

LGBTQ military service members at higher risk of sexual harassment, assault, stalking

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A recent study found that LGBTQ service members face an elevated risk of sexual victimization including harassment, assault and stalking while in the military than their non-LGBTQ counterparts.

The study, one of the first funded by the Department of Defense to look specifically at LGBTQ victimization in the military, aims to inform future policies that will identify [vulnerable populations](#) and appropriate interventions to help prevent such experiences going forward.

Previous research has found that experiencing sexual harassment and assault during [military service](#) can lead to negative [health outcomes](#) including PTSD, depression, substance use and suicidal behavior, all of which are often reported at higher rates among LGBTQ veterans than in the straight cisgender population.

"We're really trying to understand the experiences and well-being of LGBTQ service members and help the military learn how they can improve those experiences," said lead author Ashley Schuyler, a Ph.D. student in OSU'S College of Public Health and Human Sciences. "Our findings suggest that LGBTQ service members do experience an elevated risk of sexual and stalking victimization, even in this post-'don't ask, don't tell' era."

Published in the *Journal of Traumatic Stress* last month, the study surveyed 544 active-duty service members, ages 18-54, including about 41% who identified as LGBTQ and roughly 10% who identified as trans

or gender-nonconforming.

"Don't ask, don't tell," the law that barred openly gay, lesbian and [bisexual people](#) from serving in the military, was repealed in 2011, but "it seems like some of those effects could linger, including sexual prejudice and discrimination, which may elevate victimization risk," Schuyler said.

The researchers considered that the culture of the military, with a high value placed on "masculine" ideals such as dominance, aggression and self-sufficiency, may compel some individuals to act out toward people they see as weaker to prove their masculinity to others.

That environment may explain a disparity between men and women in the study: Female service members were more likely to experience sexual harassment than male service members, but the risk of harassment did not increase among women who identified as lesbian or bisexual. Among male service members, however, gay and bisexual men were significantly more likely to experience sexual harassment than straight men.

"Our conclusion was that female service members have such an elevated risk of sexual harassment in general, that being bi or lesbian doesn't increase that risk," Schuyler said.

Among all service members in the sample, those identifying as gay, lesbian or bisexual had an increased risk of sexual harassment, stalking and sexual assault compared to heterosexual service members.

More research is needed on how stalking manifests in the military, Schuyler said. It may look different on board a ship with service members confined in close quarters for months at a time, for example.

"Something the military has started to acknowledge is this idea of a continuum of harm, where if you experience sexual harassment or gender discrimination behaviors, you're at higher risk of more severe encounters down the road, like assault," she said. "We're trying to understand where stalking fits into that spectrum of experiences, so we can intervene to help people who we know experience [harassment](#) or stalking and prevent potential assault in the future."

The researchers recommend further investigation into victimization in the military, especially as the policies governing LGBTQ [service](#) continue to change. Such research was not possible during the "don't ask, don't tell" era.

Schuyler said they'd like to see military leaders and health care providers be more educated about identifying victimization experiences and providing supports that are inclusive of LGBTQ people who have experienced [sexual harassment](#), [assault](#) or stalking. With an increased understanding of those experiences, leaders can pinpoint targets for intervention to help stop sexual violence before it happens.

More information: Ashley C. Schuyler et al, Experiences of Sexual Harassment, Stalking, and Sexual Assault During Military Service Among LGBT and Non-LGBT Service Members, *Journal of Traumatic Stress* (2020). [DOI: 10.1002/jts.22506](https://doi.org/10.1002/jts.22506)

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