

# Is Sexual Assault Really an 'Epidemic'?

The U.S. military actually looks pretty good compared to, say, college.

BY ROSA BROOKS

*P*olitico calls it a "scandal," *Time* calls it an "epidemic," Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel describes it as a "scourge," and President Obama says it's "dangerous to our national security."

No, they're not talking about the spreading violence in Egypt, or hunger strikes at Guantanamo Bay, or even the high military suicide rate (we've already lost interest in that). The military crisis du jour -- what Army Chief of Staff Ray Odierno calls the Army's "number one priority" -- is sexual assault.

Sexual assault in the military is a genuine and serious problem, but the frantic rhetoric may be doing more harm than good. It conceals the progress the military has made in developing effective sexual assault prevention and response programs, and it distracts us from the even higher rates of sexual violence in comparable civilian populations.

Ultimately, the current panic about sexual violence in the military may be less a reflection of sexual abuse trends than a reflection of broader societal anxieties about the changing role of women -- and changing attitudes toward the age-old assumption that the military is synonymous with "manliness."

## **Sexual assault in the military**

On the face of it, there's plenty of reason for the shock and outrage about sexual assault in the military. Extrapolating from responses to an anonymous survey of servicemembers, the Defense Department concluded that there may have been as many as 26,000 instances of "unwanted sexual contact" in 2012.

That's a whole lot of unwanted sexual contact -- and whether it involves drunken groping or violent rape, sexual assaults can shatter careers and psyches. That's particularly true when the chain of command responds inappropriately, which still happens more often than it should. In the Pentagon's survey, some 67 percent of female servicemembers who said they experienced sexual assault never reported the assault to authorities -- and of those "non-reporters," 66 percent said they felt "uncomfortable" reporting the incident, 51 percent lacked confidence that their report would be treated confidentially, and 47 percent said that fear of retaliation or reprisal prevented them from reporting the assaults.

There's no question that the military needs to do more to address the problem of sexual assault. Nevertheless, when you look more closely at the statistics, there's much less reason than commonly assumed to condemn the military. Although the *New York Times* editorial board insists that the military has an "entrenched culture of sexual violence," rates of sexual assault in the military in fact appear to be substantially lower than rates of sexual assault in comparable civilian populations. And although underreporting remains a serious problem, military personnel are substantially *more* likely than civilians to report sexual assaults to the authorities.

Relative to the size of the military population, 26,000 sexual assaults means that 6.1 percent of female servicemembers (and 1.2 percent of male servicemembers) experienced unwanted sexual contact during 2012. If you favor your glass half full, you might prefer to note that 93.9 percent of female servicemembers and 98.8 percent of male servicemembers had *no* unwanted sexual contact.

Not surprisingly, the Pentagon found that two-thirds of both the perpetrators and victims of reported sexual assaults were young -- aged 24 or under. In part, this reflects the age distribution in the military as a whole (roughly half of all servicemembers are 17-24 years old), but it also reflects the fact that young people are disproportionately likely to engage

in foolish and dangerous sexual behavior. They have less life and military experience than older servicemembers, less sexual experience, and less experience with the effects of alcohol, which is a factor in roughly half of military sexual assaults.

### **Sexual assault rates in civilian populations**

To evaluate levels of sexual assault in the military, we need some points of comparison. First, consider sexual assault rates in the U.S. population as a whole. It's virtually impossible to get apples-to-apples comparisons, as various studies use slightly different definitions of sexual assault and look at different timeframes. But as Micah Zenko and Amelia Mae Wolff noted in a May 21 Foreign Policy article, the available evidence suggests that sexual assault rates in the civilian population are similar or higher than in the military. A 2010 study by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) found that 18.3 percent of civilian women had been raped at some point in their lifetime, while 27.2 percent had experienced "unwanted sexual contact."

In the 12 month period preceding the study, the CDC report found that 1.1 percent of women reported experiencing a rape or attempted rape, and an additional 5.6 percent of women reported some form of "other sexual violence," for an overall rape and sexual violence rate of 6.7 percent -- slightly higher than the 6.1 percent of women reporting unwanted sexual contact in the 12 month period examined by the DOD study. And in the civilian population, as in the military, sexual assault rates are highest among the young: The CDC found that 79.6 percent of rape victims reported that they were first raped before they reached the age of 25.

It's also useful to examine sexual assault rates in another kind of institution populated mainly by 17- to 24-year-olds: the civilian university. Here again, direct comparisons are impossible due to variations in the available studies, but the evidence again suggests that sexual assault rates in the military are, if anything, lower than in similar civilian settings.

One major study published by the Justice Department in 2000 found that 3.5 percent of college women reported a rape or attempted rape, while an additional 15.5 percent of college women reported that they had been "sexually victimized" in some other way during the academic year in which they were surveyed. Of these "non-rape" sexual victimizations, 7.7 percent involved physical force. Another 2007 Justice Department study found that "13.7 percent of undergraduate women had been victims of at least one completed sexual assault since entering college."

College women also appear to be even less likely than women in the military to report incidents of sexual assault to the authorities. Again, the caveat here is that the available studies looked at different time periods. But while 33 percent of female servicemembers who said they had experienced "unwanted sexual contact" in 2012 said they reported the assaults to military authorities, the Justice Department's 2000 study of sexual assaults on college campuses found that only 5 percent of victims reported the incidents to college or law enforcement authorities. As with military women, the college women who did not report their experiences cited concerns about confidentiality, not being taken seriously, or being treated with hostility by the police.

### **The military as model?**

Here's what it adds up to: All in all, the rate of sexual assault in the military doesn't appear significantly higher than the rate in the broader civilian population -- and when you look at college campuses, which, like the military, are full of 17- to 24-year-olds, the military's sexual assault rates start looking low in comparison. The *New York Times* may be right to assert that the military has an "entrenched culture of sexual violence," but it would be more accurate to observe that the United States as a whole is characterized by an entrenched culture of sexual violence. Macho traditions notwithstanding, the military appears to have done a better job than most colleges of reducing the sexual assault rate and increasing women's willingness to report assaults to the authorities.

To be completely clear, this is not an argument for deciding that sexual assault isn't a problem in the military. Far from it: Sexual assaults continue to destroy too many lives, and the high rates of military women who say they don't trust the system enough to report sexual assaults is evidence of the ongoing need to improve both prevention and response programs. Nevertheless, the military seems to be doing something right, since it has been able to bring sexual assault rates down below those prevalent in comparable civilian populations.

Even the best prevention programs are unlikely to eliminate *all* sexual crimes, but good programs taken seriously by committed leaders can make a real difference. The military should continue to study the factors that affect sexual assault rates and reporting rates, and continue to refine and improve prevention and response programs -- and civilian universities seeking to lower their own sexual assault rates should consider looking to the military for examples and ideas.

### **Anxiety and reaction: changing roles, changing norms**

All this leaves something of a mystery. If military sexual assault rates are *lower* than comparable civilian sexual assault rates, why all the frantic rhetoric recently about scandal, crisis, and epidemic? Why isn't Congress saying, "Good job, DOD, you've demonstrated that a sustained focus on preventing sexual assault can keep military sexual assault rates below the rate in civilian populations. Now let's get that sexual assault rate down even further!"

Here's my theory.

The last two years have seen two policy changes that radically challenge traditional conceptions of masculinity and military ideals: the end of the ban on homosexuals serving openly in the military and the ban on women serving in combat positions. Change can feel

threatening to those accustomed to the status quo, and social change this far-reaching has historically been accompanied by exaggerated claims of the harms likely to result. Sometimes these claims are well meaning; other times, not so much.

When President Harry Truman desegregated the U.S. military, critics warned that the move would lead to an increase in race-based tensions and violence. But as Truman and others had predicted, equality ultimately led to a decrease in incidents of discrimination and racial harassment, despite early hiccups. When ending "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" was debated, critics issued similar warnings about the impact of allowing gays and lesbians to serve openly. So far, the evidence suggests that this concern was just as unfounded.

When it comes to allowing women into the military, opponents have also asserted that allowing both sexes to serve side by side would lead to increasing sexual assaults against women -- and any news of sexual assault in the military is used to justify opposition to full integration of women in to the military. ("We told you so," crowed the right-wing Independent Women's Forum in response to a 2004 *Washington Post* story on sexual assault in the Army, proudly noting its "long history" of warning that gender-integrated training would "inevitably" give rise to "sexual mishaps.")

Maybe it's just happenstance that the most recent round of hysteria about military sexual assault rates followed hard on the heels of the Pentagon's announcement that it would open all combat positions to women, but I doubt it.

Most of those speaking out against sexual violence in the military are strong supporters of the full integration of women into combat roles, but we should be aware that when remarks about "epidemics" and "crises" are carelessly made, they can discourage young women from pursuing military careers and play into the hands of those who would prefer to keep the "no girls allowed" sign on the door.

Advocates for women in the military should press for additional sexual assault prevention reforms, but at the same time, they should insist that we keep the military's sexual assault rate in perspective -- and they should continue to point out how important and empowering it is for women to participate in the military alongside their male peers. A 2011 Pew survey found that post-9/11 female veterans were "just as likely as their male counterparts to say they have experienced the positive benefits of military service." Seventy-nine percent of women veterans believed their military service had "helped them get ahead in life," 87 percent said that serving in the military had built their self-confidence, and 93 percent felt the military had helped them "grow and mature as a person."

In the end, Gen. Martin Dempsey, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said it best: "We've had this ongoing issue with sexual harassment, sexual assault.... I believe it's because we've had separate classes of military personnel, at some level. Now, you know, it's far more complicated than that, but when you have one part of the population that is designated as warriors and another part that's designated as something else, I think that disparity begins to establish a psychology that in some cases led to that environment. I have to believe, the more we can treat people equally, the more likely they are to treat each other equally."

Say it, brother.

MARCO LONGARI/AFP/Getty Images