


COMMENTARY

Sexual assault prevention and the U.S. Navy: An overview

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Every sexual assault in the military is a failure to protect the men and women who have entrusted us with their lives . . . We will not rest until we eliminate this crime from our ranks.
—U.S. Navy Rear Admiral Ann M. Burkhardt, *Director, Department of Defense Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office (Ferdinando, 2018)*

In coordination with the U.S. Department of Defense, leaders in the U.S. Navy have devoted considerable effort to the reduction of destructive behaviors, particularly in recent years. Such behaviors include sexual assault, and the U.S. Navy has introduced a number of policies, programs, and practices in a concerted attempt to eliminate sexual assault throughout the organization. In this commentary, we first describe structural elements that enable sexual assault prevention training and related efforts within the U.S. Navy. Second, we describe our largest training program to illustrate an application of issues raised in the focal article but also some current challenges with this approach. Our direct experience in the U.S. Navy's 21st Century Sailor Office suggests that many of our current approaches have included training design elements suggested by Medeiros and Griffith (2019); however, we continue to assess our approach for new training content, methods, and updates to ensure responsiveness to sailor needs. Our hope is that by sharing these examples, we will aid other practitioners engaged in similar endeavors. Third, we broaden the conversation regarding the prevention of sexual assault in organizational contexts by describing our more recent—and still emerging—focus on primary prevention through ready relevant learning across the employment lifecycle of our people.

Structural considerations

One noteworthy advantage that the U.S. Navy has with regard to the large-scale administration of sexual assault prevention and response training is structural. Specifically, the U.S. Navy realigned its headquarters staff in June 2013 to create the 21st Century Sailor Office. This team, within the staff of and physically colocated with Chief of Naval Personnel (essentially the U.S. Navy's chief human resources officer), oversees policy for all efforts to promote resiliency and wellness across the organization and for the families of its people. Sexual assault prevention and response is one of the foci of this office, and its activities include training administration, data analysis, program funding, and issuing or updating U.S. Navy-wide policies and procedures.

Having sexual assault prevention and response efforts under the purview of a dedicated staff with far-reaching authority and high-level access to the top leaders of the U.S. Navy and U.S. Department of Defense presents several advantages. These advantages include that the

organization is able to standardize its approach, coordinate effectively with other related programs (e.g., training on suicide prevention, wellness, resiliency, etc.), and continually iterate toward increasingly effective frameworks. Feedback from program coordinators throughout the organization regularly plays a role in shaping ongoing efforts, helping to connect the headquarters staff with realities at lower levels. Additionally, having a dedicated staff led by a one-star admiral sends a clear signal that such matters are of high importance.

Civilian organizations, including universities, may consider some of these advantages when designing organization-level approaches to counter sexual harassment and sexual assault. Additionally, congruence regarding the importance of organizational goals is important for collective success (Colbert, Kristof-Brown, Bradley, & Barrick, 2008). Therefore, any such efforts must correspond with other leaders—at both the top levels and elsewhere—agreeing that devoting time and other resources to the elimination of sexual assault is important.

General military training examples

As Medeiros and Griffith (2019) note in the focal article, the U.S. military is transparent regarding its efforts to eliminate sexual assault. Interested readers can access numerous resources, including information about policies and programs at <http://www.sapr.mil/> and <http://www.sapr.navy.mil/>. Although it is only one aspect of the U.S. Navy's overall sexual assault prevention and response program, the U.S. Navy's General Military Training program has a wide reach. Every year, all active duty and reserve personnel (about 388,000 people total) must complete training on a set of topics, including a specific module on sexual assault prevention and response. Training requirements are directed by congressionally mandated requirements and higher-level Department of Defense policy. For this module, units receive a facilitation guide and supporting materials including a script, discussion questions, and applicable visual aids. Unit commanding officers choose facilitators who guide the training sessions in a face-to-face format among subgroups of personnel of similar pay grades. Below, we highlight some aspects of this training that illustrate the issues raised by the focal article.

Learning goals and content relevance

Under the broad umbrella of sexual assault prevention and response awareness, the training includes a host of short- and long-term goals. These goals include understanding what constitutes sexual assault, why it is a crime, the meaning of consent, how to report offenses, and consequences for people who are found guilty of sexual assault. Additionally, training participants watch "Broken Trust," a video featuring service members—both male and female—who are survivors of sexual assault. In the video, the survivors tell their stories and describe how sexual assault negatively influenced their lives.

Regarding content relevance, the training includes discussion questions designed to help participants connect the training content to the everyday activities that they encounter. The facilitator guide also includes prompts to discuss how sexual assault and related behaviors are contrary to the U.S. Navy's core values of honor, courage, and commitment.

Practice and feedback, behavioral examples

Practice and feedback primarily occur in the training through the discussion of potential scenarios. For example, participants discuss—given the training provided—response and prevention strategies, what resources are available, and more. To elicit behavioral examples, participants discuss a variety of scenarios, including bystander intervention strategies to disrupt a potential sexual

harassment or assault situation, examples of reprisal against someone who reports a crime and ways to stop these types of behavior, and more. Within the discussion guide, facilitators have access to both the discussion questions and suggested answers, which helps to fill in any gaps that may exist after discussing a topic.

Primary prevention of sexual assault

Although the training described above has beneficial elements and has improved considerably since its first release, we fully recognize that it is not perfect. Overall, the training is geared largely to equipping sailors with knowledge and resources for responding to sexual assault, with a more limited focus on prevention of sexual assault. It is also critical to note that such training is only one part of the U.S. Navy's overall effort to eliminate sexual assault. Among the additional training, reporting systems, policies, and related elements of the U.S. Navy's sexual assault prevention and response program are increasing foci on primary prevention of such behaviors. Current transformation efforts within the U.S. Navy are assessing potential companion trainings to the general military training that can ensure that sailors are receiving training at the right time and in the right way to not only raise knowledge about response to issues such as sexual assault but also to ensure skill building for prevention. Primary prevention, as we discuss below, is what we see as a key to eliminating sexual assault in a proactive manner—moving far beyond awareness and reporting mechanisms, although those both remain important.

What is primary prevention?

Primary prevention, in this context, refers to focusing efforts on preventing sexual assault before it ever occurs. Doing so requires an understanding of the various factors that are likely to increase the risk of sexual assault, including those at the individual, peer, and community levels (Casey & Lindhorst, 2009). Some of those risk factors include childhood victimization, distorted beliefs about gender and sex as they relate to violence (e.g., male entitlement), and numerous other attitudinal and cognitive variables. Additionally, however, peer and community norms regarding topics such as the use of coercion to obtain sex, alcohol use or abuse within the context of relationships and sexual consent, tolerance of violence in general, and perceptions regarding other similar behavior are important to consider when designing interventions to prevent sexual assault.

Primary prevention as an approach in the U.S. Navy

Primary prevention strategies that are geared toward skill building appear to be more effective in changing behavior than trainings solely focused on awareness or attitudes (DeGue *et al.*, 2014). Therefore, we are currently exploring ways to embed primary prevention of sexual assault and other destructive behaviors across what we call a service member's "behavioral learning continuum." Namely, we are attempting to identify opportunities at critical touchpoints in one's career trajectory in which targeted training on healthy relationships and related topics can both promote wellness and prevent sexual assault within our workforce.

The U.S. Navy's efforts to shift from siloed, often response-oriented approaches to include a more comprehensive primary prevention focus that builds individual competencies and shapes environments involves piloting of evidence-based and evidence-informed policies, programs, and practices. Prevention science purports the importance of data-driven and scientifically grounded intervention efforts for achieving sustainable change in areas such as sexual assault prevention (Botvin, 2004; Flay *et al.*, 2005). An important part of comprehensively assessing this impact necessitates focus on leveraging data analytics to effectively monitor change over time with program implementation. Equally important is a focus on building a prevention infrastructure that fully equips prevention staff to deliver programming and ensures the support for

implementation, evaluation, and sustainability of efforts. Given that our efforts with regard to primary prevention are in their early stages within the U.S. Navy, we do not yet have data regarding outcomes. We are confident that such efforts will be beneficial, however, given evidence of the effectiveness of primary prevention elsewhere (e.g., DeGue et al., 2014).


Potential implications for other organizations

A critical factor in the U.S. Navy's growing focus on primary prevention has involved educating leaders on the importance of prevention and implementation of strategies that build skills and competencies important to sexual assault prevention but also transferable to other facets of sailors' lives, such as healthy communication skills and building emotional intelligence. Educating leadership and aiding in their understanding of the potential impact of these types of efforts on overall well-being of an organization facilitates building the needed support. Resources, such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's assessments of unique and overlapping risk and protective factors between sexual assault and other forms of violence and technical packages on addressing prevention of destructive behaviors, provide helpful guidance to organizations implementing such efforts (CDC, n.d.).

As a part of the U.S. Navy's efforts, a comprehensive prevention strategy is being developed with concerted efforts to have input from the various stakeholders within the U.S. Navy. Building buy-in for both the importance of primary prevention and the approach for implementation is a key tenet of our prevention efforts for sexual assault and other destructive behaviors. This has reinforced the need for purposeful efforts to provide venues for information sharing and trust building across entities within organizations that may have historically had siloed efforts.

Concluding thoughts

Prevention of sexual assault and other destructive behaviors is a hefty task, but one that the U.S. Navy is prioritizing to aid in building resiliency in sailors during their U.S. Navy careers and beyond. This has required the support of leadership and an understanding of the need for cultural shifts that recognize the importance of a holistic approach to sailor well-being. Our prevention strategy builds upon the interconnected nature of risk and protective factors for sexual assault with those for other destructive behaviors and the importance of prevention efforts that build skills that speak to this overlap. As our prevention efforts continue to unfold, the U.S. Navy will continue to learn as an organization how best to prevent sexual assault and other destructive behaviors within its organizational context.

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