



Highlights of [GAO-08-1146T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on National Security and Foreign Affairs, Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

In 2004, Congress directed the Department of Defense (DOD) to establish a comprehensive policy to prevent and respond to sexual assaults involving servicemembers. Though not required to do so, the Coast Guard has established a similar policy. This statement addresses implementation and oversight of DOD's and the Coast Guard's programs to prevent and respond to sexual assault incidents. Specifically, it addresses the extent to which DOD and the Coast Guard (1) have developed and implemented policies and procedures to prevent, respond to, and resolve reported sexual assault incidents; (2) have visibility over reports of sexual assault in the military; and (3) exercise oversight over reports of sexual assault involving servicemembers. This statement draws on GAO's report on DOD's and the Coast Guard's Sexual Assault Prevention and Response programs issued on August 29, 2008 (GAO-08-924). For this work, GAO reviewed legislative requirements and DOD and Coast Guard guidance, analyzed sexual assault incident data, and obtained through surveys and interviews the perspective of more than 3,900 servicemembers on sexual assault matters.

GAO made 11 recommendations to improve implementation of DOD's and the Coast Guard's programs. These include, for example, reviewing and evaluating guidance and training, and improving oversight of the programs. DOD and the Coast Guard concurred with the recommendations.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on [GAO-08-1146T](#). For more information, contact Brenda S. Farrell at (202) 512-3604 or farrellb@gao.gov.

MILITARY PERSONNEL

Actions Needed to Strengthen Implementation and Oversight of DOD's and the Coast Guard's Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Programs

What GAO Found

DOD and the Coast Guard have established policies and programs to prevent, respond to, and resolve reported sexual assault incidents involving servicemembers; however, implementation of the programs is hindered by several factors. GAO found that (1) DOD's guidance may not adequately address some important issues, such as how to implement the program in deployed and joint environments; (2) most, but not all commanders support the programs; (3) required sexual assault prevention and response training is not consistently effective; and (4) factors such as a DOD-reported shortage of mental health care providers affect whether servicemembers who are victims of sexual assault can or do access mental health services. Left unchecked, these challenges can discourage or prevent some servicemembers from using the programs when needed.

GAO found, based on responses to its nongeneralizable survey administered to 3,750 servicemembers and a 2006 DOD survey, the most recent available, that occurrences of sexual assault may be exceeding the rates being reported, suggesting that DOD and the Coast Guard have only limited visibility over the incidence of these occurrences. At the 14 installations where GAO administered its survey, 103 servicemembers indicated that they had been sexually assaulted within the preceding 12 months. Of these, 52 servicemembers indicated that they did not report the sexual assault. GAO also found that factors that discourage servicemembers from reporting a sexual assault include the belief that nothing would be done; fear of ostracism, harassment, or ridicule; and concern that peers would gossip. There were also concerns that reporting an incident would negatively affect their careers or unit morale and that a report made using the restricted reporting option would not remain confidential.

Although DOD and the Coast Guard have established some mechanisms for overseeing reports of sexual assault, neither has developed an oversight framework—including clear objectives, milestones, performance measures, and criteria for measuring progress—to guide their efforts. GAO's prior work has demonstrated the importance of outcome-oriented performance measures to successful program oversight, and that an effective plan for implementing initiatives and measuring progress can help decision makers determine whether initiatives are achieving desired results. DOD provides information on reports of alleged sexual assaults annually to Congress. However, DOD's report does not include some data that would aid congressional oversight, such as why some sexual assaults could not be substantiated following an investigation. Further, the military services have not provided data that would facilitate oversight and enable DOD to conduct trend analyses. While the Coast Guard voluntarily provides data to DOD for inclusion in its report, this information is not provided to Congress because there is no requirement to do so. Without an oversight framework, as well as more complete data, decision makers in DOD, the Coast Guard, and Congress lack information they need to evaluate the effectiveness of the programs.