Exploring the Effects of America’s Ongoing Wars on the Children of its Soldiers

New York City – In a new report by the National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP), part of Columbia University’s Mailman School of Public Health, researchers detail a variety of ways war affects the wellbeing of children – academically, emotionally and socially – and warns that the mental health services and support system now in place are inadequate to handle a growing and increasingly apparent urgency.

“At nearly a decade of war, a growing area of research shows the negative impact on children, youth and families of U.S. military personnel,” says Janice L. Cooper, PhD, interim director of NCCP. “Without appropriate mental health support systems, these children and youth are at a significant disadvantage compared with their peers in non-military families.”

According to the NCCP brief, entitled “Trauma Faced by Children of Military Families: What Every Policymaker Should Know:”

- More than two million American children have had a parent deploy to Iraq or Afghanistan. At least 19,000 children have had a parent wounded in action. More than 2,000 children have lost a parent in one of the conflicts.
- Children in military families experience high rates of mental health, trauma and related problems. Military life can be a source of psychological stress for children. Multiple deployments, frequent moves and having a parent injured or die is a reality for many children in military families.
- Behaviors reported included changes in school performance, lashing out in anger, worrying, hiding emotions, disrespecting parents and authority figures, feeling a sense of loss, and symptoms consistent with depression.
- Media coverage of the war posed a significant source of stress for children and makes it much more difficult for children to cope with a parent’s deployment.
- Both departures to, and returns from, combat deployment cause stress in families that can lead to increased rates of child maltreatment at home. Rates of maltreatment in military families far outpaced the rates among non-military families after the U.S. started sending larger numbers of troops to Afghanistan and Iraq in 2003.
- Among families of enlisted U.S. Army personnel with substantiated reports of child maltreatment (physical, emotional or sexual abuse), rates of maltreatment are greater when the soldiers are on combat-related deployments. In fact, the rate of child maltreatment in families of enlisted Army soldiers was 42 percent higher during combat deployment than during non-deployment.

Dismayingly, another one of the findings detailed in the brief is a severe shortage of military and civilian mental health providers with expertise working with military families:

- 40 percent of all active duty licensed clinical psychologist positions remain vacant.
There is also a shortage of other specialties including social work and psychiatry.

- Military and community mental health providers face high burn-out and attrition rates.
- Military provider deployment and turnover results in lack of continuity of care for patients, even as deployment-related stress increases family need for services.
- Inconsistent policies on access to on-base mental health services for other than full-time military personnel impacts the ability to receive care for National Guard and Reserve families.

NCCP’s researchers recommend increased training in the use of effective practices for children of military personnel; training military and community mental health providers in self-care to reduce burn-out and attrition; and ensuring equal access to family support to active duty and reserve personnel. The NCCP brief, and its full list of recommendations can be found at: http://www.nccp.org/publications/pub_938.html.

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The National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP) is the nation’s leading public policy center dedicated to promoting the economic security, health and well-being of America’s low-income families and children. Part of Columbia University’s Mailman School of Public Health, NCCP uses research to inform policy and practice with the goal of ensuring positive outcomes for the next generation.