

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

HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE 2014 RAND MILITARY WORKPLACE STUDY

In early 2014, the Department of Defense (DoD) asked the RAND National Defense Research Institute to conduct an independent assessment of sexual assault, sexual harassment, and gender discrimination in the military. The resulting study, the RAND Military Workplace Study (RMWS), invited close to 560,000 active- and reserve-component service members to participate in a survey fielded in August and September of 2014, making it one of the largest surveys of its kind ever conducted for DoD. More than 170,000 service members completed the survey. Compared with prior DoD studies, the RMWS takes a new approach to counting individuals in the military who experienced sexual assault, sexual harassment, and gender discrimination in the past year (see back page).

The RMWS provides DoD with unprecedented detail on the frequency of criminal sexual assault against its members, the nature and context of those assaults, and how they differ for men and women in each branch of service. The study also provides new evidence on the prevalence and nature of sexual harassment and gender discrimination in the military. Detailed results, including recommendations, are documented in four comprehensive volumes (available at www.rand.org/surveys/rmws.html); some of the study's major conclusions about the experiences of DoD service members are highlighted in this brief.





Nearly all assaults against active-component service members in the past year (90%) took place within a military setting or were perpetrated by military personnel.

An estimated 20,300 of the 1.3 million active-component service members were sexually assaulted in the past year. Approximately 1.0 percent of men and 4.9 percent of women experienced a sexual assault in the past year, or an estimated 10,600 servicemen and 9,600 servicewomen.* Among those who were sexually assaulted, 43 percent of women and 35 percent of men experienced penetrative assaults—a higher proportion than was estimated using earlier survey methods. Nearly all assaults against active-component service members in the past year (90 percent) took place within a military setting or were perpetrated by military personnel.

The sexual assault experiences of men and women differ. This is the first survey of the military that included a large enough sample of men to provide details on their sexual assault experiences—revealing important gender differences. Relative to women, men who were sexually assaulted were more likely to have experienced multiple incidents in the past year, to have been assaulted by multiple offenders during a single incident, and to have been assaulted at work or during duty hours. They are also more likely to describe the event as hazing or as intended to abuse or humiliate them. Sexual assaults of men were also less likely to involve alcohol than assaults of women. Finally, men who experienced a sexual assault were less likely to report the assault to authorities and less likely to tell anyone at all about the incident.

The risk of sexual assault varies substantially by branch of service. Men and women in the Air Force experienced substantially lower rates of sexual assault than those in the Army, Navy, and Marine Corps. We analyzed many demographic and military factors (such as age, education, pay grade, and frequency of deployment) as possible explanations. After accounting for service differences on these characteristics, members of the Army, Navy, and Marine Corps experienced similar levels of risk, but members of the Air Force still remained at lower risk. Women in the other DoD services have 1.7 times the risk of sexual assault as women in the Air Force; men in the other DoD services have 4 to 5 times the risk of sexual assault as men in the Air Force.

*Numbers do not add to 20,300 due to rounding.

Sexual harassment is a common experience in the military, especially among women.

An estimated 116,600 active-component service members were sexually harassed in the past year, with women experiencing significantly higher rates than men: 22 percent of women and 7 percent of men experienced sexual harassment in the past year. In addition, we estimate that 43,900 active-component service members experienced gender discrimination in the past year (12 percent of women and 2 percent of men). In nearly 60 percent of these cases, the violations were committed by a supervisor or unit leader. There is also evidence that sexual harassment and gender discrimination are strongly associated with sexual assault. Members who experienced sexual harassment or gender discrimination in the past year experienced far higher rates of sexual assault in the past year. In addition, approximately one-third of those who were sexually assaulted say the offender sexually harassed them before the assault.

Many who report offenses perceived some kind of retaliation.

Of active-component women who reported a sexual assault, 52 percent perceived that they experienced professional or social retaliation afterward. Nevertheless, fear of retaliation was not typically cited as the primary reason people did not report the sexual assaults and violations they experienced. More commonly, service members indicated that they did not report a sexual assault because they wanted to forget about it and move on, or because they thought it was not serious enough to report.

The reserve component had significantly lower rates of sexual assault in the past year than the active component.

Among reserve-component members, an estimated 3.1 percent of women and 0.4 percent of men experienced a sexual assault in the past year. Similar to service differences, the demographic and service factors we examined do not explain this lower risk for reserve-component members. A majority of the assailants of reserve-component members were military personnel (81 percent) and a majority of the assaults occurred in a military setting (63 percent). Even among part-time reservists, most who experienced a sexual assault in the past year indicated that the incident involved military personnel or settings (85 percent).

The rate of unwanted sexual contact has declined since 2012.

In addition to developing new measures for the 2014 survey, the RMWS assessed “unwanted sexual contact” as it had been measured in prior DoD studies. We estimate that 1.4% of active-component service members experienced one or more unwanted sexual contacts in the past year, which represents 18,900 service members in total. This is a significant decrease in the prevalence of unwanted sexual contact compared with 2012 when it was last assessed.

Women have almost five times men’s risk of sexual assault.



RAND's approach offers greater precision in estimating the number of crimes and MEO violations that have occurred.

What did the RAND Military Workplace Study (RMWS) measure?

The new RAND survey used the definitions and criteria of sexual assault crimes under Articles 120 and 80 of the Uniform Code of Military Justice—the criminal code that defines what sexual assault is for service members. The survey measures of sexual harassment and gender discrimination are tightly aligned with criteria in DoD Directive 1350.2 on military equal opportunity (MEO) violations.

Compared with past surveys that were designed to measure a climate of sexual misconduct associated with illegal behavior, RAND's approach offers greater precision in estimating the number of crimes and MEO violations that have occurred. However, because our estimates are based on self-reports, some over- or undercounting of these crimes and violations is expected.

Specifically, the RMWS measures

sexual assault, which captures three mutually exclusive categories: penetrative, non-penetrative, and attempted penetrative crimes

sexual harassment, which consists of

sexually hostile work environment—a workplace characterized by persistent or severe unwelcome sexual advances, comments, or physical conduct that offends service members

sexual quid pro quo—incidents in which someone uses his or her power or influence within the military to attempt to coerce sexual behavior in exchange for a workplace benefit

gender discrimination, which captures incidents in which service members are subject to mistreatment on the basis of their gender that deprives them of equal opportunities within the military.



This brief describes work done in the RAND National Defense Research Institute and documented in *Sexual Assault and Sexual Harassment in the U.S. Military: Volume 2. Estimates for Department of Defense Service Members from the 2014 RAND Military Workplace Study*, Andrew R. Morral, Kristie L. Gore, and Terry L. Schell, eds., RR-870/2-OSD, 2015 (available at www.rand.org/t/RR870z2). To view this brief online, visit www.rand.org/t/RB9841. More information on the study, including links to volumes documenting the study methodology and other related topics, is available at www.rand.org/rmws.

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