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# Efforts to Prevent Sexual Violence in the U.S. Military: A Review and Recommendations for Increased Effectiveness

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Sexual violence is a significant problem in the U.S. military and has been on the rise in recent years despite growing awareness and prevention efforts. According to data collected by the 2021 Workplace and Gender Relations Survey of Military Members, there was an estimated 25% increase in military sexual assaults between 2018 and 2021. Women and service members who identify as sexual and/or gender minorities face a heightened risk of sexual assault. Data indicates that sexual assault is closely related to experiences of sexual harassment, gender-based discrimination, and hostility in the workplace, which may drive the increased risk for these groups (Abrams, [2024](#); OPA, 2022).

In 2021, the Secretary of Defense launched an Independent Review Commission (IRC) to assess the military's approach to sexual harassment and assault. The IRC's report highlighted virtually no prevention specialists within the Department of Defense (DoD) workforce, which has resulted in a significant lack of high-quality, evidence-based prevention strategies. In response, the DoD is now hiring over 2,000 psychologists and other prevention experts over the next few years to tackle this issue (Abrams, [2024](#)).

To move forward in the prevention of sexual violence in the military most effectively, it is critical to review what has previously been implemented and studied in these contexts. Therefore, we conducted a literature review to synthesize and evaluate the small body of research that describes prevention efforts made thus far.

## Method

A literature search of published efforts made to prevent sexual violence in the U.S. military from 2005 to 2024 was conducted using the APA PsycInfo database and the DoD website. Eighteen relevant peer-reviewed journal articles and two reports published by the DoD related to prevention were included. Prevention programs implemented in military settings were evaluated according to prevention best practices as identified by the DoD's Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Training and Education Center of Excellence (U.S. Department of Defense, n.d.). These best practices include:

1. **Varied teaching methods** that are interactive and encourage skill-building
2. **Sufficient dosage** to have an effect and measure impact
3. **Theory-driven, evidence-based** strategies

4. **Emphasize building positive, healthy relationships**
5. **A comprehensive approach** in which programs are integrated with other efforts such as systems-level interventions (policies, holding leadership and perpetrators accountable, etc.)
6. **Appropriately timed** to maximize impact in the lives of participants (early in career/training)
7. **Socio-culturally relevant** to the participants' context
8. **Staff are well-trained**, sensitive, and receive adequate supervision and support
9. **Evaluation of outcomes** to determine program efficacy

## Results

Of the 18 peer-reviewed journal articles included, seven were evaluations of specific prevention programs implemented in a military context, five related to sexual harassment/assault prevention training, policy development, and prevention program implementation, two were reviews and comparisons of prevention programs to best practices, and six were assessments of various factors (ex: behaviors, attitudes, skills) related to sexual assault and bystander intervention to inform future prevention training. The two reports published by the DoD included a review of current policies, steps taken to address sexual violence (Acosta et al., [2021](#)), and a review of civilian programs that could be adapted for use within the military to aid in sexual violence prevention (Farris et al., [2021](#)). Interestingly, only five of the 18 research studies and the two reports published by the DoD through the RAND Corporation appeared to be prevention-related programs or research initiated by the DoD or one of its departments (i.e. the Department of the Navy). The other thirteen research studies appeared to be led primarily by civilian academics conducting research with the cooperation of an accessible military population. Additionally, of the seven articles evaluating a prevention program (two articles evaluated the same program), only two prevention programs were created specifically for the military while the other five programs were adaptations of already existing civilian programs typically implemented on college campuses.

The studies describing the six prevention programs varied in the level of detail provided regarding program design and implementation. However, what was provided showed that the programs varied widely with respect to dosage, comprehensiveness, teaching methods, format, content,

and goals. The programs' goals typically centered around increasing awareness and knowledge about sexual assault, changing attitudes toward victims, and increasing bystander intervention behaviors. Most of the studies showed that the program had a direct effect on awareness, knowledge, and attitudes in the ways researchers expected and desired. Some of the studies also showed positive short-term effects on bystander intentions and/or behaviors when self-report post-tests were utilized a few months later. However, none of the studies evaluated the long-term effects and outcomes on sexual assault prevention. Additionally, the two review articles—one of which evaluated prevention efforts exclusive to the Air Force (Gedney et al., 2018), and the other evaluated programs implemented by various branches (Orchowski et al., 2018)—found that most programs do not closely follow prevention best practices in design or implementation.

The only study not included in the Orchowski et al. 2018 review was Griffin et al.'s (2021) study of the U.S. Air Force Academy's Cadet Healthy Personal Skills (CHiPS) program. This program focuses on increasing knowledge and skills regarding consent, the relationship between sexual violence and alcohol/substance abuse, changing social norms and increasing bystander intervention, and building self-regulation and healthy interpersonal skills. In this literature review, the CHiPS program was the prevention program that most closely aligned with prevention best practices. It was adapted for the U.S. Air Force Academy from a theory-based civilian program that demonstrated reductions in substance abuse, risky sexual behaviors, violence, and aggression in multiple randomized controlled trials. The program is seven and a half hours of interactive learning and behavioral skills rehearsal that emphasize the development of healthy relationship skills. It is led by trained facilitators and occurs at the beginning of a student's first year when most participants are around the age of 18. Developing healthy interpersonal and self-regulation skills at both a critical developmental period and at the beginning of a military career likely has cross-cutting benefits of not only reducing sexual harassment and assault in the military context but also reducing interpersonal conflict in the workplace and in personal relationships. (Farris et al., 2021).

While the CHiPS program appears promising based on this study which included measurement of unwanted sexual contact on a short-term basis, long-term outcomes have not yet been evaluated. However, future evaluation and research of the CHiPS program may include these long-term outcomes as it has been implemented at the U.S. Air Force Academy every summer since 2018 (Griffin et al., 2021).

## Discussion

The DoD is taking positive steps forward by hiring a workforce of prevention experts whose sole role will be to lead the charge in developing, implementing, and researching effective evidence-based prevention strategies. There is a significant need for further development of evidence-based programs that follow prevention best practices

and are well-suited for the unique culture of the military—whether they are adapted from civilian programs or newly developed. In the future, repeated implementation and evaluation of both short-term and long-term outcomes of these prevention programs are critical next steps to determining their efficacy. Without recurring implementation and longitudinal measurement of outcomes, we cannot determine whether these prevention efforts accomplish what we hope for—the reduction of sexual assault rates.

However, as best practices indicate, a comprehensive approach is necessary to reduce sexual violence occurrence. Programs that target specific behaviors amongst individual service members are not enough on their own to prevent sexual assault. These efforts must be bolstered by system-level interventions such as strong anti-sexual violence policies, reliable and trustworthy reporting, investigation, prosecution procedures, consistent enforcement of appropriate sanctions for perpetrators, and leadership who are held accountable for promoting and maintaining a culture of equity and respect for all service members. While a multi-level approach requires considerable time, effort, and resources to develop and maintain, the protection of our military service members from the internal threat of sexual violence is worth that investment.

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