

GAO@100 Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-21-113](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

With nearly 900,000 federal civilian employees around the world, DOD has responsibilities for preventing and responding to sexual harassment and assault within its workforce. In fiscal year 2018, DOD estimated that about 49,700 civilian employees experienced sexual harassment and about 2,500 civilian employees experienced work-related sexual assault in the prior year.

House Report 116-120 included a provision for GAO to review DOD's prevention of and response to sexual harassment and assault involving DOD federal civilian employees. GAO's report examines, among other things, the extent to which DOD has (1) visibility over such reported incidents, and (2) developed and implemented policies and procedures to respond to and resolve these incidents. GAO reviewed policies and guidance; analyzed program data from fiscal years 2015 through 2019; interviewed officials at a nongeneralizable sample of five military installations; evaluated DOD training materials; and interviewed DOD, service, and civilian officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making 19 recommendations, including that DOD issue guidance for comprehensive tracking of civilian work-related sexual assaults, enhance guidance on the structure of anti-harassment programs for civilians, and report to and request any needed actions from Congress on the ability of civilian employees to make restricted reports of sexual assault. As discussed in the report, DOD generally concurred with the recommendations.

View [GAO-21-113](#). For more information, contact Brenda S. Farrell at (202) 512-3604 or farrellb@gao.gov.

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SEXUAL HARASSMENT AND ASSAULT

Guidance Needed to Ensure Consistent Tracking, Response, and Training for DOD Civilians

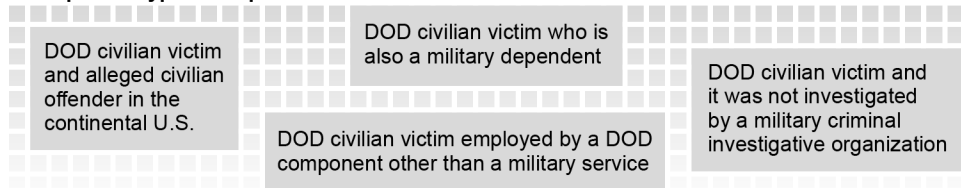
What GAO Found

The Department of Defense (DOD) has taken steps to track reports of sexual harassment and sexual assault involving its federal civilian employees, but its visibility over both types of incidents is hindered by guidance and information-sharing challenges. While employees may not report all incidents for a variety of reasons, DOD also lacks visibility over those incidents that have been reported. For example, from fiscal years 2015 through 2019, DOD recorded 370 civilian employees as victims of sexual assault and 199 civilian employees as alleged offenders. However, these data do not include all incidents of sexual assault reported over this time period. Specifically, based on DOD guidance, examples of incidents that could be excluded from these data include those involving civilian employee victims (1) occurring in the continental United States, (2) employed by DOD components other than the military services, such as defense agencies, and (3) who are also military dependents. Without guidance that addresses these areas, DOD does not know the extent to which its civilian workforce has reported work-related sexual assault worldwide.

Number of Department of Defense Federal Civilian Employees Recorded as Victims or Alleged Offenders in Reported Sexual Assault Incidents, Fiscal Years 2015-2019



Examples of types of reported sexual assaults that are excluded from these data



Source: GAO analysis of Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office data and information. | GAO-21-113

While DOD has developed policies and procedures to respond to and resolve sexual harassment and sexual assault incidents involving federal civilian employees, gaps exist. For example, DOD issued guidance in June 2020 directing components to establish anti-harassment programs, but it lacks details regarding how such programs should be structured. Without clarifying guidance, components can establish programs that do not align with U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission guidance for model anti-harassment programs. Additionally, GAO found that DOD civilian employees' ability to make restricted reports of sexual assault—confidential disclosures that do not initiate official investigations, but allow the victim to receive DOD-provided sexual assault support services—varies across components. According to DOD officials, they have not taken action to resolve this variation due to conflicts with federal statute, among other things. By reporting to and requesting any needed actions from Congress to resolve any conflicts with statute, the department can alleviate such inconsistencies and minimize legal risks for DOD components.