



# Research Brief

## Marriage and Divorce in the National Guard and Reserves

### Background

The United States Armed Services consists of five service branches: Army, Navy, Marines, Air Force and Coast Guard. Across all five branches, military members belong either to the Active Component or the Reserve Component.<sup>3</sup> Members of the Reserve Component of the U.S. Armed Forces (which is comprised of both the National Guard and the Reserves) make up a sizable population within the United States. In 2008, there were 1.1 million total Reserve Component members.<sup>1</sup> Similar to the United States population, 70% of Reserve Component (Reserves and National Guard) members are white, 15% are black, and 9% are Hispanic.<sup>4</sup> In the years since September 11, 2001, the United States has seen one of the largest military movements since World War II, and members of the Reserve Component have been an important part of this troop mobilization. Unlike the civilian population, 82% of members of the reserve component are male.<sup>1</sup> On average, members of the Reserve Component are older than their Active Component counterparts (average age 32.3 vs. 28.3 years).<sup>4</sup>

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The unique challenges facing military couples are important issues for policymakers, mental health professionals, clergy and others. A common belief is that the divorce rate is higher among military couples than civilians, but the scientific findings are much less clear cut. It is extremely difficult to compare marriage and divorce rates between military and civilian populations because members of the two

groups differ in many ways that are important for understanding marriage and divorce.<sup>5</sup> For example, service members tend to be male and younger than the general population. Because both gender and age are related to divorce rates, it can be misleading to compare military marriage and divorce rates to those of the entire civilian population; nonetheless, some studies do show higher marriage and divorce rates among the military in relation to similar civilians.<sup>6, 7, 8</sup> In addition, an informal study conducted by the Army in 2005 showed that soldiers and their significant others rated the loss of their relationship as their number one concern regarding deployment – even more than death or injury.<sup>15</sup> It is therefore important to understand and respond to the unique needs of military couples.

### Definitions

**National Guard** -The National Guard, which comprises 468,000 members<sup>1</sup>, consists of the Army National Guard and the Air National Guard. The Guard (in other words, a dual-status organization) serves the states as well as the federal government.<sup>2</sup> Each state has its own National Guard, under the control of the Governor (although the President of the United States can request the services of the Guard). Members of the Guard typically serve part-time, except when they are activated to full-time duty.

**The Reserves** - All five branches of the Armed Forces include Reserves, with Reservists typically serving the military part-time, while also maintaining civilian employment. This differs from those who are members of the Active Component – they typically serve full-time. When activated, Reservists will usually serve the military full-time, and then return to part-time service when deactivated.

**Marriage Rates** - The rate of marriage is the number of people who get married in a given year. For example, although the percentage of adults in the U.S. who are married is 55%, they got married at a rate of less than 1% (in any given year).<sup>9</sup>

**Divorce Rates** - The rate of divorce is the number of people who get divorced in a given year. For example, although the percentage of adults in the U.S. who have been divorced is about 25%, they got divorced at a rate of less than 1% (in any given year).<sup>9</sup>

## Data - Marriage Trends

The marriage rate within the Active Component of the military is substantially higher than among civilians of similar age, sex and education, meaning that in any given year, the percent of military members who marry is higher than in the civilian population – which might be expected because of their age.

<sup>5,6,8,10,11,12,13</sup> Several factors may account for the higher rates of marriage, including selection factors that differentiate service members from civilians, such as traditional values among service members,<sup>5,6,7,11</sup> as well as military programs aimed at supporting and sustaining marriages. In general, marriage *rates* for Reserve and National Guard members are similar to rates for civilians.<sup>6</sup>

**Over half (55%) of all Active Component and 48% of Reserve Component members are currently married.**

Over half (55%) of all Active Component and 48% of Reserve Component members are currently married.<sup>4</sup> Although the percentage in the adult U.S. population is the same (55%), it is important to remember that the civilian population is distinct in many ways.

- Officers are more likely to be married than enlisted members in both the Active (70% vs. 52%) and Reserve

(72% vs. 44%) Components.<sup>4</sup> This may be because officers are older and have higher education and incomes.

- The proportion of Reserve Component members who are married has gradually decreased since the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. The proportion is down about 8% for Reserve Component enlisted members and down about 2% among officers.<sup>4</sup>
- Females are substantially less likely to be married than males in both the Active (46% vs. 57%) and Reserve (37% vs. 51%) components.<sup>4</sup>
- African American military personnel, in particular, are more likely to get married than African American civilians, possibly due in part, to more secure employment and health care.<sup>7,12,14</sup>

## Data - Divorce Trends

It is believed that divorce is more common in the military than among civilians. For women, studies consistently support this belief<sup>5,6,7,13</sup> but the evidence for men is less clear. Some studies find higher divorce rates for men within the military,<sup>6,7,8,13</sup> while others find lower rates when compared to similar civilian groups.<sup>5,11</sup> Some of the contradictory findings may be due to differences in the civilian comparison groups (e.g., age), while others may be due to differences in time periods (e.g., pre-9/11 vs. post-9/11).

- In 2009, the divorce rate in the Reserve Component was lower than among Active Duty members (2.8% vs. 3.6%).<sup>4</sup> At 0.35%, the divorce rate for the general U.S. population is one tenth of the Active Duty divorce rate.<sup>9</sup> However, the general civilian population differs in many ways (e.g., older) from the military. When Active Duty divorce rates are examined relative to those of comparable civilians (e.g., those

- civilians with similar age, gender, race, education), the Active Duty divorce rate is no more than twice as high as the civilian rate.<sup>6,7</sup> This is a much smaller difference than when compared to the general U.S. population.
- Women in the armed forces have a significantly higher divorce rate than their male counterparts.<sup>5,6,7,13</sup> In 2009, this rate was 7.7% for women (compared to 3% among men).<sup>16</sup>
- Divorce rates among the Reserves have risen about a half a percentage point since 2000.<sup>4</sup> According to the Pentagon, the divorce rate among U.S. armed forces has risen a full percentage point since the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001.<sup>4,16</sup>
- **Selection:** the military attracts and selects candidates with pre-existing risk factors for divorce. These risk factors include younger age, lower levels of education, having been victims of abuse, or having divorced parents. Additional risk factors for military couples include substance abuse, lack of emotional response by the military member, depression, domestic violence and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD).<sup>17,18</sup>

Although deployments challenge couples, some studies have found that deployment may lower the risk of divorce<sup>11</sup> and actually strengthen their marriages.<sup>19,20</sup> For other couples, especially those who are already in distress, deployment may be a reprieve from a difficult relationship and delay divorce.

Those who believe divorce rates are higher in the military point to the increased number of stressors and the challenges that come with deployment, as well as the incentives for premature marriage.

## Supports for National Guard and Reserve Families

The military offers supports that may stabilize and protect marriages, including steady paychecks, healthcare, and educational programs promoting healthy marriages.<sup>5,6</sup> The military also offers a number of financial supports to married members that are unavailable to single military members (e.g., larger housing allowance, dependent health insurance). These supports appear to influence some young service members to marry earlier than they may have otherwise.<sup>5,6</sup> However, many of these incentives do not apply to Reserve and National Guard members. Unlike many members of the Active Component and their families, Reservists and National Guard members and their families may live far away from military installations and may not be able to easily access the services that installations provide. Service providers in their local communities may lack familiarity with military experiences, hampering their ability to effectively provide assistance.

## Reasons for Divorce

Those who believe divorce rates are higher in the military point to the increased number of stressors and the challenges that come with deployment, as well as the incentives for premature marriage.<sup>5,6</sup> Couples divorce for many reasons. Two prominent explanations for why divorce may be more common among military in comparison to civilian couples are:

- **Stress:** specific challenges unique to military couples may contribute to divorces. These challenges include repeated and extended family separations, dealing with the soldier's psychological and physical injuries, and difficulty communicating during deployments.<sup>6,11,17</sup>

Military couples have specific stressors that civilian couples do not necessarily face. However, these unique challenges do not prevent many military couples from having happy, healthy and successful marriages. Marriage education can be effective in strengthening marriages and decreasing military couples' risk for divorce. For example, a select number of Army chaplains are qualified to conduct the PREP for Strong Bonds marital education program. One year following completion of this course, couples who completed the program had one-third the divorce rate of couples who did not participate.<sup>21</sup>

National Guard and Reserve couples may seek services from civilian providers in their communities. It is important for service providers to educate themselves about the unique challenges that military couples face in order to better serve them. Service providers can learn more about military couples through training programs offered by the Center for Deployment Psychology, as well as many of the sources listed above. Service providers can also help military couples by registering with TRICARE, the Military OneSource network, or by donating their time to the Give an Hour program (See Resources Section).

**Service providers can help military couples at all stages of their relationships.**

Service providers can help military couples at all stages of their relationships. Prior to marriage, service providers can help couples clarify the reasons they are marrying and the potential risks of marrying prematurely. Providers can also help couples prepare for deployment and the return home. Both deployment and reunion require military couples to renegotiate family roles and responsibilities. When delivering services, strategies may include assisting couples in recognizing and addressing the physical and

psychological effects of combat deployments (e.g. PTSD, traumatic brain injury). Further, strategies can address military couples' concerns about infidelity, substance abuse, parenting and domestic violence.

Issues concerning National Guard and Reserve members are important considerations for both policymakers and professionals working directly with couples. Marriage and divorce trends of service men and women must be understood in terms of both the implications of military service on family life as well as demographic factors that influence these trends (such as age and gender). Awareness of the challenges of military personnel and their families will help guide practitioners, mental health professionals, policymakers and others on the service delivery methods that most adequately meet the needs of the population.

## Resources for Practitioners

### Center for Deployment Psychology

[www.deploymentpsych.org](http://www.deploymentpsych.org)

The Center for Deployment Psychology trains military and civilian psychologists, psychology interns/residents and other behavioral health professionals to provide high quality deployment-related behavioral health services to military personnel and their families.

### Give an Hour

[www.giveanhour.org](http://www.giveanhour.org)

Give an Hour requests that mental health professionals nationwide donate an hour of their time each week to provide free mental health services to military personnel and their families. Research will guide the development of additional services needed by the military community and appropriate networks will be created to respond to those needs.

## **National Guard Family Program**

[www.jointservicesupport.org/fp](http://www.jointservicesupport.org/fp)

The National Guard Family Program establishes and facilitates ongoing communication, involvement, support and recognition between National Guard families and the National Guard in a partnership that promotes the best in both.

## **Resources for Reserve and National Guard Families**

### **Air Force Reserve Command Family Readiness**

<http://www.afrc.af.mil/library/family.asp>

Families of deployed reservists will be assisted and supported by the Family Readiness office. The types of deployment assistance services the family can expect include joint inter-service family assistance services, crisis intervention assistance, volunteer opportunities, reunion activities, information and referral services to appropriate support agencies, and more.

### **American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy Therapist Locator**

[www.therapistlocator.net](http://www.therapistlocator.net)

This directory will assist you in locating a marriage and family therapist in your area. The listed therapists are clinical members of the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy. Be sure to ask if the therapist has training regarding military families.

### **Army Family Readiness Group (FRG)**

[www.armyfrg.org](http://www.armyfrg.org)

The Army FRG website is a secure site only available to soldiers/ Department of the Army (DA) civilians and their family members. The Army FRG site enables soldiers/DA civilians to

access important information about their unit 24/7 from anywhere in the world. Soldiers/DA civilians can invite their family members to subscribe to the unit's site to provide them with a valuable resource to gain information about the unit.

### **Community Mental Health Clinics**

Community mental health clinics offer comprehensive mental health care services including treatment, rehabilitation and other support services for people suffering from mental health issues.

### **Military Chaplains and Local Clergy**

Chaplains and local clergy may offer emotional and mental support to military members and their families. They may conduct religious services as well as provide counseling on a variety of issues affecting soldiers. Additionally, military chaplains often have first-hand experience in combat zones.

### **Military OneSource**

800-342-9647

[www.militaryonesource.com](http://www.militaryonesource.com)

Military OneSource is provided by the Department of Defense at no cost to active duty, Guard and Reserve (regardless of activation status), and their families. It is a virtual extension of installation services.

### **Military Pathways**

877-877-3647

[www.MilitaryMentalHealth.org](http://www.MilitaryMentalHealth.org)

Military Pathways provides free, anonymous mental health and alcohol self-assessments for family members and service personnel in all branches including the National Guard and Reserve. The primary goals of the program are to reduce stigma, raise awareness about mental health, and connect those in need to available resources. The self-assessments

address depression, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), generalized anxiety disorder, alcohol use and bipolar disorder. After an individual completes a self-assessment, s/he is provided with referral information including services provided through the Department of Defense and Veterans Affairs.

### National Center for PTSD

[www.ncptsd.va.gov](http://www.ncptsd.va.gov)

The National Center for PTSD is a center for research and education on the prevention, understanding and treatment of PTSD. The center has seven divisions across the country.

The purpose is to improve the well-being and understanding of American veterans and to “advance the science and promote understanding of traumatic stress.”

### National Suicide Prevention Lifeline

800-273-TALK

<http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org/>

The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline is a 24-hour, toll-free, confidential suicide prevention hotline available to anyone in suicidal crisis or emotional distress. By dialing 1-800-273-TALK, the call is routed to the nearest crisis center in our national network (of more than 140 crisis centers). The Lifeline’s national network of local crisis centers, provides crisis counseling and mental health referrals day and night.

### Navy Family Readiness Group (FRG)

[www.navyfrg.com](http://www.navyfrg.com)

NavyFRG.com offers a networking community for military families, not just FRG associations. The Navy FRG brings the community together by facilitating communications between members.

### TRICARE Management Activity

[www.tricare.mil/tma/becomeatricareprovider.aspx](http://www.tricare.mil/tma/becomeatricareprovider.aspx)

Tricare Management Activity (TMA) manages the TRICARE health care program for active duty members and their families, as well as retired service members and their families, National Guard/Reserve members and their families, survivors, and others entitled to Department of Defense (DoD) medical care.

### Unit, Personal and Family Readiness Program (Marine Corps Community Services)

<http://www.usmc-mccs.org/upfrp>

The Unit, Personal and Family Readiness Program has been directed by CMC to provide policy and support for commanders as they implement their unit family readiness programs.

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