



Research Week 2020

Examining the Narratives of Military Sexual Trauma (MST) Survivors

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Keywords

Military sexual trauma (MST), Sexual assault prevention and response efforts; U.S. Military

Abstract

Background

Reports of sexual harassment and sexual assault in the military (also known as military sexual trauma or MST) have increased significantly, especially in the last ten years. However, there exists a wide gap between the military's official efforts and survivors' experiences. Consequently, more research is needed to understand how survivors perceive the military's efforts, how these efforts affect their experiences, and how future responses can be improved.

Objectives

The goals of this dissertation study were to: 1) identify how current messaging in the military affects the experience of MST survivors; 2) explore what a survivor-centered MST prevention and response program might look like as defined by survivors, and 3) obtain recommendations for how the military's prevention and response services can be improved.

Participants

This national sample included twenty-one servicemembers from various military branches who experienced sexual harassment and/or sexual assault during their military service between 2003 and 2019. The participants identified as women (95%), non-white (15%), Hispanic/Latina (19%), LGBT-Q (24%), and have college or masters-level degrees (62%).

Methods

The data for this qualitative study was collected during phone interviews, using an open-ended, semi-structured interview protocol and were transcribed for further analysis. Using the interview transcripts, a thematic analysis was conducted by the researcher and a secondary coder, identifying semantic and latent themes.

Results

Four main themes emerged from the participant interviews: 1) The military's culture of sexism and misogyny contribute to MST, 2) The leadership and chain of command matters, 3) Prevention efforts are inadequate, and 4) The military's response is often (re)traumatizing.

Conclusions

These four themes often intersect with each other, and their interdependence is reflected in the recommendations provided by the participants to improve the military's prevention and response efforts.