

Why GAO Did This Study

Sexual assault is a crime that devastates victims and has a far-reaching negative impact for DOD because it undermines DOD's core values, degrades mission readiness, and raises financial costs. DOD data show that reported sexual assaults involving servicemembers more than doubled from about 2,800 reports in fiscal year 2007 to about 6,100 reports in fiscal year 2014. Based on results of a 2014 survey, RAND estimated that 20,300 active-duty servicemembers were sexually assaulted in the prior year.

Senate Report 113-176 includes a provision for GAO to review DOD's efforts to prevent sexual assault. This report addresses the extent to which DOD (1) developed an effective prevention strategy, (2) implemented activities department-wide and at military installations related to the department's effort to prevent sexual assault, and (3) developed performance measures to determine the effectiveness of its efforts to prevent sexual assault in the military. GAO evaluated DOD's strategy against CDC's framework for effective sexual-violence prevention strategies, reviewed DOD policies, and interviewed cognizant officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that DOD link prevention activities with desired outcomes; identify risk and protective factors for all domains; communicate and disseminate its strategy to all program personnel; align service policies with the strategy; and fully develop performance measures. DOD concurred with all recommendations and noted actions it was taking.

View [GAO-16-61](#). For more information, contact Brenda S. Farrell at (202) 512-3604 or farrellb@gao.gov.

SEXUAL ASSAULT

Actions Needed to Improve DOD's Prevention Strategy and to Help Ensure It Is Effectively Implemented

What GAO Found

The Department of Defense (DOD) developed its strategy to prevent sexual assault using the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) framework for effective sexual-violence prevention strategies, but DOD does not link activities to desired outcomes or fully identify risk and protective factors. Specifically, DOD's strategy identifies 18 prevention-related activities, but they are not linked to desired outcomes—a step that CDC says is necessary to determine whether efforts are producing the intended effect. CDC has also demonstrated that by identifying risk and protective factors—relative to the domain or environment in which they exist—organizations can focus efforts on eliminating risk factors that promote sexual violence while also supporting the protective factors that prevent it. DOD identifies five domains in its strategy and includes risk factors for three—individuals, relationships, and society—but it does not specify risk factors for the other two domains—leaders at all levels of DOD and the military community. Further, DOD does not specify how the protective factors, such as emotional health, identified in its strategy relate to the five domains. Thus, DOD may be limited in its ability to take an evidence-based approach to the prevention of sexual assault.

DOD and the military services are in the process of implementing prevention-focused activities, but they have not taken steps to ensure that installation-level activities are consistent with the overarching objectives of DOD's strategy. DOD's strategy identifies 18 activities, 2 of which DOD considers implemented while efforts to address the remaining 16 are ongoing. For example, DOD officials report that they have implemented the activity directing the development of a military community of practice. Additionally, GAO identified activities that had been developed and implemented at the four installations GAO visited, but found that they may not be consistent with DOD's strategy because it has not been communicated or disseminated to the personnel responsible for implementing the activities. Further, service policies—key conduits of such communication—do not provide the guidance necessary to unify the department's prevention efforts because they have not been updated to align with and operationalize the principles outlined in DOD's most recent strategy. Thus, DOD cannot be sure that all prevention-related activities are achieving the goals and objectives of the department's strategy.

DOD has identified five performance measures to assess the effectiveness of its prevention efforts, but these measures are not fully developed as they are missing many of the 10 key attributes that GAO has found can contribute to assessing program performance effectively, such as baseline and trend data, measurable target, and clarity. Specifically, all five performance measures demonstrate some of these attributes but collectively they are missing more than half of these attributes. All of the prevention efforts' measures demonstrate baseline and trend data but none of the measures have measurable target, clarity, and some of the other attributes. Without fully developed measures, DOD and other decision makers may not be able to effectively gauge the progress of the department's prevention efforts.