



Military Sexual Assault

**Adapted from OVC TTAC: Sexual Assault Advocate and Service Provider Training - Module 8:
Military Sexual Assault: Participant Manual**

Purpose

The purpose of this module is to review the prevalence and demographics of military sexual assault, identify unique aspects of sexual assault in the military, and describe resources and reporting options for military victims.

Lessons

1. Military Sexual Assault: The Current Landscape
2. Military Culture
3. Reporting Options and Resources

Learning Objectives

By the end of this module, you will be able to:

- Discuss the overall prevalence of military sexual assault.
- Describe two unique aspects of military culture.
- Describe the two types of reporting options for military Service members.
- Identify at least one victim assistance resource for military Service members.

Participant Worksheets

Worksheet 8.1, Military Sexual Assault Reporting Options

1. Military Sexual Assault: The Current Landscape

In 2016, more than 80 percent of both male and female Service member victims knew their offender. This means they most likely had to live near or work with their offender (DoD, 2017).

The following are findings from the FY 2018 Workplace and Gender Relations Survey of Active Duty Members (2018 WGRA):

- In 2018, the estimated sexual assault prevalence increased for young, enlisted women. The estimated sexual assault prevalence did not change for men.
- Most sexual assaults occurred between people ages 17–24 who work, train, and/or live in close proximity.
- For female Service members, offenders were most often male peers they considered a friend or an acquaintance and who acted alone.
- In cases of sexual assault, about 52 percent of alleged offenders were male, and 30 percent were female. About 13 percent of offenders were men and women acting together. The gender of the offender was unknown in 5 percent of cases.

In 2004, the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) directed the creation of a task force to review the DoD process for responding to victims of sexual assault. This resulted in the Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office (SAPRO), which serves as the single point of authority for DoD sexual assault policy and provides oversight to ensure compliance with policy. SAPRO continues to lead sexual assault prevention and response efforts. In 2021, DoD was tasked with responding to new recommendations outlined in an Independent Review Commission (IRC) report.

Because of the military's increased focus on this issue, let's review your knowledge of sexual assault in the military.

We will conduct an activity exploring what you know about sexual assault in the military.

2. Military Culture

The U.S. Military is set apart from the civilian culture by its own laws (i.e., Uniform Code of Military Justice), social customs and protocols, language, dress code, titles, and traditions.

According to the IRC report (2021), some aspects of military life make the experience of sexual assault and the decision to report it challenging: "Military units are small by design: Service members generally live, eat, and work in the same area, and because of this closeness, spend their off-hours together. This creates a small universe for the average junior enlisted Service member—the very person who is at the highest risk for sexual assault and sexual harassment."

Because of the unique nature and structure of military units, additional reporting barriers for Service members include:

- Fears of retaliation and/or being ostracized from their military unit.

- Loss of promotion opportunities. For example, an assault may occur while Service members attend a training course to advance their careers. The members may fear losing their slot in the course, having to stay away from their unit longer, or not graduating with their peers.

Male victims of sexual assault in the military may face additional challenges in reporting and coping with sexual assault due to heightened pressures relating to masculinity, including—

- Isolation and struggles with intimacy (“Because of my self-loathing due to the incident in the military, I don’t bond with nobody...I don’t make friendships very well at all, male or female.”)
- Shame and secrecy (“To this day, my two best friends in the world, I’ve never discussed [the sexual assault] with them . . . They know everything about me, except for that.”)
- Avoidant coping, including the use of alcohol and drugs, suppression of recurring thoughts, and excessive exercise (“I’m just trying to work myself out to exhaustion, so then I would go to sleep and pray that I wouldn’t have a dream or a nightmare.”)
- Distrust and hypervigilance (“[Military sexual assault] would make me a lot more cautious . . . didn’t know who would want to be friends with you because of the wrong reasons, or the wrong intentions . . . I look at people; I pay attention to people a lot more.”)

In cases of military sexual assault, there are cumulative effects that persist over time. “It is horrible . . . it is still with me . . . it never was addressed. I was never able to get it out . . . and I strongly believe that a lot of my poor relationships, a lot of my stress, a lot of my depression that I’ve had through the years is a result of that” (Turchik et al., 2013).

Responses to Disclosures

Positive responses to disclosures—such as believing, validating, and supporting the victim—are key to a victim’s recovery.

“When we were talking about that stuff, it kind of brought us closer together. We were more like family, like brothers, because they were there to support me” (Monteith et al., 2019).

Offering all survivors a choice to report after a sexual assault and throughout the process is considered best practice because such an approach is victim-centered and trauma-informed.

3. Reporting Options and Resources

Access the Sexual Assault Response Report Flow Chart PDF here:

https://sapr.mil/public/docs/policy/SexualAssault_sample_response_flowchart.pdf

- Restricted Reporting is available to victims of sexual assault who wish to disclose the crime confidentially without triggering an official investigative process of notification to Command.

- Unrestricted Reporting is available when victims of sexual assault want an official investigation and Command notification.

Military victims of sexual assault may consider the following reporting options:

- A victim discloses to law enforcement or Chain of Command, which follows the path of an Unrestricted Report. A victim discloses to a SARC, SAPR VA, or health care personnel and chooses to make an Unrestricted Report.
- A victim discloses to a SARC, SAPR VA, or health care personnel and chooses to make a Restricted Report.
- A victim seeks services in the community, which may result in an Unrestricted or Restricted Report, or the victim may opt not to report the incident.
- All military victims may access care through Veterans Affairs without a DoD referral or sexual assault report. Of course, the victim always has the option not to report the incident.

Note: While Special Victims' Counsel (SVC)/Victims' Legal Counsel (VLC) and chaplains have confidentiality/privilege, they CANNOT accept a Restricted Report (SAPRO, n.d.-b.).

We will conduct an activity exploring the military sexual assault reporting options.

Upon notification of a reported sexual assault, the SARC will immediately assign a SAPR VA and inform the victim of their right to speak to an SVC/VLC. Chaplains and legal assistance attorneys cannot receive a Restricted Report, but they have privilege and can preserve the Restricted Reporting option.

Service members who experience sexual assault have a range of resources on and off installations, including—

- The DoD Safe Helpline. This is a free, anonymous, confidential, and 24/7 worldwide call, text, and chat helpline for members of the DoD community. Safe Helpline has up-to-date contact information for resources, including SARCs, SAPR VAs, chaplains, SVCs/VLCs, medical personnel, and military police.
- SARCs and SAPR VAs. These individuals provide confidential support, such as—
 - Explaining the reporting options and services available, including medical care, counseling services, legal and spiritual support, and obtaining off-base resources, if so desired.
 - Assisting with navigating the military criminal justice process (SAPRO, n.d.-a).SVCs/VLCs. Each of the Services provides an SVC or VLC; these lawyers are experienced trial attorneys. They understand the legal process and can guide victims through the judicial process.
 - The Victim/Witness Assistance Program (VWAP). The VWAP helps give victims a voice and keeps them informed of the status of the investigation and prosecution.