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## Air Force divorce rate highest in military

By [David Larter](#) and [Michelle Tan](#) - Staff writers

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The divorce rate among airmen today is almost 64 percent higher than in 2001, and is the highest in the military, according to a recent Defense Department report.

A decade ago, when the U.S. invaded Afghanistan, the rate stood at 2.5 divorces per 100 marriages. In 2011, the number jumped to 3.9. The rate has climbed steadily in the past decade except in 2005 and in 2008, when it dropped ever so slightly, according to Air Force statistics obtained by Air Force Times.

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The Defense Department report, released Dec. 13, shows that the divorce rate military-wide is the highest it's been since 1999; 30,000 marriages ended in divorce by the end of fiscal 2011.

Of those, 7,534 were in the Air Force. Most of them — 6,743 — were enlisted airmen, for a divorce rate of 4.6 percent.

Chief Master Sgt. of the Air Force James Roy said that multiple deployments and the stress of two wars have contributed to the rise in Air Force divorces.

“Deployments do take a toll on families. What we do is not easy, and separation can be difficult. It can also be a challenge when our Airmen transition home after their deployments,” Roy said in a statement to Air Force Times.

When broken down by career field, women — both enlisted and officer — have higher divorce rates overall than their male counterparts. Of the 20 highest divorce rates by career field and gender in 2010, the most recent breakdown by career field available, only two belonged to the men: Male officers who were aides-de-camp saw a divorce rate of 4 per 100 marriages and enlisted men in the medical career field had a divorce rate of 3.92 per 100 marriages. They ranked 18th and 19th, respectively.

It's difficult to say why couples get divorced and why the numbers don't favor the women, experts said. These decisions are deeply personal, and repeat deployments, difficulty reconnecting after extended time away from home, stress, the nature of the military lifestyle, or long-standing issues could all be factors.

“The biggest issue I’ve seen is changes in life,” said Chaplain (Capt.) Steven Richardson, director of family and reintegration for the Air Force Chaplain Corps College at Fort Jackson, S.C. “These couples knew each other pretty well before they got married, but the Air Force is a very active organization. They’re gone a lot, they do a lot of moves, we work some long hours, and because of that both the spouses and the airmen end up making a lot of changes.”

Other factors could include the stress of being a dual-military couple, said Chaplain (Lt. Col.) David Carr, chief of the resource division at the Chaplain Corps College.

“There are quite a few folks who try to maintain a dual military marriage and that could come to bear in the numbers,” he said. “They’re dual military and they’re being deployed at different timetables and they’re never together.”

According to Air Force statistics, the service has 15,647 married couples with both serving on active duty.

Societal pressure also could be a factor.

“It’s a strange situation, where there’s a fair amount of equality in terms of [women’s] military roles, but as the military increasingly treats women the same as it treats men in terms of their work expectations, however, society still expects them to fulfill their family roles. And that’s not equally balanced between men and women,” said David Segal, director of the Center for Research on Military Organization at the University of Maryland.

Divorce can affect an entire unit, Richardson said.

“When marriages are crumbling, it affects readiness, it affects unit morale, it affects unit cohesion,” he said. “When someone is going through a divorce, it makes it very hard for them to focus on their jobs. When an airman is going through a divorce, it affects all the airmen they work with.”

About 500 active-duty chaplains across the Air Force offer marriage counseling, but the Air Force is making a bigger push to keep marriages intact and healthy through Marriage Care retreats.

Created three years ago and offered by the Chaplain Corps College, Marriage Care retreats were designed by Air Force chaplains specifically for airmen and their spouses.

The Air Force also offers other types of marriage retreats, but those are provided by outside organizations and were not designed with airmen and their spouses in mind, Richardson said.

As of last year, about 50 Air Force chaplains were trained to offer a Marriage Care retreat, and about 20 bases were involved in the effort. The Air Force is expanding the program as it trains more chaplains and puts more money into the program. In 2013, according to Air Force projections, the service will spend about \$740,000 on the retreats.

Richardson told Air Force Times late last year that he travels across the country to conduct the retreats and train the local chaplains.

According to numbers provided by Air Force public affairs at the Pentagon, in fiscal 2011 there were 31 weekend retreats, and more than 1,200 people, airmen and spouses, attended.

“We take the couples away to a nice hotel and give them time to reconnect,” he said. “The theory is a readiness issue. If an airman has a healthy marriage, they will be more ready to accomplish the mission.”

Staff Sgt. Brian Smith from Shaw Air Force Base, S.C., and his wife, Heather, attended a Marriage Care retreat March 11 in nearby Charleston.

Married for six years and with two kids, the couple was looking for some quality time alone after reading about the retreat in the base newspaper, said Smith, who is assigned to the 20th Maintenance Operations Squadron.

“With work and everything, it’s hard to have time for just me and the wife, and she was really wanting some one-on-one time,” Smith said. “It’s so hard, because with the military, the mission takes first priority and sometimes you have to put your family second because of the mission.”

Roy said seeking out help is the best thing airmen can do if they are struggling in their marriage.

“It’s never easy to be separated from your loved ones, but there are helping agencies that assist in working through tough situations and build resilient airmen and families,” Roy said. “I encourage all airmen and their families to seek help if they find themselves having difficulties.”

*The Associated Press contributed to this report.*

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**Brenda Grammar North Mosier** · Canyon del Oro High School

Alcohol abuse and infidelity go hand in hand , so it is no wonder. When I was enlisted it was the seperation of deployment sure, but alcohol and infidelity ran rampant and many air bases are/were remote locations within the states, and it was amazing to me the amount of infidelity compared with civilian life I knew. Now if that isn't a cause for divorce...what is? They need to address more than deployments as a cause, but seperation from a spouse does seem to make casual affairs a predictable outcome sadly and this is on the side of both parteners, enlisted or not and this was not just condoned, but encouraged with mottos such as " what goes TDY, stays TDY." Sadly. There needs to be support so women and men don't turn to others, not encouragement to misbehave while one is away, or ones loved one is. Condemn don't condone and have same sex friends for support.

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**Kip Smith** · Electrician at Duke Energy

They have the highest divorce rate because they have the best-looking women.

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**Pat Rathke** · Top Commenter

It takes a special woman, or man to be a military spouse. It takes commitment to your marriage and an understanding that you must rely on other wives who are in stable relationships for support. It means that you do not go out to bars with the girls but find other entertainment. It means you are the chief cook, bottle washer, handyman, bill payer, taxi cab and the list is endless. It also means that when your spouse comes home they may have issues relating to their deployment. It also means that while deployed with all that tax free money coming in that you the spouse account for every single penny. It is not for you to spend on a whim, a new car, new furniture, etc. Your spouse earned it and should have a say in the decision on how it is spent. It means lonely days and lonely nights, fear and yes anger. If a person is not prepared for what they find when deployment arrives then yes there will be a divorce. The military could do more by way of preparation of spouses. But ultimately it is love that keeps to people together as well as mutual respect.

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**Brook Stevenson** · Pharmacy Tech at CVS

I do not know much about the airforce. But I am prior navy and my husband is navy. We are going thru our first deployment as a married couple. He is in Kuwait. I can say that if there was a program that actually put

