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# Current Challenges Being Faced by Female Survivors of Military Sexual Assault: Suggestions for Policy Change

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**Current Challenges Being Faced by Female Survivors of Military  
Sexual Assault: Suggestions for Policy Change**

by

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A Thesis

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### **Abstract**

It is important that social workers use suitable evidence based practices both when working directly with survivors of military sexual trauma, and while advocating for applicable policy change on a macro level. Research projects such as this study can provide social workers with the valuable material they need to carry out this evidence based practice. Although there has been some previous investigation into the current sexual assault epidemic in the United States military, not enough evidence exists to support the much needed policy changes that could end this epidemic once and for all. As such, this study aims to establish an exploratory research base to point future scholars in a more specific direction in the arena of military sexual assault policy practices. The purpose of the present study was to determine what challenges are currently being faced by survivors of military sexual trauma and what suggestions they have for effective policy change. Six different studies were selected for analysis in this qualitative meta-analysis study. Each study was published within the last five years and answered the following questions: what percent of women who experienced sexual assault filed a report? If so, what type of report was filed and who did they report the assault to? If they chose not to report, what were the reasons or barriers they faced? For those women who reported the assault, was there support for the victims post assault? And finally, what policy suggestions have been made to improve the military's response to sexual assault? Conclusions were drawn based on the most frequent answers given to these questions by the female survivors interviewed in each study. Results indicated that by far, the most common sentiment among female survivors of military sexual trauma is that preventative policy changes would be most effective in changing the environment of rampant

sexual assault. These results are consistent with previous research showing that sexual assault in the United States military is perpetuated and even invited as a direct result of military structure and atmosphere; this study suggests that policies aiming to amend this hostile milieu will be most effective in reducing rates of sexual assault in the United States military.

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## **Chapter I: Introduction**

This study began as a basic exploratory study aiming to identify specific challenges being faced by female victims of sexual assault. Over time, it has become the beginnings of an evidence base for guiding social work policy efforts when it comes to serving many veteran clientele. The National Association of Social Work Code of Ethics (2008) specifically states that professional social workers have a duty to advocate for clients in the policy arena. It is my hope that the findings of this preliminary research can be expanded upon in my future practice and eventually used to guide the evidence based political efforts of macro level social workers everywhere.

### **Background**

Women have a long history of military service dating back to America's origins in 1775. During war times, females commonly "served in military camps as laundresses, cooks, or nurses, but only with permission from the commanding officer and only if they proved they were helpful" (Colonial Williamsburg Foundation (CWF), 2008). Later in America's history women such as Deborah Sampson in 1783 and Elizabeth Newcom in 1848 secretly served in the military disguised as men, however both women were eventually found out and discharged (CWF, 2008). It was not until the final years of World War I (1917-1918) that women were finally granted official permission to join military ranks, though not as soldiers. Thirty three thousand women enlisted in the military as nurses and administrative support staff, four hundred of whom were killed in the war. Finally, in 1948 the American legislature passed the Women's Armed Services Integration Act, a law that approved permanent status in

the armed forces for women which included becoming sanctioned to military practice and protocols and eligible for veterans benefits (CWF, 2008).

Despite being officially incorporated into the military, women's struggles for full inclusivity were not over yet. After the all male military draft was eradicated in 1973 and America's military became completely volunteer based, women had the opportunity to join the ranks as soldiers alongside men. In 1976 the first women were granted admission to military training schools. These women graduated and went on to serve the country as non-combat militia (nurses, officers, or technicians). In 1998, the first female soldiers to enter combat were fighter pilots in Iraq. Today, tens of thousands of women are proudly serving the United States military in both combat and non-combat roles around the world (CWF, 2008).

### **Sexual Assault in the Military**

The United States Department of Defense (Department of Defense, 2012) defines sexual assault as:

Intentional sexual contact characterized by use of force, threats, intimidation, or abuse of authority or when the victim does not or cannot consent. Sexual assault includes rape, forcible sodomy (oral or anal sex), and other unwanted sexual contact that is aggravated, abusive, or wrongful (including unwanted and inappropriate sexual contact), or attempts to commit these acts. (p. 18)

According to the most recent data released by the Department of Defense (DOD) (2013) reporting of sexual assault incidents has seen a 50% increase from the previous fiscal year (5,061 up from 3,374). It is debatable whether this increase is the result of victims feeling more comfortable in coming forward to report the assaults, or whether there has simply been an increase in sexual assault behaviors. This level of increase in reporting is extraordinary

when compared to years past in which the average growth rate for sexual assault reports was only five percent (DOD, 2013).

It is important to remember that while reporting may be on the rise, the majority of military sexual assaults are still undisclosed. The latest data in the military's Annual Report on Sexual Assault show that an estimated 26,000 sexual assault incidents occurred in one year, but only 2,828 (11%) of these incidents were reported (DOD, 2013). This means that as the reporting rate goes up, it could very well indicate that actual assault rates are increasing too.

Additionally, it is critical to recognize that mounting reporting rates do not signify a lack of concern within the arena of sexual assault. There are several reasons why trends in reporting rates may change that are unconnected to the rate of actual sexual assaults. Research from the latest military fiscal year (2012) has clearly shown that the vast majority of sexual assault cases still remain covert (89 %) (DOD, 2013). There are a number of reasons for this occurrence as women in the armed forces face unique barriers to reporting. For example the prominence of close relationships within squad units and the rank ordered organization of the military might discourage victims from reporting assaults and getting assistance (National Sexual Violence Resource Center (NSVRC), 2013). A previous officer supports this idea in describing how, "junior people don't believe they can complain. They have a 'suck it up' mentality. They want to get the job done" (NSVRC, 2013, p. 5). Female victims of sexual assault in the military also named fear of others finding out, feelings of discomfort over speaking out, as well as anxiety over lack of confidentiality of their report as reasons for not reporting attacks (NSVRC, 2013).

Indeed, these fears are not unwarranted. Numerous media reports have recounted stories of female victims of sexual assault within the military being demoted, disciplined, or dismissed after speaking out about their attack, meanwhile the alleged perpetrators were given minor or even no disciplinary action whatsoever (Corbett, 2007). Furthermore, many women have reported that once they spoke out about an incident of sexual violence, they were subsequently deemed mentally ill and dismissed from the military (Martin, 2012).

### **Reporting Policies**

Since 1995 the organization in charge of military sexual assault policy has been the Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office (SAPRO) (Mengeling, Booth, Torner, & Sadler, 2014). SAPRO came about as a result of a complete appraisal of the assets, flaws, and lack of reports regarding sexual assault cases in the US military. The report was conducted by the Department of Defense's Task Force Report on Care for Victims of Sexual Assault (Mengeling et al., 2014). Since 2005, the US military has provided victims of sexual assault two legally endorsed options, restricted and unrestricted reporting. Restricted reporting permits victims to privately discuss the offense with a Sexual Assault Response Coordinator or Victim Advocate and obtain medical care, therapy, and a criminal inspection without prompting an official inquiry into the crime. When a victim chooses restricted reporting, police are not told about the assault nor does the military hierarchy of authority become involved. This removes any chance for subsequent punitive or defensive acts. A victim who chooses restricted reporting also has the option to change a restricted report to an unrestricted report. Unrestricted reporting grants women the right to have the same assistances as they

would in restricted reporting, but with unrestricted reports police and military command officers are informed and an official forensic inquiry is opened (Mengeling et al., 2014).

However, when an assault is reported, it is not always substantiated. Twenty-seven percent of sexual assault report cases in the military do not result in disciplinary action for the offender, sometimes because command action is refused due to unsupported reviews of evidence, and sometimes due to other evidentiary problems (DOD, 2013). Even when a perpetrator is convicted of sexual assault, they do not always receive a severe penalty. Seventy-one percent of convicted military sex offenders are court marshaled, 18% receive non-judiciary punishment, and 12% receive negative administrative actions and expulsions (DOD, 2013).

Non-judiciary punishment is authorized by Article 15 of the Uniform Code of Military Justice and consists of “confinement on diminished rations, restriction to certain specified limits, arrest in quarters, correctional custody, extra duties, forfeiture of pay, detention of pay and reduction in grade” (UCMJ, 2014, para. 8). It is notable that the perpetrators receiving non-judicial punishment for sexual assault are receiving the same penalties as service members who are convicted of minor offenses such as “reporting late for duty, petty theft, destroying government property, sleeping on watch, providing false information, and disobeying standing orders” (Military.com, 2014, para. 1). Negative administrative actions are also authorized under article 15 of the UCMJ (2014), and can include being dismissed from service, loss of incentive monetary compensation, rank reduction, a ban from re-enlistment, reclassification, and forfeiture of security authorization.

Clearly, the way in which military sexual assault reports are handled differs greatly from the protocol for civilian reports. Although sexual assault everywhere is severely underreported and often under punished, the women in the military face unique policy barriers to getting justice. Victims of sexual assault in the military do not have the option of confidentially reporting assaults to someone outside the military hierarchy. This makes reporting a sexual assault especially difficult because victims may struggle more with reporting to close comrades than they would with strangers. Even worse, they may have been raped by the commanding officer whom it is military protocol for the victim to report the assault to (Aiering & Dick, 2012). Additionally, the United States Military has a history of downplaying the severity of sexual assault resulting in reduced or absent sentences for offenders, this providing even less motivation for victims to seek justice (Ziering & Dick, 2012).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to identify aspects of successful military sexual assault policy that keep sexual assault rates high and reporting rates disproportionately low. This study sought to gather secondary data from female survivors of military sexual assault regarding their experiences concerning why they did or did not report, and what current policies they feel are helpful, and what policies are not currently in place but would be helpful in reducing female military sexual assault. Overall, the purpose of this study was to examine the challenges that female survivors of military sexual assault are facing as a result of current policy practices.

Research studies, such as this one also support the efforts of politicians such as Senator Kirsten E. Gillibrand, who unsuccessfully pushed a bill calling for the removal of military command from jurisdiction over assaults within the military (Cooper, 2014). Senator Gillibrand (2013) contends a policy change is necessary because military leaders often have a relationship with the victim and the alleged perpetrator, making victims particularly reluctant to speak out about attacks. Moreover, Gillibrand and her supporters contend that military officers have not demonstrated themselves to be equipped to handle the matter.

### **Present Study**

This study focuses specifically on policies regarding the reporting and prosecution of female sexual assault within the United States military, an issue of increasing controversy (Cooper, 2014). The research attempted to answer the question of what are the current unmet policy needs of female sexual assault survivors?

Efficacy of current military prevention and response efforts was examined, as well as the value of previous policies that are no longer in effect. Additionally, current controversial legislative proposals were assessed for significance regarding their potential impact on female military sexual assault survivors.

Furthermore, based on secondary data analysis, this study suggests new and modified military policies that encourage victims to come forward and eventually end the sexual assault epidemic in the military. Research on this topic is necessary as more and more cases come to light regarding military sexual assault, and it becomes a widely known fact that the United States Military simply cannot appropriately handle the mass number of sexual assault cases it has to deal with (Cooper, 2014).

## Summary

Women have served in the United States military for 239 years, yet still struggle to attain basic rights to safety and respect within the military working environment. Cases of military female sexual assault are at epidemic proportions, and what's worse, the vast majority of those cases are kept secret, leaving victims to suffer in isolated silence.

However, research to help end this epidemic is important, and the reasons for reporting military sexual violence are munificent. Female victims of sexual assault should be encouraged to come forward to obtain medical care, call out and reprimand the perpetrator to ensure more offenses (against both the victim and other service members) are averted, and because sexual assault is a crime worth fighting (Mengeling et al., 2014).

Unfortunately, most survivors fail to speak out about their attack for purposes such as not wanting friends and fellow officers to find out, unease about scarce evidence, panic over retaliation by the rapist or others, maltreatment or doubt from the authorities, or because they feel that sexual assault is a personal problem and as such should be dealt with privately (Mengeling et al., 2014). Moreover, victims of military sexual assault who come forward risk facing personal disciplinary action for their own minor offenses (e.g., consuming alcohol), which could have a hand in preventing reporting of assaults (Mengeling et al., 2014). Discernibly, if female survivors of military sexual assault expect that sharing their story would engender the arrest and punishment of offenders, they would naturally be more prone to speak out (Mengeling et al., 2014). Therefore in order to understand what policy changes would be most helpful in an attempt to reduce incidents of sexual assault and increase reporting, it is important to hear from survivor themselves.



## Chapter II: Review of Literature

For the past several years, the matter of sexual assault in the U.S. military has been a topic of continuous scrutiny. Public institutes, politicians, and researchers have focused disapproval toward both the frequency of sexual assault among military ranks and the actions (or lack thereof) taken to fix the problem (Kuersten, 2014). The scrutiny is undoubtedly justified as not only is sexual assault a severe offense with substantial repercussions, but it is also a clear hazard to national security because it is disturbing to the concord and regulation of the US military (Kuersten, 2014).

Pentagon studies approximate that 26,000 service members were sexually assaulted in 2012, a figure up from 19,000 sexual assaults in 2010. Additionally, 3,374 sexual assaults were reported in 2012, a significant rise from 3,192 assaults reported in 2011, 3,158 assaults reported in 2010, and 3,230 assaults reported in 2009 (Kuersten, 2014). Moreover, the Department of Defense (DOD) also guesstimates that 6.1% of females and 1.2% of males in the armed forces faced sexual assault in 2012, a growth from 2010 when the corresponding figures were 4.4% and 0.9% (Kuersten, 2014). The described degree of sexual assault in the military is as great or greater than the rate of sexual assault reported by civilians, but factoring in the point that the aforementioned percentages only contain sexual assaults that occurred throughout each individuals military service, the proportions are extremely high (Turchik & Wilson, 2010).

Likewise, sexual violence is stated to be the foremost source of post-traumatic stress disorder among female veterans (Gillibrand, 2013). In May of 2013, General Raymond T. Odierno, Chief of Staff for the U.S. Army, sent an email to soldiers, civilians, and social

media sites addressing his concerns regarding the military sexual assault epidemic. He says that he was “taken aback by the emotional responses [he] received- hundreds of messages from victims, from sexual assault response coordinators, and from leaders about their personal experiences dealing with sexual assault and harassment” (Gillibrand, 2013, p. 13).

Even more disturbing the rate of female sexual assault in military ranks continues to rise. Nancy Parrish, president of the human right organization known as Protect Our Defenders (POD), points out that there is a widespread misconception among civilians and service members alike that amending the way sexual assaults are handled is an issue of the past, largely fixed by contemporary policy modifications (Gillibrand, 2013). However, this is completely erroneous: it is unanimously agreed upon that the figures are increasing rather than decreasing, despite recent changes in the law. Advocates at POD repeatedly hear frantic requests for assistance from new female victims of sexual assault, who are seeing their efforts to speak out about their assault foiled, mismanaged, or even dismissed altogether (Gillibrand, 2013).

While survivors of military sexual assault include both women and men, it is important to note that women in particular are disproportionately affected. Although women make up just 14% of US Army members, they comprise 95% of all victims of sexual assault. The level of sexual assault for females in the armed forces is roughly double the rate of sexual assault on female civilians; Department of Defense data shows that one in three female soldiers has testified to some kind of sexual crime, but only one in six civilian women has reported a sexual assault (Grassbaugh, 2014a).

## **Mental Aftermath of Sexual Assault**

The mental and emotional consequences of sexual assault have long been well recognized for males and females alike (Turchik & Wilson, 2010). Research indicates that individuals who have been the victim of a sex crime frequently have elevated amounts of depression and anxiety, habitual drug use and dependency, physical sexual difficulties, and post-traumatic stress disorder (Turchik & Wilson, 2010). Also, several survivors experience thoughts of self-blame and shame in addition to troubles with personal relationships. A particularly disturbing discovery is that survivors of sexual assault are considerably more probable to contemplate or actually try to commit suicide (Turchik & Wilson, 2010).

Analyses of these studies show that members of the military go through similar or identical psychological effects of sexual assault as civilians. One particular study assessed soldiers currently on duty and discovered that sexual trauma (prior to or throughout active-duty) was linked to greater quantities of comprehensive psychological suffering and signs of poor physical health (Turchik & Wilson, 2010). Likewise, Murdoch, Pryor, Polusny, and Gackstetter (2007) conducted a study suggesting that active-duty service members of all genders that experienced sexual harassment or assault had amplified cerebral issues and inferior performance in relation to individuals with no involvement in sexual assault. Historical sexual assault occurrences before military service also have the potential to impact a person's job functioning. Murdoch et al. (2007) found that Air Force militia that described incidences of previous sexual abuse in their lives had a lower probability of graduating from basic training.

Most research concentrating on the effects of military sexual assault has been based on female veteran participants. Among specifically women veterans, individuals who are exposed to military sexual assault are at an increased risk for symptoms of depression, alcohol consumption, and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder symptoms than their counterparts who did not experience sexual assault during their period of military service (Turchik & Wilson, 2010). A study by Surís, Lind, Kashner, & Borman (2007) revealed that female veteran survivors of military sexual assault had worse emotional and mental performance and heightened alcohol abuse compared to women who experienced a sexual assault as a civilian or had no sexual assault history whatsoever. Another study came up with findings that suggested female veterans were nine times more likely to have PTSD if they had been exposed to sexual assault during their time in the military, seven times more likely to experience PTSD if they had been exposed to sexual assault as a juvenile, and five times more likely to experience PTSD if they had experienced sexual assault as a civilian prior to their military service relative to individuals who had no sexual assault in their history (Turchik & Wilson, 2010).

Yet another study showed that female veterans who spoke out about the sexual assault they experienced in the military, as opposed to those who chose not to report, were not as able to hold a job as a result of physical or psychological difficulties from the assault. In addition, survivors felt adversely about their time in active-duty, found it more challenging to adapt to civilian life, described additional mental issues and drug abuse complications, and attended more appointments with mental health and physical health care professionals than veterans who did not experience sexual trauma during their service (Turchik & Wilson, 2010).

### **Explanations for High Rates of Sexual Assault**

It is clear that an enormous number of military women are consistently exposed to sexual assault, even if one only takes into account only the lowest number of reported occurrences (Turchik & Wilson, 2010). The manifestation of these crimes runs counter to the principles, integrity, and policies of the U.S. military; not only does sexual assault oppose military standards, but also damages those who have committed to support and defend our nation. If we are ever going to be able to counteract assault and harassment effectively, it is vital to recognize the dynamics that could enable or escalate sex crimes in the armed forces. It is probable that there is no solitary cause, but rather an amalgamation of elements behind the issue. Additional investigation is necessary into all of these elements because there is a dearth of substantial experimental analysis surrounding several possible factors (Turchik & Wilson, 2010).

### **Military Philosophy, Organization, and Atmosphere**

The way of life in the military is extremely different from the traditions found in most of society because the military has its own system of behavior, law structure, law enforcement, education, research facilities, and medical system (Turchik & Wilson, 2010). Furthermore, the military has a unique set of customs and ideals which new service members are taught in basic training as they are programmed to function in this new culture. Although several military policies are designed to prepare recruits to be successful in following orders to defend our country, some elements of military culture may encourage sexual assault (Turchik & Wilson, 2010).

Hunter (2007) points out numerous aspects of military civilization that could stimulate sexual assault, including sexualized and violent language, the general acceptance of violence, the learned ability to objectify other people, strong obedience to the chain of command, encouraged protection of the military, and the promoted belief that those outside the military will not understand what goes on within the military. In particular, the emphasis on group cohesion and devaluing of independence realized in military units are controlling forces that permit the adherence to and upholding of negative standard sexual and gender beliefs (Turchik & Wilson, 2010). The fundamentals of such a culture can lead individuals in the military to deem sexually aggressive behaviors tolerable.

Also notable is the fact that it is not simply the general culture of the military that affects the rate of sexual assault. It has been confirmed that a higher number of sexual assaults take place in units where the commanding officer is impartial or unconcerned about sexual violence than in units where officers took a zero tolerance stance on sexual assault (Pryor, 1995). This particular study also pointed out that at the unit level, the lack of grievance procedures, an unprofessional work environment, and the subsistence and approval of a sexist outlook in the workplace have been identified as the most significant forecaster of sexual assault in a military setting. Research among female service members showed that heightened numbers of sexual assault reports were linked to military milieu factors such as physical threats while on-duty, feelings of endangerment, viewing heterosexual sexual activity in barracks, and seeing ranking officers permit others to make derogatory comments or gestures about women (Sadler, Booth, Cook, & Doebbeling, 2003). Such a demeaning atmosphere

might make it harder for victims of sexual violence to report the assault due to the dread of stigmatization and potential consequences (Valente & Wight, 2007).

The configuration of the military as a male-dominated organization, where men hold more powerful roles than women, generates a divergence in levels of control held by men and women. Mazur (2007) goes so far as to say that the myriad of faulty suppositions about women in leadership is the “single greatest impediment to solving issues of sexual misconduct within the military” (p. 993). In spite of recent initiatives to augment the percentage of women in the military, females are still disproportionately recruited for and even barred from combat positions, which precludes them from getting promoted to numerous higher ranking jobs (Turchik & Wilson, 2010).

**Emphasis on violence.** Aspects of violence are entrenched in a large number of military activities, including the most noticeable aspects, such as killing, to the more understated aspects such as military jargon and cadence calls (Turchik & Wilson, 2010). As a result, violence frequently appears to be a valid way to achieve one's objectives (Hunter, 2007). By observing the government using violence as a technique to achieve its goals, individuals then are easily able to rationalize the use of aggressive tactics for their own desires (Ember & Ember, 1994). Consequently, the culture of violence exemplified in the military could add to the amplified risk for sexual assault within the armed forces.

**Hypermasculinity.** Hypermasculinity is an excessive type of masculinity founded on ideas of completely disparate sex roles, the support of stereotypical sex roles, and a lofty importance placed on control, power, and competition, toleration of pain, and compulsory heterosexuality (Hunter, 2007). The male-dominated atmosphere of the military has

customarily not been very welcoming or equipped to take care of the needs of women. The military is frequently seen as a setting that encourages hypermasculinity and firm gender roles (Mosher & Tomkins, 1988).

A substantial body of literature has connected men's derogatory views about women, approval of violence, and lenient outlook towards rape and sexual harassment to male perpetration of sexual assault (Begany & Milburn, 2002; Malamuth, 1988; Malamuth & Brown, 1994). One study even revealed that college men who had more antagonistic attitudes regarding heterosexual relationships were more probable to disclose the perpetration of a sexual assault within a seven month time span (Loh, Gidycz, Lobo, & Luthra, 2005). All of these mind-sets are included in the hypermasculine approach that is cultivated in the military. In addition, many studies have shown that males who report hypermasculine values are also prone to having a pro-rape mind-set and engage in a higher number of sexually aggressive behaviors than males who have less severe masculine values (Mosher & Anderson, 1986; Quackenbush, 1989). Moreover, research has found that groups sanctioning stereotypical masculinity (such as the military) have increased amounts of sexual harassment and assault than other institutes (Ilies, Hauserman, Schwochau, & Stibal, 2003), in addition to more acceptance of these actions (Ilies et al., 2003; Vogt, Bruce, Street, & Stafford, 2007).

Parallel associations have been reported in military studies. Kurpius and Lucart (2000) discovered that undergraduate men in military training were more prone to have authoritarian and masculine values and traditional sex-role mind-sets than civilian undergraduate men. Rosen and Martin (1998) reviewed the link between tolerance of sexual harassment in the Army and men's harmful views toward women. Adverse masculinity, antagonism towards



women, and no tolerance for women as men's equivalents in the Army were identified as harbingers of acceptance of sexual harassment in the Army.

Bigoted value systems have also been associated to augmented sexual violence. Studies reveal that individuals who have prejudiced values, such as sexism, are more liable to believe rape myths (Aosved & Long, 2006). Carroll and Clark (2006) found significant disparities in the cognitive beliefs of what a usual rape experience involves, between men at a regional university and men at a military academy. Men at the military academy were not as likely as civilian men to incorporate alcohol in their stories, less probable to acknowledge that a situation was a sexual assault, more likely to report that an incident was mistakenly called a rape, and more likely to describe that the woman consented to sex.

Furthermore, it seems that military culture promotes the growth of hypermasculine attitudes. Nicol, Charbonneau, and Boies (2007) discovered that rates of sociodominance (the degree to which a person sanctions group-based dominance) amplified over time throughout military training in a group of new recruits, and that this transformation did not take place in a similar sample of civilians. As a result of the persistent hypermasculinity in the military, female recruits usually have restricted chances to experience a sense of group cohesion within their units that would diminish their risk of sexual assault (Turchik & Wilson, 2010).

### **Cultural and Background Factors**

Military society has a history of and continues to be controlled by men, with a particular stress on autonomy that frequently gives female survivors of sexual assault the impression they cannot seek help (Baltrushes & Karnik, 2013). Additionally, there are conditions that service members experience that can exacerbate the consequences of sexual

assault. For example combatants on deployment are generally secluded from their regular support systems, facing substantial job related anxiety, and powerless to desert their position, which translates into continuing contact with the perpetrator (Baltrushes & Karnik, 2013).

Furthermore, up to 50% of enlisted women have disclosed a history of childhood sexual abuse. This number is highly inflated when compared to the civilian rate 25% to 27% of women experiencing childhood sexual trauma (Baltrushes & Karnik, 2013). This phenomenon could be somewhat rationalized by statistics revealing that almost half of the female militia named fleeing from their family and household milieu as the primary motivation for joining the military. It is important to note that despite this reasoning for enlistment, female service members with exposure to childhood sexual abuse are at a drastically increased risk for exposure to sexual assault during their service than militia who were not sexually assaulted in their youth (Baltrushes & Karnik, 2013). For example, women in the Navy who identified a history of childhood sexual abuse were 4.8 times more likely to be assaulted than those with no prior experiences of sexual abuse (Baltrushes & Karnik, 2013). Additionally, combat-related trauma confounds the situation even more: research indicates that experience with childhood physical and sexual violence is linked to augmented risk for posttraumatic stress disorder in the female combatants who were a part of Operation Desert Storm during the Gulf War (Baltrushes & Karnik, 2013). Cabrera, Hoge, Bliese, Castro, and Messer (2007) found similar results pertaining to veterans returning from combat in Iraq in 2003 and 2004.

Also remarkable is the demographic composition of the military as a whole. Due to the completely volunteer based system of recruitment in the U.S. military, individuals who enlist

are a self-selected faction of the general population. Likewise, the military has specific admissibility regulations (for example age and fitness standards) creating a distinctive demographic structure from the general civilian population (Turchik & Wilson, 2010). More specifically, the military is comprised of less females, younger recruits, more individuals with a high school education level, a smaller group of college graduates, not as many Caucasians, Hispanics, or Asians, and more African Americans than the larger civilian population (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2006). These unique demographics might put recruits at added risk for experiencing sexual violence. Despite the lack of steady research results pertaining to sexual assault and demographic factors, many connections have been distinguished in the literature (Turchik & Wilson, 2010). Numerous researchers have recognized that exposure to sexual assault and harassment occurs more frequently among younger adults than older adults (Turchik & Wilson, 2010). Elliott, Mok, and Briere (2004) discovered that factors like being a female, younger, divorced, or being poorer were associated with exposure to sexual assault in a sizeable stratified nationwide sample. With so many young, low-income, females in the military, these factors could well be an aggravating factor of the sexual assault epidemic facing the armed forces. U.S. Commission on Civil Rights data supports this assertion: 18- to 24-year-olds have the greatest chance of being sexually assaulted. Consequently, any group or organization that brings together large numbers of young people, like the military, is conceivably expected to have higher frequencies of sexual assault than the general population (USCCR, 2013).

At the beginning of the last decade, a significant meta-analysis was conducted investigating the association between social and demographic factors and sexual assault.

20,000 female military recruits were sampled, with results indicating that less sociological dominance (such as youth, lower levels of education, a racial identity besides Caucasian, and being unwed) and low structural authority (such as junior pay ranking and less time in active duty military service) were correlated with a higher probability of undergoing sexual trauma (Harned, Ormerod, Palmieri, Collinsworth, & Reed, 2002). Another more recent study used over four million veteran participants (both men and women) and discovered that individuals who disclosed a sexual assault throughout their military service were lower in age and tended to be single more frequently than veterans who reported no experiences of sexual assault during their military service (Kimerling, Gima, Smith, Street, & Frayne, 2007). Additional research supports the notion that females who experience sexual assault during their service are usually lower in age (Surís et al., 2007), non-married (Kimerling et al., 2007), and less likely to be an officer in the military (Suris & Lind, 2008). Service members who are unwed, lower in age, and hold a lower ranking title could be at increased risk of sexual assault for several reasons; non officers tend to live on base in more intimate accommodations and possess less influence within military ranks making them more susceptible to dating violence, and drug or alcohol use, possibly for the first time (DOD, 2004a). While more investigation is required into this topic, a strong argument can be made that the great quantity of young and single female military members relative to the civilian population might elucidate the elevated rates of sexual assault within the United States Military (Turchik & Wilson, 2010).

### **Drug and Alcohol Use**

The use of drugs or alcohol before a sexual assault is common among both victims and perpetrators (Abbey, 2002; Abbey, Clinton-Sherrod, McAuslan, Zawacki, & Buck, 2003;

Acierno et al., 2001; Testa, 2002). A Department of Defense statement on sexual assault in military academies revealed that alcohol was a factor in over half of sexual assault cases from the Military Academy as well as in 57% of reported assaults at the Naval Academy (DOD, 2005). A focus group on sexual assault for service members found that for young recruits just starting military training, the ease of access to alcohol coupled with factors like “newfound independence, peer pressure, close quarters, integration of units, limitations on privacy, and new relationships, could help contribute to the increased risk of sexual assault” (DOD, 2004b). Based on these facts, it is clear that the use of drugs and alcohol is an aggravating factor in military sexual assault, particularly among new recruits.

### **Previous Sexual Abuse**

Quite a few studies have discovered elevated rates of sexual abuse happening to service members prior to military service (Turchik & Wilson, 2010). By and large, the amount of abuse is high but research shows that the highest rates of prior abuse take place in the Navy, with 45.5% to 48.5% of female recruits reporting an incident of sexual assault before entering the military (Trent, Stander, Thomsen, & Merrill, 2007). Rates of historical sexual assault have also been compared to studies using civilian samples: one study revealed that the frequency of sexual assault across the lifespan for females in the Air Force is double the rate at which female civilians experience sexual assault (28% for service members versus 13% for civilians) (Bostock & Daley, 2007). Schultz, Bell, Naugle, and Polusny (2006) saw comparable rates of historical sexual assault among female military veterans and civilian women (48.6% versus 43.2%), but also found that members of the military more commonly reported being sexually abused by a parent, endured longer periods of childhood sexual abuse,

and disclosed a higher number of later adulthood sexual assault experiences than civilians (48.9% for veterans versus 21.5% for civilians).

These statistics regarding previous sexual abuse are important in understanding military sexual assault because several studies have indicated that having a history of sexual assault increases the likelihood of experiencing sexual assault in the future (Turchik & Wilson, 2010). Studies also indicate that individuals with childhood sexual abuse histories could be more prone to join the military than those who do not experience childhood sexual assault, and are therefore at an increased risk for sexual victimization during their military service (Turchik & Wilson, 2010). Suggested reasons for this trend include the idea that women who experienced childhood sexual assault view the military as a getaway plan or a place for a new beginning. It may also be the case that female recruits who experienced prior sexual abuse identify the military as a setting where they will have the chance to discharge their pent up hostility and anger. The true reasons behind women with sexual assault histories joining the military have unfortunately not yet been studied, so the connection between prior sexual abuse and the choice to join the military is still unclear (Turchik & Wilson, 2010).

### **Military Regulations**

Certain policies in the military can be utilized in a manner that promotes victim blame or rape myths (e.g., women frequently lie about being assaulted or an assault is not rape unless it is physically violent) (Turchik & Wilson, 2010). For example, rule 306(b) explained under the Rules for Courts-Martial outlines an array of factors that commanders are supposed to reflect on before deciding how to handle a reported offense or crime that could be based on and support rape myth attitudes (Houser, 2007). These factors consist of examining the

“character and military service of the accused”, “the extent of harm caused”, “possible improper motives”, “reluctance of the accused to testify”, and “availability and admissibility of evidence” (Joint Service Committee on Military Justice, 2008, pp. 11-25). This means that a service member reporting a sexual assault who is alleged by her commander to be corrupt in character, has a less than perfect service record, has no discernible physical injuries, or is hesitant to testify, might not be taken seriously as a result of official military regulations. Furthermore, in some cases, being married to the victim can be a positive defense for the perpetrator (Joint Service Committee on Military Justice, 2008), furthering the myth that married women cannot be raped.

Another problematic military regulation is the legal discrimination of homosexuals in the military, particularly since approximately 65,000 gay, lesbian, and bisexual men and women serve in the U.S. military based on the 2000 census data (Gates, 2004). One troubling matter is the military law prohibiting consensual sodomy (cunnilingus, fellatio, anal sex). This statute could make it difficult for the LGBT population in the military to report sexual assault because they worry that others will think that they have taken part in illegal homosexual behavior (whether truthful or not). This military policy is contradictory to United States national law (which states that banning consensual sodomy is unconstitutional) and is far more likely to be imposed upon homosexuals than heterosexuals, despite the fact that 75% of heterosexual military service members are thought to have taken part in what the military defines as consensual sodomy (Service Members Legal Defense Network, 2002, as cited in Bateman, 2004). The law is in alignment with the military's "Don't ask, Don't tell" (DADT) regulation which proscribes homosexual or bisexual individuals serving in the military from

having to reveal information regarding their sexual orientation (Secretary of Defense, 1993).

The DADT law makes it hard for any service member to report an assault by a same-sex offender in spite of their personal sexual orientation.

### **Low Reporting Rates**

Even though the current number of military sexual assaults occurring is frighteningly high, it is probable that the number of stated cases is an underestimation of the real rate at which military sexual assault takes place (GAO, 2008). For example, Service Women's Action Network (SWAN, 2008) published a report revealing that that nearly one third of women in the military state that they do not know how to formally report an assault and only 26% of victims officially informed their commanding officer of an assault when it happened to them. A study of the DOD and Coast Guard showed that between 13% to 43% of military recruits were still not clear about the procedures for reporting a rape even after being trained on the subject (GAO, 2008). The GAO study also examined evidence indicating that most of victims of assault in the military do not disclose the assault afterwards. This trend in military underreporting is comparable to that among civilian victims of rape and makes sexual violence more likely to continue (Catalano, 2006).

The low reporting rates suggest that there are many barriers hindering females in the military in reporting sexual assault. Air Force research confirms that there are indeed several reporting obstacles for survivors of sexual assault, such as anxiety over privacy violations or revenge, embarrassment, being denied promotions or special duties, betraying the victim's unit, being adversely judged by coworkers, and being victimized all over again (U.S. Air Force, 2004). Although the Air Force study was conducted back in 2004, several of these



concerns are still described as impediments by service members years later (GAO, 2008). Mullins (2005) also cites the military legal system, a dearth of adequate training for military officers who are supposed to help sexual assault victims, and the fact that victims are frequently made to remain at work with their attacker as further obstacles to reporting. One particular feature of the military legal system that might prevent women from reporting sexual assault is concern of prosecution for other crimes that transpired during the sexual assault. These crimes could include adultery, fraternization, or underage drinking, etc. (DOD, 2004b). Legal actions for such victim transgressions could take place prior to the sexual assault case, perpetuating the idea that victims get punished while offenders do not. In addition, the authority of the commanding officer in regulating how to handle reports of sexual assault could be significant in whether or not a victim decides to report a sexual assault. The 2004 DOD Sexual Assault Task Force on victim care stated that the military chain-of-command reporting process can sometimes result in unofficial inquiries before the official investigation takes place, making victims with the impression that they are not granted anonymity and therefore will regret speaking out about the assault.

### **Military Enactments**

Over the last 10 years, the DOD, the Department of Veterans Affairs, and the different military branches have reacted to censure over the high rates of sexual assault by altering policies, initiating a DOD office accountable solely for managing sexual assault education and treatment in the whole military, and delivering more services to veterans who suffered a sexual assault during their time of duty in the VA system. One useful law was the creation of the Victim and Witness Assistance Program in 1994 by the DOD. This policy supplied

statutory requirements regarding how to deliver assistances to victims and witnesses of crimes throughout military legal proceedings (DOD, 2004c). In October 2007, Congress modified the UCMJ rape and sexual misconduct laws, which had previously stayed similar to their original content upon establishment in the UCMJ. Prior law specified “any person subject to this chapter who commits an act of sexual intercourse by force and without consent, is guilty of rape” (Joint Service Committee on Military Justice, 2005, p. 66). The updated policy recognizes substance related assaults, making the use of force no longer a requirement for an incident to be considered rape (Joint Service Committee on Military Justice, 2008). In addition, the amended law syndicates sexual acts that were formerly explained only roughly under Article 134 and Article 120 and now includes 36 distinctive sexual offenses with different levels of crime and penalty.

The most substantial adjustment to military law was the permanent establishment of the DOD Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office (SAPRO) in 2005 as a result of a sequence of Congressional investigations regarding sexual assault in the military (DOD, 2007). The SAPRO is accountable for all five branches of the United States military, and acts as a solitary point of charge for sexual assault. Programs through the department are used to offer treatment and services to sexual assault victims, as well as avert military sexual assault via department-wide training, education, and prevention programming. Likewise, the SAPRO has introduced a private restricted reporting system for sexual assault victims. This procedure permits service members who have been assailed to obtain medical care and counseling without involving the police or their superior officers. But, a restricted report may only be made by doctors, ministers, sexual assault response professionals, or victim advocates.

Commanders or police officers are still required to report the assault to the proper parties, which usually prompts an official investigation resulting once again in victim apprehensions about reporting in the first place. Service members and their families, even when deployed, do however have the option to get in touch with Military One Source by phone or online any time of day or night to speak to a professional advisor. This resource can be used to make restricted or unrestricted sexual assault reports, and to communicate with local sexual assault response coordinators, VA centers, or other recognized DOD sexual assault amenities.

The different military branches had each executed distinct sexual assault risk reduction and prevention programs before SAPRO was established, which were subsequently reformed to fit DOD standards. For example, the Sexual Assault Victim Intervention program, applied by the Navy to expand sexual assault knowledge and to offer victims services from specially trained advocates, was one such service. Researchers assessed opinions regarding both the prevention and training piece and advocacy services, making the Navy's SAVIP the first recognized sexual assault program in the military to be empirically appraised (Kelley, Schwerin, Farrar, & Lane, 2005). While the actual abuse and commission rates were not assessed in the study, the researchers stated that participants felt both sections of the program were beneficial. The participants thought that the program demonstrated compassion for service members on behalf of the Navy and improved participant's personal health and safety. Individuals who gave greater ratings of the prevention program recounted greater overall eagerness about their role in the military, where individuals who gave better ratings to the advocacy program reported both better overall readiness and an enhanced quality of life, offering encouragement for sexual assault programming and its constructive influences.

In 1992, Congress passed Public Law 102-585, which approved psychological counseling for female veterans experiencing suffering related to sexual harassment or sexual assault. In addition, VAs are now mandated to screen all veterans obtaining services for military-related sexual trauma and elect a member of VA personnel to oversee sexual trauma screening, treatment, and employee training (Department of Veterans Affairs, 2005). Some research has assessed the results of these laws and dictates on screening for sexual trauma among veterans, and has suggested that most veterans are being screened for sexual trauma and that gathering this material is both practicable and necessary to treatment (Kimerling et al., 2007).

### **Recommendations for Additional Change**

Because sexual assault is a concern for civilians in addition to military personnel, there is no fast or simple way to fix the issue. Work to fight against sexual assault in the United States Military needs to carry on to keep our troops protected from these crimes. While the Department of Defense has indeed taken steps to decrease and preclude sexual violence among our troops, there must be ongoing programming and services to resolve military sexual assault for good.

### **Background Checks**

For one thing, the screening process for criminal background checks could be bolstered within the military to be much more strict. Research has indicated that an alarmingly high number of male recruits have committed sex crimes but were never convicted so they have no trouble passing the current military criminal background check (Merrill, Thomsen, Gold, & Milner, 2001; Merrill et al., 1998). Also, there has been a disturbing movement

within the military as of late where there has been a substantial growth in the proportion of waivers granted for convicted criminal behavior, including aggravated assault, rape, and sexual assault (Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, 2008). Even though recruiters may be having difficulties enlisting the target number of new recruits because of the current war situation, rigorous screening measures must be put in place without exception to guarantee safety for all service members. Additionally, new service members should be prudently watched for indications of sexual violence or depreciating conduct with a zero-tolerance policy for these inappropriate actions. Furthermore, there needs to be sustained sexual assault deterrence efforts with policies directed at risk factors that are probable to be extant from a recruit's premilitary experiences (childhood abuse, attitudes towards women, and hypermasculinity) In addition to elements that could be cultivated from within military training and work atmosphere (for example desensitization to aggression and substance abuse). Preclusion programming and education ought to take place at the start of a service member's career and continue throughout each recruit's time serving in the military.

### **Legal Amendments**

Legal amendments must also occur for extensive, systematic progress to happen in the military. Many current military laws have the potential to encourage sexual violence, discrimination, or under-reporting of sexual crimes. Despite the fact that UCMJ sexual assault laws were restructured in 2008, Article 125 making consensual sodomy illegal for all service members is still awaiting change. This policy is archaic and no longer adherent to federal civilian law which long ago deemed the banning of consensual adult sodomy unconstitutional, and despite the law being habitually violated, it can easily deter victims from reporting an

assault. Similarly, Articles 120 and 125, which permit the fact that two individuals are married to be a favorable buffer for numerous military sexual assault perpetrators, is deplorable. This defense must be eradicated to avert and legitimize marital sexual assault.

Furthermore, the DADT policy upholds prejudice and discrimination (Taylor, 2004), sullies the military's character (Belkin, 2008), and probably dissuades reporting of military sexual assault for victims who fear of being labeled homosexual. Moreover, a recent impartial unit of retired high-ranking officers revealed that current research suggests that letting gays and lesbians to serve without hiding their sexual orientation is not likely to pose any meaningful risk to confidence, command, regulation or solidity in the United States military (Aitken, Alexander, Gard, & Shanahan, 2008). Because there is no convincing empirical support for the DADT law it should be revoked to spread acceptance and parity among military personnel.

The conservation of a male-dominated military notorious for its hypermasculine stances is not going to change while females are limited in how much they can participate in the military. While some service members might embrace antagonistic attitudes toward women, part of the problem could also be that certain military policies are grounded in benevolent sexism, or the idea that women ought to be admired and flawless but concurrently are weak and need protection (Glick & Fiske, 2001). For instance, the collocation policy (which bars women from jobs and divisions where they will be tangibly working alongside ground combat units) and the actual ground combat segregation policy, appear to be at least partially intended to shelter women and imply that women are frailer than men (Turchik & Wilson, 2010). McSally (2007) suggests that for women to attain a more equivalent role to

men in the military the Department of Defense must withdraw the collocation policy, assume gender-neutral standards for locations and duties, repeal the ground combat exclusion policy, overturn the policy that sanctions the excision of females from duty during pregnancy, remove differences between the sexes in all aspects of military life (same basic training; same uniform and appearance guidelines), and involve women in the Selective Service Act (commonly known as “the draft”). Additional recommendations include augmenting the percentage of women in commanding officer roles and focusing more recruiting efforts on women.

Analysis and court proceedings surrounding sexual assault cases must also be made more objective and less partial toward the offender. A DOD task force denoted that the method in which trials for sex offenders is handled is injurious to the reporting of sexual assaults, frequently resulting in victims regretting that they made the report in the first place (DOD, 2004b). In order to enable true offender culpability, improved victim discretion during admission of a sexual assault and more openness concerning the rationale for legal verdicts thereafter should be put in place. Improving the efficiency of the court process as well as offering further training for military legal staff in sexual assault and harassment hearings should also be offered so that the issue can be solved both rapidly and justly for both service members involved. These structural legal amendments could promote more victims coming forwards and foster a sense of offender liability.

### **Education and Training**

Throughout all military branches and departments it is of chief importance that recruits are cognizant of all reporting processes available to them and which of those options

are private. Some research has suggested that a considerable portion of military sexual assault victims are ignorant of or uncertain of sexual assault reporting procedures (DOD, 2005; GAO, 2008). Consequently, it is crucial that all recruits receive instruction on reporting options and services for them as well as the varying levels of privacy that come with each type of report. Additionally, it is critical that all military personnel be taught to identify signs and symptoms of sexual assault in men and women and furthermore to be mindful of the applicable resources offered for victims (Turchik & Wilson, 2010). It is also necessary that the military initiate prosecution of a zero-tolerance policy concerning sexual assault, with no exclusions in combination with treating all sexual assault reports with professionalism as soon as they are disclosed (Nelson, 2002).

An additional idea is to make personal safety and self-defense education available to all women on active duty as well as veterans receiving VA services. David, Cotton, Simpson, and Weitlauf (2004) discovered that female veterans with physical and/or sexual assault histories heavily advocated for using personal safety and self-defense instruction in managing their PTSD symptoms. David, Simpson, and Cotton (2006) subsequently lead a preliminary 36-hour behavioral mediation session that included psychoeducation, self-defense training, and personal safety training with 12 female veterans with PTSD associated to military sexual assault. The female veterans who partook in the session exhibited less PTSD symptoms and better performance and ability at a 6-month follow-up. Self-defense coaching can also be utilized to safeguard and embolden females who have not experienced sexual assault since boosting women's feelings of self-assurance can increase their ability to effectively react to future hostile situations (Turchik, Probst, Chau, Nigoff, & Gidycz, 2007).



## **Evaluation**

Although the establishment of the SAPRO was a major stride in counteracting sexual assault and imposing sexual assault laws, there needs to be general assessment of its operations and their impacts on military personnel by both DOD and civilian researchers (Turchik & Wilson, 2010). There are several variables that would be meaningful to investigate, but the principal target of SAPRO is the reduced frequency of sexual assault. If the SAPRO is actually achieving that goal, then researchers should observe an upsurge in early reporting as victims feel more confident in coming forward, and then a decline in the number of reported incidents as time goes on. One report discovered that there are still lots of military victims choosing not to report due to the high number of impediments as mentioned before (GAO, 2008). Likewise, there is still a deficiency of access to mental health resources on military bases, which could inhibit victims from receiving sufficient psychological treatment (GAO, 2008). Without adequate evaluation on SAPRO, these issues will continue to go unaddressed.

Also, the VA system requires ongoing evaluation of its services and resources for victims of military sexual assault. Kimerling et al. (2007) were the first group of researchers to appraise the military sexual assault assessment process in the VA organization and specified that the DOD and civilian researchers must maintain regular scrutiny and assessment of the VAs screening, educational, outreach, and treatment programs. There should also be more broad study done by the VA regarding military sexual assault and its consequences for both victims and perpetrators. It would also be constructive to regularly unite both military and civilian research efforts to fight military sexual assault such as the

2007 case of the United States Air Force Sexual Assault Prevention and Risk Reduction Symposium (Turchik & Wilson, 2010).

### **Environment**

The military could also make improvements to its general structure and milieu as some environmental features could be encouraging sexual assault, such as the stringent command hierarchy, drug and alcohol use and abuse amongst new service members, and the incongruous use of aggression. As previously mentioned, the chain-of-command reporting, in which superior officers have the authority to decide how reports of sexual assaults are legally dealt with, and the power hierarchy produced by the general military setting are substantial hindrances to reporting sexual assault in the military. Therefore, restrictions must be imposed on the extent of control that commanders can have over members in their unit, and recruits should be cognizant of safe reporting options in the event that they need to report an officer who outranks them. Furthermore, there must be more females in command ranks so that women have the opportunity to report to another woman, should they feel more comfortable doing so. Also, military leaders should be trained to act as role models to new recruits and be aware of how recruits observing superior officers make depreciating remarks or gestures about women escalates the prevalence of sexual assault in units (Sadler et al., 2003).

### **Substance Use**

Substance use amidst recruits is another important area for change. Although laws and resources (e.g., Air Force Alcohol and Drug Abuse Prevention and Treatment Program) are enacted to curb and outlaw use of drugs and alcohol, there should to be more services and training on the safe use of substances, particularly among new recruits where drugs and

alcohol are frequently associated with sexual assault (DOD, 2004b; DOD, 2005). Another risky component of the military setting is the stress placed on aggression. Even though violence might be required in active-duty combat, service members should to be trained to distinguish between situations when the use of aggression is required and suitable, and when it is not (Turchik & Wilson, 2010). Resources for dealing with stress, impulse control, and conflict management could also be implemented to coach service members on supplementary healthy behaviors for releasing stress and tension in a military environment.

### **Summary**

In conclusion, there can be no doubt that sexual assault in the United States military is at endemic proportions. It is a phenomenon that causes physical and mental harm to both individual service members and our military as whole, yet continues to be one of the most stigmatized and least culpable crimes committed among our troops. The DOD and VA have applied noteworthy amendments that express the military's concern and readiness to confront the issue of sexual assault within the organization. Nevertheless, there continues to be a need for additional development and progress directed at amending the structural, social, and associated dynamics that preserve the sexual assault epidemic in our military. Forthcoming studies should concentrate on more firmly evaluating the true frequency of military sexual assault in addition to appraising the efficacy of present military sexual assault policies and programming.

### **Chapter III: Methodology**

The purpose of this study was to investigate how well the needs of victims of sexual assault are being addressed in the military based on current policy and procedures for handling such an event during a service member's tour of duty. The research question was: What are the challenges faced by female survivors of military sexual assault in regards to military sexual assault response policy? For the purposes of this study, a secondary qualitative design was chosen to address the experiential component of participants' opinions. Academics have widely acknowledged the fact that qualitative research is particularly useful in attempting to answer the more exploratory 'how' and 'why' research questions (Bailey, 2014) such as the one addressed in this study. This chapter will explain in detail the chosen research methods of this study.

The qualitative research design of this study aims to apprehend an accurate, realistic picture of the current management of sexual assault in the United States Military and determine how those reactive procedures could be improved. The exploratory nature of this study will afford the researcher the opportunity to review unrestricted feedback regarding service members' experiences with military sexual assault and suggestions for future policy amendments. The primary reason for conducting this study is to gather information on a topic that has long been in need of evaluation and change (Groves, 2013). The researcher's goal in conducting this study is to investigate and report on what policies and procedures survivors of military sexual assault think should be amended, eliminated, or even created in the first place to put an end to the epidemic in our country's armed forces.

## **Sampling Process**

For this qualitative study, a non probability convenience sampling method was used. Although non probability sampling methods are typically considered less desirable than probability methods such as random and stratified sampling, they can be used when the researcher lacks the resources for these other methods (University of California, Davis [UCD], 2015). It is important to remember that non-probability samples such as this one are inadequate when it comes to generality. This is because they do not accurately embody a population, therefore researchers cannot make legitimate suggestions about the larger group from which they are selected (UCD, 2015). According to the Human Rights Data Analysis Group (2013) "convenience samples rely on data that is selected by those who provide it or those who observe it... the fundamental quality that defines them as convenience samples is the lack of an underlying probability-based selection method" (para. 3). In this case, convenience sampling was used since the researcher selected the most recent and readily available articles from the Saint Cloud State University Library without regard to random or stratified sampling (commonly used probability sampling techniques).

Articles were selected by the researcher based on the most recent and pertinent articles that are readily available through the Saint Cloud State Library database. According to the Cochrane Consumers and Communication Review Group (2013) as few as two studies is an adequate number to carry out a meta-analysis study, as long as those two studies can be meaningfully pooled and if their results are suitably comparable. However, other sources have recommended at least six studies to conduct an adequate analysis (Fu et al., 2011). In order to

meet all general guidelines, this study reviewed six articles from the Saint Cloud State Library online database.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

The researcher reviewed and extracted data from existing articles that answer the following questions: what percent of women who experienced sexual assault filed a report? If so, what type of report was filed and who did they report the assault to? If they chose not to report, what were the reasons or barriers they faced? For those women who reported the assault, was there support for the victims post assault? and finally, what policy suggestions have been made to improve the military's response to sexual assault? The researcher then drew conclusions based on themes in existing research in regards to the answers to these questions (for the purposes of this study, the researcher has defined a theme as a fact or suggestion given by more than one of the data sources).

### **Ethical Considerations**

This study has limited ethical considerations as all sources of data are public record already, and therefore are not subject to traditional confidentiality concerns. Furthermore, the secondary nature of data collection in this study does not merit IRB review or approval because human subjects are not being directly studied. One ethical matter in this study is the limited number of articles being reviewed. As a result, it is important not to draw generalizable or statistically significant conclusions from this study, but rather to focus on the results of this study as a basis for further, more in depth and large scale research. Another ethical consideration to keep in mind is the research bias that could occur based on the available articles. According to De Winter and Happee (2013) most journals have a relatively

low publication rate, therefore it is common for only the studies with the most significant results to get published. Consequently, it is important to bear in mind that all articles reviewed in this study are likely to be pulled from an already biased selection of available studies. The results from this study are discussed in detail in Chapter IV.

### **Theoretical Framework**

After reviewing current literature, it becomes apparent that there is no single explanation or cause for sexual assault in the United States military. Rather, it appears to be a complex interaction between personal and environmental factors that set the scene for the internal military sexual assault epidemic. The theoretical framework that best describes this pattern is Systems Theory, with a focus on the Ecological Perspective. Systems Theory is a theory that focuses on the entire physical and human world; it looks at how different parts interact to form the whole. The Ecological Perspective is concerned with how specifically humans interact with their environment, including physical and non-physical aspects (Schrivier, 2011). This theoretical framework is highly applicable to military sexual assault since it takes a particular combination of personal, historical, and environmental factors (physical and non physical) for a sexual assault to take place. Furthermore, how an individual chooses to handle the aftermath of an assault (reporting or not reporting and how) is again the result of a mixture of personal and environmental factors.

## Chapter IV: Results

### Introduction

This chapter reviews the analyses used to answer the research question dictated in chapter three. First, the six most recent, most pertinent (in terms of content) journal articles were pulled from the St. Cloud State University online database. Next, these articles were assessed for answers to six different questions in regards to victims of military sexual assault: what percent of female survivors filed a report? If a report was filed, what type of report was filed (restricted or unrestricted) and who was the assault initially reported to? If a report was not filed, what reasons did female survivors identify as barriers to reporting? For both reported and unreported assaults, what type of support was offered (if any) for survivors post-assault? And finally, what policy change suggestions do female survivors of military sexual assault have for the future? Conclusions were drawn in regards to implications for future research based upon majority themes across all selected articles.

### Data

The articles selected for this study focused only on female victims of military sexual assault. The following studies were included in the meta-analysis:

- Walsh, K., Galea, S., Cerda, M., Richards, C., Liberzon, I., Tamburrino, M. B., & Koenen, K. C. (2014). Unit support protects against sexual harassment and assault among National Guard soldiers. *Women's Health Issues, 24*(6), 600-604.  
doi:10.1016/j.whi.2014.05.006



- Steiger, D. M., Chattopadhyay, M., Rao, M., Green, E., Nemeckay, K., & Yen, E. (2010). *Findings from the 2010 prevalence/incidence survey of sexual assault in the Air Force. Gallup Government.*
- Mengeling, M. A., Booth, B. M., Torner, J. C., & Sadler, A. G. (2014). Reporting sexual assault in the military: Who reports and why most servicewomen don't. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine, 47(1)*, 17-25.  
doi:10.1016/j.amepre.2014.03.001
- Burns, B., Grindlay, K., Holt, K., Manski, R., & Grossman, D. (2014). Military sexual trauma among US servicewomen during deployment: A qualitative study. *American Journal of Public Health, 104(2)*, 345-349.  
doi:10.2105/AJPH.2013.301576
- Herlihy, P. A., Burgess, A. W., & Slattery, D. M. (2013). Military sexual trauma: A silent syndrome. *Journal of Psychosocial Nursing, 51(2)*, 20-26.
- Grassbaugh, J. C. (2014b). The Opaque Glass Ceiling: How will gender neutrality in combat affect military sexual assault prevalence, prevention, and prosecution? *Ohio State Journal of Criminal Law, 11(2)*.

In order to ensure that the most up to date data possible was collected, inclusion criteria for this study limited articles to those published within the last five years. Five of the six articles were published within the last two years. Because there were not enough articles available through the Saint Cloud State University online database that answered each and every question outlined above, inclusion criteria was limited to articles that simply answered a majority of the six questions stated in this study.

## Questions

In regards to the question of what percent of survivors filed a report, 100% of the articles reviewed answered this question. 66.6% of the studies evaluated reported that one in five or fewer women filed a report after experiencing sexual assault. One of the other two remaining studies reported that 57% of survivors filed an official report after being assaulted (Burns, Grindlay, Holt, Manski, & Grossman, 2014), however, it is notable that this particular article only dealt with seven survivors in total. In addition, the final study was very close to meeting the one in five threshold, reporting that 25% of survivors reported the assault (Mengeling et al., 2014).

Table 1

*Percentage of Survivors Who Did or Did Not File a Report of Assault*

<b>Author</b>	<b>Percent of Survivors who Did Report the Assault</b>	<b>Percent of Survivors who Did Not Report the Assault</b>
Steiger et al. (2010)	16.7%	83.3%
Walsh et al. (2014)	18.8%	81.2%
Mengeling et al. (2014)	25.0%	75.0%
Burns et al. (2014)	57.0%	43.0%
Herlihy et al. (2013)	16.8%	83.2%
Grassbaugh (2014a)	14.0%	86.0%

Only 33.3% of the studies appraised addressed the question of what type of report was filed, but 100% of those that did found that unrestricted reporting was heavily favored over restricted reporting.

Table 2

*The Type of Report Filed*

<b>Author</b>	<b>Percent of Survivors who Filed Unrestricted Reports</b>	<b>Percent of Survivors who Filed Restricted Reports</b>	<b>Percent of Survivors who Did Not Know What Type Was Filed</b>
Steiger et al. (2010)	53.0%	9.5%	31.4%
Mengeling et al. (2014)	72.7%	27.3%	0.0%

Steiger et al. (2010) addressed the question of who the assault was first reported to, and found that the vast majority of female victims reported to either a sexual assault victim response coordinator or another unspecified channel (this could include someone outside the military). Healthcare personnel were the least common routes for victim reporting.

Table 3

*To Whom the Report was Submitted*

<b>Reporting Channel</b>	<b>Percent of Reports Made</b>
Sexual Assault Response Coordinator	42.4%
Chain of Command	27.6%
Law Enforcement	23.5%
Victim Advocate	21.5%
Healthcare Personnel	14.5%
Another Unspecified Channel	33.9%

For those survivors who chose not to report, many significant barriers were identified. 83.3% of the articles reviewed addressed this question. Of those that did, 100% identified embarrassment, confusion over what constitutes a sexual assault crime, and lack of

confidence that the perpetrator would face consequences. 60% of these articles also listed fears over confidentiality being breached as a reporting barrier (Burns et al., 2014; Mengeling et al., 2014; Steiger et al., 2010) and 80% found that fear over the victim's career being negatively impacted was a significant reporting barrier (Burns et al., 2014; Grassbaugh, 2014b; Mengeling et al., 2014; Steiger et al., 2010). According to Mengeling et al. (2014) most women do not report for purposes such as not wanting others to know, apprehension about unsatisfactory proof, distress over retaliation by the offender or others, inapposite conduct or doubt from the criminal justice system, or because they consider it to be personal matter to be dealt with secretly.

Furthermore, within the military, victims who report can face their own penalties for collateral misconduct violations that may have been involved in the assault (using alcohol for example), which could also prevent service reporting (Mengeling et al., 2014). Additionally, some survivors chose not report because either the person they had to report to was the offender or was a friend of the offender (Mengeling et al., 2014). Herlihy, Burgess, and Slattery (2013) support these assertions, noting that most survivors remain quiet because of anxiety over harassment, ridicule, gossip, being labeled a troublemaker, or because they are simply convinced that even if they did report, no condemnatory action would be taken against the perpetrator.

This fear over lack of punitive action is not unfounded. In the study by Burns et al. (2014) numerous participants reported that military leadership had failed to sufficiently handle the concern of military sexual assault and that attackers seldom faced penalties. According to the same study, other common reporting barriers included: negative reactions

from coworkers or commanders (such as disbelief, blame, criticism of character, and lack of support) worries about privacy, embarrassment or stigma, unease over potential negative career impacts, and misperceptions about what actions constitute sexual harassment or assault.

Grassbaugh (2014a) found similar reporting barriers for most women and adds that many victims fear being reproached for lying by their own disbelieving commanders and therefore have severe qualms about their report gaining any acknowledgement in a close minded, rigidly masculine hierarchal organization. Even commanders lacking personal involvement in the case could see an allegation of sexual assault as possibly detrimental to their own career (because they ‘allowed’ the assault to happen on their watch), and frequently dismiss reports and accusations as a result (Grassbaugh, 2014a). Additional peer-related factors are also going on within the strictly confined military atmosphere, such as worries of looking frail, cowardly, or unfaithful, or of being shunned and becoming the point of gossip (Grassbaugh, 2014a).

Steiger et al. (2010) found 12 main reasons for victims choosing not to report with the most common reason being not thinking the assault was serious enough to report (53.8%) and the least frequent barrier being that the victim did not know how to report (12.3%).

Table 4

*Reasons for Not Reporting Assault*

<b>Reason For Not Reporting</b>	<b>Percent of Survivors who Cited This Reason</b>
Did not think it was serious enough to report	53.8%
Not Clear it was a crime, or harm was intended	41.2%
Did not want fellow service members to know	51.4%
Lack of proof that the incident happened	48.2%
Did not want superiors to know	47.5%
Did not want family to know	38.5%
Fear of being treated badly if you reported it	43.5%
Did not want to cause trouble in your unit	45.6%
Concern over protecting your identity	34.6%
Did not trust the reporting process	25.3%
Afraid of retaliation or that the incident would happen again	24.8%
Did not know how to report	12.3%

In this meta-analysis examined, 83.3% of the studies included examined the question of female victim support post assault. 60.0% of these found that survivors of military sexual assault faced additional barriers when it came to getting medical and mental health care. According to Steiger et al. (2010), 79.5% of survivors reported receiving no legal counseling, mental health services, or medical care upon reporting a sexual assault. Of those who did receive some sort of post assault assistance, counseling on base was the most frequently utilized type of help reported among female victims (13.4%), with medical care coming in

second (8.7%) and finally legal counsel was the least frequently used form of post assault assistance on base (7.8%). Another study demonstrated that victims were largely aware of counseling services existing during deployment through a chaplain, a Combat Stress Office, or other mental health channels, however in survivors' experiences, assistance amenities during deployment from specialists trained to handle sexual assault cases was significantly reduced (Burns et al., 2014).

Herlihy et al. (2013) found that female victims of military sexual assault may have to rely on their assailant or friends of their assailant for approval before being referred for medical and mental health care. Many survivors are also encouraged by their superiors to keep silent, adding to the difficulties with obtaining post assault support services. Some survivors also report that when they did disclose their assault they were not believed or even blamed for the incident and not referred for help as a result.

Of the studies citing post assault issues for survivors, 33% named a lack of consequences for the perpetrator as a determining factor in dearth of help for victims. According to Grassbaugh (2014a) in the United States Military, perpetrators of sexual assault have an expected 86.5% chance of keeping sexual assault crimes surreptitious and a 92% percent chance of evading a court martial. Mengeling et al. (2014) found that amid unrestricted reporters, 42% confirmed that some sort of punitive action was carried out on the perpetrator, 10% did not have any knowledge of the results of their case, and 48% said that no action was taken. Over 50% of survivors disclosed that their military colleagues were hostile toward them after making an unrestricted report. Moreover, after experiencing a sexual assault, 25% of servicewomen knew that their attacker(s) had subsequently harassed other

military women and 13% knew that the offender had sexually assaulted other women in the military (Mengeling et al., 2014).

Of the studies appraised in this meta-analysis, 83.3% addressed survivor suggestions for future policy change. The most frequently cited suggestion (80% of studies) was a more preventative rather than reactive stance when it comes to sexual assault. Walsh et al. (2014) suggests programming designed to improve unit cohesion as a preventative measure for sexual assault, Mengeling et al. (2014) suggests specialty training for medical professionals that focuses on prevention instead of only survivor support, Herlihy et al. (2013) proposes educational programs in the workplace to expand support for service members in need of support while still serving, and finally Grassbaugh (2014b) advises promoting more women to officer positions to promote gender neutrality and true inclusion in all military sectors.

Other suggestions included allowing victims to seek services outside of the military to increase confidentiality as well as reduce judgment and stigma (Burns et al., 2014), and creating a national screening tool for health professionals to be able to identify undisclosed sexual trauma (Herlihy et al., 2013). Only one study made mention of investigative practices (Burns et al., 2014), specifically pointing out new protocol needs to be established to ensure fair and effective investigation and prosecution of sexual assault in the military.

### **Summary**

Upon completion of this meta-analysis it is clear that the vast majority of female military sexual assaults still go unreported for a variety of reasons. Frequently victims do not report for the same reasons as civilians (embarrassment, confusion, fear), but barriers unique to the military environment are also in play (fear of professional retaliation, victims being



forced to report to their attacker, and concerns over appearing weak in a heavily masculinized atmosphere). Of those who do choose to report, unrestricted reporting is strongly favored over restricted reporting, with SARC being the most popular choice for discloser.

When it comes to victim support post assault, significant barriers such as not being referred to legal and health services, not having adequate services available during deployment, and having to rely on the perpetrator for access to legal, medical, and mental health counsel were identified. Victims furthermore report a hostile environment among colleagues and peers after reporting a sexual assault, and a serious lack of consequences for offenders who are taken to court.

Finally, this meta-analysis demonstrates that the majority of suggested policy changes revolve around prevention rather than post assault support. These suggestions include educational programming for healthcare providers and service members alike to raise awareness about sexual assault in the military as well as create a more cohesive military atmosphere that discourages sexual assault in the first place. In addition, it has been suggested that females be promoted to higher-ranking positions within the military structure to ensure true inclusion and gender neutrality in this new cohesive environment.

## **Chapter V: Discussion**

### **Findings**

The results from this study affirmed what was found in the literature review. More specifically, this meta analysis found that sexual assault in the United States Military is a phenomenon still occurring at epidemic proportions, a trend that cannot be stopped until new policies are put in place to handle the problems current survivors are facing. According to the results of this study, survivor suggestions for policy change focus primarily on preventative efforts such as increased professional training, service member awareness and educational programming, and increasing the number of female officers in positions of power. It is thought that these preventative efforts will lead to an overall cultural shift in the military's attitude towards sexual assault, as the current hostile or disbelieving atmosphere when it comes to sexual assault was identified as the primary barrier to victims reporting and perpetrators being brought to justice.

### **Limitations**

While this study is a good foundation to point future researchers in a more specific direction for research on this topic, the results are not generalizable to the larger population as a non-probability sampling method was used, and the number of studies included in the total meta-analysis was minimal. Furthermore, it is important to remember that there may have been a bias in the data pool from the beginning, because usually only studies with the most significant or influential results get published. Therefore, it is highly likely that there may have been studies conducted finding that many female survivors of sexual assault in the military reported their assault with no difficulty, had the perpetrator punished accordingly,

and continued to function in the military work environment with no major problems, but I was unable to include these results in my study because they were unpublished.

### **Implications for Social Work**

The NASW Code of Ethics (2008) states that "the primary mission of the social work profession is to enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable [and] oppressed" (para. 1). Females in the United States Military meet the definition of a vulnerable population simply by being at high risk for sexual assault, and female survivors of sexual assault in the military meet the criteria for an oppressed population as a result of the high number of barriers they face in dealing with a sexual assault. Therefore, practicing social workers have a professional responsibility to be aware of and tend to the needs of female service members when needed.

Furthermore, the Code of Ethics (2008) states that social workers have a professional obligation to actively engage in policy practice to advocate on behalf of their clients. Thus, social workers should pay special attention to the survivors' policy suggestions outlined in this study, and advocate for change on a macro level. This political advocacy would be in direct accordance with the social and political action clause in the Code of Ethics which states "social workers should act to prevent and eliminate domination of, exploitation of, and discrimination against any person, group, or class..." (para. 4).

### **Future Research**

Subsequent studies on this topic should seek to expand the generalization of results by conducting larger meta-analyses using probability sampling to ensure reliable and accurate

results from which more widespread conclusions can be drawn. In addition, future researchers should seek to obtain primary data through direct interviews with military sexual assault survivors for comparison to data gathered through secondary data. This could help to reduce the potential bias created by only reviewing significant studies that were published over research that found no major trends. Also, consequent research projects should narrow the focus of purpose and attempt to only assess one of the multiple results coming out of this meta-analysis. For example future projects could assess only preventative policy efforts or only sexual assault response policy issues, etc.

### **Conclusion**

Although the results of this study are not widely generalizable, they are in alignment with what many previous researchers have found: female victims of sexual assault in the United States Military are facing significant barriers when dealing with an assault that can only be changed through widespread policy amendments. According to the survivor interviews reviewed in this study, the most effective policy changes would be preventative education and programming to change the current culture that condones sexual assault.

The connections between the results of this study and social work are clear: social workers have a professional duty to advocate for these policy changes on behalf of victims. The NASW Code of Ethics plainly dictates that the primary mission of all social workers is to work towards empowering and improving the lives of vulnerable populations like female victims of sexual assault. This study identified some of the significant challenges female victims of military sexual assault are facing, and it is up to social workers to use this information for further research and more effective direct practice with these clients.

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