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# Countering Sexual Assault and Sexual Harassment in the U.S. Military

## Lessons from RAND Research

**S**exual assault and sexual harassment prevention efforts within the armed services are “far short of what is required to make lasting change” (Austin, 2021). In response to Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin’s request for a frank assessment of accountability measures and prevention approaches within the Department of Defense (DoD), and with the goal of informing the work of the Independent Review Commission on Sexual Assault in the Military (IRC), this report—a joint effort by eight subject-matter expert researchers with the RAND Corporation—summarizes the actions that DoD has taken to reduce sexual assault and sexual harassment behav-

iors, describes the challenges that DoD faces in reducing such behaviors, and offers recommendations to improve prevention of sexual assault and sexual harassment in the military. The contents of this report are based on years of empirical study and direct support of hundreds of DoD installations, supported by RAND’s multiple federally funded research and development centers.

We present recent statistics for sexual assault and sexual harassment within the military and summarize the policies and steps that DoD has taken to address these problem behaviors. The *estimated prevalence* of sexual assault in the military has fluctuated, but in recent years, preva-

### KEY FINDINGS

- Although most incidents of sexual assault and sexual harassment within the military go unreported, one in 16 women and one in 143 men are estimated to experience sexual assault and one in four women and one in 16 men are estimated to experience sexual harassment.
- The services’ annual sexual assault prevention and response training does not employ the best practices from the prevention literature. For example, service branches’ self-assessments of prevention efforts found that activities focused more on building awareness than on building needed skills.
- Except for in the Air Force, there are no personnel across DoD institutions or at the service academies whose sole job is implementing and evaluating sexual assault or sexual harassment prevention activities. Thus, services and installations should receive sufficient funding and personnel for prevention.
- Consideration should be given to removing Equal Opportunity Advisors and Command Managed Equal Opportunity managers from the same chain of command as victims and offenders.

## Abbreviations

CMEO	Command Managed Equal Opportunity
DoD	U.S. Department of Defense
EOA	Equal Opportunity Advisors
IRC	Independent Review Commission on Sexual Assault in the Military
LGBTQ	lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning
OPA	Office of People Analytics
OSD	Office of the Secretary of Defense
PPoA	Prevention Plan of Action
SAPRO	Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office
WGRA	Workplace and Gender Relations Survey of Active Duty Members

lence has risen for women. *Official reports* of sexual assault and sexual harassment within the military have also significantly increased. At the military service academies, estimated prevalence and official reports for both sexual assault and sexual harassment have increased. DoD has taken steps to address this issue for over a decade with trainings, data via service- and military academy-wide surveys, original research into effective prevention programs, and policy guidance. Although these efforts are good steps, the current state of sexual assault and sexual harassment prevention within the services and at individual installations should be improved.

DoD is facing several challenges in its efforts to address sexual assault and sexual harassment. DoD reporting and accountability mechanisms may not sufficiently deter perpetration. Most incidents go

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Most incidents go unreported, limiting the likelihood that offenders will face consequences.

unreported, limiting the likelihood that offenders will face consequences, or that future offenders will be deterred. In addition, DoD installations are not implementing prevention activities consistent with the best evidence, the current DoD prevention infrastructure (i.e., dedicated personnel who are trained, data systems, accountability for conducting evidence-based prevention) is insufficient, and research on effective prevention of sexual assault and sexual harassment is limited.

We offer recommendations to improve deterrence, prevention, and research. For deterrence of sexual assault and sexual harassment, the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) should ensure that

- service members have multiple channels to report sexual assault and sexual harassment that will result in timely action, including confidential channels that exist outside their chain of command
- all sexual harassment claims, including those that are not officially reported to an equal opportunity office, are centrally documented and accessible at the service-headquarters level
- effective systems exist for tracking allegations of sexual assault and sexual harassment throughout a service member's career
- commanders levy immediate, appropriate sanctions for low-level unprofessional conduct before it escalates
- commanders are evaluated, in part, by how they manage sexual assault and sexual harassment claims within their commands
- consideration is given to removing Equal Opportunity Advisors (EOA) and Command Managed Equal Opportunity (CMEO) managers from the same chain of command as victims and offenders.

Although deterrence is critical, it is insufficient to prevent sexual assault and sexual harassment on its own. Service members need training or prevention services to help them recognize these behaviors (and their precursors) and to respond effectively. However, as we discuss in a later section, most installations do not have trained personnel who are solely dedicated to sexual assault and sexual harassment prevention and who can consistently and systematically identify,

implement, and evaluate prevention activities that are supported by the evidence base (e.g., prevention activities that are comprehensive and of sufficient length, that use varied teaching methods, and that are administered by well-trained staff). Moreover, across installations, leadership support for high-quality prevention efforts may vary within the chain of command. To strengthen prevention efforts, OSD should do the following:

- create an infrastructure (i.e., dedicated personnel who are trained, data systems, accountability for conducting evidence-based prevention) that fosters the implementation of effective, lasting, and proactive prevention efforts
- train and hold leadership accountable for sound prevention practices
- implement prevention practices that reflect the best evidence available and involve comprehensive planning and continuous evaluation (i.e., phasing out lecture-based trainings)
- provide the services and installations with the funding and personnel needed, as called for by the Prevention Plan of Action (PPoA) framework developed by DoD's Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office (SAPRO).

Regarding research, DoD could do more to develop and test new approaches for effective prevention because only a small number of evidence-based approaches are available. SAPRO is currently funding research trials of promising programs, but more could be done. DoD should build on the SAPRO research agenda by conducting additional research on the following topics:

- mutable drivers of risk by examining units with unusually high—or low—documented cases of sexual assault and sexual harassment
- new prevention approaches that target command climate or risk factors that contribute to multiple problem behaviors
- unique risks faced by service members who describe themselves as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning (LGBTQ) for sexual assault and sexual harassment.

Working in tandem, these multiple lines of effort—deterrence, prevention, and additional

research—will help DoD reduce the incidence of sexual assault and sexual harassment and keep service members safe.

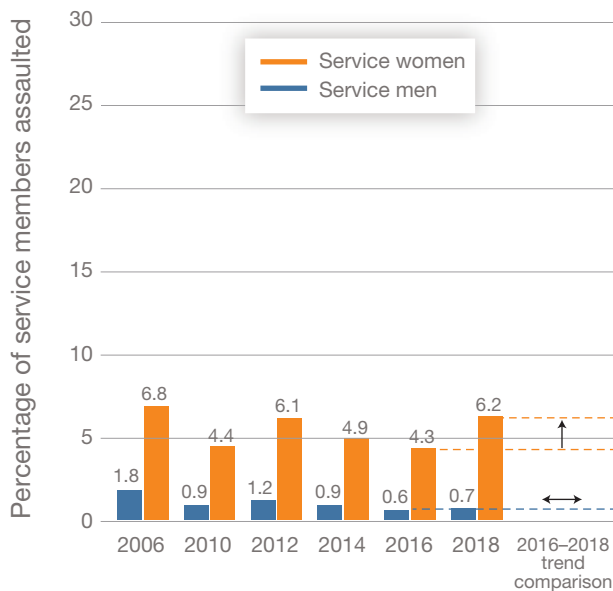
## **Sexual Assault and Sexual Harassment Trends and Key Mitigation Steps Taken by the Department of Defense**

### **Military Sexual Assault and Sexual Harassment Trends**

According to estimates from the Office of People Analytics (OPA), only one in three sexual assault victims within the military reports it to an authority (Breslin et al., 2019). In addition to data on reported offenses, DoD has access to epidemiological estimates of sexual assault through biennial surveys administered by the OPA: the Workplace and Gender Relations Survey of Active Duty Members (WGRA), the Service Academy Gender Relations Survey (SAGR), and the Workplace and Gender Relations Survey of Reserve Component Members (WGRR). Notably, these surveys also assess sexual harassment. The combination of data from official reports of sexual assault and survey estimates of population prevalence has allowed for a more complete picture of sexual assault and sexual harassment within the military. Rates of sexual assault have fluctuated across the six periods for which data are available (i.e., 2006, 2010, 2012, 2014, 2016, 2018; see Figure 1). Rates of sexual assault against service men fell by more than 50 percent from the first year of data collection compared with the most recent (1.8 percent in 2006 to 0.7 percent in 2018). Unfortunately, the drop is considerably smaller for service women (6.8 percent in 2006 to 6.2 percent in 2018). Comparing the last two reporting periods (2016, 2018), there was a sizable increase in the rate of sexual assault among service women (from 4.3 percent in 2016 to 6.2 percent in 2018), and a marginal change for service men (0.6 percent in 2016 to 0.7 percent in 2018).

Available data on sexual harassment (2014–2018) are similarly concerning: Both service men and women experienced increased rates of sexual harassment in 2018 compared with the prior reporting

FIGURE 1  
Estimated Sexual Assault Prevalence Rates, 2006–2018



SOURCE: Breslin et al., 2019.

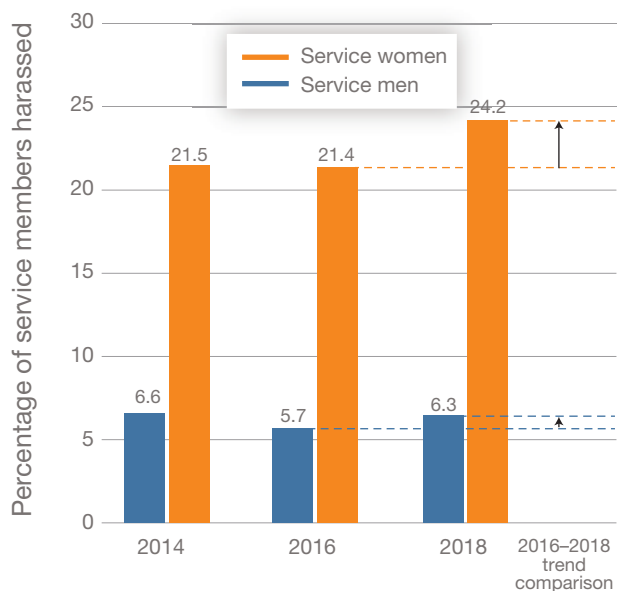
NOTE: This figure demonstrates prevalence rates for sexual assault among all DoD active duty service members. Margins for error range from  $\pm 0.1$  percent to  $\pm 0.4$  percent.

period (see Figure 2), although the rate for men is similar with that in 2014.

At the service academies, 2018 rates of sexual assault among cadets were higher than for the military as a whole. In 2018, across the service academies, the range of students experiencing unwanted sexual contact in the previous year was between 15.1 percent and 16.5 percent of women and between 1.8 percent and 3.4 percent of men (Davis et al., 2019).

*In sum, one in 16 women and one in 143 men are estimated to experience sexual assault within the military. Estimates for sexual harassment are one in four women and one in 16 men. At the service academies, one in six women and one in 29 men experience sexual assault. These behaviors degrade military readiness. Many victims report that their performance suffered as a result of these behaviors, and units often experience decreased cohesion and stability (Kamarck and Torreon, 2021). RAND research has documented that sexual harassment is associated with roughly 4 percent more service member separations from the military than would otherwise be expected (Morrall et al., 2018a; Morrall et al., 2018b). DoD recognizes that*

FIGURE 2  
Estimated Sexual Harassment Prevalence Rates, 2014–2018



SOURCE: Breslin et al., 2019.

NOTE: This figure demonstrates prevalence rates for sexual harassment among all DoD active duty service members. Margins for error range from  $\pm 0.12$  percent to  $\pm 0.6$  percent.

without bold action, sexual assault and sexual harassment will continue to have negative consequences for the military.

## Brief Summary of Department of Defense Policy Actions

DoD has taken steps to address sexual assault and harassment for over a decade (DoD, 2014). Notably, SAPRO supports the services' prevention efforts by providing training to key service SAPR staff, collecting data via service- and military academy-wide surveys, conducting original research into effective prevention programs, and issuing policy guidance. Although these efforts are good steps, the current state of sexual assault and sexual harassment prevention within the services and at individual installations should be improved.

In an effort to better address sexual assault, in 2005, DoD established SAPRO and a process for sexual assault victims to file restricted reports, which allowed victims to receive services without notifying their commands and initiating an investigation (DoD

Directive 6495.01, 2008). The intent behind these actions was to increase the likelihood that victims would report offenses, increase the care that is available to victims, and improve DoD's ability to track incidents that might otherwise go unreported.

DoD established the 24/7 Safe Helpline, a Safe HelpRoom, and the Safe Helpline mobile phone application, all of which are confidential and anonymous crisis support services specially designed for members of the DoD community who are affected by sexual assault. However, DoD recognized that a more proactive, comprehensive, and coordinated approach to sexual assault prevention was needed. To this end, in 2016, DoD launched the two-phased Applied Prevention Project (DoD, 2019). Phase 1 included site visits to understand current prevention efforts among the services. Phase 2, launched in 2018 and ongoing as of this writing in mid-2021, provides technical assistance to build the capacity of military installations to implement sexual assault and sexual harassment prevention programs. In addition to prevention-focused trainings, DoD implemented Getting To Outcomes®, RAND's evidence-based planning and implementation process, at eight military installations and service academies. Sites work with experts to select, implement, and evaluate sexual assault and sexual harassment prevention programs, informed by research evidence (Chinman et al., forthcoming).

In 2019, SAPRO released the PPOA (Office of the Under Secretary for Personnel and Readiness, 2019). Incorporating years of research on sexual assault and sexual harassment prevention and the science of implementation, the PPOA envisions that each installation will conduct sexual assault and sexual harassment prevention by choosing activities best suited for their community, implementing these activities with fidelity, and regularly evaluating the outcomes of these activities. The PPOA outlines the requirements for how to achieve this vision across several domains—i.e., infrastructure, leadership, and collaborations. PPOA requirements are critical not just for sexual assault and sexual harassment prevention, but also to support prevention across a broad spectrum of problem behaviors (e.g., alcohol abuse).

In addition to the PPOA, DoD developed and implemented a Retaliation Prevention and Response Strategy Implementation Plan to prevent retaliatory

behaviors and support victims (DoD, 2017). In 2005 and 2006, DoD released policies that established comprehensive procedures for responding to sexual assault within the department (DoD Instruction [DoDI] 6495.02, 2013); these policies have been updated regularly throughout the years to improve the department's approach and align with emerging requirements in law. The 2019 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) included a provision (Section 543) that required DoD to develop an oversight plan for the implementation of sexual harassment prevention (Pub. L. 115-232). Moreover, recognizing the interconnectedness of various forms of interpersonal and self-directed violence (e.g., sexual harassment and assault, intimate partner violence, suicide), in September 2020, DoD issued the Policy on Integrated Primary Prevention of Self-Directed and Prohibited Abuse or Harm (DoDI 6400.09, 2020). This policy aims to integrate policies and responsibilities to mitigate abuse or harmful acts and establish a DoD-wide prevention system that makes data-informed decisions and implements research-based policies and interventions.

## Report Purpose

The purpose of this report is to synthesize findings and recommendations from RAND's research to inform the work of the IRC in response to the Secretary of Defense's request for "a summary of the sexual assault and sexual harassment prevention and accountability measures . . . taken in the last year that show promise, as well as a frank, data-driven assessment of those which do not . . ." (Austin, 2021). This report summarizes the challenges facing DoD in its efforts to prevent sexual assault and sexual harassment, and it offers a series of recommendations to improve sexual assault and sexual harassment prevention in the services and at individual installations. The summary and recommendations presented here are based on years of empirical study at RAND's multiple federally funded research and development centers, through which RAND has collected survey and interview data from thousands of service members and worked directly to improve prevention capacity within the services, at the military service academies, and at select DoD sites. This large body of work has

revealed the challenges that DoD faces (which we discuss in the following section) and has enabled us to develop recommendations to significantly decrease sexual assault and sexual harassment (which we will discuss in a subsequent section).<sup>1</sup> These recommendations show great promise for overcoming the challenges that DoD faces and turning the tide on sexual assault and sexual harassment in the military.

## **Challenges: Significant Limitations in the Department of Defense’s Approach to Sexual Assault and Sexual Harassment Prevention Have Resulted in Slow Progress**

DoD faces challenges in reducing rates of sexual assault and sexual harassment in multiple areas: reporting and accountability, availability and use of evidence-based approaches, and prevention infrastructure. Challenges in each of these areas are summarized in this section, and the subsequent section provides recommendations to help address these challenges.

### **DoD Reporting and Accountability Mechanisms Are Not Sufficient to Deter Perpetration**

Most incidents of sexual assault and sexual harassment within the military go unreported. In 2018, there were 6,053 reported sexual assaults, compared with the estimated prevalence from surveys suggesting that over 20,000 service members were sexually assaulted (Breslin et al., 2019). Sexual harassment is underreported by an even greater margin. In fiscal year 2019, the military services and the National Guard Bureau processed and investigated 1,021 formal and 591 informal complaints of sexual harassment (DoD, 2020). However, in a confidential survey of just active duty service members in 2018, approximately 116,000 individuals reported experiencing sexual harassment in the previous 12 months (24 percent of women and 6 percent of men; DoD, 2020).

There are multiple challenges related to sexual assault and sexual harassment reporting. DoD

policy states that sexual harassment complaints “should be addressed at the lowest appropriate level” (DoDI 1020.03, 2020). Thus, there might be reports to supervisors and managers that are not documented. Additionally, not all of the services have centralized reporting and tracking systems that give senior leaders the ability to monitor, intervene, or evaluate the processes, actions, or outcomes related to sexual assault and sexual harassment reporting. Furthermore, social and professional retaliation against victims is perceived to be common and is not deterred by military equal opportunity and command-directed investigation policies and procedures (Farris et al., 2021). The extent to which commanders are held accountable for their management of sexual assault and sexual harassment appears limited, and emphasis on the unacceptability of harassment and abuse may not reach all levels of command (Fort Hood Independent Review Committee, 2020). All of these barriers reduce the likelihood that incidents are reported and documented, and this, in turn, reduces the potential that offenders will face consequences, thus weakening any deterrent effect (Mengeling et al., 2014).

Higher rates of reporting and consistent consequences could have a deterrent effect because service members and commanders would know that they would be held accountable for sexual assault and sexual harassment behavior. Although deterrence can help contribute to prevention, deterrence alone is insufficient to prevent sexual assault and sexual harassment. This is because any deterrence effect after an incident does not address directly the underlying issues that precede these problem behaviors.

### **DoD Installations Are Not Implementing Prevention Activities Consistent with the Best Evidence**

Prevention activities are needed to address sexual assault and sexual harassment risks and build skills among service members to prevent the occurrence of such behaviors (e.g., Kamarck and Torreón, 2021; White House Task Force to Protect Students from Sexual Assault, 2014). However, the services’ annual sexual assault prevention and response training does not employ best practices documented in the

prevention literature. Specifically, current training is not comprehensive or of sufficient length; it does not use varied, interactive teaching methods; it is not administered by well-trained prevention specialists; it does not foster positive relationships; it is not theory-driven; it does not build both skills and knowledge; and it does not include outcome evaluation (DeGue et al., 2014; Dills, Fowler, and Payne, 2016; Nation et al., 2003). A recent review of U.S. Air Force sexual assault prevention programs found that there had been some progress in implementing best practices (e.g., tailoring prevention specifically to the Air Force context) but noted overall low rates of compliance with other practices (i.e., conducting prevention with sufficient length, based on theory, and with adequately trained personnel) and a lack of a systematic way to ensure compliance (Gedney et al., 2018). Furthermore, changes to programming do not appear to be governed by evidence-based reasoning or a theory of change. These issues are not unique to the Air Force and can be found throughout the services. In 2019, SAPRO asked each service branch to self-assess their prevention efforts and conducted 61 focus groups with 493 active duty members and first responders at eight DoD installations. Those assessments found that the prevention activities focused more on building awareness than on building skills (DoD, 2019), which is inconsistent with evidence-based prevention.

There are a limited number of evidence-based approaches to prevent sexual assault and sexual harassment that are available. The approaches that do exist target social norms acceptable of assault and sexual harassment, bystander intervention, and skills to reduce victimization (Basile et al., 2016; Senn et al., 2015). Experts advocate for multiple interventions that focus on risk reduction and promote positive social norms, teach healthy relationship skills, and create protective environments (Okasako-Schmucker et al, 2019). Few male-targeted sexual assault prevention programs have been shown to reduce sexual assault perpetration. Of the two programs that have demonstrated effectiveness, Safe Dates only has been texted in adolescents, and effects faded after one year (Foshee et al., 2000). Real Consent had very high drop-out rates (Salazar et al., 2014). However, these programs do tend to produce small but significant

improvements in attitudes about sexual assault, self-reported likelihood of engaging in preventative behavior, and inclinations toward sexual aggressive behavior (Wright et al., 2020).

## Current DoD Prevention Infrastructure Is Insufficient

The services and individual installations lack adequate infrastructure to carry out evidence-based prevention (DoD, 2019). SAPRO and RAND created a Prevention Evaluation Framework (DoD, 2019), a tool that assesses critical prevention infrastructure elements at an installation or service academy, consistent with the PPoA. Applying this tool to selected installations and to the service academies, SAPRO, supported by RAND, found gaps in most prevention infrastructure elements (DoD, 2019). The lack of a dedicated, well-trained prevention workforce and the lack of leadership support for prevention are especially noteworthy. Except for Violence Prevention Integrators in the Air Force, there are no personnel across DoD institutions or at the service academies whose sole job is to implement and evaluate sexual assault or sexual harassment prevention activities. Services and installations often use response personnel (e.g., Equal Opportunity Advisors, SAPR Victim Advocates) to implement prevention activities, often as collateral duties.<sup>2</sup> Implementing prevention programming well requires specialized skills (Villaveces et al., 2010), and these skills might be lacking among those who are assigned to carry out these programs (DoD, 2019). A Competency Assessment for Sexual Assault Prevention Practitioners provides details on required specialized skills (O’Neil et al., 2021). These competencies include skills suitable for any primary prevention effort and skills specific to sexual assault prevention.

In discussions with service members and leaders at hundreds of DoD installations, leadership support for high-quality prevention varies. Some commanders might not understand the value of prevention or they might not recognize that specialized skills and established systems (e.g., for evaluation, professional development) are required. Also, instances of low leadership support for prevention might be because

of high operational tempo and demands, crowding out consistent leadership support for effective prevention strategies.

Implementation science shows that while support from top leadership is critical, support ideally should come from all levels of leadership (Damschroder et al., 2009). Support includes making time available for service members to participate in more-robust prevention activities, publicly voicing support for the importance of the programming, setting specific benchmarks for performance, and regularly evaluating whether those benchmarks have been achieved and, if not, instituting improvements and tracking their implementation (Chinman et al., 2020). Although military-specific measures and tools exist that could be used to evaluate prevention approaches (Farris et al., 2019), the services and individual installations do not regularly collect or review evaluation data to drive strategic or operational prevention decisions (Gedney et al., 2018; U.S. Army, undated). Those charged with conducting prevention activities might lack the resources or the skills to carry out evaluations of their prevention activities, and thus might select such activities based on preference rather than on past performance.

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There is no requirement to report evaluation data up the chain of command or to DoD, or to demonstrate that prevention decisions are data-driven.

## Research on Effective Prevention of Sexual Assault and Sexual Harassment Is Limited

Although having adequate infrastructure to carry out prevention is important, ultimately, services and installations need to have a variety of evidence-based options from which to choose. Sexual assault and sexual harassment can occur in different settings and can be associated with many different factors. Thus, no single approach will address the problem universally. One setting—e.g., a military service academy—might experience high rates of alcohol misuse that contribute to rates of sexual assault. Another setting, with an older population, might have service members who endorse attitudes permissive of sexual harassment as a primary factor.

Furthermore, a multitude of factors can contribute to the likelihood of sexual assault or sexual harassment, increasing the need for a variety of simultaneous evidence-based approaches that can address specific factors. Unfortunately, there are a limited number of evidence-based approaches that have been shown to be effective in reducing unwanted behaviors. As described in the previous section, the approaches that do exist target social norms (i.e., enhancing positive social norms around sexual assault and sexual harassment prevention and degrading social norms that are tolerant of sexual assault and sexual harassment) and various skill sets, including intervening as a bystander, keeping oneself safe from victimization (Basile et al., 2016; Senn et al., 2015), creating healthy relationships, and fostering protective environments (Okasako-Schmucker et al., 2019). However, most of these approaches have not been developed or evaluated in a military context.

### **Recommended Actions: Reversing Sexual Assault and Sexual Harassment Trends Will Require Additional Coordinated Action**

Preventing sexual assault and sexual harassment will require coordinated, multifaceted, and data-driven actions. There is little reason to expect that



minimally adjusting the current course of action will significantly reduce the rates of sexual assault and sexual harassment within the military. Instead, bold actions should be taken, from response-focused policies and programs that address victimization and perpetration to more-proactive prevention policies and programs that promote healthy behaviors and force readiness. In this section, we provide recommendations grouped into three actions—using research from RAND and other organizations—to address DoD’s challenges with sexual assault and sexual harassment that were outlined in the previous section. These actions are (1) enhancing accountability, (2) equipping service members and leaders with the knowledge and skills needed to prevent sexual assault and sexual harassment, and (3) enacting a research agenda that will ensure that DoD sets the standard for excellence in prevention.

### **Action 1: Prevent Sexual Assault and Sexual Harassment by Doing More to Hold Perpetrators and Leaders Accountable**

More-consistent, fair, and transparent systems should be put in place to track when and where sexual assault and sexual harassment occur, prevent incidents from occurring or escalating, and hold leaders and service members accountable when such incidents do occur. When there is a low probability of being reported or held accountable, research suggests that sexual harassment flourishes (ICF Next, 2020). OSD should institute a regular auditing process to ensure that services and individual installations are taking steps to improve the current response systems for sexual assault and sexual harassment. This audit should, at a minimum, focus on whether services and installations are exercising the practices that we now describe.

#### **1.1. Ensure That Service Members Have Multiple Channels to Report Sexual Harassment That Will Result in Timely Action, Including Confidential Channels That Exist Outside Their Chain of Command**

Comparisons between official reports and estimated prevalence demonstrate that the vast majority of sexual harassment incidents go unreported (Breslin et al., 2019; DoD, 2020). Thus, even if multiple reporting channels are technically available, it appears that they are underutilized, perhaps because of several barriers (e.g., concern about career implications, fear of retaliation). Barriers to reporting need to be overcome, and one way to do so is to provide confidential reporting options. Evidence from civilian settings shows that barriers to reporting can be overcome by ensuring the existence of multiple functioning channels (Bates et al., 2018).

#### **1.2. Document All Incidents of Sexual Harassment, Even If There Is No Official Complaint Made to an Equal Opportunity Office**

Only a small number of incidents of sexual harassment are officially reported to an equal opportunity office: When incidents of sexual harassment are reported, they are generally reported to the respective Equal Opportunity Office for most services, except for the Army. The Army is the only service that transferred the responsibilities of sexual harassment reporting from the Equal Opportunity Office to the SHARP Program Office. Most are ostensibly resolved at the lowest level in accordance with policy guidance. There should be a mechanism in place to document these incidents, even if no official complaint is made to an equal opportunity office. These “lowest-level” reports should contain sufficient information (e.g., when, where, presence of bystanders) to allow leaders to assess the timeliness, appropriateness, and success of the response to all complaints, not just the cases elevated to an equal opportunity office. Including victims in the development of a more inclusive reporting process could further improve the process (Cooper and Dranger, 2018; Holland et al., 2018).

### 1.3. Evaluate the Use and Effectiveness of Systems for Tracking Allegations of Inappropriate Behaviors Across Service Members' Careers

DoDI 1020.03 (2018) states that secretaries of all the military departments should “mandate that substantiated complaints are annotated on fitness report(s) or Service-level reporting and tracking system(s). The Service-level tracking system must be reviewed for substantiated harassment incidents prior to Service members’ selection for promotion and other favorable personnel actions.” Anecdotal evidence from subject-matter experts who review military personnel records suggests that commanders might not be complying with this accountability mechanism. A formal audit and evaluation of personnel records could help the services and DoD determine how this accountability mechanism is being used and whether it has any impact. In addition to tracking substantiated findings, DoD should also examine the legality and feasibility of tracking all allegations of sexual harassment and other inappropriate behaviors across service members’ careers regardless of whether the allegations were substantiated. Having commanders consistently document these behaviors—and having data systems that consistently capture the occurrence of these behaviors—could help inform future decisions about disciplinary action or intervention and decisions about selection for promotion or for key assignments where there might be more opportunities for abuse of authority. In addition, tracking these allegations could help identify the prevalence and patterns of inappropriate behaviors and better target prevention efforts.

### 1.4. Ensure Commanders Levy Immediate, Appropriate Sanctions for Low-Level Unprofessional Conduct

Commanders should be using the full range of administrative disciplinary measures available (e.g., counseling, reprimands, Article 15 nonjudicial punishments)<sup>3</sup> to address unprofessional conduct. Leadership plays an important role in establishing organizational climate. When leaders consistently discipline all instances of inappropriate conduct, they send a clear message about the norms and expecta-

tions for the command (Sadler et al., 2017). This could also prevent the escalation of negative behaviors. Research shows that commands with this kind of approach—i.e., commands where service members believe that their commanders take sexual harassment seriously—have a lower risk of sexual assault and sexual harassment (Sadler et al., 2017).

### 1.5. Evaluate Commanders, in Part, by How They Manage Reports of Sexual Assault and Sexual Harassment Within Their Commands

OSD should work with service branches to ensure that the performance evaluation process for commanders includes an assessment of how they manage reports of sexual assault and sexual harassment. At a minimum, commanders should be tasked with ensuring that victims who report incidents do not experience retaliation or ostracization—and commanders should be held accountable when they fail to do so. Reviews should also consider how leadership style affects the safety climate. Commanders who take a proactive approach to upholding behavioral standards, create a positive safety climate, which is associated with lower risk of sexual harassment and sexual assault (Sadler et al., 2017). Commanders who take a permissive or laissez-faire approach to upholding behavioral standards should be considered candidates for additional education or intervention. A review of commander responses to sexual assault and sexual harassment reports should be regularly included in performance evaluations. Service branches could also consider *360 performance evaluations*, in which all service members provide feedback to subordinates, peers, and supervisors (Sadler et al., 2018). This approach could create an additional channel for communication of concerns around command climate and unprofessional conduct.

### 1.6. Consider Removing EOAs and CMEOs Managers from the Same Chain of Command as Victims and Offenders

OSD should work with service branches to ensure that sexual harassment reports are able to be filed promptly and effectively to build service member trust in the response system. For example, EOAs and CMEOs might not feel free to officially file reports

of sexual harassment if they perceive that the commander prefers the matter remain unrecorded. Revisiting the command structure of equal opportunity staff members could reduce barriers to effectively reporting sexual harassment incidents.

## Action 2: Better Equip Service Members and Leaders Across the Chain of Command with the Tools to Prevent Problem Behaviors

Although it is essential, deterrence alone will be insufficient. Installations should choose prevention activities that are suited for their communities using the best evidence available, implement those activities with fidelity, and evaluate their impacts. To improve prevention, OSD should mandate and provide support for the services and installations to take actions to align with the PPoA and implement the new Policy on Integrated Primary Prevention of Self-Directed and Prohibited Abuse or Harm (DoDI 6400.09, 2020). The recommendations that follow reflect first priorities for building momentum for stronger prevention activities.

### 2.1. Create an Infrastructure That Fosters the Implementation of Effective and Lasting Proactive Prevention Efforts

To tackle sexual assault and sexual harassment, the services should ensure that there are dedicated personnel whose primary duty is to conduct and evaluate prevention activities (i.e., not as a collateral duty) (DoD, 2019). These personnel should be selected carefully to ensure that they have pertinent skills. In addition, they should receive sufficient training, including sustained access to professional development. With these personnel in place, services should

- regularly monitor the implementation and impact of new and existing prevention efforts, including collecting data—before and after prevention efforts are instituted—about the participants, the fidelity of the implementation, and the short- and long-term outcomes
- share evaluation data so that leadership is informed about which efforts are working and which are not

- ensure that appropriate collaboration is occurring by building relationships across the enterprise
- maintain a consistent vision and set of shared goals, including the role that leadership plays in sexual assault and sexual harassment prevention.

SAPRO and RAND’s Prevention Evaluation Framework (DoD, 2019) tool could be used to monitor development of this infrastructure over time. This infrastructure could be used to target a cluster of related problem behaviors (e.g., alcohol abuse, suicide) in addition to sexual assault and sexual harassment.

### 2.2. Train and Hold Leadership Accountable for Sound Prevention Practices

Leadership support for allocating sufficient resources to evidence-based prevention is crucial (Damschroder et al., 2009). To establish leadership support, leaders should have a basic understanding of sound prevention practices as outlined in the Prevention Evaluation Framework—namely, implementing prevention activities that are consistent with the best evidence and regularly evaluating those activities. Commanders should be required to use these prevention practices, and they, in turn, should hold subordinates accountable for using these prevention practices. One way to institutionalize expectations and best practices is to incorporate sexual assault and sexual harassment prevention training into leadership Professional Military Education (Sadler et al., 2018). DoD Instruction 6495.02, Volume 2, “SAPR Program Training,” sets professional military education standards for what is being described here. Curricula should be customized to the specific leadership context—recognizing that not all leadership roles are alike—and should emphasize the role of leadership in setting command climate. Accountability for the incidence of sexual assault and sexual harassment under a leader’s command should be communicated openly to all ranks, integrated into performance evaluation, and regularly monitored for evidence of adherence (Sadler et al., 2017).

### 2.3. Implement Prevention Practices That Reflect the Best Evidence Available and That Involve Comprehensive Planning and Continuous Evaluation

Although there are some evidence-based approaches currently available (though not yet demonstrated to be effective with a military population), much is known about prevention across several problem behaviors that could guide better programming (DeGue et al., 2014; Dills, Fowler, and Payne, 2016; Nation et al., 2003). For example, research shows that the strongest prevention approaches are comprehensive and of sufficient length to yield change (not just one-time meetings); use varied, interactive teaching methods (not just didactic); are administered by well-trained staff who foster positive relationships with attendees; are culturally relevant and theory-driven; build both skills and knowledge; and include outcome evaluation. Thus, although the Services will need to develop and validate new evidence-based practices, they should also eliminate practices that clearly do not reflect the above factors (Wang et al., 2018). For example, deimplementing the widely used lecture-format trainings could free up resources for other approaches (such as those mentioned in a previous section) that have a stronger chance of improving outcomes (DeGue et al., 2014; Dills, Fowler, and Payne, 2016; Nation et al., 2003). Once strong data-driven prevention practices are identified, they should be disseminated widely. Also, the conceptualization of “conducting prevention” should be expanded to include planning (e.g., ensuring implementation runs according to plan), evaluation, and quality improvement. For example, SAPRO is currently piloting the Getting To Outcomes® process (Chinman et al., 2020), which is training multiple DoD installations and service academies to engage in planning, evaluation, and quality improvement activities.

### Action 3: Set the Standard for Excellence in Comprehensive Sexual Assault and Sexual Harassment Prevention

Because of the small number of evidence-based prevention approaches that are currently available,

DoD investment in developing and testing new approaches for effective prevention in the military context could be fruitful. SAPRO is currently funding research trials of promising programs (NORC at the University of Chicago, undated), but more could be done. OSD should prioritize future research on the following topics.

#### 3.1. Investigate the Circumstances and Characteristics of Units with Unusually High or Low Documented Cases of Sexual Assault and Sexual Harassment to Better Understand the Drivers of Risk That Are Within the Military’s Control

The first step to developing new prevention interventions is to understand the variety of mutable risk factors that are linked to the problem behavior. These investigations could supplement the existing research by identifying drivers that might be unique to the military (e.g., differences in command climate, training, and prevention activities; differences in the roles and presence of civilians; differences in the surrounding community). A combination of surveys (Miller et al., 2019) and interview tools (Sadler et al., 2021) might yield the most-useful and actionable data.

#### 3.2. Develop and Rigorously Test New Prevention Approaches That, Based on the Assembled Research, Target Command Climate and Risk Factors That Contribute to Multiple Problem Behaviors

Multiple studies show that sexual assaults do not happen in a vacuum. Rather, they are associated with other negative behaviors, such as a previous history of violence (Greathouse et al., 2015; Miller et al., 2018), sexual harassment (Morrall et al., 2018a; Morrall et al., 2018b), or excessive alcohol use (Farris and Hepner, 2014). In particular, research has documented how a poor command climate that tolerates these behaviors is associated with sexual assault and that a change in culture and climate, in part, requires accountability (Marquis et al., 2017; Morrall et al., 2018a; Sadler et al., 2017).

New preventative strategies should be robust, target a cluster of risk factors, and include commanders rather than just individual service members.

Priority should be given to prevention efforts that aim to eliminate risk factors that contribute to multiple problem behaviors. For example, preventing binge drinking could reduce the risk of sexual assault and family violence (Basile et al., 2016; Farris and Hepner, 2014). Because of the documented association between command climate and sexual harassment and assault, developing interventions that aim to improve climate might be warranted. New approaches should be tested in focused pilots, i.e., across an installation rather than across an entire service branch. Rigorous evaluation should be required for all new approaches prior to more-widespread dissemination (Moylan and Javorka, 2020; Richards, 2019).

### 3.3. Study and Report on Sexual Assault and Sexual Harassment of Service Members Who Describe Themselves as LGBTQ

Data from the 2016 WGRA show that LGBTQ service members represent just 13 percent of the force but account for 45 percent of all sexual assaults (or 56 percent of all sexual assaults of people who identify as male and 37 percent of all sexual assaults of those who identify as female) (Davis et al., 2017). Those who identify as male and homosexual have more than nine times the risk of a sexual assault as heterosexual men. While this population is not responsible in any way, very little is known about what leads to sexual assaults in this population, the experience of victims, and how cases are addressed. Further study is required to understand how to effectively prevent them.

## Conclusions

DoD has invested a considerable amount of time and money to prevent sexual assault and sexual harassment, research the root causes of those behaviors, and develop robust response systems. Yet despite DoD's efforts, close Congressional oversight, hundreds of new policies and initiatives, and attention from multiple DoD leaders over time, sexual assault and sexual harassment are persistent problems in the services. Reversing this trend will require significant changes across the DoD enterprise. No single approach, on its own, will be sufficient. In this report,

we recommend that several actions be taken. Services should improve reporting and tracking systems to deter perpetrators and hold leaders accountable. The services also should ensure that there are dedicated and trained prevention personnel who are implementing and evaluating prevention practices using the best scientific evidence available. Approaches that are not consistent with evidence and that are clearly not working should be deimplemented.

Research should test new prevention approaches that better address sexual assault and sexual harassment, especially for certain populations, such as those who describe themselves as LGBTQ. OSD should (1) mandate that services take immediate and bold action, (2) provide services with the support that they need to do so, and then (3) hold services accountable through audits of installations and personnel records. OSD should also pursue more-systematic research and evaluation of the existing prevention system, policies, and programs. The

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Research should test new prevention approaches that better address sexual assault and sexual harassment, especially for certain populations, such as those who describe themselves as LGBTQ.

research suggests that these multiple lines of effort, working in tandem, are DoD's best shot at reducing the risks of sexual assault and sexual harassment and keeping service members safe.

## Appendix: Methods Used to Synthesize Relevant Research

This report has its origin in a memo—titled “Countering Sexual Assault and Sexual Harassment, Initial Tasking”—written for the Secretary of Defense in February 2021 in response to a request for information, and which drew on the expertise of RAND researchers. The content of that memo was used as the basis for this report and augmented with additional background information about trends over time, policy actions by DoD and each service branch, and research literature to help shape the challenges and recommendations that are identified in this report. In all, three sources informed this report: (1) the large body of related RAND research, (2) non-RAND peer-reviewed scientific publications on sexual assault and sexual harassment prevention from the past three years, and (3) opinions from RAND subject-matter experts in sexual assault and sexual harassment prevention.

To write the memo to the Secretary of Defense, RAND assembled a team of researchers with expertise in sexual assault and sexual harassment prevention to review RAND's body of related research. The researchers selected were the authors and principal investigators across this body of related RAND research. Each researcher was asked to complete a data abstraction form to create an inventory of this body of RAND work. The data abstraction form asked for information about the following:

- *Ongoing and completed studies*: study name; start and end dates; purpose and study goals; relevance to sexual assault and sexual harassment prevention and accountability measures (actions) that the military has taken or could take; how this study tackles sexual assault and sexual harassment within a broader violence prevention framework, if at all; and important findings from the project and their implications for future DoD efforts on sexual

assault and sexual harassment prevention and accountability measures, actions, or strategies.

- *Recommended actions for DoD*: action needed and who should take the action, as appropriate; a brief rationale for the recommendation, referencing relevant data or project findings that were used to justify recommendations; the ideal timing for this recommendation (e.g., whether it can be implemented immediately or is contingent on other actions); and what would change or what the potential impact would be if this recommendation were acted on.

Twenty-two RAND studies were evaluated using the data abstraction form, and researchers used the output to generate 11 recommended DoD actions based on these studies. Two researchers extracted the detailed information from the data abstraction form and the recommendations that were generated from the data abstraction and drafted the memo. Finally, the larger group of RAND experts reviewed and edited the memo before it was sent to the Secretary of Defense.

To transform the memo into this stand-alone report, additional pieces were required. These pieces include more-contextual information on the challenges and need for changes to the way DoD addresses sexual assault and sexual harassment; we also needed to expand the scope of the studies reviewed to include scientific literature beyond the RAND body of work. To achieve this, we conducted a targeted literature search to identify relevant peer-reviewed scientific publications in English published between January 2018 and February 24, 2021 (Table A.1). Four searches were conducted (Group 1A, 2, 4; Group 1B, 2, 4; Group 1A, 3, 4; and Group 1B, 3, 4), using four groups of search terms to find recent publications that provide a synthesis (e.g., literature review, meta-analysis) of research on sexual assault, sexual harassment, prevention, and response.

These searches yielded 418 unique publications. We conducted a title and abstract review to identify the final set of 29 publications for full text review using the following criteria:

- Inclusion criteria

TABLE A.1

## Searches by Database and Search Terms Used in Targeted Literature Review

Group	Search Terms
1. Sexual assault and sexual harassment	a. "sexual assault"[tiab] or "sexual abuse"[tiab] or "sexual aggression"[tiab] or rape[tiab] or "sexual coercion"[tiab] or "sexual violence"[tiab] OR "sexual harassment"[tiab] OR "Sexual Harassment"[Mesh] OR "Sex Offenses"[Mesh] b. (DROP MESH terms) "sexual assault"[tiab] or "sexual abuse"[tiab] or "sexual aggression"[tiab] or rape[tiab] or "sexual coercion"[tiab] or "sexual violence"[tiab] OR "sexual harassment"[tiab]
2. Prevention	prevent*[tiab] OR Intervention[tiab] OR intervene[tiab] OR program*[tiab] OR practice*[tiab]
3. Response	(response[tiab] OR respond[tiab] OR policy[tiab] OR policies[tiab] OR report*[tiab] OR procedure*[tiab]) AND (retaliat*[tiab] OR revenge[tiab] OR perpetrat*[tiab] OR deter*[tiab])
4. Review	systematic review[pt] OR review[pt] OR meta-analysis[pt] OR "systematic review"[ti] OR "meta analysis"[ti] OR metaanalysis[ti] OR "literature review"[ti] OR metasynthesis[ti] OR review[ti]

- Include both meta-analyses and narrative (i.e., non-numerical) reviews
- Include an outcome of sexual assault or sexual harassment or a risk factor known to be directly tied to sexual assault or sexual harassment (if an empirical test)
- Include adults in the sample or adults as a focus
- Exclusion criteria
  - Child abuse is the sole focus
  - No adults in the sample
  - Focus on predicting sexual assault and sexual harassment from a range of individual variables.

Key information was abstracted from each of the publications; that information then underwent full text review and was used as additional contextual information and to inform the recommendations and challenges that were identified in the original memo. Following the abstraction, the same set of RAND experts reviewed and provided edits to this report to ensure that it accurately reflected the research and adhered to RAND's quality standards.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> A summary of the methods used to synthesize the research findings into challenges and recommendations can be found in the appendix.

<sup>2</sup> Equal opportunity resource officers are not a collateral duty in the Air Force.

<sup>3</sup> A *nonjudicial punishment* is a military justice option available to commanders to resolve allegations of minor misconduct against a soldier without resorting to higher forms of discipline, such as a court martial.

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## About This Report

On January 23, 2021, the Secretary of Defense issued a tasker related to countering sexual assault and sexual harassment within the Department of Defense (DoD) that sought information on existing accountability measures and prevention approaches, as well as novel approaches that may be fruitful. A memo—prepared by eight RAND subject-matter experts in sexual assault and sexual harassment—summarized the current state of efforts to counter sexual assault and sexual harassment within the military, the challenges that DoD faces in tackling this multifaceted and persistent problem, and actions that could help quell it. The memo was delivered to the Secretary of Defense in February 2021.

Soon after, in March 2021, an Independent Review Commission on Sexual Assault in the Military (IRC) was established by the Secretary of Defense to conduct a broad assessment and issue recommendations. This report presents to the IRC the information contained in the original memo, now updated with additional context and research literature.

## Acknowledgments

We thank Coreen Farris, Kristie Gore, Miriam Matthews, Laura Miller, Andrew Morral, and Terry Schell for their expert input into the development of this report, as well as Molly McIntosh, Libby May, Rachel Ostrow, Jim Powers, Craig Bond, and John Winkler for their insights that helped to significantly improve this report.

## RAND National Security Research Division

This research was sponsored by the Office of the Secretary of Defense and conducted within the Forces and Resources Policy Center of the RAND National Security Research Division (NSRD), which operates the RAND National Defense Research Institute (NDRI), a federally funded research and development center (FFRDC) sponsored by the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the Joint Staff, the Unified Combatant Commands, the Navy, the Marine Corps, the defense agencies, and the defense intelligence enterprise.

The research reported here was completed in June 2021 and underwent security review with the sponsor and the Defense Office of Prepublication and Security Review before public release.

For more information on the Forces and Resources Policy Center, see [www.rand.org/nsrd/frp](http://www.rand.org/nsrd/frp) or contact the director (contact information is provided on the webpage).

## Funding

Funding for this research was provided through concept-development provisions of the National Defense Research Institute contract.