

***Deserted:
The U.S. Military's Sexual Assault Crisis as a Cost of War***

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Introduction

Over the past decade, the United States military has adopted policies designed to foster greater gender equality and inclusion within the ranks. We are now more than a decade beyond a major shift in policy that, in 2013, reversed the military's former ban on women in combat.² From 2016 onward, all military jobs became open to women. This policy caught up with reality on the ground that women had been serving on the front lines of combat in Iraq and Afghanistan even while they were technically banned. Yet, even as U.S. military policy reforms during the "War on Terror" appear to reflect greater equality, violent patterns of abuse and misogyny continued within military workplaces over 20 years of war.

This report focuses on prevalence of sexual assault as one of the most devastating metrics of persistent gender inequality within the military. The report compiles and distills all available data collected by the Department of Defense (DoD) and compares this to independent (non-DoD) data to estimate sexual assault figures within the military from 2001, when the U.S. invaded Afghanistan, through 2023. There are approximately 1.3 million active-duty service members for whom the military is a workplace. In 2021, when the U.S. withdrew from Afghanistan, *prevalence* estimates by the DoD remained at a high level of approximately 35,900 cases, roughly the same level at the end of the occupation as at the beginning. Meanwhile, the year 2021 also saw the smallest percentage of victims choosing to report sexual assault since 2014.³ This is

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² Technically, the combat exclusion ban prevented women from being directly assigned to combat units below the brigade level.

³ In 2021, reporting rates fell to 20 percent (from 30 percent in 2018), the lowest rate since 2014, when an estimated 23 percent of victims reported their assault. A positive outcome for *reporting* data is

especially disturbing given that reporting is the most common route by which sexual assault survivors receive medical care and other support.

Recently-released DoD data for 2023 shows a decrease in estimated sexual assault prevalence for the first time in almost a decade. While any decline is positive, the recent DoD numbers still show that approximately 29,000 military personnel were assaulted in 2023, with many of those who reported their assault expressing dissatisfaction with services they received. Beyond assault, in 2023 close to 25 percent of active-duty women were sexually harassed (a decrease from 28.6 percent in 2021).⁴

At the same time, during and beyond the 20 years of the post-9/11 wars, independent data suggest that actual sexual assault prevalence is two to four times higher than DoD estimations—75,569 cases in 2021 and 73,695 cases in 2023.⁵ This author’s review of all available independent data demonstrates that the range of two to four times higher is a conservative, mid-range, and likely accurate estimation (on the high end are estimates suggesting prevalence is ten times higher than DoD figures). **On average, over the course of the war in Afghanistan (2001-2021), 24 percent of active-duty women and 1.9 percent of active-duty men experienced sexual assault.**⁶

These numbers, bad as they are, follow over a decade of interventions intended to address the sexual assault crisis, including 10 DoD Inspector General engagements, 60 Government Accountability Office recommendations, over 200 government panel and task force recommendations, over 150 Congressional provisions, and more than 50 Secretary of Defense initiatives.

Yet military officials have described how they prioritized “readiness”—or the ability to train and deploy troops to the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars—over confronting a clear institutional problem of sexual assault.⁷ **During the post-9/11 wars, the**

increasing (meaning more victims reporting their assault) while a positive outcome for *estimated prevalence* data is *decreasing* (meaning fewer assaults).

⁴ In 2021, an estimated 28.6 percent of active-duty women experienced sexual harassment and an estimated 6.5 percent of active-duty men. In 2023, these numbers improved to 24.7 percent of active-duty women and 5.8 percent of active-duty men. Sexual Assault Prevention and Response (SAPRO). (2024). *Department of Defense Annual Report on Sexual Assault in the Military - Fiscal Year 2023*. https://www.sapr.mil/sites/default/files/public/docs/reports/AR/FY23/FY23_Annual_Report.pdf

⁵ The range of “two – four times higher” is an average based on ratios that are rounded to the nearest tenth and that vary by year. Independent data for 2021 suggests prevalence was 2.10498607 times DoD estimates of 35,900. Independent data for 2023 suggests prevalence was 2.5412069 times DoD estimates of 29,000. Independent data for 2016 suggests prevalence estimates of 69,940 were more than four times DoD estimates of 14,900 (precisely 4.69395973 times higher). See Appendix B (especially re: Figure 5) for discussion of the author’s calculations deriving the comparison between independent sexual assault prevalence and DoD estimations.

⁶ The average of 24 percent of women and 1.9 percent of men is derived from the author’s consolidation of all available independent (non-DoD) estimations of sexual assault prevalence. These percentages (24 women, 1.9 men) appear in multiple independent studies and exclude the highest-range estimations that may over-sample populations accessing medical care. See Appendix B (especially re: Figure 4) for full discussion of all available independent estimations and why this report foregrounds the average middle-range of 24 percent of women and 1.9 percent of men.

⁷ Secretary of the Army Christine Wormuth, in Rascoe, A., & Al-Shalchi, H. (2023, June 11). The U.S. Army Has Been Falling Short of Its Recruitment Targets. *NPR*.

prioritization of force readiness above all else allowed the problem of sexual assault to fester, papering over internal violence and gender inequalities within military institutions, and thus we must consider this problem to be a cost of war.

The slight decrease in 2023 is further evidence that the previous 20 years of institutional focus on training and deploying troops to Afghanistan, ending in 2021, contributed to a permissive environment for sexual assault.⁸

This report highlights how experiences of gender inequality are most pronounced for women of color, who experience intersecting forms of racism and sexism and are one of the fastest-growing populations within the military.⁹ Independent data also confirm queer and trans service members' disproportionately greater risk for sexual assault.

Broader structures of gender and racial inequality are visible in the experiences of women deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan, also highlighted in this paper, who were seen as breaking the so-called “brass ceiling” through their roles in combat, but were in reality often pigeonholed into gender stereotypical jobs. These same women were also denied medical care due to the persistent myth among medical service providers that “women do not serve in combat.”¹⁰ This translates into higher denial rates of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) diagnoses for women and is thus a barrier to accessing treatment and services.¹¹ Such inequalities in military medicine are part of the broader landscape of discrimination.

The sexual assault crisis should draw our attention to the contradiction of military policies aimed at greater gender and racial equity when this institution waged post-9/11 wars that displaced 38 million people, directly killed 929,000 people, and indirectly killed 4.5-4.7 million people worldwide.¹² These are casualties primarily

<https://www.npr.org/2023/06/11/1181547703/the-u-s-army-has-been-falling-short-of-its-recruitment-targets>.

⁸ Sexual Assault Prevention and Response (SAPRO). (2024). *Department of Defense Annual Report on Sexual Assault in the Military - Fiscal Year 2023*.

https://www.sapr.mil/sites/default/files/public/docs/reports/AR/FY23/FY23_Annual_Report.pdf

⁹ Barroso, A. (2019, September 10). *The Changing Profile of the U.S. Military: Smaller in Size, More Diverse, More Women in Leadership*. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2019/09/10/the-changing-profile-of-the-u-s-military/>.

¹⁰ Swords to Ploughshares. (2022, February). *Veteran Reference Guide: Understanding Characteristics, Common Challenges, and Access to Care*. <https://www.swords-to-plowshares.org/research-publications/veterans-reference-guide>

¹¹ Zottarelli, M. (2015, April). *Women Veteran Screening Guide*. *Institute for Veteran Policy, Swords to Ploughshares*. 5. <https://www.swords-to-plowshares.org/research-publications/women-veteran-screening-guide>

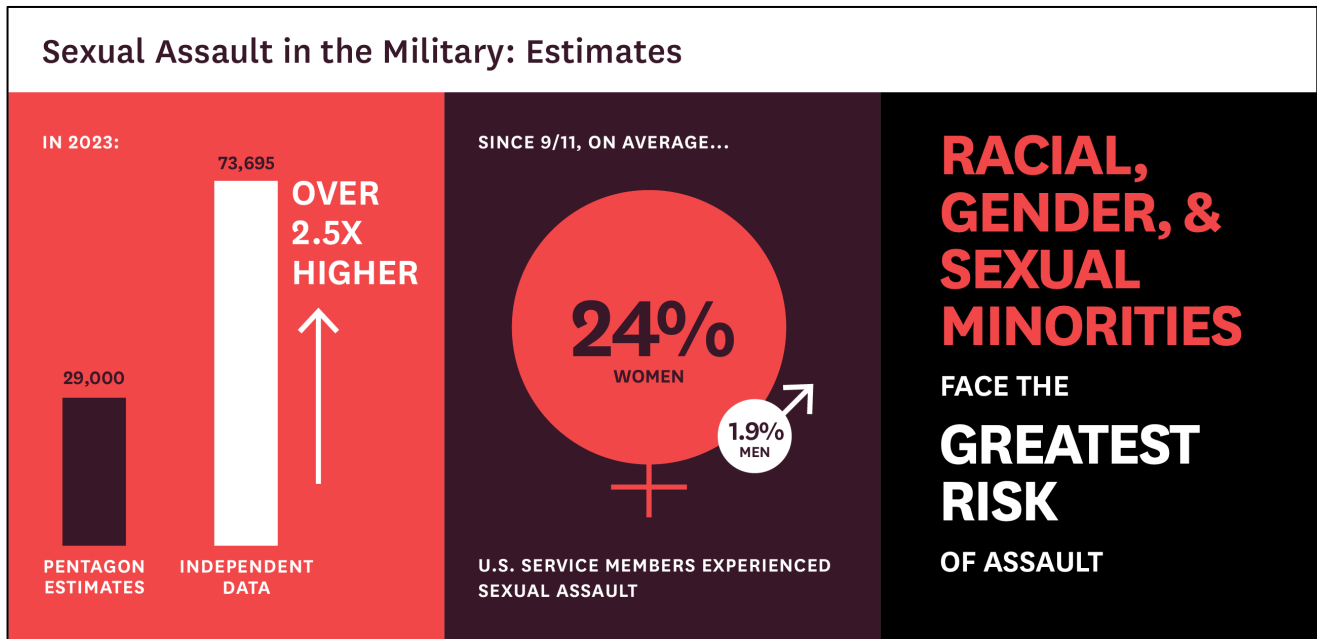
¹² Vine D., et al. (2021). *Creating Refugees: Displacement Caused by the United States' Post-9/11 Wars*. Costs of War, Watson Institute, Brown University.

https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/files/cow/imce/papers/2021/Costs%20of%20War_Vine%20et%20al_Displacement%20Update%20August%202021.pdf; Crawford, N. & Lutz, C. (2021, September 1).

Human Cost of the Post-9/11 Wars: Direct War Deaths in Major War Zones, Afghanistan and Pakistan (October 2001–May 2021); Iraq (March 2003–August 2021); Syria (September 2014–August 2021); Yemen (October 2002–August 2021); and Other Post-9/11 War Zones. Costs of War, Watson Institute, Brown University.

https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/files/cow/imce/papers/2021/Costs%20of%20War_Direct%20W

among people of color in the Global South, with women and children disproportionately impacted by violent conflict.¹³ One justification of the so-called “War on Terror” was to restore Afghan women’s rights. Yet 20 years of war made Afghan women’s lives significantly worse.¹⁴ The wars waged by the U.S. are existentially linked both to the military as an institution and to racism and sexism within the United States.¹⁵



A Continuing Epidemic of Military Rape

The new 2023 data was released during one of the biggest military sexual assault scandals in history, in which an Army doctor is accused of assaulting over 100 patients, the majority of whom lack adequate legal representation and point to the DoD’s

ar%20Deaths_9.1.21.pdf., Savell, S. (2023, May 15). *How Death Outlives War: The Reverberating Impact of the Post-9/11 Wars on Human Health*. Costs of War, Watson Institute, Brown University. <https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/papers/2023/IndirectDeaths>.

¹³ Guterres, A. (2023, September 28). *Women and Peace and Security: Report of the Secretary General*. UN Security Council. <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4024756?ln=en&v=pdf>

¹⁴ There is no equivalence between the absolute devastation and destruction of women’s lives in war zones and the experiences of service women. Rather, this parallel calls into question whether gender equity policies for women in the U.S. military (however limited in themselves) can be understood as feminist if they occur on the backs of women in war zones. For more information about how Afghan women’s lives were made significantly worse by war, see Daulatzai, A. (2006). Acknowledging Afghanistan: Notes and Queries on an Occupation. *Cultural Dynamics*, 18(3), 29–311. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0921374006071616>;

Daulatzai, A. (2015, May 28). *Not Their War to Fight: The Afghan Police, Families of Their Dead, and an American War*. Costs of War, Watson Institute, Brown University.

https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/files/cow/imce/papers/2015/Daulatzai_FINAL%20Costs%20of%20War%205.28.15.pdf; Fluri J. L., & Lehr, R. (2017). *The Carpetbaggers of Kabul and Other American-Afghan Entanglements: Intimate Development, Geopolitics, and the Currency of Gender and Grief*. University of Georgia Press. For poverty and women’s rights metrics before and after 20 years of war, see Costs of War, Watson Institute, Brown University. Afghanistan before and after 20 years of war (2001-2021).

<https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/Afghanistanbeforeandafter20yearsofwar>

¹⁵ Singh, N. P. (2019). *Race and America’s Long War*. University of California Press.

negligence as specifically failing to protect them from abuse.¹⁶ The 2023 data also sit alongside two inspector general reports finding that the military failed over half the time to expeditiously transfer sexual assault victims to other units, and that the Navy and Marine Corps failed to effectively document and track sexual harassment reports.¹⁷

The Faces of the Victims

In 2020, Vanessa Guillén was murdered at Fort Hood Army Base in Texas. Guillén, a 20-year-old Latinx Army specialist, had suffered multiple incidents of sexual harassment within her company in the months leading up to another soldier bludgeoning her to death with a hammer inside an armory building. Guillén had uncovered her murderer's affair with another soldier, which was illegal under military fraternization rules.¹⁸ Her dismembered, scattered, and burned remains were only discovered along the Leon River months after she disappeared. In the months following her disappearance, thousands of soldiers proclaimed [#IAmVanessaGuillen](#) in a social media campaign that ultimately shamed the military into investigating her disappearance. The sheer number of military personnel who publicly shared experiences of sexual harassment and assault in that campaign speaks to how Guillén's case, far from an isolated or exceptional incident, was representative of an epidemic of military sexual harassment, assault, and violence—an epidemic that got worse when the post-9/11 wars began.¹⁹

The same year Guillén was murdered, the body of Sgt. Elder Fernandes, age 23, was found hanging from a tree outside of the same Fort Hood installation. Fernandes killed himself after he was sexually assaulted by his sergeant. He reported the offense, but instead of receiving help, Fernandes was transferred to another unit and harassed by other soldiers who spread rumors about him.²⁰ Even more recently, Pvt. Ana Fernanda Basaldua Ruiz was found dead, also at Fort Hood, in March 2023. Basaldua had also told her family she was being sexually harassed by a superior before her

¹⁶ Hymes, C. (2024, March 20). New Civil Complaints Filed Against Army Amid Doctor's Sexual Assault Case. *CBS News*. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/new-civil-complaints-army-doctor-sexual-assault-case/>

¹⁷ Inspector General, Department of Defense. (2024, April 2). Review of the Navy and Marine Corps Policies Covering Sexual Harassment Complaint Process. https://media.defense.gov/2024/May/09/2003460392/-1/-1/1/DODIG-2024-081_REDACTED_SECURED.PDF; Inspector General, Department of Defense. (2024, May 7). Review of the DoD's Implementation of Expedited Transfer Policy Requirements. https://media.defense.gov/2024/Apr/04/2003429069/-1/-1/1/DODIG-2024-071_REDACTED%20SECURE.PDF.

¹⁸ Steinhauer, J. (2020, July 11). A #MeToo Moment Emerges for Military Women After Soldier's Killing. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/11/us/politics/military-women-metoo-fort-hood.html>.

¹⁹ Lutz C. & Elliston, J. (2002, October 14). Domestic Terror. *The Nation*. 19; on the violence constitutive of base life in and around Fort Hood, see MacLeish, K. T. (2013). *Making War at Fort Hood: Life and Uncertainty in a Military Community*. Princeton University Press.; see also Catherine A. Lutz, C. A. (2001). *Homefront: A Military City and the American Twentieth Century*. Beacon Press.

²⁰ Waller, A. (2020, August 26). Family of Fort Hood Soldier Found Dead Demands Congress Investigate. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/26/us/elder-fernandes-ft-hood-missing.html>.

death.²¹ After the Army reported Basaldua died by suicide, her father publicly responded, “My daughter did not commit suicide; my daughter was *suicided*.”²²

These are the most recent faces of a longer list of victims sexually assaulted and murdered within the military. In 2007, Maria Lauterbach was raped and impregnated by her supervisor while on night duty at Camp LeJeune, a Marine Corps base in North Carolina. She reported the attack to Naval Criminal Investigative Service, who accused Maria of making trouble and emphasized her attacker’s “stellar” record. After being transferred, ignored, and forced to attend work events with her assailant, she disappeared and was later found murdered in the back yard of her rapist.²³

In the 1990s, several high-profile scandals such as Tailhook (1991) and Aberdeen (1996) brought public attention to military cultures of sexual harassment and assault. Scholar Aaron Belkin found that during the 1999-2000 academic year at the U.S. Naval Academy alone, an estimated 23 male and 14 female midshipmen [students] were raped, with these numbers vastly undercounting a pervasive rape culture. As one former faculty member of the Naval Academy told Belkin blankly, “male midshipmen there rape each other ‘all of the time.’”²⁴ Professor Megan MacKenzie identifies a consistent narrative in U.S. news reporting in this same time period of a “band of brothers” culture that treats military rape as a byproduct of producing “strong warriors.”²⁵ Such studies speak to the scale at which sexual violence has long occurred within the military and how media narratives have historically naturalized and minimized this environment.

Historical Trajectory: Government Data on Military Sexual Assault Over 20 Years of War

Data on sexual assault during the early period of the post-9/11 wars is less reliable than later years because this information was only systemically tracked following the establishment in 2005 of the Department of Defense Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office (SAPRO). However, independent reporting and data from organizations assisting sexual assault survivors indicate a spike in assaults immediately following the invasion of Afghanistan.

²¹ Beauregard, L. P. (2023, March 17). Death of Ana Basaldua Ruiz Raises Questions about Sexual Harassment at Fort Hood. *EL PAÍS English*. <https://english.elpais.com/usa/2023-03-17/death-of-ana-basaldua-ruiz-raises-questions-about-sexual-harassment-at-fort-hood.html>; El-Bawab, N. (2023, March 26). Army Says ‘no Foul Play’ Evident in Death of Soldier Who Alleged Sexual Harassment by Superior. *ABC News*. <https://abcnews.go.com/US/fort-hood-investigating-death-soldier-complained-sexual-harassment/story?id=97906781>.

²² Rojas R. & Bonmati, D. (2023, September 6). Army Report Finds Ana Basaldua Died by Suicide After Struggles at Fort Cavazos. *NBC News*. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/army-report-finds-ana-basaldua-died-suicide-struggles-fort-cavazos-rcna103072>.

²³ Brooke, L. N. (2015, April 8). Marine Mother Shares Tragic Story of Daughter’s Sexual Assault, Murder. *Army.mil*. https://www.army.mil/article/145996/marine_mother_shares_tragic_story_of_daughters_sexual_assault_murder

²⁴ Belkin, A. (2012). *Bring Me Men: Military Masculinity and the Benign Facade of American Empire, 1898-2001*. Columbia University Press.

²⁵ MacKenzie, M. (2024). *Good Soldiers Don’t Rape: The Stories we Tell About Military Sexual Violence*. Cambridge University Press.

The problem of violent abuse and rape within the military was particularly visible in public discourse in the summer of 2002, when, over a six-week period, four army wives were murdered by their husbands at Fort Bragg military base in North Carolina. Three of the men were from Special Operations units that played a major role in the invasion of Afghanistan the previous fall. While reporting suggested that these murders were caused by combat stress, curiously absent from media commentary was a recognition that the Fort Bragg killings occurred within “the larger epidemic problem of violent abuse by men within the military, including rape of female (and some male) soldiers and civilians...”²⁶ About one year after the Afghanistan War began in October 2001, the executive director of the Miles Foundation, which assists victims of military violence, said, “We could literally tell what units were being deployed from where, based on the volume of calls we received from given bases. Then the same thing happened on the other end, when they came back.”²⁷

Between September 2002 and March 2004, the Miles Foundation received reports of 83 service women being raped or assaulted in the Central Command Area of Responsibility, which includes Iraq and Afghanistan, with multiple victims naming the same perpetrator. The Pentagon initially denied any knowledge of the complaint filed by the Miles Foundation based on these reports. However, following reporting that at least 112 women had been raped in Central Command units, the Pentagon eventually ordered an inquiry.²⁸ In 2004, media fervor and Congressional ire prompted Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld to order a DoD-wide inquiry into sexual assault policies and programs in response to evidence that sexual assault had increased in deployment zones and military communities inside the U.S. in the early period of the post-9/11 wars.²⁹ All the while, the Miles Foundation reported a steady increase in reports of sexual assault in the Central Command Area of Responsibility, documenting 976 reports from 2002 through 2007.³⁰

Once SAPRO had been established as a result of the 2004 inquiry, this new DoD office became responsible for tracking reports of sexual assault in each year and conducting a biannual survey that includes a measure to estimate how many service members experienced sexual assault in a given year. SAPRO also became a central point for training, resources, and implementation of policy within each branch of the armed services. In 2005, the National Defense Authorization Act began to require SAPRO to track reports and estimated prevalence of sexual assault and present this information to Congress.

Figure 1, below, shows data collected from 2006 to 2023 reflecting SAPRO’s DoD-wide estimated prevalence survey of sexual assault among all active-duty

²⁶ Lutz C. & Elliston, J. (2002, October 14). Domestic Terror. *The Nation*. 19.

²⁷ Lutz C. & Elliston, J. (2002). 18.

²⁸ Borger, J. (2004, February 25). US Soldiers Accused of Raping 100 colleagues. *The Guardian*.
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2004/feb/27/iraq.afghanistan>

²⁹ U.S. Department of the Army. (2004, May 27). *Task Force Report on Sexual Assault Policies*.
https://dacipad.whs.mil/images/Public/10-Reading_Room/04_Reports/03_DoD_Reports_Regs_Surveys/Task_Force_Reports/2004_Army_TaskForce_Report_SexAsslt_Policies_20040527.pdf

³⁰ Norris, M. (2007, October 4). Reported Cases of Sexual Assault in Military Rise. *NPR*.
<https://health.wusf.usf.edu/2007-10-04/reported-cases-of-sexual-assault-in-military-rise>.

members (blue) and yearly report to Congress of reported sexual assaults (red).³¹ The “prevalence survey” used to estimate how many service members experience assault (blue) includes only military-affiliated DoD employees, so it does not account for civilians, even those living or working on military bases, who have been assaulted by a military service member.³² Reporting (red) includes both service and non-service members, including such civilians, although in reality the vast majority of these numbers are service members.³³ Even with these limitations in mind, the estimated prevalence survey provides an important point of comparison to the number of sexual assault reports actually filed.³⁴ Figure 1 begins in 2006 because it is not possible to compare data from the first years of the post-9/11 wars to that available after SAPRO’s establishment.

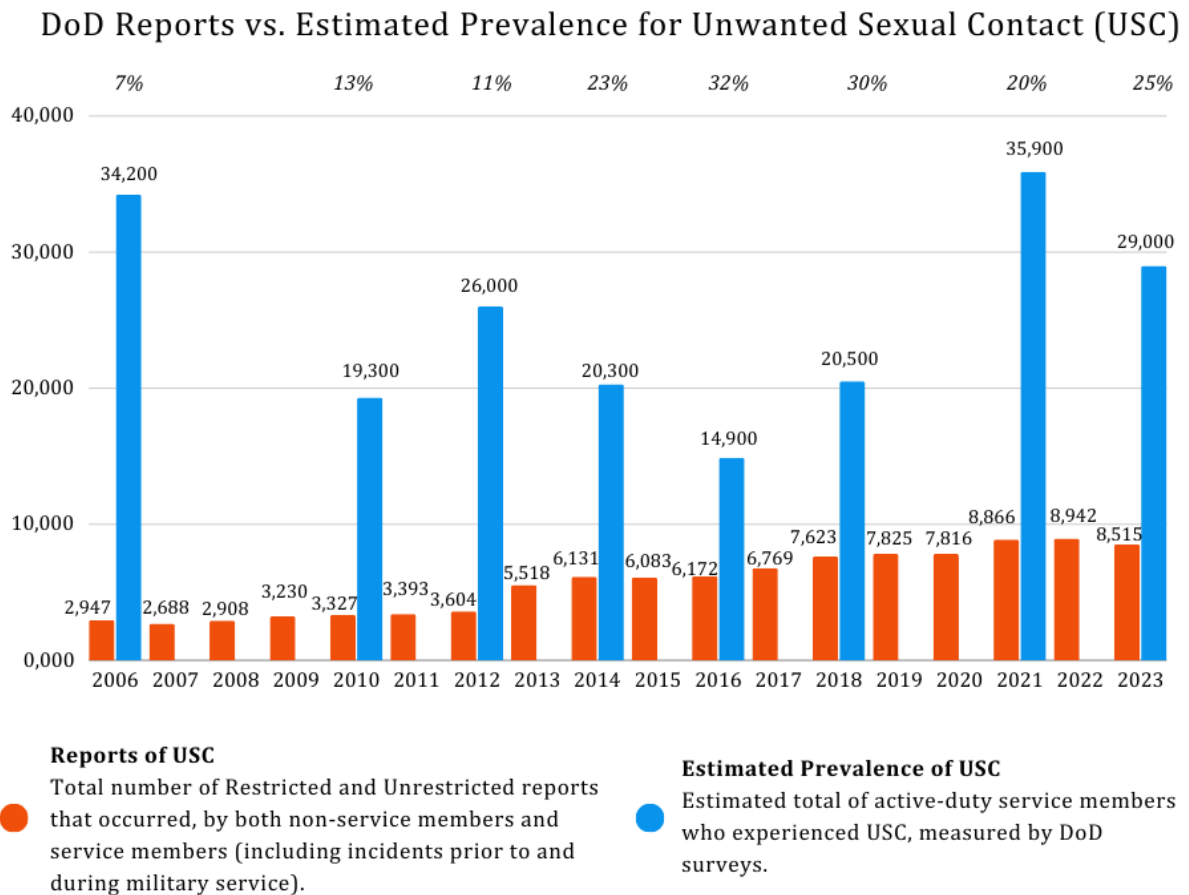
³¹ Note some DoD SAPRO figures refer to only active-duty reporting numbers while others include all reports by non-service members and service members (including incidents prior to and during military service, active and non-active duty). This report consistently uses the latter DoD inclusive numbers (service and non-service members, active and non-active duty).

³² The limitation of estimating prevalence of harm to military but not civilian victims reflect prioritization of military over civilian lives. It also points to broader issues of data inconsistencies, evident in a recent DoD audit that found almost 2,000 domestic abuse incidents involving soldiers had been left out of Army tracking systems. On the interlinked issue of domestic violence that is separated in military record-keeping from the issue of sexual assault explored here, see Kladzyk, R. (2024, June 13). *Incidents Uncounted, Audit Shows*. Project on Government Oversight. <https://www.pogo.org/investigations/thousands-of-army-domestic-abuse-incidents-uncounted-audit-shows>

³³ SAPRO reporting numbers must be interpreted within the context of what one internal Department of Defense report described as “extraordinary low trust in the Department’s sexual assault data and reporting among both internal and external audiences.” This report was authored by a new DoD unit established in 2016 – Defense Digital Service – staffed by data analysts and software engineers from the private sector. The new unit was poised to reform DoD’s approach to collecting and analyzing sexual assault data, which was compromised by a slow, glitchy data collection system that was prone to losing data and did not speak to other relevant databases. In this internal report, never publicly released but obtained by *The American Prospect*, the new office recommended fixing these technical issues and called on the DoD to “remove any perverse incentives to hide or affect sexual assault reporting.” On how this report was buried and the staff responsible were pushed out, see Guyer, J. (2021, November 18). *Burying the Evidence: How the Military Concealed Its Best Chance at Solving Its Sexual Assault Problem*. *The American Prospect*. <https://prospect.org/justice/burying-the-evidence-sexual-assault-military-data/>. On the inaccuracy of DoD sexual assault reporting numbers involving U.S. military personnel stationed on the African continent, see Turse, N. (2021, July 6). *The Africom Files: Pentagon Undercounts and Ignores Military Sexual Assault in Africa*. *The Intercept*. <https://theintercept.com/2021/07/06/military-africa-sexual-assault/>.

³⁴ This includes both Restricted and Unrestricted reports. An Unrestricted Report triggers an investigation and notification of the service member’s chain of command, while a Restricted Report does not trigger an investigation and provides information to a service member’s command without revealing the identity of the victim or offender. Both reports allow the victim to receive medical treatment, advocacy services, and legal support. In 2011, the DoD proposed changes to the SAPRO policy, including clarification of the Department’s existing reporting options and expansion of the categories of individuals eligible to elect the Restricted and Unrestricted Reporting options. See Department of Defense. (Amended 2016, September 27). *Electronic Code of Federal Regulations (e-CFR)*. Section 105.8: Reporting options and Sexual Assault Reporting Procedures. <https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-32/subtitle-A/chapter-I/subchapter-D/part-103>

Figure 1. DoD SAPRO Figures: Comparisons Between Numbers of (Unwanted Sexual Contact) Reports and Estimated Prevalence of Unwanted Sexual Contact, 2006-2023



Percentage indicates % of active-duty service members experiencing USC making Restricted and Unrestricted Reports.

Notes on Figure 1: Data used to create Figure 1 come from the United States Department of Defense Sexual Assault Prevention and Response (SAPRO), Annual Reports.

<https://www.sapr.mil/?q=reports>.³⁵ DoD prevalence estimates give a range of 0.6–1.8

³⁵ The DoD estimates annual sexual assault prevalence (the blue bars on Figure 1) based on the survey responses to the *Workplace and Gender Relations Survey of Active Duty Members* (WGRA). This “prevalence survey” includes only active-duty military. In contrast, reporting data includes *both* service and non-service members such as civilians working on military bases, although in reality the vast majority of these numbers are service members. The percentage at the top of Figure 1 was generated by comparing *only* active-duty reports of incidents that occurred during military service in the given fiscal year to the estimated prevalence of assaults in that same year. DoD keeps multiple reporting data sets: some include only active-duty service members reporting assault in a given fiscal year, others are more expansive (including non-service members and, for service-members, incidents outside of military service). Figure 1 represents the more expansive reporting data set (shown in the red bars) in the interest of including civilians who work on or live near bases and service members’ experiences of assault outside of military service. However, to repeat, it is important to note that the *percentage* included at the top of Figure 1 is calculated based on the portion of this data that is *only active-duty in the given fiscal year*, as this is the data set that is comparable to *estimated prevalence*. For example, in 2023, of 8,515 total reports, 7,266 are active-duty service member victim reports for incidents during military service in 2023. 7,266

percent of men and 4.3–8.4 percent of women experiencing unwanted sexual contact. According to the author's calculations, the ratio of estimated prevalence to reports (EP/R) varies from 2.69 to 11.61 depending on the year, with an average over the period of 5.3. This means that on average, fewer than one in five people are reporting assaults, according to the DoD's own data. Independent estimates suggest this ratio could be far lower still.

Compiling available data from 2006 onward reveals fluctuation in both reporting and estimated prevalence, with improved reporting rates following policy reforms before reporting rates again fell, potentially due to service members' fears of retaliation (explained in more detail below). Direct comparisons between data points are difficult due to methodological changes in how DoD estimated sexual assault prevalence over time (see Appendix A for detailed methodological discussion and more figures). However, even given methodological and definitional differences in estimating the prevalence of sexual assault, we can safely make several inferences.

The data clearly demonstrate that the DoD has put tremendous resources into studying and attempting to measure sexual assault. Moreover, though there is fluctuation, by the military's own admission, the slew of policy reforms and trainings pursued in the years examined here have not meaningfully transformed institutional patterns of abuse. As military officials have themselves described in retrospect, the military prioritized training and deploying troops to the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars over confronting a clear institutional problem of sexual assault.³⁶

Most importantly, a comprehensive view of all available DoD data points shows how sexual assault has remained high during the entire post-9/11 period. At least tens of thousands of service members are assaulted each year, ranging between an estimated 34,200 in 2006 (the first year DoD surveyed all active-duty troops), to a low point of 14,900 in 2016, to a high point of 35,900 in 2021, when the U.S. withdrew from Afghanistan.³⁷ The year 2021 also saw the smallest percentage since 2014 of those who suffered from sexual assault, deciding to report it.³⁸

reports is 25 percent of 29,000 estimated prevalence for 2023. For full reporting numbers and calculations, see SAPRO, Department of Defense. *Annual Report on Sexual Assault in the Military - Fiscal Year 2023, Appendix B, Figures 1-3*, p. 8-11. The DoD states that while survey measures use different methods to estimate past-year occurrence of sexual crimes for the prevalence surveys, it is possible to statistically compare estimates. Our research revealed internal inconsistencies in DoD reports in regards to differences between multiple DoD data sets stating different numbers for the same year groups, when comparing multiple data points across yearly datasets. For this reason, we utilized the most recently cited DoD numbers in our infographic as the total numbers of reports. Our research indicates that this is the most consistent way of interpreting the data across multiple years.

³⁶ Secretary of the Army Christine Wormuth, in Rascoe, A., & Al-Shalchi, H. (2023, June 11). The U.S. Army Has Been Falling Short of Its Recruitment Targets. *NPR*. <https://www.npr.org/2023/06/11/1181547703/the-u-s-army-has-been-falling-short-of-its-recruitment-targets>.

³⁷ As represented in Figure 1, prevalence drops from 34,200 in 2006 to an estimated 19,300 in 2010, the next year the survey was fielded, rises to 26,000 in 2012, 20,300 in 2014 (when survey methodology was overhauled), 14,900 in 2016, 20,500 in 2018, and back up to 35,900 in 2021.

³⁸ In 2021, reporting rates fell to 20 percent (from 30 percent in 2018), the lowest rate since 2014, when an estimated 23 percent of victims reported their assault. A positive outcome for *reporting* data is *increasing* (meaning more victims reporting their assault) while a positive outcome for *estimated prevalence* data is *decreasing* (meaning fewer assaults).

In May 2024, SAPRO released its most recent report, which shows that in 2023, estimated prevalence of sexual assault fell for the first time in nearly a decade. In 2023, an estimated 29,000 personnel experienced unwanted sexual contact, representing a 19 percent decrease from 2021. The 2023 survey also found that fewer men and women experienced sexual harassment than in 2021; however, this potential improvement still estimates that close to 25 percent of active-duty women were sexually harassed in 2023 (down from 28.6 percent in 2021).³⁹

Although these recent improved numbers are encouraging, they still reveal high levels of sexual harassment and sexual assault. Commenting on the improved 2023 numbers, former chief prosecutor for the Air Force Don Christensen noted, “While we can celebrate the improvements, the numbers are still too high. 29,000 service members who have been victims of unwanted sexual violence are still far too many,” drawing attention to how few cases still go to trial and fewer still result in conviction.⁴⁰

Another way to interpret all of these sexual assault numbers is to compare estimated prevalence to actual reports in each year. A higher percentage of cases reported is typically interpreted as positive because it demonstrates confidence in reporting systems and means more survivors are accessing healthcare, counseling, and other resources. In 2015, Human Rights Watch estimated that only one in four victims report sexual assault to military authorities, an approximate ratio reflected in other studies.⁴¹ An updated average ratio of all available SAPRO reporting to estimated prevalence data suggests that on average fewer than one in five victims report. As indicated in Figure 1, SAPRO data shows reporting rates generally increasing from 2012 (11 percent reported) to 2016 (32 percent reported) and remaining relatively high in 2018 (30 percent). But in 2021, reporting rates fall to 20 percent, below 2014 levels, with fewer than one in four victims reporting their assault. In 2023, the reporting rate of 25 percent is an improvement from 2021, but this is still lower than the reporting rates of 30 percent in 2018 and 32 percent in 2016 (see Appendix A for a more detailed discussion of reporting trends).

³⁹ In 2021, an estimated 28.6 percent of active-duty women experienced sexual harassment and an estimated 6.5 percent of men. In 2023, these numbers improved to 24.7 percent of active-duty women and 5.8 percent of active-duty men.

⁴⁰ Vanden Brook, T. (2024, May 16). Military Sexual Assaults Decline for the First Time in Almost a Decade. *USA Today*. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2024/05/16/us-military-sexual-assault-reports-decline/73713414007/>

⁴¹ In 2018, the DoD *Workplace and Gender Relations Survey* for active duty members found that 30 percent of women and 17 percent of men reported sexual assault, while Protect Our Defenders found that 81 percent of victims did not report their assault in 2016, with over 1 in 4 of those who did not report fearing retaliation and nearly 1 in 3 who did not report fearing the process would be unfair or ineffective. Breslin, R. et al., (2019, May). *2018 Workplace and Gender Relations of Active Duty Members: Overview Report*. Office of People Analytics. U.S. Department of Defense. Protect our Defenders. (2018). *Facts on United States Military Sexual Violence*. <https://www.protectourdefenders.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/1.-MSA-Fact-Sheet-180209.pdf>.

Independent Data on Military Sexual Assault

Independent studies reflect higher prevalence rates than SAPRO data alone. One meta-analysis of 69 different studies that include a combination of independent and DoD data found approximately 16 percent of military personnel and veterans experiencing both harassment and assault (4 percent of men and 38 percent of women) and 14 percent experiencing assault only (2 percent of men and 24 percent of women).⁴² A meta-study focusing on women found that between 9.5 and 33 percent of women reported being raped while serving in the military, which is much higher than the range of approximately 4-8 percent in SAPRO's data. If sexual harassment and forms of sexual assault other than rape are included, rates reported by women during military service range from 22 to 84 percent.⁴³ Focusing on veteran populations, studies based on a Veterans Affairs (VA) screening program show 15 to 36 percent of women and 1 to 2 percent of men screening positive for military sexual trauma.⁴⁴

While it is difficult to definitively compare SAPRO data to independent studies on military sexual assault—due to differences in sample characteristics (including differences between veteran and active military populations), study design, measurements and definitions of harassment, trauma, and assault, and inconsistency in years studied—these independent studies provide an important counterpoint to government data.

Figure 2, below, uses these independent estimations to show potential prevalence of sexual assault. It is based on figures that come from independent meta-analyses of mean prevalence levels as derived from multiple sexual assault studies, including but not limited to SAPRO data.⁴⁵

⁴² Wilson, L. (2018). The Prevalence of Military Sexual Trauma: A Meta-Analysis. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, 19(5). <https://doi.org/10.1177/152483801668345>

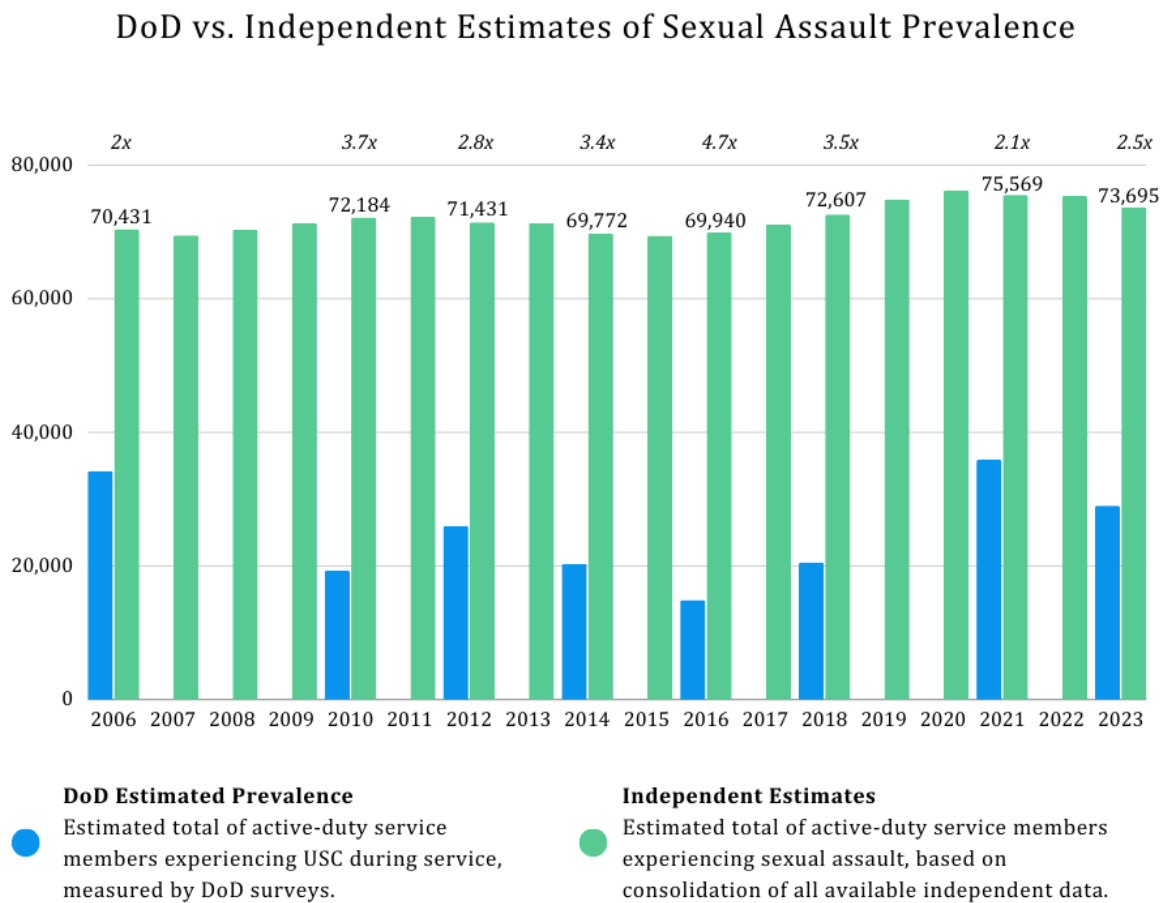
⁴³ Turchik J. A. & Wilson, S. M. (2010). Sexual Assault in the U.S. Military: A Review of the Literature and Recommendations for the Future. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 15(4), 267–77. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2010.01.005>

⁴⁴ Stander, V. & Thomsen, C. (2016). Sexual Harassment and Assault in the U.S. Military: A Review of Policy and Research Trends. *Military Medicine*, 181(1), 21. <https://doi.org/10.7205/MILMED-D-15-00336>

⁴⁵ Carrie L. et al. (2021). Homelessness Among Veterans: Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, Depression, Physical Health, and the Cumulative Trauma of Military Sexual Assault. *Journal of the Society for Social Work and Research*, 12(4), 731–54; Zipfel, G., Campbell, K. & Mühlhäuser, R., (2019). *In Plain Sight: Sexual Violence in Armed Conflict*. Zubaan Publishers; Darehshori, S. & Rhoad, M. (2015, May 8). *Embattled: Retaliation against Sexual Assault Survivors in the US Military*. Human Rights Watch.

<https://www.hrw.org/report/2015/05/18/embattled/retaliation-against-sexual-assault-survivors-us-military>; Pritchard, A. (2023). Military Sexual Assault, Post-Service Employment, and Transition Preparation among U.S. Military Veterans: New Directions for Research. *Victims & Offenders*, 19(4), 692–708; Suris, A. & Lind, L. (2008). Military Sexual Trauma: A Review of Prevalence and Associated Health Consequences in Veterans. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, 9(4), 250–69; Turchik, J. & Wilson, S. (2010). Sexual Assault in the U.S. Military: A Review of the Literature and Recommendations for the Future. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 15(4), 267–77; Stander, V. & Thomsen, C. (2016). Sexual Harassment and Assault in the U.S. Military: A Review of Policy and Research Trends. *Military Medicine*, 181(1); Blais, R., Tannahill, H., & Davis, K. C. (2023). Sexual Risk Taking among Survivors of U.S. Military Sexual Assault: Associations with PTSD Symptom Severity and Alcohol Use. *The Journal of Sex Research*, 61(5), 683–90; Wilson, L. (2018). The Prevalence of Military Sexual Trauma: A Meta-Analysis. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, 19(5), 584–97; Zaleski, K. (2018). *Understanding and Treating Military Sexual Trauma, Focus on Sexuality Research*. Springer International Publishing; Frayne, S., Skinner, K., Sullivan, L., Tripp, T., Hankin, C.,

Figure 2. DoD vs. Independent Estimates of Sexual Assault Prevalence, 2006-2023



X indicates how many times higher independent estimates are than DoD estimates.

Notes on Figure 2: On average, this figure shows prevalence estimates that are equal to 24 percent of active-duty women and 1.9 percent of active-duty men experiencing sexual assault over the course of all of these years. This conservative mid-range estimate, based on the author’s consolidation of all available independent data, estimates that the total number of active-duty sexual assault victims is at least twice DoD’s estimations (in 2006, independent estimates are 70,431 versus SAPRO’s 34,200) and in some years more than four times DoD figures (in 2016, independent estimates are 69,940 versus SAPRO’s 14,900).

Kressin, N., et al. (1999). Medical profile of women Veterans Administration outpatients who report a history of sexual assault occurring while in the military. *Journal of Women's Health & Gender-Based Medicine*, 8(6), 835-845; Sadler, A., Booth, B., Nielson, D., & Doebbeling, B. (2000). Health-related consequences of physical and sexual violence: Women in the military. *Obstetrics & Gynecology*, 96(3), 473-480; Coyle, B.S., Wolan, D.L., & Van Horn, A.S. (1996). The prevalence of physical and sexual abuse in women veterans seeking care at a Veterans Affairs Medical Center. *Military Medicine*, 161(10), 588-593; Suris, A., Lind, L., Kashner, T.M., Borman, P., & Petty, F. (2004). Sexual assault in women veterans: An examination of PTSD risk, health care utilization, and cost of care. *Psychosomatic Medicine*, 66(5) 749-756; Beckman K, Shipherd J, Simpson T, & Lehavot K. (2018). Military Sexual Assault in Transgender Veterans: Results From a Nationwide Survey. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 31(2), 181-190.

A low-range estimate of 9 percent of active-duty women and 1.5 percent of active-duty men still shows higher independent sexual assault estimations than SAPRO data, with these low independent figures estimating 34,864 assaults in 2016 compared to SAPRO's 14,900, or more than double). A high-range independent estimate of 33 percent active-duty women and 12 percent active-duty men suggests that actual sexual assault figures could be more than 10 times SAPRO estimates.

This report highlights a middle range—two to four times higher than DoD estimates—as likely providing the most accurate numbers. This range is based on percentage estimates that appear in multiple independent studies and exclude the highest-range estimations that could have oversampled from populations accessing medical services. Two to four times higher than DoD data is a conservative but realistic estimation of actual prevalence that is also consistent with figures found in investigative reporting on this topic.⁴⁶ See Appendix B for a detailed explanation of how the author derived these low, mid, and high-range estimates from independent data.

Figure 2 also incorporates estimations of total numbers of active-duty transgender service members.⁴⁷ Independent studies estimate that 17.2 percent of transgender veterans have experienced military sexual assault (trans women 15.2 percent and trans men 30 percent) suggests that between 1,100-1,500 trans service members experience sexual assault each year.⁴⁸

Military Admits it has “Failed to Move the Needle” on Sexual Assault

When the U.S. withdrew from Afghanistan in 2021, this also presented a unique moment when military officials openly admitted the dire and worsening state of military sexual assault. The DoD stopped couching its own sexual assault data as lagging behind positive policy developments, or alternatively, as a positive demonstration of survivors' greater comfort in reporting sexual assault. In contrast, a DoD official

⁴⁶ Moyer, M. W. (2021, August 3). 'A Poison in the System': The Epidemic of Military Sexual Assault. *The New York Times Magazine*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/03/magazine/military-sexual-assault.html>.

⁴⁷ There is not a reliable method of collecting numerical estimates over time of trans-identified service people. The Department of Defense only began including a question on trans identity in the 2016 Workplace Gender Relations Survey and it does not have any way of tracking non-binary or other gender-queer identities. Given the high rates at which we know trans service members experience sexual harassment and assault, we have included several estimates available from different data points in years available, including, for 2008, the UCLA Williams Institute used data from the National Transgender Discrimination Survey to estimate that 0.06 percent of the armed forces on average was transgender; for 2014, Gates and Herman's estimate of 8,800; for 2015, Belkin's estimate of 7,800 active duty transgender troops; for 2016, a RAND survey estimated 6,630 active duty trans troops as its higher bound (lower bound was 1,320); for 2018, the Palm Center's estimate of 8,980 active duty. Belkin, A. & Mazur, D. (2018). *Department of Defense Issues First-Ever Official Count of Active Duty Transgender Service Members*. Palm Center. <https://palmcenterlegacy.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/14700-Transgender-Troops-.pdf>; Gates, G. & Herman, J. (2014). *Transgender Military Service in the United States*. UCLA Williams Institute. <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/publications/trans-military-service-us/>; Schaefer, A. et al. (2016). *Assessing the Implications of Allowing Transgender Personnel to Serve Openly*. RAND. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1530.html

⁴⁸ Beckman, K. et al. (2018). Military Sexual Assault in Transgender Veterans: Results From a Nationwide Survey. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 31(2), 181–90.

speaking to media described the 2021 numbers as “tragic” and “frustrating.”⁴⁹ After years of DoD leaders claiming that they were doing everything they could to address the problem, SAPRO’s 2021 report prompted leadership to finally admit that they did not have the problem in hand and were open to large-scale changes within a system that has failed to prevent or prosecute sexual assault.

Reflecting a similar pattern, a 2021 Congressional report on military sexual assault summarizes, “while there have been several efforts to improve prevention, response and accountability for sex-related offenses within the Department of Defense (DOD), *there has not been a concomitant decrease in either estimated prevalence or sex-assault reports among military service members.* In addition, there is some evidence that a majority of sexual offenses are not being reported, as estimated prevalence of sexual assault from survey data consistently exceeds number of incidents that are reported.”⁵⁰

The Independent Review Commission (IRC) similarly reported to Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin in 2021:

*Devastatingly, these gains [in reporting numbers 2014-2016] did not last, contemporaneous with changes in leadership that quickly undermined efforts to drive down the scourge. In 2018, sexual assault prevalence increased by 44 percent among women (men’s prevalence stayed the same). More than 20,000 Service members were the victims of sexual assault that year (13,000 women and 7,500 men). Fewer than 8,000 per year reported that assault, according to the Department’s own annual surveys. The sexual harassment numbers are bleaker, with about one in every four active-duty women reporting experiences of sexual harassment. Yet DoD received only 1,781 reports of sexual harassment in FY20. Military leadership has failed America’s daughters and sons, and the Service members know it.*⁵¹

Following the 2018 and 2020 data Austin refers to, the 2021 numbers were even more discouraging, ultimately showing an even larger increase in estimated prevalence of sexual assault alongside lower reporting and prosecution numbers. The IRC cites SAPRO’s director cautioning in 2010 that “changing attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs related to sexual assault takes between eight and ten years to achieve.” The IRC report puts a fine point on the fact that in the 11 years between 2010 and the devastating 2021 figures, roughly 135,000 active duty service members (65,400 women and 69,600 men) were sexually assaulted and 509,000 active duty service members were sexually harassed.⁵² Military leadership admitted it had, in Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff

⁴⁹ Myers, M. (2022, September 1). The Military’s Sexual Assault Problem Is Only Getting Worse. *Military Times*. <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/your-military/2022/09/01/the-militarys-sexual-assault-problem-is-only-getting-worse/>.

⁵⁰ Italics added, Congressional Research Services. (2021, February 26). *Military Sexual Assault: A Framework for Congressional Oversight*. Congressional Research Services. <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R44944>.

⁵¹ Independent Review Commission on Sexual Assault in the Military. (2021, July 2). *Hard Truths and the Duty to Change: Recommendations from the Independent Review Commission on Sexual Assault in the Military*. 12.

⁵² Independent Review Commission on Sexual Assault in the Military, 11; Isikoff, M. (2011, February 15). Lawsuit Claims Pentagon Ignored Military Rape Victims. *NBC Bay Area*. https://www.nbcbayarea.com/news/politics/did_pentagon_turn_blind_eye_to_rape_victims_/1909120/.

Mark Milley's words, failed to "move the needle" on sexual assault, despite the fact that 2010-2021 saw more than 10 DoD Inspector General engagements to review and improve sexual assault prevention and response efforts, more than 60 Governmental Accountability Office sexual assault-related recommendations assessed to measure prevention and response efforts and to inform future programming, more than 200 recommendations from government panels and task forces, more than 150 Congressional provisions, and more than 50 Secretary of Defense-directed initiatives to improve prevention and response efforts.⁵³

The same report throws up its hands that "a broken culture is the root of the sexual harassment and sexual assault policy failures over the past two decades." As one non-commissioned officer told the IRC during a listening session, "zero tolerance [of sexual assault] is actually 100 percent tolerance," calling to mind the exact ways in which Guillén's harassment, assault, then disappearance was not only tolerated but deliberately swept under the rug to protect sexual predators and their enablers.⁵⁴ Such reference to a "broken culture" evokes entrenched aspects of military culture that permit de facto "100 percent tolerance."

A *Military Times* article published shortly after SAPRO released its 2021 annual report bluntly stated that "the military's sexual assault problem is getting worse." The 2021 report was especially concerning in that it showed that "not only is unwanted sexual contact rising, but fewer people are opting to report it, and fewer perpetrators are being legally punished."⁵⁵ The 2021 report estimated that "more than 8 percent of female service members experienced unwanted sexual contact in 2021, the highest rate since the department began counting in 2004. For men, it was the second-highest figure, at 1.5 percent."⁵⁶ This disparity of prevalence rates between men and women is expected, given that historically higher percentages of women than men experience sexual assault in the military, but given that women comprise a much smaller proportion of armed service members to begin with (around 17 percent), these prevalence rates nonetheless translate to numerically much higher numbers of male sexual assault victims.⁵⁷ A 2015 study found that at most, 13 percent of male victims

⁵³ Ryan, M. & Lamothe, D. (2021, May 6). 'We haven't moved the needle' on Sexual Assault in the Military, General Says. *The Washington Post*. https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/military-sexual-assault/2021/05/06/a8f51a7cae98-11eb-8109-f8ba1ea2eeab_story.html

⁵⁴ Italics added, Independent Review Commission on Sexual Assault in the Military, 21.

⁵⁵ Myers, M. (2022, September 1). The Military's Sexual Assault Problem Is Only Getting Worse. *Military Times*. <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/your-military/2022/09/01/the-militarys-sexual-assault-problem-is-only-getting-worse/>.

⁵⁶ Sexual Assault Prevention and Response (SAPRO). (2022). *Department of Defense Annual Report on Sexual Assault in the Military, FY2021*.

⁵⁷ Multiple studies have shown women experiencing significantly higher prevalence rates of both sexual assault and harassment as compared to men. One study conducted by the DoD/SAPRO's *Workplace and Gender Relations Survey* between 2006-2012 found that approximately 8-9 percent of women and 1-3 percent of men reported coercive sexual harassment. For harassment involving other types of unwanted sexual attention, the annual prevalence rate has ranged from 22 percent to 31 percent for women and 5-7 percent for men. During the same time frame, annual sexual assault prevalence rates ranged from 4-7 percent for women and 1-2 percent for men. The authors also note the breadth of methodological differences in studying MST and how this can create confusion for comparisons across time periods and by gender. Stander, V. & Thomsen, C. (2016, January 1). Sexual Harassment and Assault in the U.S. Military: A Review of Policy and Research Trends. *Military Medicine*. 181; see also Wilson, L. (2018). The Prevalence of Military Sexual Trauma: A Meta-Analysis. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse* 19(5); Suria, A. & Lind, L. (2008). Military Sexual Trauma. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse* 9(4).

report military sexual assault, as compared with an estimated 40 percent of women. Fewer men than women seek VA services for sexual assault despite numerically higher incidences.⁵⁸

Analysis of the Effect of Policy Changes on Reporting and Prevalence

Policy changes provide some insight into fluctuations in reporting and prevalence data over time. Between 2012 and 2015, following media coverage and public outrage over what by this time was recognized as an epidemic of military rape, the DoD, branches of the U.S. military, and Congress produced over 200 initiatives, independent commissions and recommendations, and secretarial initiatives, ranging from changing the Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ) to prohibit retaliation for reporting sexual assault to changing security clearance applications so that victims do not have to report mental health counseling.⁵⁹ A Special Victims Counsel was established in 2013 to provide military victims with legal counsel, although the program left hundreds of civilians who reported military sexual assault to fend for themselves.⁶⁰

Initially, these reforms seemed to make a difference and this is reflected in changes between the 2014 and 2016 data, with a statistically significant reduction in estimated prevalence of sexual assault in 2016 alongside an increase in reporting.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Swords to Ploughshares. (2015, August). Military Sexual Trauma: Understanding Prevalence, Resources, and Considerations to Care. *Swords to Ploughshares*. <https://www.swords-to-plowshares.org/research-publications/military-sexual-trauma-understanding-prevalence-resources-and-considerations-to-care>.

⁵⁹ Darehshori, S. & Rhoad, M. (2015, May 8). *Embattled: Retaliation against Sexual Assault Survivors in the US Military*. Human Rights Watch. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2015/05/18/embattled/retaliation-against-sexual-assault-survivors-us-military>.

⁶⁰ Jaafari, J. D. (2019, July 30). A Unique Military Program Helps Sexual Assault Survivors. But Not All of Them. *The Marshall Project*. <https://www.themarshallproject.org/2019/07/30/a-unique-military-program-helps-sexual-assault-survivors-but-not-all-of-them>.

⁶¹ Reports published by Human Rights Watch and the Independent Review Commission on Sexual Assault in the Military associate the changes in 2016 with positive institutional reforms before this time. However, in making direct comparisons between 2014 and 2016 versus prior years, it is also important to be aware of significant changes in 2014 to the military's methodology for collecting information to estimate prevalence rates and incidence rates of unwanted sexual contact. In 2014, Congress requested the RAND Corporation to provide an independent assessment of unwanted gender-related behaviors in the military force through the RAND Military Workplace Survey (2014 RMWS). In particular, the 2014 RMWS designed a prevalence measure more closely aligned with legal language in the Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ). This methodology was used throughout 2014-2019. The results from the 2014 survey marked a significantly lower prevalence rate and incidence rate of unwanted sexual contact than in previous years. Although direct scientific comparisons cannot be made between older survey findings and the RMSW findings, 2016 marked the lowest estimates on record since the DoD began surveying active-duty members in 2006. This is likely due to both effective policy changes within the military and in methodological differences between the DoD/SAPRO's *Workplace and Gender Relations Survey* and the RAND Military Workplace Surveys. In the years following, reports and estimated prevalence continued to rise, with the estimated prevalence of unwanted sexual contact in 2021 at the highest ever estimated. Notably, due to the change in the metric used to estimate prevalence of sexual assault in 2021, the DoD did not conduct scientific testing between rates measured in 2021 and prior years. While no direct statistical comparisons can be determined, the trend in reporting and estimated prevalence of unwanted sexual contact throughout 2002-2021 indicate a pervasive pattern of behavior in the military. Estimated rates of other misconduct highly correlated with unwanted sexual contact (i.e. sexual harassment, gender

Drawing attention to how 2014's decline in prevalence marked a 10-year low in service members who experienced sexual assault in the past year, the Independent Review Commission on Sexual Assault in the Military attributed these numbers to some of the institutional changes made to reduce retaliation, support victims, and prosecute sex crimes.⁶²

In 2015, Human Rights Watch published a report describing how many victims of sexual assault faced fear of retaliation given that "military service members who reported sexual assault were 12 times more likely to suffer retaliation for doing so than to see their offender, if a service member, convicted for a sex offense."⁶³ Human Rights Watch warned that any gains in reporting would be lost if victims who report their assaults continued to experience retaliation.⁶⁴ Sadly, this seems to be the exact pattern that played out over the following several years, with reporting rates falling gradually after 2016's high of 32 percent to 30 percent in 2018, and more drastically to 20 percent in 2021.⁶⁵

The dramatic increases in estimated prevalence of sexual assault and lower reporting rates in 2021 represented another important opening to pass a complete version of the "I am Vanessa Guillén Act" (Military Justice Improvement and Increasing Prevention Act). The full version of the act that removed military commanders from prosecuting military sexual assault and introduced a special counsel passed as part of the 2023 NDAA. Initially introduced by Senator Kirsten Gillibrand in 2013, the Military Justice Improvement Act did not even receive a vote between 2016-2020—and before 2016, it was filibustered. Gillibrand held a Congressional hearing in 2021, in which the Guillén family's attorney testified. The testimony directly connected the grisly details of Guillén's murder to systemic failures in how the military handles sexual harassment and assault, in particular how the chain of command is rife with secrecy and abuse.

discrimination, and workplace hostility) also increased for women when 2018 and 2021 are compared, suggesting overall unhealthy and abusive patterns within the military at that time. Darehshori, S. & Rhoad, M. (2015, May 8). *Embattled: Retaliation against Sexual Assault Survivors in the US Military*. Human Rights Watch. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2015/05/18/embattled/retaliation-against-sexual-assault-survivors-us-military>; Defense Manpower Data Center. (2013, April). *2012 Workplace and Gender Relations Survey of Active Duty Members*. https://www.SAPRO.mil/public/docs/research/WGR_ActiveDuty_2012_Report.pdf; Davis, L. et al. (2017, May). *2016 Workplace and Gender Relations Survey of Active Duty Members*. Department of Defense. https://www.SAPRO.mil/public/docs/reports/FY17_Annual/FY16_Annual_Report_on_Sexual_Assault_in_the_Military_Full_Report_Part2_4.pdf.

⁶² The Independent Review Commission is a DoD entity established by Defense Secretary Austin under the direction of President Biden.

⁶³ Darehshori, S. & Rhoad, M. (2015, May 8). *Embattled: Retaliation against Sexual Assault Survivors in the US Military*. Human Rights Watch. 3. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2015/05/18/embattled/retaliation-against-sexual-assault-survivors-us-military>.

⁶⁴ Human Rights Watch. (2015). 4, 30.

⁶⁵ The 2021 *Workplace and Gender Relations Survey of Military Members* (from the Active and Reserve components) was fielded from December 2021 to March 2022. Due to the Coronavirus pandemic, survey fielding was delayed and the survey regulations were changed. Departing from previous surveys, which used a 41-item measure of specific behaviors, intent, and mechanisms aligned with the elements of the Uniform Code of Military Justice offenses, the 2021 survey used a five-item measure of unwanted sexual contact. Given the differences in methodology, prevalence of sexual assault as estimated in 2021 are not directly comparable to prior years. However, comprehensive examination of the data gathered each year all together – as in Figure 1 – can demonstrate overall trends.

Advocacy, attention, and media coverage of the Guillén family and many other survivors of military sexual harassment and sexual assault (including Senator Joni Ernst), shaped 2021 into a watershed moment that garnered enough cosponsors for the legislation, nicknamed the “I am Vanessa Guillén Act,” to pass the Senate. Defense Secretary Austin’s Independent Review Commission in 2021 was also part of a machinery pushing for legislative change. However, the provisions included in the 2022 NDAA removed important elements of the Act that had passed in the Senate, which would have removed military commanders from authority over judicial procedures if their subordinate is accused of sexual harassment or assault. This meant that while the Act did include important reforms such as empowering independent military prosecutors and making sexual harassment a crime under the Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ), commanders were still allowed to choose juries and witnesses, grant or deny witness immunity, and offer their subordinates the option of separating from the military instead of facing justice.

In 2022, the commander’s convening authority powers were finally removed through an amendment to the 2023 NDAA. In July 2023, President Biden signed an executive order implementing the legislation, which hands decision-making powers to independent prosecutors in sexual assault cases (and murder, child abuse, and other serious criminal cases) where members of the military are accused.⁶⁶ Special trial counsels were established at the end of 2023, removing military commanders’ authority over the prosecution of sexual assault, murder, and other crimes.⁶⁷ Specialized military lawyers who report to civilians, not commanders, will now decide whether to pursue charges in sexual abuse cases.

Removing commanders’ authority over sexual assault and other serious offenses and handing such authority to special prosecutors is the largest change to the UCMJ since the military created its own legal system in 1950. Given that 51 percent of survivors of military sexual assault reported being more likely to report and get help if an independent prosecutor rather than their commander were in charge of their case, this could represent a watershed improvement to reach victims.⁶⁸

The U.S. military’s focus on “readiness,” or the ability to train, deploy, and generally respond to the post-9/11 wars was a specific institutional orientation that exacerbated the already-dire situation of military sexual assault. The Independent Review Committee Report on Fort Hood sparked by Guillén’s murder found that the Army’s two decades of war since 2001 created a climate in which “military readiness

⁶⁶ The White House. (2023, July 28). *Fact Sheet: President Biden to Sign Executive Order Implementing Bipartisan Military Justice Reforms*. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/07/28/fact-sheet-president-biden-to-sign-executive-order-implementing-bipartisan-military-justice-reforms/>; Shear, M. D. (2023, July 28). Biden Overhauls Military Justice Code, Seeking to Curb Sexual Assault. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/28/us/politics/biden-military-sexual-assault.html>.

⁶⁷ Hlad, J. (2022, December 8). It’ll Be ‘Years’ Before the Pentagon Fully Implements Changes to Handling Sexual Assaults. *Defense One*. <https://www.defenseone.com/policy/2022/12/itll-be-years-pentagon-fully-implements-changes-handling-sexual-assaults/380542/>.

⁶⁸ Press Release. (2022, December 15). Gillibrand Praises Historic Military Justice Reforms Passed in Defense Bill. *Kirsten Gillibrand | U.S. Senator for New York* (blog). <https://www.gillibrand.senate.gov/news/press/release/gillibrand-praises-historic-military-justice-reforms-passed-in-defense-bill/>.

became paramount over all other responsibilities.”⁶⁹ At Fort Hood, this meant that no commanders actually followed the reporting, mitigation, and victim services laid out by the existing Sexual Harassment/Assault Response and Prevention (SHARP) Program, which was already underfunded and understaffed.

Sexism, misogyny and gendered violence were already characteristics of what military voices themselves have called a “broken culture” that predates the post-9/11 wars. But 20 years of war have made this situation worse through institutional disavowal of the problem or the responsibility to address it. Speaking on National Public Radio in 2023 about why the Army is currently struggling to meet recruitment goals, Secretary of the Army Christine Wormuth described how “in the intense years of the war on terror, we may not have been focused on that [sexual harassment and sexual assault] as much as we should have.”⁷⁰ The military’s own admission that it was more focused on deploying troops to fight the post-9/11 wars than confronting a clear institutional problem of sexual assault speaks to an institutional decision rather than an individual (or aggregate) reaction to long, difficult, or subsequent deployments. Military institutions prioritized force readiness above all else, allowing the problem of sexual assault to fester and violent misogyny to remain entrenched within military culture. Sexual assault is a cost of war.

As we see in the Fort Hood inquiry, even potentially useful resources and policies were delegitimized by the general climate and the specific focus on force readiness above all else. Changes in policy alone will not automatically transform the gender politics of a violent institutional environment that is permissive of sexual assault.⁷¹

Reflecting on the improved 2023 numbers, a notable aspect has been their media framing as a direct result of improvements the Pentagon made following the 2021 Independent Review Commission. Some of these reforms have been implemented, such as a new Integrated Primary Prevention Workforce that has already seen 1,000 new staff working at military installations around the world and which will eventually total 2,500 personnel. These new staff are intended to drive better understanding of and ultimately change the climate among troops that leads to high levels of sexual harassment and assault. However, some of the most meaningful reforms, such as the operation of special trial counsels that made prosecutorial authority fully independent rather than under the thumb of one’s commander, have only been implemented at the very end of 2023, making it too early to tell what effect such reforms will have on prevalence and reporting numbers. Even with these encouraging policy reforms and an end to large-scale deployments of troops to post-9/11 war occupations, a major question remains whether and how change will come to military culture, in which

⁶⁹ Fort Hood Independent Review Committee. (2020, November 6). *Report of the Fort Hood Independent Review Committee*. U.S. Secretary of the Army.

https://www.army.mil/e2/downloads/rv7/forthoodreview/2020-12-03_FHIRC_report_redacted.pdf; Mervosh, S. & Ismay, J. (2020, December 8). Army Finds ‘Major Flaws’ at Fort Hood; 14 Officials Disciplined. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/08/us/fort-hood-officers-fired-vanessa-guillen.html>.

⁷⁰ Rascoe, A. & Al-Shalchi, H. (2023, June 11). The U.S. Army Has Been Falling Short of Its Recruitment Targets. *NPR*. <https://www.npr.org/2023/06/11/1181547703/the-u-s-army-has-been-falling-short-of-its-recruitment-targets>.

⁷¹ On the limits of policy reform within a “rape culture” institution, see Belkin, A. (2012). *Bring Me Men*. 8/12/24 10:40:00 AM

violence, racial and gender inequities, and misogyny are deeply embedded, and which continues to enable high levels of sexual assault.

Inequalities Most Pronounced for Women, Gender and Sexual Minorities of Color

Available data on sexual assault prevalence and reporting for the post-9/11 wars does not isolate the role of race, gender, or sexual minority status in making service members more or less vulnerable.⁷² A lack of data makes it harder to determine how race, class, gender identity, sexual orientation, and other intersectional categories of difference affect military personnel's risk for sexual harassment and assault. However, existing military and independent studies of veterans confirm that minority populations, especially Black female veterans, are at disproportionate risk for experiencing military sexual trauma.⁷³ A study of nearly 2,000 men in the U.S. military found that Black men were more likely to experience sexual harassment than white men, but that rank also mediated this relationship.⁷⁴ Even less information is available as to whether Latinx service members, the fastest-growing demographic within the military, face higher risk for harassment and assault.⁷⁵ Criminological literature has shown that intersecting oppressions produce different risks for sexual abuse and that neglecting this intersectional reality can make for inadequate responses if those responses inadvertently assume a uniform victim.⁷⁶

Sexual and gender minority status is another intersectional dimension of risk for sexual assault. Active-duty LGBTQ personnel were 4 to 5 times more likely to experience sexual harassment and assault than their non-LGBTQ peers, according to the 2016 annual SAPRO survey used to estimate prevalence. In 2018, LGB personnel (this survey does not include transgender service members) were between 2 and 9 times more likely to experience sexual assault than their non-LGB peers.⁷⁷ Independent research shows that gender minority identity (such as transgender, genderqueer, or

⁷² Smith-Benson, P. (2021). *A Systems Thinking Approach to Formulating the Problem of Military Sexual Trauma Among Black Female Veterans*. [PhD Dissertation, Thomas Jefferson University.] Jefferson Digital Commons.

⁷³ Independent studies have shown that Black and Latina women veterans are less likely than white women to report sexual assault during a standard Veterans Health Administration screening, making reporting data even less reliable for these populations. Hargrave, A. S. et al. (2023). Factors Associated with Military Sexual Trauma (MST) Disclosure During VA Screening Among Women Veterans. *Journal of General Internal Medicine*, 38(14), 3188–97; Smith-Benson, P. (2021). *A Systems Thinking Approach to Formulating the Problem of Military Sexual Trauma Among Black Female Veterans*. [Doctoral Dissertation, Thomas Jefferson University]. Jefferson Digital Commons; Kimerling, R. et al. (2016). Prevalence of Intimate Partner Violence among Women Veterans Who Utilize Veterans Health Administration Primary Care. *Journal of General Internal Medicine*, 31(8), 888–94; Department of Veteran Affairs. (2017). *Minority Veteran Report: Military Service History and VA Benefit Utilization Statistics*. https://www.va.gov/vetdata/docs/SpecialReports/Minority_Veterans_Report.pdf.

⁷⁴ Settles, I. H., Nirole, T., Buchanan, N., & Colar, B. (2012). The Impact of Race and Rank on the Sexual Harassment of Black and White Men in the U.S. Military. *Psychology of Men & Masculinity*, 13(3), 256–63.

⁷⁵ Barroso, A. (2019). *The Changing Profile of the U.S. Military*. Pew Research Center.

<https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2019/09/10/the-changing-profile-of-the-u-s-military/>

⁷⁶ Bonnes, S. (2021). An Intersectional Approach to Military Sexual Violence. *Sociology Compass*, 15(12), e12939.

⁷⁷ Department of Defense. (2017). *2016 Workplace and Gender Relations Survey Among Active Duty Service Members*; Department of Defense. (2019). *2018 Workplace and Gender Relations Survey Among Active Duty Service Members*.

gender nonconforming) has been associated with significantly higher rates of sexual harassment and assault than cisgender identity.⁷⁸ A nationwide survey found that 17.2 percent of transgender veterans had experienced military sexual assault, with significant differences between trans women (15.2 percent) and trans men (30 percent).⁷⁹ Queer and trans service members may also be less likely to report sexual harassment or assault for a number of reasons, including distrust in reporting systems.⁸⁰

These specific risks for sexual assault occur within a broader system of intersecting racial and gender inequities. The military has long represented itself as a positive symbol of a diverse American society. More recently, diversity within the military is increasingly discussed as an asset that makes the armed forces more effective in today's environment.⁸¹ The military's new recruitment strategy reflects this emphasis on diversity, visible in the Army's attempt to rebrand itself through a new series of "Be All You Can Be" ads featuring women and people of color doing humanitarian relief and science and engineering jobs alongside more traditional military tasks such as firing weapons. One of the first of these ads begins with the viewer looking into a soldier's eye through the periscope of a tank. The ad follows the commands and steps the soldier takes to fire the tank, revealing when she turns away from the periscope at the end that the soldier is a young Black woman. This woman embodies the military's new recruitment strategy. After failing over the past several years to meet recruitment goals, the Army has increasingly targeted women as a higher-quality recruitment pool, citing their overall higher test results and fewer arrest records than men. However, U.S. Army surveys showed 20 percent of women to be skeptical of joining due to the military's reputation for gendered discrimination and sexual harassment and assault.⁸² An independent survey found that one-third of active-duty family respondents of color considered racial discrimination a factor in whether or not to reenlist.⁸³

In light of the military's current recruitment strategy and its stated interest in diversifying the armed services, it is important to take stock of how uneven diversity has historically been distributed across rank and service. On this uneven terrain, the very women of color featured in recent military recruitment ads—who are treated as symbols of the military's meritocracy and career opportunity for Black and Latinx people—experience the most pronounced intersections of racial and gender discrimination during military service.

⁷⁸ Schuyler, A. C. et al., (2020). Experiences of Sexual Harassment, Stalking, and Sexual Assault During Military Service Among LGBT and Non-LGBT Service Members. *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 33(3), 257–66.

⁷⁹ Beckman, K. et al., (2018). Military Sexual Assault in Transgender Veterans: Results from a Nationwide Survey. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 31(2), 181-190.

⁸⁰ Castro, C. A. & Goldbach, J. T. (2018). The Perpetrator Hypothesis: Victimization Involving LGBT Service Members, in *Military and Veteran Mental Health: A Comprehensive Guide*. Springer, 145–56.

⁸¹ Blue Star Families. Statement from Key Leaders of the Defense Community. accessed October 26, 2023, https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/BSF_Defense_Leader_Statement_v2.pdf. See also Roth-Douquet, K. (2022, May 17). Diversity and Inclusion Are Critical to Future Military Readiness. *Military Times*. <https://www.militarytimes.com/opinion/commentary/2022/05/17/diversity-and-inclusion-are-critical-to-future-military-readiness/>

⁸² Bowman, T. (2023, September 25). Low Enlistment Numbers Has the Army Rethinking Their Tactics to Attract New Recruits. *NPR*. <https://www.npr.org/2023/09/25/1201617590/low-enlistment-numbers-has-the-army-rethinking-their-tactics-to-attract-new-recr>.

⁸³ Blue Star Families and Syracuse University Institute for Veterans & Military Families. (2021). *The Diverse Experiences of Military & Veteran Families of Color*. Blue Star Families.

The Department of Defense's demographic data shows that African Americans make up around 17 percent of the 1.3 million active-duty military personnel, relative to about 12 percent of the U.S. population. **Black women specifically represent over one quarter of all active-duty women, which is nearly twice their percentage in the civilian female population.**⁸⁴ But this diversity is unevenly distributed in terms of rank and opportunity. A Carnegie Endowment for International Peace study found that although U.S. public opinion considers the military a means for underprivileged and minority groups to "move up," these groups are overrepresented in military enlistment but underrepresented at the highest levels of military leadership.⁸⁵ The Carnegie study found that African Americans in particular comprised 19 percent of active duty enlistment, but only 9 percent of active duty officers and 6.5 percent of generals.⁸⁶ Similarly, diversity is not distributed evenly across military services. The highly valorized special operations sector is, in the words of one military trainer, "notoriously white," with Black service members comprising only two percent of Navy SEALs, 4.5 percent of Green Berets, and one percent of Marine Corps special operators.⁸⁷

Nearly all Black officers interviewed for the Carnegie study recounted bias and overt forms of racism they had experienced in the military. Such experiences match a 2019 *Military Times* poll that found more than one-third of all active-duty troops and more than half of service members of color had personally witnessed examples of "white nationalism or ideologically-driven racism within the ranks in recent months." This was a significant increase from the same poll conducted in 2018, from 22 to 36 percent.⁸⁸ Black women officers interviewed for the Carnegie study described how "experiences of prejudice were routine." One respondent described, "I was the only female, and my battalion commander was very sexist, chauvinistic, and made cruel jokes." She and others reported experiencing retribution, with negative consequences for their career progression, if they confronted instances of racism and sexism. Women interviewed for other studies describe their experiences of racism as covered up by the pervasive belief within the military that "everyone is green"—a

⁸⁴ U.S. Department of Defense. (2022, December 14). *2021 Demographics: Profile of the Military Community*. U.S. Department of Defense. <https://www.militaryonesource.mil/data-research-and-statistics/military-community-demographics/2021-demographics-profile/>.

⁸⁵ Chivvis, C. S. & Lauji, S. (2022, September 6). *Diversity in the High Brass*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/09/06/diversity-in-high-brass-pub-87694>.

⁸⁶ Note the 19 percent of active-duty enlistment cited here is different than the 17 percent cited above because the Carnegie study uses slightly older military demographic profile numbers.

⁸⁷ Vanden Brook, T. (2015, August 6). Pentagon's Elite Forces Lack Diversity. *USA Today*. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2015/08/05/diversity-seals-green-berets/31122851/>; Department of Defense. (2021). *2020 Demographics: Profile of the Military Community*. <https://www.militaryonesource.mil/data-research-and-statistics/military-community-demographics/>. Military trainer cited was interviewed by Greenburg in 2017 and had trained and deployed with Special Forces.

⁸⁸ Schuyler, A. C. et al. (2020, February 6). Experiences of Sexual Harassment, Stalking, and Sexual Assault During Military Service Among LGBT and Non-LGBT Service Members. *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 33(3), 257–66. <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/pentagon-congress/2020/02/06/signs-of-white-supremacy-extremism-up-again-in-poll-of-active-duty-troops/>; See also Snow, S. (2019, September 4). The neo-Nazi Boot: Inside One Marine's Descent into Extremism. *Marine Corps Times*. <https://www.marinecorpstimes.com/news/your-marine-corps/2019/09/04/the-neo-nazi-boot-inside-one-marines-descent-into-extremism/>

reference to the olive drab of some military uniforms and a claim that the military is a color-blind and meritocratic institution.⁸⁹

Multiple studies have found that across all military services, Black service members are substantially more likely to face disciplinary action than white service members.⁹⁰ An Air Force Inspector General investigation into disparities in discipline and career development between Black and white service members found that two out of five Black enlisted service members, civilians, and officers distrust their chain of command when it comes to addressing racism, bias, and inequality in career opportunities.⁹¹ The Air Force's second disparity review, based on over 100,000 service members surveyed, found that Hispanic/Latino, Native American, and Asian American enlisted and officers were promoted below the overall average promotion rate.⁹²

In 2021, the military conducted a force-wide “stand down” to discuss the dangers of white nationalism and white supremacy.⁹³ This followed the realization that nearly one in five of the January 6 Capitol rioters had served in the military.⁹⁴ The first DoD Equity Action Plan, released in 2022, also grew out of this moment. These are public recognitions that race and racism exist within the military—not an insignificant change from the color-blind language dominant before the Trump Administration and January 6. These first steps certainly present an opening for more transformative change to reduce incidences of racial discrimination within military institutions. Yet none of these issues occurs in a vacuum. Even the most transformative equity plans cannot undo the contradiction of working for gender and racial justice within an institution waging wars that have killed, displaced, and devastated the environment for millions of people across the globe, with women and people of color living in the Global South bearing the brunt of this destruction.⁹⁵ Racism within the U.S., including within the armed forces, has been produced through wars waged abroad.⁹⁶

⁸⁹ Greenburg, J. (2023). *At War with Women: Military Humanitarianism and Imperial Feminism in an Era of Permanent War*. Cornell University Press.

⁹⁰ Protect Our Defenders. (2017, May 5). *Racial Disparities in Military Justice*. https://www.protectourdefenders.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Report_20.pdf; Anwar, S. et al., (2024, April 10). *Racial Disparities in the Department of the Air Force Military Justice System*. RAND Corporation. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA1751-1.html.

⁹¹ Inspector General Department of the Air Force. (2020, December). *Report of Inquiry: Independent Racial Disparity Review*. <https://permanent.fdlp.gov/gpo160284/IRDR.pdf>; Chivvis, C. & Lauji, S. (2022, September 6). *Diversity in the High Brass*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2022/09/diversity-in-the-high-brass?lang=en>

⁹² Inspector General Department of the Air Force. (2021, September). *Report of Inquiry: Disparity Review*. https://www.af.mil/Portals/1/documents/2021SAF/09_Sept/DR_ROI_Baseline.pdf.

⁹³ A “stand down” refers to a force-wide discussion. In this case, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin directed all commanding officers and supervisors across the Pentagon to select one full day to devote to discussing extremism and procedures for reporting extremist behaviors.

⁹⁴ Dreisbach, T. & Anderson, M. (2021, January 21). Nearly One in Five Defendants in Capitol Riot Cases Served in the Military. *NPR*. <https://www.npr.org/2021/01/21/958915267/nearly-one-in-five-defendants-in-capitol-riot-cases-served-in-the-military>.

⁹⁵ The post-9/11 wars have displaced 38 million people, directly killed 929,000 people, and indirectly killed 4.5-4.7 million people worldwide. Vine et al. (2021). *Creating Refugees: Displacement Caused by the United States' Post-9/11 Wars*. Costs of War, Watson Institute, Brown University; Crawford, N. & Lutz, C. (2021). *Human Cost of the Post-9/11 Wars: Direct War Deaths in Major War Zones*. Costs of War, Watson Institute, Brown University; Savell, S. (2023). *How Death Outlives War: The Reverberating Impact of the Post-9/11 Wars on Human Health*. Costs of War, Watson Institute, Brown University.

⁹⁶ Singh, N. P. (2017). *Race and America's Long War*. University of California Press.

A Broader Context of Gender Discrimination

Even beyond the issue of sexual assault, a closer look at service women's actual experiences reveals how deeply entrenched gender discrimination is within military culture. The experiences of women deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan reflect these gender politics. During the post-9/11 wars, the U.S. military relied heavily on its proportionally small female forces to search Iraqi and Afghan women at checkpoints and gain access to households, especially in Afghanistan. This work often happened through women being unofficially assigned to support all-male combat units from which women were technically banned. Women who served in this capacity were represented in popular media as breaking the military's "brass ceiling" that prevented them from accessing job opportunities equal to their male counterparts.⁹⁷ But these women often found themselves pigeonholed into gender-stereotyped roles such as baking or interacting with children. One common example was when U.S. troops would raid an Afghan family's home at night, women attached to the combat team were expected to have an innate ability to calm down Afghan women and children.⁹⁸ This unequal treatment is reflected in the military's own training materials that imagined women as "softening" the military presence.⁹⁹

Women who unofficially deployed in these post-9/11 combat roles often returned home with written records that did not reflect that they were in combat. Since injury and disability claims must be connected to military service, many women were wrongly denied medical and disability benefits. Bias within military medicine, including the prominent myth that "women do not serve in combat," also contribute to documented gender inequities within military medicine, such as higher PTSD claim denial rates.¹⁰⁰ These gender inequities intersect with racial biases within military medicine, which have also been shown to influence higher PTSD claim denial rates for minority groups.¹⁰¹ This is all the more disturbing given studies showing that racial and ethnic minority veterans, who comprise a higher percentage of the female veteran population, experience higher *prevalence rates* of PTSD.¹⁰²

⁹⁷ Lemmon, G. T. (2015). *Ashley's War: The Untold Story of a Team of Women Soldiers on the Special Ops Battlefield*. Harper.

⁹⁸ Greenburg, J. (2023). *At War with Women: Military Humanitarianism and Imperial Feminism in an Era of Permanent War*. Cornell University Press.

⁹⁹ Watson, J. (2011). Female Engagement Teams: The Case for More Female Civil Affairs Marines. *Marine Corps Gazette*.

¹⁰⁰ Swords to Ploughshares. (2022, February). *Veteran Reference Guide: Understanding Characteristics, Common Challenges, and Access to Care*. <https://www.swords-to-plowshares.org/research-publications/veterans-reference-guide>

¹⁰¹ Murdoch, M. et al. (2003). Racial Disparities in VA Service Connection for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder Disability. *Medical Care*, 41(4), 536–49; Department of Veterans Affairs Office of Inspector General. (2010). *Review of Combat Stress in Women Veterans Receiving VA Health Care and Disability Benefits*.

¹⁰² Swords to Ploughshares Institute for Veteran Policy. (2017). *Veterans and Their Families Reference Guide*. 12, https://uploads-ssl.webflow.com/5ddda3d7ad8b1151b5d16cff/5e67d54e8c296ffede3c4f62_Reference-Guide-2017.pdf.

Jaclyn “Jax” Scott is one of the hundreds of women named in the “Jax Act,” a bill awaiting a full hearing by the House of Representatives that seeks to amend records of women who were denied rank, benefits, medical care, and disability because their combat was not documented in the post-9/11 wars. Scott returned from consecutive deployments to Afghanistan in 2013 and sought medical care for a brain injury from concussive grenade blasts; back, neck, and shoulder injuries from heavy falls; and symptoms of post-traumatic stress. Her army doctor laughed at her and prescribed her sleep aids for jet lag. After Scott left the Army, she sought treatment at the VA for extreme pain in her knee. But the VA determined that her injuries were not service-related, meaning she could not access VA medication and care. She turned to alcohol to cope with the pain and became homeless. Only after a Congressional appeal to recognize her combat service was Scott able to begin VA treatment for traumatic brain injury and multiple other injuries.¹⁰³

There are hundreds of documented cases like Scott linked to women’s deployments in the post-9/11 wars (310 are named in the Jax Act). Their experiences are also part of a broader context of a Veterans Health Administration that has recently expanded to provide more women’s healthcare, but where this expansion has often been criticized for lacking staff trained in women’s health, insufficient appointment times, general lack of supplies and resources, and harassment and discrimination within medical facilities.¹⁰⁴ Women veterans also underuse VA healthcare relative to men, resulting in delayed healthcare and unmet needs among women.¹⁰⁵

Discrimination within military and veteran’s healthcare speaks to how gender inequalities are prevalent across multiple institutional and cultural aspects of military life, even as gender policy has improved on paper. Although few studies have even been conducted on racial and ethnic disparities among women veterans, the intersection of racial and gender biases discussed here further intensifies the barriers women of color face to access fair treatment.¹⁰⁶ Gender discrimination in military healthcare and inadequacies in gender-specific healthcare are part of the fabric of a military culture that enables high levels of sexual harassment and assault.

Conclusion: Sexual Assault and Gender Inequalities as a Cost of War

The Department of Defense is the largest employer in the United States and by some measurements the entire world.¹⁰⁷ This makes it especially alarming that sexual

¹⁰³ Seck, H. H. (2023, March 27). These Women Survived Combat. Then They Had to Fight for Health Care. *The Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2023/03/27/jax-act-women-combat/>.

¹⁰⁴ Department of Veterans Affairs Office of Inspector General. (2020, January 23). *Deficiencies in the Women Veterans Health Program and Other Quality Management Concerns at the North Texas VA Healthcare System*. See also Marshall, V. et al., (2021). The Focus They Deserve: Improving Women Veterans’ Health Care Access. *Women’s Health Issues*, 31(4), 399–407.

¹⁰⁵ Washington, D. L. et al. (2011). Access to Care for Women Veterans: Delayed Healthcare and Unmet Need. *Journal of General Internal Medicine*, 26(2), 655; see also Goldzweig, C. L. et al. (2006). The State of Women Veterans’ Health Research. *Journal of General Internal Medicine*, 21(S3), 82–92.

¹⁰⁶ Carter, A. et al., (2016). Racial and Ethnic Health Care Disparities Among Women in the Veterans Affairs Healthcare System: A Systematic Review. *Women’s Health Issues*, 26(4), 401–9.

¹⁰⁷ Department of Defense. (2020). *United States Department of Defense Agency Financial Report FY2020*. https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/afr/fy2020/1-Foreword_About_the_DoD_Agency_Financial_Report_and_Table_of_Contents.pdf; Steve Minter, S. (2015,

harassment and sexual assault continue to occur within the military at such high levels. Military sexual assault occurs within what military voices themselves have called a “broken culture” rife with sexism, misogyny and gendered violence. This is not new, but it was made worse by 20 years of war. In the Secretary of the Army’s own words, going to war has prevented the military from institutionally reckoning with its shameful longstanding epidemic of sexual assault.

High prevalence of sexual assault must be considered a likely cost of future wars as well. Sexism and racism within military medicine and in relation to career advancement speak to widespread gender inequities as a cost of war, even beyond (but surely linked to) sexual assault.

Any discussion of gender inequality within the U.S. military must occur alongside reckoning with how the “War on Terror” was fought in the name of restoring Afghan women’s rights. In her radio address in November 2001, just weeks after the invasion of Afghanistan began and in place of the weekly radio address normally given by President Bush, First Lady Laura Bush condemned “the brutal oppression of women,” calling this oppression “a central goal of the terrorists” with whom the U.S. was now at war. She claimed this “fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women.”¹⁰⁸ But 20 years of war made Afghan’s women’s lives worse. A full 100 percent of households headed by women in Afghanistan went hungry in 2022, including an estimated 2 million widows.¹⁰⁹ Women’s rights remain heavily restricted. Punishing sanctions and banking restrictions implemented by the U.S. following the Taliban’s reassertion of control have even further exacerbated the food insecurity and poverty indicators that were already worsened by 20 years of war. In 2022, 92 percent of Afghans faced food insecurity (compared to 62 percent in 2001), 50 percent of children under five experienced acute malnutrition (compared to 9 percent in 2001), and 97 percent of Afghans were living in poverty (compared to 80 percent in 2001). Dramatic increases in the number of Afghan widows and the number of Afghans living with physical disabilities as a result of the war all speak to how women’s lives have been severely worsened by a war supposedly fought in their name.¹¹⁰

During the same time period in which the U.S. government attempted to justify the post-9/11 wars in the name of women’s rights, the U.S. military granted service women equal access to all military jobs, invested in new institutions and resources to

June 24). Who Are the World’s Biggest Employers? *IndustryWeek*.

<https://www.industryweek.com/talent/article/21965429/who-are-the-worlds-biggest-employers>; Eoyang, M. (2020, December 2). Why Every American Should Care about Biden’s Pick to Lead the DOD. *MSNBC.com*. <https://www.msnbc.com/opinion/michele-flournoy-good-pick-defense-secretary-period-n1249703>.

¹⁰⁸ Bush, L. (2001, November 17). Radio Address on Taliban Oppression of Women. *The Washington Post*. https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/nation/specials/attacked/transcripts/laurabushtext_111701.html.

¹⁰⁹ RFE/RL’s Radio Azadi & Siddique, A. (2022, March 25). Afghan Widows Struggle To Survive Amid Humanitarian Disaster. <https://www.rferl.org/a/afghan-widows-struggle-to-survive/31768872.html>

¹¹⁰ Costs of War. (2023, October 26). *By the Numbers: Afghanistan before and after 20 Years of War (2001-2021)*. Costs of War, Watson Institute, Brown University.

<https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/Afghanistanbeforeandafter20yearsofwar>; Rao, N. (2023, February 3). Afghanistan: Single Women and Widows Are Struggling to Find Their Next Meal Under Taliban Restrictions. *The Conversation*. <http://theconversation.com/afghanistan-single-women-and-widows-are-struggling-to-find-their-next-meal-under-taliban-restrictions-198279>.

address sexual assault, and expanded women's healthcare. But in practice, women were still assigned to gender stereotypical roles, denied medical care because their combat was not believed or documented, and faced disproportionate danger for sexual assault in their workplace.

The experiences of women deployed during the post-9/11 wars challenge the idea that more equitable gender policies, on their own, are enough to lead to greater gender equality in practice. Racial and gender discrimination have not only persisted through the post-9/11 wars, but by some measures, particularly in relation to sexual assault, became more entrenched due to the military focus on "readiness" above all else. The persistence of violent misogyny within military culture speaks to the difficulty of changing how gender operates within an existentially violent institution. It is also another reminder of the contradiction of achieving greater gender and racial equality within an institution whose wars contribute to global poverty and inequality around the world.

Appendix A: Data and Methodological Challenges

Multiple studies on military sexual assault have noted extreme methodological heterogeneity in attempts to measure actual prevalence of military sexual assault, ultimately pointing to the impossibility of directly comparing prevalence data points across years. It is less problematic to directly compare the actual number of sexual assault reports filed across years, although these reports only reflect a small proportion of actual assaults.¹¹¹ Some methodological differences between studies attempting to estimate prevalence include disparity in how the population is screened, how sexual assault is defined, or whether self-reporting versus medical records data was used. Independent studies have shown that these methodological differences significantly affect the estimated prevalence of sexual assault.¹¹² These methods varied between years of the DoD surveys discussed here, problematizing direct comparison across years (See Figure 3).

Methodological change over time in studying sexual assault also makes it impossible to definitively know whether some of the significant policy changes that occurred during these years changed prevalence and reporting numbers. This is important because consistency in data collection over time is necessary to understand changes in prevalence of sexual assault, a major purpose of SAPRO. Within this longer time span, it is also possible to safely compare certain years in which methodology remained the same, but policy changed. These comparisons are addressed in the following sections.

The most dramatic methodological differences in estimating prevalence occurred in 2006, 2011, 2014, and 2021. In 2006, SAPRO overhauled an older survey that asked

¹¹¹ Reporting data is estimated to reflect an approximate average of 25 percent over this time. Darehshori, S. & Rhoad, M. (2015, May 8). *Embattled: Retaliation against Sexual Assault Survivors in the US Military*. Human Rights Watch. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2015/05/18/embattled/retaliation-against-sexual-assault-survivors-us-military>.

¹¹² Wilson, L. (2018). The Prevalence of Military Sexual Trauma: A Meta-Analysis. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, 19(5).

about a broad range of workplace issues, including a questionnaire on sexual harassment, to specifically collect information estimating the prevalence of sexual assault.¹¹³ One major difference between the updated survey and older variants was that it asked about “unwanted sexual contact,” a broader category than the specific sexual crimes listed in the Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ) that earlier surveys attempting to measure sexual harassment asked about. The 34,200 number comes from active-duty service members surveyed with the 2006 overhauled study. In 2008 (not pictured), only reservists were surveyed using the Workplace and Gender Relations Survey (which is used to estimate prevalence when it is fielded among *active-duty*) because at this time SAPRO was in a cycle of running the active-duty component of the survey on which prevalence is estimated every 4 years, and in alternating 4-year cycles, running the reserve component of this survey. In 2010, SAPRO changed from a 2- to a 4-year cycle to better assess sexual assault prevalence. It is thus difficult to compare the 2006 numbers to later years given that this was the first year the updated survey was fielded, and it was not followed by more regular comparable studies until after 2010.

In 2011, SAPRO introduced changes to broaden access to restricted reports of sexual assault, in which victims can confidentially report assault and access to medical care, victim advocacy, and counseling without triggering an investigation. This change in definition could have affected survey response from 2010-2012. 2014 saw a major change in survey methodology when the Department of Defense hired RAND National Defense Research Institute to conduct an independent assessment of sexual assault, sexual harassment, and gender discrimination to improve DoD’s reporting measures and procedures regarding sexual assault. The 2014 prevalence estimate comes from this RAND survey. Instead of the single item measure of “unwanted sexual contact” used since 2006, the 2014 survey replaced language of “unwanted sexual contact” with “sexual assault” and asked a 41-item measure of specific behaviors, intent, and indicators of crimes under the UCMJ.¹¹⁴ In SAPRO’s methodological appendix for 2016, it explicitly states that prevalence estimates from 2014 and 2016 are not directly comparable to prior years.¹¹⁵ Another major methodological change occurred in 2021,

¹¹³ The 2006 and 2008 numbers from the *Workplace and Gender Relations Survey of Active Duty Members* (2006) and the *Workplace and Gender Relations Survey of Reserve Component Members* (2008). The 2006 and 2008 surveys followed the establishment of SAPRO, who modified a survey carried out semi-regularly since 1988 by the Defense Manpower Data Center (part of the DoD), which since 1995 included questionnaires designed to estimate levels of sexual harassment and its consequences. The 2006 survey for the first time attempted to measure unwanted sexual contact alongside measures of harassment that had been included since 1995. Before major changes in 2014, SAPRO based prevalence estimates on the results of the *Active* component of the Workplace and Gender Relations Survey, which was fielded (with some variation) ever 4 years before 2010, after which it was fielded every 2 years to more closely monitor SAPRO’s progress. The Reserve component of the survey was fielded in alternate years to the active, also following a similar 4- then later 2-year cycle. Department of Defense Office of People Analytics. (2009, February). *2008 Workplace and Gender Relations Survey of Reserve Component Members: Tabulation of Responses*. Defense Technical Information Center. <https://www.opa.mil/research-analysis/health-well-being/gender-relations/2008-workplace-and-gender-relations-survey-of-reserve-component-members/2008-workplace-and-gender-relations-survey-of-reserve-component-members-tabulations-of-responses>.

¹¹⁴ These changes aligned the definition and measures of sexual assault in the questionnaire more closely with specific crimes listed in the UCMJ.

¹¹⁵ Sexual Assault Prevention and Response (SAPRO). (2016). *Appendix C: Metrics and Non-Metrics on Sexual Assault*. Department of Defense. 5. https://SAPRO.mil/public/docs/reports/FY16_Annual/Appendix_C_Metrics_Section.pdf.

when the 2020 survey was delayed due to COVID-19 and adopted a shorter five-item measure of unwanted sexual contact.¹¹⁶

Prevalence Data Comparisons

The strongest comparisons can be made between 2014, 2016, and 2018, which used the most comparable methodologies and definitions. The 2014 RAND independent assessment found that over 20,000 service members experienced at least one sexual assault during 2014, or 1.0 percent of active-duty men and 4.9 percent of active-duty women. This same study found that 10 percent of active-duty service members experienced some form of discrimination that violates the military's own equal opportunity program, including sexual harassment, hostile work environment, sexual quid pro quo, or gender-based derogatory comments or mistreatment (26 percent of women and 7.4 percent of men).¹¹⁷ The years 2014-2016 see an initial estimated decrease in unwanted sexual contact by more than 25 percent in 2016, at the same time as reporting numbers increase slightly during those years. Then, in 2018, estimated incidences rise back to 20,500, just above their 2014 levels.

The overall decrease in prevalence in 2023 mainly came from lower prevalence rates for young (under 21) and lower-ranking (junior enlisted) women; however, this group of women still remained at higher risk than their more senior peers for unwanted sexual contact. There was no statistically significant decrease for sexual assaults among men. The decrease was also uneven across military services, with overall change driven by decreases for women in the Navy and Air Force.¹¹⁸ Direct comparisons between 2021 and 2023 are problematic due to the ways in which COVID impacted the survey on which 2021 numbers are based.

Reporting Data Comparisons

Reporting (as opposed to estimated prevalence) numbers can be more directly compared to one another given that they were tabulated in a more consistent manner from 2006 to 2021. Between 2012 and 2014, there was an increase in reporting from 2,828 (11 percent of estimated incidences reported in 2012) to 4,744 (23 percent of

¹¹⁶ Beginning in 2007, SAPRO reports use a fiscal year that does not correspond to the calendar year. For example, the FY2021 report includes data from October, 1 2020-September 30, 2021, and the report itself only becomes available in 2022. Some earlier reports (2002-2006) use a calendar year. This means that in some of the data used here, the date of the report includes part but not all of the report year, and in others, the data comes from the entire year before the date that appears on the report. For consistency, in all text, figures, and tables in this report, we use the year a report is labeled to discuss or compare a year of data.

¹¹⁷ Morral, A. R. et al. (2014, December 4). *Sexual Assault and Sexual Harassment in the U.S. Military: Top-Line Estimates for Active-Duty Service Members from the 2014 RAND Military Workplace Study*. RAND Corporation. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR870.html.

¹¹⁸ Sexual Assault Prevention and Response (SAPRO). (2024). *Department of Defense Annual Report on Sexual Assault in the Military - Fiscal Year 2023*. https://www.sapr.mil/sites/default/files/public/docs/reports/AR/FY23/FY23_Annual_Report.pdf

estimated incidences reported in 2014).¹¹⁹ Reports also increase from 2014 (23 percent reported) to 2016 (32 percent reported). In 2018, 30 percent of estimated cases were reported. But then reporting fell to below 2014 levels in 2021 at 20 percent reported, or fewer than one in four victims reporting assault. The decrease in reporting rates in 2021 follows from a small increase in reporting numbers for 2020 (there are no prevalence numbers for 2020 so we cannot calculate a percentage of reports, but we do know the number of reports was higher by about 1 percent in 2020 than in 2019).¹²⁰

In 2023, the rate of almost 25 percent of estimated victims reporting their assault also represents improvement from the 10-year low reporting rate of 20 percent in 2021. This also follows from a slight increase in 2022 of 1 percent in raw reporting numbers across all services (this year did not include a prevalence estimate so we only know the number of cases reported, not the percentage of all estimated cases reported).¹²¹ The 2023 numbers are, however, still lower than the reporting rates of 30 percent in 2018 and 32 percent in 2016, which followed on the heels of a series of policy reforms, including the 2013 establishment of Special Victims Counsels. These 2023 data still indicate that at least 75 percent of military personnel do not report sexual assault, meaning that 75 percent likely do not receive adequate counseling, medical care, and resources for recovery that are most often accessed through reporting. Of service members who filed a report in 2023 for a sexual assault occurring over the past year, 58 percent were satisfied with support from their Victim Advocate, 51 percent were satisfied with support from their Special Victims Counsel and 59 percent were satisfied with support from their Sexual Assault Response Coordinator. These low levels of satisfaction regarding services represent no change from 2021.¹²²

¹¹⁹ These reporting numbers are incidents among active-duty service members in the given fiscal year (they do *not* include non-service members or incidents outside of military service). As explained in Figure 1, active-duty reporting numbers are compared to estimated prevalence to calculate the reporting percentage, because estimated prevalence is based only on information about the *active* component and thus must only be compared to *active-duty* reporting data.

¹²⁰ Baldor, L. (2021, May 13). Tiny Uptick in 2020 Military Sex Assault Reports, Officials Say. *Military Times*. <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/pentagon-congress/2021/05/13/tiny-uptick-in-2020-military-sex-assault-reports-officials-say/>.

¹²¹ The 2023 report shows that the Army, the military's largest branch, reported a 9 percent drop in reported sexual assaults in 2022. This represents a significant decline given that the Army reported a nearly 26 percent increase from 2020-2021. However, the Air Force reported a 13 percent increase, the Navy a 9 percent increase, and the Marine Corps a 4 percent increase, amounting to 8,942 sexual assault reports filed in total, a 1 percent increase from the previous year. Cisneros, G. (2023, April 26). *Memorandum to Senior DoD Leadership Directing Actions to Address and Prevent Sexual Assault and Sexual Harassment in the Military*. Sexual Assault Prevention and Response (SAPRO). https://www.SAPRO.mil/sites/default/files/public/docs/reports/AR/FY22/FY2022_Annual_Report_Actions_To_Address_Memorandum.pdf; Sexual Assault Prevention and Response (SAPRO). (2023, March 16). *Department of Defense Annual Report on Sexual Assault in the Military*. Department of Defense. https://www.SAPRO.mil/sites/default/files/public/docs/reports/AR/FY22/DOD_Annual_Report_on_Sexual_Assault_in_the_Military_FY2022.pdf; Mitchell, E. (2023, April 27). Pentagon Reports Slight Rise in Military's Sexual Assaults over Prior Year. *The Hill*. <https://thehill.com/homenews/3976009-pentagon-rise-sexual-assaults-2022/>.

¹²² Sexual Assault Prevention and Response (SAPRO). *Department of Defense Annual Report on Sexual Assault in the Military - Fiscal Year 2023*. Department of Defense. 21.

Figure 3: Methodological and Policy Changes Affecting Prevalence Data 2002-2023

Name and Year of Study*	Method Used (** indicates change in methodology)	Results Found	Policy Changes in this Period ***
Armed Forces 2002 Sexual Harassment Survey and DoD Task Force Report on Care for Victims of Sexual Assault	Questionnaire on sexual harassment included since 1995 as part of broader "Workplace and Gender Relations Survey" fielded since 1988		
DoD Task Force Report on Care for Victims of Sexual Assault (2004)		The rates of alleged sexual assault across DoD were 69.1 and 70.0 per 100,000 uniform service members for 2002 and 2003, respectively.	
Sexual Offenses Involving Members of the Armed Forces - Calendar Year 2004 Report			DoD Care for Victims of Sexual Assault Task Force Report established
Sexual Offenses Involving Members of the Armed Forces - Calendar Year 2005 Report		No SAPRO estimated prevalence is available prior to 2006.	DoD established SAPRO Program
DoD Annual Report on Sexual Assault in the Military - Calendar Year 2006 Report	Only active duty service members were surveyed, not reservists. First year of estimating prevalence of USC**	34,200	The category of "sexual assault" was modified to "unwanted sexual contact" (USC) to encompass a broader category than the specific sexual crimes listed in the Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ) that earlier surveys attempting to measure sexual harassment asked about. Only active-duty service members were surveyed.
DoD Annual Report on Sexual Assault in the Military - FY 2007		No estimated prevalence is available for years 2007, 2008, 2009,	
DoD Annual Report on Sexual Assault in	Only reservists surveyed using the "Workplace and Gender	as before this the Workplace and Gender Relations	

the Military - FY 2008	Relations Survey" for the Reserve component.	Survey for the Active component was only fielded every 4 years (estimated prevalence is based on this Active survey).	
DoD Annual Report on Sexual Assault in the Military - FY 2009			
DoD Annual Report on Sexual Assault in the Military - FY 2010	Workplace and Gender Relations Survey moves from 4- to 2-year cycles**	19,300	
DoD Annual Report on Sexual Assault in the Military - FY 2011			Introduced changes to broaden access to restricted reports of sexual assault, in which victims can confidentially report assault and access to medical care, victim advocacy, and counseling without triggering an investigation.
DoD Annual Report on Sexual Assault in the Military - FY 2012		26,000	Between 2012 and 2015, the DoD, branches of the U.S. military, and Congress produced over 200 initiatives, independent commissions and recommendations, and secretarial initiatives, ranging from changing the UCMJ to prohibit retaliation for reporting sexual assault to changing security clearance applications so that victims do not have to report mental health counseling.
DoD Annual Report on Sexual Assault in the Military - FY 2013			Special Victims Counsel was established to provide victims of USC with legal counsel.
DoD Annual Report on Sexual Assault in the Military - FY 2014	The RAND survey replaced language of "unwanted sexual contact" with "sexual assault" and asked a 41-item measure of specific behaviors, intent, and indicators of crimes under the UCMJ. Unlike other years, this year also saw Reserve	20,300	The Department of Defense hired RAND National Defense Research Institute to conduct an independent assessment of sexual assault, sexual harassment, and gender discrimination to improve DoD's reporting measures and procedures regarding sexual assault.

	and Active survey components surveyed at same time**		
DoD Annual Report on Sexual Assault in the Military - FY 2015			
DoD Annual Report on Sexual Assault in the Military - FY 2016	In SAPRO's methodological appendix for 2016, it explicitly states that prevalence estimates from 2014 and 2016 are not directly comparable to prior years due to using the survey created by RAND.	14,900	
DoD Annual Report on Sexual Assault in the Military - FY 2017			
DoD Annual Report on Sexual Assault in the Military - FY 2018		20,500	
DoD Annual Report on Sexual Assault in the Military - FY 2019			
DoD Annual Report on Sexual Assault in the Military - FY 2020	The 2020 survey was delayed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. DoD adopted a shorter five-item measure of unwanted sexual contact for this year.**		
DoD Annual Report on Sexual Assault in the Military - FY 2021		35,900	Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin orders Independent Review Commission on Sexual Assault in the Military, which reports that "military leadership has failed daughters and sons, and the Service members know it".
DoD Annual Report on Sexual Assault in			A partial version of the "I am Vanessa Guillén Act" (Military Justice Improvement and

the Military - FY 2022			Increasing Prevention Act) passes as part of the 2022 NDAA. This partial version empowers independent military prosecutors over accusations of sexual assault and other serious offenses and makes sexual harassment a crime under UCMJ. However, commanders are only fully removed from prosecution and special trial counsels established in 2023 (as amendments to the 2023 NDAA)
DoD Annual Report on Sexual Assault in the Military - FY 2023		29,000	In July 2023, President Biden signed executive order fully implementing the "I am Vanessa Guillen Act," handing decision-making powers to independent prosecutors in sexual assault cases (and murder, child abuse, and other serious criminal cases) where members of the military are accused. Special trial counsels were established at the end of 2023, removing military commanders' authority over the prosecution of sexual assault, murder, and other crimes. Specialized military lawyers who report to civilians, not commanders, will now decide whether to pursue charges in sexual abuse cases.

* Note on year versus FY: some reports use Calendar Year, while others use a DoD Fiscal Year that does not correspond to the calendar year. In some cases, the date of the report includes part but not all of the report year, and in others, the data comes from the entire year before the date that appears on the report. For consistency, in all text, figures, and tables, we use the year a report is labeled to discuss or compare a year of data.

** indicates a year methodology changed

*** Out of the hundreds of policy changes over time that could be listed here, this list reflects policy changes most likely to have affected prevalence data (or changes in the collection of this data) 2001-2023

Appendix B: Independent estimations of sexual assault prevalence

On average, over the course of the war in Afghanistan (2001-2021), 24 percent of active-duty women and 1.9 percent of active-duty men experienced sexual assault.

Amongst independent estimates, this is a mid-range estimate, and the author made a conservative choice in highlighting these data points, for these percentage estimates are repeated in multiple independent studies.¹²³ This mid-range estimate also excludes the highest but less-cited estimations, such as one independent meta-analysis finding a higher range of 41 to 71 percent of women having been assaulted during military service (range dependent on survey methodology and population surveyed).¹²⁴ This conservative mid-range estimate also matches a commonly-cited media figure of “nearly one in four U.S. service women reports being sexually assaulted in the military.”¹²⁵ Figure 4, below, lists the independent estimations of sexual assault prevalence (and, where available, harassment and assault) on which this paper’s highlighted range (24% women, 1.9% men) is based.

In contrast, the low-range independent estimations of 9 percent of women and 1.5 percent of men is slightly higher than SAPRO prevalence estimations which average 8 percent women (lowest 4.3, highest 8.4) and 1.1 percent men (lowest 0.6, highest 1.8). This low-range estimate is not consistent with frequently higher estimations for percentage of women who have experienced sexual assault during military service. However, even this low-range estimation of 9 percent women and 1.5 percent men gives higher sexual assault prevalence estimations in every year when compared to SAPRO data.

On the high end, a high-range estimate of 33 percent of women and 12 percent of men reflects multiple independent studies finding between 4 and 12 percent of men reporting assault and at least one in three women. This high-range estimate still excludes the highest survey estimations of over 70 percent and is consistent with meta-analysis of at least 25 studies of military sexual trauma finding that overall prevalence typically ranges from 20 to 43 percent.¹²⁶ This high-range percentage estimate results

¹²³ Blais, R., Tannahill, H., & Davis, K. C. (2023). Sexual Risk Taking among Survivors of U.S. Military Sexual Assault: Associations with PTSD Symptom Severity and Alcohol Use. *The Journal of Sex Research*, 61(5), 683–90; Frayne, S., Skinner, K., Sullivan, L., Tripp, T., Hankin, C., Kressin, N., et al. (1999). Medical profile of women Veterans Administration outpatients who report a history of sexual assault occurring while in the military. *Journal of Women's Health & Gender-Based Medicine*, 8(6), 835-845; Pritchard, A. (2023). Military Sexual Assault, Post-Service Employment, and Transition Preparation among U.S. Military Veterans: New Directions for Research. *Victims & Offenders*, 19(4), 692–708; Suris, A., Lind, L., Kashner, T.M., Borman, P., & Petty, F. (2004). Sexual assault in women veterans: An examination of PTSD risk, health care utilization, and cost of care. *Psychosomatic Medicine*, 66(5), 749-756; Wilson, L. (2018). The Prevalence of Military Sexual Trauma: A Meta-Analysis. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, 19(5), 584–97.

¹²⁴ Lucas, C. L. et al. (2021). Homelessness Among Veterans: Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, Depression, Physical Health, and the Cumulative Trauma of Military Sexual Assault. *Journal of the Society for Social Work and Research*, 12(4), 731–54.

¹²⁵ Moyer, M. W. (2021, August 3). ‘A Poison in the System’: The Epidemic of Military Sexual Assault. *The New York Times Magazine*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/03/magazine/military-sexual-assault.html>.

¹²⁶ Suris, A. & Lind, L. (2008). Military Sexual Trauma: A Review of Prevalence and Associated Health Consequences in Veterans. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, 9(4) 250–69.

in dramatically higher sexual assault prevalence, ranging between 5 and more than 10 times SAPRO prevalence estimates.

During and beyond the 20 years of the post-9/11 wars, independent data suggest that actual sexual assault prevalence is two to four times higher than DoD estimations—75,569 cases in 2021 and 73,695 cases in 2023.

The author calculated this range of 2 – 4 times higher based on a synthesis of independent data, using the mid-range, high-range, and low-range estimations of the percentage of active-duty service members experiencing assault, described above. Figure 5 (following Figure 4 below) shows these calculations for each year. In 2023, for example, the author started with Defense Manpower Data Center reports of 1,079,312 active-duty men and 221,616 active-duty women, for a total active-duty force of 1,300,928 (see Figure 5d). Using the mid-range independent estimation of 24 percent of women and 1.9 percent of men experiencing sexual assault, the author derived a total number of active-duty personnel experiencing sexual assault: $(1,079,312 * 0.019 \text{ men}) + (221,616 * 0.24 \text{ women}) = 73,695 \text{ total (20,507 men + 53,188 women)}$. In 2021, this calculation is: $(1,108,754 * 0.019 \text{ men}) + (227,094 * 0.24 \text{ women}) = 75,569 \text{ total (21,066 men + 54,503 women)}$.

Figure 5a includes a final column that shows how much higher independent estimations are than DoD estimations of sexual assault prevalence. For example, in 2023, 73,695 (independent) is 154.12069 (rounded to 154) percent higher than DoD estimated prevalence of 29,000 (or higher by a factor of 2.5412069). This has been rounded to “2.5x higher than DoD data” throughout the report. For 2021, the final column of Figure 5a compares 75,569 (independent) to 35,900 (DoD), calculating that the independent prevalence estimate is 110.498607 (rounded to 110) percent higher than DoD estimated prevalence (or higher by a factor of 2.10498607). This has been rounded to “2.1x higher than DoD data”.

For comparison, Figures 5b and 5c show the same calculations using the high-range (5b) and low-range (5c) percentages of service members experiencing assault, described above.

Figure 4: Independent Estimations of Military Sexual Assault and Harassment

Percentage of Total Active Duty Estimated to Experience Sexual Assault (and harassment if available)	Percent Women	Percent Men	Percent Trans	Source
	23.6% assault	1.9% assault		Pritchard, A. (2023).

	58.7% harassment and assault	4.1% harassment and assault		
			17.2% total (15.2% trans women 30% trans men)	Beckman K., Shipherd J., Simpson T., and Lehavot K. (2018)
14% assault 16% harassment and assault	23.6% assault 38.4% harassment and assault	1.9% assault 3.9% harassment and assault		Wilson, L. (2018).
	Between 9.5% and 33% assault Between 22% and 84% harassment and assault	Between 1% and 12% assault		Turchik, J. and Wilson, S. (2010).
	Mailed: 23%–71% In-person: 9%–43% Community sample: 41% Assault	Mailed 4% In-person 12% Community sample 5% Assault		Carrie L. et al. (2021).
	22% assault	1% assault		Suris, A. and Lind, L. (2008)
	24 % assault 38% MST prevalence	1.9% assault 3.9 % MST prevalence		Blais, R., Tannahill, H., and Davis, K. Cue. (2023).
	30 % assault 48% physical or sexual victimization			Sadler, A., Booth, B., Nielson, D., and Doebbeling, B. (2000)

	25% assault			Suris, A., Lind, L., Kashner, T.M., Borman, P., and Petty, F. (2004)
	23% assault			Frayne, S., Skinner, K., Sullivan, L., Tripp, T., Hankin, C., Kressin, N., et al. (1999).

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Beckman K., Shipherd J., Simpson T., & Lehavot K. (2018). Military Sexual Assault in Transgender Veterans: Results From a Nationwide Survey. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 31(2), 181-190.

Blais, R., Tannahill, H., & Davis, K. Cue. (2023). Sexual Risk Taking among Survivors of U.S. Military Sexual Assault: Associations with PTSD Symptom Severity and Alcohol Use. *The Journal of Sex Research*, 61(5), 683–90.

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Frayne, S., Skinner, K., Sullivan, L., Tripp, T., Hankin, C., Kressin, N., et al. (1999). Medical profile of women Veterans Administration outpatients who report a history of sexual assault occurring while in the military. *Journal of Women's Health & Gender-Based Medicine*, 8(6), 835-845.

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Suris, A. & Lind, L. (2008). Military Sexual Trauma: A Review of Prevalence and Associated Health Consequences in Veterans. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, 9(4), 250–69.

Suris, A., Lind, L., Kashner, T.M., Borman, P., & Petty, F. (2004). Sexual assault in women veterans: An examination of PTSD risk, health care utilization, and cost of care. *Psychosomatic Medicine*, 66(5), 749-756.

Turchik, J. & Wilson, S. (2010). Sexual Assault in the U.S. Military: A Review of the Literature and Recommendations for the Future. *Aggression and Violent Behavior, 15*(4), 267–77.

Wilson, L. (2018). The Prevalence of Military Sexual Trauma: A Meta-Analysis. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse, 19*(5), 584–97.

Figure 5: Mid-range, high-range and low-range estimates using independent data

5a. Resulting mid-range independent sexual assault prevalence estimates using 24% women 1.9% men (17% transgender used throughout)*

Year	Active Duty (Total)	Active Duty Men	Active Duty Women	Active Duty Transgender	SAPRO number for comparison	% higher than SAPRO comparing independent estimates v DoD
2001	71622	22737	48885			
2002	73441	22998	50442			
2003	74398	23263	51134			
2004	73462	23083	50379			
2005	70646	22533	48113			
2006	70431	22540	47891		34,200	106
2007	69511	22473	47038			
2008	70327	22863	47464	1446		
2009	71354	23141	48213			
2010	72184	23311	48872		19,300	274
2011	72290	23174	49116			
2012	71431	22757	48674		26,000	175
2013	71319	22398	48921			
2014	69772	21619	48153	1514	20,300	244
2015	69465	21139	48326	1342		
2016	69940	20838	49102	1140	14,900	369
2017	71129	20661	50468			
2018	72607	20819	51789	1545	20,500	254
2019	74845	20914	53931			
2020	76207	21034	55173			
2021	75569	21066	54503		35,900	110
2022	75391	20439	54952			
2023	73695	20507	53188		29,000	154

5b. Resulting low-range independent sexual assault prevalence estimates using 9% women 1.5% men

Year	Active Duty (Total)	Active Duty Men	Active Duty Women	Active Duty Transgender	SAPRO number for comparison	% higher than SAPRO comparing independent estimates v DoD
2001	36282	17950	18332			
2002	37073	18157	18916			
2003	37541	18366	19175			
2004	37115	18223	18892			
2005	35831	17789	18042			
2006	35754	17795	17959		34,200	5
2007	35361	17742	17639			
2008	35849	18050	17799	1446		
2009	36349	18269	18080			
2010	36731	18404	18327		19,300	90
2011	36714	18295	18419			
2012	36219	17966	18253		26,000	39
2013	36028	17683	18345			
2014	35125	17068	18057	1514	20,300	73
2015	34811	16689	18122	1342		
2016	34864	16451	18413	1140	14,900	134
2017	35237	16311	18926			
2018	35856	16436	19421	1545	20,500	75
2019	36735	16511	20224			
2020	37296	16606	20690			
2021	37070	16631	20438		35,900	3
2022	36743	16136	20607			
2023	36743	16190	19945		29,000	27

5c. Resulting high-range independent sexual assault prevalence estimates using 33% women 12% men

Year	Active Duty (Total)	Active Duty Men	Active Duty Women	Active Duty Transgender	SAPRO number for comparison	% higher than SAPRO comparing independent estimates v DoD
2001	210820	143603	67217			
2002	214612	145253	69358			
2003	217236	146927	70309			
2004	215056	145785	69271			
2005	208468	142312	66155			
2006	208209	142359	65850		34,200	509
2007	206610	141933	64677			
2008	209660	144398	65262	1446		
2009	212444	146151	66293			
2010	214430	147230	67200		19,300	1011
2011	213895	146360	67535			
2012	210654	143727	66927		26,000	710
2013	208728	141462	67266			
2014	202752	136542	66210	1514	20,300	899
2015	199958	133510	66448	1342		
2016	199121	131606	67515	1140	14,900	1236
2017	199882	130488	69394			
2018	202695	131485	71210	1545	20,500	889
2019	206244	132090	74155			
2020	208711	132849	75862			
2021	207991	133050	74941		35,900	479
2022	204649	129090	75559			
2023	202651	129517	73133		29,000	599

5d. Size and Gender Composition of U.S. Active-Duty Forces

* Calculations of total active-duty assault cases are based on data of total active-duty size and gender composition from Defense Manpower Data Center (see <https://dwp.dmdc.osd.mil/dwp/app/dod-data-reports/workforce-reports>) and Military OneSource Demographics (see <https://www.militaryonesource.mil/data-research-and-statistics/military-community-demographics/>).

To estimate transgender active-duty numbers, multiple sources were consulted for years available. See note 42 in report for full discussion and citations regarding counting trans service members. Belkin, A., Mazur, D. Department of Defense Issues First-Ever Official Count of Active Duty Transgender Service Members. Palm Center (2018); Gates, G., Herman, J. Transgender Military Service in the United States. UCLA Williams Institute (2014); Schaefer, A. et al. Assessing the Implications of Allowing Transgender Personnel to Serve Openly. RAND (2016).

Year	Active Duty (Total)	Active Duty Men	Active Duty Women	Active Duty Transgender*
2001	1,400,379	1,196,690	203,689	
2002	1,420,620	1,210,443	210,177	
2003	1,437,450	1,224,391	213,059	
2004	1,424,787	1,214,875	209,912	
2005	1,386,407	1,185,936	200,471	
2006	1,385,870	1,186,325	199,545	
2007	1,378,769	1,182,778	195,991	
2008	1,401,079	1,203,314	197,765	8408
2009	1,418,813	1,217,925	200,888	
2010	1,430,552	1,226,917	203,635	
2011	1,424,317	1,219,667	204,650	
2012	1,400,535	1,197,725	202,810	
2013	1,382,684	1,178,848	203,836	
2014	1,338,487	1,137,851	200,636	8800
2015	1,313,940	1,112,581	201,359	7800
2016	1,301,308	1,096,716	204,592	6630
2017	1,294,520	1,087,397	210,285	
2018	1,304,418	1,095,711	215,787	8980
2019	1,326,200	1,100,746	224,712	
2020	1,333,822	1,107,072	229,886	
2021	1,335,848	1,108,754	227,094	
2022	1,304,720	1,075,753	228,966	
2023	1,300,928	1,079,312	221,616	