

Child Abuse Homicides: A Special Problem within North Carolina's Military Families

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The media have done a good job of reminding us of the sacrifices that military families are called on to make, especially during wartime. Few of us, however, really understand the full spectrum of factors and circumstances that military families experience at all times.

Most of the military are young people and are paid rather poorly. They are not only subject to foreign deployment, but also to frequent changes of location within our country. Military families are thus separated from their extended families, and often feel a sense of isolation. Though there are support services available through the Department of Defense, most military families (as is also the case with civilian families) are reluctant to seek assistance, both out of embarrassment and an unwillingness to let the military hierarchy know that they are experiencing troubles.

In the Issue Brief for this issue, Michelle Hughes et al. describe the following "family risk factors" for child maltreatment: lack of resources; social isolation; inadequate monitoring by other family members; family disruption; and the young age of parents and their children.¹ Note that these risk factors match the general description of military families in the prior paragraph.

Indeed, these considerations were not in the scope of the North Carolina Child Fatality State Prevention Team when it conducted a 1998 study of child abuse homicide.² Findings from that study led to another study published by the North Carolina Child Advocacy Institute (NCCAI) in 2004.³ The surprising results of these combined studies, along with some

recommendations and the status of their implementation, are the basis for this commentary.

Child Abuse Homicides among All North Carolina Families: 1985-2002

Child abuse homicides are a significant cause of preventable injury deaths among young children in North Carolina. From the Child Abuse Homicide Study, published in 1998,² we learned that 85% of all homicides of children less than 12 years of age are due to child abuse, not "stranger danger." Most are committed by males, either the biological father or another male caregiver. Combining these numbers with ongoing data from the North Carolina Child Fatality State Prevention Team, we know that a total of 439 North Carolina children were killed by their parents or caregivers from 1985 through 2002—an average of one every two weeks for the entire 18-year period.

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Child Abuse Homicides among North Carolina's Military Families: 1985-2000

Data analysis found that counties with the two largest military facilities had by far the highest rates of child abuse homicides. That finding led to the further analyses below. As far as we know, North Carolina is the only state to have accurate child abuse homicide figures as far back as 1985. Therefore, we cannot compare ourselves to other states, and we do not know if these findings are typical for the country as a whole or are unique to North Carolina. Even so, the findings point out areas for improvement that would benefit all states and military installations.

North Carolina's Military Installations

North Carolina has six military installations. Only four, Pope Air Force Base and Fort Bragg in Cumberland County and Camp Lejeune and New River Air Station in Onslow County, had numbers large enough to provide statistically sound results. Comparing counties with small numbers is unreliable, since the results could be due to chance fluctuations. Therefore, we only studied the four installations and the two counties in which they reside.

How We Did the Study

We looked at all cases of child abuse homicides in children birth through ten years of age from Medical Examiner records. We stopped at the year 2000, since it was the most recent with complete data at the time we conducted the study. A military case was one where one or both of the parents or other caregivers who killed the child were on active duty at the time of the homicide.

The Findings

In this 16-year time period:

- 378 North Carolina resident children 0-10 years of age were killed by caregivers.
- The overall state child abuse homicide rate per year was 2.2 per 100,000 children ages 0-10.
- 26 small counties had no child abuse homicides during the 16-year study period.
- The rates for the larger population counties (Wake, Mecklenburg, Guilford) ranged from 2.1 to 2.4 per 100,000 children ages 0-10.
- Cumberland and Onslow counties had rates twice as high as the state average: 4.6 and 4.3 per 100,000, respectively.
- In Cumberland County, the child abuse homicide rate for children of military families was 5.0 per 100,000 children ages 0-10. For Onslow children of military families, the rate was 4.9 per 100,000. Tragically, these rates are more than twice the state rate.

Recommendations and Progress in Their Implementation

Understanding the root causes of parental violence against children and how to prevent it is obviously a complex issue. And the special stresses faced by military families only add to the complexity. This is not to say that the problem of child maltreatment in military families is being ignored. In fact, we commend the Department of Defense for its Family Advocacy Program, through which many services ranging from prevention to recognition and treatment on military installations are offered. It is clear from the tragic data, however, that much more needs to be done.

In the NCCAI issue brief on this matter, *Reducing Collateral Damage on the Home Front*,³ there are a host of national, state, and local recommendations offered for consideration. Below is a synthesis of these recommendations, along with notes on progress.

- *Military installations should strive for improved investigations of child fatalities, including standardized procedures for all responders and the sharing of information with the appropriate military and civilian agencies.* The Department of Defense is currently implementing a standardized fatality review process. This will provide more accurate data and a better understanding of the underlying causes of child abuse homicide in military families, hopefully leading to improved interventions that will prevent future occurrences.
- *Military installations should provide an array of prevention services—including primary, secondary, and tertiary components—designed to decrease the occurrence of child abuse homicide. A family violence approach should be employed to reduce both spousal and child abuse.* As noted above, the Family Advocacy Program sponsored by the Department of Defense already offers a broad array of services. Department officials are currently reviewing the Program both to enhance its relevance and to enhance access to services by military families in need.
- *Local Task Forces should be established in the counties with the highest child abuse homicide rates to develop strategies for better communication among military and civilian agencies to enhance opportunities both for prevention and for the handling of cases when they do occur.* Task Forces have been established in Cumberland and Onslow counties under the leadership of each county's department of social services and with the broad participation of community agencies and the military installations. Both groups have been quite active, and both have decided to take a broad community-based approach to the problem (i.e., a study of the occurrence of child abuse homicide in all families, not just military families). The enhanced spirit of cooperation has the potential to successfully address the critical problems at hand.

A Final Hope and a Final Word

It is likely that additional fiscal resources will be necessary to implement the enhanced services aimed at reducing the occurrence of child abuse homicide in military families. The North Carolina General Assembly has recently created the opportunity to access such resources through passage of the Military Support Act of 2005. Through tax breaks available under this statute, as much as \$2 million may be available to North Carolina's military installations annually to "improve the quality of life for military families." We hope some of these resources will be targeted to the tragic problems addressed in this commentary.

All of us involved with this issue recognize that being in the armed services injects unique stresses and difficult situations into the family lives of the men and women who courageously serve. We are grateful for their service to our country. We also recognize the many on-going prevention services, training initiatives, counseling systems, and other programs and services provided by the armed services to lessen violence within their families. Still, our findings indicate that we need to do more. Society can, and must, reduce the frequency and severity of family violence at-large and within military families. Helping our military men and women and their families is an important way to really "support our troops." **NCMedJ**

REFERENCES

- 1 Hughes et al. Preventing child maltreatment in North Carolina: New directions for supporting families and children. *NC Med J* 2005;66(5):343-355.
- 2 Herman-Giddens ME, Brown G, Verbiest S, Carlson P, Hooten EG, Howell, E. The North Carolina Child Homicide Study, 1985-1994. North Carolina State Child Fatality Prevention Team and the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner, Chapel Hill, 1998.
- 3 NC Child Advocacy Institute. Reducing Collateral Damage on the Home Front. Raleigh, NC. 2004. Available at: www.ncchild.org. Accessed September 13, 2005.

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with her own stuff.*

Tracie helps to make it possible.

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If you're like me and have wondered how you can make a difference, volunteer with *Faith in Action*. A neighbor's independence depends on you and me."



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Faith in Action Believer.

