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Doubts on military's sex assault stats as numbers far exceed those for the U.S.

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By Rowan Scarborough - The Washington Times

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The Pentagon's survey results for the percentage of military women who are sexually assaulted in a year are much higher than the Justice Department's findings for young women in the U.S.

In its 2012 survey, the Pentagon said 6 percent of military women — or 12,000 — were victims of unwanted sexual contact, which is abusive contact that includes rape. The release of that figure triggered an uproar on Capitol Hill, where some lawmakers said the military suffers a sexual misconduct epidemic.

A Bureau of Justice Statistics survey released last year found almost one-fourth of a percent of women ages 18 to 34 had suffered such abuse in 2010. Preliminary numbers for 2012 show a rate of just over four-tenths of a percent.

The age range roughly, but not perfectly, matches that of women in the armed forces. If the military's abuse statistics corresponded with the national figures, fewer than 1,000 active-duty female service members would have been victims.

Overall, the Bureau of Justice Statistics survey found that sexual assault against U.S. women declined sharply over 20 years until 2012, when preliminary numbers show it jumped up to 2008 levels. The number of individual female victims 12 and older plunged 55 percent, to 127,730, in 2010.

Social conservatives who have compared the Pentagon and Justice Department surveys say the disparity can mean one of two things: The armed forces is in the throes of a sexual misconduct wave unmatched in the civilian world, or the methodology of the Pentagon's email survey is flawed.

Critics of the Pentagon survey say its 20 percent response rate for 2012 may include a disproportionate number of those who are motivated to participate. This might produce a higher number because the response did not capture a true scientific sample of the total female active-duty force, they say.

The Pentagon defends the survey as sound.

Robert Maginnis, a retired Army officer and a defense fellow at the Family Research Council, said that if the Defense Department survey and the Justice survey are to be believed, it means military women made up 7 percent of all female sex abuse victims in the country in 2010, yet only a fraction of the population.

"It is wildly out of bounds, and yet President Obama and congressional feminists grasped the results and are jamming politically correct solutions down our military's throat," Mr. Maginnis said. "The result in fiscally austere times is to rob other more important training and intimidate our warriors."

The Pentagon provided a statement to The Washington Times saying the Justice Department's survey is not a good comparison.

"The Defense Department's survey results are not comparable to the Justice Department's survey results because they compare vastly different demographic populations," the statement says. "When surveys examine all age ranges, the average prevalence is lower than if you just look at certain

segments of society. When you look at the military — which is a segment of society — it has higher rates of prevalence than society on average as a whole." **You are currently viewing the printable version of this article, to return to the normal page, please click here.**

Comparing apples to apples

The Pentagon said there are better comparisons, such as the 2007 Campus Sexual Assault Study of undergraduates at two large public universities.

RTI International, a North Carolina research firm, conducted a Web-based survey of 5,446 women ages 18 to 25 and got a 42 percent response rate. It found that 19 percent of women said they had experienced an attempted or completed sexual assault since entering college — which could mean over a single year for freshmen and over four years for seniors.

Released in May, the Pentagon survey fueled an Obama administration campaign to depict sexual assault in the military as out of control. Media reports have suggested that the military is a haven for sexual misconduct. Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel has made stamping out sexual misconduct a top priority and talks about it frequently.

The difference between the Pentagon and Justice Department surveys is striking, if not an apples-to-apples comparison.

The Pentagon said 4 percent of all active-duty military women in 2010 and 6 percent in 2012 were victims of "unwanted sexual contact" in the previous 12 months.

"Unwanted sexual contact" is a catchall phrase for attempted or completed abusive sexual contact to include rape.

In 2013, the Bureau of Justice Statistics released reports in March and in September based on months of in-person interviews. They focused on violent crime in 2010, including the category of rape/sexual assault. It fits essentially the same parameters as the Pentagon's definition, and Justice uses the same term, "unwanted sexual contact."

Its survey found that 0.1 percent, or one-tenth of one percent, of girls and women 12 and older were victims of rape or sexual assault in 2010. It was based on a Bureau of Justice Statistics report in March titled "Female Violence of Sexual Violence, 1994-2010."

It contains data that more closely match the military women population. The survey found that 0.37 percent, more than a third of a percent, of women ages 18 to 34 experienced sexual assault "victimization." This term captures all incidents, not just individual victims. But 85 percent were individual victims.

Again, the rate is far below the Pentagon survey rate.

'Such bad math'

The bureau's statistics are based on the National Crime Victimization Survey, which is considered the gold standard for capturing violent crime rates because of its methodology.

Unlike the Pentagon's emailed survey to a website link, the National Crime Victimization Survey involves face-to-face interviews with a scientific sample size (146,570) and follow-up telephone sessions, all conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau.

The Pentagon survey said 12,000 military women, or 6 percent of the roughly 200,000 active-duty women, reported being victims of unwanted sexual contact. The total number of victims was 26,000, including 14,000 men.

The Bureau of Justice Statistics report, "Measuring the Prevalence of Crime with the National Crime Victimization Survey," said there were 127,000 unique female victims in 2010 in the U.S. With 131 million girls and women 12 and older in 2010, it works out to a rate of 0.1 percent.

Some inside the military have questioned the Pentagon results, which were based on 22,792 respondents from 108,478 emails.

The month it was released, Capt. Lindsay Rodman, a Marine Corps judge advocate, wrote an op-ed in The Wall Street Journal titled "The Pentagon's Bad Math on Sexual Assault."

"The truth is that the 26,000 figure is such bad math — derived from an unscientific sample set and extrapolated military-wide — that no conclusions can be drawn from it," Capt. Rodman wrote. "It is disheartening to me, as a female officer in the Marine Corps and a judge advocate devoted to the professional practice of law in the military, to see Defense Department leaders and members of Congress deal with this emotionally charged issue without the benefit of solid, verifiable data."

Critics make another point. The same survey has fluctuated greatly. It found 34,000 victims in 2006, then 19,000 in 2010, a 44 percent drop. Then the 2012 number came out — 26,000.

"These numbers vary widely because incidents involving unwanted sexual contact cannot accurately be extrapolated military-wide using this survey," Capt. Rodman wrote.

The Pentagon statement to The Times defended the survey sample as sufficient to "drill down" into many population components. As to the fluctuation, it said the male responses have remained constant in all three surveys since 2006, proving the methodology is sound.

"If there were a methodological issue with the survey resulting in an artificial inflation of estimates, we would expect to find this kind of fluctuation across the board — not just with active duty women," the Pentagon said.

Chain of command

It was the 12,000 female victims figure, coupled with questionable legal decisions by some commanders, that drove a move in Congress to revamp sexual assault laws under the Uniform Code of Military Justice.

The rhetoric was heated. Sen. Kirsten E. Gillibrand, New York Democrat, said she was "looking to end the epidemic of sexual assault in the military." She wanted to take commanders out of the process of deciding serious sex abuse cases.

She told USA Today: "And if you listen to victims, they will tell you over and over again that the reason they're not reporting these cases is they don't believe the chain of command will do anything. They also fear or have witnessed retaliation."

The Pentagon report said in May: "Additional work is needed to reduce the negative consequences of reporting and to encourage more victims to come forward."

The Pentagon has put people and programs in place the past year to achieve just that. There were 3,374 reports in 2012 of military and civilian victims, men and women. The Pentagon says the number increased to 5,400 in 2013 for a report due April 30.

"The numbers of real cases have escalated, and that is reason for concern," said Elaine Donnelly, director of the Center for Military Readiness, referring to reported complaints, as opposed to the 26,000 survey figure. "But the virtual numbers, based on surveys, seem to have one purpose only — building political pressure for more highly paid [sexual assault response coordinators], civilian consultants, and harmful legislation like the Gillibrand bill, which would violate principles of justice for both accusers and the accused.

"This is a sign of cultural dissonance and confusion about gender 'roles' in the military," said Mrs. Donnelly. "Men don't know how to act because some women want to be treated like women and others want to be 'one of the boys' — until they get hurt physically or emotionally. It is difficult for a young man to know how to be 'an officer and a gentleman' when the word 'lady' is considered a four-letter word, and the Pentagon wants to expose unwilling women to more violence in land combat."

Said Mr. Maginnis, author of "Deadly Consequences: How Cowards Are Pushing Women Into Combat": "The Pentagon survey is absolutely absurd and incredibly misleading but great fodder for radical feminists who aim to destroy our military."