

Military Service and Marital Dissolution: A Trajectory Analysis

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ABSTRACT

“Military service adds additional challenges for married couples. Previous literature on service and marital stability is comprised of mixed results and has often ignored the timing of these effects. This timing is important as it helps disclose the nature of causality and has implications for both military and social security policies. Using a trajectory specification, I estimate the effect of military service on the likelihood of divorce during the volunteer’s period of service and the years following. Two veteran cohorts are examined, those who served during the early twenty-first century wars and those who served during the early 1980s. Among my results, the former cohort is shown to have had their divorce probability increased in the first 2 years post-service, while the opposite effect is found for the latter cohort. Unlike many previous studies of military service and marital stability, I find that effects are not overly dissimilar across racial groups.”

RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

- Researchers have found that military service adds additional challenges for married couples, such as spouses undertaking increased household responsibilities and the psychological effects of service that may impact marital stability. To further understand the relationship between military service and divorce, this study examines the probability of divorce during and after service.
- Married volunteers who served in the post-9/11 wars were slightly more likely to become divorced during their first 2 years post-service compared to the civilian population. However, married volunteers who served during the early 1980s were less likely to become divorced in the first 2 years post-service compared to the civilian population.
- Volunteers from both eras (1980s and early 2000s) were slightly less likely to be or become divorced during their period of active service when compared to the general civilian population.
- Unlike the findings of many previous studies, divorce rates were not significantly different among racial groups. Additional research is needed on the relationship between military service and the breakdown of marriages.



IMPLICATIONS

FOR PRACTICE

Military service in the post-9/11 era appears to increase the probability of divorce, with the risk highest during the first two years after military separation. Young married couples entering active duty or who are active duty should engage in conversation about effectively communicate with each other during stressful times. Since couples communicate differently, discussing healthy communication strategies early on could reduce misunderstandings during stressful events. Both active duty service members and recently separated veterans who are experiencing marital difficulties should consider talking with a marriage counselor. During these sessions, marriage counselors should help the couple talk through difficult topics and learn healthy communication strategies. Families seeking help for marital stability or support while a spouse is on active duty should enroll in one of the many programs available to help them address their specific needs and concerns. There are several programs and services to promote healthy marriages among active duty personnel and veterans, including offerings from the Department of Defense (DoD). Additionally, families preparing to separate from the military should consider talking with a marriage counselor about maintaining a healthy marriage after a military separation. Married couples should also participate in support networks with other recently separated military families. Couples should use their support networks to learn and improve strategies for maintaining healthy marriages and families. Marriage counselors should continue working to understand the challenges military families face during and after service.

FOR POLICY

The DoD and policymakers might continue creating policies that support healthy marriages and promote marital stability. Policymakers may provide funding to support programs and services that teach active duty, Reserve, and National Guard personnel tips to creating and sustaining healthy marriages. Considering The DoD might expand their family workshops, marriage enrichment classes, and couples' retreats to include additional sessions on effective communication during stressful events. Since many same-sex couples face discrimination the DoD and policymakers might offer workshops specifically for same-sex partners. Offering such workshops could help teach service members and veterans in same-sex marriages strategies for navigating points of marital instability. To minimize the negative effects of military service on marriages, the DoD might offer additional marital aid programs through partnerships with community organizations. Policymakers may allocate funds to provide more programs and trainings for marriage counselors on strategies for teaching military families how to effectively communicate and build strong marriages and relationships.

FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Further research is needed to better understand the relationship between the effects of military service and marital stability. The veterans included in this study were all from the All-Volunteer Force (AVF) era. Future research that examines the effects of military service on marital stability during the first two years after deployment and separation should include data from previous war periods. Including data from earlier war eras could allow for a deeper analysis on the impact of the AVF on marriages compared to a draft. Future researchers should also measure the impact of marital history and stability over longer amounts of time. A limitation of this study is that information on military occupation, rank, branch of service, and marital counseling history was unavailable. Though unavailable for this study, future researchers should assess the effectiveness of marriage counseling programs and conferences that are offered to service members and veterans. Future research could also study if the factors that contribute to one deciding to enlist are associated with marital stability and success. Though race was included in the analysis, it was limited. Future researchers should explore whether additional services to encourage marital stability for different racial/ethnic groups. Studying the effects of race and marital stability outcomes for military families could be important considering the varied experiences of service members and veterans.

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