

Actions the Army Can Take to Reduce Sexual Assault, Sexual Harassment, and Gender Discrimination

In 2021 and 2022, RAND Arroyo Center released several reports that provide critical information on risk for and experiences of sexual assault, sexual harassment, and gender discrimination in the military—and, specifically, in the U.S. Army. This brief provides a set of actionable recommendations for the Army based on this recent RAND research. This research brief addresses four questions:

- Where should the Army target prevention resources?
- What topics should prevention training cover?
- How can the Army support unit leaders so that they can better prevent sexual assault, sexual harassment, and gender discrimination?
- What still needs to be learned to improve efforts to prevent sexual assault, sexual harassment, and gender discrimination?

Where Should the Army Target Prevention Resources?

One-third of sexual assaults of female soldiers in 2018 occurred at just five installations (Fort Hood, Fort Bliss, Fort Riley, Fort Campbell, and

Fort Carson), but the prevalence of sexual harassment varied widely across Army installations, units, and commands. Furthermore, soldiers assigned to some installations, units, and commands have a higher risk of experiencing sexual assault and sexual harassment than would be expected given the individual demographic and military characteristics (e.g., gender, rank) of their assigned installation, unit, or command. Importantly, results show considerable stability in risk levels among groups and across locations over time. If resources are limited, **sexual assault and sexual harassment prevention resources should be targeted to installations, units, and commands that are at high risk for these behaviors.**

Poor unit and command or supervisor climate is also associated with a high prevalence of sexual assault and sexual harassment. **Installations with high levels of sexual assault and sexual harassment should receive interventions to improve both unit and command or supervisor climate.** Such interventions should be designed to improve the full variety of climate issues related to sexual assault and sexual harassment, including whether commanders or supervisors model respectful behavior, correct unprofessional language, encourage unit members to challenge—and intervene in—sexual harassment and gender discrimination, encourage report-

ing of sexual assault and sexual harassment, and take reports seriously. Such climate issues also include how units deal with conflict, how they support victims of sexual assault, and whether they respect soldiers from diverse backgrounds.

What Topics Should Prevention Training Cover?

Currently, sexual assault and sexual harassment prevention training tends to focus on stereotypical and seemingly more-severe forms of sexual assault and sexual harassment; for example, penetrative sexual assaults of women. However, sexual assault and sexual harassment incidents in the Army span a wide spectrum of harm. A large percentage of sexual assaults are of men; disproportionately target sexual minorities (i.e., nonheterosexual individuals); and appear to have been committed with the intent to haze, bully, humiliate, or abuse rather than primarily for the purposes of sexual gratification. Additionally, seemingly less severe behaviors that constitute sexual harassment and gender discrimination (e.g., being mistreated, insulted, or ignored because of one's gender; offensive and persistent sexual jokes; insults related to gender expression) are substantially more common in the Army than sexual assault. **Sexual harassment and sexual assault prevention programs and training should emphasize the full range of behaviors and scenarios that soldiers experience**—that is, all the behaviors that the Army is seeking to prevent.

Such behaviors as offensive and persistent sexual jokes and unwanted, upsetting discussions about sex are among the most common types of sexual harassment behaviors experienced by both male and female soldiers, and these behaviors should be emphasized in prevention training. Training should also include gender discrimination,^A which is one of the most common problems experienced by women in the Army, along with other common types of sexual harassment,

^A Gender discrimination includes being ignored, mistreated, or insulted because you are a woman (or man); being told you are not as good at your job as a man (or woman); or being told that a man (or woman) should be prevented from having your job. This definition of gender discrimination is based on language used in the 2018 Workplace and Gender Relations Survey of Active Duty Service Members (see Department of Defense Directive 1350.2, *Department of Defense Military Equal Opportunity (MEO) Program*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Defense, incorporating change 2, June 8, 2015).

such as repeated attempts to establish an unwanted romantic or sexual relationship, insults related to men's masculinity or gender expression, and sexual comments about soldiers' appearances or bodies. Training should emphasize that the overwhelming majority of sexual harassment and gender discrimination in the Army occurs at soldiers' places of duty, during the duty day, and is typically reported to occur more than once.

The most common type of sexual assault by far in the Army is nonpenetrative; i.e., having someone touch private areas of the victim's body without their consent. Prevention training should have a strong focus on nonpenetrative sexual assaults in addition to focusing on penetrative sexual assaults. Prevention training should also cover types of sexual assaults that are common across the Army but may not meet the stereotype of a "typical" sexual assault, including assaults of men, assaults that are meant to abuse and humiliate, and assaults that are linked to bullying or hazing.

Sexual harassment and sexual assault risk are strongly correlated. Being in a unit with high rates of sexual harassment increases a soldier's risk of experiencing both sexual assault and sexual harassment. For this reason, prevention programming should treat these two problems together. Training should address the more common behaviors of sexual harassment and gender discrimination, and doing so also might achieve a reduction in the prevalence of sexual assault. Thus, **prevention programs should treat sexual harassment, gender discrimination, and sexual assault as part of a continuum rather than addressing them as separate phenomena.** These prevention programs could include training for leaders on how to recognize and intervene when they are aware of demeaning behaviors that fall just below the standard necessary for assault, harassment, or bullying, because such behaviors might be precursors to or contribute to a climate that is conducive of more-serious offenses.

Prevention training should also be expanded to focus on the experiences of sexual minorities. Sexual minorities face dramatically higher risk of sexual assault than heterosexual soldiers, and there are large differences in the types of sexual assaults that non-heterosexual soldiers experience relative to those experienced by heterosexual soldiers. Because a substantial and disproportionate percentage of all sexual assaults in the Army are of sexual minorities, prevention training should reflect the characteristics of those assaults.

How Can the Army Support Unit Leaders so That They Can Better Prevent Sexual Assault, Sexual Harassment, and Gender Discrimination?

Commanders should be provided with sexual assault and sexual harassment risk reports to warn them of known problems within their commands and allow them to identify, monitor, and address problems quickly. Although it is difficult to construct indicators for future sexual assault and sexual harassment, the risk of experiencing these behaviors within installations, units, and commands tends to be stable over time. These risk reports should differ from those that already exist (e.g., the Defense Equal Opportunity Management Institute Organizational Climate Survey) and may require new data-collection efforts to provide data that are as contemporary as possible. Therefore, these risk reports should help commanders understand

- whether their unit is currently experiencing an elevated risk of sexual assault or sexual harassment
- whether their unit has a history of elevated risk of sexual assault or sexual harassment
- whether their unit has experienced a risk level that is significantly different (i.e., higher or lower) than the average level of risk for similar units
- whether risk is changing over time (i.e., increasing, decreasing, or holding steady)
- whether the current climate and risk rates for other harmful behaviors, such as bullying and hazing (which are correlated with the risk of sexual assault and sexual harassment), are elevated.

Finally, these risk reports should help commanders locate resources available to help them in developing a response to elevated levels of risk of sexual assault or sexual harassment and climates or cultures conducive to such behaviors.

What Still Needs to Be Learned to Improve Prevention Efforts in the Army?

How Do the Experiences of Sexual Minority Soldiers Differ from Those of Heterosexual Soldiers?

Approximately four in ten sexual assault victims (across service branches) do not self-identify as heterosexual, and any program attempting to substantially lower rates of sexual assault will need to address this specific class of assaults. Although prior work has documented several ways in which the sexual assault experiences of sexual minorities differ from those of heterosexual victims in the military, there is very little research on sexual minorities' other experiences, including discrimination and harassment and other types of mistreatment, or whether they face adverse career outcomes, such as slower promotion or lower retention. Such research is extremely limited because sexual orientation cannot currently be tracked as a demographic characteristic in U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) administrative databases. Therefore, **sexual orientation should be treated as a standard demographic characteristic in DoD databases to enable researchers to track whether sexual minorities have an elevated risk of experiencing forms of mistreatment in addition to sexual assault and sexual harassment.** However, following this recommendation will require a policy change at the DoD level, and it is important to consider how to implement that policy in a way that minimizes unintended negative consequences of disclosure.

Who Are the Perpetrators of Sexual Assault, Sexual Harassment, and Gender Discrimination?

A very basic description of perpetrators of sexual assault, sexual harassment, and gender discrimination in the Army is known: They are most often male enlisted soldiers who are peers of the victims. However, detailed information about the perpetrators remains unknown, which makes it difficult to target prevention efforts at potential perpetrators. **More research is needed on the risk factors for perpetration of sexual assault, sexual harassment, and gender discrimination to improve the targeting of prevention efforts.**

This recommendation aligns with the recommendations of the Independent Review Commission on Sexual Assault in the Military made in 2021.

This brief describes research and analysis conducted in RAND Arroyo Center and documented in *Sexual Assault Experiences in the Active-Component Army: Variation by Year, Gender, Sexual Orientation, and Installation Risk Level*, by Avery Calkins, Matthew Cefalu, Terry L. Schell, Linda Cottrell, Sarah O. Meadows, and Rebecca L. Collins, RR-A1385-2, 2022 (available at www.rand.org/t/RR-A1385-2); *Sexual Harassment and Gender Discrimination in the Active-Component Army: Variation in Most Serious Event Characteristics by Gender and Installation Risk*, by Avery Calkins, Matthew Cefalu, Terry L. Schell, Linda Cottrell, Sarah O. Meadows, and Rebecca L. Collins, RR-A1385-1, 2021 (available at www.rand.org/t/RR-A1385-1); *Organizational Characteristics Associated with Risk of Sexual Assault and Sexual Harassment in the U.S. Army*, by Miriam Matthews, Andrew R. Morral, Terry L. Schell, Matthew Cefalu, Joshua Snoke, and R. J. Briggs, RR-A1013-1, 2021 (available at www.rand.org/t/RR-A1013-1); and *Sexual Assault of Sexual Minorities in the U.S. Military*, by Andrew R. Morral and Terry L. Schell, RR-A1390-1, 2021 (available at www.rand.org/t/RR-A1390-1). To view this brief online, visit www.rand.org/t/RBA1385-2. The RAND Corporation is a research organization that develops solutions to public policy challenges to help make communities throughout the world safer and more secure, healthier and more prosperous. RAND is nonprofit, nonpartisan, and committed to the public interest. RAND's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. RAND® is a registered trademark.

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