

Highlights of [GAO-11-809](#), a report to Ranking Member, Subcommittee on National Security, Homeland Defense and Foreign Operations, Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, House of Representatives

## Why GAO Did This Study

Sexual harassment is a form of unlawful discrimination that can jeopardize the military's combat readiness and mission accomplishment by weakening interpersonal bonds and eroding unit cohesion. GAO was asked to examine the most current available data on sexual harassment in the military and to assess the Department of Defense's (DOD) efforts to address this issue. GAO evaluated the extent to which DOD (1) has developed and implemented policies and programs to help prevent and address incidents of sexual harassment involving servicemembers, (2) has visibility over the occurrence of sexual harassment involving servicemembers, and (3) provides oversight of its policies and programs for addressing incidents of sexual harassment. To conduct this review, GAO analyzed DOD and service policies and DOD's available sexual harassment complaint data. GAO also conducted small-group discussions and administered a nongeneralizable survey during site visits to six military installations.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO is making a total of five recommendations to improve the implementation and oversight of DOD's sexual harassment policies and programs, such as specifying uniform data elements when collecting and reporting complaint data and developing an oversight framework to help guide the department's efforts. DOD concurred with GAO's recommendations and noted it will develop an executable plan, prioritize actions, and address resourcing for the changes recommended.

View [GAO-11-809](#). For more information, contact Brenda S. Farrell at (202) 512-3604 or [farrellb@gao.gov](mailto:farrellb@gao.gov).

# PREVENTING SEXUAL HARASSMENT

## DOD Needs Greater Leadership Commitment and an Oversight Framework

### What GAO Found

DOD has a long-standing policy aimed at providing an environment that is free from sexual harassment, and each of the military services has implemented its own policies and a program for addressing sexual harassment; however, some aspects of its policy and programs could be improved. For example, according to a 2010 DOD survey, while the majority of active duty servicemembers indicated that they believe that their immediate supervisor makes honest and reasonable efforts to stop sexual harassment, an estimated 25 percent of servicemembers indicated they did not know whether or did not believe their supervisor made such efforts. DOD's survey also found that an estimated 41 percent of servicemembers indicated that in their work group people would be able to get away with sexual harassment to some extent, even if it were reported. Similarly, GAO's nongeneralizable survey of active duty servicemembers found that 64 of 264 females and 53 of 319 males did not believe or were unsure of whether their direct supervisor created a climate that discourages sexual harassment from occurring. GAO also found that DOD has not held commanders accountable for completing required assessments of the equal opportunity climates in their commands. Further, GAO found that DOD does not have adequate guidance on how incidents of sexual harassment should be handled in environments wherein two or more of the services are operating together, resulting in confusion or reducing servicemembers' satisfaction with how complaints are handled.

GAO found that DOD has limited visibility over the occurrence of sexual harassment because not all military installations and commands report sexual harassment complaint data to their respective service-level sexual harassment program offices and found that the department does not have a set of uniform data elements with which to collect such data. GAO also found that servicemembers resolve most complaints of sexual harassment informally rather than report them formally. Estimates from DOD's survey found that the majority of servicemembers who felt they were harassed sexually chose not to formally report the incident. Similarly, GAO's survey found that 82 of 583 servicemembers indicated that they had been harassed sexually during the preceding 12 months; of these, only 4 indicated that they had reported the incident formally. GAO found several reasons why servicemembers may choose not to report an incident, including the belief that the incident was not sufficiently serious to report or that the incident would not be taken seriously if reported.

DOD has established some oversight requirements but has exercised little oversight of its policies and programs for addressing incidents of sexual harassment. GAO found that the office responsible for overseeing DOD's sexual harassment policies and programs has not developed an oversight framework—including clear goals, objectives, milestones, and metrics for measuring progress—to guide its efforts. For example, although DOD requires the services to provide an annual assessment of their programs, including specific data for sexual harassment complaints, DOD has not enforced these reporting requirements for almost a decade. Moreover, DOD's resources for oversight of this area are limited to one person, who has multiple other responsibilities. As a result, decision makers in DOD do not have the information they need to provide effective oversight, or assess the effectiveness, of the department's policies and programs.