

WHAT MAKES DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AMONG VETERAN FAMILIES UNIQUE?

THE REASONS FOR DV AND IPV may be a complex set of circumstances—including mental and cognitive trauma, and economic factors after transitioning out of the military—which can create a recipe for violence. But the exact nexus between the root cause and the violence may or may not be directly linked to military service-related trauma. Research on veteran IPV generally focuses on the relationship between combat-related PTSD and IPV perpetration (Gerlock, 2004; Orcutt, King, & King, 2003; Sayers, Farrow, Ross, & Oslin, 2009).

Not all veteran families experience domestic and inter-partner violence (DV and IPV), but the trauma of war and military service can easily come home. The transition from military to civilian life can bring enormous strain to the family. Indeed, the common terminology when leaving the military is not retirement but separation, and encompasses a true separation from one culture to another.

Providers working with veteran families who've experienced domestic or inter-partner violence should consider the unique circumstancesⁱ and types of violence the veteran family may be experiencing. **It is important to emphasize that not all veteran families experience violence in their homes**, and DV/IPV among veteran families is not limited to these scenarios.

What type of abuse might the veteran family experience?

Intimidation and threats, both non-weapon and weapon use:

A victim spouse/partner may be especially subject to intimidation as the service member has in-depth training in hand-to-hand combat and weaponry and may have close access to guns. Access to, and skilled use with weapons (by both service members and veterans) make them a unique cohort, **but most military domestic violence cases do not involve weapons.**

Economic abuse: This is a commonly identified type of abuse among military families. This can occur when a victim spouse/partner may fear leaving the relationship with the service member because of a loss of financial benefits. Often spouses are not part of the workforce as the family may move around frequently. Service member victims may experience this abuse when deployed and the spouse is in charge of finances, may hold Power of Attorney and may withhold money from the spouse. Veteran victims reliant on benefits from the VA may have them withheld by spouses or caregivers.

Caregiver burden: A veteran with injuries related to military service may rely on their spouse/partner as a caregiver. The caregiver might experience stress as a result of the overwhelming financial and emotional responsibility of caring for them. This most often occurs when the veteran has a physical injury, post traumatic stress, traumatic brain injury, or another service-related issue. The impact of co-occurring IPV perpetration is even greater in this circumstance, as the caregiver has the added stress of taking care of the perpetrator. The caregiver victim may be less willing to leave the service member if they are the primary caregiver. On the flipside, a caregiver may experience such a great amount of stress that it may escalate to abusing the veteran. Family caregivers are also eligible for VA benefits for that care, making family separation more difficult economically.

Isolation: Military families are a unique culture. They most often live in “‘closed society’ military bases.” Further, a service member may use certain cultural norms such as upholding secrecy to isolate the military spouse/partner. The constant moving and geographic mobility further isolate the spouse/partner who is often away from family and friends.

Witness abuse/resistive violence: Children and siblings may witness the abuse of one another or their parent. This may be accompanied by threats from the perpetrator to keep the “family secret.” Also, the spouse/partner victim may engage in resistance violence to mitigate abuse and prevent it from escalating.

Using children: A military spouse/partner may threaten to move children away while the service member is deployed.

Mutual abuse and women perpetrator abuse: IPV among veteran couples can often be mutual whereby the veteran can be both victim and perpetrator. Also, women service members and veterans may be perpetrators as well.

Socioeconomic factors: Socio-demographic differences in risk for violence have been found for gender, race/ethnicity, pay grade, religious faith, marital status, and career type (e.g. lower rank predicted higher risk for both perpetration and victimization across men and women).

Obstacles to reporting

Military identity: Especially for families living on base in a “closed society,” divorce and separation from the spouse is a complete severance of their military family identity.

Veteran as the conduit to care: Often the service member is the head of household and conduit to care, and income and healthcare is lost if they are discharged from the military.

Financial stress: Spouses may be loath to report because abuse as it may compromise the family’s already marginal economic welfare.

Lautenberg Act: Incidents of DV may go unreported in the military because a record of DV can compromise the service members’ security clearance. The *Lautenberg Amendment* precludes those convicted of DV from possessing a firearm, which often results in the service member being discharged.

Lack of privacy: Because of the “closed society” nature of the military, there is a potential for word of the abuse to reach other service members and families on base. This lack of privacy makes the family fear being judged by other families and often inhibits reporting.

For more information

about Swords to Plowshares’ domestic violence research, as well as a screening guide and training program for civilian providers to identify veteran families and route them to treatment when appropriate, visit swords-to-plowshares.org/advocacy-and-policy/research-publications.

Quick resource lists for providers on veteran DV:

- National Center on Domestic and Sexual Violence:
www.ncdsv.org/ncd_military_veterans.
- Battered Women’s Justice Project:
www.bwjp.org/military.

Institute for Veteran Policy

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¹Types of abuse among veteran families were identified in a 2011 roundtable of San Francisco Bay Area providers organized by Swords to Plowshares.