

Military makes progress with sexual assault training, but more can be done

September 12 2014, by Jared Wadley

(Medical Xpress)—The U.S. military has made progress by conducting sexual assault training, but a new University of Michigan study raises questions about the effectiveness of those efforts.

Sexual assault has been a problem in the military for years, resulting in the Department of Defense in 2005 creating a Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office. This office oversees sexual assault training conducted by the five branches. However, their training had undergone little evaluation by outside researchers.

U-M psychology and women's studies researchers analyzed responses from more than 24,000 active duty personnel from all five branches (Army, Air Force, Marines, Navy, and Coast Guard) who completed the Department of Defense's own workplace and gender relations survey. They tested whether exposure to sexual assault training fostered accurate knowledge about the resources and protocols among personnel.

About 93 percent of personnel had received some form of sexual assault training within the last year. Just over half of these trainees (54 percent) described the content as comprehensive, 30 percent reported it was partial (overlooking some critical topics), and 7 percent reported minimal content coverage in their training (missing many important domains).

Exposure to comprehensive training predicted lower incidence of sexual assault and superior knowledge of military sexual assault resources and

protocols. This suggests that military sexual assault training, when done right, can be effective. However, less than one out of five personnel responded with 100 percent accuracy to six questions that measured knowledge of military sexual assault resources and protocol. About 33 percent correctly answered three or fewer items, the study found.

"Inadequate training may leave victims unsure of their rights and options, and potential responders (e.g., officers) unsure how to manage the situation," said U-M doctoral student Kathryn Holland, the study's lead author.

Deficient training could also "perpetuate an institutional culture that is ignorant or tolerant of sexual assault," said co-author and doctoral student Verónica Caridad Rabelo.

The researchers found that military sexual assault training is often lacking in content and efficacy, especially in the eyes of personnel for whom it is most relevant.

Servicemen perceived the training to be more effective at actually reducing/preventing sexual assault and explaining reporting options than servicewomen. Past-year nonvictims also believed the training was more effective than victims, the study showed.

The Department of Defense concluded in 2010 that "most active-duty members receive effective training on [sexual assault](#)." The U-M research, using DoD data, casts doubt on that assertion.

The study, which was also co-authored by Lilia Cortina, associate professor of psychology and women's studies, appears in the current issue of the *American Journal of Community Psychology*.

More information: "Sexual Assault Training in the Military:

Evaluating Efforts to End the 'Invisible War.'" Kathryn J. Holland, Verónica Caridad Rabelo, Lilia M. Cortina. *American Journal of Community Psychology*. September 2014. [DOI: 10.1007/s10464-014-9672-0](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10464-014-9672-0)

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