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# Alcohol Use, Drinking Climate, and Experiences of Sexual Harassment in Military Barracks

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Sexual harassment in U.S. military workplaces is an enduring problem that affected more than 135,500 Active component service men and women in 2021 (Breslin et al., 2022). Although prevalence rates related to military workplaces are reported (Breslin et al., 2022), few studies have examined sexually harassing behaviors in service members' living quarters despite the barracks being an extension of the workplace, and sexual harassment being closely associated with sexual assault, which can occur in the barracks (Harned et al., 2002; Sadler et al., 2003). Common living areas on installations are often occupied by the same individuals with whom one works and socializes with in other professional and/or community-based contexts (Bell et al., 2018). Accordingly, it is reasonable to assume that the sexual harassment experienced in the workplace could carry over into living environments, and that gathering estimates for sexual harassment in living environments should be included in prevalence estimation.

Although barracks are generally inhabited by junior enlisted members, who are typically below the legal drinking age, they are an influential setting for forming climate perceptions about drinking and engaging in drinking behavior (Poehlman et al., 2011) and have been implicated in other sexual stressors within its milieu (Standard & Thompson, 2016; Swecker et al., 2020). Installation commanders have identified issues related to alcohol intoxication within these communal settings, and have implemented policies to thwart alcohol storing and consumption (Sadler et al., 2018; Sicard, 2022). However, problematic drinking in barracks persists, given that social perceptions of drinking climate are often underpinned by the belief that alcohol consumption is normative, and therefore appropriate and justified (Sicard, 2022; Osborne et al., 2022). Furthermore, alcohol intoxication has been identified as a risk factor in experiences of sexual harassment and assault (Bell et al., 2018; Buysse et al., 2023).

Shared living contexts on military installations appear to be associated with alcohol use and peer pressure to assimilate to expectations of group cohesion created by local social norms (Mulrine, 2012; Skopp et al., 2020; Swecker et al., 2020)—which are thought to be risk factors of sexual harassment and assault. Therefore, it is imperative to invest in research that focuses on the effect of military members' perceptions of drinking climate within the barracks and the relationships among drinking climate, drinking behaviors, and sexual harassment.

In this study, we examined whether alcohol use in the barracks would be associated with sexual harassment and explored the relationships among perceptions about a climate conducive to drinking while in the barracks, alcohol use, and experiences of sexual harassment.

## Method

### Sample

An anonymous, cross-sectional survey of U.S. military service members recruited through social media outlets was fielded through Qualtrics. Inclusion criteria are 18 years or older, English-speaking, an Active or Reserve component member of the U.S. military, and having lived in military housing. A total of 277 respondents began the survey, 67 were eligible and chose to participate, and 39 respondents had complete data.

The average age of respondents was 27 years ( $SD = 5.00$ , range 19-37 years). Self-reported race and ethnicity included 18% ( $n = 7$ ) African American/Black, 10% (4) Asian, 5% (2) Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, 10% (4) Hispanic/Latinx, and 56% (22) White. Seven (18%) self-reported gender as female, 29 (74%) male, and the remainder reported gender identity as agender (1), questioning (2), or transgender woman (1). The majority (54%) were single and never married. Army was the most frequent branch of service (46%), followed by Marine Corps (21%), Navy (15%), Air Force (13%), and Coast Guard (5%). The majority of the sample's pay grade was E1-E9 (74%), with 13% W1-W5, and 13% O1-O6 or above. The majority (82%) of the sample had been in service 1-5 years with 18% in service 6-15 years. In the past 12 months, 87% of the sample had resided in the barracks for at least one month or longer with the remainder of the sample (13%) having resided in the barracks more than one year ago.

### Measures

Perceptions About Drinking Climate in the Barracks (Ormerod et al., 2023), an author developed measure, assessed perceptions about a climate supportive of drinking alcohol within the barracks/dorms with four items that were scored from 1 (*not at all*) to 4 (*all the time*). Items were summed with higher scores reflecting a stronger perceived climate for drinking in the barracks. Sample item: "How often do you feel influenced to drink while in the barracks/dorms?"

Alcohol consumption was measured by the modified version of the Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test or AUDIT-C (Bush et al., 1998) via a 3-item self-report screener to identify hazardous drinking among military members. Three questions measured respondents' frequency of drinking, number of drinks consumed on a typical drinking day, and the frequency of binge drinking defined as the maximum number of drinks consumed in a day. Therefore, one standard drink was defined as one can or bottle of beer, a glass of wine, one cocktail or one shot of liquor. Specific items included: "How often do you have a drink containing alcohol?" "How many standard drinks containing alcohol do you have on a typical day?" and "How often do you have six or more drinks on one occasion?" (Bush et al., 1998). Response options ranged from 0 to 4 and were scored accordingly with higher scores reflecting greater alcohol use. The AUDIT-C has been acknowledged as a valid measure for identifying hazardous drinking among U.S. military populations (Crawford et al., 2013; Searle et al., 2015; Osborne et al., 2022) and effectively measured hazardous drinking in study respondents ( $\alpha = .74$ ). Gender differences in the use of alcohol have also been identified, with an AUDIT-C score of four or higher considered hazardous among men and a score of three or more considered hazardous in females (Bush et al., 1998).

Sexual harassment was measured using the military version of the Sexual Experiences Questionnaire (SEQ-DoD-s; Fitzgerald et al., 1995; Fitzgerald et al., 1999; Stark et al., 2002). This version of the SEQ included 16 items assessing the type and frequency of unwanted sexual harassment including sexist behavior, sexual hostility, unwanted

sexual harassment, and sexual coercion. Three additional items were included that assessed experiences with electronic sexual harassment (Swartout et al., 2019). Response options ranged along a 5-point Likert scale where 0 = *never*, 1 = *once or twice*, 2 = *sometimes*, 3 = *often*, and 4 = *many times* (Fitzgerald et al., 1995; Fitzgerald et al., 1999). Items were behaviorally worded. Example items include "made offensive suggestive remarks," "made offensive remarks about your appearance, body, or sexual activities," "made unwanted attempts to establish a romantic sexual relationship with you despite your efforts to discourage it," and "made you feel threatened with some sort of retaliation for not being sexually cooperative" (Stark et al., 2002). Stark et al. (2002) reported alpha coefficients for the SEQ-DoD-s total scale as  $\alpha = .92$  for active-duty women and  $\alpha = .91$  for active-duty men.

## Results

A post hoc power analysis using G\*Power for linear multiple regression with  $N = 39$ , a medium-large effect size of  $f^2 = .27$ ,  $\alpha = .05$ , yielded power = .80 with 2 predictors. Nearly all respondents (92.3%) reported at least one experience of sexual harassment. Table 1 displays descriptive statistics, bivariate correlations, and psychometric information for the study variables (all analyses performed in SPSS 29). All correlations were in the expected directions and suggested that drinking climate in the barracks was positively associated with greater alcohol consumption and more frequent experiences of sexual harassment, and that alcohol consumption was positively related to more frequent sexual harassment.

**Table 1**  
Descriptive Statistics, Bivariate Correlations, and Alpha Coefficients for Study Variables

Variable	Range	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Cronbach's $\alpha$	1	2	3
Drinking Climate	4-15	8.36	2.37	.69	-		
Alcohol Consumption	0-10	3.51	2.52	.74	.50**	-	
Sexual Harassment	19-77	43.74	15.98	.96	.55**	.60**	-

$N = 36$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

In the linear multiple regression, the overall model accounted for a significant 44.4% of the variance in sexual harassment  $F(2, 36) = 14.39$ ,  $p < .001$ . The findings are summarized in Table 2. As

expected, more frequent sexual harassment was associated with stronger perceptions that there was a climate supportive of drinking in ones' barracks/dorm and more consumption of alcohol.

**Table 2**  
Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analysis with Sexual Harassment as the Criterion

Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Barracks Drinking Climate	2.29	.97	.34	2.37	.023
Alcohol Consumption	2.72	.91	.43	3.00	.005

$N = 36$ .

## Discussion

Findings from this ongoing investigation are promising. Our study is the first to examine whether an association exists between local social norms (drinking climate) in military living situations (barracks/dorms) and experiences of sexual harassment. It further contributes to the existing literature because few studies of sexual harassment in the military examine unwanted sexual experiences outside of the workplace and little is known about these experiences in shared living situations in the military. The finding that nearly all respondents experienced some form of sexual harassment suggests that sexual harassment in the barracks is an area that should not be overlooked.

Our findings are in line with previous research, which shows that local norms or micro-climates are associated with sexual stressors for military men and women (Murdoch et al., 2009). Further, our findings suggest that men in the barracks experience sexually harassing behavior and that this is linked to drinking climate and alcohol consumption. By examining both drinking and sexual harassing behavior, we measured two elements of cultural norms that are ubiquitous across all military branches. Broadly, these results illuminate servicemember perceptions of local social norms related to drinking and association of such norms with drinking behavior and sexual harassment.

While this research is ongoing and final results may differ, alcohol use and experiences of sexual harassment in the military are of importance. The issue of sexual violence in military workplace settings is well documented, and military barracks represent a unique extension of the workplace where these cultural norms exist without external influence or challenge. Our findings suggest that examining microclimates associated with alcohol use in the barracks and their relationship to sexual harassment is a promising direction for research. Understanding the interplay between drinking climate, drinking behavior, and sexual harassment appears to be a useful direction to explore with the intent to inform prevention of sexual harassment in the U.S. military.

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