

Military Sexual Trauma

2013 California Women Veteran Survey

April 2014

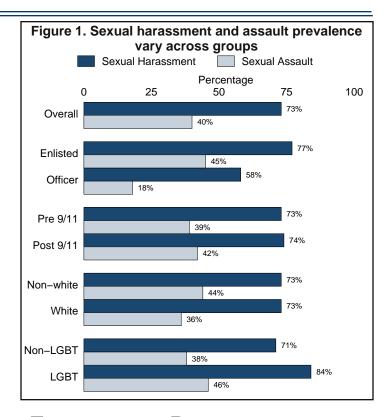
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ilitary sexual trauma (MST) is the term that the Department of Veteran Affairs (VA) uses to refer to "psychological trauma, which, in the judgment of a VA mental health professional, resulted from a physical assault of a sexual nature, battery of a sexual nature, or sexual harassment which occurred while the Veteran was serving on active duty or active duty for training." While the exact rate of MST is uncertain, approximately 20 percent of women veterans who seek VA health care report MST¹ and 23 percent of women reported experiencing unwanted sexual contact since joining the military in a 2012 survey of active-duty service-members.² This Short Subject presents results from the 2013 California Women Veteran Survey, which asked respondents questions about the prevalence and aftermath of sexual harassment and assault while serving in the military.³

SEXUAL HARASSMENT AND ASSAULT

Figure 1 presents data on the percentage of 2013 survey respondents who reported experiencing sexual harassment or assault during their military career. Overall, 73 percent of respondents reported sexual harassment and 40 percent reported sexual assault. These percentages are considerably higher than those mentioned above. The differences are likely due, in part, to variation in question wording and sample composition, but it is not immediately clear which estimates are a more accurate reflection of MST rates among California's women veteran population.

Figure 1 breaks these percentages out by respondents' rank upon entry to the military, era of service, race/ethnicity, and sexual orientation. While reported rates of sexual harassment are fairly similar across era and race/ethnicity, enlisted members and those identifying as LGBT experienced higher rates of harassment than officers and non-LGBT respondents. Sexual assault was more prevalent among enlisted, non-White, and LGBT respondents. Most notably, enlisted members were more than twice as likely to have suffered a sexual assault than were officers.



TREATMENT AND REPORTING OF HARASSMENT AND ASSAULT

Figure 2 displays information on the percentages of women veterans who sought treatment or reported incidents after experiencing harassment or assault. The majority of respondents did not seek treatment, though they were more likely to seek it following assault than harassment. Of those who did seek treatment, most reported that they did not receive the services they needed. Rates of reporting follow a similar pattern. The majority of respondents who experienced sexual harassment or assault did not report the incident. Of those who did, most reported that the incident was not resolved to their satisfaction.

NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES OF REPORTING HARASSMENT AND ASSAULT

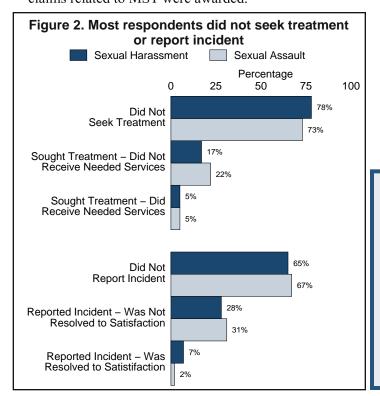
Figure 3 illustrates some of the negative events women veterans experienced as a result of reporting harassment and/or assault. Roughly 70 percent of

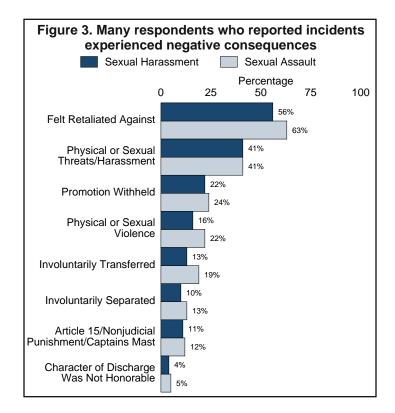
respondents who reported harassment or assault experienced at least one form of retaliation. In general, such negative consequences were more common following the reporting of sexual assault than for sexual harassment.

More than 60 percent of women veterans who reported sexual assault "felt retaliated against" and more than 1 in 5 reported suffering from additional physical or sexual violence. A smaller, but considerable, proportion identified professional- or career-related consequences including promotions withheld, involuntary transfers and/or separations, nonjudicial punishment, and less-than-honorable discharges.

MST, PTSD, AND DISABILITY CLAIMS

A recent report analyzing data on mental health disability benefit claims filed by veterans with the VA⁴ suggests that the "VA granted disability benefit claims for PTSD related to MST at a significantly lower rate than claims for PTSD unrelated to MST every year from 2008 to 2012." Data from our 2013 survey appear to support this finding. The 2013 survey asked women veterans about their disability claims, whether they were based on PTSD, and whether their PTSD was related to MST. Of all the non-pending claims reported by respondents (some reported more than 1 claim), 90 percent of those based on PTSD but not related to MST were awarded while only 70 percent of PTSD-based claims related to MST were awarded.





ENDNOTES

- Department of Veterans Affairs. (2013). "Military Sexual Trauma."
- 2. Defense Manpower Data Center. (2013). "2012 Workplace and Gender Relations Survey of Active Duty Members."
- 3. The 2013 California Women Veteran Survey was carried out between September and December of 2013. A total of 1,040 individuals volunteered to participate in the survey and 648 chose to answer questions on MST. The values reported here are estimates and subject to multiple sources of error. Because the sample is based on volunteers who self-selected to participate rather than a probability sample, no estimates of sampling error can be calculated. The data have not been weighted to reflect the demographic characteristics of the California women veteran population.
- American Civil Liberties Union and Service Women's Action Network. (2013). "Battle for Benefits: VA Discrimination Against Survivors of Military Sexual Trauma."

This Short Subject was requested by the California Commission on the Status of Women and Girls (www.women.ca.gov) and the California Department of Veterans Affairs Women Veterans Division (www.calvet.ca.gov/calvet-programs/women-veterans).

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