

Highlights of [GAO-08-1013T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on National Security and Foreign Affairs, Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

In 2004, Congress directed the Department of Defense (DOD) to establish a comprehensive policy to prevent and respond to sexual assaults involving servicemembers. Though not required to do so, the Coast Guard has established a similar program. This statement addresses the extent to which DOD and the Coast Guard (1) have developed and implemented policies and programs to prevent, respond to, and resolve sexual assault incidents involving servicemembers; (2) have visibility over reports of sexual assault; and (3) exercise oversight over reports of sexual assault. This statement draws on GAO's preliminary observations from an ongoing engagement examining DOD's and the Coast Guard's programs to prevent and respond to sexual assault. In conducting its ongoing work GAO reviewed legislative requirements and DOD and Coast Guard guidance, analyzed sexual assault incident data, and obtained through surveys and interviews the perspective on sexual assault matters of more than 3,900 servicemembers stationed in the United States and overseas. The results of GAO's survey and interviews provide insight into the implementation of the programs but are nongeneralizable.

GAO expects to issue its final report in August 2008 and to make a number of recommendations to improve implementation of sexual assault prevention and response programs and improve oversight of the programs in both DOD and the Coast Guard.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on [GAO-08-1013T](#). For more information, contact Brenda S. Farrell at (202) 512-3604 or farrellb@gao.gov.

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MILITARY PERSONNEL

Preliminary Observations on DOD's and the Coast Guard's Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Programs

What GAO Found

DOD and the Coast Guard have established policies and programs to prevent, respond to, and resolve reported sexual assault incidents involving servicemembers; however, implementation of the programs is hindered by several factors. GAO found that (1) DOD's guidance may not adequately address some important issues, such as how to implement its program in deployed and joint environments; (2) most, but not all, commanders support the programs; (3) program coordinators' effectiveness can be hampered when program management is a collateral duty; (4) required sexual assault prevention and response training is not consistently effective; and (5) factors such as a DOD-reported shortage of mental health care providers affect whether servicemembers who are victims of sexual assault can or do access mental health services. Left unchecked, these challenges can discourage or prevent some servicemembers from using the programs when needed.

GAO found, based on responses to its nongeneralizable survey administered to 3,750 servicemembers and a 2006 DOD survey, the most recent available, that occurrences of sexual assault may be exceeding the rates being reported, suggesting that DOD and the Coast Guard have only limited visibility over the incidence of these occurrences. At the 14 installations where GAO administered its survey, 103 servicemembers indicated that they had been sexually assaulted within the preceding 12 months. Of these, 52 servicemembers indicated that they did not report the sexual assault. GAO also found that factors that discourage servicemembers from reporting a sexual assault include the belief that nothing would be done; fear of ostracism, harassment, or ridicule; and concern that peers would gossip.

Although DOD and the Coast Guard have established some mechanisms for overseeing reports of sexual assault, neither has developed an oversight framework—including clear objectives, milestones, performance measures, and criteria for measuring progress—to guide their efforts. In compliance with statutory requirements, DOD reports data on sexual assault incidents involving servicemembers to Congress annually. However, DOD's report does not include some data that would aid congressional oversight, such as why some sexual assaults could not be substantiated following an investigation. Further, the military services have not provided sufficient data to facilitate oversight and enable DOD to conduct trend analyses. While the Coast Guard voluntarily provides data to DOD for inclusion in its report, this information is not provided to Congress because there is no requirement to do so. To provide further oversight of DOD's programs, Congress, in 2004, directed DOD to form a task force to undertake an examination of matters relating to sexual assault in which members of the Armed Forces are either victims or offenders. However, as of July 2008, the task force has not yet begun its review. Without an oversight framework, as well as more complete data, decision makers in DOD, the Coast Guard, and Congress lack information they need to evaluate the effectiveness of the programs.