

## Unseen foe for troops: sexual assault in US military

Sexual assault poses 'intolerable' threat to US military troops, amid poor record of reporting and prosecution, a broad survey finds. Lawmakers seek better resources for victims.

By Anna Mulrine, / Staff writer / April 29, 2011



Air Force Sgt. Marti Ribeiro says she was assaulted by a fellow serviceman while on duty in Afghanistan.

Courtesy of Brian Schroeder

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### WASHINGTON

When US Army Sgt. Andrea Neutzling was raped by two fellow soldiers during a yearlong deployment in Iraq in 2005, she recounts, she decided not to say anything to her commanders. She had previously reported a sexual assault by a colleague, with little consequence, and didn't want to be viewed as a troublemaker, she says. She simply slept on a cot, her rifle pointed toward the door, for days afterward.



Panayiota Bertzikis, executive director of the Military Rape Crisis Center, says she was a victim of assault in the US Coast Guard.

Cliff Owen/AP/File

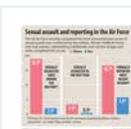
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Throughout the military, sexual assault – which affects about 19 percent of female troops and 2 percent of males, according to the most comprehensive survey of sexual assault ever conducted by the US military – is rarely reported. Released last month, the survey of Air Force personnel found that "less than 1 in 5 women and 1 in 15 men" filed a formal report after their most recent sexual assault.

Half of the female airmen who reported being raped said they chose not to report the attack for "fear of being treated badly" or because they "did not want to cause trouble" in their unit. Nearly a third said they did not trust the reporting process.

Top military officials acknowledge the need for change. "This crime threatens our people, and for that reason alone it is intolerable and incompatible with who and what we are," said Gen. Norton Schwartz, Air Force chief of staff.

### Bipartisan legislation under way



Graphic: Sexual assault and reporting in the Air Force  
(Rich Clabaugh/Staff)

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Reps. Niki Tsongas (D) of Massachusetts and Mike Turner (R) of Ohio have proposed legislation to address the crime and to encourage more victims to come forward.

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Of those few troops who do report sexual offences, even fewer see their attacker face justice, these representatives note. While 40 percent of civilian allegations are prosecuted, "this number is a staggeringly low 8 percent in the military," they said in a joint statement.

The bill ensures that conversations between assaulted service members and victim advocates remain confidential. Currently, those conversations can be subpoenaed.

The bill also calls for more training of sexual assault response coordinators, or SARCs, and requires them to hold full-time Defense Department positions, not be hired as contractors.

Better-trained SARCs could have helped Air Force Sgt. Marti Ribeiro after an officer in her unit raped her when she took a smoking break – 10 feet from the guard station, behind a large generator – while on guard duty at a base in Afghanistan, in 2006.

After the rape, she says, she completed her guard duty shift, then looked for a sexual assault coordinator. "I didn't take a shower, I didn't wash my hands," Ribeiro remembers. "I'd watched 'Law & Order' and thought to myself, 'I'm going to do exactly what [character] Detective Benson says' ... so they can swab and do the rape kit."

After Ribeiro told the SARC what had happened, "Her first question was, 'Where was your weapon?' " – implying, it seemed to Ribeiro, that she should have been able to defend herself.

Ribeiro's answer prompted the coordinator to send her away. "Because I'd left my weapon in the guard shack, she told me I would be charged with dereliction of duty." Ribeiro returned to her base housing and did not speak about the attack for six months.

The SARC had failed to advise her that she could receive a rape kit (she didn't), that she could save the evidence in case she chose to pursue a charge later, or that she could not be charged for details included in a confidential reporting of the crime. "You don't think about those things at the time," Ribeiro says. "You're just in survivor mode."

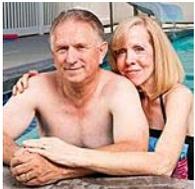
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