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Sexual Assault of Sexual Minorities in the U.S. Military

Although Congress, the public, and the military have focused on the problem of sexual assaults of service members, much of this focus has been on the sexual assault risk faced by women: The risk to women is many times greater than the risk to men. According to the 2018 Workplace and Gender Relations Survey of Active Duty Members (the 2018 WGRA; also referred to in this report as Breslin et al. [2019]), 6.2 percent of women across U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) services were sexually assaulted in the past year, compared with 0.7 percent of men; this is approximately a ninefold difference in risk.

In civilian populations, however, there is another group found to experience especially high rates of sexual violence: Individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB).¹ For instance, a nationally representative survey of sexual violence found that lesbian women had a lifetime risk of sexual violence that is similar to heterosexual women, but that bisexual women were more than twice as likely to have been raped and nearly twice as likely to have experienced other sexual violence (Walters, Chen, and Breiding, 2013). The same survey found that gay and bisexual men had twice the rate of lifetime experiences with sexual violence other than rape relative to heterosexual men, although rapes were too rare to be estimated precisely for gay and bisexual men. Other large survey efforts have found that LGB people all face sexual assault risks that are considerably greater

KEY FINDINGS

- Service members who identify as LGB or who do not indicate that they identify as heterosexual represented only 12 percent of the active component population in 2018, but accounted for approximately 43 percent of all sexually assaulted service members in that year.
- The 91 percent of men who identify as heterosexual only accounted for 52 percent of men who were sexually assaulted over a one-year period; the remaining 9 percent of men who did not indicate a heterosexual orientation accounted for 48 percent of all men who were sexually assaulted.
- The 77 percent of women who identify as heterosexual only accounted for 60 percent of sexual assault survivors, while the remaining 23 percent of women who did not indicate a heterosexual orientation account for 40 percent of all women who were sexually assaulted.

Abbreviations

| | |
|------|--|
| DoD | U.S. Department of Defense |
| LGB | lesbian, gay, and bisexual |
| OPA | Office of People Analytics |
| PNA | prefer not to answer |
| WGRA | Workplace and Gender Relations Survey of Active Duty Members |

than heterosexual individuals (Canan et al., 2019; Ford and Soto-Marquez, 2016; McKay, Misra, and Lindquist, 2017).

Therefore, there is reason to suspect that a disproportionate share of sexual assaults in the military might target LGB members. In this report, we examine evidence from the 2016 and 2018 WGRA survey results to assess the problem of sexual violence against LGB individuals and others who do not describe themselves as heterosexual.

Evidence

There were no estimates of the rate of sexual assault against LGB members of the military prior to 2016, the first year that the WGRA included a question on sexual orientation. However, in 2016 and again in 2018—the most recent WGRA results currently available—DoD published estimates of sexual assault risk for LGB service members. In its 2018 report, DoD researchers estimate that 3.7 percent of gay or bisexual service men experienced one or more sexual assaults in the prior year, which is approximately nine times higher than the rate estimated for non-LGB men, 0.4 percent (Breslin et al., 2019, p. 39).² Similarly, the researchers estimate that 9.0 percent of lesbian or bisexual service women experienced one or more sexual assaults in the prior year, which is approximately twice as high as the rate estimated for non-LGB women, 4.8 percent. These substantial differences in risk were also found in estimates based on the 2016 WGRA (Davis et al., 2017), although the overall rate of sexual assault was slightly lower for both men and women in that year relative to 2018.

To understand the magnitude of the problem of sexual assaults on LGB service members, we need to consider how large these at-risk groups are. Using data provided in the WGRA reports shown in Table 1, we can estimate the proportion of all sexual assaults that are committed against service members whose sexual orientation response is anything other than heterosexual.

The 2018 WGRA report indicates that 91 percent of men and 77 percent of women indicated that they were heterosexual or straight, and 4 percent of men and 14 percent of women indicated that they were gay or lesbian or bisexual (Breslin et al., 2019). In addition to these individuals who affirmatively indicated their sexual orientation on the survey, 6 percent of men and 9 percent of women did not indicate a sexual orientation, selecting either “Other (for example, questioning, asexual, undecided, self-identified)” or “prefer not to answer” when asked.³ These proportions imply that, within the population of 1,076,000 active component service men, there are approximately 43,000 service men who identify as gay or bisexual, and there are approximately 64,000 men who do not indicate either “other” or who prefer not to answer the sexual orientation question. Similarly, in the population of 209,800 service women, there are approximately 29,000 women who identify as lesbian or bisexual, and there are 19,000 women who did not indicate a sexual orientation.

Because a substantial number of service members do not identify exclusively as heterosexual, and because these sexual minorities appear to have a markedly higher risk of being sexually assaulted, a considerable fraction of all sexual assaults in the military must be against LGB service members. Indeed, the 2018 WGRA implies that 979,000 service men in the population identified as heterosexual or straight. If we assume that the non-LGB rate of past-year sexual assault from the 2018 WGRA (0.4 percent) is accurate for those heterosexual men, we can calculate that there were approximately 3,900 assaulted men who identify as heterosexual (see Table 2). Those assaults of heterosexual service men only account for 52 percent of the 7,546 male sexual assault survivors in the population (Breslin et al., 2019, p. 26). Thus, the 91 percent of men who indicated heterosexual orientation only accounted for 52 percent of those

TABLE 1

Population Characteristics and Sexual Assault Rates, as Reported in WGRA Reports

| Year | Population | Population Proportions | | | | Sexual Assault Rates | | | |
|-------------|------------|------------------------|----------------|----------|-------|----------------------|---------|-------|---------|
| | | Heterosexual | Lesbian or Gay | Bisexual | Other | PNA | Overall | LGB | Non-LGB |
| 2018 | | | | | | | | | |
| Men | 1,076,000 | 0.91 | 0.02 | 0.02 | 0.01 | 0.05 | 0.007 | 0.037 | 0.004 |
| Women | 209,800 | 0.77 | 0.07 | 0.07 | 0.02 | 0.07 | 0.062 | 0.090 | 0.048 |
| Total | 1,285,800 | 0.89 | 0.03 | 0.03 | 0.01 | 0.05 | | | |
| 2016 | | | | | | | | | |
| Men | 1,098,577 | 0.9 | 0.01 | 0.01 | 0.01 | 0.06 | 0.006 | 0.036 | 0.003 |
| Women | 192,780 | 0.79 | 0.06 | 0.05 | 0.02 | 0.08 | 0.043 | 0.063 | 0.035 |
| Total | 1,291,357 | 0.88 | 0.02 | 0.02 | 0.01 | 0.06 | | | |

SOURCES: Figures are from Breslin et al. (2019), except 2016 total population and overall sexual assault rate are from Davis et al. (2017); 2016 population estimates for men and women are RAND Corporation estimates that use the total population size reported in Davis et al. (2017); and total population proportions, which are the average of proportions for men and women weighted by their share of the total population.

NOTE: PNA is the survey response option “prefer not to answer.”

who were sexually assaulted over a one-year period, while the remaining 9 percent of men who did not indicate a heterosexual orientation accounted for 48 percent of all men who were sexually assaulted.

Similarly, the 2018 WGRA implies that 162,000 service women in the population identify as heterosexual or straight. If we assume that the non-LGB rate of past-year sexual assault that the WGRA provides (4.8 percent) is accurate for those heterosexual women, we can conclude that there were approximately 7,800 assaults of women who identify as heterosexual. Those assaults of heterosexual service women only account for 60 percent of the 12,927 female sexual assault survivors in the population (Breslin et al. 2019, p. 26). Thus, the 77 percent of women who indicate heterosexual orientation only account for 60 percent of the sexual assault survivors, while the remaining 23 percent of women who did not indicate a heterosexual orientation account for 40 percent of all women who were sexually assaulted.

We also conducted this analysis using data from the 2016 WGRA and found similar results (Table 2). Combing across service men and women, we estimate that 43 percent of all assaults in 2018 were against service members who did not indicate that

Because a substantial number of service members do not identify exclusively as heterosexual, and because these sexual minorities appear to have a markedly higher risk of being sexually assaulted, a considerable fraction of all sexual assaults in the military must be against LGB service members.

TABLE 2

Estimated Number of Sexually Assaulted Individuals, by Gender and Sexual Orientation, in the DoD Active Component in 2016 and 2018

| Year | Total | Sexual Assault Counts | | Percentage of All Sexual Assaults | |
|-------------|--------|-----------------------|------------|-----------------------------------|------------|
| | | Heterosexual | All Others | Heterosexual | All Others |
| 2018 | | | | | |
| Men | 7,546 | 3,917 | 3,629 | 52% | 48% |
| Women | 12,972 | 7,754 | 5,218 | 60% | 40% |
| Total | 20,518 | 11,671 | 8,847 | 57% | 43% |
| 2016 | | | | | |
| Men | 6,591 | 2,966 | 3,625 | 45% | 55% |
| Women | 8,290 | 5,330 | 2,959 | 64% | 36% |
| Total | 14,881 | 8,297 | 6,584 | 56% | 44% |

SOURCES: 2018 total sexual assault counts are from Breslin et al. (2019). 2016 total population and total sexual assault counts for men and women combined are from Davis et al. (2017). 2016 breakdowns of total population by gender are RAND estimates that used 2016 reported sexual assault rates by gender and total assaults reported in Davis et al. (2017). 2016 total sexual assault counts by gender are the product of population and overall sexual assault rates (see Table 1).

NOTES: Sexual assault counts for the heterosexual service members are the product of population, the heterosexual population proportion, and the non-LGB sexual assault rate. See appendix for discussion of the assumption that the non-LGB sexual assault rate provided by Breslin et al. (2019) accurately describes risk to heterosexual service members. The “all others” sexual assault counts are the difference between the total and heterosexual sexual assault counts that combine members who indicated gay, lesbian, bisexual, other, or PNA in response to the sexual orientation question on the WGRA.

they are heterosexual; in 2016, that percentage was 44 percent.

These calculations assume that the non-LGB rate of sexual assault is accurate for the heterosexual respondents. However, no definition of *non-LGB* is provided in Breslin et al. (2019), and it is possible that this group includes more than just the respondents who indicated that they identified as heterosexual, such respondents who selected *other* or *prefer not to answer* response categories. To the extent that (1) any of those other categories were included in the non-LGB grouping and (2) the non-LGB group combined categories with meaningfully different rates of sexual assault, it is possible that the true proportion of sexual assaults that occurred to members who affirmatively indicated heterosexual orientation might be slightly higher or lower than we calculated. In the appendix, we conduct additional calculations to demonstrate that it is unlikely that our estimate of the proportion of assaults on members who do not indicate they are heterosexual is substantially incorrect.

Discussion

Given the proportion of the military that identifies as heterosexual, the rate of sexual assault among non-LGB service members, and the size of the military population—data for which are provided in DoD reports—we can calculate the number of sexual assaults against all service members who did not indicate that they identify as heterosexual. Although this group represented only 12 percent of the active component population for the 2018 WGRA, it accounted for approximately 43 percent of all sexually assaulted service members in that year, and 44 percent of all sexually assaulted service members in 2016. Indeed, when we look at the 2018 estimates by gender, we find that 48 percent of assaulted men and 40 percent of assaulted women did not indicate heterosexual orientation.

These statistics demonstrate that assaults on the minority of service members who do not describe themselves as heterosexual constitute almost half of all service members who were sexually assaulted in

each of these years. However, we have seen little focus on sexual assaults against LGB service members in DoD prevention materials, research, or public discussion of sexual assault in the military.

Successfully preventing these assaults might require understanding the circumstances in which they occur and the motivations of the attackers. In particular, it would be critical to learn if sexual assaults on service members who do not describe themselves as heterosexual are primarily hate crimes or harassment based on sexual orientation rather than crimes with sexual motives. The Uniform Code of Military Justice does not require that there be a sexual motive to charge an attacker with sexual assault. Indeed, we know from the WGRA surveys that 38 percent of sexual assaults of men and 20 percent of sexual assaults on women were described by victims as committed with the intent to humiliate or demean them (Jaycox et al., 2015). Many assaults take place in the context of hazing incidents, but others might be motivated by dislike of sexual minorities and a desire to humiliate or debase them. This would be consistent with reports that sexual minorities in the military experience high rates of threats, intimidation, vandalism to their personal property, and other types of physical assaults (Gurung et al., 2018).

Because very limited information has been published from the 2016 and 2018 WGRA surveys about LGB service members, we do not know what proportion of sexual assaults against sexual minority service members are done with a sexual motive or with the intention of harming or humiliating those service members. The WGRA could be used to investigate these questions and to detail the circumstances of the assaults on nonheterosexual service members. Indeed, the Office of People Analytics (OPA) has indicated in its reports that summarize the 2018 WGRA that detailed analyses into the assaults of LGB service members were being conducted; however, no publications on this topic have yet been released. For development of effective prevention strategies, it would be useful for OPA and the DoD Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office to disclose what they have learned about assaults on these service members. Such strategies would benefit from information about who is committing the assaults; where the assaults are occurring; what

assaultive behaviors are involved; whether different groups of service members who did not indicate a heterosexual orientation—i.e., *LGB*, *other*, or *prefer not to answer*—are all at similarly high risk for sexual assault; and whether LGB members are experiencing unusually high rates of specific forms of sexual harassment tied to their sexual orientation.

The estimates provided in this report are subject to four important sources of uncertainty. First, the survey estimates themselves are subject to sampling error, and the reports from which we draw these estimates do not provide information about this uncertainty to generate confidence intervals. Second, the published estimates have been rounded to just two or three significant digits. We examined the effect that this might have on our estimates and the effect appears small. For instance, we computed that 48 percent of all sexually assaulted men did not indicate that they were heterosexual. Because of the rounding of the numbers used in this report, however, the true percentage could be between 42 percent and 55 percent (estimates for women are less sensitive to possible error from rounding).

Third, we assume that the sexual assault rate for *non-LGB* service members that is published in Breslin et al. (2019) accurately describes the sexual assault risk faced by heterosexual service members. In the appendix, we provide evidence for the reasonability of this assumption, but it might not be precisely correct if Breslin et al. created their *non-LGB* group by combining those who indicated either *heterosexual* or *other* orientation, and if those two groups have substantially different risks of sexual assault.

Slightly more than half of all sexual assaults in the military target women, and women face a risk of sexual assault that is approximately nine times greater than men's risk. For good reason, therefore, much of the public discussion of sexual assaults and some of the prevention materials used across DoD focuses on sexual assault of women. However, our analyses highlight another high-risk population in the military that has not been understood well by the public, and which might not be understood well by leaders in the military charged with preventing sexual assaults. Specifically, nearly half of all sexual assaults target service members who do not identify as heterosexual on the WGRA. Better understand-

ing these crimes could help refine prevention strategies to better target a large proportion of all sexual assaults across the services.

Appendix

Our analysis assumes that the non-LGB sexual assault rate published by Breslin et al. (2019) correctly characterizes the risk to heterosexual service members. However, Breslin et al.'s report does not explain how their LGB and non-LGB groups were constructed. This introduces an important ambiguity that could affect our calculations of the magnitude of the problem of sexual assaults of service members who are LGB or who indicate something other than heterosexual on the sexual orientation WGRA question: In which groupings (LGB or non-LGB), if any, were respondents who selected *other* or those who selected PNA included? The report includes the proportion of respondents indicating *other* and PNA but does not describe how those groups were handled when creating LGB and non-LGB groupings for which they provide sexual assault prevalence.

We believe Breslin et al. (2019) calculated their LGB and non-LGB sexual assault rates by combining (or excluding as missing) groups using one of six approaches listed in Table A.1.⁴ We believe that our primary conclusions are robust across these possibilities, and show in the following section that: (1) If either the first or the sixth of these methods was used, our assumption that heterosexual risk is correctly described by the non-LGB group is exactly correct; (2) that methods 2 and 4 are inconsistent with the available data in the report and can be dis-

missed as possible groupings used by Breslin et al. (2019); and (3) that if methods 3 or 5 were used, our calculation of the number of assaults on members who do not describe themselves as heterosexual is not meaningfully changed.

Although Breslin et al. (2019) do not describe how the analysts combined different response categories, we know that the estimated number of sexual assaults in the entire military should be the sum of the assaults against members who indicated that they were heterosexual, LGB, *other*, and PNA. We can use this relationship to assess the plausibility of the six possible analytic approaches listed in Table A.1.

First, we will consider variable recoding, in which none of the original responses are treated as missing and therefore are excluded from the estimate of sexual assault risk for both LGB and non-LGB groups (Table A.1, methods 1–4). If the non-LGB group just includes heterosexuals and all other sexual orientation responses are combined in the *LGB* group, this would imply that there were approximately 7,900 total assaults across all men (which is 5 percent higher than the published estimate of 7,546 contained in Breslin et al. [2019]), and approximately 12,000 assaults on women (which is 7 percent lower than the published estimate of 12,972), for a total of 20,000 sexual assaults across the military, which is 2.5 percent lower than the published total of 20,518 (see the first three rows of Table A.2). The method 1 recoding is relatively consistent with the total number of assaults estimated in Breslin et al. (2019), and might have been used by the analysts. Table A.2 provides comparable calculations for each of the other definitions of non-LGB that Breslin et al. (2019) might have used. The other methods (2–4) to recode the responses into LBG and non-LGB groups implies a total number of sexual assaults that is less consistent with published numbers of sexual assaults than coding method 1, in which non-LGB only includes heterosexual service members. However, method 1 only differs from the published numbers by an amount within the rounding error of the underlying numbers.

The *non-LGB* definition that includes *other* and PNA respondents is the worst-fitting definition; the total estimated count of sexual assaults differs from the published value by around 3,000. Therefore, we

Nearly half of all sexual assaults target service members who do not identify as heterosexual on the WGRA.

TABLE A.1

Estimates of Total Sexual Assaults Under Six Possible Definitions of OPA's Non-LGB Grouping of Service Members

| Method | Non-LGB | LGB | Treat as Missing |
|--------|----------------------------|-------------------|------------------|
| 1 | heterosexual | LGB + PNA + Other | None |
| 2 | heterosexual + PNA | LGB + Other | None |
| 3 | heterosexual + Other | LGB + PNA | None |
| 4 | heterosexual + Other + PNA | LGB | None |
| 5 | heterosexual + Other | LGB | PNA |
| 6 | heterosexual | LGB | PNA + Other |

TABLE A.2

Estimates of Total Sexual Assaults Under Four Possible Definitions of OPA's Non-LGB Grouping of Service Members

| Method | Gender | Definition of Non-LGB Grouping | LGB Assaults | Non-LGB Assaults | LGB and Non-LGB Assaults | Total Across Men and Women |
|--------|--------|--------------------------------|--------------|------------------|--------------------------|----------------------------|
| 1 | | | | | | 19,995 |
| | Men | Heterosexual | 3,981 | 3,917 | 7,898 | |
| | Women | Heterosexual | 4,343 | 7,754 | 12,097 | |
| 2 | | | | | | 17,603 |
| | Men | Heterosexual + PNA | 1,991 | 4,132 | 6,122 | |
| | Women | Heterosexual + PNA | 3,021 | 8,459 | 11,480 | |
| 3 | | | | | | 19,464 |
| | Men | Heterosexual + Other | 3,583 | 3,960 | 7,543 | |
| | Women | Heterosexual + Other | 3,965 | 7,956 | 11,921 | |
| 4 | | | | | | 17,071 |
| | Men | Heterosexual + Other + PNA | 1,592 | 4,175 | 5,767 | |
| | Women | Heterosexual + Other + PNA | 2,643 | 8,661 | 11,304 | |

NOTE: If none of the four sexual orientation response categories was excluded from the calculation of LGB and non-LGB sexual assault rates, the sum of assaults against LGB and non-LGB members should approximate closely the published total number of sexual assaults—20,518—for the coding method actually used by OPA in Breslin et al. (2019).

rule out method 4 as inconsistent with available data. Similarly, method 2, which combines only PNA with heterosexual, produces estimates of total numbers of assaulted service members that are far from the published values, so we rule out method 2.

This leaves just two possible methods that could invalidate our calculation, both of which combine *other* and heterosexual in the *non-LGB* group, and both of which are equivalent for the purposes of our analyses (i.e., whether PNA is excluded or included in the LGB group, assaults of PNA respondents are not among those we calculate as non-LGB assaults). Note, however, that if sexual assault risk to the *other* group is higher than risk to the heterosexual group, the estimates that we report for respondents who do not indicate they are heterosexual are conservative: The true proportion of assaults that is experienced by this group would be slightly higher than we report. Alternatively, if the *other* group has lower rates of sexual assault and was combined with respondents indicating that they were heterosexual in the non-LGB group, our estimate of the percentage of individuals experiencing a sexual assault who did not indicate that they were heterosexual would be slightly too high. However, such effects will be extremely small because the *other* group is very small relative to the heterosexual group. For example, if the *other* group has no risk whatsoever (i.e., none were sexually assaulted in 2018), our analysis approach would conclude that 42 percent of all sexual assaults are committed against service members who do not state that they are heterosexual (compared with the 43 percent that we estimate in this report): That is, the estimates are not affected by the uncertainty about whether they combined *other* and heterosexual in the non-LGB group.

To conclude, the definition of *non-LGB* that most closely reproduces published values—and differs from the published values by an amount easily explained by rounding errors—is one where *non-LGB* comprises just the heterosexual group. The

other possible definition of *non-LGB*—one in which *other* respondents are grouped with the *heterosexual* group—makes our analysis conservative if, as seems likely, *other* respondents are at higher risk of sexual assault than heterosexual respondents. If, in fact, risk to the other group is as low as it can possibly be, that would not meaningfully alter our conclusion that service members who do not describe themselves as heterosexual face disproportionate risks of sexual assault. Additional research that investigates the relationship between sexual orientation and risks of sexual assault and harassment would clear up this ambiguity. Such research could also answer a range of important questions about the sexual assaults of nonheterosexual service members, which account for nearly half of all sexually assaulted members. These answers could be key to designing sexual assault prevention and response programs that effectively target the most-prevalent forms of sexual assault in the military.

Notes

¹ We refer here to *LGB* rather than broader terms for sexual minorities because the most recent WGRA survey does not assess transgender identification. Thus, we lack data about this group.

² The rates of sexual assault by sexual orientation provided in Breslin et al. (2019) are rounded and presented without standard errors or confidence intervals. Because of this, we cannot present confidence intervals for our computed-risk ratios, but those intervals are likely to be relatively wide.

³ Note that the percentages across sexual orientation groups among men adds up to more than 100 percent because of rounding of the numbers prior to presentation in Breslin et al., 2019. If we subtract 0.25 percent from each of the four population sexual orientation proportions, thereby causing them to sum to 100, our calculation of the number of assaults on nonheterosexual men increases from 3,629 to 3,640.

⁴ We discount the possibility that Breslin et al. (2019) recoded *other* as missing but combined PNA in either LGB or non-LGB groups. PNA legitimately could be considered a missing value or a type of nonresponse, while responding “Other (for example, questioning, asexual, undecided, self-identified)” is responsive to the question. If any response category was treated as missing, it would necessarily be PNA, or PNA and other.

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About This Report

This report examines a feature of military sexual assaults that has received little public attention, but which may be important for developing more effective prevention strategies. Specifically, we use publicly available information to estimate the proportion of all sexual assaults of active component service members that are against members who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or who indicate something other than an identification as heterosexual on survey questions.

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