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Children of deployed service members have increased rates of psychiatric hospitalization

By Shari Roan, Los Angeles Times / For the Booster Shots blog

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Honolulu -- Many studies have looked at the mental health impact on members of the U.S. armed forces deployed in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan as well as the impact on their spouses. But little formal research has been directed at how children of deployed service members fare.

A study presented this week at the [American Psychiatric Assn.](#) annual meeting showed a link between a parent's deployment of six months or more and mental illness in children severe enough to require hospitalization.

Dr. Jeffrey Millegan, a psychiatrist with the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences, examined records of children, ages 9 to 17, of active-duty personnel from 2007 to 2009. He found a 10% increase in the rate of hospitalization for the children of parents who were deployed compared with children of military personnel who were not deployed. The risk was higher in children with a history of psychiatric problems and among children whose parent had a past psychiatric history.

More attention should be directed at the impact of long deployments on children's mental health, Millegan said.

The increased risk seen in children "is most likely related to the obvious family disruption when a caregiver leaves for a period of time," he said. "Deployment does cause increased mental health issues in the civilian parent and the parent that deploys. It's quite clear that it can have influence on the child."

Future research should explore the impact of repeated deployments on the mental health of vulnerable children, said Dr. Jeffrey Borenstein, chairman of the communications council for the American Psychiatric Assn. Borenstein was not involved in the study.

"There really hasn't been this kind of research up until now on the effects on the children of our service members," Borenstein said.

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