

Child abuse and neglect soar in US military families

By Shelley Connor
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A recent investigation by the *Los Angeles Times/Tribune* has uncovered a significant increase in child abuse and neglect among US military families since 2003.

Using Freedom of Information Act requests, the *Times* gained access to reports from the Army, Navy and Air Force that reveal that, in many cases, military officials failed to act upon known or suspected cases of child abuse in military families.

The reports confirm that child fatalities in military homes jumped from 14 in 2003 to 38 in 2012; from 2012 to 2014, they remained above 30 per year until they dropped to 23 in 2015—the last year that Pentagon records are available. That same year, the Family Advocacy Program (FAP), a military program aimed at intervening in cases of domestic violence and child neglect, reported 5,378 cases of child abuse and neglect in military families.

For years, the Pentagon has maintained that child abuse is less common and less severe in military homes than it is among the civilian population. It asserts that its vigilance in weeding out drug and alcohol users screens out most abusive parents—moreover, service members, the Pentagon says, are free from the stress of unemployment faced by most civilians, which decreases the financial strain upon military families.

Most proudly, the Pentagon points to its Family Advocacy Program (FAP) and the obligation of base commanders to monitor the welfare of their troops' families and to order the FAP to intervene in cases where service members are suspected or known to have abused their family members.

Despite the Pentagon's boasts, however, the rate of child abuse and neglect in the military has risen from 4.8 incidents per 1,000 children to 7.2 within five years. This rise, demonstrated by the Pentagon's own records, has occurred even as the number of enlisted personnel has

declined by 10 percent in recent years.

Moreover, FAP personnel point out that these are only the cases to which its caseworkers are alerted. The *Times* report quotes Rene Robichaux, who oversees the Army's clinical child abuse treatment program, who said, "We get about 25 percent of the incidents. The rest occur behind closed doors."

The FAP was founded in the years following the Vietnam War, when there was a spike in spousal abuse cases amongst returning military personnel. Previous efforts by the military to intervene in domestic abuse cases amongst its members had been poorly funded and unenthusiastically maintained.

FAPs predecessor, the Child Advocacy Program, was established in 1976 to address mounting incidents of child abuse in military homes. In 1979, after multiple reports demonstrated that military service members were responsible for 15 percent of the nation's total spousal abuse cases, the program was expanded to include spouses and renamed the Family Advocacy Program. The program has a budget of around \$2 million a year, and is brandished by the Department of Defense both as a benefit to military recruits and as a shield against the public outcry against the military's treatment of enlistees and their families.

Child abuse and neglect are known to correlate strongly with deployment. Despite this, base commanders have failed to report cases of abuse to the FAP. Child welfare advocates have pointed out that there is reluctance among commanders to address cases of abuse and neglect, because they can lead to a service member's discharge. Not only that, these reports can be seen as evidence of a commander's incompetence to monitor his or her troops.

Several recent high-profile child murder cases have also shown that FAP referrals alone are inadequate to address concerns over child maltreatment in military families.

In the case of 22-month-old Tamryn Klapheke, who

died of starvation on Dyess Air Force Base, the FAP had previously intervened, along with Texas' Child Protective Services, after the infant's malnourished state was reported by doctors. Tamryn's father was serving overseas at the time. Tamryn's mother, Tiffany Klapheke, cooperated with FAP's requirements, making all of Tamryn's assigned doctors' visits and completing a parenting course.

Three months after a social worker had noted in Tamryn's file that fatality was likely if she were not fed appropriately, the family was released from the program's oversight. Autopsy reports demonstrate that Tiffany Klapheke had provided neither food nor water for Tamryn for at least four days before she died.

All branches of the military have increased staffing for the FAP in recent years. Nevertheless, the program is overwhelmed, particularly when units return from deployment. A service member might wait for three weeks or more to speak with an FAP therapist after being referred to the program. Moreover, the cases that are referred tend to be extreme, demanding immediate attention. There is an incentive for caseworkers and their managers to quickly move families through the program in order to work through the caseload.

In some cases, parents never come into contact with an FAP caseworker, even when there are multiple, well-documented reports of abuse.

Such was the case of Talia Williams, a five-year-old girl living on Wheeler Air Force Base, who died after being beaten by her father and stepmother in July of 2005. Mrs. Williams had been reported by coworkers numerous times for remarking that beating children was acceptable as long as there were no incriminating marks. Her father did not take such precautions; the staff at Talia's daycare notified military police after finding bruises on Talia's arms and back. Talia had told them that her father beat her with a paddle when he was angry.

The FAP agent assigned to Talia's case never took action; Naeem Williams was sentenced to life in prison for his daughter's murder. In 2008, Talia's mother sued the Army for negligence and wrongful death in federal court. The Justice Department attempted to block the suit, arguing that the Army was not responsible for child abuse on its bases. U.S. District Judge Alan C. Kay rejected the government's motion to dismiss. Last year, the Justice Department settled with Tarshia Williams for \$2 million—the amount of the FAP's yearly budget—in the case of her daughter's death.

The United States has been at war continuously for

more than 15 years. Decreases in enlistment have meant that enlistees face multiple deployments. The stress placed on these service members and their families is well-documented.

Children of service members suffer from anxiety at a higher rate than their civilian cohort. Behavioral problems, distractibility, and cognitive impairment among the children of deployed troops reveals the tremendous strain that their parents' deployments places upon their young shoulders. When their parents return, readjustment to civilian life is fraught with peril. Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is prevalent among these service members; added to that is the economic uncertainty to which they return.

It is wholly unsurprising that child abuse and neglect are increasing in these families. In fact, the military's own research, conducted since the late 1970's, confirms that this is not a novel, undocumented phenomenon. The evidence accrued steadily throughout the 1980's that spousal abuse was much more prevalent in the homes of service members who had been deployed, and child abuse, it is well-known, is much more likely in families where there is spousal abuse.

The military's use of the FAP as a fig leaf to hide behind is therefore obviously disingenuous, as is the Pentagon's insistence that military families are well-cared for economically.

Many service members, lured to war by the dangling of recruitment bonuses, are now being forced by the Pentagon to repay those bonuses, despite serving multiple overseas tours and incurring significant psychological and financial strain.

The unnecessary deaths of Talia Williams and Tamryn Klapheke testify to the fact that the United States' endless wars are claiming victims on American soil; moreover, they expose the indifference of the military to the scourge of child abuse amongst its ranks, when addressing it would endanger the steady stream of soldiers to fight and die for the interests of American imperialism.

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