

# Characteristics of Sexual Assault and Sexual Harassment in the U.S. Army

## Implications for Prevention Efforts

In February 2021, U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin ordered the armed services to take immediate action to address sexual harassment and sexual assault in the military, including by focusing on high-risk military installations. An improved understanding of the characteristics and context of sexual harassment and sexual assault events could inform the design of prevention efforts aimed at reducing the prevalence of such incidents. Recent research conducted in RAND Arroyo Center has explored these topics.

This research brief highlights the top-line findings from two projects that have implications for Army prevention strategies: an assessment of organizational characteristics of sexual assault and sexual harassment and an exploration of the types of sexual harassment or gender discrimination events experienced by Army soldiers.

### **Organizational Characteristics of Sexual Assault and Sexual Harassment**

RAND Corporation researchers examined the organizational and operational characteristics associated with the risk of sexual assault and sexual harassment at U.S. Army bases, within commands, and in career management fields. The analysis used U.S. Department of Defense administrative and personnel data, along with survey data from the 2014 RAND Military Workplace Study and the 2016 and 2018 Workplace and Gender Relations Survey of Active Duty Personnel.

The results of these analyses showed considerable variation in the risk of sexual assault and sexual harassment across groups of soldiers, primarily

among Army women. More specifically, the principal findings showed the following:

- Groups of soldiers, and particularly women, in different commands, bases, and career fields experience substantially different rates of sexual assault and sexual harassment.
- The rates of sexual assault and harassment among some groups of soldiers are considerably greater or less than are typical for soldiers with similar ages, ranks, education, deployment histories, and other risk factors, which suggest that other factors, such as command climate, culture, or type of work, influence risk.
- Groups that have high rates of sexual harassment are very likely to also have high rates of sexual assault and vice versa.
- Groups with high risk of sexual assault or sexual harassment differ from those with lower risk in several ways. For example, among men and women, commands and installations with better unit climate and better supervisor climate have lower rates of sexual assault and sexual harassment.
- For women, assignment to groups in which more civilians work appears to protect against sexual assault, whereas assignment to groups with large proportions of combat arms soldiers might be a risk factor for assault.
- Overall rates of sexual assault and sexual harassment are quite stable over time: Units that were at risk two or four years ago are likely to remain at risk. Even after adjusting for various personnel characteristics, risk is relatively stable over time.

## Policy Implications

A notable finding was the connection between unit and command climate and rates of sexual assault and sexual harassment. *Improving unit and command climate* therefore might help reduce rates of sexual assault and sexual harassment. Furthermore, given the difference in risk across units, commands, and career fields, *targeting prevention efforts at large units with high rates of sexual assault or sexual harassment* could bring down total sexual assault and harassment rates. Indeed, 34 percent of all women soldiers who were sexually assaulted in 2018 were assigned to just the five highest-risk bases. The Army also should *investigate differences among bases and commands* that are associated with unexpect-

edly high risk of sexual assault and sexual harassment as a strategy for better understanding drivers of risk and differences that are associated with unexpectedly low risk to understand protective factors.

Because sexual harassment and sexual assault appear to be tightly linked, sexual harassment risk could serve as an early warning of sexual assault risk. This suggests that prevention of sexual harassment also might prevent sexual assault. Sexual harassment, however, might be easier to combat: It is more public and more frequent, providing leaders with opportunities to counsel and reprimand soldiers and establish professional workplace norms before inappropriate behaviors become crimes. Thus, a better characterization of sexual harassment (and gender discrimination) in the Army, which is the topic of the second piece of research reviewed here, could be used to train leaders and develop more-effective prevention tools and outcomes.

## Types of Sexual Harassment or Gender Discrimination

In the second research effort, RAND researchers developed profiles of active-component soldiers' self-reported most serious experiences of sexual harassment or gender discrimination. The profiles, which we developed using data from the 2018 Workplace and Gender Relations Survey of Active Duty Personnel, describe the types of behaviors that occurred, characteristics of (alleged) perpetrators, and the time(s) and place(s) in which the experiences occurred.

The analysis also provides information about how the experiences of sexual harassment and gender discrimination vary for men and women between high- and non-high-risk installations and among high-risk installations. Consistent with the definition of *total risk* used in the analysis of organizational characteristics, a high-risk installation has rates of reported sexual harassment that are higher than the average rate experienced by all soldiers.<sup>1</sup>

The results identify types of sexual harassment and gender discrimination experiences that are similar for men and women, circumstances in which these experiences are different, and whether the types of incidents are markedly different for soldiers who are stationed at

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<sup>1</sup> This research on the types of sexual harassment and gender discrimination experienced excluded the Pentagon and service academies in its analysis.

high-risk installations. More specifically, researchers found the following:

- Sexual jokes and discussions of sex that are either persistent or severely offensive are among the most common behaviors experienced by both men and women.
  - For women, the other most common behaviors experienced are gender discrimination and attempts to establish unwanted romantic or sexual relationships.
  - For men, the other most common behaviors experienced are insults related to their masculinity, sexual orientation, or gender expression.
  - Both men and women often experience multiple forms of sexual harassment or gender discrimination, but women experience significantly more.
- The most-serious experiences of sexual harassment and gender discrimination in the Army for women and men are primarily committed by male service members, especially enlisted members. These events occur at military installations and during military activities, especially while soldiers are at work during duty hours rather than during their free time.
- Experiences are broadly similar at high-risk and non-high-risk installations for both women and men. The exceptions are the following:
  - Women at high-risk installations are more likely than women at non-high-risk installations to report that they experienced being ignored, mistreated, or insulted because of their gender.
  - Sexual harassment and gender discrimination at high-risk installations are more often perpetrated by members of the military, especially among the enlisted ranks.

- Women at high-risk installations are more likely than women at non-high-risk installations to report that the perpetrator was either in their chain of command or lower-ranked.
- Experiences were broadly similar *across* high-risk installations for both men and women.

## Policy Implications

Sexual harassment and gender discrimination prevention training materials should emphasize the most common behaviors and scenarios that service members experience outlined by this research: gender discrimination (especially among women); persistent and offensive discussions of and jokes about sex in the workplace (among both women and men); repeated attempts to establish an unwanted romantic or sexual relationship (among women); and insults related to men's masculinity, sexual orientation, or gender expression. Prevention efforts also should focus on the workplace as the setting for sexual harassment and gender discrimination events.

However, the data suggest that there is no need to tailor the content of training materials for the prevention of sexual harassment and gender discrimination for each individual installation. This conclusion is not meant to imply that all aspects of prevention approaches should be one-size-fits-all. As the results of the previous project indicated, targeting prevention efforts at specific installations using risk, career field, or such characteristics as climate could have a measurable effect on overall prevalence rates for sexual harassment and sexual assault.

Thus, it is possible to *target prevention efforts* using different risk characteristics but still *use the same training content* insofar as it focuses on types of behaviors that are common across all installations, regardless of risk.

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This brief documents research and analysis conducted in RAND Arroyo Center and documented in *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](http://www.rand.org/t/RR-A1013-1)); and *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 S. 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](http://www.rand.org/t/RR-A1385-1)). To view this brief online, visit [www.rand.org/t/RBA1385-1](http://www.rand.org/t/RBA1385-1). 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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