free YMCA memberships to primarily families of deployed National Guard members and reservists. The program, which began last October, has provided nearly 26,000 memberships.
- Expanding teams of specially trained family counselors that the Pentagon provides to state military family program directors. "It's been a huge difference-maker for us," says Lt. Col. Robert Bramlish, director of the Ohio family support program for servicemembers.

There is some evidence of success. Army figures show that while incidents of emotional, physical and sexual abuse and child neglect increased during early phases of the war — peaking at nearly five cases per 1,000 children in 2004 — those numbers have since leveled off to between 3.6 to 3.9 per 1,000.

Cozza says the programs are there to help families, but they don't always ask.

"We need to help people understand that it's not that strong people don't have problems, it's that strong people who have problems address their problems," he says.

Thompson urges families who seek help to contact Military OneSource, a Pentagon resource center, at www.militaryonesource.com or 1-800-342-9647.

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