



BARBARA THOMPSON
EXCELLENCE IN RESEARCH
ON MILITARY AND VETERAN
FAMILIES AWARD



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Military Family Research Institute

The Military Family Research Institute (MFRI) at Purdue University established the *Excellence in Research on Military and Veteran Families Award* in 2015.

The goals of the award are to:

- » bring visibility to issues of military and veteran families generally, and to outstanding new research specifically;
- » increase the impact of rigorous scientific evidence on programs, policies and practices affecting military and veteran families;
- » strengthen connections between researchers and practitioners interested in military and veteran families; and
- » raise awareness of research about military and veteran families across many disciplines.

The winning paper is selected through a rigorous process. No nominations or applications are accepted, and authors have no idea their work is being considered. Instead, a panel of accomplished scholars examines every relevant article published during the eligible year. Multiple rounds of review include standardized quantitative assessments. In this way, the panel arrives at the final selection.

In 2019, MFRI named the Excellence in Research on Military and Family Veteran Award after Barbara Thompson, who has served military and veteran families for more than 30 years.

MFRI thanks the Association of the United States Army and Military REACH for supporting this award, and joining us in our mission to advance important research about and for military and veteran families.

About Barbara Thompson

Barbara Thompson assumed the duties of director for the Office of Military Family Readiness Policy, Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Military Community and Family Policy in 2006 and retired in 2017. She was responsible for programs and policies that promote military families' well-being, readiness and quality of life. In this capacity, she had oversight for Department of Defense child development and youth programs, serving 700,000 children daily at more than 300 locations worldwide.

Thompson had purview over military family readiness programs, including spouse career advancement, military family life cycle and transition support, community capacity building supporting geographically dispersed military members and their families, the Family Advocacy Program, and Exceptional Family Member Program. She also coordinated programs for the severely injured and supported the rebuilding of the Ministry of Education in Iraq.

Thompson is continuing her leadership in the military community by advising multiple national organizations, including MFRI.



About AUSA

The Association of the United States Army (AUSA) is the only private, nonprofit professional organization serving all components of America's Total Army and its supporters. Since 1950, AUSA has provided a voice for the Army and vital services for Soldiers, Army civilians, and their families to advance the security of our nation. If you have a connection with the Army—professionally or personally—AUSA is your resource for exclusive access to scholarships and grants, business opportunities, educational resources, philanthropy initiatives, family programs, influential representation, and genuine relationships with a supportive Army community. Join us today at www.ausa.org/join.



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About MFRI

The Military Family Research Institute (MFRI) at Purdue University conducts research on issues that affect military and veteran families and works to shape policies, programs and practices that improve their well-being.

Founded in 2000, MFRI envisions a diverse support community that understands the most pressing needs of military and veteran families. To achieve this, MFRI collaborates to create meaningful solutions for them. This internationally-recognized organization is located at Purdue University's College of Health and Human Sciences, in the Department of Human Development and Family Science.



Military Family Research Institute

mfri.purdue.edu

About Military REACH

The purpose of Military REACH, a partnership between Auburn University and the DoD-USDA Partnership for Military Families, is to bridge the gap between military family research and practice. To facilitate the DoD's provision of high-quality support to military families, our objective is to make research practical and accessible. We do this by producing research summaries with action-oriented implications for our target audiences: families, helping professionals, and those who work on behalf of military families. Our team critically evaluates and synthesizes military family research related to issues of family support, resilience, and readiness. We identify meaningful trends and practical applications of that research, and then, we deliver research summaries and action-oriented implications to our target audiences.



militaryreach.auburn.edu



2024

AWARD WINNER

Sullivan, K. S., Park, Y., Richardson, S., Cederbaum, J., Stander, V., & Jaccard, J. (2023). Early and recent military and nonmilitary stressors associated with posttraumatic stress symptoms among military service members and their spouses. *Journal of Traumatic Stress, 36*(5), 943-954.

Study takeaways

- » Among both service members and their spouses, exposure to abuse in their childhood was, by far, the strongest predictor of post-traumatic stress symptoms, particularly when compared to military stressors like deployment, which were less important. Assessing these experiences in military couples is critical to understanding their risk of poor mental health.
- » Experiencing abuse as a child also exacerbated the impact of stressful experiences during adulthood, like financial difficulties or losing a loved one, on top of post-traumatic stress symptoms among both members of the military couple.
- » Stressful experiences among one member of the military couple were related to the post-traumatic stress symptoms of their partner. Though it has long been understood that spouses may be impacted by the stressful experiences of their service member partners, these findings suggest that service members are similarly affected by the stressful experiences of their spouses.

Researcher biography

Kathrine Sullivan, Ph.D., is an associate professor at the Silver School of Social Work at New York University. She received her doctoral degree from the University of Southern California's Suzanne Dworak-Peck School of Social Work. Sullivan's work employs quantitative and qualitative methods to explore the impact of stress, trauma and other risk exposures on family process and mental health outcomes, primarily among the families of service members, veterans and other vulnerable family systems.

FINALISTS

Bock, J. E., Tucker, R. P., Brown, R. P., Foster, S., & Anestis, M. D. (2023). Veteran suicide rates mirror, but do not account for, elevated suicide rates among the general population in US cultures of honor. *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior*, 53(4), 692-701.

Study takeaways

- » Veteran total and firearm suicide rates are higher compared to the general population. In states with cultures of honor that emphasize personal and family reputation and the ability to defend oneself, overall suicide rates are higher compared to dignity-oriented states, in part because firearms are more accessible in these states. Considering that veterans tend to live in states where firearms are more accessible and that veteran population rates predict both statewide suicide rates among the general, it is possible that the elevated suicide rates seen in honor-oriented states are in part due to those states having a greater presence of veterans compared to dignity-oriented states.
- » After controlling for factors associated with where veterans live and with suicide rates (e.g., rural and economically precarious areas), we found that a greater proportion of veterans live in honor-oriented states compared to dignity-oriented states. More importantly, we observed that both veteran and non-veteran total and firearm suicide rates were higher in honor-oriented states compared to dignity-oriented states, but rates were much higher for veterans. Statewide differences in all four suicide rates were indirectly explained by honor-oriented states having higher firearm ownership rates than dignity-oriented states.
- » These findings add to research on the honor-suicide association by showing that it also applies to veterans. Furthermore, results could support the development of public health campaigns aimed at veterans, such as service ads around suicide prevention, that reflect honor-oriented themes and address honor-based concerns.

Researcher biography

Jarrod Bock, Ph.D., is an academic professional lecturer at the University of Wyoming. His research broadly examines how individual (e.g., gender norms) and state-level features (e.g., firearm accessibility) of cultures of honor impact important health outcomes, such as suicide. Recently, he has examined honor within the military context, focusing on cultural differences in veteran suicide rates, military enlistment, and the relationship between soldiers' honor norm endorsement and disbelief in private firearm ownership affecting one's own suicide risk. He currently serves on the editorial board for *Psychology of Men and Masculinities*, a peer-reviewed journal focused on men and gender identity.

Dorrance-Hall, E., Gettings, P., Wilson, S. R., Hintz, E., & Vidal, A. (2023). Making sense of changes in military partners' post-deployment adjustment concern: Turning points, trajectories, and accounts. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 40(11), 3679-3702.

Study takeaways

- » Adjustment post-deployment is both a couple and family challenge. Participants' stories show that partners are (a) on the "front line" observing the behavior changes of their service member – and therefore are important resources for identifying and encouraging SMs to seek behavioral healthcare when needed, and (b) often facing their own behavioral healthcare challenges along with reintegrating their service member back into their lives.
- » The challenges service members face when returning home (and the concerns their loved ones have) are varied and often broader than just mental health. This study supports the idea that post-deployment adjustment occurs in a variety of contexts. Participants' explanations for why they were concerned about their service member included many aspects of life including the romantic relationship, family relationships, career issues, and physical health.
- » The turning points framework used in this study could be incorporated into family reintegration programs as a tool family members could use to think through and document their concern for a service member's adjustment post-deployment. Families may benefit from exploring reasons for their concerns, as understanding one another's sense making may help them provide more coherent stories which are linked to greater well-being.

Researcher biography

Elizabeth Dorrance-Hall, Ph.D., is an associate professor in the Communication Department at Michigan State University and Director of the Family Communication and Relationships Lab. She received her Ph.D. in Family and Interpersonal Communication from Purdue University. Elizabeth's research focuses on communication processes in close relationships, especially in the context of family. Recent projects have explored family member marginalization, family-of-origin dynamics for first-generation college graduates, and difficult conversations in families and the workplace. Elizabeth is funded by a National Science Foundation CAREER Award grant to assess effective parent-daughter communication about STEM interests and careers in families from diverse backgrounds.



Hyatt, C. S., Halvorson, M. A., & Campbell, S. B. (2023). A daily diary study of the romantic partner relationship dynamics associated with anger and other posttraumatic stress disorder symptoms. *Journal of Traumatic Stress, 36*(3), 484-495.

Study takeaways

- » 64 couples comprised of a male service member with PTSD and a female romantic partner were surveyed. Participants who reported higher levels of PTSD symptoms across the two-week study period tended to experience more relationship challenges.
- » Across all PTSD symptoms tested, day-to-day fluctuations in anger had the greatest impact on relationship functioning. Specifically, on days when service members reported higher levels of anger, both service members and their romantic partners felt less emotionally close to one another.
- » Additionally, higher levels of service member anger were related to more accommodation behaviors by romantic partners (e.g., tiptoeing around to not upset the service member). Although accommodation behaviors are well-intentioned, they ultimately contribute to the maintenance of PTSD symptoms over the long term.

Researcher biography

Courtland Hyatt, Ph.D., is a clinical psychologist and assistant professor in the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at Emory University in Atlanta, GA, USA. Hyatt's research interests include aggression, personality, PTSD, neuroimaging, and open science methods. His current research projects have an applied focus, with the aim of improving and disseminating effective treatments for antagonistic behavior in adults. In the Emory Healthcare Veterans Program, Hyatt provides clinical services for PTSD, anxiety and mood disorders, and harmful substance use. He strives to deliver evidence-based, warm psychotherapy that promotes value-driven living in his patients.

Sullivan, K. S., Richardson, S., Ross, A., Cederbaum, J. A., Pflieger, J., Abramovitz, L., Bukowinski, A., & Stander, V. (2023). Pre- and perinatal risk factors for child maltreatment in military families across the first two years of life. *Child Maltreatment, 28*(2), 209-220.

Study takeaways

- » The rate of suspected or met-criteria child maltreatment in the first two years of a baby's life was low in this population of military families, at less than 1% compared to 3.7% in the general population.
- » The health of both parents and children appears related to risk for maltreatment. Among babies, premature birth was the strongest risk factor for maltreatment before age 2, increasing risk of abuse or neglect by over 130%. Among service member parents, better physical health was associated with a lower risk for maltreatment.
- » Risk for maltreatment was lower in the Navy and the Air Force compared to the Army. These differences may be partially related to how maltreatment is investigated and addressed across branches but may also be connected to higher rates of deployment in the Army as well as demographic factors, like socioeconomic status, which vary across branches.

Researcher biography

Kathrine Sullivan, Ph.D., is an associate professor at the Silver School of Social Work at New York University. She received her doctoral degree from the University of Southern California's Suzanne Dworak-Peck School of Social Work. Sullivan's work employs quantitative and qualitative methods to explore the impact of stress, trauma and other risk exposures on family process and mental health outcomes, primarily among the families of service members, veterans and other vulnerable family systems.

2023 FINALISTS, CONTINUED

Shepherd-Banigan, M., Shapiro, A., Stechuchak, K. M., Sheahan, K. L., Ackland, P. E., Smith, V. A., ... & Van Houtven, C. H. (2023). Exploring the importance of predisposing, enabling, and need factors for promoting veteran engagement in mental health therapy for post-traumatic stress: A multiple methods study. *BMC Psychiatry*, 23(1), 372.

Study takeaways

- » Qualitative interviews revealed that a positive attitude toward treatment by Veterans and their support person, as well as the Veteran's desire to improve social relationships, motivated their engagement in PTSD treatment.
- » Veterans emphasized the importance of the emotional and logistical support of their social network. For example, Veterans valued family checking in regularly and providing transportation or childcare so they could attend therapy sessions.
- » Veterans with a greater need for healthcare services tended to initiate and remain in therapy. A substance use diagnosis, emergency department visits, and greater need for PTSD medication refills all related to therapy retention.

Researcher biography

Megan Shepherd-Banigan, Ph.D., is an assistant professor in Duke University's Department of Population Health Science and School of Medicine and Core Faculty in the Duke-Margolis Institute for Health Policy. She is also a Health Research Scientist at the Durham VA. Shepherd-Banigan won a VA Career Development Award from 2019-2024 that examined how to strengthen family support for veterans undergoing traumatic stress treatment. She directs the Durham VA-Cares Evaluation Center which evaluates the VA National Caregiver Support Program.

HONORABLE MENTIONS

DeGarmo, D. S., Gewirtz, A. H., Li, L., Tavalire, H. F., & Cicchetti, D. (2023). The ADAPT parenting intervention benefits combat exposed fathers genetically susceptible to problem drinking. *Prevention Science*, 24(1), 150-160.

Eliacin, J., Patterson, S. M., Mendez, D. M., Burgess, D. J., Traylor, M. H., Borden, M. Y., ... & Matthias, M. S. (2023). Findings from a peer-facilitated, social isolation intervention in the Veterans Health Administration healthcare system: A mixed-methods, pilot feasibility study. *Journal of General Internal Medicine*, 38(16), 3460-3471.

Wasserman, M., Dodge, J., Barrera, W., Aralis, H., Woodward, K., & Lester, P. (2023). The impact of changes in family communication on sustained mental health symptom improvement in parents/caregivers following a military family intervention. *Military Behavioral Health*, 11(3), 176-188.

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