Washington

Deployments and child deaths

Exclusive investigation shows military failed some victims

By Andrew Tilghman
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The number of children in military families who have been killed through abuse and neglect has more than doubled since 2003, and has begun to exceed child abuse fatality rates in the civilian world, military records show.

In many cases, local military Family Advocacy Program officials had previous reports about those children and their troubled homes, but outreach efforts failed to save them.

Deaths of military dependent children related to abuse and neglect have risen steadily from 14 in 2003 to 29 in 2010, according to data from the Defense Department's Family Advocacy Program office.

The trend peaked in 2008, when 36 child deaths were linked to abuse or neglect, a level that exceeds rates found in the civilian world. Those data are based on a Military Times review of more than 400,000 electronic records and FAP reports released under the Freedom of Information Act.

Pentagon officials cannot say for sure how many military children die from abuse each year. The office that maintains the FAP database was unable to say whether there has, in fact, been a rise in child fatalities or whether the higher numbers result from improvements in record keeping.

Keeping those records has become a new priority for the Defense Department. Last year, officials instituted an improved tracking system for child fatalities.

But it will be several years until those data will be reliable enough to identify trends, said Pentagon spokeswoman Air Force Maj. Monica Matoush.

Outside experts say an upward trend would come as no surprise, highlighting a rarely discussed symptom of stress on the force that is linked to the frequent war deployments of the past decade.

"Most research suggests that child abuse and neglect was lower in the military" than in the private sector, said researcher Deborah Gibbs, who has studied child abuse in the military under a Defense Department contract.

"That shifted once large-scale deployments started," she said. "These are large and meaningful differences that are very clearly tied to specific events of the large-scale deployments."

Gibbs and others say little research has been done on military child fatalities caused by abuse or neglect.

One study in North Carolina found that the rate of military child fatalities is about double the civilian average.

There is evidence that the FAP office may be underreporting child fatalities. Officials are quick to caution that the FAP offices do not necessarily hear about every fatality. And data from individual services show a significantly higher number of deaths.

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The troubled family of 5-year-old Talia Williams came up on the radar of Army police and social workers four times in the six months before her father, Spc. Naeem Williams, left, allegedly beat her to death in 2005. Officials say one in five dependent children who died of abuse or neglect in the past decade came from families that were previously reported to local military Family Advocacy Program offices for either child or domestic abuse.

Known to the system

In many cases of child deaths, military officials knew the children were in troubled homes.

According to the Defense Department, about one in five deaths in the past decade involved a child or family that was previously reported to the military's family advocacy system for either child or domestic abuse.

The service-specific data show an even higher rate. The Army says six of the 14 children of soldiers who died from abuse or neglect in 2007 were the subjects of previous reports. And five other deaths should have been in the FAP files because those families were involved with other military or civilian assistance offices, Army documents show.

An Air Force review of 15 deaths found its FAP office had open files on about one-third of abusers. One underlying problem: "insufficient coordination between military health care providers, law enforcement agencies, civilian psychiatric facilities and the chain of command," Air Force documents state.

The Navy Department in 2009 reviewed the deaths of 12 children and concluded that five were homicides. Of those, two had histories of domestic abuse on file with the FAP, Navy records show.

That contrasts with data from the civilian world, where 10 percent to 15 percent of child deaths occur in families that were on the radar of local social service agencies and had received "family preservation" help within the five years prior to the deaths, according to the Department of Health and Human Services.

Four warnings, no help

The first time 5-year-old Talia Williams' troubled family drew attention from Army social workers came in January 2005, when military police arrested her stepmother for beating up her father, a soldier posted to Schofield Barracks, Hawaii.

The second warning sign came a month later, when a military day care worker noticed scars on the young girl's arms. They sent Talia to a doctor. According to court documents, the doctor "could not say with 100 percent certainty that it was not abuse, but he could say with 98-99 percent certainty that it was not abuse," and sent the girl home. The third time, a family friend lodged a hotline complaint with local civilian child protective services, directly accusing Talia's father and stepmother of abuse. Caseworkers did not follow up or relay the complaint to the Army.

According to court documents, "The log completed by the CPS Intake worker … remarked that 'step mother suspected of mistreating five-year-old, will re-contact with correct name and address'" — the last apparent record of anyone doing anything in response to that phone call.

The fourth time, also in June, military police got a call from a neighbor about a screaming child in the Williams home. When MPs entered the home, they found Talia "upstairs in a room, naked and mute, standing near feces on the floor" with scratches on her face, court records state. When police questioned her father, Spc. Naeem Williams, he said she got scratched playing with a friend.

On July 16, doctors say Talia died from blunt head trauma, allegedly beaten to death by her father. He was charged with murder and prosecutors are seeking the death penalty.

Now the Army faces a highly unusual lawsuit from Talia's mother, who was living in South Caroli-

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na all that time. Tarshia Williams claims the Army was negligent in her daughter's death amid clear warning signs, and that Army officials had a responsibility and duty to keep the child safe.

The Army's defense is that its FAP office and other military officials have no real legal responsibility to keep Talia — or any child — safe from abuse.

A federal judge has rejected that argument. The case will go to trial in January.

Data discrepancies

Every year, the services convene fatality review panels that investigate deaths linked to child and domestic abuse. Since their creation in 2004, those review boards have consistently reported higher numbers of child deaths than the FAP office.

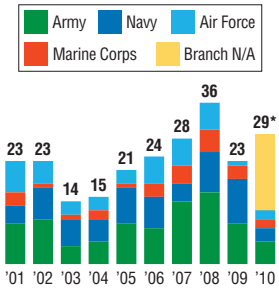
Dr. Barbara Craig, director of the Armed Forces Center for Child Protection in Bethesda, Md., cited those review boards when asked about an apparent rise in deaths.

"I sit on the Navy and Marine Corps spouse and child death review teams and one of my former staff members is on the Air Force team," Craig said in response to an inquiry from Military Times. "It has not been our experience that we are seeing more child abuse and neglect deaths over the past few years.

A TRAGIC TREND

At least 219 military children have been killed through abuse and neglect since 2001. The annual figure rose markedly from 2003 through 2008, which coincided with the heaviest deployments for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan — something researchers say is no coincidence.

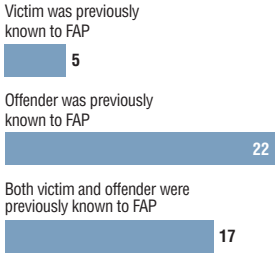
Annual child deaths



*A year-end number for 2010 was provided directly by the Defense Department because the database released to Military Times had incomplete data for that year.

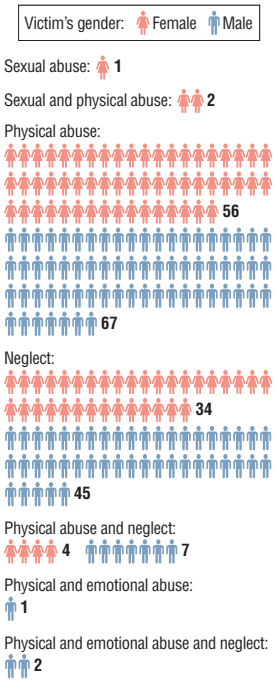
In the system

In some cases, the military's **Family Advocacy Program** office had received reports of problems in the family before the death.

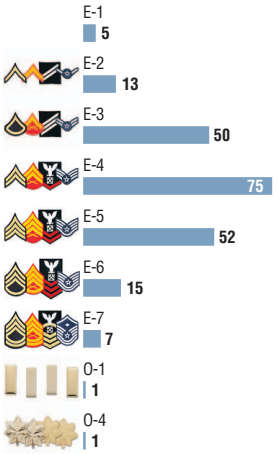


Kinds of abuse suffered by deceased

Boys were more likely to be victims than girls.

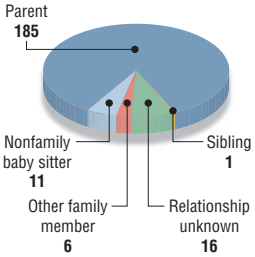


Paygrade of family sponsor

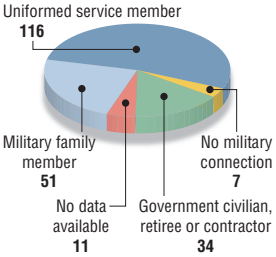


Relationships

The relationship of the suspected abuser to the child:



The relationship of the suspected abuser to the military:



SOURCES: DEFENSE DEPARTMENT — CHILD MALTREATMENT AND DOMESTIC ABUSE REPORTING SYSTEM, MILITARY TIMES STAFF RESEARCH

Methodology

These data were compiled from the Defense Department's Child Maltreatment and Domestic Abuse Reporting System, a database the Pentagon began keeping in 2004. The Defense Department provided an electronic copy of the database with more than 400,000 incident reports to Military Times following a Freedom of Information Act request. The data here reflect child fatalities involving dependents of uniformed service members. Military Times database editor Cid Standifer helped compile the data.

JOHN BRETSCHNEIDER/STAFF

"To the contrary, since the Armed Forces Center for Child Protection, in collaboration with the [Navy Bureau of Medicine] perinatal advisory board instituted a nonaccidental head trauma prevention program for new parents … the number of abusive head trauma cases has declined over the past decade," she added.

Head trauma, a symptom of so-called shaken baby syndrome, is a common cause of death for young children.

Experts say the military is a tightly knit community that may be better at identifying troubled homes where children are in danger. But these tightly knit military bases and communities can be isolated from local civilian child protective agencies.

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Abuse

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The military must report allegations of abuse or neglect to local civilian authorities, but "the military tends to want to care for its own rather than utilize the civilian network for assistance," said Barbara Cohoon, a deputy director for government relations for the National Military Family Association.

That tendency is rooted in the belief that outsiders do not understand military culture and will offer less effective assistance, Cohoon said.

For years, rates of military child deaths linked to abuse and neglect were far lower than in the civilian population. But that may not be true anymore. FAP records show the 36 deaths in 2008 outpaced national civilian averages for the first time.

For a community the size of the active-duty military — which has about 1.4 million children, according to Tricare — that rate of child abuse deaths is about 2.5 per 100,000. National civilian averages are about 2.2, according to the Department of Health and Human Services.

Records provided by the individual services suggest the number of deaths is significantly higher. For example, the FAP office recorded 24 child deaths in 2006. Yet service records show at least 38 children died from abuse or neglect in 2006, according to data found in documents produced by the individual services and obtained by Military Times.

That amounts to a death rate of about 2.7 per 100,000 children.

A records mess

Officials both inside and outside the military have criticized the Pentagon's efforts to track child deaths.

The Government Accountability Office has repeatedly rapped the Defense Department for failing to properly maintain domestic abuse records, which Congress mandated in 2000. A decade later, the Pentagon still provides "incomplete data" and "cannot analyze trends," the GAO said in a report last year.

The services also complain that Pentagon policy complicates data collection and investigations. For example, a major challenge to getting accurate data is a policy that prohibits local FAP offices from investigating a fatality until after "all criminal proceedings have been completed."

That can take years, which "severely delays the fatality review process … and possibly contributes to under reporting of deaths," stated a 2009 internal Army report on child and domestic abuse deaths.

The Air Force notes that FAP offices that investigate child abuse have no authority to obtain personnel records on the service members involved. Such records would help investigators determine the cause of death in individual cases and help identify long-term trends.

State and local law enforcement officials who receive reports of abuse or neglect in families living off base are not required to notify local commanders. The Navy report said this information would be a "significant benefit" and has encouraged the Defense Department to push Congress to enact a law making that a legal requirement.

For many reasons, the Pentagon cannot vouch for its own data. Defense officials recognized the problem in 2008, while reviewing data from previous years. They found "a potential inconsistency in the way deaths had been recorded in the Family Advocacy Program Central Registry," Matoush said.

Overshadowed by war

Domestic abuse was a major concern for the Pentagon about 10 years ago after Congress created a task force to study what many felt was a problem that deserved more light and heat. But the task force was overshadowed from the start when it delivered its final report to Congress on April 20, 2003 — the day the U.S. invaded Iraq.

That day was "totally bizarre," said Deborah Tucker, a task force's co-chairwoman who went to Washington to deliver and testify about the findings.

Lawmakers left the hearing room during breaks to check cable news reports about dust storms slowing down U.S. troops advancing toward Baghdad.

"We knew that day that what we wanted — for the department to focus on domestic violence and really help us create a segment of society that had eliminated it — was not going to happen," Tucker said.

The office of the undersecretary of defense for personnel and readiness followed up on some recommendations, assigning key responsibilities to FAP offices.

But the Pentagon closed its Family Violence Policy Office in 2007 and rejected a request from the task force to reconvene and evaluate the Pentagon's progress. □

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Parents' video-game distraction a growing trend in deaths

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Military child advocates are seeing signs of a disturbing new trend: parents so involved in video games and other forms of electronic entertainment that they forget to be parents.

This year alone has seen three such cases:

■ In June, Rebecca Christie, the former wife of an airman at Holloman Air Force Base, N.M., was sentenced to 25 years in prison after becoming so obsessed with the video game "World of Warcraft" that she let her 3-year-old daughter "wither away" and die from malnutrition and neglect, federal prosecutors said.

Bixby

Warner

A week later, her ex-husband, Air Force Sgt. Derek Wulf, was sentenced to three years in prison for child abuse in his daughter's death.

■ In May, former Electronics Technician 2nd Class (SS) Andrew Warner of Naval Submarine Base Kings Bay, Ga., was sentenced to eight years in jail after being convicted for child neglect because he was playing "World of Warcraft" while his child suffocated on a bed nearby.

Warner told jurors that he saw a pillow covering the 11-month-old boy's head but did not want to stop playing to make sure the child was OK.

■ In February, Lance Cpl. Michael Bixby of Marine Corps Air Station Miramar, Calif., was sentenced to 20 years in prison after prosecutors say he shook his 4-month-old son to death. Bixby had been playing a video game when the child began to cry, prompting him to grab the baby, breaking his arm and then shaking the child so hard that he died of spinal cord injuries.

This is a relatively new concern for child advocates, but the concern is growing, said Dr. Barbara Craig, director of the Armed Forces Center for Child Protection.

There have been numerous cases where "a parent or parents have been playing video games or using other electronic devices for long periods of time and either neglected their children because they were too preoccupied, or killed their children when the activity was interrupted," Craig said.

"It's not just video games," she added. "It's what I call 'electronic distractions' in general — video games, texting, phones, email, surfing the Web, etc. Many people are very connected to their 'toys' these days." □

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