

## The “Invisible War” against Sexual Assault in the Military: How Community Psychology can help identify an effective strategy

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“Military sexual assault training, when done right, can be effective.”



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The United States Department of Defense (DOD) began organizational-wide sexual assault training in 2005. Holland et al. (2014) studied whether the training received predicted accurate knowledge of sexual assault resources and protocols and lower incidence of sexual assault, whether training differed across branches and ranks, and whether service members’ judgments of training effectiveness differed.

Results of this study challenge the assertions made in the 2010 DOD annual report on military sexual assault claiming that “most Active Duty members receive effective training on sexual assault.” Instead, the study team finds that military sexual assault training differs by military branch and by efficacy.

Among other gaps, Holland et al. find that women and sexual assault survivors reported that training was less effective at reducing/preventing sexual assault and explaining reporting options. Insufficient training places servicewomen in a bind where reliance on “fellow soldiers” competes with victim-blaming ideas frequently embedded within sexual assault prevention.

<sup>1</sup> Article Citation: Holland, K.J., Rabelo, V. C., Cortina, L.M. (2014). Sexual assault training in the military: Evaluating efforts to end the “Invisible War.” *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 54 (289–303) doi: 10.1007/s10464-014-9672-0

### Highlights

**Every year of military service, 9-13% of service women and 1-2% of service men experience sexual assault.**

**The DOD’s Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office provides sexual assault training for the military.**

**Is this training effective in communicating information and preventing sexual assault?**

**DOD says “Yes,” study team says. “It’s not that simple.”**

## Methods

Holland et al. used a secondary analysis of DOD data from the *2010 Workplace and Gender Relations Survey of Active Duty Members* (n = 26,505). The dataset identifies gender (male/female), as well as service branch (Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, Coast Guard), and service rank (officer versus enlisted). The team also analyzed whether or not the respondent experienced sexual assault in past year of service.

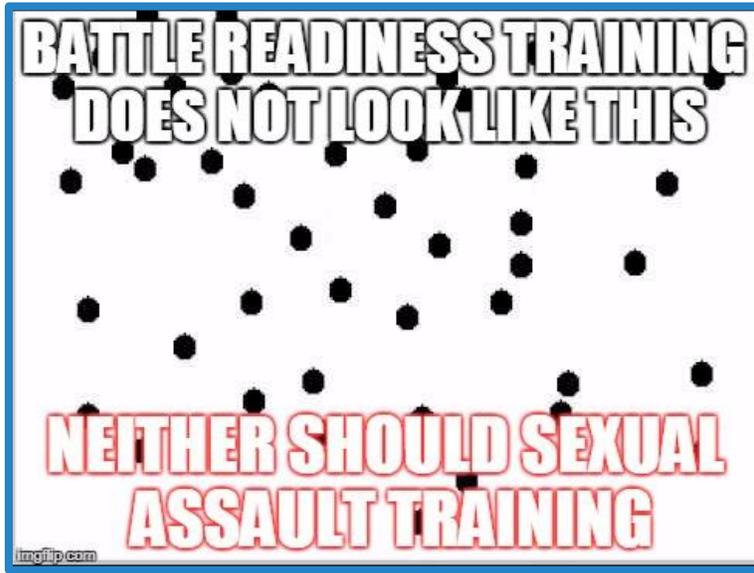


Figure 2. Meme created by author.  
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## Study Results

- Women comprise 79% of the service members who reported sexual assault in the past year
- Knowledge of basic military resources/protocols is low (17.9% provided completely accurate answers)
- Perceived effectiveness of training differs by branch, gender, and sexual assault history, with Air Force members, men, and nonvictims reporting that training was more effective
- The training is perceived as surface level; 93% received training in previous year, but only 54% described that training as “comprehensive”
- Participants describing training as comprehensive have greater knowledge of sexual assault resources and protocols
- Air Force reported more comprehensive training and lowest incidence rates of sexual assault

## READ MORE

Holland, K.J., Rabelo, V. C., Cortina, L.M. (2014). Sexual assault training in the military: Evaluating efforts to end the “Invisible War.” *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 54 (289–303) doi: 10.1007/s10464-014-9672-0.

## NEWS YOU CAN USE

Social context matters. The U.S. Military is comprised of many communities. Organizational factors like service branch mediate the depth and effectiveness of the content delivered. We need to understand these differences and ensure that sexual assault prevention training is both effective and context-relevant.

## What Does This Mean For?

**Policy Makers**—We must hold the U.S. Military accountable not only for prevalence of training, but also nuanced content.

**Research and Evaluation**—Gendered analysis is vital when evaluating sexual assault programs. History of sexual assault and gender are lenses through which individuals can “hear” training.

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