



Secondary Victimization: Implications for Sexual Assault Response

It is well documented that the majority of sexual assault victims will never report their crime. This reluctance is understandable as evidence shows that climate and response systems can be, and often are, extremely hostile to victims. Without reports, it is not possible to hold perpetrators accountable; therefore understanding and addressing the factors that contribute to under-reporting will be very important in your efforts to address sexual assault in your Wing.

As you examine ways to increase reporting in your Command, it is important to understand the impact on victims of their own reporting experience. The phenomenon of secondary victimization is frequently discussed in the field of sexual assault response and prevention: According to Campbell (1999) secondary victimization refers to behaviors and attitudes of those receiving assault reports that are "victim-blaming" and insensitive, and which are traumatic to crime victims. "The disregard of victims' needs by providers can so closely mimic victims' experiences at the hands of their assailants that secondary victimization is sometimes called "the second assault." Research has suggested that almost half of rape victims are treated by law enforcement in ways that result in secondary victimization (Patterson, 2011). Additionally, victims of non-stranger rape (e.g., acquaintance rape and date rape) were at particular risk for secondary victimization (Campbell et al., 1999). When victims experience secondary victimization, they are much less likely to follow-through with a complete disciplinary process, thereby making it less likely that perpetrators are held accountable (Campbell, 2011).

How Reporting Processes Can Re-Victimize

There are a number of ways that reporting processes can "re-victimize" those who come forward following a sexual assault.

1. Those receiving reports are uninformed about the rarity of false reporting and respond as if the victim is not telling the truth or as if the victim is responsible for the assault.
2. Victims are required to tell their story repeatedly and to multiple people.
3. Interviewers follow lines of questioning that involve victims having their prior conduct called into question.
4. Victims experience formal or informal retaliation (e.g., fail to get promoted; are harassed, etc.).
5. Victims must continue to interact with their alleged perpetrator on a daily basis.
6. When a case is handled such that a victim perceives that his/her assault is not being taken seriously, a plea deal is arranged without his/her involvement, or when the alleged perpetrator is not held accountable.

As a Commander you cannot always mitigate the unfortunate mis-steps during the reporting process. However, you are in a position to be sure that Air Force procedures are followed and that you do all in your power to minimize the negative impact on any victims who come forward. The reality is that many of the primary reasons victims of sexual assault in the Air Force give for not reporting include things within Commanders' reach such as: not wanting superiors to know; concern about privacy; fear of



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retaliation; lack of trust in the reporting process; not knowing the reporting process (AF Gallup Survey, 2010). The responsibility for an increase in reporting is that of leadership, not victims. Note what is being communicated within your Wing that is contributing to barriers to reporting, and address it. An increase in reporting will be unlikely to happen until after the response is strengthened and improved.

Creating a Safe Reporting Environment

There are a number of things that Commanders can do to promote an environment that is safer for reporting.

1. Educate those in your command about the benefits of reaching out to the SARC first to report. This not only protects their right to choose either restricted or unrestricted forms of reporting, but it also guides them to someone who is trained to understand this issue and avoid responses associated with secondary victimization.
2. Be sure that those in your command avoid asking questions that imply a victim is to blame for his/her assault.
3. Be sure that all individuals who interact with victims avoid any explicit statements suggesting that a victim's actions contributed to his/her assault (e.g., victim's dress, use of alcohol or drugs, being at a certain location at the time of the rape, degree of resistance, prior sexual encounters with the alleged offender, whether the victim responded sexually during the incident) (Campbell, 2011).
4. Do not require a victim to share his/her story more times or with more people than is absolutely necessary for a fair process.
5. Balance victims' needs with the necessity of gathering sufficient evidence to move forward with a case.
6. Ensure that procedures are utilized to minimize stress during interviews and/or testimony (e.g., don't require a victim to testify in the same room as his/her alleged assailant, limit cross-examination to information that is germane to the case, etc.).
7. Strictly enforce Air Force non-retaliation policies to protect victims who come forward.
8. Strictly enforce Air Force confidentiality processes for sexual assault cases.
9. Whenever possible, involve a victim in the decision-making process regarding his/her case.
10. Do all you can to be sure that victims are treated with dignity and respect throughout the entire process.
11. Educate yourself and those in your command about reporting procedures, victim's rights, and resources.

In summary, by understanding and addressing one of the primary factors that leads to under-reporting – the reporting process itself – you can contribute to increased accountability for perpetrators in your Wing.



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