

Briefing

Seven Recommendations to Prevent Military Sexual Harassment Military Sexual Trauma

Summary

Military sexual harassment (MSH) and military sexual trauma (MST) continue to be critical problems for the U.S. armed forces.

While the RAND survey found improvements since 2012, reports of sexual assaults are still exceptionally higher than other areas of society. The result is a serious impact on mission performance, and a heavy requirement for V.A. after-care—in addition to the permanent damage done to thousands of lives and careers.

MSH/MST prevention programs are currently in place, and the related training is being conducted, but the data makes it clear that there is still much work to be done.

The question is: *Where are the next gains coming from? It's not a matter of trying harder with current solutions. What enhancements are required to make a difference?*

The U.S. armed forces need to utilize a comprehensive, unified, best-practices approach to *prevent* MSH/MST—one that's been *proven* to work.

The civilian sector has spent decades refining this process, and has steadily reduced sexual harassment incidents to levels that are a small fraction of the military. The communications tools and techniques are ready to be adapted to the needs of the U.S. armed forces.

This Briefing presents seven recommendations to continue and accelerate the prevention of MSH/MST.

If military leadership is to be successful in combatting MSH/MST, it needs to significantly upgrade its related training and support processes to incorporate these proven practices. Nothing less will work.

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Progress in the civilian sector

In support of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the EEOC has established guidelines for managerial and front-line training, and for the investigation and resolution of incidents.

As a result of implementing these guidelines in the civilian sector, reports of sexual harassment have declined steadily, from about 70% in the 1970's to 24% in 2011. And it's important to note that these numbers include *all* forms of sexual harassment, not just assault.

This establishes that sexual harassment can be significantly reduced in the workplace. It is *not* an unavoidable fact of life.

A continuing problem

In contrast, research on the U.S. armed forces indicates a different situation. There is little data publicly available on MSH, but research prior to 2013 on MST includes the following:

- 26,000 men and women were assaulted in 2012. (Pentagon)
- 34% to 48% of women and 6% to 38% of men report being sexually assaulted. (Afterdeployment.org)
- 20% to 48% of female veterans report having been sexually assaulted. (U.S. Dept. of Labor)
- 80% of women report being assaulted. (California Research Bureau)
- 23% to 28% of women were assaulted. 11% were raped. (Dept. of Defense)
- 526 military cadets reported unwanted sexual contact. (Dept. of Defense)
- 11% of assaults were reported. 86% of those reporting were women. (U.S. Dept. of Labor)
- A 2012 documentary titled, *The Invisible War*, detailed a history of MST incidents, the lack of action on reports, and the damage done to victims.

U.S. Department of Defense data shows that the reports of sexual assault nearly tripled over a nine-year period ending in 2013. And reports at U.S. military academies nearly doubled over that time.

It was argued that some of this increase might have been due to victims' being more willing to report abuse, but that was refuted by the Department of Labor's finding that only 11% of assaults were reported. Most military victims are still extremely reluctant to file a formal complaint.

In 2014, a RAND survey sponsored by the Pentagon reported that MST was finally on the decline after years of increases. Data indicated that reports of "unwanted sexual contact" in the military dropped 27% from the 2012 high to an estimated 18,900 complaints in 2014. The survey also found that more people were willing to report incidents.

The RAND numbers mean that one in 23 women and one in 111 men are assaulted each year. These are levels that would force a private sector organization to close its doors.

Detractors pointed out that this decrease merely brought the military back to 2010 levels for MST. Military leadership agreed that, despite the gains, much work still needs to be done.

It's a matter of perspective. Incidents of MST still greatly exceed those in any other area of society. Even with the reduction since 2012, the RAND numbers mean that one in 23 women and one in 111 men are assaulted *each year*. These are levels that would force a private sector organization to close its doors.

A cultural disconnect

There has long been the perception that the military has a culture of denial concerning MSH/MST.

There were the "I survived the Tailhook witch hunt" patches that circulated after that 1991 incident. More recently, a Brigadier General was accused of threatening to kill a subordinate or her family if she didn't have sex with him. He received a \$20,000 fine with no jail time, and then retired.

The 2012 documentary movie, *The Invisible War*, features interviews with veterans from multiple branches detailing their assaults. The stories had common themes such as: the lack of an impartial justice system, retaliation against victims, lack of consequences for offenders, forced expulsion from service of victims who file a complaint, and the lack of adequate post-care for survivors.

In the 26,000 military sexual assaults in 2012, less than 3% of them resulted in punishment for the alleged perpetrators. The leadership climate at the top is different now. But the consequences for offenders are still minimal. This is a major cultural disconnect.

The wrong messages

It's a misconception that sexual assault is an act of sex. It isn't. It's an act of *power*.

The Sexual Assault and Prevention Center at the University of Michigan explains, "One of the biggest myths about rape is that it happens out of sexual desire." In fact, many assailants have readily available sexual partners.

MST is pathological behavior. It's a criminal act. Criminals don't think like normal people.

This is why messaging in current MSH/MST programs may actually *reinforce* this pathology. It often shows people who are traumatized, injured, and physically separated from their teammates. This is what offenders want.



This “damaged victim” imagery doesn’t deter offenders. It *gratifies* them. It illustrates what they can do to others with a sexual assault, and probably get away with it. It *supports* their pathology.

In a “Military & Defense” article from *Business Insider*, one female soldier—a 10-year veteran and commander—talked about misguided messages. She described a poster on base titled, “Avoid becoming a victim.” One of the suggestions was to “Avoid secluded areas.” Implicit in this is the assumption that MST is an unavoidable part of military life.

Imagine if a business advised its employees, “Don’t use the back stairs of our HQ building. They’re too isolated. So if you get raped, it’s your fault.” It’s inconceivable.

Then there is the “Sexual Assault Awareness Month.” Personnel just need to be *aware* of it? It’s not about *prevention*? And the focus is *for a month*? It’s not important *all of the time*?

This is incredibly insulting to victims, and sends another wrong message. Imagine if a business had a “Let’s Don’t Rape Other Employees Awareness Month.” Again, it’s inconceivable.

Current training isn’t working

When done improperly, sexual harassment programs can actually *increase* problems post-training. There is often a backlash from the very people this training is designed to protect. Attendees don’t come out feeling protected. They leave feeling humiliated.

The wrong type of sexual harassment and assault training becomes a “difference creator.” It singles out potential targets, and makes the people around them nervous about how everyone should now act.

It creates subtle put-downs, like working shoulder-to-shoulder and telling someone, “Oh, I shouldn’t be touching you. It’s probably sexual harassment.” All that does is build bigger barriers between teammates.

A female airman in the U.S. Air Force wrote an open letter to the *John Q. Public Blog*. She was upset about the Sexual Assault Prevention Response program she attended. “You made me a victim today, and I am nobody’s victim. I am an American airman in the most powerful air force in the world, and you made me into a helpless whore.”

The female commander in the *Business Insider* article also commented, “The training doesn’t help. In all my years in the military, I’ve never heard anyone say anything about what’s being done to stop the perpetrators. It is absolutely alarming.”

Then add in training that is frequently cringe-worthy, where the examples can either trivialize the problem or make things worse, and there is no chance of extinguishing offensive behavior. The data says it’s not working.

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Proven tools that work

It takes more than attitudes and good intentions to prevent MSH/MST. People need to know what they need to *do*. It takes *concepts, tools, and processes* that everyone can apply.

As a result of decades of research and consulting, hundreds of sessions, and thousands of attendees sharing their experiences, there is a proven approach for preventing, communicating, analyzing, and resolving MSH/MST incidents.

Some of the key concepts include:

- Male-female perception gap
- Situational propriety
- Zones of touching
- “Available target” signals
- Creating a culture of performance excellence
- Emotional reactions to MSH/MST training
- Conditions fostering MSH/MST
- Denial attitudes

Some of the communication and prevention tools include:

- Cooper’s 6 levels of Sexual Harassment™ (4 MSH, 2 MST)
- MSH/MST vocabulary
- Profile of a target
- Profile of an offender
- Cooper’s 8 Offender Stereotypes™
- 10 informal response strategies
- 8 instigator stereotypes
- 13 early warning signs
- How to investigate incidents
- Counseling offenders
- Coaching leaders

Cooper’s 6 Levels of SH™:

1. Aesthetic appreciation
2. Active mental groping
3. Social touching
4. Foreplay harassment
5. Sexual abuse
6. Sexual assault

Properly educating personnel on the concepts and tools, and instituting the right processes, will equip all military personnel to not tolerate MSH/MST, and to prevent it.

Seven recommendations to prevent MSH/MST

There are important lessons learned from decades of reducing sexual misconduct in the workplace:

One ... Sexual harassment and sexual assault are not separate issues, to be handled in two different training programs as the military currently does. They are the end points of a single

continuum of escalating behavior. They need to be addressed together, in the same program. This is not only a long-standing best practice, it was confirmed by the RAND survey.

Two ... Slogans and platitudes won't change behavior. MSH and MST are not advertising programs. It's not about one-time training, posters, and focus months. It's about culture, behavior, knowledge, skills, and process—all the time.

Three ... You have to change the culture at all levels. You can't start with command, and have it trickle down. It gets lost in translation somewhere down the line. And you can't start with entry-level personnel, and let it work its way up as a new generation rises through the ranks. You can't afford to wait. You owe it to victims to fix this immediately.

Four ... You have to create a peer culture that is adamantly anti-MSH/MST. Everyone needs to view MSH as the "loser behavior" that it is. And everyone needs to see MST for the pathological, criminal behavior that it is. Normal people seeking healthy relationships don't need to resort to MSH/MST.

Five ... Platitudes, mottos, or people sitting around chatting doesn't work. Everyone, at all levels, needs to have the same training on the core concepts regarding MSH/MST—from an *expert*. This must include specific conceptual and process tools to *prevent* incidents.

Six ... There needs to be additional training tailored to different functions. This includes specialized content for command, leadership, and entry-level personnel, in addition to post-incident training for other departments such as JAG, IG, and SAVI.

Seven ... The training can't be a one-and-done event. There have to be support services, such as refresh learning opportunities, facilitation training, individualized remote coaching, regular updates, and consulting. Training is only one part of a comprehensive solution.

To significantly reduce MSH/MST going forward, there has to be an integrated effort. Experience shows that ignoring any one of these elements puts the entire process in jeopardy.

The key point is that nothing less than a major upgrade of the current MSH/MST training and the surrounding processes will work.



About the authors

Ken Cooper ... has over 35 years of experience as a researcher, trainer, and consultant. He has educated thousands of front-line workers and leaders on the prevention of sexual harassment.

Ken is the author of *Stop It Now: How targets and managers can end sexual harassment*, *Taming the Terrible Too's of Training, Effective Competency Modeling & Reporting*, *BodyBusiness: The sender's and receiver's guide to nonverbal communication*, and *The Relational Enterprise*.

CAPT Bryan Cuny USN, Retired ... is a former Marine, Navy FA-18 fighter pilot, and career officer of 25 years. As an officer, he experienced the full range of military sexual harassment and military sexual trauma training, and was responsible for ensuring adherence.

Bryan has had a variety of leadership roles through the transition from an all-male combat force to an integrated crew. This included leading 750 men and women officers and enlisted personnel in the close confines of a warship at sea and ashore, and managing male and female military, government service, and contract personnel.

Anita Marx ... is a nationally recognized expert on high-performing organizations, and has formally assessed over 50 applicants using the *Baldrige Criteria for Performance Excellence*.

Anita was the Director of the Anheuser-Busch Learning Center, a leading corporate university. She is an Alumni Baldrige Examiner, Chair of the Panel of Judges for Excellence in Missouri, a member of the Ishikawa Medal Committee, and a Certified Manager of Performance Excellence (ASQ).

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