

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-18-33](#), a report to the Committee on Armed Services, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

Unwanted sexual behaviors in the military—including sexual harassment, sexual assault, and domestic violence involving sexual assault—undermine core values, unit cohesion, combat readiness, and public goodwill. Recent studies suggest that these behaviors are part of a “continuum of harm,” which DOD defines as a range of interconnected, inappropriate behaviors that are connected to the occurrence of sexual assault and that support an environment that tolerates these behaviors.

Senate Report 114-255 included a provision for GAO to review efforts by DOD to prevent unwanted sexual behaviors in the military. GAO assessed the extent to which DOD has (1) policies on sexual harassment that include CDC principles and relevant legislative elements; (2) processes for maintaining and reporting consistent data on incidents of unwanted sexual behaviors; and (3) overarching efforts, including a prevention strategy, to address unwanted sexual behaviors across the continuum of harm. GAO reviewed DOD policies and pertinent databases, and interviewed agency officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that DOD fully include in its new policy on sexual harassment CDC’s principles for sexual violence prevention and mechanisms for anonymous reporting, develop standard data elements and definitions for reporting sexual harassment incidents, and incorporate in its overarching prevention strategy elements key for a long-term, results-oriented strategy. DOD generally concurred with the recommendations.

View [GAO-18-33](#). For more information, contact Brenda S. Farrell at (202) 512-3604 or farrellb@gao.gov.

December 2017

SEXUAL VIOLENCE

Actions Needed to Improve DOD’s Efforts to Address the Continuum of Unwanted Sexual Behaviors

What GAO Found

The Department of Defense’s (DOD) policies on sexual harassment include some but not all of the Centers for Disease Control’s (CDC) principles for preventing sexual violence and include most relevant legislative elements. GAO identified six principles from CDC’s framework for preventing sexual violence, which CDC defines as including sexual harassment. GAO found that Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) and military service policies generally include CDC’s principles regarding prevention strategies, but none address risk and protective factors, which identify conditions or behaviors that might heighten or lower the risk of sexual harassment victimization or perpetration, respectively. Additionally, a statutory provision in fiscal year 2013 mandated that DOD, among other things, develop a comprehensive sexual harassment policy that includes prevention training, mechanisms for anonymous reporting, and mechanisms for resolving incidents of sexual harassment. OSD and service policies are generally consistent with those required elements except for the inclusion of anonymous reporting. DOD is developing a new department-wide policy that will address sexual harassment, but it is too early to determine how the policy will address these issues. Without policies that include CDC’s principles and mechanisms for anonymous reporting, DOD may miss opportunities to address and potentially reduce incidents of unwanted sexual behaviors. Finally, a statutory change in fiscal year 2017 redefined sexual harassment for certain purposes so it is no longer defined solely as a form of sex discrimination but is recognized also as an adverse behavior on the spectrum of behavior that can contribute to an increase in the incidence of sexual assault. While officials indicated a need to update policies, they were unclear on the full implications, if any, of this change.

DOD has processes for maintaining and reporting consistent data on incidents of unwanted sexual behaviors including sexual assault and incidents of domestic violence that involve sexual assault, but does not have similar processes for maintaining and reporting data on incidents of sexual harassment. Specifically, DOD uses centralized databases to maintain and report data on incidents of sexual assault and domestic violence that involve sexual assault, but relies on military service-specific databases for information on incidents of sexual harassment. DOD has not established standard data elements and definitions to guide the services in maintaining and reporting data on sexual harassment. Inconsistencies in data elements and definitions generally mean that one service may be maintaining data that is more or less detailed than, or that differs from, the data maintained by other services. Such inconsistencies may create difficulties in reporting department-wide sexual harassment data, since the individual service data must be adapted to fit reporting requirements.

DOD has several overarching efforts to address unwanted sexual behaviors across the continuum of harm, including developing an overarching prevention strategy. However, it is unclear whether the strategy under development will contain key elements for long-term and results-oriented strategic planning such as long-term goals, strategies to achieve goals, and metrics to gauge progress. Without incorporating these elements into its overarching prevention strategy, DOD may not be in a position to effectively coordinate and integrate prevention activities and reduce instances of unwanted sexual behaviors.