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Sexual Assault Training in the Military:
 Evaluating Efforts to End the “Invisible War”

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RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

- In 2014, the RAND National Defense Research Institute (NDRI) study estimated that at least 20,000 active-duty service members were sexually assaulted in the past year. The U.S. Department of Defense has undertaken significant efforts to provide comprehensive sexual assault training for service members, but their training initiatives have undergone little evaluation by outside researchers. This study assesses whether prevention and education fostered accurate knowledge about sexual assault resources and protocols among active duty personnel, and how service members perceive the effectiveness of these efforts.
- After thorough assessment, the researchers found that exposure to comprehensive training predicted lower sexual assault incidence and superior knowledge. However, comprehensive training differed across military branch, rank, gender, and sexual assault history. For example, both Enlisted personnel and Service members in the Air Force described greater exposure to comprehensive sexual assault training than Officers and Service members in the other branches.
- Women and sexual assault survivors (especially, female survivors) were less likely to report that training was effective at reducing/preventing sexual assault and explaining the difference between restricted and unrestricted reporting options compared to men and Service members who had not recently experienced sexual assault. These findings raise questions about conclusions made in the Department of Defense’s 2010 Annual Report on sexual assault in the military, that training is effective because “most” Service members agree.

ABSTRACT

“Sexual assault is an insidious problem in the United States military. In 2005 the Department of Defense (DoD) created the Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office, which centralizes responsibility for sexual assault training. However, this training initiative has undergone little evaluation by outside researchers. Addressing this need, we analyzed responses from over 24,000 active duty personnel who completed the 2010 DoD Workplace and Gender Relations Survey. We assessed whether sexual assault training exposure (None, Minimal, Partial, or Comprehensive) predicted accurate knowledge of sexual assault resources and protocols. Using a social-ecological framework, we investigated whether institutional and individual factors influenced Service members’ training exposure and judgment of training effectiveness. According to our results, exposure to comprehensive training predicted lower sexual assault incidence and superior knowledge. However, comprehensive training differed as a function of military branch, rank, gender, and sexual assault history. Judgments of training effectiveness also varied across these dimensions. Our results highlight the importance of considering context, gender, and victimization history when evaluating institutional efforts to end sexual violence. The DoD’s 2010 annual report on military sexual assault concluded that “most Active Duty members receive effective training on sexual assault” (p. 104). Our results cast doubt on that assertion.”

IMPLICATIONS

FOR PRACTICE

Persons leading sexual assault trainings should remain cognizant that the main goal of sexual assault training is to instill accurate knowledge of military resources available and to inform service members of the protocols regarding sexual assault, including preventing and responding to sexual assault. In addition to seeking any necessary physical health services, military sexual assault survivors should consider speaking with a mental health professional, spiritual leader, doctor, or Sexual Assault Response Counselor to address any trauma. Health, spiritual, medical professionals, and counselors serving sexual assault survivors should offer comprehensive and inclusive treatment that is sensitive to survivors’ needs, including counseling and addressing any active concerns. Addressing active concerns could assist in survivors maintaining a high quality of life. Family members and friends of returning service members who have been sexually assaulted should remain supportive, keeping in mind that individuals respond to trauma in different ways.

FOR POLICY

The DoD might standardize the content provided by the Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office to ensure all service members are receiving the highest quality of training regardless of service branch. Air Force participants reported the most access and exposure to training; other military branches might collaborate with the Air Force to develop best practices for delivering sexual assault training to service members. The DoD might mandate participation of sexual assault prevention and response training to ensure that all service members are provided with the essential training needed to reduce sexual assault and provide assistance to survivors. Further implementation of training might include interactive learning modules that encourage discussion and active participation. Recently, there have been several well-publicized instances in which those individuals, whose jobs are to prevent sexual assault, have been charged with sexual assault themselves; the DoD might further review who is teaching sexual assault trainings to maintain integrity of such a vital program. The DoD might restructure course to ensure training class sizes are small enough to encourage active participation; one problematic training session had as many as 800 service members. The restructuring might include periodic refresher courses and post-training activities to ensure long-term effectiveness. The DoD might establish rigorous evaluations of training effectiveness, and increase the transparency of those efforts.

FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The data used in this empirical study cannot determine causal relationships between sexual assault training and knowledge of sexual assault reporting protocols. Future research should collect data on the length of military service, which could provide useful information on the breadth of sexual assault training provided over service members’ military career and the effectiveness of such training. Since findings show that training results varied significantly across service branches, future studies should examine differences in training programs and delivery. A limitation of this study is that sexual assault survivor status was limited to the past year. Future researchers should expand the definition of sexual assault survivor to more than the past-year as many of this study’s ‘non-victims’ may have experienced sexual assault at some point during their military career. To more objectively quantify the amount of training received, forthcoming research should use number of hours of training as a measurement. Experimental methods to evaluate training should be used in future studies to determine if there is a causal relationship between sexual assault training, knowledge, and prevention. Finally, future studies should consider the possible unanticipated outcomes of training that may reinforce gender stereotypes and evaluate the specific content of military sexual assault programs.

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